A stone's throw from Place Vendôme: creativity in a jewellery workshop

by

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Overview

When the jewellery brands were bought by the major luxury goods companies, they decided to handle all the creative aspects themselves in order not to have to buy from others. There was a danger that the workshops, which supplied these jewellery brands with models, would become manufacturers dependent on the brands' orders or decisions to relocate. Faced with this situation, Mathon, a family-run company founded in 1931, decided to launch its own brand. Its workshop, which is located close to Paris' jewellery quarter in the Place Vendôme, works for about six well-known brands. It has a specialised level of expertise as well as being able to anticipate precisely the manufacturing times of new and complex pieces. The company also has to make sure that the creations for its brand, 'Mathon Paris', are ready in time for the jewellery collections to be presented to the Japanese, Korean, Chinese and United Arab Emirates' markets.

Report by Sophie Jacolin • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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The history of the Mathon workshop largely reflects that of my family, and is set against the backdrop of the well-known jewellery shops in the Place Vendôme. Mathon's golden age lasted until the end of the 1980s. It subsequently underwent a transformation when the luxury goods groups started buying the famous jewellers (who were our clients) and were tempted to manufacture their jewellery themselves. Mathon consequently concentrated on its creativity (which has always been the *leitmotiv* of its business), its increasingly specialised expertise, and the diversification of its activities.

Reinventing oneself in order to preserve one's creativity

In 1931, Camille Bournadet, my grand-father's great-uncle, founded his workshop in the rue Richelieu in Paris, and employed five jewellers, a jewel setter and a polisher. He was an excellent designer. He created pieces of jewellery, made most of them himself, and then sold them to jewellery shops. As his reputation grew, he started attracting private clients even though he did not have his own brand. His great-nephew, Roger Mathon, who joined him a few decades later, had studied at the prestigious École Boulle and the School of Decorative Art, and had worked in a variety sectors including the manufacture of medals and ceramics, and the design of cinema and theatre posters. When the opportunity arose for him to work for his great-uncle's jewellery business, he fell in love with designing jewels and gemstones, and became an apprentice there. He remained independent for a long time, selling his designs to Camille Bournadet as well as other well-known jewellers. In 1972, when Camille Bournadet retired, he decided to sell his workshop to Roger. My grand-father's original reaction was not to buy it, but he probably realised that later on he might need to manufacture jewellery if he wanted to remain creative. When his daughter completed her studies in architecture, she joined her father and helped him on the creative side. Later, his sons, Pascal and Frédéric (the latter is the current president of Mathon) also joined the family business as the production manager and the sales manager respectively. This was the golden age of the workshop, manufacturing pieces of jewellery for well-known brands such as Van Cleef & Arpels and Fred. Elizabeth Taylor was even wearing one of Mathon's creations when she was given an award at the Oscars in 1993.

In the 1990s, the tide changed

During its first sixty years, Mathon devoted itself to creation without any particularly structured approach: if we designed a piece of jewellery which we liked, we manufactured it. Things changed in the 1980s and 1990s when the major groups started making their presence felt in the jewellery world by taking over jewellers, some of which were more than one hundred years old. They tried to rationalise the processes especially in terms of purchasing. Richemont took over Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels; LVMH made a joint venture with De Beers and bought Fred, Chaumet and Bulgari; and Gucci bought shares in Boucheron. At the same time as the jewellery houses were becoming concentrated in fewer hands, fashion houses started making their own jewellery. Some had a certain historical legitimacy, such as Coco Chanel who had launched her '*Bijoux de diamant*' collection in 1932, but others were new to the market like Dior and Vuitton. The emergence of companies which were new to this sector forced Mathon to take action: jewellery houses with which Mathon had worked for more than thirty years were beginning to turn away Mathon's designs, choosing instead to develop their own in-house creative departments and to produce creations themselves. Other newcomers were starting to look for trustworthy, legitimate jewellery manufacturers. In all these cases, clients turned to the Mathon workshop purely for production. Therefore, it was very important for Mathon to consolidate its manufacturing activity, but at the same time preserving its in-house creation using its own brand.

Decision to become more professional

Mathon's first reaction was to develop a professional workshop which was established as a subcontractor and outsourcer. It worked on clients' sketches of pieces of jewellery, and designed, developed, and made prototypes

of them. They also made moulds for their production. At this time, Mathon recruited highly qualified and experienced people who were capable of reproducing technically the creative and aesthetic requests of their clients.

At the same time, the workshop was reinforcing its expertise and legitimacy by carrying out all the operations in the production chain (melting metals, wax modelling, setting, polishing, etc.) itself, and it stopped using subcontractors for specific functions. However, certain skills are hard to find: in Paris, only two people are truly capable of threading pearls professionally; and finishing skills, especially lacquering, are tending to disappear. To make sure we have the necessary in-house skills, we have undertaken training programmes over the last five years organised by AGEFOS (a professional training fund) and UFBJOP (*Union française de la bijouterie, joaillerie, orfèvrerie, des pierres et perles*: French trade union for the jewellery, silversmith, gem and pearl trades). It is also very important to ensure that our craftsmen remain loyal to us, and so we are keen for them to expand their range of skills and to develop a speciality in addition to their usual tasks.

At the same time, we acquired expert skills in product development. During 2005/2006, the workshop installed computer-aided design (CAD) software which makes it possible to work on sketches on the screen in 3D, and to automate certain operations, such as the creation of symmetric patterns in mirror image. Even though today most workshops are equipped with this sort of tool (apart from the luxury jewellers), at the time it was quite rare. We also bought an Enterprise Resource Planning system (ERP) to follow precisely the production flow and cycle of each piece in the workshop. Each object has a barcode which the craftsman scans when he is working on that piece. As a result of this system, our quotations and invoices have become more accurate, and our productivity has increased. We seized on this opportunity to make a catalogue of our models and product ranges, and to explain in detail the successive stages of the manufacturing process with the related components.

Finally, the workshop equipped itself with a laser engraver which can stamp engravings on very thin pieces thereby making it possible to use gold elements which are lighter or less costly. Since 2015, with permission from the French Customs Department, we can inscribe our hallmark, an eagle's head, on our pieces of jewellery.

These tools and expertise make us stand out from the other fifty or so independent, rival workshops which are mainly located in Lyon and Paris.

Official forms of recognition help our work and our reputation. First of all, we received the '*Entreprise du patrimoine vivant*' (Living Heritage Company) certification which is awarded to companies which have been in existence for a length of time, have an advanced level of expertise, and help to pass on their skills. We were also awarded the '*Joaillerie de France*' certification created by UFBJOP in 2005. Because of this certification, we can stamp a piece of jewellery with a hallmark which confirms where it was made and its quality. This serves as its 'passport'. This guarantee of its French design and manufacture is an important factor as far as foreign customers, especially our Asian clients, are concerned.

Finally, the 'Responsible Jewellery Council' certification promotes ethical standards throughout the jewellery supply chain, from the mines (gold and diamonds, for example) to retail. We ourselves buy the gems for our own collection. The diamond market is easy to understand and codified. However, the coloured gemstone market is massive, including a huge number of varied individuals. Some are well established and buy their raw materials in India, Thailand or Sri Lanka, and cut them where they bought them or in their Parisian workshops. We prefer to work with 'free agents' who get their supplies directly from the mines and sell raw stones with unusual colours for attractive prices. My father is an expert in buying gemstones, and I am starting to become more knowledgeable and to increase my network in this field.

Reasserting our creative status: the Mathon brand

As well as this attempt to make our activity more professional, the workshop wanted to reassert its creative status, and therefore we launched the 'Mathon Paris' brand. This was not straightforward because many of our clients associated us purely with manufacture. In order to avoid confusion, the brand concentrated on a commercial export strategy. As a result, we were not in direct competition with the jewellers in the Place Vendôme, and we were able to keep the clients for whom we were outsourcers. Our collection was successful first of all in Japan,

and then in Korea, China and the United Arab Emirates. We managed to gain recognition in some markets, and even had our display windows next to those of Van Cleef & Arpels and Boucheron, which would have been impossible in France.

The 'Mathon Paris' brand is based on the historical and family legitimacy of our company where creation has always played a central role. However, we still had to decide on the style we wanted to project. This involved more than just a search for aesthetics which had always motivated us and, depending on the gemstones, had taken us in different directions ranging from gold-hammered necklaces to delicate pieces of jewellery. We decided to focus on so-called 'fine gemstones' (such as beryl, tourmaline and garnet) which were rarely used at that time, and which importantly meant that our clients had no price reference for them. It is a fact that anyone can estimate the price of a piece of jewellery in gold or with diamonds by looking up their official market price. We wanted to avoid this sort of approach in order to promote our 'Made in Paris' expertise, and make people appreciate the work that we put into our designs. We added a Parisian touch, presenting jewellery which was original. Our style is figurative and depicts nature in the pure tradition of French jewellery. There are often representations of animals, floral patterns and strong cultural references. Examples include references to the marine world of Jules Verne, and to Impressionism, with our 'Nymphéas' collection which involves plays of light by alternating coloured, brilliant-cut gemstones with rose-cut diamonds. We also stand out by the use of colour in our stones, and similarly in the golds we use, or by lacquer and enamels, and even by our unusual ways of cutting stones such as the rose-cuts with large facets which produce a particular light, and cabochons which are mixed with moonstones and opals which we like.

Our brand boasts impeccable quality because our jewellery ranges were made in the same workshops as high jewels displayed in boutiques in the Place Vendôme. Our brand is aimed at *connaisseurs* who are looking for French craftsmanship and novel design and, above all, an alternative to the well-known brands. In mature markets, such as the Japanese market, our female clients grow bored of luxury accessories which are instantly identifiable and worn by other women in their social circle. Our clients want to stand out, but still wear jewellery which represents excellence and conveys Parisian elegance. By targeting this clientele, we are aware that we are catering to a niche market and not a mass market contrary to the strategy of luxury goods groups. In any case, our production facilities, which include about twenty craftsmen, would not be able to satisfy larger volumes. We want to remain small and discrete which is synonymous with our family and independent traditions. We do not have a shop in Paris, but have retail outlets in Japan, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

A new direction: the techno-creator

Since we developed our creative activity and outsourcing at the same time, we would now like to see how we can combine them. Our new clients, who are often international, now have a choice of products which are a mixture of drawings and designs, and which go beyond what a freelance designer or an external artistic studio would normally offer. We give them access to a manufacturing workshop as well as a creative service and therefore, from the outset, we take into account concerns associated with production techniques and assembly. As a result, we are able to provide a complete service for our clients from A to Z.

The workshop has tried to make its offer and position clearer, with regard to clients who have segmented the market into 'fashion jewellery', fine jewellery and high jewellery (which can be categorised further into basic, image and prestige jewellery). Consequently, we reorganised our team and formally created a high jewellery workshop. It is now easier for us to justify to well-known brands our hourly rates, quality and speed of work. They understand our point of view especially because marketing is involved from the very beginning, with the creation of designs. Another advantage is that in doing this we increase our legitimacy as a high jewellery workshop, whereas some clients, who were unaware of the extent of our expertise, had assumed we were in the 'fine' jewellery category. Some clients made the leap, adding pieces of high jewellery to mass pieces of jewellery which they had given us in the past.

We are also trying to promote our skills in product development. Some foreign jewellery brands ask us to work just on the design phase using CAD software on their designs. We give them a file which they then use in their

workshops or factories. It does not come naturally to us to work like this as we are first and foremost a workshop, and we are used to dealing with all aspects related to production. Nevertheless, this service helps us gain recognition as experts in design and enables us to make contacts with clients who, in the long term, might let us develop and manufacture their jewellery.

Continuing to combine creation with manufacture, we now have a tailor-made service under the white label, 'Les Ateliers du Palais', which makes no reference to Mathon. It has its own website, without being able to buy on-line, and offers personalised pieces of jewellery which the client orders (such as engagement rings or altering existing pieces of jewellery, etc.) or variations on pieces which already exist in our collections or archives. Private customers know about us by word of mouth or thanks to our website, and briefly describe their project. If it is a simple order, we can send them a quotation straightaway; otherwise, we arrange to meet them in our showroom where we ensure complete confidentiality. These sorts of personalised requests are part of our niche strategy. Such direct sales clearly account for a lower turnover than our other activities, but they have greater margins and give us additional production and work for our designer. They are also a means of finding a clientele which will most likely be tempted in the future by our 'Mathon Paris' brand. Due to lack of time, we have not publicised this service very much. This could be our move.

Discussion

A family business

Question: *What has been your career path, and how did you join the family business?*

Aude Mathon: The ups and downs in the workshop have always been present in our family life. In the beginning, I wanted to take a step back from the business, and so I studied to get into business school and managed to get into the HEC business school where I took a degree in Management of the arts and culture. At HEC, I could combine my taste for art and literature with more practical, managerial questions. After graduation, I worked for a publishing company, but I was confined to marketing and sales jobs which did not satisfy me. At this time, the Mathon company asked me to replace temporarily the person in charge of commercial development while they found someone to fill this job. When this came to an end, my father and uncle asked me to stay for nine more months to launch 'Les Ateliers du Palais'. I got to know service providers and partners, and I learned to talk about jewellery directly with clients. In the end, I decided to stay permanently. My father is still president, but he remains in the background. He delegated the responsibility for human resources management and work organisation to me, but he remains an essential source of support for any technical issues. He still comes with me to visit our important clients and to present our models, and answers clients' most specific questions. My uncle is in charge of the design side (design, creation, CAD), and my husband is the production manager.

Q.: *In the 1990s, jewellers experienced financial difficulties. As a result, many were bought by large groups. Was Mathon affected? How did you manage to finance the investments which you thought were necessary in order to adapt yourself to this new era?*

A. M.: We did not need the help of the banks at this time. Our cash reserves enabled us to finance our development. However, we were supported by our professional sector which put in place a support plan to help workshops like ours to become industrialised. Our professional sector worked towards the creation of an ERP which was adapted

to the specificities of our profession of which we were one of five pilot companies. It also helped us to receive certifications. The *Comité Francéclat* collects 'parafiscal' charges on watch-making, jewellery, silversmithery and tableware (0.2 % of the pre-tax value of objects sold in France) and uses this money to carry out campaigns to promote the jewellery trade, helps its professionals to invest in tools, and finances growth phases and individual projects. Additionally, we benefit from tax credits for art and craft professions.

Q.: *Have any jewellers in the Place Vendôme shown interest in buying Mathon? Would you entertain this idea?*

A. M.: My father received several offers a few years ago, but he made it clear that the company was not for sale. When I took up my place on the management board, this confirmed that the business was going to remain in the family, and dissuaded potential buyers. Nonetheless, we are sometimes contacted by Chinese businessmen.

Q.: *Would you agree to let investors into the company's capital?*

A. M.: Strictly speaking, this question has never arisen, but we might envisage taking on a partner who is an expert in distribution in order to support the development of the 'Mathon Paris' brand. But first of all we have to find this partner! On the other hand, we want to remain fully in charge of our manufacturing activity.

Q.: *Would you be interested in buying an independent workshop?*

A. M.: Yes. We tried on two separate occasions to buy a workshop. Each one had about fifteen people, and was very attractive because it was a subcontractor to a world-renowned jewellery brand with whom we would like to work. In one case, the valuation of the company seemed too closely linked to the personality of its manager and the privileged relationship he had with his clients. If he were to leave (and take his clients with him), we would have had to cover the costs of this workshop without being certain whether we could benefit from its principal asset. In the other case, the seller received a better offer than ours.

Q.: *Why do you not have a sales outlet in Paris? Would the famous jewellers be against this?*

A. M.: Retail trade is not our profession. We do not currently have the necessary resources to be able to launch ourselves into this sector alone. Especially in the jewellery business in Paris, it only makes sense to have a shop in the Place Vendôme or close by, where the premises are hard to come by and are expensive. If we were to take the leap, we would join forces with a partner who had experience in the distribution industry. Our clients would not be able to oppose this. In any case, they are quite understanding as far as we are concerned. We often have stalls next to each other at international trade shows such as Hong Kong, Basel (home of the Baselworld show) and Las Vegas. They prefer to deal with a supplier whose business is doing well and where they are not the only client. This reassures them so that if they reduce their orders with us, we will still be able to rely on other clients for business.

The advantages of an integration strategy

Q.: You stand out from the others because of the bold choices you have made. These include the ability to design, develop and manufacture; the capacity to both outsource work and to create; and the use of your expert knowledge. What strategies have the other independent workshops – your competitors – chosen?

A. M.: Some have purely an industrial activity, producing less high-end jewellery than we do, but very well crafted. They do not set centre stones, for example, which can only be done manually. Other jewellers, who are smaller but have a high turnover, only work with high jewellery companies. Others who have a similar position to ours work for both high-end and fine jewellers. Those who used to work with fine jewellers before they bought a workshop which supplied more high-end jewellers, experience most problems because they have to adapt to a very different mind-set.

Of the fifty independent French workshops, only about ten still design and create. As far as we are concerned, we have always created pieces of jewellery: it is our specialty and it is what we like to do. It enhances our activity even though in-house creation is not always rational in economic terms. When the markets decline, as is the case currently in Japan, one has to justify having an in-house creative person and continuing our collection. Nevertheless, we feel strongly about this and for us it is an important asset. We think along the same lines as our prestigious clients in the Place Vendôme. Every week I report on the state of our development and prototypes to our in-house committee which includes the technical manager, those in charge of the studio and marketing, the designer and the project manager. Their remarks are both technical and artistic. Frequently we ask our in-house creator to help us with our outsourcing work for other jewellery brands in order to find a good compromise between the aesthetic and the technical side.

Until now, I have not taken the workshop manager with me to meet clients. Some of our colleagues do, and we will probably do so in the future. When our workshop manager retires in a few years' time, we have decided not to find an exact replacement for him. A workshop manager is an excellent technician, but too often he has to do other tasks for which he is not trained, and which he does not always want to do such as managing teams, ordering tools, monitoring production, and so on. He does not have enough time to pass on his knowledge. We preferred dividing the workshop into two teams, each with its own technical manager who can share his knowledge, advise and undertake the most complex projects. We could ask these technical managers to come with us to client meetings, but this would reduce their time and availability in the workshop.

Q.: *Do you manage to build team loyalty, or do your rivals try to poach your craftsmen? Do you have people to replace them quickly?*

A. M.: Our craftsmen are very precious because they give the company its value. They are very well paid but are always looking for a better salary. As a result, our wage bill is constantly growing, but we have to recognise our limits, even if it means losing a colleague. Having said this, it is unusual for Parisian jewellers to entice them away with better offers. Numerous, smaller companies have no obvious prospective buyers and their financial survival is threatened. Our employees are aware that we have made provisions for the future. To make sure that the people whom we consider to be vital to us – because they have the most expertise or are able to set stones, a rare talent – stay with us, we train them, in management, for example. Very few workshops similar to ours carry out in-house lacquering and pearl-threading. Nonetheless, we had to satisfy a demand for a critical resource, that of a stone polisher, a skill which is fast disappearing. This job, which is quite repetitive and undervalued, did not have specific training and was just listed as an option in the Vocation Training Certificate for arts and jewels. We told the profession about this five years ago and subsequently UFBJOP, AGEFOS and the Job Centre put in place a reconversion course intended specifically for polishers who used to work in the silversmith's trade and the optical business, as well as dressmakers.

Q.: *What are your concerns and potential sources of risk today?*

A. M.: We are preoccupied by the weight of our wage bill in our economic model. This makes us monitor the productivity of the craftsmen extremely closely. Our profit margin depends on this. Our machine pool is also a large expense as are our rent and the consumables required for production. Increasing our productivity thanks to management and industrial excellence is our main challenge.

Another important concern is to avoid depending on a single client. Subcontracting represents 70 % to 80 % of our turnover (nearly 5 million Euros in total); the rest is mainly from our own brand and, to a much lesser extent, from the 'Ateliers du Palais'. We outsource for about ten brands including one major brand. From the very beginning, our company grew because our clients' needs developed. Our greatest danger would be to have just one client. This is why we make sure that we diversify our portfolio, and include clients who are not in the Place Vendôme. I am sure they see us as subcontractors, but above all as professional craftsmen, especially since they do not all have the means to manufacture their jewellery themselves.

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Creativity which is both technical and artistic

Q.: *How do the creation and manufacturing processes differ between the fine and the high jewellery?*

A. M.: Theoretically, high jewellery is limited to single pieces. Nevertheless, certain brands offer 'basic high jewellery', in other words expensive and well-crafted pieces but ones which can be copied. Frequently high jewellery includes an exceptional gemstone with a setting which enhances it.

In both cases, the process begins with a creator's design. Then there are two ways to proceed. The first, which is the traditional way, consists of carving out a model. This used to be made from boxtree, but today it is made of wax or modelling clay such as Plasticine. Another model is made: one can make moulds from it if necessary. Each of the elements of the jewellery (made in green wax) is fixed onto the 'branches' of a cast-iron 'tree' which is covered in plaster and baked in an oven. Once the wax has melted and the plaster shell has hardened, molten gold is injected and runs down the branches. This is how a 'golden tree' is made in order to make pieces of jewellery. As many as one hundred pieces can be made for complex assemblies of high jewellery. For smaller series, we make an impression and then a mould for each of these elements.

The second way to proceed, which is more modern and commonly used, consists of transposing the sketch onto a computer and redrawing it virtually in three dimensions. The advantage of this technique is that the constraints of the assembly (the position of the hinges for the joints, making links, and so on) are visible straightaway, and it is accurate to one-tenth of a millimetre. The CAD increases the creative possibilities because it allows one to understand how the piece of jewellery is made. We then make a prototype and produce a large volume of different elements thanks to a 3D wax printer. Making the moulds with the cast-iron tree can then begin.

Once this design phase is complete, we transfer the pieces to the workshop. Each piece is reviewed, frosted and polished. The setter sets the gems in the precious metal. The components are transferred to the workshop where the claw settings and grain settings are checked, because they can be slightly offset. They are polished once again. The entire structure is then assembled using screws, pins, laser welding or a flame. If the jewellery is made of white gold, a layer of rhodium is plated on it by electrolysis. The piece of jewellery is now ready.

Q.: *Where does creativity come into this process?*

A. M.: Creativity takes place in the design and also in the conception, either using a model or in CAD. It is a creative exercise even to imagine assembling a piece of jewellery, finding solutions to overcome the multiple technical constraints without distorting the aesthetics of the jewel, or making a very small but solid clasp. Each craftsman proves his creativity by assembling jewellery as best he can, and achieving the best flexibility for a necklace. The manufacturing techniques which are chosen are almost as important as the initial design. Each person in the manufacturing process brings his personal taste and touch in order to make the jewellery light and ethereal. The art of making jewellery is to enhance a stone, ideally by using the least amount of metal possible.

Q.: *How do you manage to breathe new life into your brand's collections? How many creations do you launch every year?*

A. M.: We launch one or two complete collections every year in each of our lines, for example, a set of jewels based on a theme of wisteria for our floral collection. To renew our collection, we rely on our fundamental technical skill, and we vary the assembly of necklaces or bracelets, or use different settings and unusual stones. For example, at the end of the 1980s we made a collection using opals which few other jewellers had done. Opals are very delicate stones whose colour may change. The same is true of moonstones and tanzanites, magnificent blue-purple stones which are even rarer than diamonds. We are also looking into new surface treatments such as using lacquer and enamel, or techniques such as physical vapour deposition (PVD). We design original uses of jewellery, like parts of necklaces which can be detached and worn as brooches, as well as ingenious clasps. This mixture of technique and creation means that we are constantly reinventing our collections.

Presentation of the speaker

Aude Mathon: graduate of HEC (*Hautes Etudes Commerciales*) business school. She began her career in publishing before joining the Mathon family business where she is the managing director.

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