

# LITTLE SHOP

# OF CULTURES

In the cultural melting pot that is Singapore, a store concept born out of a French emperor's desire finds itself located in a shopping venue called Knightsbridge in Singapore and undertaken by a local brand that made its name retailing European watches.

**By Desiree Koh**

**R**einvention is often a cornerstone of continued success. Organisations that are comfortably ensconced in their chosen industry are often jostled off the tracks by changes that take place, often beyond their control. Rather than be derailed by these sudden twists and turns in the track, those with imagination will often regroup and consider a new approach.

Then there are those that opt to continue the process of reinvention even though they are neither threatened by circumstances nor unduly challenged by the competition. The Hour Glass cemented its position as a premium watch retailer under the extroverted leadership of Jannie Tay. In handing over the reins to her son, Michael, a decade ago, the course has been reset with a more youthful perspective and a boldness to embrace new ideas without excess sentimentality attached to the role of heritage. While The Hour Glass stores continue to sell watches, the quiet arrival of a new concept harks to a more personal experience.

Located off the main Orchard Road strip at the crossroads of consumerism — where Ngee Ann City squares off against Paragon and Knightsbridge confronts Mandarin Gallery — is a newly unwrapped jewel box. Beyond its auspicious red doors, Malmaison invites you into its intimate confines. Under the watchful eye of a spotlight griffin that dominates the passageway, you find your eyes flitting from bell jars to trinkets to jewellery, watches and much more. As you make your way in, the theme shifts to the sartorial elegance of clothes for men, and as you

"I wish that Malmaison may soon become the source of riches for all (of France)... the most beautiful and curious garden in Europe, a model of good cultivation," Josephine de Beauharnais wrote of Château de Malmaison, the opulent estate she shared with one-time husband Napoleon Bonaparte. In their rendition of Versailles and the Hearst Castle, the rarest and most exotic flora and fauna from around the world adorned these extensive 60-ha grounds just outside of Paris, which also served as the headquarters of the French government from 1800 to 1802.

veer past that, it's into watch displays in a setting of subtle blue lighting.

Up the stairs and the mood is transformed as if climbing into daylight. The brighter ambience unfolds a small book corner, a fragrance section, colourful stones from long-time Hour Glass collaborator, John Clajz, more watches, and many more artefacts to leisurely absorb as you walk and stop frequently.

Behind this emporium of ineluctable elegance is Michael Tay's vision. The Executive Director of The Hour Glass is a man who obviously favours the finer things in life. A collector of knowledge as well as artefacts, his tastes veer from tribal masks to Hindu sacred stones, books to watches...and much else beyond that.

If Napoleon were able to see Malmaison at Knightsbridge, he would have been pleased at the acquisitive nature of the collections presented — fine handcrafted clothing, jewellery,

and accessories for the person and home, all from the world's most distinguished artisans, none of which can be found elsewhere in Singapore.

Think shirts by Charvet, chief dressmaker to Emperor Bonaparte himself. Rubinacci, a tailor from Naples who caters to nobility. Cire Trudon, the oldest and most prestigious French wax maker and royal supplier to the Napoleonic empire. Frederic Malle, one of the greatest contemporary perfumers, where you experience his scents in life-sized vacuums. And rare stones and jewellery by Glajz, Aurelie Bidermann, Mawi, AS29 and Marjana von Berlepsch. Malmaison also houses an exclusive horology gallery, some selections unique to the boutique and some, such as the Rolex Comex and Steve McQueen timepieces, not for sale at all.

The union of Napoleon and Josephine might have ended in divorce, but at this Malmaison, there is no separation of culture from humanity, or authentic from luxury. Here, art is both a merger and acquisition of the intrinsic passions and impulses of collecting and owning it. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who also wrote *Bobos In Paradise*, puts it, the relationship has blossomed from a "demonstration of wealth" to a "demonstration of tastes."

"You must practice the perfectionism of small things... no gaudy possessions that make extravagant statements. [Bohemian Bourgeoisie, or Bobos] can spend hours looking through catalogues or the Internet to find rare gadgets not discovered by masses. It allows Bobos to be egalitarian and pretentious at the same time," he writes.

As if walking out of the pages of Brooks' book, Tay, tastefully adorned in a navy blue and maroon knit tie by Rubinacci, brown leather Cortthay shoes, a Hublot Classic Fusion timepiece, and Shamballa bracelets, leads this expedition with **STORM** into the intricacies of exclusivity.

**STORM:** How important is Malmaison to The Hour Glass group? What role will it play?

**TAY:** As market leaders in the world of the watch industry — this is how we position ourselves; we don't care so much about local competition per se — it's about being the best and excelling in what we do. We know that in terms of size and numbers, it would be very difficult to dismiss the Chinese retailers, for instance, in terms of revenue and profitability, just because the market is so much larger. But where we can lead, we can lead with our ideas.

We did it with projects like Tempus — that was very revolutionary when we introduced it; since then it's spawned a number of other watch fairs globally. We've always said that Tempus was bigger than The Hour Glass itself — it was an idea that we felt could be replicated throughout the world, and it has been. We're very happy to see that happen. With projects like l'Atelier, when it was first put up, and until today, it's still a reference point in the watch industry because it's a very innovative retail idea that expresses the origins of watchmaking.

With Malmaison, we've taken it to a different degree — it's created huge waves, especially in the watch industry as well. We're trying to chart a new course for watch retailers globally. It's really about leadership in the sector, coming up with innovative ideas, benchmarking

ourselves against the world and not just a local context or a regional context, and where it may be difficult for us to demonstrate leadership in terms of numbers by sheer geography and size, we can do so with ideas. That's a Singapore story. The Singapore story has always been about innovating and exporting our ideas to the world.

**STORM:** Is Malmaison something you've always wanted to do?

**TAY:** The idea of Malmaison has been brewing as very fragmented pieces of the mind over the past decade. It was probably only in end '06, the beginning of 2007, that the idea truly formulated and gestated sufficiently in order for us to proceed with the initial concept, plans and ideas. It was really only in that particular moment in time because Malmaison was also a response to the prevailing market environment. It's not such a distant memory, but if you remember what was going on then, those really were the go-go years of the luxury industry. We hadn't seen such a run-up or such an explosion in demand and consumption for luxury goods.

There were a lot of brands putting out high-ticket prices on their objects that truly did not represent or fully entail the canons of what we believed to be authentic luxury. The values of exclusivity, of longevity, of skilled craftsmanship — those ideas and values were really put to the wayside. Anything with a high-ticket price would be called and deemed luxury.

That led to a lot of substandard objects being introduced into the market and consumers were still buying them because they didn't know any better.

We saw erections of these global flagship stores — largely homogenous in design, large-format flagships, in the key major cities around the world. Our retail design strategy took a very different course because we didn't want to replicate experiences — we wanted to differentiate experiences. We wanted to develop new and unique opportunities for clients to experience. This is where we felt it was necessary to break the mould. I equate the retail store experience with a theatrical performance. The set has to change. People have to have variety, otherwise they get bored with the landscape.

Malmaison is a store really plugged in to expressing the ideas of what authentic luxury should be. That was the initial genesis of the whole idea — the Napoleon Room. Then we sort of expanded on that and became Malmaison. Napoleon and Josephine were interesting characters in history. They were huge purveyors of luxury. In themselves, they actually charted an entire new style of design for the world and the fact is, if you look at it, Napoleon was the first French leader who started promoting the export of French luxury goods worldwide.

**STORM:** How often does the set change at Malmaison?

**TAY:** Malmaison in itself is a big departure, so that's already a big set change. We've built it in such a way that it can be largely quite flexible, in how we shift our furniture around in there. But it's really more about the objects we have, the merchandise that we feature, that were highly curated. Not just in terms of the permanent objects, but also in terms of the objects that are for sale.

**STORM:** Which came first, the brands or the kind of products that you wanted in there?

**TAY:** The products, certainly. And I think one factor that drove that was trying to differentiate the retail offering, something that represented this world of what we call authentic luxury. Categories that we also felt were under-represented in this market. And at the same time, the final maxim of our merchandising policy was that we won't have anything housed in there that I wouldn't buy myself.

**STORM:** Is it Mike's Maison?

**TAY:** [Laughs] It could be, that's what a lot of people have said. I've been quite Hitler-ish over how things are represented and what goes in. If somebody tries to change the location of an object I've displayed, I put it straight back.

**STORM:** You've got a bookstore as well.

**TAY:** I have a great passion for books. I have a huge library at home, and I put a lot of money into it. I've always toyed with the idea of having a bookstore as well, but it's not a very profitable initiative. So when this opportunity came about to represent books by the publisher Taschen, I said, "Great!" Books are a gateway to representing the culture of humanity.

And this was part of the driving desire to make Malmaison into this cultural epicentre in Singapore.

**STORM:** Will the brands be consistent or will they also be changed?

**TAY:** There are a few key anchors that we have in there, and will continue to be housed in Malmaison. But it's never going to be static. There will be some degree of brand churn...but what's important to note is the merchandising philosophy of Malmaison will never change. And the merchandising philosophy centres very much on the idea of presenting objects that we feel fall into the category of authentic luxury, representing the values of exclusivity, of longevity, of skilled craftsmanship — objects that basically have a high degree of handcraft in

there. We want to demonstrate and to showcase the beauty of the imperfection of the human hand. If something is too perfect, you'll find that it's typically machine-made in its entirety.

**STORM:** What's the profile of the customer at Malmaison?

**TAY:** Interestingly, across the board, but we're seeing a lot of younger clients coming in now, which is the objective as well. We wanted to spur on a whole new generation of luxury consumers and engage them, and to also impart and enrich them with the culture that we're trying to put forward.

**STORM:** Would you say that the profile of the consumer today is probably more suited for Malmaison?

**TAY:** Oh, absolutely! We could never have done this 10 years ago. The Internet or the Internet generation plays a big part in us having the confidence to go out and do something like this. Singaporeans are global shoppers. And that was really one of the benchmarks we set ourselves — how do we create a retail offering that is able to appeal to these global shoppers? Clients are spending anywhere from one-and-a-half to two hours at Malmaison. We wanted to slow the whole sales process down so that it would give us the opportunity to tell the stories of all the wonderful objects we have here.

**STORM:** Are there a lot of people out there who take the same approach to art as you do, or do you feel that you have to help people kindle that passion?

**TAY:** Malmaison is about expressing the culture of humanity. All these objects that are in here, whether they're for sale or whether they're from my collection, my parents' collection or the collection of The Hour Glass, represent the culture of humanity. It's taken this length of time for the ingenuity of the human mind and the skill developed in the artisans' hands to bring luxury to such a degree. ■

