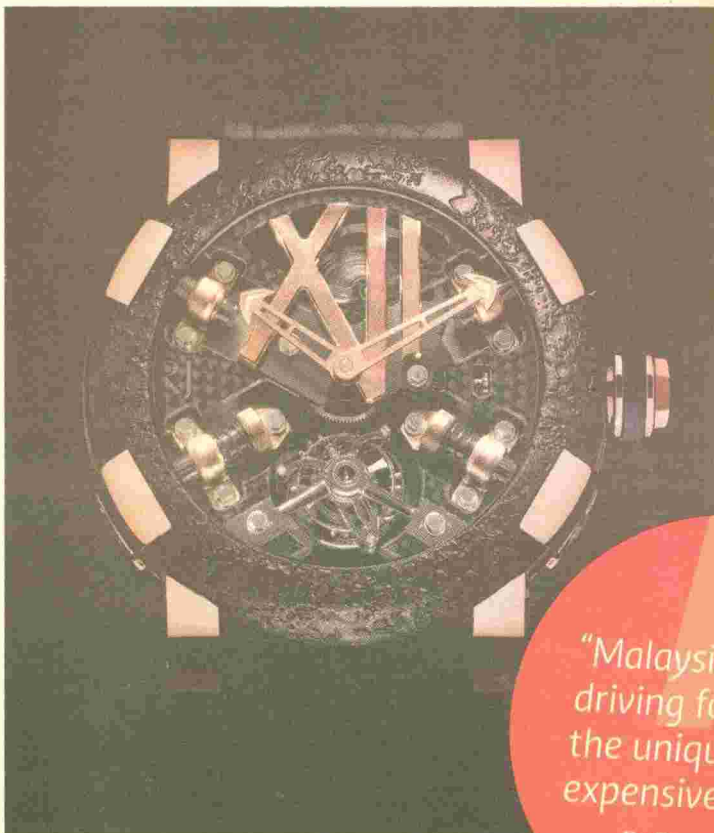


## LIFE&amp;TIMES PEOPLE

# Faces of brilliance

Every watch has a fascinating story, the official ambassador for Foundation De La Haute Horlogerie tells **Aneeta Sundararaj**, as he unravels the tales behind some magnificent pieces



Steam punk watch from Romain Jerome collection. The oxidised steel that comes from the extraordinary fusion of authentic steel from the sunken ocean liner, Titanic

**S**OME people collect stamps. And some collect coins. Then, there's Dr Bernard Cheong. He collects watches, to the point where he says, "Practising medicine has become something I do in my spare time."

Born in Kuantan, Pahang, Dr Cheong's parents chose to make Singapore their home when the city state left the Federation of Malaya. "My parents insisted that I go to a good school and enrolled me in ACS (Anglo Chinese School)."

New to the social dynamics at play, he felt totally out of place. "Even a primary school student would wear an Omega or Rolex. I learnt the difference between the 'haves' and 'have nots'."

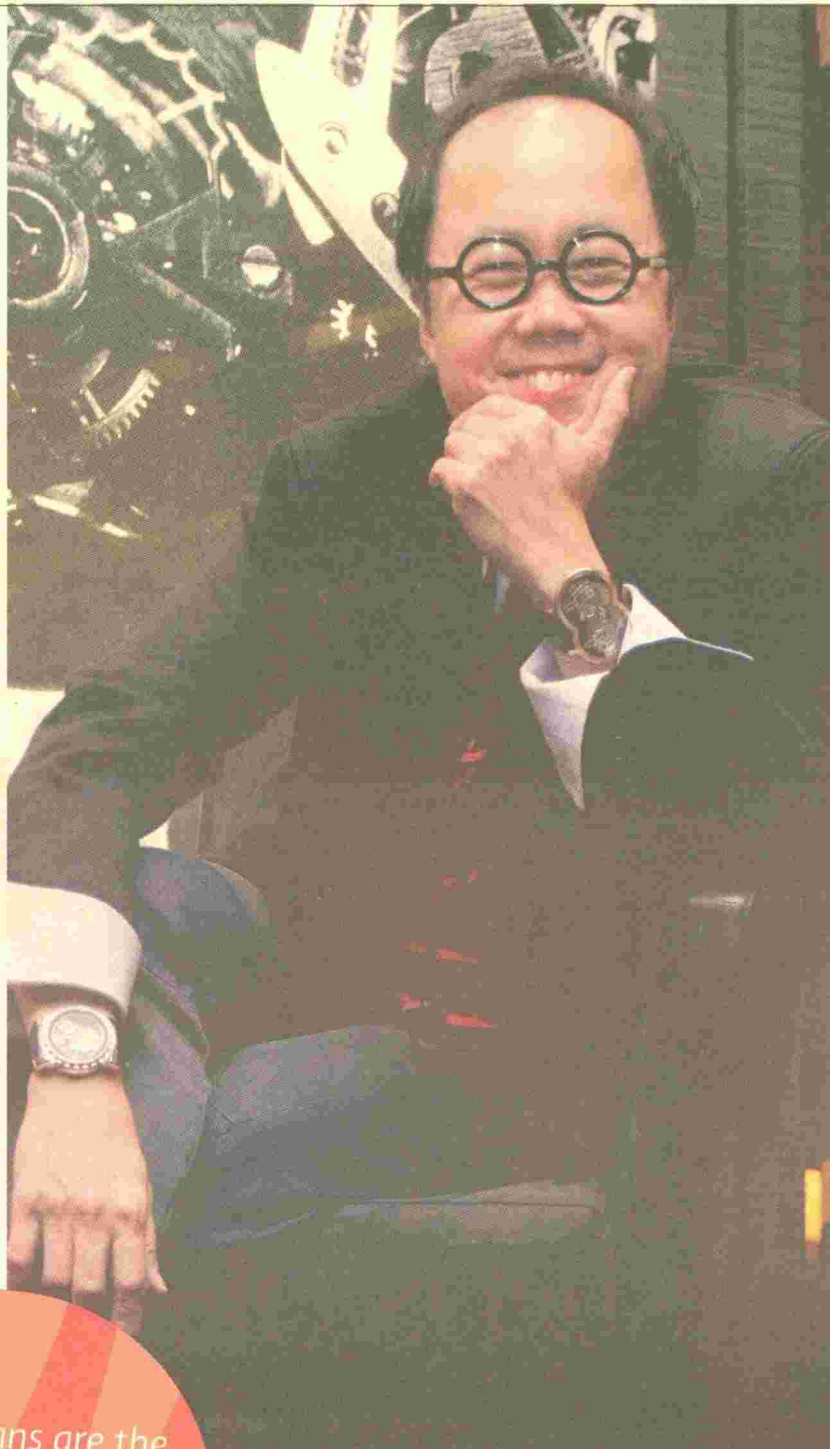
Such experiences have shaped this 50-something's philosophy, which is, to champion the underdogs.

In the case of watchmakers (also known as horologists), Dr Cheong tries to "recognise individuals who want to make watches but don't have the means to do so".

He explains: "Previously, it was all about the architecture of the watch, mechanics and accuracy. They were decorated with either enamel or cloisonne. I like to look at the story behind the watch. For instance," he says, turning to a window display at Khronos-Unique Horlogerie (a multi-brand watch boutique in Starhill Gallery), "take a look at these watches."

#### TIME-TELLING STORIES

The exquisite timepieces are from the Romain Jerome collection. The one named Steampunk contains oxidised steel that comes from the extraordinary fusion of authentic steel from the wrecked ocean liner,



"Malaysians are the driving force behind the unique and uber expensive watches..."

Dr Bernard Cheong

the Titanic.

Then there's the memorable watch crafted as a gift for Julio Iglesias during his recent visit to Malaysia. The watch rests in a custom-made case and is called Geograph Rainforest. It is a limited edition timepiece which has, "a part of Malaysia in it; there is a fossil from an oil palm tree embedded in the design," explains Dr Cheong.

"When such watches were first made, serious collectors didn't see the brilliance in them. I wanted to be instrumental in helping watchmaking companies like this achieve success."

Malaysia, Dr Cheong insists, has a treasure trove of people who are interested in the watchmaking industry. The person who comes easily to his mind is the late Datuk Rolf Schynder. "His love for Asia was reflected in his work."

Dr Cheong then pulls up his right shirt sleeve to reveal the gift from his friend. "Can you see that yellow bit in the watch? Doesn't it look like the crescent moon on the Malaysian flag?"

The other person the doctor has enormous respect for is Tan Sri Fran-

cis Yeoh of YTL Corporation.

"He's a very brave man. When he first started this Journey Through Time series; we thought it wouldn't go beyond the first year. And, here we are, in our fifth year." Dr Cheong is also one of the judges for this year's A Journey Through Time Watch of the Year 2011 award.

Surprisingly, Dr Cheong also gives credit to the Malaysian people. "The Russians, Japanese and Americans cater for the mass market. But Malaysians are the driving force behind the unique and uber expensive watches. This is because many here like to carry their wealth with them. It's not that they are showing off. They have a deep appreciation of what they own and seem to understand that watches have evolved from being just jewellery to art."

#### HE IS WATCHING HIS ASSETS

Dr Cheong's collection of watches seems to mirror such evolution: his first watch was a Seiko stopwatch. "It cost me about SGD130 (RM316). That was a lot of money in the 1970s."

Today, wearing two watches all the time, he does find it difficult to pick a favourite from his vast collection. Eventually, he settles on the "master watch" (a prototype of sorts) given to him by Vianney Halter. Such

#### You are what you wear!

DR BERNARD Cheong, believes that he can tell a lot about a person by the watch he wears. For instance:

1. A person who doesn't wear a watch at all is usually a practical person who tells the time by looking at his handphone. He likes the simple things in life.
2. A person who wears brands like Seiko is probably uncomfortable with computers.
3. A person who wears luxury watches is aware of, and comfortable with, his status and cultivates it.
4. A person who wears "one-off" watches is someone who realises that owning such a watch is the most convenient and practical way to collect art.

#### A Journey Through TimeV

**What:** Asia's grandest luxury watch and jewellery showcase  
**The theme this year:** Time to Celebrate.

**When:** Until Saturday  
**Where:** Starhill Gallery  
181 Jalan Bukit Bintang  
Kuala Lumpur  
**Tel:** 03-2782 3800  
[www.starhillgallery.com](http://www.starhillgallery.com)

admiration, it appears, is mutual as Dr Cheong says that Halter thanked him in his acceptance speech when Halter was awarded the title of The Best Watchmaker of the Year 2011.

Now the official ambassador for Foundation De La Haute Horlogerie, Dr Cheong stresses that collecting watches can be a good investment.

"The watch industry suffered the least during the economic crisis. You see," he elaborates, "watches are a portable asset. With real estate, you can't take it with you. With paintings and fine wine, they are fragile. But, you can carry watches worth millions from US to China without much worry. Also, it's much easier to verify the authenticity of watches than it is to verify paintings."

There are two ways to approach the task of making a watch, he says. The first is to consider the aesthetics of the watch, then figure out how to put things in place.

The second is to concentrate on how the watch functions before thinking of the aesthetics. "With computers, this second approach has become redundant," says the founding partner of a chain of clinics in Singapore called Lifeline Medical Group.

When assessing a watch, Dr Cheong looks, primarily, for the watchmaker's contribution to the industry. The doctor will ask: Is the watchmaker bringing the industry to the next level or is he just making another fancy watch?

In the end, Dr Cheong is looking for, "that Wow! factor in any watch. Beauty is not necessarily in the eyes of the beholder. I believe that the language of beauty crosses all cultures."