

Pure genius: The late, great George Daniels, far left, and a selection of timepieces from his collection



# Time lord's treasures

George Daniels' personal collection goes on sale at Sotheby's this week – it offers a rare chance to buy a piece of horological history.  
By Simon de Burton

The attention of horological connoisseurs the world over will be riveted on London this Tuesday, when the most remarkable collection of clocks and watches to be offered for sale this century will go under the hammer at Sotheby's.

The 130 lots, conservatively estimated to fetch £5 million, come from the estate of Dr George Daniels CBE, who died last year aged 85. Widely acknowledged as the greatest watchmaker since Abraham-Louis Breguet, Dr Daniels is reputed to have been the only person to have mastered 32 of the 34 individual crafts deemed necessary to hand build a watch from scratch. He didn't do his own engraving or make his own mainsprings, but he did everything else – even down to grinding his own glass.

Perhaps his most notable achievement, however, was the invention of the co-axial escapement, which overcame the problem of the accuracy of a watch being compromised by the deterioration of its lubricant.

Although he originally made the breakthrough in the 1970s, Dr Daniels battled for more than 20 years to gain recognition for its significance before it was eventually adopted by Omega, which now uses the co-axial system extensively across its range.

Based on the Isle of Man since 1982, Dr Daniels produced no more than 30 pocket watches, all made entirely by hand and each taking up to 2,500 hours to complete. He rarely sold them and the two or three that appeared on the open market during his lifetime fetched up to £200,000 apiece.

But that sum looks set to pale into insignificance this week when Sotheby's offers the late 'time lord's' personal watch and clock collection, including the most important pieces he made during a career which spanned more than 60 years.

The most sought-after items of the sale will undoubtedly be the remarkable pocket watches he created from scratch, piece by piece, with meticulous attention to detail.

One of these, the Grand Complication watch of 1987, features a one-minute tourbillon, minute repeater, instantaneous perpetual calendar, equation of time, moon phases, thermometer and power reserve indicator enveloped in a massive, yellow gold case. It is estimated to fetch up to £800,000.

Another timepiece for which he was acclaimed, his 1982 Space Traveller's watch, boasts a chronograph with Dr Daniels' independent double-wheel escapement, mean solar and sidereal time displays, ages and phases of the moon and equation of time indication. This watch is likely to fetch more than £600,000.

Long-standing friend Roger Smith recalls seeing the

remarkable watch for the first time when Dr Daniels visited the Manchester School of Horology, where Smith was studying. "I had no idea who he was the morning he arrived but by the end of the day I knew I had met one of the greatest watchmakers who ever lived," says Smith.

"We were all totally mesmerised by what he had to say to us. And when someone asked him what was on the end of his watch chain and he pulled out the Space Traveller's watch, we were speechless – no one could believe it was possible to make such a thing entirely by hand."

Smith became Dr Daniels' apprentice in 1998, working with him for three-and-a-half years and collaborating on the production of the 50 co-axial Daniels watches, designed to mark the new millennium.

The four examples included in the sale – one in white gold, three in yellow – could exceed £100,000 apiece. When first released, Dr Daniels sold them for between £25,000 and £30,000.

Also on offer will be a remarkable replica of an early 19th-century weight-driven, three-wheel "skeleton" clock which was made by Dr Daniels to such a high standard that it was granted an official certificate of authenticity by Maison Breguet. It is modestly estimated to fetch between £60,000 and £90,000, while the one and only marine chronometer he made is tipped to sell for a mere £2,500 to £3,500. Although Dr Daniels didn't have a middle name, the piece is signed "G.W. Daniels" as it was made during a phase when the watchmaker thought it appropriate to have an extra initial.

Other items on sale will include clock making tools, scientific instruments, the actual pantograph used by Abraham-Louis Breguet to inscribe his pieces with a "secret" signature, a bust of Dr Daniels by the celebrated sculptor Sir Eduardo Paolozzi and watches by brands including Zenith, Patek Philippe and Rolex, which Dr Daniels used as test-beds for his inventions.

An exquisite, silver-mounted striking table clock by the great 17th-century maker Joseph Knibb is also up for grabs with an estimate of £600,000 to £900,000.

Geoffroy Ader, head of Sotheby's European watch department, described the sale as a landmark event which is likely to have a significant effect on what is already a buoyant market.

"George Daniels can legitimately be described as the father of modern horology," says Ader.

"He is the person who led the way for today's great independent makers, the person who proved that the truly hand-made, mechanical watch still had a place in the world.

"Above all, I hope the sale will open the eyes of collectors to the wonder of technical pocket watches – this is a chance to buy a piece made by the last genius of timekeeping."

The George Daniels Horological Collection will be on view at Sotheby's, London W1, until November 5. (020 7293 5000) www.sothebys.com

See the premiere of The Watchmaker's Apprentice, a film about George Daniels, at SalonQP



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