

TENS MAGAZINE N°17

FOCUS VINTAGE — GILBERT ALBERT

English translation of the editorial text

Cover

GILBERT ALBERT

FOCUS VINTAGE

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Focus — pages 9–10

The jeweller behind Patek Philippe's creations for seven years.

Gilbert Albert was a landmark figure too, though in a different way from Gérald Genta, whom we covered in the previous section.

Gilbert Albert was born on 20 September 1930 and passed away on 30 September 2019. A true creative, a man who devoted his time to the city of Geneva and to the shining reputation of Swiss craftsmanship, Gilbert Albert left his mark on the artisanal landscape of Helvetic luxury.

Not trained in watchmaking but in jewellery and fine jewellery, Gilbert Albert studied at the École des Arts Industriels in Geneva, which he entered in 1945. A genuine lover of nature, the designer's various creations would lean towards the principles of Art Nouveau.

An admirer of everything the earth and the sea have to offer as materials, precious or not for that matter, Gilbert Albert also made form his own as a creator, adorning seashells, corals, pearls, bark, fossils, diamonds and more to craft pieces with instantly recognisable designs, which earned him around ten prizes at the Diamonds International Awards.

You're probably asking yourself: what is a creative jeweller doing in a magazine dedicated to watchmaking?

You're right to ask, and the answer lies in a few years spent at a renowned Geneva house: Patek Philippe.

Gilbert Albert worked for several watch houses during his career: the Geneva house, and Omega as well. In 1955, he reigned for seven years within the Geneva house, as creator and head of the atelier, giving Patek Philippe great freedom in its proposals. Beloved by Henri Stern, his employer at the time, Gilbert Albert had fun with it, and positioned Patek Philippe as a brand that knows how to take risks and break out of the round (literally).

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Right-hand column

Three notable watch collections came out, along with jewellery for the brand, and the legend was born.

Gilbert Albert built the reputation of a rare period for the House, and is adored by watch collectors, simply for the creative capacity of that era and the balance of the pieces.

I shared with you in Tens Magazine N°6 the notion of the “design of watchmaking”, with the Focus on Boucheron. So consider that Patek Philippe had the presence of mind to recruit the man behind the designs, and to build matching movements for the collections of a watch brand.

That, in my view, is how the finest Patek Philippe creations came to be, and why they feel timeless despite a very bold design.

The Asymétrique is a watch that, as its name suggests, has for its signature an asymmetric case in precious materials. Released in 1957, the piece plays on elements that are imperfect in their straightness, yet harmonious in the final shape, bringing balance back to the watch.

One example was released in 1959, near unique, but regarded by the sharpest collectors as a grail: the Cobra.

Gilbert Albert — pages 11-12

GILBERT ALBERT

1957 — Asymétrique

1959 — Cobra

1961 — Ricochet

A piece that was difficult to put into production, but which Gilbert Albert had developed in collaboration with Louis Cottier to allow a linear display on a mechanical watch. Entirely in gold, it strayed off the beaten track, yet always with that constant nod to nature, in this case the unmistakable reptile that inspired its shape.

Another collection, named Ricochet, was created in the early 1960s, this time offered as a pocket watch or a wristwatch, and often praised among the best in its category for the harmony of its forms and, above all, the utterly splendid finishing that reminds me of tree bark.

What I love about these pieces is that they show a less traditional, more playful side of Patek Philippe, but with a premise that goes far beyond the creator's wish to make Patek a brand that breaks out of the round. No, I get the feeling the goal was always to follow Nature throughout Gilbert's time at the House, and even as an independent right after. Art Nouveau brings originality without seeking it, and that, I think, is what makes the well-deserved success of the watches signed Gilbert.

If you're a designer or a creator, the takeaway from Gilbert's adventure at Patek is that you have to start from your own vision to bring your own touch, without ever trying to make a sequel to something you didn't create yourself. The proof, right here: it worked.

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Photo credit — @roni_m_29 — Asymétrique

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Photo credit — FHH — Cobra

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Tens Magazine N°17 — Focus Vintage: Gilbert Albert

Text and editorial concept: Gabriel G. — Tens Horology

ISSN 3130-3331 — tens-horology.com

English translation of an originally French text, produced with the assistance of AI.

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