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# LIFE & TIMES

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# Pewter legacy

A visit to the Royal Selangor Visitor Centre leaves **Aneeta Sundararaj** with a lesson in history

**I**N future, it is imperative to point out to all visitors to Kuala Lumpur that there is more to our capital's tourist sites than just KLCC and the Twin Towers. The Royal Selangor Visitor Centre in Setapak is a must-visit.

After the warm welcome at the reception, take the traveler up to the visitor centre and train an eye on the Mengkuang Arch.

"The geometrical shape on the Mengkuang Arch is what we use in our corporate design," says Chen Tien Yue, 34, the executive director of Royal Selangor Marketing. "It's a contemporary design and not many people expect this of a company that is now 127 years old."

Also, look out for the Giant Tankard, which is certified as the largest in the world by the Guinness World Records.

The great-grandson of the founder of Royal Selangor, Chen explains that the centre was recently renovated.

"We now receive more than 250,000 visitors a year and needed to expand our space. The retail store has adopted the brand's latest retail identity that draws inspiration from the source of pewter — the tin mines. So, the colours of this centre are neutral with black, grey, white and natural wood tones. The aim is to create a calm ambience within the store."

All these extra spaces mean that Royal Selangor now also provides more visibility for its sister brands, Selberan and Comyns, to cater for jewellery and more contemporary



Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kueh and the **Melon Pot**

PICTURES BY SHIRAZ ALI



Chen Tien Yue with the **Wall Of Hands**



Beautiful **pewterware**

items. "We are thinking of the future. We'd like to create cuff-links, wine glasses and flash drives."

This modern approach does not mean that the past is forgotten. Chen quickly adds: "Our museum houses items like altar pieces, which are the kind of things Yong Koon Seong used to make. He came to Malaya because of the tin mining boom in the late 19th Century. He was already skilled in pewtersmithing. In China, pewter was used in the Middle Ages, before glass and ceramics became more popular."

Smiling, he adds: "When we go to China and tell them our story, we can see that they do feel some pride. That link with the country and the brand we've created give them something to be proud of."

Then Chen shares something unique: The Wall Of Hands. Every employee who has been with the company for more than five years will have an imprint of his or her hand and name cast in pewter. This pewter tile is then cemented onto the wall.

All these warmth and hospitality make

leaving Royal Selangor much harder. All that seems missing from this almost fairy-tale place is a well or fountain where one can toss a coin in to make a wish to return.

The Royal Selangor Visitor Centre is located at 4, Jalan Usahawan 6 in Setapak Jaya, 53300 Kuala Lumpur. It is open daily from 9am to 5pm. For details, visit [www.royalselangor.com](http://www.royalselangor.com).

Solo Art Exhibition  
**My Secret Garden**  
by Yee Fuh Wen

2-27 July 2012  
10.00am - 6.00pm

INSTP

Main Lobby, Balai Berita  
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## Pot luck

"I'M a storyteller," is how Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen introduces herself. She then takes out a hardcover book *The Royal Selangor Story* and opens to a page with the image of an old map of Asia. Pointing to a place marked Shantou, her story begins.

Once upon a time, "that's where my grandfather came from," Chen begins. Her grandfather is none other than Yong Koon Seong, the founder of Royal Selangor. Then, she turns the pages to one titled *The Melon Pot*. "The story I want to tell you is how this pot came back to us. My grandfather would have made pots like this. He would use 12 sheets of pewter, hammer them into perfect oblong shapes and solder them together, by hand. Today, it's an antique."

After pausing, she continues: "Now, for the next part of the story. During the Second World War, in Kajang, there were many hungry villagers. One of them, Ah Ham, went into one of the warehouses to gather bags of grain. He spied this teapot on the ground and bent to pick it up. At that moment, a bomb fell on the ware-

house and if he was standing up, shrapnel would have surely pierced his head. He decided that the pot had saved his life and it was his lucky pot. He took it home with him. For years after, Ah Ham used the pot to serve tea to his guests.

"My husband was one of his guests. When my husband told Ah Kam that he works in a pewter factory, Ah Kam asked my husband to take the pot back and have it polished. At the factory, we immediately recognised it as a pot made during my grandfather's time. So, my husband begged him to sell the pot to us. He thought we were mad. Ah Ham would not part with it because he said that the pot brought him luck. Finally, he decided to give it to us because the pot would be going to the right home."

Smiling, Chen says: "This pot is now in our museum."

She flips the pages of the book again and points to a picture on the dust jacket of the book. Pride etched on her face, she adds: "This book is written by my daughter, Chen May Yee." So ends the tale of our intrepid storyteller.

## Experiential workshop

A NEW highlight at Royal Selangor is an experiential workshop — the Apprentice Pewtersmithing Workshop. Visitors will have the opportunity to make their own pewter accessories such as earrings, pendants and lockets. The workshop runs for 90 minutes and an instructor will guide you throughout. The number of steps you have to take depends on the type of finish you choose for your item. Briefly, the steps are as follow:

### STEP 1: CASTING

If you want pre-determined designs, choose one of the many moulds and pour molten pewter into them. This requires dexterity and accuracy. If the instructor feels that what you've created has dimples, holes or is not close to perfection, she will not hesitate to tell you to do it again. The other option, where you can create your own designs, sounds easier. Careful though, as you may end up creating a hideously chunky bracelet or one that is so delicate that it'll snap when pressure is applied.

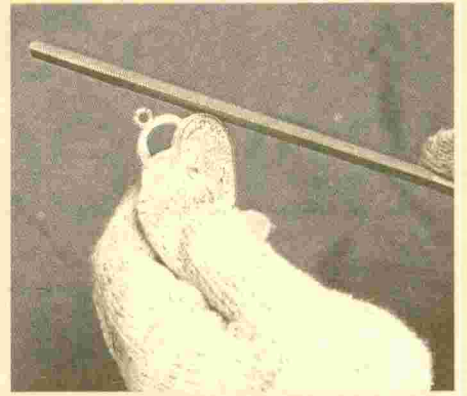
### STEP 2: SCORCHING

The trick here to hold the piece you're making firmly as all sharp edges are smoothed out.

### STEP 3: EMBELLISHMENT

If you choose "Brilliant" you'll have a piece that's shiny. Choose "Tumbled" and you'll stain your piece with chemicals, and add lacquer to achieve that antique look.

This workshop certainly exceeds expectations. In addition, it will give you an appreciation of how much work the artists in Royal Selangor put into making these luxurious items.



Crash course in pewtersmithing



Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen (seated far right, front row), with her parents and siblings

## Halls of fame

THERE is a saying, "Children learn most from playing". In view of this, the Royal Selangor Visitor Centre has dedicated an interactive play area that allows children and adults alike to learn about its history, heritage and science. There are five creatively-named halls:

**Science Of Pewter:** Here, you'll learn the chemical composition of pewter from a mural of a gigantic Periodic Table.

**Look To The Stars:** Pewter is often used to make items to commemorate special events. For example, on Sept 12, 1991 a commemorative pewter medallion became the first Malaysian-made object to leave Earth's

gravity. Commissioned by Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, the Royal Selangor medallion left Florida's Kennedy Space Centre aboard the space shuttle Discovery".

**Chamber Of Chimes:** Here, you get to listen to the sound that sheets of pewter will make in their different forms.

**Hall Of Finishes:** Run your hand along the walls here and you'll get an idea of how cool your house can be if you use pewter tiles to decorate your home.

**Hall Of Frames:** As its name suggests, this hall has a sample of every photo frame that Royal Selangor has ever produced.



Children can learn a lot at the interactive area

## Star quality

THE "touchmark" that Yong Koon Seong used to brand his creations consisted of four Chinese characters: Yu He Zi Xi (Jade, Peace, Pure, Tin).

Today, only some of the articles bear this mark. The majority bear the trademark of Royal Selangor to reflect its association with royalty.

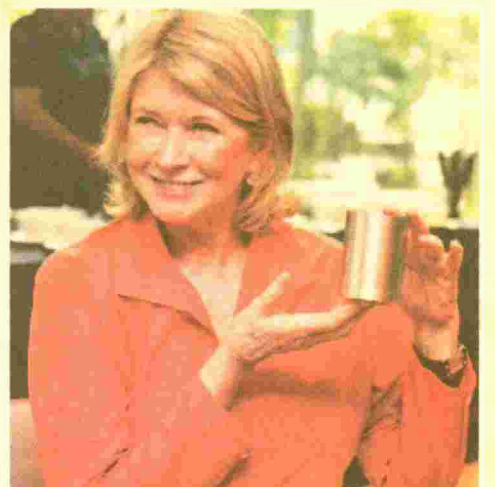
Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen who calls herself "the storyteller of Royal Selangor", then tells yet another story:

By all accounts, it was an ordinary day in a department store in Perth, Australia, when sales assistants saw a gentleman and his entourage walking in. They wanted to know who he was. Upon being informed that he was the Sultan of Selangor, they showed him merchandise that also bore the name Selangor.

The late Sultan of Selangor, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, was delighted that people in a foreign land knew of his state. Upon his return, the sultan granted Selangor Pewter a royal warrant. In 1992, in recognition of the royal warrant, the company changed its name to Royal Selangor.

A recent royal commission resulted in an extraordinary gift. For the installation of the 11th Yang di Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan, Royal Selangor was commissioned to create models of the Seri Menanti Palace. These were presented as gifts to members of other royal households.

Chen then rattles off names of some of other



Martha Stewart is a fan

distinguished guests she's hosted, from Princess Rania of Jordan to Prince Edward, Martha Stewart and Christine Legarde.

After listening to all the people she has rubbed shoulders with, it is decidedly humbling to realise that the storyteller of Royal Selangor is a remarkably down-to-earth person.

