
“GÉRALD WAS VERY PROUD OF THE INGENIEUR.”

Evelyne Genta, long-time spouse and business partner of Gérald Genta, remembers the work, creativity and passion of the most legendary watch designer of all time. She also reveals what the recent discovery of the original Ingenieur SL drawing means to her and how she preserves her husband's legacy with the Gérald Genta Heritage Association.

Not only did you play one of the most important roles in Gérald Genta's private life as his spouse, but you were also tightly involved in managing his business. What did you enjoy most about working with him so closely?

For us, working so close together is also what made for a fantastic marriage. When I look back at our life together, it really was a big adventure. We would go to the factory in the morning, work together, have lunch together, and go home together. It was actually quite fortunate that we got along so well!

Did you always agree, or were there disputes from time to time?

If we had disagreements, they were only ever related to work. Gérald was a genius, a wonderful man, but not of the easiest temperament. I was more down to earth. His genius was creating and making sure that the manufacturing corresponded exactly to his vision – and I was doing all the rest. I would never argue about a model he was designing, but sometimes, he had such strong feelings for pieces that he was not very keen on selling them. That's when I would step in because I had to run the factory and pay the bills as well as the salaries.

You were in charge of the numbers and had to ensure the boat stayed afloat. Did you have to pull him back down to earth sometimes?

Never. We were both pretty mad back then: we took every risk under the sun! Many people are not aware that Gérald also designed automata and larger clocks. We didn't even have orders for these pieces, but he would create them anyway because he believed in them. Some of them took over four years to make. We had to invest so much money, the risk was huge.

I never heard about Gérald Genta designing automata!

This is a fascinating chapter of his career. He once made a clock with a large circus wheel, and there was a little clown or columbine in each wheel. When you started the automaton, all these little characters would move to beautiful music. This is a side of his work that many people do not even know about. These extraordinary pieces are with different clients all over the world today. Sometimes I just wish they were in a museum for people to see and appreciate them.

When and where did you meet for the first time? Could you share with us what was your impression of him then?

We first met in the summer of 1981 at the house of a mutual friend in Monaco. He told me that my watch was shabby, and he contradicted everything I said. I thought he was incredibly rude. I put my watch in my pocket and then completely forgot about it. It then went into the washing machine and came back out in little pieces. So, in the beginning, I was very upset with this guy!

How would you describe his character in three words?

Creative. His creativity was nothing short of amazing. Secondly, I would mention his integrity. Throughout his career, I never saw Gérald do anything he did not fully believe in. For example, he never changed a design just to be able to sell it. I would also describe him as inspired. He would get up in the morning and just know what he wanted to design that day. He kept saying that his inspiration came from above, it was incredible.

And how do you think your husband would have described your character?

Probably as a very organised person, which was not always meant as a compliment. Maybe also a bit obsessive. And down to earth. This side of my character maybe had to be developed more in order to balance his own way of being as an artist.

What did you appreciate most about his personality?

Gérald was a very loving person. A wonderful man and a loving husband. And then there was his curiosity. Even as he got older and ill, he was still so curious about the world! He would never talk about the old days and how everything used to be better. He would never think about the watches he had already designed. He always looked ahead to the ones he was still going to make. He was so curious about new things – he liked rap music, which to me was insane!

He liked rap music?

Yes, he did. I was stunned by that. Even our daughter could hardly believe it. She was pretty young back then and would say, “Mommy, have you heard what Daddy is listening to?”. I would listen to Tchaikovsky or Beethoven, and he was listening to rap. He would say, “This is genius, you don’t understand!”. After all these years, I still don’t understand!

How would you describe Gérald’s way of working?

There were different places where he designed, depending on where we stayed at the time. In our house in London, he was always right at the centre of the home in his studio. He liked people to walk by when he was working. He wasn’t reclusive at all.

What characterised his drawing technique?

The process always started exactly the same way. First, he would use his compasses to draw a circle in the original size of the watch. Then he would draw two lines – one horizontal and one vertical. Finally, Gérald would take very fine pencils and paintbrushes and paint the watch with watercolour, down to the tiniest details. He would always go from a circle with two lines to a finished watch. There was no sketching involved in the process, no intermediary step.

So, he always drew the watches in their actual size?

Yes. Some of the ladies’ watches he designed were incredibly small and detailed. He would wear a watchmaker’s magnifying glass and need a powerful light source. And I never saw him tear anything up.

That’s one of the reasons why I think the finished watch was all in his head before he started to draw.

Did he have a favourite place or time to draw?

Gérald designed everywhere and all the time. When we were on holiday, he would find himself a quiet spot in the restaurant after lunch and start to draw. He wasn’t fussy at all about where or how he worked, he just designed.

Was he fast, or did it take him a lot of time?

He was fast! It was like he had the finished watch in his head already and it just needed to get out on paper. Sometimes he would show me two drawings at the end of the day and ask which one I preferred. If I said, “the right one,” he would say, “because you hate the left one?”. Therefore, I always had to be very diplomatic and careful when giving him my feedback.

Where do you think Gérald’s inspiration came from?

He loved nature. He used to say that all shapes and colours are in nature. And he loved architecture and art. But he never looked at other people’s watches. He used to say that it would damage his creativity. He paid so much attention to the world around him. For instance, if he were to visit your apartment, he would look around and notice everything there was to see.

Did he hold on to an old design, or was he constantly improving things?

Gérald’s artistic vision was very detailed, and his drawings were always very close to the watch we would make in the end. If he changed a design, it would only occur during the manufacturing process – most changes were motivated by technical issues that came up at that stage.

Were there exchanges between him and the watchmakers, the engineers?

All the time! He didn’t just design a piece and then forget about it. He was constantly up and down the floors of the factory, talking to everyone involved in the manufacturing process. My husband knew exactly what he wanted and always wore the prototypes. We only made the final piece once he was totally happy with it.

I once read in an interview that he didn’t like to wear watches. Is that true?

That’s true. On some occasions, I had to insist on him wearing a watch. Of course, if you go to the Basel Fair, it looks better if you wear a watch. But at home, did he bother? No!

Is that also true that watches were just one of his passions? What else was he passionate about?

Painting! He painted every day. He loved drawing his watches, yes, but had he been able to, I think he would have been a painter. He once said that if he had lived in Italy, he would probably have designed cars – Gérald loved cars. But because he was born in Switzerland he designed watches instead. His true love was painting.

Who was your husband's favourite painter?

He was obsessed with Picasso. Picasso was the ultimate artist to him because he painted, sculpted, and mastered so many creative expressions. That's why they call Gérald the "Picasso of timepieces" in Singapore.

How many watches did your husband design throughout his whole career?

I can't tell you because I honestly don't know. I roughly have 3,100 watch designs and about 400 paintings in my archive, but so many of his designs are lost. Early on in his career, Gérald travelled around Switzerland and sold his drawings for 15 Francs. We have no idea how many watches he designed during all those years. He probably designed up to 100,000 watches in total.

We know you were not present when Gérald designed the Ingenieur SL for IWC Schaffhausen, but do you remember him talking about the company and the Ingenieur?

Gérald talked about the Ingenieur a lot. He always liked IWC for their seriousness, for doing their own thing, and for being true watchmakers. And he was very proud of the Ingenieur. He felt that the name "Ingenieur" was reflecting IWC and what they do very well. He also appreciated that they didn't fight him on his design. They got it straight away; they just understood it.

IWC recently discovered the original drawing of the Ingenieur SL. You assisted in certifying its authenticity. Can you tell us more?

When the design was recovered, it was very exciting for me to see it as I had no trace of it in my archive. Gérald talked about the Ingenieur a lot. When IWC showed me the drawing, it was very moving for me to hold it in my hands for the first time. I made a copy which I am now keeping in the archive as well. I am excited that it has been discovered and certified by the Gérald Genta Heritage Association.

Does the drawing feature typical traits of his technique and style?

The paper, the technique, the colours. Looking at the rest of his designs, you instantly see that these are the same. Nobody else could have done it. What I thought was particularly interesting is that the crown is octagonal – Gérald was obsessed with octagonal shapes, even my wedding ring is octagonal. This is so typical!

However, he seems to have used a different signature on this drawing.

Yes, this is a signature that he would use early on in his career. He's always had different signatures, even later in life, but I have seen this one before. It is definitely a Genta design.

Did you already know then, from the moment you held the drawing in your hand, that it was genuine?

Absolutely. Everybody seems to be discovering Genta designs these days, and I would never give my approval if I were not 100% sure. Currently, two well-known watch brands are asking me if a design they found is from my husband, but I don't have proof because he never talked about these other watches. So, I will not give them my authorisation while I grant it – totally free-willingly – to IWC.

You have seen a rendering of the new Ingenieur Automatic 40. Did you like it?

Yes, I think it will be great, I can't wait to see the final watch. I think it is very faithful to Gérald's design – I am sure my husband would have liked it.

In 2019, you founded the Gérald Genta Heritage Association. Why?

The primary purpose is to preserve my husband's artistic legacy and heritage. I am excited when I see how many personalities from the watch world have already come on board to support the idea. But we also want to encourage and inspire a younger generation of watch designers. With that in mind, we are now preparing a design competition, and hopefully, we will be able to announce something soon.

IWC SCHAFFHAUSEN

IWC Schaffhausen is a leading Swiss luxury watch manufacturer based in Schaffhausen in the north-eastern part of Switzerland. With collections like the Portugieser and the Pilot's Watches, the brand covers the whole spectrum from elegant to sports watches. Founded in 1868 by the American watchmaker and engineer Florentine Ariosto Jones, IWC is known for its unique engineering approach to watchmaking, combining the best of human craftsmanship and creativity with cutting-edge technology and processes.

Over its more than 150-year history, IWC has earned a reputation for creating professional instrument watches and functional complications, especially chronographs and calendars, which are ingenious, robust, and easy for customers to use. A pioneer in the use of titanium and ceramics, IWC today specialises in highly engineered watch cases manufactured from advanced materials, such as coloured ceramics, Ceratanium®, and titanium aluminide.

A leader in sustainable luxury watchmaking, IWC sources materials responsibly and takes action to minimise its impact on the environment. Along the pillars of transparency, circularity, and responsibility, the brand crafts timepieces built to last for generations and continuously improves every element of how it manufactures, distributes, and services its products in the most responsible way. IWC also partners with organisations that work globally to support children and young people.

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