

# Shine *On*



It was precisely three years ago that the world's oldest diamond company made its first foray into the world of watches - yet already a Backes & Strauss timepiece has found its way onto the wrist of America's First Lady. But, the firm's glittering veneer hides real horological credentials. There's more to life than ice at Backes & Strauss.

**Simon de Burton**



The very literal jewel in the  
crown of the oldest diamond  
trader in the world.



The Star of Ghana, commissioned by the President of Ghana for presentation to Michelle Obama during President Obama and family's official visit to the country in July 2009.

*The Star of Ghana embodies two of the republic's main resources – gold and diamonds*

You will probably say it is odd to describe as 'understated' a watchmaker that includes in its range a timepiece called the Royal Berkeley that is encrusted with a wrist-dragging array of 297 custom-cut diamonds weighing 77.5 carats, or another called the Prince Regent which dazzles with 505 stones set into the case and dial. But to prove my theory that Backes & Strauss really is a rather low-key brand, let's consider how many people are aware of the fact that no less a person than America's First Lady, Michelle Obama, was recently presented with a unique Backes & Strauss watch during an official visit?

I've no doubt that a fairly large percentage of *QP's* well-informed readership will know about the event, but the point I am trying to make is that the majority of people won't. Most other watch firms would have milked such a priceless piece of publicity for all it is worth - not so Backes & Strauss, which was commissioned to make the gift by the aides of Ghana's President

President and Mrs Obama visited the republic in July, not long after Backes & Strauss CEO Vartkess Knadjian was first contacted by the brand's recently-appointed Ghanaian distributors, who appear to have some rather useful connections. "We were simply told that the President of Ghana was looking for a suitable gift for Michelle Obama and that a Backes & Strauss watch seemed appropriate.

"We didn't have much time to play with, so we decided to base the piece on a model from the Regent collection with the Great Bear constellation that normally surrounds the moonphase being substituted for the Ghanaian flag marked with a star representing the lodestar of African freedom," Knadjian told *QP*.

"The watch subsequently became known as the Star of Ghana. Part of the idea behind it was that it embodies two of the republic's main resources - gold and diamonds. Its creation and presentation had to be kept pretty low key and it was not until a couple of months later that the White House even gave us permission to reveal the fact that we had made it at all."

*Our more expensive pieces are only available to special order and we have neither the ability nor the desire to make watches in large numbers*



Backes & Strauss first limited edition show stealer, the Regent 1609 AD. The watch pays tribute to English astronomer Thomas Harriett and showcases an original and luxurious moon phase indicator.



The one-off, rose gold watch set with 288 diamonds in three rows is probably valued at around Sfr.50,000, making it a 'mid-range' Backes & Strauss product. The firm's watches can cost up to £750,000 for the Royal Berkeley which takes months to create but, even taking the less expensive pieces into account, Backes & Strauss has only just reached a production level of around 1,000 watches per year - a quantity that Knadjian is keen not to exceed.

"What we are about is making gem-set watches of an exceptionally high standard at a very low volume. Our more expensive pieces are only available to special order and we have neither the ability nor the desire to make watches in large numbers."

That reluctance to increase numbers will hold obvious appeal to those who like their wrist wear to be on the 'exclusive' side, and it is highly unlikely that anyone who owns a Backes & Strauss will find themselves seated beside a fellow owner at a dinner party. The Regent 1609 AD, for instance, launched in 2008, is the company's first limited edition timepiece (just 218 pieces). The name pays tribute to English astronomer Thomas Harriet who made the first drawings of the moon, even before Galileo, and the watch showcases an original and luxurious moon phase indicator, which presents a representation of a 17-star constellation, depicted in round brilliant diamonds set into the gold case.

But, in my opinion, combining an ethos of exclusivity with a low-key approach to promoting itself has resulted in one rather large drawback for Backes & Strauss - not many people seem to know that there is far more to its watches than merely an ability to out-shine the crown jewels.



In the production of a Backes & Strauss watch, many centuries of hard-learned skills are harmoniously brought together by a Master Diamond-cutter and a Master Watchmaker.



### Dedicated partnership

When Knadjian decided to capitalise on his firm's heritage by combining its diamond expertise with a horological offering, the obvious decision was to seek a partnership with Franck Muller since Backes & Strauss had, for years, been supplying the stones for Muller's gem-set watches and even created the special 73-facet Curvex diamond to complement the tonneau-shaped Curvex wristwatch. As many *QP* readers will know, every part of a Backes & Strauss watch is made in-house at Franck Muller's Watchland, meaning that these are genuine *manufacture* pieces, while the gem-setting itself is carried-out by dedicated Backes & Strauss specialists, often using techniques that are unique to the company.

"There are clearly two divisions in horology - the purist makers who create ever greater complications and the makers, such as us, of exceptional high quality jewellery pieces. We have not gone into business to compete in the first category. As far as making the internals and cases of a watch are concerned, we want that to be done by the absolute experts, which is why we work with Franck Muller.

"What we do is add something very special by using our decades of knowledge to dress the watch in Ideal cut diamonds, which are of perfect symmetry and form. This is not simply a matter of setting a standard watchcase - our cases are specifically designed to carry our diamonds and it is this that makes our products stand out.

"To understand why I think the market for such extravagant watches will remain strong we need to understand the original European phenomenon of luxury, which was that the wealthy, the aristocratic and the truly discerning have only ever wanted the best products made by the best craftsman, almost regardless of cost. We cater for such people, and we believe there is still a great deal of creativity to be realised."



The Regent collection is inspired by the architecture of John Nash who was commissioned by the Prince Regent in 1811 to develop part of London, then known as Marylebone Park. The classical proportions of Nash's work - Regent Street, Regent's Park, St James's Park - can be seen in the sweeping curves and bold symmetry of the Regent Collection.

### Classics count

Before the end of this year, a new high-end model will be added to the range called the Berkeley Prince that will incorporate a similar invisible setting to that used in the 505-diamond, £255,000 Prince Regent - but the good news for lovers of more low-key watches is that Backes & Strauss offers a range of non gem-set models at surprisingly affordable prices.... yet, once again, it rarely talks about them.

At this year's World Premier of Haute Horlogerie in Geneva - organised by Franck Muller as a sideshow to the 'official' Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie - Backes & Strauss unveiled its Black Knight, a special, PVD coated version of the Berkeley that will be limited to 125 pieces. The Franck Muller movement is enhanced with a part-platinum rotor, there's a choice of leather or rubber straps and the only hint of bling is to be seen in the single, ideal cut diamond set into the winding crown in signature Backes & Strauss style. Case sizes of 40 mm and 43 mm are available at a starting price of £4,830, with a chronograph model due to be released soon starting at £6,640.

They fall under the banner of the Backes & Strauss 'Classics' range, which includes Piccadilly, Berkeley and Regent models made from rose or white gold and which, like the Black Knight, are low-key and gem-free save for that diamond-set crown. The designs are striking without being tacky, the case shapes are all interesting and, above all, the finish is equally as good as that of the fully paved watches. They strike me as a worthy and 'different' alternative to a Roger Dubuis or even, dare I say, a Franck Muller.

It just seems a shame that so few people actually know they exist. ☹



A distinct lack of bling, but the Black Knight from the Berkeley collection is proving to be a huge success for Backes & Strauss. A chronograph version is due for release at the end of the year.