

# Lucky Numbers

The Swiss watchmaker, Bédat, known for its elegant, Deco-inspired and classically feminine designs, is back and moving in the direction that its founders intended under the design direction of its original head of creation, Dino Modolo. *QP* meets the man and previews the new collection.

**Avril Groom**



Among the vitrines in Bédat & Co's unassuming Geneva showroom – an interesting mix of rustic Swiss-ness and Art Deco elegance – are two watches that eloquently illustrate where the company is at today. One is small, tonneau-shaped and has a completely diamond-set bracelet – a skillfully-crafted mix of little circular brilliants and rectangular baguettes, in a 1930s-inspired style that manages to be both opulent and classy. The other is much larger with a leather strap and a broad bezel of large stones that manages to come over as somewhat flash. The house's creative director Dino Modolo leaves me in no doubt as to which one he approves of.

"We are phasing out two-thirds of our existing references," he says with a nod to the larger model, "taking Bédat back to its original principles – primarily ladies' watches (85 to 90 per cent), made to last with high standards that justify our own *appellation d'origine* certificate, and in design terms always Art Deco-inspired and beyond fashion."

Since the inception of the company, Dino Modolo, one of watchmaking's most respected designers, has been channeling his unique aesthetic vision into Bédat & Co.

Led by passion, Simone Bédât founded the eponymous watch brand in 1996 with her son Christian.

This sounds like a new broom talking but Modolo has hardly been away. The upheavals that Bédât has been through since its foundation in 1996 – through three owners and perilously near to closure in 2009 – have been entirely on the business side. He has steered the creative and production aspects of this distinctive, stylish, quality brand through some stormy times and now feels that, with owners who are sympathetic to its original aims, it is set fair for success.

Look on the company website and you will not see a single mention of Modolo's name. For a flamboyant, opinionated and well-known watch designer he is remarkably modest about his position and achievements and fully accepts that the mother and son partnership that founded the company are the names still associated with it, even though Simone Bédât died last year and her son Christian now has no direct link with the company.



The No8 collection is available in a 26.5mm- or 36.5mm-wide case with a Swiss ETA automatic mechanical movement in the larger model and a Swiss quartz movement in the smaller one.

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The No8 collection features round-shaped cases. The figure eight is significant as it is the Bédat & Co emblem and universally symbolizes prosperity and luck as well as representing the hourglass and infinity.

## Eighth wonder

As is well known, Madame Bédat left Raymond Weil, which she started in partnership with the eponymous owner, to found the new company with her son who had also worked at Weil. Modolo joined as designer though, he says, "the creative concept was very much the Bédats'. Simone had always loved Art Deco style and the classic watches that were produced then, so that was the natural design inspiration. Christian was very interested in numerology and came up with the idea of numbering new models rather than naming them, and not in chronological order but with numbers relating to their aesthetic and spiritual significance in different cultures".

Fortuitously, one of these was the association of the number eight not only with good fortune in Far Eastern culture but also the company logo of paired Bs, representing the two Bédats, which looks like an eight. "Christian was aware of the link," says Modolo, "but he had no idea how quickly the Far East market would grow and how useful the logo would be."

Each number follows a geometric watch shape – the original 1997 tonneau No3 and rectangular No7, both with incurved details and distinctive Roman numerals, formed the initial house codes. Bédat was an immediate hit, soon occupying a prominent position at Basel and boasting points of sale on every continent.

Then in 2000 it attracted the attention of Gucci, looking to increase its portfolio of luxury companies and buoyed by €2.5 billion from PPR's François Pinault to fight off the advances of Bernard Arnault's LVMH group. "As a purely luxury watch firm we were something they did not have", says Modolo, "and we liked the way Domenico de Sole and Tom Ford [CEO and creative director at that time] worked, so joining them made sense." With rapid acquisitions, the set-up became the Gucci Group, but relations soured after De Sole and Ford left in 2004 over policy differences.



The No2 collection is composed of oval-shaped models that represent union and the meeting of two connected elements through the graphic interplay of two ellipses.



Created in 1997, the No3 collection features a tonneau shape that is concave at 6 and 12 o'clock. The number three symbolises perfection and totality.



**Left:** Created in 1997, the No7 Collection offers various takes on the rectangular shape, curved at 3 and 9 o'clock. The collection features some very nice looking tank style watches and some funky chronographs.

### To Gucci and back

Modolo praises Gucci creatives like the house designer Frida Giannini and names no culprits in his comments about Gucci management but clearly blames them for driving the firm in the wrong direction. "I was designing the watches for Gucci itself and for Boucheron as well as Bédát and none were doing the right thing," he says. "Gucci wanted to go up market yet historically its main sales base starts at €250 and it made mistakes like grossly underestimating demand on some styles."

Designs such as the jewellery-oriented Signoria and the rose gold Twirl were critically well received but not, he says, commercial successes. Meanwhile, he says, "we had eight managing directors in nine years, most from non-watch backgrounds, and strategy changed all the time but was inevitably related to capital investment. I think it's fair to say they understood big companies but not watchmaking, or companies where human relationships are important".

The Bédats left the company in 2006 (though Modolo is still in close contact with Christian) and the Gucci Group continued to use Modolo's recognised talents across its watch board, while apparently doubting that Bédát itself could make money despite increasing sales especially in the Far East. Frank Low's upmarket Luxury Concepts company in Malaysia did very well with the brand and in 2009 Low negotiated to open the world's first ever stand-alone Bédát boutique, in the country's capital city, Kuala Lumpur.



**Above & below:** Elegance and sophistication are perfectly captured in the Bédát & Co collection No1 – square-shaped and concave at 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock.





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By this time, says Modolo, "our strategy had been changed yet again and I felt it was too much, so I resigned and Gucci made no attempt to change my mind." Less than a month after the boutique's sumptuous opening, attended by Malaysia's great and good, Gucci announced it was closing the company. At this point Modolo believes fate took over.

"Frank, who really understands how luxury works, decided he couldn't close a shop he had opened so spectacularly, so he started analysing the company with a view to buying it. Christian happened to be in Kuala Lumpur and told Frank that if he took on Bédat he needed me too. Christian then got straight on to me – I had recently left Gucci, was not sure what I wanted to do next and wasn't convinced about this company I didn't know. Frank was due in Geneva the next day – we had a long discussion and found our philosophies were very close. I told him that Bédat was like a garden – after two years of near-neglect it would take time to pull round before we could build.

"I then went to Malaysia to meet the holding company owner, who is a Calvinist Protestant and understands very well our Geneva-based philosophy of pride and attachment to strong values besides money. It all happened very fast and suddenly I was back, trying to undo what I felt were the mistakes of the past two years".

## Back to the future

Modolo reconstructed the small Bédat family, with workers who had been with them since the start teaching novices. He is currently building on three main lines – elegant day and evening watches, more active (though not sports) women's styles and jewellery interpretations based on texture and craft. Last year was low-key for new Bédat models. "I don't like to show prototypes, which may never happen," says Modolo. "Our models are ready for delivery when we reveal them".

New styles for 2011 will include bi-colour models in steel and red gold with brown dials and new chronograph styles probably followed next year by a women's dual time watch. At present the movements, whether mechanical or quartz, are made by ETA. While agreeing that women are interested in complications and mechanical movements, Modolo insists that Bédat will not produce its own "until we can do it in a proper, integrated way, making our own components."

At present, prices start at under £3,000 and distribution is back on course, including in the UK. But the big push, unsurprisingly, is in the Far East. Hong Kong is already benefiting from the brand's first TV advertisement and in June it will enter China. Then that lucky eight logo will undoubtedly prove its worth.

Further information: [www.bedat.com](http://www.bedat.com)



Above and below:  
Novelties from the  
Bedat 2010 collection.

