

Watches & Jewellery Women’s timepieces

# ‘Designers must imagine tomorrow’s market’

**Interview** Fabrizio Buonamassa Stigliani, Bulgari’s creative chief, talks to *Ming Liu* about the challenge of preserving the past and predicting the future

For Fabrizio Buonamassa Stigliani, 2014 was a standout year. The senior director of Bulgari’s Watches Design Centre saw the Italian house’s Diva High Jewellery Emeralds watch won a plum award at the Grand Prix d’Horlogerie de Genève: the jewellery watch prize.

The winning design was inspired, he says, by some of the Italian brand’s most noted Hollywood clients of the 20th century, including Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren. The 18-carat white gold watch, set with 444 diamonds and 258 emeralds, beat competition from 15 other entries, including watches by Boucheron and Chaumet.

Mr Buonamassa Stigliani oversees the design of all Bulgari’s timepieces, both men’s and women’s collections, complications, grand complications and special edition watches, at prices ranging from £3,640 to more than £500,000.

He joined the company in 2001 after three years at Fiat’s Style Centre in Turin designing cars, and has been in his current role since 2007. During his tenure Mr Buonamassa Stigliani has launched Bulgari’s first grand complication for women – the miniature-painted Il Giardino Tropicale di Bulgari – and last year’s sundial-inspired Lucea. Fresh variations of the latter design will be on show at Baselworld.

Mr Buonamassa Stigliani was also behind the 110-faceted Octo luxury watches for men in 2012, followed by the Octo Finissimo, which the house claims to be the world’s thinnest tourbillon movement at 1.95mm.

Other Octo creations include a collaboration with Maserati, the carmaker, in 2012, and at Baselworld, a sapphire-dialled Bulgari Bulgari will be unveiled.

Bulgari, which was acquired by LVMH in 2011 for \$5.2bn, does not provide information about its profits. MainFirst Bank estimates turnover last year to

have been about €1.3bn, with watches contributing about €600m.

With 2014’s operating margin estimated at about 13.5 per cent – up from about 8 per cent since its acquisition – Bulgari is the “1,000lb gorilla” in LVMH’s watches and jewellery portfolio, says John Guy, managing director of luxury, branded and sporting goods at the bank.

Mr Guy says since the acquisition, Bulgari has become more co-ordinated in its marketing and communication strategy. “What LVMH has done very well is address Bulgari’s heritage and history,” he says.

Mr Buonamassa Stigliani makes the same point. Managing the company’s signature style and its “amazing heritage in terms of signs” – motifs in particular from ancient Rome or ancient Greece – is the “most important thing now for my role,” he says.

“When I imagine new products, I have to imagine something that works with Bulgari’s roots. It has to be the evolution of Bulgari signs and fit. I have designers in my studio making the best shapes, prototypes and products possible – but I have to imagine the concept behind those products.”

Mr Buonamassa Stigliani produces luxury timepieces for “everyday wear”, but at the same time, his consumers want to pass watches on to future generations. To meet the challenge, he takes a strategic approach to design.

“I imagine a line-up – a product that could fit very well in our assortment – at the right moment, with the right price and right stock-keeping units.”

In 2011, Mr Buonamassa Stigliani moved the Bulgari design team from Rome to Neuchâtel in Switzerland, home of Bulgari’s in-house watchmaking production.

“We work closely with the technical department and manufacturing sides,” he says, and

‘We are ironic in an Italian way, a different sense for proportion, colour and function’



“it was impossible to manage this complexity from Rome”.

Although Mr Buonamassa Stigliani is not involved in technical development of the watches – “I am a lucky man for this” – he describes himself as the “guardian of the technical side”. He says his role is to ensure his designs are not compromised by Swiss watchmaking expertise. That technical know-how can sometimes clash with Italian design culture – at the crux of Bulgari’s look.

“We design watches with a different approach to the form and function than you find in [Swiss] design. This approach is ironic, in an Italian way, with a different sense and taste for proportion, colours and function.

“It’s beautiful, because sometimes we find a different solution – at other times, it’s impossible.”

He says he also faces challenges with Bulgari’s marketing

department, which examines current market information and data. Often this can lead to “fights”, especially as Mr Buonamassa Stigliani’s creative ideas can take between two and six years to come to market.

He must imagine new products, predict evolving trends and keep abreast of the competition. As a result, he is often sketching ideas for timepieces two to three years ahead.

“For designers, the most important thing is the future,” he says. “And the marketing team talks about the past. But I have to imagine tomorrow’s market.”

His managerial skills are essential, he says. “You are working in a very complex structure – you have to be able to manage people.”

Mr Buonamassa Stigliani also works with Jean-Christophe Babin, Bulgari’s dynamic chief executive, presenting prototypes.

The designer describes their relationship as “open” and “easy”, noting that the only aspect of his role to change after the LVMH acquisition was dealing with a new chief executive.

“It’s a great opportunity for the watches business unit to work with [Mr Babin],” says Mr Buonamassa Stigliani. “He’s a great support for our ideas. He knows the watches and products very well, and knows the market and its needs.”



Competitive: Mr Buonamassa Stigliani, left. Bulgari’s prizewinning Diva High Jewellery Emeralds watch, right –

## Feathers and lace complement a close attention to detail

**Craftsmanship** Rare textiles and trimmings are in demand, says *Syl Tang*

In the past, watchmakers might have thrown extra diamonds on to quartz watches to appeal to women. But now, women’s watches are benefiting from the meticulous, painstaking and rare craftsmanship once reserved for men’s pieces.

Harry Winston recently revived the intricate 16th-century decorative art of feather marquetry. With Nelly Saunier, the Parisian *plumassière*, the company made three women’s watches in 2012 with dials illuminated by bright purple and turquoise pheasant, silvered pheasant and guinea fowl feathers.

Dior, too, has released plumage watches within its Dior VIII collection of 2013, with feathers decorating the lower half of the dial in evening pieces.

Elsewhere, intricate enamel techniques are in evidence. Vacheron Constantin released the Métiers d’Art Florilège in 2013 – an enamelled wrist watch series. The watches feature *cloisonné* – a process that involves bending gold wire and applying enamels to the *guilloché* dial.

But perhaps the most unusual embellishment is the use of old and fine textiles. Roger Dubuis’ Velvet series includes three watches, limited to 88 pieces each. One, made in collaboration

with Daniel Benjamin, the Geneva-based furrier, features a wristband made of mink with a face of rose and brilliant-cut diamonds. Another, made in collaboration with Les Artisan Selliers, a French watchstrap maker, features classic leather corsetry on the blush and black band, while a third, in partnership with Declerq Passementerie, involves tiny, hand-knotted, black fish-netting covering the camel-coloured band.

Declerq, a family-owned *passemmentier* [maker of trimmings] since 1852, is one of the oldest French *maisons* and makes curtains and tie-backs for the Palace of Versailles and the Garnier Opera. Hand-made, a single tieback can cost tens of thousands of dollars. For the Roger Dubuis watches, the *passemmenterie* straps are made one at a time by a crafts-woman. Knots are created one by one and without glue. The design takes about 10 hours to create and is woven directly on to the strap.

“Women expect more from watches than ever,” says Jean-Marc Pontroué, chief executive of Roger Dubuis.

“The movements inside these are the same craftsmanship as our men’s watches so these are not only beautiful outside, the rarities are there inside as well.”



Tactile (from top): Roger Dubuis Velvet series watches with fish-netting strap and velvet strap; Dior VIII watch with feathers –

