



CREATING DESIGN RULES

*Gérald Genta is not only the most important watch designer of all time, but also the person who has managed to impose his own unique aesthetic imprint on most of today's watches, since he has created the most important ones among them.
I had the honour of conversing with him on numerous occasions.
The following conversation took place in December 2009.*

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CONSTANTIN STIKAS : *Would you like to recount for us your trajectory in the watchmaking sector?*

GÉRALD GENTA : I was born in Geneva in 1931. I began an apprenticeship in the jewellery business at the age of 15. I completed it in 1950, a year that had already seen the onset of a recession. So I did a number of different jobs. At the age of 23 I loved painting and I had a passion for designing jewellery. At the time, the jewellery sector was still in its early stages of development in Switzerland and most of the business proposals I received were from Watchmakers for designing watch cases, dials, bracelets and everything to do with watches. Thus, within a span of around twenty years, I had designed watches and sold designs for watches.

Your readers will be bemused to learn that all watch designs at the time were

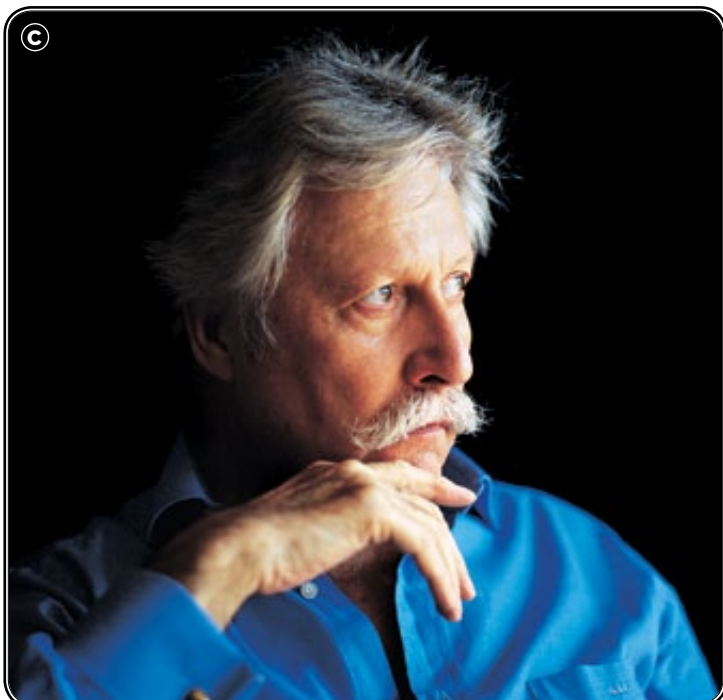
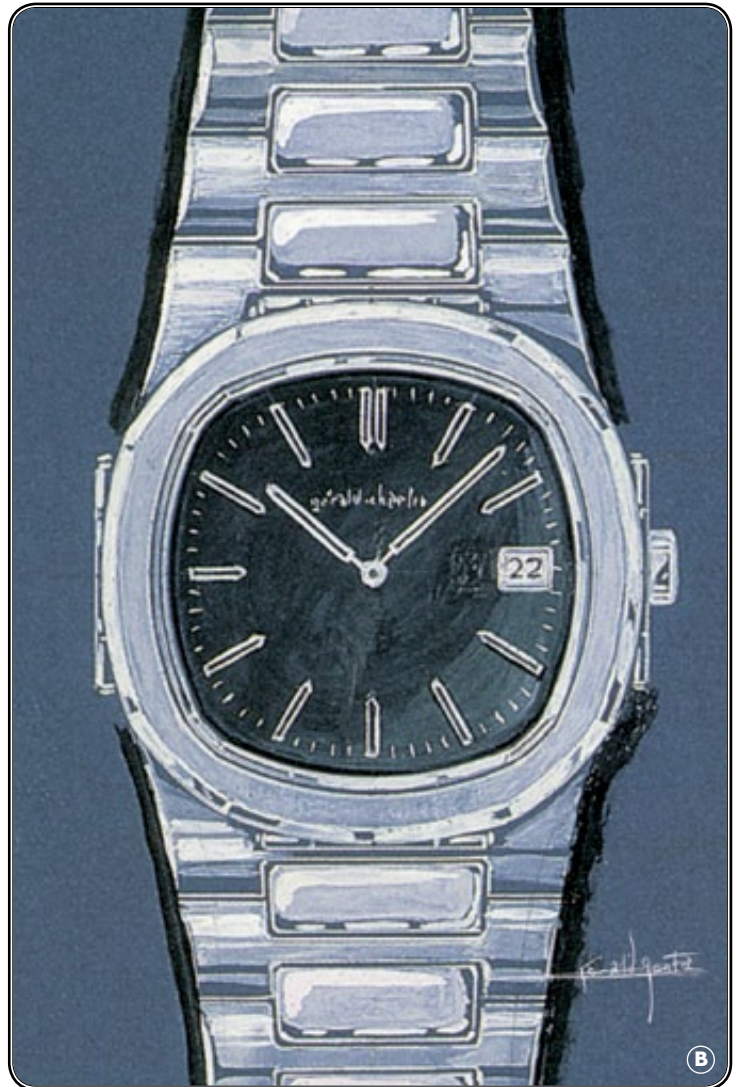
sold for 15 Swiss Francs! You can imagine the quantity one had to produce in order to manage to scrape a living at that rate! However, despite that situation, I managed to earn a lot of money, because I had clients everywhere in the world, in America, in Italy, in France, in Germany. My first clients were Benrus, Hamilton etc.

Afterwards, I had the opportunity to sign contracts with brands in Switzerland, such as Omega, Universal and Audemars Piguet, often secured through their suppliers. By this I mean that, for example, my direct client wasn't Omega, but Omega's suppliers and it was in this manner that I participated in the creation of the Seamaster, or of the Constellation, for example by designing the case for the one, or designing a dial or a bracelet for another.

Today, even within Omega itself they do not know all that I have done for them, but no matter!

Later, in 1969, I embarked on the adventure of the designer turned producer, since that year saw me establishing my own watchmaking Company, the Gérald Genta brand. In 1981 I designed a unique piece, which left its seminal mark on watchmaking history, namely the Minute Repeater with self-winding movement, encased in a 2.72mm-thick case! It was a great success. We sold more than one thousand pieces! In 1994 I created the Grande Sonnerie which, at the time, was the most complicated watch in the world. In 1998 I sold the Gérald Genta company and I devoted myself entirely to painting. In 2001 I launched a new brand, Gérald Charles, that I also sold after a few years.





— A —
Royal Oak original design for
Audemars Piguet

— B —
Nautilus original design for
Patek Philippe

— C —
Gérald Genta



And had you been collaborating with Audemars Piguet for a long time prior to the Royal Oak?



For about twenty years, since 1953! I had been creating for Audemars Piguet for nearly 20 years, their entire collection. All classic Audemars Piguet pieces are made by G rald Genta. Up until the time of the Royal Oak.

Would you like to recount for us how the conception of the Royal Oak began?



One afternoon, at four o'clock, Mr. Georges Golay, the Managing Director of Audemars Piguet, rings me up and tells me: "Mr. Genta, I need a steel sports watch that has never been done before, I want it to be something totally new and waterproof." On my part, I understood that what he was looking for was a brand-new waterproofing technology. "I want the design by tomorrow morning." I designed it overnight and my idea was to replicate the system of the scaphander's helmet on the watch case. With the eight screws and with the joint visible on the case's exterior. So I was given the 'green light' straight away to begin work on the prototype. I completed the prototype myself within a year. In 1970, I designed the watch. And it took one more year before industrial production, which finally came about in 1972.

However, the endeavour did not immediately meet with success...

In the beginning, we met with no success! The watch was not a success because it was too big for the standards of the time!...

What was the diameter of its case?

It measured 36 by 38mm and that meant it was enormous. The watches of the time, such as Rolex's Oyster for instance, measured 32 by 34mm. You must excuse me if I'm not entirely accurate in my millimeter measurements! Today people always discuss everything in terms of millimeters. I don't understand this language, I find it very peculiar. I detest large watches, I detest thick watches. That's the fashion today. I am not really in fashion. They also will go out of fashion. As you will see, today they are about to release ultra thin watches, which are very comfortable. Large watches, watches that are highly sophisticated technically,



with advanced technology, with double Tourbillons, will always be around. If we could manage to fit a dozen Tourbillons, we would include a dozen... It's so stupid! It bears no interest.

However, there are clients who like them...

The taste of the client is important. And the client could be anyone from among us. Historically, there have been junctures in time when there were many people who were utterly lacking in culture, in fine taste. We sold them anything. Watches adorned with gems in all possible colours. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds etc. They were very fond of this kind of thing. And, suddenly, that changed. Today, we have a client base that loves highly spectacular ornate watches, but not necessarily with diamonds. Some love diamonds. Most love technically sophisticated watches with a lot of showiness through the use of Tourbillons, retrograde indications etc.



Following Audemars Piguet, you worked for many other companies...

I designed watches for Chaumet, Van Cleef & Arpels, as well as the entire Breguet watch collection, while at the same time working for Bvlgari. It thus came about that I designed Bvlgari-Bvlgari, with the brand name engraved on the bezel twice. In the beginning they thought the design was crass, but the watch later met with great success, which it continues to enjoy down to this day. As for IWC, it was a man who worked for that company, called Ott, who commissioned me to design a watch for them. And it was thus that I came to create the Ing nieur watch.

Yet another successful watch, with visible screws... It is a very technical detail that you had introduced 40 years earlier and that today has become established as a mandatory element in most sports watches...

Yes. At the time it marked an innovation. That of making visible what had hitherto always been meant to remain hidden. We have always kept everything hidden. A bit like what fashion sometimes does. Today we reveal women's underwear, thinking that what we are doing is very bold. Watches al-



ways had screws. And we had to keep them concealed. I revealed them as a technical element, which has since become something of interest.

And immediately afterwards, you created the Nautilus...

It is a watch that I designed during the Basel Trade Fair. I was at the restaurant of a hotel and some people from Patek were sitting in one corner of the dining hall, while I was sitting alone in the other corner. I told the head-waiter: "Bring me a piece of paper and a pencil, I want to design something" and I designed the Nautilus while observing the people from Patek eating!... It was a sketch that I completed in 5 minutes... It very quickly met with success. I made the prototype in my studio and its success was accelerated.



Which watch did you wear at the time?

I will request that you don't write this, but I don't like watches!



Why not write it? It's impressive!...

For me, watches are the antithesis of liberty. I am an artist, a painter, I hate having to adhere to the constraints of time. It irritates me.



And why not write it?

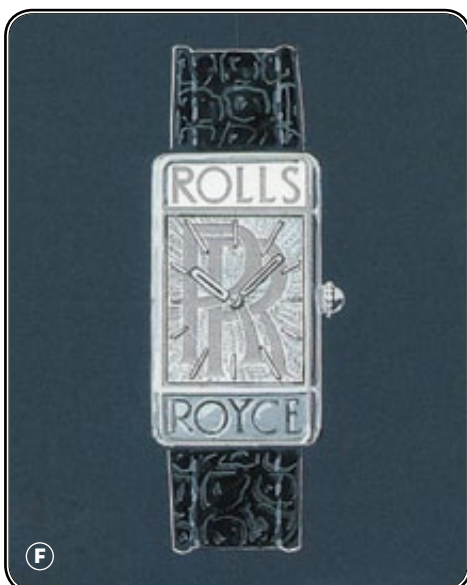
It is somewhat pejorative. However, though I don't like wearing watches, I do really like creating them!... Personally, my interest is more intrigued by a pair of high-quality shoes, because they offer comfort, or by an elegant piece of clothing, because elegance forms part of my personality.

In the watchmaking world, we can discern two opposing universes: that of the creators, who create a watch in order to propose their vision to the public, and that of the people working in marketing, who try to identify client needs, even if the clients themselves are not consciously aware of those needs.

It is for this reason that one must make collectors and buyers discover what they really love in the product and to arrive at a true harmony with that. You have seen the example from Bvlgari-Bvlgari that I cited earlier.



- (A) — Watch that was specially produced for the Hong Kong market, to commemorate the occasion of that country's unification with China. Mickey hurls the bowling ball depicting the flag of Great Britain, while brandishing the Hong Kong and Chinese flags on his T-shirt and glove.
- (B) — The first sketch for the Bvlgari-Bvlgari model
- (C) — Limited edition for Seiko, specially commissioned by its President, Reiji Hattori
- (D) — Sketch for a watch commissioned by the King of Saudi Arabia
- (E) — Sketch for a watch commissioned by the King of Spain
- (F) — Sketch for a watch specially commissioned by one of the most important collectors of Rolls Royce vehicles in the world
- (G) — Sketch for a watch commissioned by the Sultan of Brunei. The colours of the polo player's clothing are identical to those of the Sultan's team.
- (H) — Pocket-watch with Grande Sonnerie





3 Duality A.P.
Oil on canvas.
170x170



At first they didn't like it, but it later came about that it has been their greatest success to date! To make what you love, loveable to others: that is what creation is all about! As with the example of Bvlgari-Bvlgari that I cited earlier.

And the role of marketing? Is it that significant?

Of course! We may have the most beautiful idea in the world, but without the means to make it known, it will remain buried at the bottom of a drawer. In the majority of cases, this is achieved by means of a huge investment. One has but to look at the amounts spent by Rolex, Audemars Piguet etc. They lavish entire fortunes in order to imbue their products with value. And, often, this money is invested in a product that will not meet with success.

I have always been under the impression that we tend to forget a lot of your creations...

Yes. Pasha by Cartier, the famous dollar watch by Corum... You know, I do not have a recollection of all the watches that I've designed. Within the space of 50 years, I must have designed at least 100,000 different watches! I designed a lot of models for Audemars Piguet, among which some continue to enjoy great success. They continue to be produced with sometimes just a faint touch-up, a slight modification to the dial, or to the hands... If we were to begin counting them one by one...

How did it come about that you have designed all these watches all on your own? Didn't you have any competitors at the time?

This profession did not exist before me. I invented it, drawing my inspiration from the work of the foremost designer worldwide, Raymond Loewy, who designed the American railways, the Shell logo, the Lucky Strike cigarette pack etc.

Is there a watch that you would have liked to have designed?

I regret not having designed the Oyster! Because, to me, it represents the biggest success in watchmaking. Today, we cannot find a single watch that could possibly stand up to and pose a challenge to the Oyster in terms of stylistic breakthrough!

I am alone in saying this! People say "Oh, I don't like the Oyster"... Trying to create a watch that manages to achieve success for over 70 years! That is extraordinary...

Does the same also apply to the Reverso?

The Reverso is also a phenomenon. In my opinion, it is not as important, because I do not find this watch to be very 'virile'. It looks pretty on a woman's wrist, but I don't think it's very masculine to wear a watch with a swivel case. I don't really see the use.

The identity of the person who created the Oyster remains obscure...

Yes, this happened 70 years ago... Personally, I have only designed one Rolex, which still exists today and forms part of the Cellini collection. This creation dates to the time when I used to make designs for 15 Swiss Francs. I have also designed a watch for Piaget. It was titled the 'automatic television'. It was a cushion-watch, which had a case in the form of a television!

Today, one observes that most high-end sports watches have been inspired by the Royal Oak...

The priceless sports watch is a new concept that we invented together with Audemars Piguet. When the Royal Oak was released, it was sold for 3,750 Swiss Francs, retail price. At the time, the most expensive steel watch cost 850 Swiss Francs! That was something utterly inconceivable.

Have you created watch designs for Vacheron Constantin?

I have also worked a bit for Vacheron Constantin, but it was more difficult because my passion was for Audemars Piguet. So, when you are passionate about a brand like Audemars Piguet, which was more or less like the cousin of Vacheron Constantin... I did not feel very comfortable working for both.

When designing a watch, what are the limitations that one's liberty is subject to, since we cannot escape certain functional constraints in terms of its architecture, such as, for example, the fact that the number '12' must always appear at the top of the dial etc?

You are mistaken. When I made the retrograde watch by Gérald Genta, it was

something that had never been done before. The same also applies to the Heure Glissante [Slipping Time] watch by Gérald Charles. I adore inventing new ways of reading time.

Is there a consideration of the recycling of fashion trends in the watchmaking world? For example, we see Franck Muller, who once again brought to the fore the cushion-shape, he established it as the hallmark of his brand, and then all other brands followed his lead.

He had the intelligence to adopt a very well-known form, since we can always come across vintage cushion-shape watches even in flea markets, but he managed to do so while exhibiting great talent. What he did was really good. Unfortunately, it is now becoming dated.

In terms of materials, is there a specific one that you favour?

I was the first to showcase the fusion of bronze with steel for the Gefica model. We met with enormous success. It was the audacity of showcasing a material that was not frequently encountered in the watchmaking sector. Today, if I were to create a watch for myself with the Minute Repeater mechanism, I would opt for titanium. It's very light and it allows the penetration of sound. When one creates a highly-valuable watch, its price does not depend on the material. We could use platinum or aluminum, it would make no difference.

What is design for you?

For me, design is a means of expressing my own personality.

Are there any rules one must comply with?

The first rule is to be classical, yet also new at the same time.

Are you satisfied with your career path?

When your track record comprises models that have been around for 20 years, you have by definition been successful in your career and this provides a feeling of satisfaction. It's really extraordinary to at last be recognised today as being the man who introduced an element of modernity in a sector in which it had hitherto been lacking.





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But, frequently, design is widely copied...

For me, being copied does not cause me sadness... It constitutes an encouragement and a compliment. If you are not copied, you are incompetent.

Have you also designed other objects, apart from watches?

I am passionate about the creation of logos. I have created many for companies etc.

Were your relations with watchmakers and brands always straightforward?

Many among them accused me of being someone who is not an 'insider'. You know, it's very difficult to knock on the door of a prominent company and say "This is what I propose you do"! It's very pretentious. It's a delicate situation and you will never be recognised for your talent. It's like in the fine jewellery circle in Paris: a prominent company would never want a design workshop to declare "I have created the design for this jewel." It's the client who has the renown. I had to wait very patiently before the public could learn that it was I who had made the Royal Oak of Audemars Piguet etc. We don't dare say it when we have done it but, afterwards, it gradually becomes known to the public.

Designing watches on a computer, is it totally different?

It introduces an advantage today, which allows one to have an obsession with technology. I am self-taught. I do not know how to use a computer to design a watch. I always work with my thoughts and I never look at what the others are doing.

Does the opinion of the people who wear your watches interest you?

Ah, that! I like it a lot. There is a foremost Italian collector who one day told me: "The watch that you made for me, keeps me company!" That is an extraordinary phrase...

Today, what brings you the greatest satisfaction in design?

It's special orders. The owner of an island in the South of Italy invited me to spend a few days on his island, in order to grasp the atmosphere of his island

and to create a watch inspired by his island! It was something magnificent...

Are you currently collaborating with any brand?

Yes. With the Confrérie Horlogère of Mathias Buttet, for which I design watch hands and other details. I recently had a 3-year contract with Patek Philippe. One must be very careful with Patek Philippe. Everything that deviates from classical forms is out of the question. I designed the Nautilus for women.

Have you also designed high-street watches?

Yes. I designed the watch that was produced in 30,000,000 copies for Timex! It was digital, naturally. But I have also worked for Hamilton, Bulova and other American brands. They had always sought to emanate a distinct Swiss-watch 'aroma'!...

Today, your great passion is painting...

Yes, it brings me great joy. I paint every day. Today, I made two watercolors. They often feature an element drawn from the watchmaking world. A Royal Oak, screws... But I also like painting hidden people, or a small bird. There, in front of me, I've got an oil painting on canvas depicting a bird, some screws, a person etc. The end-result is special!... And they always have a lot of colours.

Who are your favourite painters?

Miró, Dali, Picasso, Cézanne, the Impressionist masters, but equally Anish Kapoor, whose work is currently on exhibition at the Royal Art Gallery, here in London. Painting is very important to me. It is painting that led me to design watches. It was as if I held a palette in my hands with all the colours of metals, gold, steel, bronze, but also tortoiseshell color, ivory, black, even carbon fiber, which is not a precious material. The same applies to jewellery. Before Chopard became the renowned company it is today, we would make sublime watches by adding a highly valuable precious stone in the form of a heart in the centre of the dial. And that, is not design. It is Art.

You have stated that you do not wear a watch. Do you however hold a collection of your most important watchmaking creations?

I have the Royal Oak and the first Nautilus that was released from the workshop which, by the way, has no serial number or anything of the sort. I had been keeping it all this time in a safe-box and I took it out to wear it when I was recently at their company for signing the 3-year collaboration contract I mentioned earlier. I also have the prototype of the Grande Sonnerie and an Automatic Perpetual Calendar by Gérald Genta, as well as the Gérald Charles Turbo, which I hate wearing, because it is too uncomfortable! I have never owned a Pasha by Cartier, an Ingénieur by IWC, a piece by Van Cleef & Arpels, a Breguet etc.

You have an admiration for Patek Philippe... Would you like to talk to us about some more of their models, other than the Nautilus?

Patek Philippe, is Patek Philippe! It is exceptional. It is the most prestigious brand in the world, for a number of different reasons. They are the ones who have been the most conservative, because they never departed from the rules of total classicism. They have made slightly eccentric watches from time to time, like those created by Gilbert Albert.

And the Ellipse?

They made the Ellipse with Rubli. One day at the Basel Trade Fair, at 4 o'clock in the morning, there was a group of us from the watchmaking world and the creative professions. Mr. Rubli said: "Had Mr. Genta not existed, I would never have conceived of the idea for the creation of the Ellipse." It is true that watches similar to the Ellipse had first been designed by Rubli himself for Audemars Piguet, but they never exploited their models in the manner that Patek Philippe did with the Ellipse.

Do you have anything to add in conclusion?

I thank the Heavens for having granted me this opportunity, of amusing myself while working. It is exceptional!...



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Self-portrait,
Gérald Genta

