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Universal Genève

A brief compilation of their heritage
A dedication to the past which should not be forgotten.

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Foreword

In the passage of time, there is nothing as evanescent as a brand in the consumer's mind. After all, you are as well-known as your latest success. Every choice made does not merely have short-term consequences, but invariably affects the future in perpetuity.

History is an asset to be taken advantage of; after all, it gives a brand narrative. In the world of luxury, nothing is more important than heritage. Heritage is often utilized by companies to add allure to their products, as well as to draw on during reintroductions.

As a watch enthusiast and collector, I confess I am sensitive to such heritage. Then again, as a marketeer, I am intrigued by how companies leverage and exploit such history.

In the horological world things go one step farther; it is long established watch brands that dominate the market. Those that have successfully transitioned from utilitarian products to a more luxurious positioning after the quartz crisis.

Yet a few years ago, when many reintroductions by established brands were launched, I was tantalized to delve into the history of bygone brands. Which ones survived and which ones failed? It has always been my dream to build a luxury watch brand. Though I can't call it an aspiration, or else I probably would have succeeded a while ago. It was during this journey of exploration where I stumbled upon the Universal Genève brand and its fascinating history.

How come a brand, that in its heyday was on par with Rolex and Patek Philippe, has somehow vanished from the minds of the average consumer? What are the reasons that the potential for a promising re-launch up until 2023 has still not been realized? These are questions that excite and encourage me to delve further into the matter.

This book does not answer these questions, but its intent is to lay the foundation for in-depth analysis. It is a compilation of the history that can be found across scattered sources on the worldwide web. As I am not a historian, I depend on the expertise of others.

My aspiration was to compile and outline all the relevant pieces of information in a manageable, accessible, but above all, thought-provoking way. It is written through the eyes of a marketer obsessed with watches, so enjoy the read.

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1894-1917

The beginning

Early on a Thursday morning, frost lined the streets as two business soon-to-be partners made their way to the Chamber of Commerce in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. January 18th, an unremarkable day until 1894, when these two men set the foundation for what was to grow into one of the most influential watch companies in the world.

The men in question were horology students Numa-Emile Descombes and Ulysse Georges Perret. They registered their new company, Universal Watch, intending to produce boxes, covers, dials, movements, cases, and packaging for watches. But not for just any watch, as these ambitious men were focused on the production of their own brand of watches.

They began producing pocket watches for a variety of precision dependent industries, such as railways - those who appreciate accurate timekeeping the most! The railway industry required accurate timekeeping devices spread over large distances, to ensure that only one train would arrive at a certain point at a certain time. You can picture what would happen if one watch were even 3 seconds behind...

In those early years they registered their first patents. Among these patents was a highly advanced 24-hour indicator watch, with instantaneous jumping discs that confirmed these founder's skill and innovative mindset. But sadly, Numa-Emile passed away before this watch could even go into production, and before Universal Watch grew into the fame of Universal Genève.

Ulysse knew that he needed a new partner to further this growing company and turned to Louis Edouard Berthoud. Together the two formed Perret & Berthoud, and all trademarks and patents were transferred to ensure the legacy could be passed on.

These new partners found themselves in transforming times. For centuries, pocket watches had been the standard timekeeping device. But trends were changing, wristwatches were rapidly increasing in popularity. Such popularity was fueled by a world hungry for higher speeds, shown in 1894 when the Parisian magazine, *Le Petit Journal*, organized the world's first motoring competition.

But Louis and Ulysse took this change as an opportunity, realizing the market potential it provided. This realization, and the vision accompanying it, led to a Universal Watch patent in 1898. A patent like no other, for a watch to keep track of elapsed time, the *montre-chronographe de bras*, the world's first chronograph wristwatch.

1917-1919

The move to Geneva

That 1898 patent led to the production of the first wrist-worn chronograph in 1917, laying the foundation for many famous models other brands would produce. Such as the Rolex Daytona and Omega Speedmaster, to be released over four decades later to wide acclaim.

The technical ingenuity and prowess of Louis and Ulysse gained them popularity and recognition. To keep up with this newfound status, and ensure the utmost quality for their products, a change of location was required. At the time, all major brands were located in one place, as the center of the watchmaking industry of 1918 was Geneva. Ulysse and Louis opened a boutique there and a year later, the two partners packed their own bags and relocated the administrative offices to Rue de l'Arabesque in Geneva. Completing the symbolic transition to Universal Genève.

Their atelier remained in Le Locle, and research there focused on ways to power a wristwatch without the need to manually wind it. And to figure it out before anyone else could.

Outside the workshop, and Switzerland, World War I was underway. The company's involvement was to produce pocket watches and trench watches for both sides of the conflict, retaining true Swiss neutrality.

1925

Out with the old, in with the AutoRem

With the end of the First World War, rapid economic growth was witnessed across the globe. The general feeling of novelty associated with modernity, made everything now feel possible due to new technologies. Tradition was shoved aside in favour of progression, and formal decorative amenities were replaced by practicality. The Roaring Twenties were well underway.

As mentioned, several companies had begun the race to develop self-winding movements, also known as an automatic watch. This movement consists of a mechanical system where the natural motion of its wearer provides the necessary energy to run. Thus, making manual winding obsolete.

After years of dedication, research and development, Universal registered two patents for their self-winding wristwatch. These patents led to the “AutoRem”, derived from the French “Remontage Automatique”.

Released in the height of the Roaring Twenties, the AutoRem embodied the break from tradition. The classic round shaped appearance was replaced by a daring new octagonal look. The fetching design was accompanied by a leap in practicality, as the AutoRem contained one of the first self-winding movements ever developed and produced.

1927-1929

Reversing before the Reverso

Ask anyone about a reversing watch, and they'll probably name the Reverso. Many mistakenly believe Jaeger-LeCoultre to be the only company to produce reversible watches. But actually, they weren't even the first. For another brand introduced their model long before the Reverso; Universal Genève and their Cabriolet.

Universal Genève introduced Le Cabriolet in 1929, which also features a square case sitting in an outer frame. However their crown is at the number 6, and above the 12 there is a small screw that allows you to snap the case out and rotate it 180 degrees before snapping it back into the outer frame, securing it once more with the crown.

It could be that both brands had planned to launch a watch for polo players, that it was merely a coincidence. It is interesting nonetheless that two of the major watch brands of the era came up with such similar designs, so close to each other in time. But for now, we'll simply have to consider it an unlikely coincidence.

During this time, Universal Genève also developed watches endowed with an 8 day battery reserve, powering themselves to speed ahead in the new decade.

1930-1950

The Collaboration

Whilst many view Universal's rise to be with the Autorem, or even the skill of Le Cabriolet, others consider it in terms of status. More specifically, when Universal Genève collaborated with the Parisian high fashion brand, Hermès.

The Pour Hermès (For Hermès) chronographs featured square button registers, telemeters and tachometers, a movement containing a Breguet balance spring, and an Arabic-numeral dial. They were immensely popular.

But the partnership didn't end there, for the Hermès headquarters would in turn act as a major sales centre for all Universal brand watches in Europe until the 1950s. This brought their designs further into the public eye.

And across the waters, another collaboration was underway, with Henri Stern Watch Agency in Manhattan, who became the official Universal Genève dealer for North America. They're best known as the U.S. distributorship of Patek Philippe, and thus Patek became regarded as the "sister" brand to Universal Genève. Many would consider Universal Genève to be the "poor man's Patek Philippe". And perhaps this family resemblance is most noticeable in the similarity of the Tri Compax to the Patek Philippe 1518.

1933

The Golden Age

Following Perret's passing in 1933, his son Raoul Perret would take over management of the business, ensuring that Universal Genève would remain a family-run company for 30 more years.

During the First World War, the pocket watch began to lose usefulness in favour of the more convenient wristwatch- one was the ideal choice for storming the trenches. Universal seized this opportunity by creating the Compur, featuring a 36mm measuring case and flat bezel. Today's vintage watch collectors are delighted most by the slightly domed plexi Crystal with mesmerizing dial with multiple scales in 3 colours.

Under Raoul's leadership, the brand would enter its Golden Age. His greatest insight was to concentrate on perfecting the aesthetics of the watches. This allowed them to not just be a timekeeper, but an accessory, and thus hold added value. However, it was essential to do this without compromising on the attention and research dedicated to the technical aspects. This is the approach that led to the Compur, and the underlining value of Universal Genève.

1934

Changes

This was a year of great changes for Universal Genève and marked a new milestone in the brand's history. Firstly, in exactly that, their name. The company was renamed Universal Watch Co. Ltd Geneva. Another change came in location, as production was relocated to Geneva.

By now, the company was enjoying impressive growth, particularly internationally. This led to their first exhibit at Baselworld, the world's largest watch and jewellery exhibition. Their stall was among some of the biggest names, including Rolex, Patek Philippe and Heuer.

But it was Universal Genève who would decisively change the horological landscape, with the introduction of the Compur in 1934.

The Compur paved the way for numerous later chronographs, particularly the Compax line. The Compax line is known for the sporty "Nina Rindt" and the stylish "Eric Clapton", chronographs and styles that present-day collectors go crazy for.

1935

Wait a minute!

This year marked the release of the Compax chronograph wristwatch, another revolutionary patent. For the Compax was the world's first chronograph to feature an hour dial as well as a minute one. It featured 12 hour and 30-minute counters, with an extraordinary attention to detail we have come to recognize as the influence of Raoul Perret.

Furthermore, in 1935 the Head Office of Universal Genève moved to a prestigious new address. They could now be found at 43 Rue du Rhône in Geneva, and believe me, plenty were looking to them by this point.

1936

Marching on time

Furthering their 1935 success of the Compax, this year saw the launch of the Uni-Compax. From 1940 onwards, it gradually replaced the legendary Compur.

A fascinating watch, given that it was both a consumer favorite and utilized by the military. That may seem odd, given that your everyday watch wearer and a soldier look for different things in their timekeeper, but that is accounted for by the skill and success of Universal Genève. An attention to detail matched equally by practicality, the creation of complicated wrist watches featuring high-quality, in-house movements as well as a stunning design one would eagerly wear.

It's functionality for military services lay primarily in the built-in stopwatch, fashioning it ideal for training exercises and fully-fledged combat operations. The first of numerous military partnerships that would continue for Universal Genève.

The Compax was reproduced in several variations, including the Moon Phase, Medico, Tri-Compax, Uni-Compax and Master Vortex. These all featured their unusual but stunning square pushers, and incredible 45 minute counter.

1937

Time for the ladies

And finally, we reach the name that we all recognize this prestigious brand as, for in 1937 Universal Watch Co. Ltd is renamed Universal Genève.

During this time the industry was experiencing its darkest moment yet. The Great Depression had fallen on the world of watches as well, with unemployment only rising. But this was not felt at 43 Rue du Rhône, Geneva, where Universal Genève was struggling to keep up with a worldwide demand for their products.

This may partly be due to their entry into a new market, previously untapped, of ladies' watches. They had created the slimmest lady's chronograph wristwatch of that time, and if we know anything of 20th century women's products, it's that slim was in!

Its chronograph movements were so impressive that Zenith decided to purchase Universal ébauches to mount in their hand-wound chronographs. Universal's expertise was further enlisted to develop their own 'El Primero' self-winding calibre. But this close collaboration between the two esteemed brands involved more than the supply of parts or knowledge, they effectively joined forces to advertise chronographs abroad.

The influence of Zenith lended more respected lineage to Universal Genève's already striking pedigree.

1939

Going Dutch

As mentioned previously, Universal Genève was no stranger to aiding military forces through precise timekeeping. Their popularity with chronographs had been noticed by high-ranking government officials throughout Europe, and everybody was longing for a taste of time.

They caught the attention of the Dutch Royal Family in particular, who wanted to bring this immaculate accuracy to the Netherlands. They granted the Swiss brand with a Royal warrant in 1939, to issue a military watch for their nation's army.

This unique watch had Queen Wilhelmina's initials embossed on the dial, the ruler of the Netherlands at the time. It featured a 262-caliber movement and was issued exclusively to the Dutch army. These watches were utilized until the Nazi's invaded Rotterdam in May 1940, and bombed its entirety. The Netherlands remained occupied until 1944, and these watches became sacred memorabilia, only now beginning to appear at auctions and vintage stores.

1940s-1950s

What time is breakfast at Tiffany's?

From the late 1940's and throughout the 1950's, Universal Genève held a partnership with Tiffany & Co. During this collaborative period, Tiffany house brand watches were produced with Universal cases and movements, and of course featured Tiffany & Co on the dial.

The watches were immensely popular, propelling Universal Genève further into the female market. An example of such was the 18k Pink Gold Watch, featuring an 18k Pink Gold Band. With a fine width of 30mm and delicate pink hands, it was a hit with the greatest socialites of the era. Very few parties this era occurred without a Universal Genève decorating somebody's wrist.

1940-1942

Entering the big leagues

1940 witnessed the launch of the Aero-Compax, patent N° 235608. The “Aviator’s Compact Chronograph” was a progression of their popular Compax range, and a new factory was opened to focus on it.

This Compax chronograph was equipped with a fourth sundial featuring hour and minute hands at the 12 o’clock. This enabled the watch wearer to memorize the beginning of an operation, or start time of an event, with ease by means of an additional crown at 9 o’clock.

Across the waters in the U.S., Henri Stern Watch Agency continued to oversee the sales of Universal watches. They had succeeded in making the Universal brand a household name across the U.S., thanks to a multitude of prosperous advertising campaigns. An example of such a campaign is their “one drop of water can ruin a watch”, a bold ad that featured three different prototypes and captured the nation’s attention.

1943

Presenting the Montre-Calendar

Maybe this was it, that moment, when watches became more than watches, when they became everything you needed on a single, slim strap.

In 1943, Universal Genève gifted the world the Montre-Calendar, more commonly known as the calendar watch. It featured the small seconds at the 9 o'clock, the day at 12 o'clock, and the months and moon phases at the 6 o'clock. Potentially a crowded face, but the well thought out design ensured it looked anything but busy. There was also the option to purchase it without the moon phasing, ensuring all customers received exactly what they wanted from this chronograph.

In the year to come, production would commence for a new totalizing chronograph, specifically orientated at aviation. Alongside this, watches and chronographs would be developed for purely military purposes, as the world was still tight in the grips of WWII. And whilst Switzerland continued its tradition of neutrality, it still commanded the production of the timepieces deemed so necessary to both sides.

1944

Happy 50th Birthday Universal Genève!

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Universal Genève, the company unveiled its latest accomplishment at Baselworld; the Tri-Compax.

A common misconception is that the 'Tri' refers to the three subdials, when it represents the complications present: the moonphase, calendar and chronograph. This hour counter chronograph is considered to be one of the most complicated watches ever created, even for watchmakers specialized in intricate designs. The calibers utilised throughout the Tri-Compax line were UG Caliber 481, 287 and 281, all supplied by ébauches Martel and customized by Universal Genève. Later versions included a panda or reverse panda dial coloring, much to the public's appreciation.

The Tri-Compax was a resounding success, quickly becoming one of watchmaking's greatest feats. In July of 1945, the President of the United States, Harry Truman, wore the watch at the signing of the Potsdam Conference. This earned the chronograph the nickname, The Glorious.

And glorious it was and remains to this day.

1945-1947

Outgrown dependency

The Compax range of chronographs were selling successfully, aided greatly by President Truman's unintentional sponsorship.

Within this range, the Medico-Compax was introduced, a chronograph featuring an hour counter that bore a unique scale on the outer edge of the dial: a pulsometer or pulsograph.

The watch was designed specifically for those in the medical profession, hence the name, and the pulsometer measured heartbeats per minute on a scale of 15 to 30 beats. Once more, Universal Genève had successfully designed a watch for a specific occupation and use, whilst still retaining its beauty and allure.

The Dato-Compax was also released, the counter fitted with a 4th sundial at 12 o'clock, which indicated the date from 1 to 31. However, this watch did not receive the attention deserved for its quirky design and advanced technology. This was mainly due to the Tri-Compax, which was sold for a similar price, and left little market for its Dato-Compax sister.

Another change occurring throughout this period was that all chronographs currently produced, along with simpler timepieces, were now equipped with movements designed and manufactured entirely in-house. Universal Genève had outgrown the need for others.

And while the rest of the world was still commemorating the end of World War II, a further loss was grieved within Universal Genève. On March 3rd, 1947, Louis Berthoud passed away in Geneva. The father of the Maison, the final of the three founders, and the descendent of the legendary Ferdinand Berthoud, his loss was mourned within the company, and throughout the watchmaking community.

1950

Worldwide, but never far from home

By the 1950's, Universal Genève was represented globally in over 40 countries. An example of the brand's prestige is visible in 1950, when the Compax was chosen as the official chronograph for the American racing team's first participation in 24 Hours of Le Mans.

It continued to be a promising year, when the Montres & Bijoux exhibition allowed Universal to present their newest accomplishment. They introduced the watchmaking world to their first watch with a polychrome enamelled dial, available in both hand-painted and cloisonné variations. The dials were designed by Charles Poluzzi, one of Switzerland's most reputable enamellists.

This period, of the 1950's to the early 1960's, is unquestionably one of the most important in Universal Genève's growing history. Not only were they establishing themselves as an international brand, selling out worldwide, but they were differentiating themselves in terms of customer care. They rolled out a far-reaching, professional after-sale service, guaranteeing the maintenance of all watches produced. One can almost compare it to Patek Philippe, the belief that watches are a heritage to be passed on, and Universal ensured their watches would be passed on in mint condition.

1953

Taken to new depths

Universal Genève took their chronographs to new depths in 1953, through the presentation of the water-resistant model of the Tri-Compax.

It contained the same beloved features of the original Tri-Compax, including a 36mm stainless steel case, rounded pushers, and a screw back. But now it also featured a new watertight system for both the crown and case, and the dial had been split in two parts.

They were not the first to create a water-resistant model, as Rolex is considered to have achieved this with the Rolex Oyster. But the Tri-Compax can be considered one of the first times a popular model was adapted for water-resistance, instead of being preliminarily designed for this purpose. This is a more difficult form of adaptation, but the watchmakers of Universal Genève were always up for the challenge.

1954

A room fit for a Universal Genève chronograph

On the 28th of April, 1954, Universal Genève opened a new production plant for the design and manufacture of superior watches. Situated in Carouge, it was considered to be the most innovative in existence, matched only in quality by the chronographs it would produce.

Architects designed an extremely light-filled building, with over 60% of the façade adorned by huge windows. They also took the time to consider the weight of the machinery, the need for stability during manufacturing, and how they would solve these issues. They constructed systems to eliminate any vibration, thereby guaranteeing the most accuracy for watches produced.

The previous site in Geneva, on the Grand Quai, remained under the company's ownership. It was transformed into a prestigious showroom, to display products and launch new models.

1954 - 1955

How time flies

Picture it. You are tens of thousands of feet above a desolate white expanse, stretching out as far as the eye can see. Soaring at 315 MPH (507 km/h) in a piston-powered aircraft, heading to a destination that remains over half a day away. With only the stars and a gyroscope to guide you, while winds drift you off your intended course. Oh, and a Universal Genève watch of course.

These were the conditions that the crew of the Helge Viking, flight number SK931, found themselves in on the first ever transpolar commercial flight. The SAS (Scandinavian Airline System) intended to prove the viability of flights across the north pole, which would save thousands of miles on the trip west, and thus several hours and significant amounts of fuel. But to achieve this, they needed a watch that would withstand the harsh magnetic fields of the polar region.

They turned to Universal Genève for this challenge, who recruited one of their newest employees, Gèrald Genta, to design a watch fit to accompany SAS on the biggest aviation event in Scandinavia. The 23-year-old did not disappoint, and Genta's original design featured an automatic, shockproof, and anti-magnetic movement known as the 138SS 'Bumper' movement. The nickname 'Bumper' refers to the rotor oscillating between two springs (bumpers) instead of fully rotating. The 138SS was soon succeeded by the famous 'Microtor' movements, which came with a small rotating mass incorporated in the movement and was used in all subsequent variations of the 'Polarouter'.

The Polarouter was worn by the SAS crew as they completed this daring trip in 27h and 15m, unveiling a flight path that is replicated

to this day. Universal Genève released the Polarouter - renamed the Polerouter- to the public, with the first hundreds containing a SAS logo on the dial. Over the next 12 years Universal Genève released several variations of the classic Polerouter. This included the classic case featuring Bombe lugs and an inner index ring - the Polerouter de Luxe and the Polerouter Date. They also adapted the casing and dial designs later, with the Polerouter Compact, Polerouter Genève and more.

Gèrald Genta went on to become one of the most famous watch designers of all time, creating classics such as the Bulgari Bulgari, the Omega Constellation, and the Patek Philippe Nautilus.

The Polerouter is a sought-after collectible, particularly due to the unique trapezoid shaping of the date window and distinctive textured dial. But mainly because it will always remain the first watch that helped time fly.

1961

The Polerouter reaches new depths

Now that they had conquered the skies, Universal Genève headed for the deepest depths of the ocean. The Polerouter Sub was developed for the purpose of diving, as diving watches were extremely popular during the 50's and remain so today.

It is the only Polerouter to have a super compressor case, which was designed by Ervin Piquerex as a unique alternative to standard case designs. This was intended to increase the durability and water resistance of a dive watch. It also extended the life expectancy of the watch, as the case back was no longer constantly pressing down on the O-ring.

The Polerouter Sub features a 42mm steel case with an inner rotating index ring. But the most iconic aspect of this watch is the double crown. One at two o'clock for rotating the inner diving bezel, and the other sharp at 4 o'clock for winding the movement and changing the time.

Once more, Universal Genève managed to create a unique and functional watch that still dazzles on the wrist, and the Polerouter Sub remains a highly desired collector's item.

1962-1964

Moving on from movements

This period marks another move, one away from the traditional movements. Universal Genève began their foray into applied electronics for wristwatches, propelling their company into the future of chronographs, a position they had always proudly maintained.

By the late 60's, Universal Genève was no longer manufacturing its own movements. Instead, it had switched to mounting those of other manufacturers in watches it assembled and then sold. This included manufacturers such as Valjoux, who later became a part of the Swatch group.

In 1963, Universal Genève managed to present their Railrouter and Polerouter Electric models at Baselworld, to great success. They had entered the second half of this quick moving century with ease and style.

1966

Genta and his shadows

A few years, or chapters, ago we introduced you to a remarkable 23-year-old watchmaker, the one responsible for making time fly. Over the years he continued his fine work for Universal Genève, and created another set of stunning watches; the Shadows.

Launched in 1966, the Golden Shadow and White Shadow were the world's thinnest self-winding watches, driven by Calibre 66 and 67. They held the record of having the thinnest automatic watch movements, with a thickness of only 2.3mm, until 1978.

The Golden Shadow was available in 18k yellow and white gold, and the White Shadow in stainless steel. They were immensely popular, for their delicate nature and modern features. A famous wearer of the Golden Shadow is actress Joan Rivers, who owned it for numerous years before donating it to Antiquorum.

In years to come, when the quartz crisis raged on, the later Shadow models would contain electric movements, with the microtors replaced by Unisonics and Accutrons.

1967

The Eric Clapton

Another year, another watch!

In 1967, Universal Genève released their newest Tri-Compax. It was powered by the Caliber 281, which had been first introduced in the 1930s and ranks among the most important chronograph calibers as it was the first to feature a calendar complication. The Caliber 281 was produced by Martel, an ébauche manufacturer, and was also used by Zenith. It saw an impressive three decades of inclusion in some of the most iconic models of chronograph. Staying relevant as the rest of the watch world progressed rapidly and making its way into the “Eric Clapton” Tri-Compax.

But why the “Eric Clapton, were Universal Genève simply huge ‘White Room’ fans? Probably, but that’s not the reason that he has this watch named after him!

Eric began his career as a simple English musician, performing with his rock band Cream in the mid to late 1960’s. And during this time, he donned a panda dial Tri-Compax for most performances.

So what better way to honor this incredible musician, and wildly successful watch, than to combine the two? Thus, the Tri-Compax is more commonly known as the Eric Clapton Tri-Compax and will hopefully grace the stage once more on the arm of another virtuoso.

1968

Tuning in

As we've mentioned, Universal Genève was partly built on the foundations of their successful collaborations. From Hermès to the Scandinavian Airline System, their range of partners led them to conquer numerous fields. From the battlefield to the Emergency Room, the wrist of a rock singer to the slimmer arm of an actress or model, Universal Genève chronographs could be found everywhere.

And in 1968, they decided to tune in to yet another market. They collaborated with Bulova, an American watch brand that you could consider as their equal across the oceans. Together they introduced the Tuning Unisonic, a watch that featured a tuning-fork type frequency regulator.

It utilised Bulova's Accutron 218 movement, creating a marriage of Universal Genève's attentive Swiss design with Bulova's future-forward American movement. The result of this union is a crisp, clean watch that became a relic of horological history. You can consider the 1968 Unisonic to be a steppingstone from the transitional period between the introduction of the tuning fork and the Quartz Revolution.

1971

Oh Nina, you're so exotic!

Since its introduction in 1935, the Compax was one of Universal Genève's most celebrated chronographs. By now produced for over 40 years, there were endless variations for the public to enjoy. But following 1971, there were two pieces most desired by shoppers and collectors alike: the "Nina Rindt" and "Evil Nina".

But who is this mysterious Nina? She was an eponymous Finnish supermodel and the widow of Jochen Rindt, who had died the previous year and won the Formula One Championship posthumously.

The "Nina Rindt", is a panda dial chronograph, featuring black subdials on a cream dial, with a black tachymeter bezel. The "Evil Nina" mirrors this, featuring a reverse panda dial in black, instead of cream.

Both watches have the same case with "twisted" style lugs, an epitome of 70s chic, alongside thick rectangular minute, and hour hands. They utilise a Valjoux 72 movement, renowned for the famed Rolex Daytona.

A fitting name for a watch as stylish as its model, and particularly appropriate given the racing chronograph theme with the black bezel. Whilst many women weren't wearing these on the stands of the Formula One track, they were certainly wearing them whenever they could.

1970-1990

Crazy about quartz

During the 70's, Universal Genève was one of the few Swiss watch brands to introduce a quartz movement and begin to phase out automatics, an exciting new frontier in modern timekeeping. However, whilst this was a thrilling way to further develop their many patents, it coincided with an era we now recognize as the "Quartz Crisis".

The Quartz Crisis. A daunting term, bringing about the same fears to watchmakers as the economic crisis to bankers, and it was their equivalent. It refers to the upheaval in the watchmaking industry caused by the advent of quartz watches, which largely replaced mechanical watches across the world. It resulted in a significant decline in the Swiss horological industry, which chose to remain focused on traditional mechanical watches, and allowed Asian companies who embraced the change to soar ahead.

Universal Genève was one of the few Swiss brands to accompany the change, such as through the introduction of the world's thinnest quartz caliber in 1975. But sadly, they were still thrown into a period of general upheaval that proved economically devastating for the brand. A loss of capital among its holding companies, and a painful drop in popularity.

Could they have avoided this fate, through removing themselves from the Quartz race? Perhaps, although many others who had, still faced a similar fate. But even if they had, it would not have been Universal Genève to survive it through avoidance. For Universal Genève centered on innovation, on the alluring harmony between creation and style, and always followed the cusp of change

1990's until now

The Comeback?

Universal Genève haven't been silent since the takeover by Stelux. There have been a few releases during this time, and they remain a member of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry.

In 1994, they celebrated their centenary year through launching the Janus watch. It was inspired by the Cabriolet model and contains a reversible dial that features a single movement. This allows the user to read the time off two dials, including one with jumping hours. Another world first.

Next in 2005, they launched two new collections. The Okeanos, for men, and the Anthea, for women. Perhaps their most contemporary creations to date, with sleek silver colouring and a robust black strap.

2006 saw Universal Genève presenting their four new models at Baselworld. The Microtor UG 100, the Okeanos Compax, the Okeanos Aero-Compax and the Okeanos Moon Chronograph. These are considered to reflect their vintage watches in style, with a rose-gold hue with slim black seconds dial to contrast the hour and minute.

Then in 2007, they introduced three steel men's watches at Baselworld. The Microtor UG 101, featuring a self-winding propriety and now produced in series. The Uni-Timer, with a two-counter chronograph Caliber UG 71.5. And finally, the Timer Chronograph, with a three-counter Calibre UG 71.6. But they also had a little something for the ladies, as the steel Anthea watch was now available in two new jewelry versions, one set with 46 brilliant cut diamonds, and the other with 132 brilliant cut diamonds.

Finally, in 2008 they presented the world with the Microtor Cabriolet. Inspired by the Cabriolet, it was the first reversible watch that Universal Genève had launched since 1928. This daringly shaped model held a decidedly masculine spirit. Considered to be a marvel of mechanical ingenuity, the Microtor Cabriolet is driven by the signature Microtor UG 101 movement.

Since then, Universal Genève has not released new collections, or updated existing ones. But that is not to say that they've vanished from the public eye, for Universal Genève is still all around us. On the wrist of yet another US President, as Donald Trump owned a Universal Genève Senna watch. On the pages of Michael Korda's book, the Simon & Schuster editor-in-chief, who names a pink gold Universal Genève Tri-Compax as the igniting force for his lifelong interest in watches.

Will Universal Genève make a comeback? The question is more of whether it would be a comeback, as they're still present, with their vintage watches growing to a worth of tens of thousands, eagerly sought by collectors across the globe. So, it would not be a comeback, merely the opportunity to bring their previous esteem to the new century.

Worldwide, the horological community and the watch wearers of tomorrow eagerly await the next Universal Genève creation, the new boundaries they will break, the Autorem or Polerouter of the 21st century.

The past is not forgotten

And now, in 2023, as I write the final words of this short read, we find ourselves in an unwritten chapter. A new era is upon us with the acquisition of the brand by Breitling. If anyone can successfully redefine what a brand is, it is them.

With the compilation of material gathered into this book, I intended to emphasize that history is not being lost and above all not forgotten.

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