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ACQUIRED THE RAREST
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PHILIPPE MODELS



PATEK PHILIPPE
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THE WATCH HUNTER OF AFRICA

Roni Madhvani, a Ugandan of Indian origin, has the rarest collection of Patek Philippe's vintage watches.

In fact, his stock of the Gilbert Albert watches is probably second only to the brand itself. WatchTime India brings you a rare peek into the revered collection

BY NEHA S. BAIJAI





Uganda, a “must” on any discerning traveller’s list, defines the ultimate African adventure—unspoiled wilderness packed with gorgeous discoveries and exhilarating experiences. It’s a fantastical reality away from the everyday world, where one day you go hiking with mountain gorillas and the next day a boat trip down the Nile takes you past snoozing crocodiles and snorting hippos. Hugely favoured by Ernest Hemingway, who cheated death twice during his African safari in 1954, Uganda was the “Pearl of Africa” for Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth’s most cherished haunt.

The mighty Murchison Falls and the terrifyingly dense Bwindi Forest still lure travellers from the world over. However, in the elite circle of luxury watch collectors, Uganda assumes another significance—it is home to one of the most revered collectors of vintage Patek Philippe timepieces in the world.

Over the last 30 years, Roni Madhvani, a Kampala-based businessman, has acquired an enviable collection of

asymmetrical, time-only watches of yore. Right from Swiss jeweller Gilbert Albert’s famed Patek Philippe creations to a custom-made Cartier and some really rare watches from Audemars Piguet, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Breguet and Vacheron Constantin, Madhvani’s treasure trove is one of a kind. “Roni is very unique among all the Patek Philippe collectors I know. He collects out of passion, with a knowledgeable eye and with seemingly endless patience to find the perfect watch,” says John Reardon, international head of watches at Christie’s. “His eye for Patek Philippe mid-century design is one of the best in the world. He is a hunter, market maker, scholar and, most notably, a gentleman.”

An authority on vintage watches and a passionate Patek Philippe fan, Reardon has been studying Madhvani’s collection for over a decade now. “Roni’s passion for vintage predates the trend among today’s collectors. He bought vintage watches well ahead of the curve,” says Reardon. “Patek Philippe watches made by Gilbert Albert impress me the most and Roni has assembled the world’s greatest collection of Gilbert Albert watches outside of the Patek Philippe museum in Geneva,” says Reardon.

Incidentally, among the dozens of precious watches gathered over time, Madhvani’s first Patek Philippe happened to be the Reference 3424 designed by Gilbert Albert. The brand released only five pieces of the Reference 3424 with unique cases, of which three never went into commercial production and the other two were produced in limited quantities.

One of Madhvani’s favourite hunt stories is how this watch and its immediate successor made it to his collection. “I found the watch with a prominent Italian dealer, Alessandro Ciani, who has now become a dear friend. When I saw the watch, he had many others for sale, including a Jump Hour model that took my fancy. But, it was not something I could afford to purchase

Patek Philippe Reference 3424 by Gilbert Albert





*Patek Philippe
Reference 2549
Devil's Horn*

COLLECTOR PROFILE
Roni Madhvani

*Patek Philippe
Reference 3412
by Gilbert Albert*





Gold Patek Philippe with Markowski case

*Patek Philippe Reference 5004P
with Breguet numerals*



Asymmetrical Audemars Piguet from the 1960s

WHILE MOST WATCH COLLECTORS HANKER AFTER LIMITED EDITIONS AND SUPERCOMPLICATIONS, MADHVANI HAS BEEN FOCUSING ON DISTINCT SHAPES AND CASE DESIGNS

at the time,” recalls Madhvani. “To my surprise, Alex asked me to just keep the watch and pay for it whenever I could. That’s not something a stranger would say; it’s not common in Europe or the Americas.”

While most watch collectors hanker after limited editions and supercomplications, Madhvani has been focusing on distinct shapes and case designs. In fact, he has always found watches more attractive from a design perspective than from a mechanical aspect. “In many ways, it was probably my interest in design and sculpture that led to this

aspect of watch collecting,” says Madhvani, whose majestic hilltop mansion in Kampala is a mini museum of African and Indian contemporary art. “I like art deco pieces, particularly in bronze, pre-war car mascots, books and certain maharaja-related items,” he says.

Born into one of the most prominent business families in East Africa, Madhvani graduated from The London School of Economics in 1985. The Madhvani Group is the country’s largest private conglomerate, with interests in sugar, power, packaging, construction, tourism, agriculture, real estate and hos-

pitality. Its current turnover in Uganda exceeds \$500 million and its assets are valued at more than \$1 billion.

As the third generation scion of the group, Madhvani lived a storied childhood. “Our business in East Africa originated from a very humble background. It was started by my grandfather, who came here from Gujarat. It grew and expanded considerably until 1972, when the infamous dictator Idi Amin decided to expel Ugandan Asians, giving us precisely 90 days to leave,” recalls Madhvani.

The Madhvani family returned to



Uganda in 1979. However, they got possession of their substantial assets only in 1986. “It was an extremely challenging and emotional journey. Our family believed in this country and its future, and we are proud to have contributed to it in whatever small ways we could, despite the challenges that fate threw our way,” says Madhvani, who is now largely focusing on promoting hospitality and tourism across Uganda and Kenya. “We are fortunate to have a series of charming safari lodges, each with a unique offering. Tourism in Uganda is not commercialised to the same extent as it is in other African destinations. For example, if you go on a game drive, it is quite likely you will be the only person to encounter a pride of lions or a herd of elephants. Besides this, the country is extremely beautiful with lush green landscapes and very friendly people.”

The Madhvani Group is also coming up with a chain of budget hotels at some prominent religious destinations across India. These hotels will be unique as they will incorporate the design, architecture and ethos of each temple at that particular location. “We



have completed the first (Marasa Sarovar Premiere Tirupati) and this is being followed by the next project in Bodh Gaya and Rishikesh,” he says.

When not jet-setting across continents on business trips, Madhvani loves unwinding in his extensive library at home. He is not just obsessed with watches, but also with books and journals on watchmaking. “I have got every book ever published on any watch brand and also auction catalogues from the early 1990s,” says Madhvani, who fancies quiet evenings at home, in company of his favourite single malt Yamazaki, Partagás cigars and, of course, vintage watches.

Interestingly, Madhvani’s intense af-

fair with watches started with a Baume & Mercier chronograph bought from a shop on Bond Street, London. It was his first ever wristwatch, bought with a princely sum saved over 16 months. “I always had a natural disposition towards watches; they were part of my attire since childhood. However, when I lost my heart to this Baume & Mercier, I didn’t have the means to purchase it. I haunted the shop for days and harassed them to show me the piece again and again till I finally saved some money and bought it,” he says.

Madhvani started out as a collector at a time when vintage watches were not in vogue. It was in the early 1990s, and one largely relied on auction houses

for any information on old timepieces. A few years later, as the internet became an integral part of the luxury watch business, there was a deluge of watch forums and websites to help one buy and sell watches. “Even though internet connectivity in Africa was dismal then, it allowed me an access to the world of collectible watches from the middle of nowhere. I still don’t bid at auctions through the web but it is a great place to catch up with friends and the community at large,” says Madhvani.

Known to be extremely guarded, luxury watch collectors hardly part ways with their prized acquisitions. But, thanks to his passion and persuasion, Madhvani got lucky with quite a few gracious deals in recent years. “Collecting Patek Philippe is an expensive proposition and it doesn’t happen overnight. I do buy from other collectors, but that camaraderie has developed over the last many years. It means we help each other find timepieces and that’s how I got my hands on the Patek Philippe Reference 2549,” he says.

Madhvani had been hunting this watch for over 15 years and, one day, when it came up for auction, he lost the fixed bid on the timepiece. “The winner, a prominent American collector, subsequently found out how desperate I was for this watch and offered it to me at the same auction price. A true gentleman, he has since been a dear friend.”

According to Reardon, Madhvani collects watches that speak to his heart more than his wallet. He doesn’t collect with the intention of making money, but for the joy of collecting. His watch pursuits have now become legendary not just among fellow collectors, but also at auctions. “Around 10 years ago, I was on a hunt for this most unusually cased watch from Patek, the Reference 2546. Made by Markowski, the entire case of this watch was sculpted out of solid gold and only six pieces were known to exist. After a decade-long search with a French dealer based in Hong Kong, I found that one watch had been sold to someone in Indonesia by Beyer [a retail-



Madhvani designed the dial for this Cartier Tank Cintrée

***“I HAVE GOT EVERY BOOK EVER
PUBLISHED ON ANY WATCH BRAND
AND ALSO AUCTION CATALOGUES
FROM THE EARLY 1990S.”***

er] in Switzerland. I traced another one in London but the owner refused to sell it. Recently, the watch was consigned at an auction and I was lucky to finally own it. For me, much of the pleasure of collecting watches is about the hunt for that unique timepiece,” says Madhvani, who is now looking to add some modern Patek Philippes to his collection. “It is extremely costly and very difficult to buy limited editions. Each purchase is approved by the owner of

Patek Philippe and this can take up to two years.”

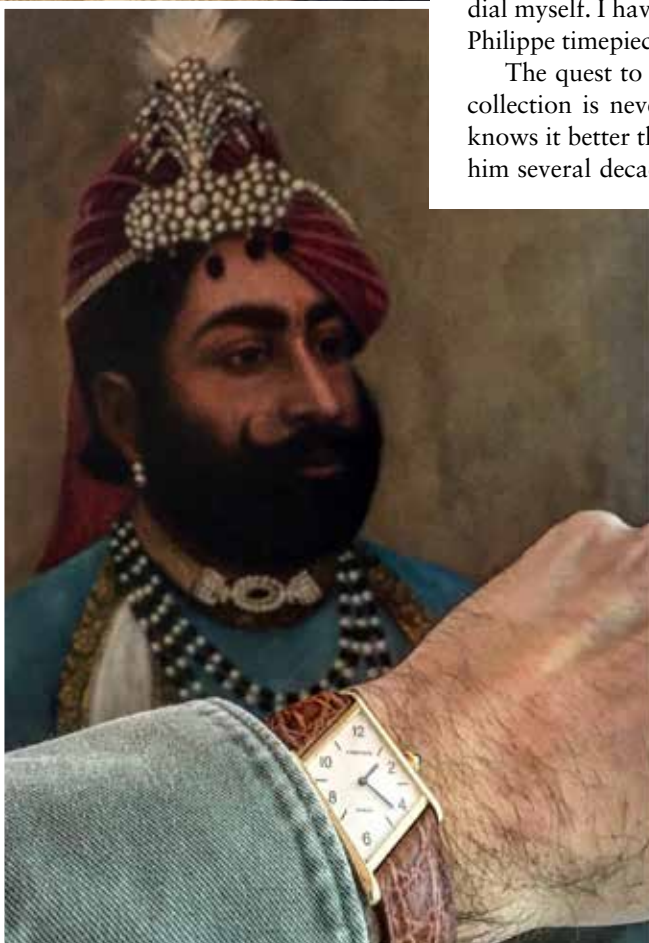
Talking of modern timepieces, Madhvani does like a few independent brands like F.P. Journe, but his love for Patek Philippe remains uncontested. “I dislike large and vulgar modern timepieces that resemble some pressure gauge dial from the boiler room of the Titanic. Unfortunately, manufactures seem to feed the frenzy for this trend. Patek Philippe’s biggest attraction to



Patek Philippe Reference 2471

me has been its understated design sensibility.” A basic vintage steel Patek can cost anything between \$30,000 and millions, and no one can ever assume such a high value strapped on one’s wrist. This is what Madhvani finds most charming about the brand.

Apart from his famed vintage watches, Madhvani also has a gorgeous selection of enamelled pocketwatches and unconventional cigarette cases stashed in his vault. “What is interesting to note is that I found a majority of these maharaja pocketwatches in New Orleans and Australia, but not a single one from India. Dating back to the late 1880s and up to the 1930s, they have beautiful enamelled portraits on the cases. The more sought-after ones were done by individual artists in Geneva,” says Madhvani, who also owns a couple of art deco “wandering hours” pocketwatches made by Breguet in the 1930s.



Though the origin of most of these timepieces remains unknown, some of the pocketwatches reveal delectable anecdotes about their eccentric owners. “I have a pocketwatch with an enamel portrait of the Maharaja of Junagadh, who was very much into his dogs and invited the then viceroy to the lavish wedding of his Afghan hounds. Of course, the invitation was declined,” recounts Madhvani.

In the high watchmaking universe, custom-made watches are few and far between. However, Madhvani has been one of those privileged few to have several unique pieces and also a customised Cartier as part of his collection. “Most leading brands do not make custom watches for their clients. It all depends on your relationship with them; sometimes they do it for discerning collectors. I am blessed to have a Cartier Tank Cintrée, for which I designed the dial myself. I have several unique Patek Philippe timepieces too,” he says.

The quest to put together a vintage collection is never ending and no one knows it better than Madhvani. It took him several decades and commendable



Madhvani's collection also includes some beautiful enameled pocketwatches dating back to the late 1880s



Madhvani's hilltop mansion in Kampala is a mini museum of African and Indian contemporary art

**MADHVANI COLLECTS WATCHES THAT
SPEAK TO HIS HEART MORE THAN HIS
WALLET. HE DOESN'T COLLECT WITH
THE INTENTION OF MAKING MONEY,
BUT FOR THE JOY OF COLLECTING.**

patience to get where he is today, and he feels there is still a long way to go. "I would love to have one of the earlier perpetual calendar minute repeaters from Patek Philippe. I don't think my collection can ever be complete as I would never be able to afford whatever I like! And, besides this, there are many watches that probably can't be bought. There are individual pieces that make up a certain design series or a reference with a different dial or a differently cased metal," says Madhvani, who, at times, has to give up a few pieces to buy new ones.

"I wish I could afford to keep whatever I collect but, unfortunately, the budget is finite. It means letting go of some pieces for the sake of something better. Watch collecting at its height is also about quality and that quest to find the perfect vintage watch," he says. ○