

Fire From Ice



A model from Backes & Strauss' new Piccadilly watch collection, which, like Regent and Berkeley, is named and styled after a London landmark. This watch's oval shape alludes to Piccadilly Circus, which links the centre and south sections of visionary architect John Nash's sweeping Regent Street.

i Antwerp diamond giant Backes & Strauss has ventured beyond its role as cutter and polisher to the industry this year, with a new luxury watch brand that alludes strongly to the group's London roots. But while there's no doubting the horological integrity of the watches themselves, which come courtesy of long-term diamond-happy client Franck Muller, the most striking facet is the sheer brilliance of their stones. Every one is painstakingly 'ideal cut' for maximum fire, marking-out Backes & Strauss London as a serious jewellery watch brand, rather than just another watchmaker 'blinging-up' its existing models. And unlike Boucheron's recent toe in horological waters (p.66) this venture should forge a platform from which Backes & Strauss can launch itself as a luxury brand *per se*. But are watches the best route to take?

Maria Doultton

What do Ethiopia, an ostrich and the oldest diamond company in the world have in common? The answer is to be found on the wrist of handsome, silver-haired Vartkess Knadjian: a large, oval, white-gold watch bearing a black dial shimmering with applied gold numerals and a diamond set into the crown. As Knadjian pulls his cuff back into place, seated in the firm's not-quite-yet-completed showroom on St James, the story unfolds.

Born to an Armenian watchmaker in the court of Emperor Haile Selassie I in Addis Ababa, Knadjian is CEO of the Backes & Strauss diamond group, whose corporate symbol is an ostrich. With its main office in global diamond capital Antwerp, B&S Group's latest venture is a diamond watch brand, Backes & Strauss London, operating out of its branch in jewellery district Hatton Garden. Simple really.

Or is it? Backes & Strauss makes its high-carat entrance at a time when we are becoming somewhat jaded by ever-more improbable permutations of luxury watchmaking and jewellery: watch companies making jewellery, jewellery companies making watches, diamond traders making jewels, auction houses launching diamond jewellery... All very confusing for the innocent punter and often with less-than-dazzling results.

But Knadjian has good reason for moving from diamond trading into horology. "The natural thing for us would have been to jump into the world of jewellery, but it is very difficult to create a jewellery brand. I believe it is easier to get a watch brand out there first." From April, the house launched three lines (Regent, Piccadilly and Berkeley), all inspired by the extravagant architecture of John Nash's sweeping crescents, fluted columns and white stucco *en vogue* during the era of the Dandy. Backes & Strauss has some 650 watches on offer, with the most modest models (bearing just one diamond on the crown) priced at £3,906, going up to £84,000 for those with diamond-set bezels, and way beyond into "price upon request" territory. Undoubtedly, the most extrovert and extravagant will have the choice of getting even more bling for their buck, at their behest. After all, bespoke is what Backes & Strauss does best, at a premium of course.

Trading up

Backes & Strauss started life in 1789 as a diamond cutter and polisher when Georg Carl Backes registered as a goldsmith in Hanau near Frankfurt. Following considerable success, he sent his son Johann Franz to London in 1814 to open a branch at 10 Hatton Garden, a few doors from the modern brand's current location in Holborn. The company launched a line of jewellery and successfully traded stones from Hanau, even exhibiting at the Great Exhibition in 1851. By then, Johann had been joined in the business by his sons, Charles and William and in 1856 the company employed an office boy called Max Strauss. The firm's second founding father, Strauss was managing JF Backes & Co. within 15 years and in 1873 the company started trading as 'Backes & Strauss'. Manufacturing activities in Great Britain started in 1877.

The company claims a history of jewellery making and offers satisfyingly yellowed newspaper advertisements as proof. "Owners of costly bracelets may well rejoice



The Regent collection draws on the architecture of John Nash who was commissioned by the Prince Regent in 1811 to conceive a new layout for a huge swathe of London, then known as Marylebone Park. Nash created a masterplan (put into action in 1818) for an area that stretched from St James's northwards, including its neighbouring streets, terraces and crescents of elegant townhouses and villas. The classical, balanced proportions of Nash's work (Regent Street, Regent's Park, St James's Park, Marble Arch) are reflected by Backes & Strauss' Regent collection.



Backes & Strauss CEO Vartkess Knadjian (left) and Franck Muller Watchland CEO Vartan Sirmakes (right) at the former's brand launch in November last year. Backes & Strauss has supplied the high-end watch brand with diamonds for many years, as well as developing its own exclusive cut - the 73-facet 'Curvex' diamond, conceived to build on the success of Muller's 'Curvex' case shape; a wide tonneau that jumpstarted a resurgent trend for tonneau watches in the Nineties.

Not content with merely supplying the jewellery industry, Knadjian's next step was to turn Backes & Strauss into a luxury-goods supplier in its own right.

over the subtleties of this modern invention... The bracelet opens sufficiently to allow the putting on or the removal of the glove without taking off the bracelet," extols the 1884 advertisement for the Backes & Strauss 'Snap Bracelet' fastening system. At the bottom of the advertisement is that ostrich, which today has been positioned centre stage.

In 1952, Backes & Strauss opened its office in Antwerp under the direction of Robert Lee and Gustave Ponet. Robert Lee retired in 1986, and it was Knadjian who took over. Knadjian himself has had a sparkling career (excuse the pun), joining the Antwerp works as an apprentice after an English education. He learned all the disciplines along the way and six years later was in charge of the office, which he successfully transformed into a major international diamond trader. In 2001 he became Group Managing Director and in 2003 led a management buyout, placing him at the helm of the firm.

Not content with merely supplying the jewellery industry, Knadjian's next step was to turn the company into a luxury-goods supplier in its own right. And the way to take the firm out of the back office was to create a watch brand.

The Muller connection

Having supplied diamonds for many years to high-end horologist Franck Muller, owned by compatriot and friend Vartan Sirmakes, Knadjian approached Sirmakes to join him in his venture. "In January 2004 I sat down with Vartan and told him about my idea of making jewellery watches. I had just bought-out Backes & Strauss and wanted leverage to the name. I established

the basis of the brand and united it with Simarke's watchmaking knowledge."

Knadjian firmly believes that the 50/50 joint venture with Sirmakes adds watchmaking credibility to his fledgling brand, despite the turbulent history between Sirmakes and former partner Franck Muller (actually back aboard his eponymous brand up until very recently, in a tentative capacity as 'consultant'). And how does the association benefit the Franck Muller brand? Surely Sirmakes, himself no stranger to bling, could launch an all-diamond brand himself? "We see ourselves as developing independently from Franck Muller in terms of design, but we will use their mechanical innovations. We are not cannibalising Franck Muller because we are different. We are not into complications or fashion, we are much more of a jewellery line," explains Knadjian.

So what makes Backes & Strauss different from, say, Harry Winston, Cartier, Chopard or indeed Jacob & Co., all of whom supply fully iced-up wrist candy to the wealthiest horological patrons of the world?

Knadjian replies: "The diamond-set watches sector is very competitive but we can set ourselves apart. I think that we are the only ones to use perfectly cut or 'ideal' diamonds, which create the 'hearts and arrows' effect, bringing more brilliance and fire to the stone. All the diamonds on our watches are perfectly matched, which is very difficult to achieve, even on jewellery. Each stone is cut and polished to our specification by our group, which is also an advantage."

Continued on page 82



In 1914, Backes & Strauss boasted three European branches, illustrated here in an original catalogue. The 'B&S Group' now provides customised goods and services to clients in over 40 countries from offices in Antwerp, London, Dubai, Canada and Hong Kong. With the Franck Muller link-up, the Backes & Strauss name will solely refer to the group's branded products, while the polished diamond business will operate as B&S Diamonds.



Making the Cut

The beauty of a diamond lies in its 'brilliance' (the reflection of light falling on it) and its fire (splitting of white light into rainbow colours). Maximum fire and brilliance can be obtained by cutting a diamond according to a set of specifications, called the 'ideal cut', creating the most beautiful diamonds.

The ideal cut was discovered in 1919 by a young mathematician named Marcel Tolkowsky, who canvassed the public's opinion of differently cut diamonds and worked with cutters to draw-up the best, or 'ideal' proportions for maximum brilliance: in cross section, a flat-topped pentagon. To achieve this, a diamond cutter must cut 57 precise facets at exact angles. The proof of an ideal cut is the 'hearts and arrows' pattern given off by the stone when viewed with a special instrument called a 'hearts and arrows viewer'. The pattern is a series of eight arrowheads when viewed from above, through its 'crown' **A**, and eight heart shapes when viewed from below, through the 'pavilion' end **B**.

Diamond cutters that produce diamonds for the mass market are usually instructed to cut a diamond quickly and to preserve as much carat weight as possible, resulting in a diamond that is not as brilliant as it could be. Hearts-and-arrows cutters on the other hand are instructed to make a diamond as beautiful and brilliant as possible. It is a difficult task and much of the rough diamond weight (up to 55%) is sacrificed to achieve such perfection in a process that can take up to 10 times longer. According to the GIA (Gemological Institute of America), less than 3% of the world's diamonds are cut to these ideal proportions. It is, however, a speciality of Backes & Strauss, and all but its bespoke diamonds are cut this way.

Every Backes & Strauss watch has an ideal-cut diamond set into the crown.

“The natural thing for us would have been to jump into the world of jewellery, but I believe it is easier to get a watch brand out there first.”



The Berkeley collection's cut-off corners are inspired by one of London's great squares found in the heart of Mayfair. Originally laid out in the 18th century by Palladian master and landscape architect William Kent, Berkeley Square has particular resonance for Backes & Strauss as its great plane trees, among the oldest in London, were planted in 1789, the year the company started trading diamonds.

Using only ideal-cut diamonds (see box) means that the cutting and polishing process can take up to 10 times longer than normal. The stone loses carats but gains brilliance, so it helps that Knadjian can delve into his group's resources to secure the rocks.

Haute joaillerie

This obsession with the brilliance and purity of the diamonds used by Backes & Strauss, as opposed to its watches' balance springs or power reserves, reflects the house philosophy that these are jewellery watches, not watches merely embellished with diamonds. "I want people to see these watches as beautiful pieces of jewellery, as we are using the criteria of high jewellery in watches designed to carry diamonds from the start." An example of this is the fully loaded Regent model with two rows of invisibly set baguette diamonds slinking around its voluptuous curves. A sophisticated setting technique slides the individually cut diamonds along rails, allowing them to sit shoulder-to-shoulder without a glint of metal in sight, creating the effect of solid ice.

The jewellery theme is carried through to the dial, with the idea that, like a diamond, it should catch the light by using guilloché, applied numerals, faceted and polished hands, all set in deep cases. Despite the large size, with cases going up to a gargantuan 44 mm, they sit comfortably, if not discreetly on the wrist thanks to the curved case shape. The large size is, according to Knadjian, to please the Russian market.

The straps are predominantly of ostrich leather and even the most modest models feature a gold deployant clasp and a diamond set into the crown. The latter is a feature that Knadjian is keen to emphasise, as he is proud to have cracked the conundrum of how to set a round-cut diamond into this small knob with the top of the diamond facing outwards. Again, not exactly high horology, but confirmation that this is a watch created by a diamond expert, rather than a watchmaker. Certainly an unusual approach, which in itself sets this brand apart – something becoming increasingly difficult in the rapidly populated world of watchmaking. ○

Further information: Backes & Strauss, 30 St James's St, London SW1A 1HB. Tel: 020 7839 8709, www.backesandstrauss.com, www.groupbs.com