

Founder of local men's accessories label Gnome & Bow switches from banking to business

# Economics graduate makes his fashion fantasy come true

● RACHEL CHAN

Making a career switch to a different industry might be a terrifying idea for some, but not for this accessories designer.

Mr Quanda Ong, 31, founded local men's accessories label Gnome & Bow in October 2013.

He previously worked in the marketing department of a bank for 21/2 years.

Mr Ong, a Singapore Management University economics graduate, told The New Paper last week: "I was always interested in fashion since my junior college days, but back then, it was all about finance and engineering.

"I would always be looking around for bags, and I credit this to my ex-girlfriend, who made me catch the fashion bug as she would always take me out to shop."

Mr Ong could not stop thinking about starting a fashion business while he was at work.

"I did love my job, but I felt it did not allow me to exercise my creative freedom."

"After two years of carrying out routine processes, I felt stifled. From day one, I stood out for dressing and doing things differently. It was not very 'bank-like,'" he said.

A year into the marketing job, Mr Ong started doing intensive research on how to start a business, and he would source for suppliers during his leave.

Without any background in designing, he taught himself how to design, first using Microsoft PowerPoint.

"Embarrassingly enough, that was how I started because I did not know anything about drawing. I would teach myself every day for about a year, and finally learnt how to use Adobe Illustrator for my logo. But there was a lot more I needed to know, such as the materials and structure techniques," he said.

Mr Ong's family and friends were initially not supportive of his plunge into fashion as they thought it was too risky.

He said: "My parents were against it, with my mother being paranoid and my dad being practical.

"But after seeing me working on it every month, they knew that I was serious about it. I was also convinced that my idea would work."



Mr Quanda Ong, founder of local men's accessories label Gnome & Bow. TNP PHOTO: PHYLLICIA WANG

*"Dragons might be too strong while unicorns might be too feminine, and the gnome just gave off the right dose of fantasy, especially with its rustic beard and iconic pointy hat."*

— Mr Quanda Ong, founder of Gnome & Bow, on the label

Gnome & Bow was finally born after crowdfunding made it possible by raising more than \$37,000 in five weeks in early 2014.

"I think it is best to do crowdfunding when you are new. In a way, you can get support from

friends and family. (Setting up a business) took up a lot of time and it was very stressful.

"But, I was so engrossed in it so I could not really feel it. It was the passion that kept me going."

Mr Ong explained that the "gnome" in his label represented fantasy, while the bow tie stood for class.

#### 'STORYTELLING'

He said: "I knew from the beginning that the products should reflect storytelling, so I thought, how do we encapsulate the idea into the brand name?"

"It was initially called Quirky & Dandy, because that was what I would tell people when they asked me about the brand. But it was too 'in your face!'"

Mr Ong then thought of animals and mythical creatures, and gnomes immediately popped up.

"Dragons might be too strong while unicorns might be too feminine, and the gnome just gave off the right dose of fantasy, especially with its rustic beard and iconic pointy hat."

"Bow ties have been the quintessential finishing touch for gentlemen for many decades, and it is an accessory that has stood the test of time, so I thought it represented the brand well in terms of classic design,"

said Mr Ong.

"Stories are something that everyone enjoys, both telling and listening, and Gnome & Bow seeks to re-imagine storytelling, and to have the bags as a medium for this purpose with their endless inspiration and possibilities."

The stories that inspired the bags include The Tortoise And The Hare and the Strange Case Of Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde.

"Every story is unique, and my inspiration comes from looking at signboards to what people are wearing. It is difficult to tell the story behind the bag in a classy way that will attract people," said Mr Ong.

Now, after three years, and with a team of three others, Mr Ong is reaping the fruits of his labour — Gnome & Bow products are being sold at local stores, such as Tangs and Na-ise.

Mr Ong has also expanded his business overseas to the Philippines and Sweden.

He said: "I think we are pretty fortunate and lucky to have all these retailers find us through social media. It still feels like I had just started, and there is definitely still room for improvement."

shiyunc@sph.com.sg

## Bags 101

Have you always wanted to incorporate bags into your outfit but do not know how? Here are some tips from Mr Quanda Ong on the top three latest trends here:



#### BACKPACKS

"Backpacks are extremely versatile," Mr Ong said.

With better design options now, backpacks do not have to be labelled as something for school anymore.

Find one that is of good material. It will not only be perfect for work but also when paired with any outfit.

He added that it is important to stick to clean lines and muted colours for a more mature style.



#### CLUTCHES

Who said clutches are only for women? Mr Ong said the clutch is clean and minimalistic — it is fuss-free for the man on the go.

It can look professional too. A good size for clutches will be an A4- or iPad-size.

For those who are more hesitant to try the clutch out, Mr Ong advised to think of it as a laptop case.



PHOTOS: GNOME & BOW

#### DUFFEL BAG

Mr Ong thinks duffel bags are under-used here, and that they are a style that gives off the vibe of a backpacker or gym-goer.

Look out for duffel bags with short handles.

"Your hands won't swing about so much, so it looks more put together," he said.

— RACHEL CHAN

