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Headline: Continuing the legacy: Rachel Hoe of Royal Insignia on finding a narrative and a sense of purpose

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More than just keeping local heritage crafts and traditions alive, millennial, second-generation business leaders are making waves in their fields. In this series, Annabel Tan finds out how they are taking carpentry, local coffee and bespoke gifts to the next level.

Rachel Hoe (pictured right) often jokes that it was “a combination of laziness, coercion and bribery” that led to her joining Royal Insignia, the heritage local atelier started by her father that specialises in crafting bespoke gifts for royals and heads of state. After graduating from Singapore Management University with a bachelor’s degree in business management, she was determined not to join the family business immediately. But despite her best efforts in trawling through job listings in the Classifieds, she could not find one she was interested in.

“I didn’t realise it at the time but because I was raised in this culture of craftsmanship where the autonomy to create is a huge part of the job, it was subconsciously something that I really wanted to have in my work,” the 31-year-old recalls. Seizing the opportunity, Rachel’s father tasked her with a three-month-long project to work on and she has stayed with the company since then. Now, seven years later, she is the company’s director and leads its strategic and creative direction. Her younger sister, 28-year-old Charlotte (pictured left), is Royal Insignia’s master enameller. Charlotte’s move to join the family business was a more organic path as she was an arts graduate who always knew she would work there.

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Making a mark



Making this connection resulted in a big difference in the way Rachel approached the business and the initiatives she would lead. “Finding the narrative not only helps you attain meaning in your work, but also charts the future. That’s very important to me,” she explains. “We can diversify and explore other markets, but I want to always stay true to what we’re doing and why we are doing it.”

About two years ago, she spearheaded the development of the company’s conservation and restoration department. One of the first projects was to restore medals from the State of Johor, followed by replicating its royal regalia. Today, Royal Insignia also performs restoration and conservation work for local museums.

As a self-confessed heritage and history buff who has worked with monarchs in the region, Rachel also initiated the publication of two books that delve into the history of orders, decorations and medals in Johor as well as in Negara Brunei Darussalam. “This really lent so much more meaning to the things that we are doing.”

The next level



For Rachel, her perception of the business took a few years to evolve. Her initial reluctance has given way to a new sense of purpose in carrying on the heritage trade. “Growing up and hanging around the workshops, we knew that we were surrounded by expensive and beautiful products, but we never understood the true significance of it all,” she says.

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Three years into officially joining the business, she became compelled to ascertain the true meaning of Royal Insignia's work.

She felt the company's old tagline of "Medallists, jewellers and purveyors of fine gifts" did not communicate well and sought a stronger narrative. After back and forth conversations with her father, it suddenly clicked. "The products we make are given to royalty, presented at historical events like diplomatic visits and royal weddings, and eventually will make their way to museums and become historical artefacts. We realised that in our gifting business, we are actually marking history."

Getting to work on particularly special projects also cements this significance for Rachel. Last year, Royal Insignia crafted a 24k gold Crest Gem embellished with 4,300 carats of precious stones for the Ruwanwelisaya, a stupa in Sri Lanka considered to be sacred to Buddhists. "I didn't realise the weight of what we did until the day it was installed, and one million people turned up just to see it," she says. "People were prostrating in front of the stupa and that was when it hit me that it was a huge thing in marking history."