

ANNALS OF CELEBRITY

THE STRANGE JOURNEY OF JOHN LENNON'S STOLEN PATEK PHILIPPE WATCH

For decades, Yoko Ono thought that the birthday gift was in her Dakota apartment. But it had been removed and sold—and now awaits a court ruling in Geneva.

By Jay Fielden

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The missing watch, now valued at between ten and forty million dollars, was a fortieth-birthday gift from Yoko Ono, along with a tie she knit herself. Photograph by Bob Gruen

For years, John Lennon's Patek Philippe 2499 has been the El Dorado of lost watches. Lennon was known for collecting expensive things: apartments in the Dakota (five); guitars (one apartment was mainly for musical equipment); country estates; jukeboxes (three); and Egyptian artifacts, including a gold-leafed sarcophagus containing a mummified princess, who Yoko Ono believed was a former self. But the Patek appears to have been his one and only wristwatch.

A gift from Ono, the watch is more than anyone would ever need to tell the time. A perpetual-calendar chronograph, it is, as Paul Boutros, the head of watches at the American arm of Phillips auction house, says, a "mechanical microcomputer, the most sought after of all Pateks." Between 1952 and around 1985, Patek produced just three hundred and forty-nine of them. The watch, which Ono bought at Tiffany on Fifth Avenue, records time in eight different ways; the dial houses three apertures (day, month, moon phase) and three subdials (seconds, elapsed minutes, date). If you never memorized the mnemonic "thirty days hath September," no worries—the 2499 Patek hath. Its miraculous ganglia of tiny wheels and levers will adjust its readings to the quirky imperfections of the Gregorian calendar, including leap years. No other watchmaker was able to produce a perpetual-calendar-chronograph movement small enough to fit into a wristwatch until 1985.

What makes this 2499 even rarer—and perhaps the most valuable wristwatch in existence—is how little we know about it. Ono gave it to her husband for his fortieth birthday, on October 9, 1980, two months before he was fatally shot by a deranged man outside the Dakota. For the next three decades, the existence of the watch remained unknown except to a handful of family and close friends.

But, sometime around 2007, in the early days of social media, a new kind of watch obsessive materialized, equipped with native computer skills and an appreciation for the places where pop culture and the luxury market intersect. In those pre-Instagram years, fanboy wonks traded watch esoterica online: an image of Picasso wearing a lost Jaeger-LeCoultre; Castro with *two* trendy Rolexes strapped to one arm; Brando, on the set of "Apocalypse Now," "flexing," as watch geeks say, a Rolex GMT-Master without its timing bezel, a modification he made to better inhabit the role of Kurtz; and—the Google image-search find of them all—two frames of an uncredited snapshot of Lennon and his Patek.



"I'm not a watch guy," Sean Lennon said. "I'd be terrified to wear anything of my dad's. I never even played one of his guitars." Photograph by Bob Gruen

Since its discovery, around 2011, the image has appeared online again and again, fuelling a speculative frenzy about what the watch—which cost around twenty-five thousand dollars at Tiffany in 1980—might bring at auction today, with estimates ranging from ten million to

forty million dollars. (Bloomberg's Subdial Watch Index tracks the value of a bundle of watches produced by Rolex, Patek, and Audemars Piguet, like an E.T.F.; the Boston Consulting Group reported that, between 2018 and 2023, a similar selection outperformed the S. & P. 500 by twelve per cent. In 2017, Paul Newman's Rolex Daytona broke records by selling at auction for \$17.8 million.) But all the clickbait posts about the Lennon Patek, as it had come to be known, were regurgitations that contained few facts. There was never a mention of who took the photo, where it was taken, or even where the watch might be.

During the long, dull days of the pandemic, I decided to see what I could find out. Several years went by, as I traced the journey of the watch from where it was stowed after Lennon's death—a locked room in his Dakota apartment—to when it was stolen, apparently in 2005. From there, it moved around Europe and the watch departments of two auction houses, before becoming the subject of an ongoing lawsuit, in Switzerland, to determine whether the watch's rightful owner is Ono or an unnamed man a Swiss court judgment refers to as Mr. A, who claims to have bought the watch legally in 2014.

Having reached its final appeal—Ono has so far prevailed—the case is now in the hands of the Tribunal Fédéral, Switzerland's Supreme Court, which is expected to render a verdict later this year. Meanwhile, the watch continues to sit in an undisclosed location in Geneva, a city that specializes in the safe, secret storage of lost treasures.

Lennon holding up his birthday Patek in the fall of 1980 is one of the happiest moments captured on film in the final years of his life. That summer, he'd begun making music again, during a trip to Bermuda which he'd hoped would help repair the well-publicized strain in his marriage to Ono. Lennon's "lost weekend"—more than a year spent living in Los Angeles with May Pang, a former assistant who became his lover—was not that far in the past, and Ono had fallen into an infatuation with an art-world socialite named Sam Green. (It was in Bermuda that Lennon wrote "I'm Losing You.")

Lennon had spent the previous five years holed up in the Dakota as a self-proclaimed "househusband," raising his son Sean so that Ono, whom Lennon called Mother, could take her turn at being the decision-maker of the music-business enterprise they'd named Lenno. While Ono dealt with Beatles headaches, controlled the purse strings, and invested in real estate, Lennon occupied himself by watching soap operas, eating bran biscuits and rice, smoking Gitanes, and listening to either classical music or Muzak. "If I heard anything bad," he later explained, "I'd want to fix it, and if I heard anything good, I'd wonder why I hadn't thought of it."

In the photograph, Lennon, trim and fit from a macrobiotic diet, wears jeans and a loosely knotted striped knit tie adorned with a jewel-encrusted American-flag pin. The picture was

taken in the Hit Factory, where he and Ono had been recording “Double Fantasy,” his first album in five years. The room is dim, but he has on sunglasses, celluloid horn-rims recently bought in Japan. Buckled on his left wrist is the Patek 2499.

In order to find out more about the photograph, I tracked down Jack Douglas, the noted record producer who oversaw “Double Fantasy,” and sent him the picture by e-mail. He replied right away. “Bob Gruen took the photo,” he wrote, referring to the well-known documenter of the seventies and eighties rock scene.

When I contacted Gruen, who is now seventy-eight and lives in New York City, he had no idea that his photograph had become the talk of the horological world or why he’d never been given credit for it; he’d published the image in a book, titled “John Lennon: The New York Years,” in 2005. But he remembered the night he took the photo—Lennon’s fortieth birthday. Since late that summer, Lennon and Ono had been spending a lot of time in a multiroom studio on the sixth floor of the Hit Factory building, then on West Forty-eighth Street. “I was one of the few people who had an open invitation,” Gruen told me. “They liked to work late.” Gruen, who said he was living on a “steak-and-Cognac diet” in those days, showed up after midnight, having attended the thirty-sixth-birthday party of the singer Nona Hendryx. “I thought I’d bring John a piece of her birthday cake,” he said.

When Gruen arrived, Lennon was enjoying his presents: the knit tie, which Ono had made herself (a copy of the one he wore at school in Liverpool); the flag pin; and the Patek, in yellow gold, which had a rare and highly coveted double-stamped dial, meaning that both the watchmaker’s and Tiffany’s logos were printed on it. Gruen remembered Lennon being abuzz over the tie and the pin, a nod to Lennon’s fourth anniversary as a green-card holder. He doesn’t recall talking about the watch. But Lennon nonetheless strapped the black lizard band onto his wrist when Gruen reached for his Olympus OM4.

A few other photographs that Gruen took that week have never been seen by the public. One shows Lennon at a mixing board with Douglas, who is wearing a recognizable watch himself, a Porsche Design Chronograph I—stainless steel and coated in black—which Porsche had presented to him and to the members of Aerosmith in 1976, after the band’s German tour for its album “Rocks.” Douglas told me that he and Lennon later wrist-checked each other. “Although I thought his watch was beautiful,” he wrote in an e-mail to me, “I told John it didn’t have the pizzazz of my black beauty, and we had a good laugh.”

After Lennon’s death, Ono had a full inventory taken of her husband’s possessions, a document that amounted to nearly a thousand pages. She then put the Patek in a locked room of her apartment. And there the watch remained for more than twenty years.

I found a clue as to what happened next by putting together shards of information from various members of the watch intelligentsia who had all “heard” that the Patek had been stolen. “I think the guy was Turkish,” one said. Another remembered “something about a chauffeur.” This led me to a 2006 article in the *Times* about a man named Koral Karsan (Turkish: check), who had served as Ono’s chauffeur (check two) for the previous ten years. Karsan, a veteran member of Ono’s oft-shuffled staff—trusted enough that he had full access to her apartment—had simply gone berserk in December of that year, threatening to release embarrassing photos and private conversations he’d been recording unless Ono paid him two million dollars; he allegedly said that if she refused he would have her and Sean killed.

A tall, square-jawed man with a thick burr of white hair, Karsan, then fifty, was arrested. In a series of preliminary hearings in a Manhattan courtroom, he defended himself against charges of extortion and attempted grand larceny by claiming, as the *Times* reported, that Ono had “humiliated and degraded him, wrecking his marriage and making him so nervous that he ground eight of his teeth to the bone.” A letter he’d written to Ono describing himself as her “driver, bodyguard, assistant, butler, nurse, handyman and more so your lover and confidant” was also entered into the record. Ono disputed Karsan’s claims about a romance, but the prosecution allowed him to plead guilty to a lesser charge, and he was ordered to return to his native Turkey.

According to a story that Karsan would later tell, Ono—who was known to consult psychics—became worried one day in 2006 that a forecasted heavy-weather event might endanger some meaningful Lennon items, including two pairs of Lennon’s eyeglasses and several *New Yorker* desk diaries (which he used as journals during the last five years of his life); she asked Karsan to find a safer place to keep them. Unbeknownst to Ono, when Karsan was subsequently deported, these items, along with the Patek, followed him.

Ono, who is ninety-one and lives in seclusion in upstate New York, declined to comment. Of Karsan, Sean Lennon told me, “He took advantage of a widow at a vulnerable time. Of all the incidents of people stealing things from my parents, this one is the most painful.”

Karsan, back in Turkey, was in the market for a house. Around 2009, he showed Lennon’s watch to a Turkish friend visiting from Berlin named Erhan G (as he came to be known owing to German privacy laws). Karsan let Erhan G flip through the diaries, including one marked 1980, which includes Lennon’s final entry. Karsan threw out an idea: he’d give the Lennon Patek to Erhan G as collateral for a loan. Erhan G agreed.

One evening in 2013, in Berlin, Erhan G met an executive who worked for a new, much hyped digital auction platform called Auctionata. He couldn’t resist boasting about the Patek 2499 and the rest of the Lennon trove—some eighty items. In short order, a dinner was arranged with Oliver Hoffmann, Auctionata’s twenty-eight-year-old director of watches. “He told me

the story of how he'd gotten the watch," Hoffmann recalled, of his meeting with Erhan G. "It was strange, but it felt whole and true. It was credible because of the many details." Erhan G, who said that he was the watch's rightful owner, per an agreement with Karsan, didn't strike Hoffmann as a man desperate for money. "He owned a successful business and lived in a large apartment in a building close to Potsdamer Platz," Hoffman said. (Erhan G could not be reached for comment.)

Auctionata, which live-streamed its auctions, was one of Germany's dot-com darlings, lauded in the press for disrupting the old auction-house model, dominated by Christie's and Sotheby's, which had yet to develop a digital-first business. Investors including Groupe Arnault, Holtzbrinck Ventures, and Hearst Ventures had put up more than a hundred million dollars of venture capital for the company. Hoffmann says that the C.E.O., Alexander Zacke, recognized what a publicity boon selling John Lennon's lost watch would be and pushed for a way to do it with or without notifying Ono. (Zacke did not respond to a request for comment.) Teams of lawyers studied the watch's provenance and puzzled over how to offer it for sale without raising eyebrows. A document called an extract was obtained from Patek Philippe, which meant that the watch had not been registered as stolen, and Karsan himself travelled to Berlin, where he signed a document in front of a notary testifying that Ono had given him her husband's Patek as a gift in 2005. As for the authenticity of the watch, there was no doubt: on the case back is an identifying inscription that has never been made public outside Germany.

In late 2013, in preparation for an auction, Auctionata had the watch professionally photographed. (In the photo, the watch floats in a vacuum, a carefully lit token of commerce, divorced from all human and emotional context.) But Erhan G got cold feet. Some years earlier, Ono had sued a former employee who had slipped out of the Dakota with Lennon memorabilia; Frederic Seaman, Lennon's last personal assistant, confessed to having stolen diaries similar, if not identical, to those which Karsan and Erhan G had stashed away. (He later returned them.) Searching for a private buyer, Hoffmann approached Mr. A, a man he knew from the rare-watch circuit. A deal by "private treaty"—a sale undisclosed to the public—was reached, and in March, 2014, Mr. A agreed that he would consign a selection of Rolex and Patek watches from his own collection, whose sale proceeds would go toward payment for the Lennon 2499, which was priced at six hundred thousand euros (about eight hundred thousand dollars). "This, in some ways, was more helpful than auctioning the watch," Hoffmann told me, explaining that Auctionata's watch department needed the inventory. The vintage watches Mr. A consigned, most of which Hoffmann valued at between twenty thousand and forty thousand euros apiece, were in total likely worth more than the 2499.

Mr. A told Hoffmann that he planned to keep Lennon's watch in his collection, which has included pieces owned by Eric Clapton. But, within months, he took the Lennon Patek to the

Geneva office of Christie's. As part of the auction house's appraisal process, a Christie's representative reached out to Ono's lawyer, who promptly notified his client. Ono rushed to check the locked room, only to discover that the Patek wasn't there. She had no idea how long it had been gone.

In August of 2023, a reporter named Coline Emmel, who works for a small but enterprising Web site in Switzerland called Gotham City, found something interesting in a backlog of documents filed that summer by the *Chambre Civile* in the canton of Geneva—an appellate judgment in a civil case that had been going on for five years. European privacy laws, especially those in Switzerland, make legal documents unusually hard to decipher. The Swiss judiciary uses a system of letters and numbers to create pseudonyms for appellants, respondents, and anyone else involved, turning a case file into a cryptogram. Emmel knew enough about Beatles history to recognize that “C_____, widow of late F_____, of Japanese nationality and domiciled in [New York City]” was, in fact, Yoko Ono. Although the appeals court affirmed the lower court's decision that Ono was the “sole legitimate owner of the watch,” Mr. A—“a watch collector and longtime professional in the sector, of Italian nationality”—was launching another appeal. Emmel posted a brief synopsis on Gotham City, along with the news that a final judgment was now being awaited from the Swiss Supreme Court.

“Mystery solved!” was the gist of the message that ricocheted around the watch world. But, to me, the mystery had only deepened. The basic itinerary of the Patek's odyssey and its current location had been discovered, but the human detail of how it had passed from wrist to wrist, hiding place to hiding place, still hadn't been reported. What's more, where had Ono ever got the idea of giving a guy like John Lennon—eater of carob-coated peanuts, singer of a song about imagining no possessions, peacenik—a watch that was a status symbol of lockjawed good taste? And what was its famously secret inscription?

I had already been in contact with Mr. A; three days before Emmel posted her scoop, he'd cancelled a planned meeting with me in Italy. Instead, we arranged to speak over Zoom. Seated in a panelled room, he told me that, when Ono had found the watch missing, her counsel demanded its return. It was a tricky legal situation, because Ono, having never realized that the watch was gone, hadn't reported it stolen, and because the case spans several national jurisdictions. Mr. A explained that he didn't return the watch because he didn't believe it to be stolen property. He mentioned the inventory that had been taken of Lennon's possessions after his death, which was referred to in the judgment; he claimed that only two watches were listed—a gold watch (presumably the Patek) and another that Mr. A said was a pocket watch Ono had auctioned through Sotheby's in 1984, two decades before Karsan swore she gave him the Patek.

Mr. A pointed to Ono's own version of the story. "Following the death of the late [John Lennon]," the Swiss court's judgment reads, in a summary of a deposition that Ono gave to investigators from Berlin at the German consulate in New York City, "[Ono] wanted to give something belonging to her to those who had worked very faithfully for her. So, she told [Karsan] to take a watch." Ono, however, added that she in no way meant the "watch she'd given the late [John Lennon]." What watch did she mean? Mr. A asked rhetorically. "There was only the Patek."

Christie's, informed that the watch had been stolen, kept the 2499 secured in its Geneva vault, where it sat for several years. The judgment states, "On December 17, 2015, the parties and [Christie's] SA entered into a consignment-escrow agreement under which the Watch would be consigned to [Mr. A's lawyer], until agreement or right is adjudicated on the property." (Christie's did not respond to a request for comment.) Mr. A told me that he eventually decided to go on the offensive. In 2018, he initiated a civil lawsuit against Ono to prove that he was the Patek's rightful owner.

What Mr. A never expected was that his fate would become intertwined with that of Auctionata, which went bankrupt in early 2017. A German court brought in a bankruptcy expert and lawyer named Christian Graf Brockdorff, who, in a review of the company's inventory, stumbled on the eighty-odd other Lennon items that Erhan G had consigned for a high-six-figure sum. "I doubted that everything that had happened in the past was legally correct," Brockdorff told me in an e-mail. He contacted the police; a criminal case was opened, and Erhan G was found guilty of knowingly dealing in stolen goods. He served a one-year suspended sentence, having admitted that the story that Karsan had told of how he got the Lennon items "did not correspond to reality." (A Europol warrant was issued for Karsan, whose whereabouts are unknown; he could not be reached for comment.) That the case itself ever came to be is curious, but its verdict set a legal foundation that the Swiss judgment cited in declaring that Mr. A is not the watch's rightful owner. According to Guido Urbach, a knowledgeable Swiss attorney, it is unlikely that the Supreme Court will decide any differently.



The secret dedication that Ono had inscribed on the back of the Patek Philippe 2499: "(JUST LIKE) / STARTING OVER / LOVE YOKO / 10 • 9 • 1980 / N. Y. C."

In a series of follow-up e-mails, I asked Mr. A about what John Lennon's Patek meant to him. "I'm more of a Rolling Stones man," he replied, mentioning that he has played bass in a local band for years. Still, "to own the JL watch is really a double good feeling," he said, adding that he remained hopeful that he could "wear it as soon as possible."

But, if the Supreme Court confirms the appellate court's ruling, the watch will likely return to

New York. “It’s important that we get it back because of all we’ve gone through over it,” Sean Lennon told me. He added, “I’m not a watch guy. I’d be terrified to wear anything of my dad’s. I never even played one of his guitars.” He paused. “To me, if anything, the watch is just a symbol of how dangerous it is to trust.”

The watch never seems to have given anyone peace and happiness for long. When Lennon was in Bermuda, writing what he described as the best kind of songs—“the ones that come to you in the middle of the night”—Ono was spending time with Sam Green, whom the *Times* once described as “an unabashed poseur blessed with good looks.” Green had a way with rich and eccentric women. He’d had an affair with the Bakelite heiress, Barbara Baekeland, and by 1980 he was spending his time juggling Greta Garbo, Diana Vreeland, and Ono.

Looking through Green’s papers, which are at Yale’s Beinecke Library, I got an eerie feeling. I found a number of diary entries that corroborated his close relationship with Ono (“Yoko all day and night,” numerous notations read), and a handwritten tally for more than twenty-five thousand dollars—the cost of furniture that Green had sourced to appoint the Hit Factory studio. Whether Green was the one who suggested the Patek as a birthday present for Lennon is hard to confirm, but the cursed history of the watch invites speculation.

The secret engraving, which I found in the never-published Auctionata photo of the watch, is haunting in another way:

(JUST LIKE)
STARTING OVER
LOVE YOKO
10 • 9 • 1980
N. Y. C.

Was there a new start? By the time “Double Fantasy” was finished, Ono had lost interest in Green, and Lennon, who had just written and recorded no fewer than four love songs about her, appeared to be a happy man. The weeks they spent together at the Hit Factory that year had been charmed, which means that the Lennon Patek captures a measure of time that no other watch ever will—the little they had left together. ♦