

Flair

Bulgari, once a jewellery shop in Rome and now Italy's best-known luxury brand, are looking to expand their watch range even further, explains Francesco Trapani to QP

Nicholas Foulkes

ⓘ Bulgari are Italy. Or at least a part of it. It is not the rustic, first-pressed olive oil gentility of Tuscany that appeals to so many *bien pensant* northern Europeans, but it's rather more... how does one say... the *expressive* side of Italy – the Italy that likes its women in fur coats (even though it seldom snows in Rome), the Italy that prizes *la bella figura* above all else... the side of Italy that seriously thought that when crash helmets became mandatory Romans would stop using their Vespas because they would not look so cool any more.



Francesco Trapani, the nephew of Gianni Bulgari, one of founder Sortirio Bulgari's grandchildren, continues to keep the company a family-run business.

By European standards Italy is a young country, albeit one with an old past. That may sound like an oxymoron, but think about it: in spite of Rome, the Renaissance and everything else, Italy has only existed as a unified state stretching from the Swiss Alps almost to the shores of Africa since 1870. Bulgari have been Italian jewellers since 1880 when a talented young Greek silversmith called Sortirios Bulgari arrived in Naples. So in a sense, Bulgari is only a decade younger than Italy itself.

By the mid 1880s, Sortirio (doubtless dropping the 's' made him sound more Italian) had shops in Rome and St Moritz. By the turn of the century he was operating in most of the smart resorts in and around Italy: San Remo, Naples and Bellagio to name a few. The early 20th century saw his eponymous business established in some splendour on the Via Condotti. Bulgari's fortunes mirrored those of Italy during the turbulent 20th century, and,

while the 1960s made London swing, Rome was rocking to the rhythm of *La Dolce Vita*, the Fellini film that became a city-wide party from which Rome has yet to recover.

That piece of cinema put Rome on the jet setters' map, and Bulgari joined their list of approved stores. The '60s and '70s saw the likes of Liz Taylor, Kirk Douglas, Audrey Hepburn, the Greek Royal family and most of the rest of the international set thronging at the Bulgari store on the Via Condotti. Even the politically precarious state of Europe during the '70s did not leave Bulgari unscathed: Gianni Bulgari, one of the triumvirate of Sortirio's grandchildren running the business, was kidnapped in 1975. Indeed it was Gianni, or rather his departure, that initiated Bulgari's rise during the 1980s and 1990s to the status of an internationally known luxury goods house, rather than a small but exclusive Roman jeweller and silversmith catering to the whims of the world's rich.

During the 1980s, the three brothers Nicola, Paulo and Gianni had different views on the company's future. Eventually, Gianni left the company, and it was a nephew, Francesco Trapani, who took over as CEO. Together with his uncles Paolo and Nicola, Trapani has taken Bulgari to a level of international awareness that his great grandfather Sortirio could not have imagined. Bulgari has become to Italy what Cartier is to France.

Personally, I am sceptical of luxury juggernauts: if I want a tie I go to Charvet on the Place Vendome; if it is an eau de toilette I am after I approach Messrs Creed or Caron; should I require a new lighter then it is to ST Dupont that I turn. I do not regard shopping for luxury bibelots and gewgaws a one-stop experience. However, there are exceptions to this rule.

Bulgari, rather like Italy, have more than one image – there is the one you see from the outside and then there is the internal view. To the world at large, Bulgari are a smoothly oiled luxury machine: they lend pieces of jewellery

There's a suspicion that Trapani is being more than a little disingenuous when he answers "God knows," to what exactly defines Bvlgari's style.

to the right people (like British Royal Lady Helen Taylor); have their name appear in the right films (such as *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *Minority Report*, in which Tom Cruise's futuristic Bvlgari watch was so desirable that it prompted people to ring in and order it – even though the film was set in the 2050s); come up with such innovative communications vehicles as a Bvlgari novel written by Fay Weldon; produce such original watches as the rubber and aluminium timepiece that has become the Swatch for rich people on the beach; and market a whole range of leather goods, eyewear, fragrances and so on.

The heart of the matter

But when viewed from the interior of their historic headquarters on the Via Condotti, Bvlgari are an Italian family business. The entrance hall has hardly changed in seven decades; marble floored, lined with cabinets displaying rare antiquities, clustered with marble columns and with a marble-topped table bearing two huge porphyry vases with ormolu mountings, it is more like the vestibule of a grand private house or small museum than a shop.

It feels even more like a museum when entering a parquet-floored room to the right of the entrance. Crowded with rare pieces of antique silver (for sale) and pieces from the Bulgari family's private collection (decidedly not for sale), this is a room that would not look out of place in the Wallace Collection. And yet it is a shop too, but not of the Bvlgari type with which you will be familiar. Sales assistants are like long-serving family retainers at a castle or stately home. For instance, the man who runs the watch room and painstakingly talks me through the delights of the 18-ct. gold Petite Complication (£8,900) – with its eye-catching bronze dial, straight-line day and month indicators and retrograde seconds – and the charm of the Amplificator white-gold yachting chronograph (£10,400) – with its colour-changing red, white and blue racing start timer – has been working here for 34 years and remarks with considerable understatement that there have been one or two changes since he started.

Bvlgari on the Via Condotti give a sense of being a human family business. A sales assistant shrugs apologetically and fatalistically when he says that the man who has the key to a cabinet containing a solid silver spirit level and some interesting-looking watchstraps cannot be found. Instead, he directs my atten-



The Amplificator (£10,400) and the Scuba 2000 (£2,500), while actually being quite different, share a common design thread that makes them unmistakably Bvlgari.

tion to one of his colleagues who stands behind a counter containing other necessities you never knew you needed, such as silver and gold gaming chips, a half-size silver replica of a Roman paving stone or 'San Pietrino'.

On the way out I nearly bump into a preoccupied-looking elderly gentleman in a crumpled blue linen suit. He continues to shuffle off down the corridor and it is only when we step outside the shop does my cicerone tell me in a tone of hushed awe that the man I nearly collided with was none other than Signor Bulgari himself... one or other of the *capo di capi*, ambling almost absent-mindedly through his own shop. I have to say that such pleasing informality makes a welcome change from the almost imperial style of some luxury goods honchos – the last time I saw Bernard Arnault, he was making a state visit to Bond Street with a train of advisors and courtiers bobbing about in his wake. The same spirit of cheerful yet businesslike informality prevails elsewhere in the group: in its design studio, at the jewellery workshops, in the archives and even the penthouse PR department with its shaded roof terrace and its staff of so many pretty, intelligent women that I thought I had stepped into a 1960s Bond film.

Guiding light

The same relaxed easiness, albeit alloyed to a businesslike demeanour, is evinced the next day when I am ushered into Francesco Trapani's corner office at Bvlgari's HQ overlooking the Tiber. Trapani is a model of the composed CEO: cropped, slightly greying hair, blue single-breasted suit and just enough of a tan to look healthy but not so much that he looks like he spends too much time on his yacht (sailing is his passion and his 139-foot yacht is said to be one of the best in the Mediterranean). In fact he only departs from the uniform of the international business high-flyer when it comes to his choice of wrist candy – today his left arm is weighed down by a Bvlgari Scuba, which, with its steel and rubber bracelet, extra-thick steel case, domed glass and helium

escape valve, is capable of being submerged at least 2,000 metres below sea level.

Indeed, it is just such products as the watch he is wearing that have come to define Bvlgari under Trapani's stewardship. Bvlgari launched their first line of watches in the 1970s and now timepieces account for a third of the brand's turnover. Trapani freely admits that "the watch business is under pressure at the moment," though his strategy of meeting the challenges of what is a difficult period for all purveyors of luxury is certainly an encouraging one from an horolophile's point of view. "Over the next years we are going to offer new things that are extremely appealing and different in all categories," and this will not just mean replacing existing products with new models. "My aim is to make our product offer more complete."

However, when asked to elaborate in more detail about the sort of watches he will be premiering over the next 2 or 3 years, he becomes cagey. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that the run of what Bvlgari calls Petites Complications will continue. Certainly, acquiring expertise in the manufacture of complications was part of the point of Trapani's purchase of the two *haute horlogerie* houses, Gerald Genta and Daniel Roth. Genta is one of the legends of watchmaking, having designed such masterpieces as the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak and Patek Philippe's Nautilus, while Roth is one of the new generation of eponymous brands concentrating on small numbers of high-quality timepieces. "They are two small makers and we wanted to buy in the know-how of making complications," explains Trapani. "They have some potential for growth but they will remain concentrated on expensive watches made in small numbers at an artisanal high level."

When asked how the company that he runs has reached such a position of global eminence from the position of having only five shops worldwide when he took over in 1984, he is disarmingly frank. "By luck," he says with a smile. However, there is the suspicion that he is being more than a little disingenuous when he

says, "God knows," in answer to a question about what exactly it is that defines Bvlgari style. The supreme being may indeed know everything there is to know about the aesthetic definition of the Bvlgari style, but Trapani has a pretty good idea too: "There are a certain number of designs close to our roots." Although he does not employ the overused expression "DNA of the brand," Trapani's Bvlgari is certainly a company in tune with its heritage helix and has just released a collection of jewellery inspired by designs from the 1970s.

However, Bvlgari's heritage is living too, as Trapani explains: "Bvlgari's style has evolved a lot; it is a combination of elegance and daring. The Aluminium watch is a good example of a daring product. Aluminium and caoutchouc is not the kind of thing that you expect from a major jeweller; this is a single product that shares the combination of elegance and daring."

Similarly intriguing and unusual is Bvlgari's collaboration with Cadillac. If Trapani's passion is the high seas, then his uncle Nicola has a love affair with the open road and has assembled a collection of American cars, which he stores at two large garages: one in Rome (often the scene of private parties, dinners and concerts), the other a couple of hours' drive

away in Tuscany. Nicola's automotive passion is publicly evinced in dashboard designs for Cadillac, with matching Bvlgari watches, and Bvlgari design will also make an appearance inside Cadillac's new 16-cylinder, 8-litre beast, the XLR.

The next step

However, it is Bvlgari's latest venture that is perhaps their most daring to date: having established the Bvlgari name in everything from luxury watches to leather goods and everywhere from high society to Hollywood, Francesco Trapani is about to take the Bvlgari name into the hotel business. In partnership with Ritz Carlton, a Bvlgari hotel is due to open in Milan next spring. Trapani feels that by entering the hotel market Bvlgari will have a new carefully controlled environment to reflect Bvlgari values, where visitors to Bvlgari, and of course Italy, can be accommodated in a style of which Bvlgari can be proud.

Whether it is product placement or hotels, "I want Bvlgari to be involved with situations that nourish awareness, prestige and respect." And talking of nourishment, it is surely about time that Bvlgari launched a restaurant or at least café. I raise the question with Trapani; he smiles omnisciently and tells me that such a project is already in hand. ◉

The Petites Complications range looks set to continue, with retrograde seconds, moon-phase displays and annual calendars all currently available.

Bvlgari's acquisition of Daniel Roth and Gerald Genta will strengthen their capacity to make ever more complicated watches.



Further information: Bvlgari, 172 New Bond Street, London. Tel: 020 7872 9969, www.bulgari.com