

Zen of jewellery

Master jeweller Wallace Chan stands out with his philosophical approach. **By Patrick Lecomte**

IN the exclusive world of high jewellery, there is one creator who has put Asia on the map: Wallace Chan. His calm demeanour, Confucian-style beard and Chinese black suit stand out in the glamorous universe of jewellery designers.

Born in Fuzhou, China, in 1956, Chan moved to Hong Kong at the age of five. At 13, he left school to become an apprentice to a sculptor making Chinese religious iconography. After a few years, he went on to study Western sculpture and founded his own gemstone workshop in 1974. His company, renamed Wallace Chan International in 2007, operates two workshops – one in Hong Kong and another in Macau.

Over the years, Chan earned global fame for his technical innovations, including the gemstone carving technique named after him (the Wallace cut) as well as jade refining and luminosity enhancing technology.

Beyond these achievements, Chan is also an artist with a wild imagination. His delicate jewels are colourful and whimsical, in some cases almost baroque.

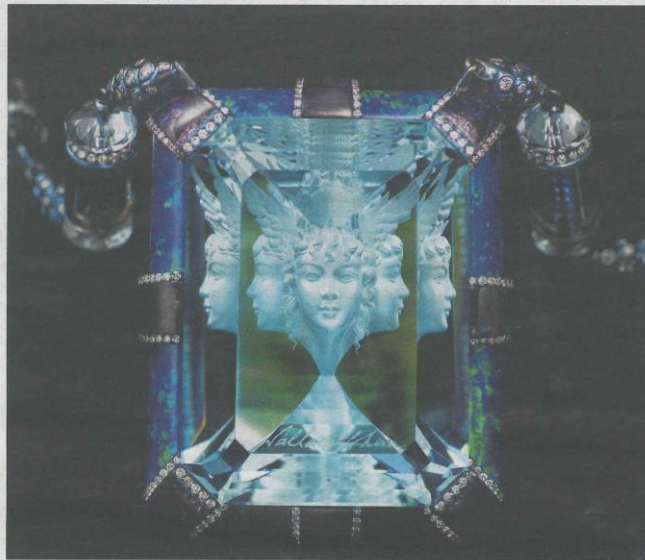
He explains: "I am particularly interested by the micro-worlds of nature. I feel that there is always a world within a world and with advanced technology, we can look into these micro-worlds that live in us and around us. Sometimes, I look at a gemstone and I am absorbed by the world inside it. The crystal structure inspires me. Through my creations, I want to make that world visible."

Half-jokingly he adds: "I really enjoyed the movie *Avatar*. I watched it nine times."

Chan, whose office is located in Central Hong Kong, an "East-meet-West melting pot" in his own words, is very much at the crossroads of influences. He emphasises that "it is important for a jewellery creation to reflect the spirit of its time. Being a Chinese living in the contemporary world, I embrace the spirit of our globalised world".

What makes him truly unique is his spiritual approach to jewellery. A Zen Buddhist himself, he is famous for creating a one-metre high Great Stupa of gold and crystal and rubies for Taiwan's Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Center completed in 2001. Beyond their incredible beauty and unique style, his works are designed to convey deep philosophical significance.

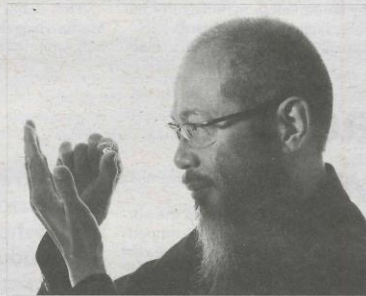
In a world dominated by fast-changing fashions and sometimes purposeless bling, he designs jewels with meaning and a reverence for nature.



Beyond their incredible beauty and unique style, Chan's works are designed to convey deep philosophical significance.

BEAUTY AND FUNCTION

From top, clockwise: A 135.4-ct aquamarine Wallace Cut necklace; 10.40-ct emerald, fancy coloured sapphire, diamond and ruby brooch; a bangle made of yellow diamond, blue topaz, tsavorite garnet, fancy coloured diamond, sapphire; Chan was the first Asian jeweller ever to be invited to the Biennale des Antiquaires; a ring made of yellow diamond, blue topaz, fancy coloured diamond, sapphire



"Jewellery contains human emotions. I understand adornments not only as something pretty to look at but also as something which is functional emotionally," he says.

"I believe in combining beauty and functions. For instance, my gemstone-setting-gemstone technique uses gemstones as claws to eliminate the appearance of metal on a piece and so harmony is further achieved."

Chan has received numerous accolades for his creations. The publisher Rizzoli has just released *Wallace Chan: Dream Light Water*, a limited-edition art book showcasing Chan's talent. The book was launched at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York in late January.

In 2012, Chan was the first Asian jeweller ever to be invited to the Biennale des Antiquaires, an art fair gathering the most

renowned antique dealers and jewellery houses in Paris every two years. He returned in 2014. In March, he makes history again by being the first Chinese jeweller to display his creations at TEFAF (The European Fine Art Fair) in Maastricht, Netherlands.

His works are rarely seen on the open market. Collectors are reportedly jetting in to buy his exclusive creations – no more than a dozen pieces a year – available to a few clients only. His "Great Wall" necklace featuring an imperial jadeite central stone sold for 56 million euros (\$86 million) at the 2012 Biennale.

Chan seems unfazed by all the attention he gets and the dizzying prices some of his jewellery fetch. As a passionate craftsman and true artist, he focuses on letting his imagination run free so that each creation is a new challenge both technically and artistically.

At his recent book launch in New York,

he explained: "Painters use paints, musicians use notes. I use gemstones to create."

The jeweller who lives in a quiet corner of Macau is still personally involved in every piece produced in his workshops. "I spend so much time with one piece that it becomes me," he says.

Chan is among a handful of creators who are successfully bringing their Chinese roots and original visions to the global stage. His visionary and timeless creations magnificently encapsulate Chinese culture at its best with their intricate combination of sublime craftsmanship, arresting beauty and deep connection with the universe: past, present and future.

While raising contemporary high jewellery to the level of fine art, Wallace Chan, the jewellery artist and philosopher, is also quietly writing a new chapter in China's 6,000-year history of jewellery creation.

