



(From left) Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Johor Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar and his wife Raja Zarith Sofiah, Permaisuri (Queen Consort) of Johor, and PM Lee's wife Ho Ching in Johor Bahru last month. PM Lee received Johor's highest state honour: the First Class, Grand Commander of the Order, Dato' Sri Paduka Mahkota Johor (SPMJ – Order of the Crown of Johor; sample on right). PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, KUA CHEE SIONG, ROYAL INSIGNIA

GIFTS FIT FOR KINGS

Singapore atelier Royal Insignia has crafted medals, royal orders and other special items for monarchs, ministers and more



Yamini Chinnuswamy
Correspondent

Last month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong received Johor's highest state honour from Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar: the First Class, Grand Commander of the Order, Dato' Sri Paduka Mahkota Johor (SPMJ – Order of the Crown of Johor).

The order's provenance might come as a surprise: It was crafted right here in Singapore by local atelier Royal Insignia.

The company was officially founded in 2000, but its founder Ivan Hoe, 59, has been in the business of medal-making for about four decades.

He cut his teeth making medals for school and sporting events for a local company back in 1981, but took his craft to the next level with help from an English mentor – Mr Steve Dix, who had worked with established medal houses in London, and was in Singapore from 1992 to 1995.

Mr Hoe says: "He taught me everything I know about medals, from

the difference between the honour systems of France and Britain, to the techniques and secrets of achieving a flawless finishing."

Today, his atelier counts the Sultans of Johor and Brunei as regular clients. In addition to medals and royal orders, it also produces bespoke diplomatic gifts such as jewellery and commissions – like a brass chess set coated in white and yellow gold – for luxury brands such as Swiss watchmaker Audemars Piguet.

One interesting royal project that Royal Insignia worked on was a pair of intricately decorated gold-plated guns for the Sultan of Brunei, presented to the King of Jordan during the inaugural International Defence Exhibition held in Brunei in 2007.

But only the individual components were made in Singapore, says Ms Rachel Hoe, 31, who is Mr Hoe's eldest daughter and a director at Royal Insignia.

"It was armed and assembled in Switzerland. And from there, it was an interesting logistical struggle to get it to Brunei."

Another exciting project was for the Sultan of Brunei's Golden Jubilee in 2017: making the medals worn by the heads of state who attended the celebrations, including PM Lee and Britain's Prince Edward, the youngest child of Queen Elizabeth.

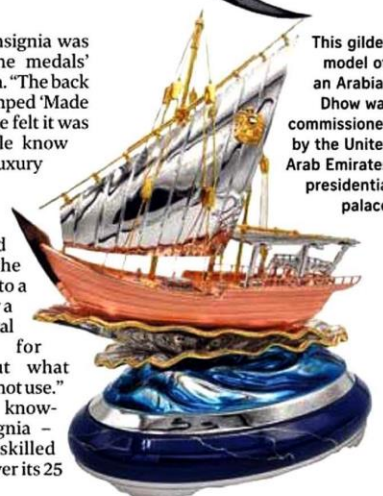
Royal Insignia worked on a pair of gold-plated guns for the Sultan of Brunei, presented to the King of Jordan during the inaugural International Defence Exhibition in Brunei in 2007.



Ms Hoe says Royal Insignia was careful to highlight the medals' Singaporean connection. "The back of every medal was stamped 'Made in Singapore' because we felt it was important to let people know Singapore is capable of luxury craftsmanship."

Indeed, such craftsmanship requires a specific set of skills and design knowledge, she adds. "You can't walk into a department store to buy a diplomatic gift or a royal medal. There are, for example, rules about what colours you can and cannot use."

This is institutional knowledge that Royal Insignia – which employs 42 skilled artisans – has built up over its 25 years of existence.



This gilded model of an Arabian dhow was commissioned by the United Arab Emirates' presidential palace.

The craftsmen work across five broad areas: mould-making, metal-smithing, gem setting, enamelling and surface finishing.

"Because of how niche the craft is, our craftsmen rarely come to us with prior training. They are mostly trained on the job and, over the years, we have developed a comprehensive training programme for each new hire."

They are aided in their efforts by a group of young digital designers and engineers – an investment made by the company some seven years ago to groom its next generation of talent.

"Most of our master craftsmen are fairly old, in their late 50s or so. But now with our designers and engineers, the average age of our employees is in the late 20s."

The needs of their clients, Ms Hoe adds, were also becoming more urgent. It was necessary to bring in technology to shorten the design, prototyping and manufacturing process.

Today, Royal Insignia hosts a full suite of design and production capabilities on its premises in Ang Mo Kio. It employs some 60 staff in total, a number that also includes administrative and business development employees.

At its core, Royal Insignia is a family-run business. Mr Hoe remains involved in its day-to-day operations, while Ms Hoe's younger brother Shawn, 29, works

on business development. Younger sister Charlotte, 28, is the company's master enamellist.

Ms Hoe jokes that she was coerced into joining the family business. "I studied business at Singapore Management University and was bumming around for a month after graduating. My dad suggested I come help for just a month – and that month became nine years."

Her earlier reluctance stemmed from familiarity, she says. Growing up in the family business meant that gemstones and fine gold did not have the same shine for her as it did for other girls. "But after joining, I realised the historical significance of what we do," she says.

Case in point: In 2019, Royal Insignia took on a commission from the royal house of Johor to restore the medals received by Sultan Abu Bakar Daeng Ibrahim, who lived in the last decades of the 19th century.

A great traveller, he received medals from the emperor of Japan at the time and Queen Victoria, among others.

"Holding the medals, which were 200 years old, I realised we were holding history in our hands – and that this is also the case with any jewellery, medal or luxury gift we make," says Ms Hoe.

yaminic@sph.com.sg

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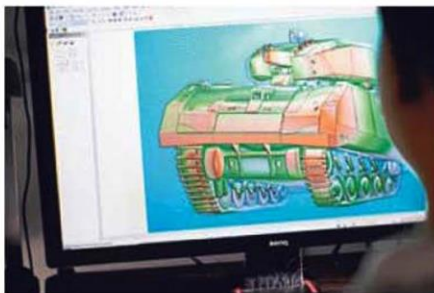
FROM C1

Making a royal order

Yamini Chinnuswamy
Correspondent

For objects such as a royal order, Royal Insignia typically works with a budget upwards of five figures and uses luxury materials such as pure gold and diamonds. In the case of the First Class, Grand Commander of the Order, Dato' Sri Paduka Mahkota Johor (SPMJ) – Order of the Crown of Johor bestowed on Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Royal Insignia's director Rachel Hoe says the enamelling was particularly challenging. Enamelling is a decorative technique in which powdered glass is applied to fine silver to colour it. "When enamelling on embossed surfaces, the chance of the enamel cracking is a lot higher," she says. She gives The Straits Times the lowdown on what it takes to make a royal order from scratch.

yaminic@sph.com.sg



1 Digital design: "We did not have to design the SPMJ from scratch as it followed the template the royal house of Johor has been using for the last 200 years. However, we were not provided with design files. Instead, we were given the old orders to examine. So, our designers translated what they saw into a flat artwork and then a three-dimensional model."



(From left) Sisters Rachel and Charlotte Hoe, Royal Insignia's director and master enamellist respectively, with the sample royal SPMJ order. PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, ROYAL INSIGNIA



2 Mould engraving: "The digital model is uploaded to a special machine, which creates a mould. However, this mould still has to pass through the hands of our master mould-maker for quality inspection and some final touches before it's ready."



3 Mould stamping: "The completed mould is loaded onto the stamping machine. Blank silver sheets can now be stamped with the design of the royal order."



4 Hand filing and sawing: "The stamped silver sheets are refined further by our craftsmen."



5 Welding: "Craftsmen weld the different silver components together. A royal order like the SPMJ consists of more than 60 separate components."



6 Enamelling: "Powdered glass is applied to the welded silver components, following the order's design, and then fired in a kiln at over 700 deg C."



7 Polishing and plating: "The enamelled silver components are polished. Extreme attention has to be paid during polishing so as not to deform the embossed details on the surface. During plating – where we plate each individual piece in white and yellow gold – there is a high possibility the enamel will crack or that the finishing will turn dull. We assign only our most experienced craftsmen to polishing and plating an important order such as the SPMJ."



8 Assembly: "Earlier, we fused the metal parts of each piece together during the welding process. Now, we must connect the 60 individual pieces. This is a very delicate operation. The craftsmen must take care not to damage or scratch the surface during assembly. With the clients and budgets we work with, even a fine scratch is not acceptable."



9 Stitching: "The sash accompanying the order is hand-stitched onto each piece by our in-house seamstress."

10 Final quality control and delivery: "Once our master craftsmen have given the all-clear, the completed royal order is ready to be delivered."