

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 of 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,