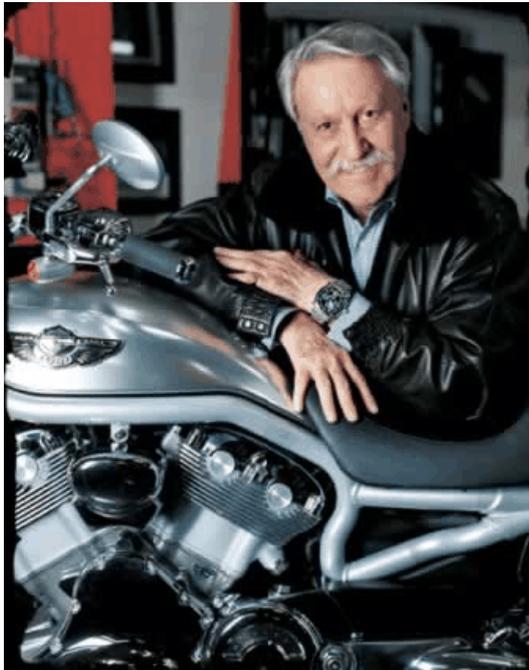


Omega's Genta Connection – the Definitive Story

The Mystery



Gerald Genta pictured with a Harley Davidson – the Inspiration for his 'Turbo' designs under the Gerald Charles brand

For years, I have read and heard that Gérald Genta designed a Constellation model for Omega. In blogs, on websites, and in discussion forums, a steady stream of assertions have been made about a Genta Constellation. A number of writers have stated it as an absolute fact, while others have queried the specific model he designed. Some have speculated that it was the integrated bracelet line of the later 1960s while others have dated his creation either earlier or later than that.

Oswaldo Patrizzi, former CEO of Antiquorum, in sharing some remarks at an Omegamania launch in 2007, made reference to Genta's Contribution to Omega, saying "'I would like to share a comment made by Gérald Genta, an icon in the horological world, made to me when I mentioned the Omega project. He reflected for a moment and said, *'In the early 60's I designed many models for Omega, very discreetly; I felt very connected to this company. Everything that Omega produced was copied by all the others – they were the best!'*" The reference to discretion explains the practice of watch manufacturers

giving the 'brand name' primacy over all who had contributed to the production of various models. The "cult of the designer" was unheard of in the 1950s and early 1960s (In watch design, Genta was the first) Watch companies did not advertise the names of designers or suppliers of cases, dials and bracelets – a practice the big brands continue to this day.

While allusions to a Genta Constellation were fairly common, hard evidence was nowhere to be found. Omega, while confirming that Gérald Genta designed the titanium Seamaster Polaris, did not have any direct evidence that Genta had ever created a Constellation. In correspondence I exchanged with the Omega Museum's, John Diethelm, it was recorded that he worked on contract to Pierre Moinat in the Omega special projects office "some time around 1960." All other avenues of pursuit resulted in either dead ends or further repetition, often verbatim, of earlier assertions about the Genta connection.

Genta, in promotional material for the Gérald Charles brand, refers to a Constellation in a list of horological achievements. Clearly, if the mystery of the Genta Constellation was ever going to be unravelled, Genta would have to be coaxed out of semi-retirement to answer some pointed questions about his relationship with Omega.

By a stroke of luck, I was given an introduction by Giampaolo Ziviani to Gérald's wife. Evelyne Genta is a tireless supporter of Genta's work, and between 1983 and 1999 was a very active partner in the Gérald Genta brand, managing two factories with more than 250 employees in Switzerland and developing new markets in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.



Evelyne Genta. Appointed Monaco's Consul General to London in 2007

Genta had been living and painting quietly in London after the appointment of Evelyne to the position of Monaco's first Consul General to the United Kingdom in 2006. Elected President of Mission Enfance in Monaco in 2000, appointed to the boards of a number of organisations including the Bank of Monaco, Evelyne is a Monaco native educated in London at the French lycée.

Over a series of communications in which Evelyne drew upon her own knowledge of Gérald's work, quizzed Gerald on my behalf and passed on photographs for him to review and comment upon, an untold story emerged of Genta's significant contribution to the iconolary of the Omega brand.

Gérald Genta – the World's First Bona Fide Watch 'Creator'

Before Gérald Genta, watch design was a relatively unsophisticated and ad hoc affair. Customarily, the design of cases, bracelets and dials was the preserve of those who manufactured them. The watch companies would ask their contractors for ideas, say, for case and dial options for a new calibre of movement they planned to produce, and through a type of committee process components would be mixed and matched to create the desired aesthetics.

This in no small way explains the rather austere and uninspired nature of most of the watch styles to have emerged after Art Deco and modernist design was extinguished by World War Two. It wasn't until the mid 1950s that watch design (if one could call it that) began to move away from the utilitarianism of the previous two decades and become more of a fusion of function and aesthetics. Gérald Genta was in no small way responsible for this trend. Earlier, in casting around for opportunities in Switzerland after having worked as a jewellery maker, and later dabbling in fashion design, he saw potential in a career designing watches. He started making the rounds of watch factories, demonstrating to all who would listen the different ways of conceiving "these instruments that told the time".



The young teenage Genta at the easel

In communicating Gérald's recollections of those early days, Evelyne Genta recalled that, "From around 1952, aged 21, Gérald designed jewellery as well as watches and watch parts such as cases, dials and bracelets for many workshops and suppliers". "He gradually built up his reputation and ended up little by little working with all of the most important Swiss watch companies" she added. In those days, she exclaimed, "He received as little as 15 Swiss Francs for each design!"



Pierre Moinat. Creation department head from 1955 at Omega

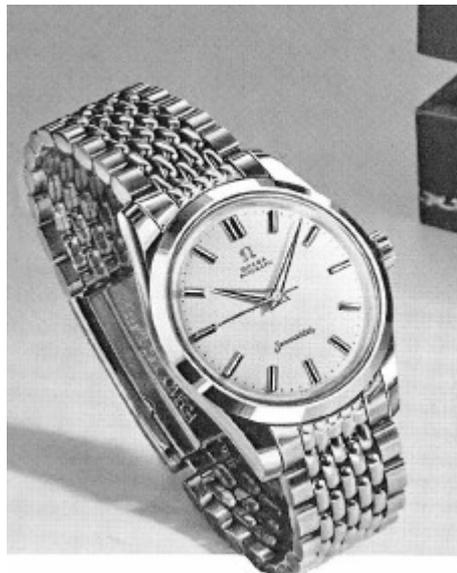
Gérald confirmed that he worked with Pierre Moinat at Omega's "special projects", or creations, department. He had provided designs to Omega at Moinat's request prior to 1960, but, Evelyne explained, "In 1960 Mr Moinat offered my husband exclusive contracts to work with different suppliers of Omega dials, cases, and bracelets" In other words, Gérald's task was to create designs for various components of Omega models and work with suppliers at Omega's behest to bring those designs to fruition.

So it came to be that Genta was the prime design source for Omega models in the early to mid-1960s. In one example, Evelyne reports, "For a Seamaster, he designed the case, the dial, the bracelet, and the indexes separately." "Omega then put together these ideas in one watch."

The evidence of Genta's hand in the design of the famous "Beads of Rice" bracelet collection is convincing. It was Genta, under Moinat, who was charged exclusively with creating case, dial and bracelet designs during the conception, manufacture and bringing to market of the first Beads of Rice bracelet in the early 1960s. 2

We are coming tantalisingly close to confirming a Genta connection with the Omega Constellation. However, let's explore the rest of Genta's career before arriving at a definitive answer on his contributions to the Constellation and other milestone models.

By around 1965 Genta was beginning to feel uneasy at maintaining a singular commitment to one company. Evelyne recounts that, "He was finding this way of collaboration not totally satisfying and he left Omega." "Gérald then chose to collaborate with Universal and thereafter created the Golden Shadow as well as 80 other models." Genta had earlier designed the Polerouter in 1954 at the age of 23! His design, incorporating a beautifully machined inner bezel that created a three-dimensional effect to the dial, is one of his true mid-50s classics and far ahead of its time.



A Genta designed Seamaster from the early 1960s. CK14710



Polerouter from the early 60s showing the ultimate evolution of Genta's 1954 dial design.

Evelyne observes that during the rest of the 1960s, "Gérald was kept very busy creating designs for a number of the big names of the time such as the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak (see picture below right), the Patek Philippe Nautilus, the IWC Ingenieur, the Bulgari Bulgari and a lot of other watches" "Then Gérald opened his first 'design workshop' under the Gérald Genta name in 1969 in St-Jean – Geneva."

While Genta forged a career as the world's first watch creator, he graduated into manufacturing and high-complication horology with the establishment of his own brand. In 1973 he developed the first Grande Sonnerie 3-hammer pocket-watch and the first Gérald Genta Perpetual Calendar model.

In 1979 he was awarded the Poinçon de Genève quality hallmark and he hit the horological headlines again in 1988 with the launch of the Gefica. In 1990, he created a hand crafted perpetual calendar, push-button minute repeater with a skeleton tourbillon that sold for a quarter of a million US dollars. This was well in advance of the tourbillon craze that swept the world of haute horlogerie in the late 1990s, continuing until the Wall Street meltdown. It is not gilding the lily to suggest that Genta played an important role in the resurgence of the mechanical watch in the aftermath of the Switzerland's own meltdown caused by the Japanese quartz tsunami in the 70s and 80s. The Genta story is very much that of groundbreaking achievements well in advance of their time.

The Mystery Unfurls

But what of the Omega Constellation? In my communications with Evelyne we touched upon the subject on a number of occasions, and from the tone of her responses I was beginning to suspect that Genta designed more than one Constellation. Also, in viewing his designs of some of the cases that were used in the Universal Golden Shadow collection, I saw an uncanny resemblance to one of Omega's ground-breaking Constellation designs of the early 1960s.



So, we agreed that I would send a selection of photographs of Constellations that were designed in the very late 1950s and early 1960s. I sent a number of variations of two particular models known to have been created during Genta's tenure at Omega.

The variations included the two models opposite – An Omega Constellation case number 14900 designed to house the new calibre 551 movement and a C-Shape Constellation model 168.009: the first design in the third generation of Constellations powered by a calibre 561.

I received the following communication back from Evelyn Genta after she had reviewed the various photographs with Gérard. She wrote that Gérard had looked at the pictures and confirmed that they were of his designs. "They all come from Gérard and are typical." "The case and dial was designed by Gérard (14900). The same applies to the other two." (168.009 and another watch that hasn't been mentioned yet) She went on to mention that the applied markers with the "index in ebony" (We know them as Onyx inserts) was an original Genta idea.

Having deep suspicions that two of the most famous case designs of vintage Omega Constellations came from the pen of Gérard Genta, I had added another photograph of two of the first Louis Brandt series of jewellery watches released in 1984.

I had earlier confirmed with Omega that Genta created the 1982 Seamaster Titanium Polaris designs, and noticing that the hand of Gérard looked suspiciously present in the first Brandt designs, I asked Evelyn to show the designs to Gérard. Her reply was as follows, "You are absolutely right in assuming that Gérard worked with Mr Fontana in Seste Calende to produce these designs." Fontana headed the case making company Lascor in Seste Calende.

The first Brandt series (see picture opposite) was launched to coincide with the World Congress of Omega Agents held at Interlaken in May 1984. It offered a series of hand crafted calibre 716 and 717 movements, some featuring complications including the exquisite Louis Brandt Perpetual Calendar.

What began as a search to unravel the mystery of one Gérard Genta designed Constellation ended up with a confirmation of authorship of two of the greatest Constellations designs ever produced. Authenticating Genta's association with the first Brandt collection was a delightful and unexpected bonus!

