

## WATCHES

By MICHAEL CLERIZO

Late on a May morning in 2008, the Isle of Man endured a fierce downpour, leaving pools of water on the lawns of Riversdale, George Daniels's estate. By noon, the water shimmered like silk in the sunlight.

The 82-year-old Daniels savored the sight from his massive drawing room windows. I had asked a question about how he planned his first watch in 1968, one of 23 pocket watches and two wristwatches that mark him as the greatest practitioner of the art of watch making since its golden age ended in the early 19th century.

As he frequently did, Daniels thought for a few moments before answering. Just as frequently, his responses ignored the narrow focus of my questions and shifted the discussion to a broader context.

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"It helped in my case that I didn't fully understand my circumstances, the difficulty of what I was trying to do," he said. "I think now that was my greatest talent. All my life I have never really fully comprehended my circumstances. Therefore I have never been beaten by the circumstances."

Daniels's circumstances were against him from the start. Born in England in 1926, to parents who were violent, neglectful and poor, Daniels was one of 11 children.

The family often moved. In one apartment, the 5-year-old Daniels found and opened a broken pocket watch. The movement mesmerized him. Days later, he removed the back from the family alarm clock. The effect was the same. His lifelong relationship with things mechanical had begun.

In the 1960s, he became the world's leading restorer of golden-age watches, especially those of his horological hero, Abraham-Louis Breguet (1747-1823). In the same decade, he started as a consultant to Sotheby's, married and wrote the first of eight books. Despite his accomplishments and growing wealth, mostly accumulated by selling vintage cars he had restored, Daniels was dissatisfied.

"When you restore watches and clocks," he told me in 2005, "you bury yourself. You've got to. You've got to work like the man who made the watch you're restoring. I didn't want to carry on with restoration, always working in another man's style. I wanted my watches with my own style. And I wanted to make them working alone."

The circumstances that confronted Daniels as he hunched over his London workbench were unique. There was no master watchmaker at his shoulder offering advice and no books to consult. His great advantage: He knew what he wanted to achieve.

"It was of utmost importance to me that my watches possess elegance and simplicity. They are the sources of beauty in watches. These are things you can only create at the workbench with tools in your hand," Daniels said in 2005, as he explained his watchmaking philosophy to me. "The beauty of a watch for me lies, in part, in its geometry, in the shape of the case and design of the dial. But geometry is even more important for the movement: a movement must be geometrically perfect, nothing superfluous, nothing that makes the movement look out of proportion, and it must have the perfect finish. The other part of the beauty of a watch lies in its timekeeping. A beautiful watch keeps perfect time. The whole thing fuses into one. The beauty of a watch is geometric and aesthetic and about timekeeping. If we are looking at a perfect watch we are looking at the perfect machine for telling time."

Each watch he made was also an experiment containing an accuracy-improving innovation. His experiments led to the invention of the coaxial escapement in 1975. The escapement is the crucial component of a mechanical watch, controlling the flow of energy through the movement and producing that familiar ticktock sound. For 18 years, the watch industry rejected and ridiculed the coaxial and its



# Watch Making's Self-Taught

A Year After His Death, Master Horologist George Daniels's Legacy of Supremacy

inventor. Daniels, however, persisted. When in 1993, Omega, a powerhouse brand, adopted the coaxial, Daniels's creation became the first successfully mass-produced escapement in more than 200 years.

Daniels died in October 2011. His will decreed the sale of Riversdale and its contents, including his car and watch and clock collections, with the proceeds going to fund the George Daniels Educational Trust, which will aid students of horology, engineering, medicine and building construction. In June 2012, Bonhams auctioned the cars and auto memorabilia, raising more than \$17 million.

Sotheby's in London will hold the watch and clock auction on Tuesday. Some of Daniels's watches, such as his 1987 Grand Complication, are expected to fetch around \$1 million.

Yet the Daniels legacy is about more than a rags-to-riches story, his position as the pre-eminent watchmaker of his time and an ingenious inventor.

His former Sotheby's colleague, Daryn Schnipper, chairman of the watch depart-

ment, says, "George is the father of the modern independent watchmakers movement. Big brands have factories producing tens and hundreds of thousands of watches. George showed young watchmakers that there is another way. They could start their own workshops on their own or with only a few employees and make their own watches in small numbers and survive."

One watchmaker inspired by Daniels is a 42-year-old Englishman, Roger Smith. In 1998, Mr. Smith moved from the north of England to the Isle of Man to help Daniels produce a series of 58 wristwatches celebrating the millennium. Mr. Smith, Daniels told me in 2002, "has the skills, the imagination and the dedication to be a first-rate watchmaker." At Daniels's funeral, Mr. Smith recalled the moment of the job offer: "He said that he would like some assistance and that as I had shown promise, would I like to move to the Isle of Man to work with him. I didn't hesitate, and said yes—well, you have to. It isn't every day that God phones you up."

Today, Mr. Smith's workshop on the Isle of Man makes about 20 watches a year bearing his own name. His newest project is the Anniversary watch, a wristwatch designed by Daniels to commemorate the invention of the coaxial and made entirely by Mr. Smith and his three-man team. Based on one of Daniels's pocket watches, it costs \$265,000.

In 2005, the Swiss-based L'Académie Horlogère des Créateurs Indépendants, the world's sole organization for independent watchmakers, celebrated its 25th anniversary. All 31 members, including Daniels, an honorary member, were asked to list watchmakers they admired. Daniels chose Breguet.

Of the other 30 members, 16 named Daniels—far more mentions than any other watchmaker. His standing is a surprise considering he never taught at a watchmaking school and Mr. Smith was his only apprentice.

An explanation appears in Vanity Fair. In October 2011, the magazine's watch supplement published the results of a survey in which 100 horological heavyweights named



WATCHES

Marking Time With Rare Watches

[ Collecting ]

By MARGARET STUDER



Auction houses in London and Geneva this month will offer a starry lineup of trophy timepieces by famed watchmakers, including much sought-after pieces by George Daniels and Patek Philippe.

On Tuesday, Sotheby's will auction Daniels's collection in London. Top watches in the sale include his Space Traveller's pocket watch, circa 1982, at £400,000-£600,000, and the first wristwatch he made to demonstrate his pioneering coaxial escapement, from around 1991, at £150,000-£250,000.

A trio of Geneva sales follow, with Antiquorum kicking off with around 613 watches and clocks on Nov. 11. Christie's continues the next day with about 310 lots, and Sotheby's on Nov. 13 with 313 pieces.

The most highly estimated watches in this celebration of timekeeping will be at Christie's. There, guitarist-song writer Eric Clapton will provide celebrity glamour with his Patek Philippe platinum perpetual calendar chronograph with moon phases, from 1987. Only two of this model were produced in platinum—the other example is in the Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva. Mr. Clapton's exceptionally rare wristwatch is expected to fetch between 2.5 million Swiss francs and 4 million francs (around €2.07 million-€3.3 million).

It "ticks all the boxes" in providing what collectors look for today, says Aurel Bacs, head of Christie's international watch department. Collectors want watches by big-name makers, and complicated mechanical pieces, he says, adding that they are "maniacs about condition" and seek an "unrepeatable opportunity" through rarity and a well-known provenance.

Also fitting the bill, says Mr. Bacs, will be a unique platinum chronometer from

1952 that was made to order by Patek Philippe for American lawyer and prominent watch collector J.B. Champion (estimate: 2 million francs-4 million francs). A third piece on Mr. Bacs's list of star offers will be a Patek Philippe chronograph wristwatch from 1946; only three of the model are known to exist in platinum (1 million francs-1.5 million francs).

The cover of Sotheby's catalog shows a striking yellow-gold Patek Philippe wristwatch (1954-61), with thick black strokes marking the time. The markers would have normally been in yellow gold, but they were designed in black at the request of an American gentleman who wanted to be able to read the time more easily (250,000 francs-350,000 francs). It is also the only one in the model's series with a dial bearing the name of the retailer, Tiffany & Co. "The black display makes this watch unique, and Tiffany adds to the value," says Geoffroy Ader, Sotheby's European head of watches.

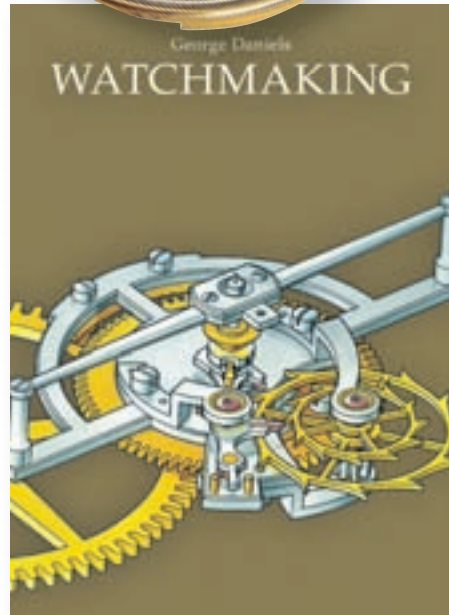
Of other brands, Sotheby's will have a 1943 pink-gold, minute-repeating wristwatch by Vacheron & Constantin that is believed to be unique (130,000 francs-150,000 francs); and a Vacheron & Constantin perpetual calendar tourbillon wristwatch with 250-hour power reserve, made in 2007 for the company's 250th anniversary (300,000 francs-500,000 francs).

But these sales aren't just about vintage and modern watches. Antiquorum will offer a beautiful musical fan with a hidden watch from around 1810—a gift from Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to Vicomte de Morais. The enamel, gold and pearl-set fan is estimated at 300,000 francs-500,000 francs. Two charming antique items at Sotheby's will be a gold, enamel, pearl and diamond-set pendant watch in the shape of a strawberry from circa 1810 (8,000 francs-12,000 francs); and a gold, enamel and diamond-set pendant watch from around 1890 in the shape of a beetle whose wings open to reveal the time (8,000 francs-12,000 francs).

Clockwise, George Daniels working at the Rose engine, 2010; the Anniversary watch by Roger Smith (\$265,000); Grand Complication watch (estimate £500,000-£800,000); the cover of Daniels's book 'Watchmaking'.



Daniels London (2); Sotheby's (Grand Complication); I.B.Tauris Publishers (book cover)



ht Genius  
me Craftsmanship Lives On

their three favorite watch books. Thirty-three people named books by Daniels (in second place, Dava Sobel, with 13 mentions), especially "The Art of Breguet" (1975) and "Watchmaking" (1981). The first is the definitive study of Breguet, elucidating how he produced such magnificent watches. The second explains how to do what Daniels did: make a watch by hand entirely alone.

Mr. Smith admits that despite attending the Manchester School of Horology, he learned his skills from Daniels's "Watchmaking." While employed in a big-brand repair shop in 1989 he received the book as a Christmas gift. When he finished reading it he thought, "If he can do it, I can do it." Mr. Smith quit his job and started making his own watches.

"Watchmaking" also inspired 55-year-old French watchmaker François-Paul Journe. The output of Mr. Journe's Geneva-based atelier hits about 800 a year, with prices for many exceeding \$100,000. In 2010, Mr. Journe gave a dinner in Daniels's honor. During his after-dinner speech, Mr. Journe described how he

made his first watch with "tools in one hand and 'Watchmaking' in the other."

A self-taught Japanese independent watchmaker, 34-year-old Hajime Asaoka, is testament to how far the Daniels legacy stretches. "I began to educate myself by reading 'Watchmaking.' So, I consider him to be my master," Mr. Asaoka, who produced his first watch in 2009, said in an email. "I think that 'Watchmaking' contains all the know-how needed to make one's own watches."

But summing up Daniels is done best by Mr. Journe. In the Sotheby's catalog for the Daniels auction he wrote: "You were the pioneer, George, you showed the rest of us the way."

—Michael Clerizo is the author of "George Daniels: A Master Watchmaker and His Art," to be published by Thames & Hudson on March 14, 2013.

Online»

See more of George Daniels's handcrafted watches, at [WSJ.com/lifeandstyle](http://WSJ.com/lifeandstyle).



▼ Patek Philippe unique minute-repeater wristwatch. Movement 1954, cased 1961. Estimated at 250,000 Swiss francs-350,000 francs.

▲ Strawberry pendant watch, circa 1810. Estimate: 8,000 francs- 12,000 francs.

◀ Beetle pendant watch, circa 1890. Estimate: 8,000 francs-12,000 francs.

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