

Sector loses giants of horology

PARIS

The late George Daniels hailed as the Steve Jobs of fine watchmaking

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

George Daniels, widely admired as one of the world's greatest watchmakers, died Oct. 21 in his home on the Isle of Man. He was 85.

The world of horology has lost four giants this year: the ground-breaking designer Gérald Genta; Rolf Schnyder, chief executive of Ulysse Nardin; Nicolas Hayek, founder of the Swatch Group; and Mr. Daniels. For many, the greatest of these, for watchmaking artistry, was Mr. Daniels.

"George Daniels was the Steve Jobs of horology," said Geoffroy Ader, European head of watches at Sotheby's in Geneva.

In his lifetime, Mr. Daniels received some of the most prestigious honors bestowed in his native Britain and abroad for his achievements in horology.

He was the only watchmaker to receive from Queen Elizabeth II the honor of "Master Watchmaker, for services to Horology."

Mr. Daniels is credited with the invention in the 1970s of the coaxial escapement, a mechanism that helped improve the performance of mechanical watches by virtually eliminating the need for lubrication.

The invention has been hailed as unparalleled in 250 years of watchmaking.

"The problems of viscosity had been addressed by watchmakers for hundreds of years and not solved until the coaxial escapement," Mr. Daniels said on the Web site of Omega, the brand that ultimately acquired the rights to his invention.

"In a classification of horology inventors, Daniels is in first place," said Osvaldo Patrizzi, the founder and former head of the specialist watch auctioneer Antiquorum, from New York.

Traditional lever escapements, a feature invented in 1754 by another Englishman, Thomas Mudge, and largely used today, regulate time-keeping using a mechanism that generates friction, and must therefore be lubricated.

The coaxial escapement, in contrast, transmits energy using a mechanism that reduces both friction and loss of energy, ensuring better chronometric performance and avoiding all the problems associated with lubricant-related deterioration.

"The precision achieved by Daniels forty years ago can only be obtained today with certain complex machines," said Mr. Patrizzi.

Mr. Daniels was born in Edgware, North London, on Aug. 19, 1926, into a family with 11 children and modest means.

"We ate our meals standing up around the table," said Mr. Daniels in an interview viewable on the Web of Stories, a Web site that compiles recorded interviews and personal life stories. "We owned one chair, where our father would sit."

At the age of six, the discovery of a watch in his own house awoke his interest in watches.

"I don't know whom it belonged to, but it was fair game to open it up with a bread knife and examine its contents," said Mr. Daniels.

By the age of 12, he was making pocket money repairing watches.

While serving as a soldier in the World War II, he repaired watches, typewriters and cameras, making enough to allow him to buy tools when he returned home in 1947 and began repairing watches while attending horology school at night.

"There were not very many watch-



SOTHEBY'S

makers in England then," he said.

In the 1960s, as he started earning a living from his own watch repair business, Mr. Daniels developed a passion for classic cars, leading to an encounter with Cecile (Sam) Clutton, an author and expert in vintage cars and watches, who introduced Mr. Daniels to the world of moneyed watch collectors.

Another meeting with George Brown, then owner of Bréguet, led to Mr. Daniels's becoming an agent for the brand in London and engaging in a restoration and repair of complex Bréguet pieces.

"Daniels was the cultural heir to Bréguet," said Mr. Patrizzi. "Like Bréguet, he was both a watchmaker and an aesthete."

"With his artist's sensibility, he could capture the style and spirit of Bréguet, while adding something of his own touch," Mr. Patrizzi added.

In 1982, Mr. Daniels moved to the Isle of Man, where he continued to work as a watchmaker.

Though his invention of the coaxial escapement is viewed as revolutionary, for years he tried unsuccessfully to find

"With his artist's sensibility, he could capture the style and spirit of Bréguet," and add his own.

a Swiss watch producer to incorporate it in modern, series-made watches.

"I wasn't Swiss, and 'not invented here' was applied heavily to me," he said on the Web of Stories. "For nearly 20 years, I visited Swiss factories and became more and more despondent."

It was not until 1999 that Omega, owned by the Swatch Group, introduced his coaxial escapement mechanism in the watches first presented at the Basel-world fair that year.

If Mr. Daniels had to resort to Swiss brands to produce and commercialize his invention, it was because the post-war British watch industry was in severe decline.

"When George started making his pocket watches in the late 1960s, the British watch industry had all but disappeared," Roger Smith, an independent watchmaker and longtime protégé of Mr. Daniels, said from the Isle of Man.

According to Mr. Smith, the advent of mass-produced timepieces in the United States starting in the 1850s had already brought on the decline of the British watch industry, slow in modernizing its means of production.

The growth of the Swiss watch industry in the 1900s put the nail in the coffin of the British industry.

Still, the British Isles have a long tradition of horological excellence, from John Harrison, the 18th-century inventor of the marine chronometer, to the handful of independents working today, including Mr. Smith, Peter Speake-Marin, and the Irish brothers John and Stephen McGonigle — not to mention Big Ben's creator, the recently revived clockmaker Dent.

"Much of the innovation in watchmaking has come from England, but it was not capable of being commercialized there," Mr. Speake-Marin said from Bursins, Switzerland.

"Daniels proved that that an individual could be successful in an industry dominated by empires," he said.

In his lifetime, Mr. Daniels produced some 37 entirely handmade timepieces, not including prototypes. Today they are recognized as rare and highly collectible works of art.

"You can admire a George Daniels timepiece for hours," said Mr. Patrizzi. "They are fabulous to watch."

"There is no watchmaker today capable of achieving the same manual quality that Daniels was able to create," he said.

If Mr. Daniels was not a household name outside horology circles, it is partly because of his limited production.

"In a Daniels timepiece, you see a work of supreme craftsmanship, but with that limited quantity, you will not make waves in the mass market," said James Gurney, editor of QP magazine, a British watch magazine, in an interview from London.

Mr. Patrizzi said, "Daniels did not have the same marketing abilities as Bréguet."

Still, undisputedly, Mr. Daniels deserved the same name recognition earned by Abraham Louis Bréguet, a watchmaker he admired and about whom he published in 1975 a book titled "The Art of Bréguet," considered definitive on the subject.

"Daniels's book about the mechanical horology of Bréguet contributed to the current reputation of Bréguet," said Mr. Gurney.

"Daniels was offered to take over Bréguet, an offer he refused saying that Daniels, London, sounded better to him than Bréguet, Paris," he said.

In the natural order of things, some in the industry say Mr. Daniels's coaxial escapement should have been bought by Bréguet rather than Omega.

"My regret is that the Bréguet company, then not owned by Swatch, did not buy Daniels's escapement," said Mr. Patrizzi. "The escapement naturally belongs in a Bréguet watch."

George Daniels, widely admired as one of the great watchmakers, created a slim coaxial escapement for this rare 18-karat gold wristwatch, dated about 1999.

Still, according to Mr. Speake-Marin, given the greater sales volume of Omega watches, more people today have a coaxial escapement on their wrists than if Bréguet had acquired the invention.

Given their rarity, George Daniels timepieces rarely appear in auction.

On Dec. 13, the cover lot of the catalogue of Sotheby's Fine Watches sale in London is a Daniels handmade wristwatch with a coaxial escapement, estimated £40,000 to £60,000, or \$64,000 to \$96,000.

In 2002, Sotheby's New York sold a Daniels pocket watch from the estate of the American watch collector Esmond Bradley Martin for \$317,500.

"Our cover page is a tribute to this exceptional watchmaker," said Mr. Ader of Sotheby's.

In July 2006, Sotheby's — where Mr. Daniels had been a consultant for years — held a retrospective exhibition in London of his timepieces, the first time that all his pieces were displayed together, to commemorate his 80th birthday.

Early this month, the salon QP, a watch event at the Saatchi Gallery in London, held another anniversary event, at which Mr. Smith unveiled the first in a limited series of the "Daniels Anniversary Wristwatch," a new English caliber, 18-karat rose gold piece with a case diameter of 40 millimeters, or 1.6 inches, individually numbered from 1 to 35.

According to Mr. Smith, Mr. Daniels wanted to create a caliber of his own that incorporated his coaxial escapement.

"George asked me to help him because he could no longer work alone," Mr. Smith said.

The watch was completed shortly before Mr. Daniels's death.

"George saw the finished piece a few weeks ago and was quite pleased," said Mr. Smith. "We only wish he could have been there at the show."



SOTHEBY'S

The second Daniels space travelers' watch. Today his watches are considered rare and highly collectible works of art.

WWW.SWAROVSKI.COM

© 2011 SWAROVSKI AG

SWAROVSKI