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SPECIAL REPORT: JEWELRY

A Luxury Phone Designed for Women

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Paris — The market for status-symbol smartphone jewelry became a little more crowded in July with the birth of Savelli, a brand aiming to capture a niche previously unexplored by other competitors.

“Our smartphone is a modern piece of jewelry and the first phone designed exclusively for women,” said Alessandro Savelli, chief executive and co-founder of the brand in an interview in Paris.

Since 2008, players like Motorola, Aura, Modelabs, Christian Dior, Tag Heuer, Goldvish and Ulysse Nardin have brought out luxury mobile phones to compete with the industry leader, Vertu.

But no brand had designed a phone specifically for sophisticated, A-list women.

“When it comes to women, high-end mobile phone brands practice the ‘pink it and shrink it’ approach, which consists in taking men’s models as a base design instead of a completely new concept,” said Ketty Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge, who co-founded the brand with Mr. Savelli. In her book, “The Luxury Alchemist,” published in September, Ms. Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge tells how the team behind Savelli carried out extensive research to create an avatar of the woman whose tastes and spending habits would lead her to the Savelli phone.

“We embarked on the Savelli adventure with a clear vision of our client: She was international, in-the-know, confident and didn’t take herself too seriously,” Ms. Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge wrote.

After a debut in July in London, the Savelli phone was rolled out again during the Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week in September, with a glossy party at the Jacquemart-André Museum. Their first collection, titled “Jardin Secret,” consists of 11 models assembled in Switzerland to rigorous technical standards. Almond-shaped and highly tactile, they feature rich, smooth metals and polished ceramics, precious stones, exotic skins, and an ultradomed sapphire, crystal glass: “We wanted to create a shape that was feminine, curvaceous and at the same time, extremely modern,” Mr. Savelli said.



The Blue Jean Ostrich model has an exotic skin and is curved.

“The basic design of the phone was inspired by William Hogarth’s ‘Line of Grace,’” he said, referring to the 18th-century writer and artist whose book “The Analysis of Beauty” expounded on the aesthetic values of the S-shaped, serpentine line. “In nature, there are only curves and soft angles, so we decided that the best shape for this object of beauty was curved.”

Born of English and Italian parents, Mr. Savelli grew up in a family of jewelers in Vicenza, Italy. While attending Columbia Business School, he met Ms. Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge, an Italian-born luxury branding expert and an adjunct professor teaching a course on luxury marketing at the school.

Together they started Savelli, with financial support from some experienced players in the luxury goods market: “The company is financed by two institutional venture capital funds, Rho Ventures and Innogest, and a group of executives, some formerly with De Beers, LVMH, Svedka Vodka, Gianfranco Ferré and EMI Music,” Mr. Savelli said.

Rho Ventures is a technology investor based in New York City; Palo Alto, Calif.; and Montreal. Innogest is based in Italy.

Like Vertu, the market leader in the luxury sector, the brand does not aim for technical superiority. “From the beginning, we agreed with Vertu’s approach: Our phone would not need to be revolutionary in its technology,” Ms. Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge wrote. “Other companies were better positioned to do that.”

Savelli phones run on Android technology, with a touch screen and custom-made graphics and sounds. Many features are amusing — the “unlock” button features handcuffs, and the flashlight application, a chandelier icon.

“We completely changed the look and feel of the Android system with redesigned icons, and our sound files were all custom designed by the DJ Stéphane Pompougnac,” Mr. Savelli said, referring to the celebrity French disc jockey and record producer.

An exclusive concierge service — included as a feature — picks up the user’s location via GPS and can make suggestions as to venues and events to suit the user’s profile. “Based on the information customers have shared with us, Savelli can propose tailored activities, such as an art opening in Miami or new opportunities in a particular neighborhood,” Ms. Pucci-Sisti Maisonrouge wrote. “It could also notify someone’s favorite hotel or restaurant of her preferences.”

Savelli aims to produce 1,000 phones a year, assembled by a team at Chatelain, a watch components maker in La Chaux-de-Fonds, a famous Swiss watchmaking town. “We have our own mini-factory within the Chatelain factory,” Mr. Savelli said.

According to Guillaume Most, Savelli’s Industrial Manager, the biggest technical challenge comes from the curved surfaces of the design. “The interface of the different components like the precious stones, the metal and the skins, all on curved surfaces, must be absolutely perfect, to yield a product with a luxurious feel,” he said in an interview.

Ceramic parts for the phone are made by a company in California. They must be perfectly flat and smoothly polished to avoid gaps when fitted against other components, Mr. Most said. The gemstones are set in Valenza, a town in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy famous for jewelry making. The scratch-proof domed sapphire glass is made by a company in Shenzhen, China.

“Assembling the parts to make 11 different products with all different materials requires surgical precision,” Mr. Most said.

Prices start at about \$9,000 and go up to \$119,000 for the Black Insane, a sleek, more masculine model. On one side, the phone features black alligator rubberized leather, on the other an 18-karat white-gold case set with 75 baguette-cut white diamonds weighing nearly eight carats. Its white-gold buttons are set with white pavé diamonds.

In a softer style, the Diamond Rain combines 18-karat rose-gold with 144 white diamonds weighing 1.62 carats, rose-gold buttons and a white ceramic case. The whole thing, enveloped in pearly Iguana leather, retails for \$23,950.

At a lower price, the Blue Jean Ostrich and Python models offer the luxury of exotic skins, but without precious stones, for \$8,990.

Even at that price, it is best not to lose or drop the phone.

Still, if you do drop it, “because this phone is curved, it is much more resistant and will not break like a hard-edged, hard-angled object,” Mr. Savelli said.

Should the phone be soiled or damaged, the company provides cleaning and repair services.

The phones are sold in the jewelry rooms of Harrods in London and at Colette and the Printemps department store in Paris. The company says it plans to open boutiques next year in Hong Kong and Geneva.

For next year’s collection, it is working on ways to personalize its phones for clients who want to have a personal symbol engraved on their phones.

“Some people will see this product as jewelry, others as a watch, and others still as a fashion accessory,” Mr. Savelli said.

“It is a little bit of all that, but mostly it is new, fresh and completely modern.”