

History

WATCH AUCTIONS: THREE DECADES OF A LEGEND PART I

BY OLLIVIER BROTO, WATCHONISTA CONTRIBUTOR, AND JOËL A. GRANDJEAN, CHIEF EDITOR OF WATCHONISTA

In the early 90s, watches at auction could only be found among the general objects to come under the hammer at non-specialist sales. We take a look back in time.

→
The Rolex "Bao Dai" reference 6062 ignited a bidding war of 13 minutes, eventually selling for CHF 5.1 million, at the Phillips auction in Geneva in May



The age of the visionaries

Auctions dedicated exclusively to horology were once specialist rivulets supplying, alternately, the ever-widening stream of dealers and, albeit less frequently, the three main general auction houses present in Geneva.

A handful of personalities with a nose for the business, genuine watchmaking enthusiasts and legend builders, came to the fore immediately prior to this period. Osvaldo Patrizzi was one such figure. In 1974, he had already founded the “Galerie d’Horlogerie Ancienne”, an auction house for “wristwatches, clocks and other objets de vertu”, which became Antiquorum SA in 1987. He also subsequently took advantage of the demise of Habsburg Feldman, whose last auction in Hong Kong was back in 1990.

The other leading figure was Dr. Helmut Crott, an expert collector somewhat eclipsed by the much-hyped Osvaldo Patrizzi. He is nevertheless one of the visionaries to whom the industry owes so much today. Originally the founder of Dr. Crott Auctioneers in 1974, he embodies a German tradition, which, at the time, was just as, if not more, important than that of Geneva. He still owns what purists consider to be the largest Patek Philippe database for old watches. A reliable tool, which continues to be regularly updated and consulted to this day, listing all the product references with their sales scores and which is based on a system that relies on traceability and exhaustive documentation. The information contained therein proves just how independent of stock market developments these pieces have been in terms of investment and legacy value over the last 25 to 30 years.

Still active in the industry and highly respected among an entire breed of collectors impervious to passing crazes and trends,

Suddenly, based on an idea of Osvaldo Patrizzi, the concept of the themed auction revolutionised the industry.

the pioneer Helmut Crott remembers how Patek Philippe already dominated the field back in the day. The remainder of the offering comprised complicated pocket watches produced by home-grown (Swiss) and foreign brands, including those made by Abraham-Louis Breguet in the 1800s, steel Rolex Sport watches, such as the Stellite Moon ref. 6062, the Jean-Claude Killy or Paul Newman Daytona chronograph watches, Vacheron Constantin’s pocket or wristwatches, and the old A. Lange & Söhne models from Glashütte.

In addition to these figurehead models, one could also find enamelled pieces made in Geneva in the first half of the 19th century and Swiss automaton models dating from around the 1800s, stellar mechanical works of art, which fetched over 2 M CHF. On the other hand, wristwatches made by brands less in demand, often chronographs, commanded derisory prices. Thus, brands such as Omega, Eberhard & Co, Heuer or Longines were far more affordable compared to Patek Philippe.

The turning point of 1989, the birth of themed auctions

Suddenly, based on an idea of Osvaldo Patrizzi, the concept of themed auctions revolutionised the industry. “Today, they are milestones in watchmaking history”, Dr. Helmut Crott confides. He may well have been inspired by Sotheby’s famous sale of a watch collection in the United States in 1986 belonging to Seth Atwood, the American industrialist, who sold off his Time Museum in Rockford, Illinois. Be that as it



Dr. Helmut Crott, the founder of Dr. Crott Auctioneers in 1974, an expert collector and one of the visionaries to whom the industry owes much today.

Rolex Ref. 6265/6262
Daytona 'Paul Newman Panda'
circa 1971 (Sotheby's)



may, he made the year 1989, coincidentally the date of Patek Philippe's 150th anniversary, a turning point. Osvaldo Patrizzi had, in fact, held the very first auction exclusively dedicated to the legendary maison's timepieces. Head honcho organiser and expert hammer-wielder with a firm grip on the finer points of interpersonal and communication skills, the exuberant entrepreneur auctioneer managed to gather a sufficient number of sought-after pieces to turn the event into an overwhelming success with the public. This brief overview helps give an idea of the watch offering in the late 80s and of the trends that would emerge. It was the end of a decade, which, after the fatal quartz crisis, contributed in its own way to the rebirth of the mechanical watchmaking industry.

Lot no. 34 was a PPC 2499/100 in platinum, where C stood for & Cie, since the company still carried the name Patek Philippe & Cie. The price achieved for this unique timepiece under the hammer was CHF 380,000. Lot no.

297 was a rectangular minute repeater, the only piece attributed to Mel Blanc (1908-1989), the Californian actor dubbed "the man of a thousand voices" for his mastery of the cartoon voice, which went for just over half a million at CHF 520,000. Lot no.229, a rectangular Patek Philippe timepiece with tourbillon, topped all sales at CHF 650,000.

As Dr. Helmut Crott himself proclaimed in response to this remarkable result: "At that time, as in previous years, it was the pocket watch, not the wristwatch, that was putting up the best sales performance." Thus the grand complication dubbed as Lot no. 300 and Calibre 89 achieved a record CHF 850,000 and CHF 4.5 million, respectively, at auction.

1989 was also the inaugural year of the Patek Philippe Museum, at 7, Rue des Vieux-Grenadiers, Geneva. The wealthy Italians who were contributing largely to the surge in horology-specific auction sales were then joined by a newcomer, followed by aficionados from all over the world: none other than



Osvaldo Patrizzi,
the founder of Antiquorum and
a legend of watch auctions

the owner of the brand, Philippe Stern, ever keen to add to his watchmaking and enamel collections, and build upon his prestigious library. His thirst for acquiring historical pieces of his own, as well as Swiss watchmaking items in general, only served to boost sales and excite interest.

To sum up, 1989 saw the breakthrough of vintage wristwatches onto a market hitherto dominated by pocket watches and automata. It also marked the point at which watchmaking pieces acquired a division of their own in the auction sector, a fact that the grand old institutions of watchmaking had to learn to live with. It was therefore at

this moment that a genuine division was born and the sound of the gavel reverberated for the first time at exclusive watchmaking sales. Since then, in collectors' circles, the collector's watch has had a special place, of the kind hitherto reserved only for paintings and sculptures. The new business area has continued to gather momentum to this day, save only for a sharp downturn at the end of the Gulf War in 1992. "Even Patek Philippe pieces were victims of the crisis and falling prices," Dr. Helmut Crott remembers.

Other key dates

First off are the themed auction dates arranged by Osvaldo Patrizzi. Patrizzi organised several events under the banner of Antiquorum, whose cultural staging approach and impressive catalogues helped bring together the world of vintage watches with that of art in the form of painting, sculpture and legendary objets d'art: "L'Art de Breguet" in 1991, "L'Art de l'Horlogerie Française" in 1993, "L'Art de Vacheron Constantin" in 1994, "L'Art de l'Horlogerie Anglaise" in 1995, and "L'Art de Cartier" in 1996.

Dr. Crott Auctioneers created a buzz in Frankfurt in 1992 with its themed auction of watches from Glashütte, in particular a number of timepieces produced by A. Lange & Söhne. It topped the one million DM mark with a gold and enamel pocket watch with tourbillon dating from 1900. The millennium ended on a record note, when, in 1999, Patek Philippe's Henry Graves Super-Complication, the most famous watch in the world, went under the hammer at Sotheby's and sold for a record-breaking 11 M USD, thus making it the most expensive timepiece in history.



Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva, inaugurated in 1989

Read the article online at Watchonista.com



AUREL BACS: A COLLECTOR OF SUPERLATIVES

INTERVIEW BY SERGE MAILLARD

Aurel Bacs has put his stamp on today's auction world with his record-beating sales. What hidden mechanisms are at work behind these skyrocketing sales statistics?

Without a doubt the most iconic figure in today's watch auction world, Aurel Bacs has been with several prestigious auction houses, each time leaving his own inimitable stamp on the industry: Sotheby's (1995-2000), Phillips, for the first time (2000-2003), then with Christie's (2003-2013), before returning to Phillips in 2015 with the stand-alone consulting firm Bacs & Russo, founded jointly with his wife. In May, the auctioneer packed a big punch with a Rolex 'Bao Dai' wrist-watch, which went for over 5 million CHF.

You drove Christie's ahead of Antiquorum, you are now driving Phillips ahead of... Christie's. Is the success of an auction house mainly linked to the aura of the auctioneer – Osvaldo Patrizzi back then, now your good self? Is it really just a matter of personality?

At the risk of appearing provocative, I'd say that even if you start out with a McDonald's logo, you can still make it to the top, if you build the best team! I'm no miracle-maker, or angel sent from heaven. Success is built on reputation, a good address book and a solid team. Whenever I've joined a house in the past, sometimes I've found a team already in place, other times none at all. Each time, we were either no.3, no.4, or nowhere in the ratings. On two occasions, I started from scratch at Phillips. But we've always been able to build a team and secure a leadership positioning.

Have your teams always followed you from one house to the next?

I've never taken any teams with me! You can find new talent everywhere. The man who currently manages the American market had never worked in a watch auction house before: he previously worked in defence... But he had what mattered most: passion, an address book and a reputation. You could

call it obsession, love, the pleasure of dealing in fine watchmaking... We move in a world where there are no contracts to protect you, where you rely solely on a relationship of trust between the client and the auction house. That's why our reputation must be flawless. And that's the guarantee that also attracts the finest experts.

Have you noticed how your clientele has evolved since you first started out?


It has completely changed: only 10% of the clients I had in 1995 are still in business. If the top specialist a decade or so ago had fallen into a deep sleep and woken up today, he would never be able to organise a 10 million CHF auction sale. Firstly, we work with new players and the address book has changed totally: hugely wealthy clients with an interest in watchmaking are turning up from nowhere. Information is widely available, collectors are now acquiring an in-depth technical knowledge of timepieces. Trends have also evolved: the square pink models with manual winding popular back then have been replaced by round steel automatic designs. And appraisals have become highly complex.

The current development in the vintage market is no doubt linked to the general resurgence in interest for watches after 2000. In that respect, your own fortunes seem to be inextricably linked with those of the contemporary watchmaking industry...

I'm indeed very grateful to those people who have never abandoned fine watchmaking at the manufactures, for example Messrs. Stern, Hayek, Cologni, Rupert and Biver. They have been responsible for giving millions of people the taste for watchmaking, and of course we also benefit. At the same time, globalisation has contributed enormously to the rise in popularity of watchmaking and watch auctions. Never would we have grown so fast if we had confined ourselves to Western, or, indeed, Japanese demand.

But the correlation with the current industry appears to end there: you are now achieving record sales, while modern watch sales are in decline...

There's an easy answer to that: the demand outweighs the number of vintage watches that are actually saleable. No one's likely to come across a safe containing a million rare watches. And lots of old watches are no longer saleable, they are either damaged, poorly restored, or altered almost beyond recognition. Consequently, the prices have necessarily risen. What to do if you don't have the wherewithal to buy your precious Patek Philippe or Rolex? You look for alternatives. This explains the recent successes posted at watch auc-



tions by brands such as Longines, Tudor, Omega and Heuer, and the “independent” watchmakers, such as F.P. Journe, Richard Mille, MB&F, to name but a few.

Occasionally, one hears criticisms that today’s boutique staff lack expertise. Does this also explain collectors’ current interest in the vintage watch world?

The subject of knowledge is a tricky one. If someone spends millions of CHF on watches, does it make him a specialist? For instance, I’m not a wine connoisseur, if I were to be handed a wine list the length of an auction catalogue, I’d tell the wine steward: *“I’d like to enjoy some quality time in good company; I’ll leave it to you: this is my budget and my preference.”* It’s also like that in the watchmaking world. It’s perfectly OK to not be a specialist, it doesn’t make you unworthy in any way!

The internet has nonetheless increased the amount and reach of information and knowledge available: we can find out anything we want about a particular model, old or new, whenever we want...

I’m still sceptical about the internet. Recently, Twitter’s founder apologised that what started out as an information dissemination tool has ended up being invaded by fake news, to such an extent as to even influence the election results... We shouldn’t bury our heads in the sand: much of the stuff written on the internet about watchmaking is fake! We use the web for our communication and people can now bid at our auctions via the internet, but there are some experiences that technology cannot replace, such as talking with people face-to-face... And 95% of our clients bidding on the internet have already seen the timepiece in the flesh. ♦

RESURRECTING ANTIQUORUM: ROMAIN REA'S TRICKY TASK

INTERVIEW BY SERGE MAILLARD

Despite being the first house to launch thematic auctions devoted to watchmaking under the impetus of the charismatic Osvaldo Patrizzi, Antiquorum has seen a drop in its fortunes in the past decade. The task that lies ahead for French expert watchmaker Romain Réa, who has just taken over the reins, is an obvious, but not easy, one.



Were you not in two minds about taking over the reins at Antiquorum since the decline in its fortunes over the past decade and the forced departure of the legendary Osvaldo Patrizzi?

I gave the matter a lot of thought before agreeing to take over the management. I was certain in my heart, because Antiquorum, a pioneering auction house in the field, is one of the reasons I am so passionate about watches! But as far as my head was concerned, the decision was less instinctive, given its eventful past. But my task was to put those events behind me and turn a new page. I submitted an action plan, which was accepted by the owners of Antiquorum Management. I should just like to point out that our shareholder, FIDES, is based in Zurich and invested in the company in 2014. We have no contact at all with Antiquorum USA, which suffered so many setbacks involving Osvaldo Patrizzi. One of my conditions, in fact, was that we should be backed by a powerful shareholder... without any complications.

What kind of auction experience do you have?

I was first approached as watchmaking expert and entrepreneur in the sector. I've had several stores in Paris and was the founder of the watchmaking department of Artcurial. In particular, I led the first thematic auctions devoted to Jaeger-LeCoultre and Panerai in France.

How do you intend setting Antiquorum back on its feet?

I have a three-pronged action plan. First of all, my task is to resurrect the company's heritage and rekindle the "magic" of Antiquorum. We want to restore the undeniable quality of the entity's expertise, put a stop to the rumours surrounding the company and defend the brand on every level: that's the main objective, the main task from which everything else will follow.

The second strategic move is geographical: while sales in Geneva remain very good, the same cannot quite be said for Hong Kong, a market that was abandoned by the previous management team. We want to revive the momentum in Asia, not just in China, but also in Japan. Also, we are launching a new permanent presence in Monaco, or "little Geneva" as it is known, where I have several on-the-spot contacts. As is the case with Geneva and Hong Kong, we'll be there 365 days a year. It's the French Riviera, so watchmaking will grow increasingly in importance. We should also point out that even though we're not specialists in everything, we're going to extend the range of items for sale to include jewellery and other luxury goods. We've therefore planned another jewellery auction in Monaco in July.

Finally, our third task is to re-establish the prestige of Antiquorum's thematic watch auctions, which came into existence within our company. Although the last big date in the calendar was Omegamania in 2007, we're going to make this our core activity. The first thematic sale that we'll be organising in November in Geneva will be the Art of Calatrava to mark the 85th birthday of the model and the anniversary of the creation of the Croix de Calatrava. It will be a tribute to The Art of Patek Philippe, Antiquorum's first thematic sale in 1989.

What about the digital revolution?

Surprisingly enough, the .com address of the site still belongs to the former director, Evan Zimmermann. We therefore launched a new antiquorum.swiss address, firmly connecting the company to its roots in Geneva, the birthplace of luxury watchmaking. More generally speaking, the online store will be developed before summer. There are a lot of projects going on at the same time. We'll carry on as if we'd just started up!

How do you reckon on repairing the poor image plaguing Antiquorum following the ousting of Osvaldo Patrizzi, even though he has since emerged as blameless from the affair, cleared of all suspicion? It's difficult to rise untainted from such a business, in the watch connoisseur's eyes...

We are undertaking a major overhaul from the catalogue graphics chart to the pieces exhibited! Our task is to preserve the DNA of this historical company intact by recreating a top-quality image and content symbolic of its rebirth. Antiquorum is now way behind its competitors. As for Osvaldo Patrizzi, he is still the founder of the company and in this regard he retains his integrity. We must not forget this. I simply have a new vision for the company.

But what, in particular, can you offer collectors, when there are people like Aurel Bacs at Phillips, Christie's and Sotheby's, who occupy nearly the entire territory?

I work with a huge team of experts in France and Monaco. Many companies have a distinctive face, an expert who dominates. We rely heavily on teamwork and have many experts. The quality of our skills is already top-notch, but hardly anyone realises it. We must work on promoting them. In fact, we have garnered an extraordinary wealth of experience since 1974. As far as I'm concerned, I won't be abandoning my activities in Paris or my work as expert at the Court of Appeals. Basically, I'm placing my networks at Antiquorum's disposal. That's the network we'll be building on. ♦