

Q&A



Known as the world's oldest diamond company, Backes & Strauss, through its luxury timepiece brand, aims to marry the skills of diamond cutting and watchmaking. *QP* questions the company's Master Polisher on his horological outlook.

Watchmaking and diamond cutting are two complementary but very different crafts. How hard is it to bring them together?

There are many parallels between the Master diamond cutter and the Master watchmaker. Both are supreme craftsmen. Both share the same mathematical precision, the same combination of art and science, the same almost elemental understanding. The fundamental difference is that one works with light while the other works with time. It is this meeting of the mastery of diamonds and watchmaking, this genius for light and time, that makes a Backes & Strauss watch unique. It is a masterpiece both on the inside and out.

The Backes & Strauss name is synonymous with the best in gemstones. Would you say that the art of horology is of secondary

importance to the diamonds and overall look of the watches?

Not at all. Our watch movements are manufactured exclusively by Franck Muller, a house renowned for its innovation and horological brilliance in a similar way that Backes & Strauss is revered throughout the world of diamonds. It was always been of prime importance for the quality of the movement to match the quality of the case.

So the clients buying a watch from you are looking for more than bling?

Absolutely. We don't simply set a standard watch with diamonds. First of all, as already mentioned, we have world-class movements and our watches are designed to showcase the diamonds with maximum impact. The sweeping curves of the case are carefully calculated to allow the optimum light to reach the stones. We use same quality of diamonds in Backes & Strauss



watches as in the jewellery and each one is selected, cut and polished to perfection by us. Every stone is positioned by a craftsman and each is mounted so that full advantage of the stone can be taken from every angle

How many people and processes are involved in producing a Backes & Strauss timepiece?

It's difficult to give numbers here. There are a large number of different teams working together to produce a Backes & Strauss watch. The process starts with the design team, which then works closely with the technical drawing team before the prototype department gets involved. When everyone is happy with the prototype, we begin the production of the various parts - case, movement, dial, hands, crown, buckles, choice of straps - with different craftsmen involved in every process. Running parallel to this, of course, is the selection and setting of the diamonds by the craftsmen.

Finally, everything is assembled by the Master watchmaker.

That's a lot of watchmaking. How many man-hours does it all equate to?

A lot! It depends on the model and the complication of the movement or diamond setting but, just to give you an example, the Prince Regent dial - set with 380 tapered baguettes - takes 2,150 man-hours just to cut the diamonds and invisibly set them on the dial.

Are there limits in terms of designs as to what you can do?

Although there are always going to be certain limits in watch design, we are constantly pushing the boundaries in terms of what we can do with diamonds. Just as the Master watchmaker challenges himself with new complications, as Master diamond cutters we aim to find new challenges in diamond cutting and setting.

What level of training and apprenticeship is involved in becoming a Backes & Strauss diamond cutter and how many are there?

Diamond cutting requires a relatively long apprenticeship. However becoming a Master diamond cutter takes seven to eight years with many never making the grade. It is only the Master diamond cutter who can polish an ideal cut diamond which is used in all Backes & Strauss watches and jewellery and only 2-3 per cent attain this level.

What makes a Backes & Strauss diamond so special?

The brilliance, the fire, the life inside a stone depends entirely on how light is reflected within and dispersed by the facets. For a diamond to reveal its true beauty, each facet must be cut so that it mirrors its opposite exactly - only then will all the light entering the stone be reflected internally and dispersed through the top



alone. When the symmetry is perfect, a unique pattern is formed inside the stone. With a Backes & Strauss diamond, when you look down through the crown with a special viewer you can see eight arrows radiating outwards. Look up through the pavilion and you can see a circle of eight hearts. The slightest flaw in cutting spoils the hearts and arrows effect. Having taken such care in polishing the diamonds, we use only Flawless and VVS clarity stones and the finest DEF colours.

How technical are your clients and to what degree do they understand and appreciate the cut of diamonds used?

Consumers are always fascinated by technical information – diamonds hold a special fascination for people and as we explain to them the speciality of Backes & Strauss diamonds we increase their appreciation.

How important is it for you as a craftsman and Backes & Strauss as a brand to get the message of quality over to those who wear your pieces?

Today where most of our daily gadgets are chip operated – it is important to show people that we are producing the finest products using the finest materials and the best craftsmen. People are

fascinated to see how diamonds are cut and polished and there is a growing interest from our customers to witness the craft at first-hand.

We are very much looking forward to SalonQP in November. The show gives the visitor the opportunity to enter the world of horology and gain a glimpse of what happens behind the scenes. This is the only way to begin to understand how difficult it is to create the beautiful timepieces that are on view. At Backes & Strauss we hope that we will be able to add to that insight in 2010 by demonstrating the craftsmanship required for polishing even the smallest diamonds with the same care and attention as larger ones ☺