



WHEN A COMPLICATION BECOMES USEFUL

STORY

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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In 1996, Patek Philippe launched the innovative annual calendar complication to great acclaim. This clever construction was not just an exercise in horological experimentation; it was a thoughtful response to the requirements of the manufacture's clientele and the watch industry as a whole

Opposite: the 37 mm REF. 5035 (see also p. 46, top row), here shown in yellow gold, was launched in 1996. The annual calendar mechanism for its caliber 315 S QA movement was patented by Patek Philippe in the same year. This "useful complication" only requires the user to adjust the date once a year, at the end of February

An excited buzz could be felt in the air at the 1996 Basel fair. Patek Philippe had unveiled a wristwatch that no attendee could have predicted. The REF. 5035 was equipped with the groundbreaking annual calendar complication that only required the wearer to correct the date once a year. Those lucky few observers bore witness to the inception of a brand-new horological concept: the "useful complication."

During this same period, the Swiss watchmaking industry, although still recovering from the effects of the quartz crisis, was in the midst of a mechanical watch revival. In 1989, on the occasion of its 150th anniversary, Patek Philippe had presented

its historic Calibre 89. The model was the most complicated timepiece in the world at its launch (and remained so for more than 25 years), with 33 functions driven by 1,728 parts. At the time, Patek Philippe was the only maker to offer a significant number of complex watches in its regular collection. But other companies were catching on. Following the launch of the Calibre 89, other brands were increasing their production numbers for grand complication models. Sensing the likelihood of market saturation in this prestigious and costly watchmaking category and the potential to overwhelm a limited audience of collectors and wealthy enthusiasts, the company's then president,

FIRST ANNUAL CALENDAR



In 1996, the innovative REF. 5035 (left) was awarded “Watch of the Year” by the Swiss magazine *Montres Passion*. The model is fitted with the 315 S QA caliber. Patek Philippe’s first foray into useful complications paved the way for an ever-evolving collection of timepieces equipped with the annual calendar mechanism. At the 1998 Basel fair, the REF. 5036/1 (left, below) was launched in yellow, white, and rose gold, on a gold “droplet” bracelet created for this model. This 37 mm watch has moon-phase and power-reserve indicators as well as the annual calendar function, all powered by the caliber 315 S 1RM QA LU

FIRST METAL BRACELET VERSIONS



Philippe Stern, chose to change course. He had strategic, economic, and horological reasons for his decision. “Our customer base is faithful but getting older,” he said. “If we want to extend it, we need to offer a more accessible option, a sportier watch that is easier to use. We must innovate.” Strategically, Philippe Stern’s approach consisted of branching into a new market, though by no means renouncing grand complication watches. The useful complications that Philippe Stern and his team had in mind would occupy the gap between the time-only watches and the grand complication timepieces. The cost of these useful watches in the 1990s would fill a similar space, between that of a classic time-only Calatrava (priced at CHF10,200, around US\$10,000) and a coeval perpetual calendar watch (CHF47,000, around US\$45,000). But it was important for Patek Philippe to tread carefully. In the early 1990s, the market for accessory watches was waning. Even watches such as the 1976 Nautilus no longer held the same appeal. One new watch would not be enough on its own to reinvigorate enthusiasm and interest in the

company. “We have to reinvent ourselves,” Philippe Stern insisted. And that meant reinvention in every sense of the word. In 1996, the year that bore witness to the Annual Calendar REF. 5035 launch (retailing then at CHF17,800, around US\$17,500), the company also inaugurated its impressive new manufacturing site. This huge investment united all the workshops (which had formerly been scattered in and around Geneva) under one roof in Plan-les-Ouates. In 1999, just three years later, the company introduced the Twenty-4, its first collection of watches for women. Philippe Stern had held the company to its promise of reinvention. And all this laid the groundwork for Patek Philippe’s new useful complication. The annual calendar function was a great concept. It would offer the wearer a convenient calendar – without the complexity of a perpetual calendar – that only needed to be adjusted once a year, at the end of February. The attractive price point only increased this new complication’s appeal. However, several years were to pass between idea and realization. To begin with, Patek Philippe tested other useful

THE DIAMOND DISTINCTION



CELEBRATING PARTNERSHIPS



Above, top: the REF. 5056P was Patek Philippe’s first platinum model to have a diamond set between the lugs at 6 o’clock. Thierry Stern proposed the charcoal gray color of the dial, which has a date aperture as well as day and month sub-dials, moon phases, and a power-reserve indicator. Above, left: in 2001, Patek Philippe crafted the limited-edition REF. 5150J to mark 150 years of collaboration with Tiffany & Co. A “T” sits at 12 o’clock, and the day, month, and date are all shown in apertures. Above, right: to celebrate 125 years since the establishment of Wempe, the German watch retailer, and the pair’s long-standing relationship, Patek Philippe created the limited-edition REF. 5125P

CURRENCY CONVERSIONS CALCULATED USING HISTORICAL EXCHANGE RATE

SHAPED CASES



In 2004, the annual calendar complication first appeared in a shaped case, in the REF. 5135 (far left), which uses the caliber 324 S QA LU 24H. This was the first model to display apertures on an arc. In 2007, the larger REF. 5033P (left) followed and was unusual in that it combined the annual calendar function with a minute repeater

LADIES’ VERSIONS



THOSE PRESENT AT THE 1996 BASEL WATCH FAIR BORE WITNESS TO THE INCEPTION OF A HOROLOGICAL CONCEPT THAT STILL AMAZES TODAY



In 2005, the REF. 4936J (above, left) was the first ladies’ model to include the annual calendar function. The bezel is set with 156 Top Wesselton diamonds, and the dial and sub-dials are made of mother-of-pearl. Applied gold Roman numerals and gold *feuille* hands indicate the time. The REF. 4936 was followed by the REF. 4937, REF. 4947, REF. 4948, and REF. 4946. Many of the subsequent models also have mother-of-pearl dials and sub-dials and diamond-set cases. Day, month, and moon-phase indicators occupy the sub-dials, and the date aperture sits at 6 o’clock. The REF. 4947/1A was the first steel bracelet model. It has no diamonds and the dial features a “shantung” finish that mimics the texture of shantung silk. This style was also used on the REF. 4946R (left) and on the REF. 4946G’s blue-gray dial (see left and p. 51)

LARGER CASES



A demand for larger watches led to the 39 mm case of the REF. 5146 (above, left), which replaced the 37 mm REF. 5035 (the first model to be fitted with the annual calendar function). The new reference was available in white gold, yellow gold, or platinum and with either a strap or a bracelet. In 2006, a diamond-set version, REF. 5147G, was released

ADVANCED RESEARCH



Patek Philippe's Advanced Research department made the REF. 5250 (above, left) with its Silinvar® escape wheel in 2005. The REF. 5350 (above, right) debuted the Spiromax® balance spring in 2006, and the REF. 5450P (left) was fitted with the Pulsomax® escapement. The inventions within these limited-edition pieces greatly improve a caliber's precision

AUTOMATIC FLYBACK CHRONOGRAPH



The 2006 Annual Calendar Chronograph REF. 5960P (above, left) houses the CH 28-520 1RM QA 24H caliber, which was Patek Philippe's first self-winding flyback chronograph and is also equipped with the mechanisms for the annual calendar, power reserve, and day/night indicator. The caliber was used in the 2011 diamond-set REF. 5961P and in the 2015 REF. 5905P (above, right) in a larger case with scalloped lugs

AUTOMATIC FLYBACK CHRONOGRAPH EVOLUTIONS



concepts, such as offering a power-reserve or moon-phase indication. Then, in 1991, the manufacture decided to collaborate with the Geneva School of Engineering to develop the annual calendar complication.

Philip Barat, Patek Philippe's now retired Head of Research and Development, was an Expert at the Geneva School of Engineering at the time. He remembers that, because of this collaboration, it was suggested that final-year students create an annual calendar complication as part of their diploma thesis. "This was not simply a case of adapting a perpetual calendar complication," Mr. Barat explains. "They were to base their design on the so-called 'simple' wristwatch calendar that required adjustment five times a year."

Mr. Barat clearly recalls the reasoning for this stipulation, which was to present a real challenge for the new learners: "Philippe Stern wanted the watch to be slender and

THE FUNCTION WAS BASED, IN ESSENCE, ON THE 24-HOUR WHEEL FOUND IN SIMPLE CALENDARS

legible. It also needed to be as simple as possible to manufacture and assemble in order to reduce production costs." As a result, the brief "obliged the young engineers to devise a construction consisting mainly of wheels, rather than the cumbersome levers, pinions, cams, and racks typically used in a perpetual calendar watch," he explains.

The annual calendar complication, once realized, was lavishly finished and patented by Patek Philippe. The mechanism was based on the simple calendar's 24-hour wheel, to which two finger pieces were added at an angle to each other. The first advanced the date wheel by one notch a day, and the second only intervened in months with 30 days, moving the date directly from 30 to 1. As a result, the watch only had to be adjusted once a year, at the end of February.

This single adjustment captures the simplified concept of the annual calendar mechanism compared with the complexity

IN-LINE DATE APERTURES



The REF. 5396R-001 (above, top left) was the first model to feature twin in-line day and month apertures and it is powered by the caliber 324 S QA LU 24H. The case shape drew on that of the 1930s REF. 96. In 2026, the rose gold REF. 5396R with a sand-beige dial (left) launched. The REF. 5205G (below) features an arced aperture display and a new case with open-worked lugs

OPEN-WORKED LUGS



NAUTILUS ANNUAL CALENDAR



ANNUAL CALENDAR REGULATOR-STYLE DISPLAY



Patek Philippe combined the functionality of the annual calendar with the sporty Nautilus aesthetic for the first time in the REF. 5726A (far left). A steel-on-steel version arrived in 2012, and in 2019 a blue-dial version replaced both earlier models. The REF. 5235G (left) was the first model to use the regulator display with the annual calendar

ANNUAL CALENDAR TRAVEL TIME



The REF. 5326G combines a travel time and an annual calendar function in the 31-260 PS QA LU FUS 24H caliber. Clous de Paris is engraved on the caseband, and the dial texture mimics that of vintage cameras

THE DIAL OF THE 1996 REF. 5035 DIFFERENTIATED IT IMMEDIATELY FROM A PERPETUAL CALENDAR MODEL

of a perpetual calendar. But as Mr. Barat notes, “achieving simplicity is a complicated affair,” which is why the annual calendar complication has more parts than that of a perpetual calendar – 324 compared to 280. The jumper spring is one good example of why the annual calendar complication requires an increased number of parts. As Mr. Barat explains, “In a perpetual calendar complication, a jumper spring is produced as one piece and machined on several levels, making it an intricate part to manufacture. In an annual calendar complication, the same jumper spring is made as two flat pieces that are simpler to produce but need two pins to join them together. In this one example, a perpetual calendar function uses one part and an annual calendar uses four.” At the end of 1996, the 37 mm REF. 5035, the first annual calendar wristwatch, was crowned “Watch of the Year” by the Swiss magazine *Montres Passion*. Philippe Stern declared himself “extremely touched” by the industry’s recognition of a product that was so technically innovative at the time. The model was also visually innovative. The dial differentiated it immediately from that

of a perpetual calendar model: the date no longer appeared in a subsidiary dial but was immediately legible in an aperture at 6 o’clock. The day, month, and 24-hour displays were indicated in three small sub-dials. Furthermore, in contrast to a perpetual calendar timepiece the REF. 5035 used a center seconds hand, and the numerals and hour and minute hands had a white luminescent coating. At the time, such hands were rare in a complicated watch, but the effect is clean, understated, and elegant. The annual calendar complication has gone on to enjoy extraordinary success, and, with the passing years, numerous models and iterations have appeared to great acclaim. As the timelines across these pages demonstrate, subsequent annual calendar models have followed the award-winning REF. 5035, often enriched with additional functions such as travel time, moon phases, a minute repeater, or power-reserve indication. The annual calendar complication has been included in established watch families, appearing in the tonneau-shaped Gondolo Calendario REF. 5135 in 2004, with a new layout for the month, day, and date displays

AQUANAUT ANNUAL CALENDAR



In 2023, the annual calendar function was added to the Aquanaut collection for the first time. The REF. 5261R features month and day sub-dials as well as a moon-phase indicator at 12 o’clock on its blue-gray dial. The automatic 26-330 S QA LU caliber powers this model

in apertures. The complication also featured in an elegant Calatrava case in the 2006 REF. 5396R, and, in 2007, was added alongside a minute repeater to the REF. 5033, a tonneau-shaped grand complication wristwatch. In 2011, the regulator-style display of the REF. 5235G included the annual calendar function, and in 2012 it was used in the Nautilus REF. 5726/1A. The useful complication also appeared in elegant jeweled models that were designed for smaller wrists; the REF. 4936, first released in 2005, had several iterations, proving the useful complication’s popularity with women. At 30 years old, the annual calendar function has enjoyed a rich and adventurous youth. Ready now to take on a fine array of new faces and make itself useful on countless occasions, the complication asks for just one thing, that at the end of February the wearer makes a small adjustment and takes this moment to acknowledge the model’s infinitely useful and elegant capabilities. ♦ *Translated by Barbara Caffin*



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In 2026, Patek Philippe’s collection continues to include the annual calendar function. The rose gold REF. 5396R (bottom) has a sand-beige dial with day, date, and month apertures and a moon-phase sub-dial. The white gold REF. 4946G (top) has day, month, and moon-phase sub-dials on a blue-gray “shantung” dial and a tone-on-tone calfskin strap with a “denim” pattern