



# Ahead of his time

A master jeweller at heart, Gilbert Albert also transformed watch design and his genius lives on today. By *Tania Edwards*

Gilbert Albert (1930-2019) may not be a household name in the world of great jewellery or watch designers, yet his fantastical and original pieces saw him scoop an unprecedented 10 De Beers Diamonds International Awards: three for Patek Philippe watches, two for Omega watches and five for his own jewellery designs. No other designer has ever achieved this.

Often referred to as a “master alchemist”, Albert was the first jeweller to set meteorite fragments into fine jewellery. His lifelong love of nature and an early interest in entomology inspired his use of raw materials such as fossils, scarabs, feathers and shells. Combining these elements with coloured golds, gemstones and pearls secured his position as a pioneer of contemporary jewellery design. And, even though his designs were eccentric, they were also practical: stones could be interchanged in rings, or brooches transformed into pendants.

Before Albert went on to make his distinctive mark in jewellery, he first transformed the world of watch design. His talent was evident from the start – by the age of 15 he was studying at the prestigious L'Ecole des Arts Industriels in Geneva. In 1955, he caught the attention of Henri Stern at Patek Philippe, who asked the then 25 year old to join the company as head of design. This was the golden age of commercial air travel, and the jet set was moving away from the conventional towards more modern, innovative design. As an early disrupter, Albert reinvented the way that Patek Philippe and all watchmakers looked at watch design. A watch case was no longer routinely round, rectangular, or square, but asymmetrical, triangular, or rhomboid.

During the eight years that Albert worked for Patek Philippe, his designs brought the



elder statesman of watchmaking well into the Swinging Sixties. As much as Stern was a fan of Albert's creativity, his avant-garde designs were not typical of the brand's traditional style and many watches only made it to the prototype stage (including one watch case wrapped with fur). Fortunately, designs such as 'Ricochet', 'Flying Saucer', 'Asymétrie', 'Futuriste' and 'Tutti Frutti' did appear in Patek Philippe's design catalogue and are now highly sought after by collectors.

Albert admired artists such as Brancusi and Mondrian, and their influence can be seen in his Asymétrie wristwatch collection for Patek Philippe, which launched in 1959 and was produced up until the late 1960s. Timepieces such as the asymmetric ref. 3424 can now sell for six figures on the secondary watch market.

Someone with an enviable collection of Albert-designed watches is renowned vintage watch collector, Ugandan businessman Roni Madhvani. “As someone interested in



Better by design: clockwise from main image: Gilbert Albert with a model wearing one of his distinctive pieces; 1961 Patek Philippe ref. 3266/53 necklace with a concealed watch behind a fresh-water pearl; Omega Maille d'Ors ref. 7148 (circa 1968) with a bark-finished bracelet; Albert's avant-garde Patek Philippe ref 3424; Patek Philippe ref. 789/1 'Ricochet' pocket watch

the arts and design, I got blown away when I first saw one of Albert's asymmetric watches in an old auction catalogue,” he says. “At that stage in my life, a few years out of university and in the most tempestuous of times, the ref. 3424 timepiece remained a compulsive dream that was only fulfilled almost a decade later. It also went further in fuelling my passion for the design genre of watches that I've come to embrace now.”

Gilbert Albert did not only change the way we looked at wristwatches — even the gentlemanly pocket watch received a complete makeover. His Ricochet collection included pebble-shaped cases made of solid gold that Albert hand-chiselled and engraved until each pocket watch became an organic form that rests comfortably in the hand.

Always a jeweller at heart, many of the watches he created for women are miniature works of art. In 1960, his award-winning Tutti Frutti ref. 3295 confection of different coloured gold elements and pearls, which decorated a cuff with a concealed dial, adorned the wrist of Princess Marta zu Windisch-Graetz of Austria, but could have equally be made for a mermaid princess.

After his time at Patek Philippe, Albert worked for Omega. Here, he created some of his most daring timepiece designs almost exclusively for women. Elaborate mesh bangle watches such as the Mailles d'Or, Rocaille d'Or and Frisson d'Or became signature pieces, often with the watch dial hidden beneath the intricate design of the bracelet. Once again, nature inspired every aspect of his design and the textured, hand-engraved bracelets with bark-like or coral-inspired finishes are mini marvels to wonder at.

As much as Albert loved designing watches, his passion for jewellery eventually led him back to the workbench, and in 1962 he opened his own atelier in Geneva while still consulting for Patek Philippe and Omega. His driving motivation was to follow the advice of his college tutor, who had told him: “If you want to succeed, do what others will not do.” His creativity reinvigorated, Albert saw beauty where no one else would. He contrasted rough materials such as meteorite, fulgurite and dinosaur bones with highly polished or textured gold, sprinkled with more traditional gemstones such as rubies, emeralds and diamonds.

Albert died on 1 October 2019, yet his legacy and impact on the world of watch and jewellery design continue to reverberate as new generations appreciate his unique contribution. Ahead of his time in so many ways, Albert's genius lives on through his extraordinary designs.