

# Mysteries

## OF THE FAR EAST

DISCOVERING WATCHES PRODUCED IN PAIRS FOR THE CHINESE MARKET AT THE PATEK PHILIPPE MUSEUM

In the 1700s and 1800s, one of the biggest markets for fine timepieces was China. The products were pocket watches, and the Chinese bought them in pairs—sometimes two identical watches, and sometimes two watches with “mirror-image” designs. Conventional thought was that the Chinese bought these “pair watches” so that there would be spare parts available if the primary watch needed repair, but an exhibit called “The Mirror of Seduction,” at the Patek Philippe Museum, questions this assumption.

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG



“SENTIMENTAL DUEL,” A PAIR OF ENAMELED CLOCKWORK PISTOLS MOUNTED WITH CLOCKS, GENEVA, CA. 1805

## THE EXHIBITION

The incredible exhibit of Chinese pair watches includes more than 100 objects made expressly for the Chinese market from the mid-18th century through the mid-19th century, including 40 matched pairs of watches and some automata. Despite the venue, there isn't a single Patek Philippe watch in this exhibition. Instead there is a mix of famous and obscure makers, names like Bovet, Vaucher, Juvet, Piguet & Meylan, John Rich, Ilbery and others. This exhibition has been a goal of the museum since it opened in 2001. It was ultimately made possible this year with the support of public museums, private foundations and collectors who generously loaned pieces from their collections.

## THE HISTORY

Geneva's watchmakers were not only skilled in horology; they were also on the cutting edge of marketing. As an example, nearly every watchmaking enterprise in the little

Swiss town of Fleurier had its brand name translated into Chinese characters on the dials of the watches made for export to the East.

The first watches arrived in China around 1700. One of the first Swiss watchmakers to export watches, clocks and automata to China was Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son Henri-Louis. Many of their products found their way into the collection of the Imperial Palace in Beijing. Early on, many Swiss companies did business with the Chinese through English firms that had established a trading presence in the Middle Kingdom. Eventually, the Swiss set up their own offices, but it wasn't long before the First Opium War shut the gates of China.

## THE BEAUTY

The pair watches and other timepieces on display showcase the high level of watchmaking found in Switzerland during this period. There is incredible lacquer work, enameling, enamel painting, automata and more. Some will find it surprising that the decorative themes of the watches are not Chinese, rather they are typical of the French Louis XV, Louis XVI, Directoire and Empire styles preferred by the Chinese. The musical movements play well known European tunes and, sometimes, Swiss folk songs.

The attention to detail is incredible, and the watches are extremely well preserved. One portion of the exhibit is dedicated to movements, and what is on display is stunning. The precision achieved without the aid of CNC machines, CAD-CAM technology or any of the modern tools watch producers now take for granted is amazing.

Of course, today, China is once again a major market for fine timepieces, the market

that watch companies most want to serve. It seems that the Chinese appetite for fine watches hasn't changed much in 300 years. This exhibition is a testament to its strength.

So, what of the pair watches' reason for being? Were these exquisitely decorated duplicates produced only so that they could be dismantled for spare parts? According to the curators, demand for pair watches was more likely fueled by the Chinese tradition of offering gifts in pairs—most even numbers being considered lucky and highly preferred over odd numbers. This custom was good luck for the Swiss as well. After all, what watchmaker wouldn't consider himself lucky when demand doubles production?

212.218.1240, [patekmuseum.com](http://patekmuseum.com)



PERFUME BOTTLES WITH CLOCKS,  
LONDON, CA. 1775



MIRROR-IMAGE WATCHES IN  
THE FORM OF PEACHES, LONDON  
AND GENEVA, CA. 1810



## “THE MIRROR OF SEDUCTION”

RUNS THROUGH OCTOBER 16 AT THE PATEK PHILIPPE MUSEUM  
IN GENEVA AND ONLINE AT [PATEKMUSEUM.COM](http://PATEKMUSEUM.COM).

A 176-page exhibition catalog is offered at chf 30.