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TIME OUT WITH...
NICOLAS MULLER



THE Art OF PENMANSHIP

God is in the details goes a popular quote and in the case of Caran d'Ache, Nicolas Muller is at hand to make sure the phrase rings true.

Leong Wong reports

Tucked in the corner of the second floor of the Pavilion Kuala Lumpur is the Caran d'Ache boutique. Upon entering the store, one couldn't be helped being drawn to the beautiful, handcrafted pens and collection of small leather goods on display in the glass cases.

Sitting behind a small table atop which lay a tool pouch was a distinguished man wearing a white lab coat and a warm smile. Meet the famed Swiss pen maker's technical and design consultant Nicolas Muller.

Having been with the Caran d'Ache since 1961, Muller was supposed to have retired a couple of years ago, but was retained as the company still needed his expertise. Like many great and successful men, he started from the bottom, as a technician before working with the machine and moving on to different divisions.

Muller said whenever he had to start in a new division, the pattern was always the same. "I wouldn't like it at first but after a while, I would always find myself enjoying it more than my last place," he said.

It didn't take long for Muller to become a real expert in the craft of pen making. As he enthusiastically explained the process of pen making, you could tell that this was a man who took a lot of pride in his work.

What could have been a tedious regurgitation of technical facts turned into a fascinating and informative exercise for a pen enthusiast – albeit one who has no knowledge of the technical aspect of making a pen – like myself.

As I listened to him, I soon learned how complicated and delicate the process is – from the basic form to the finished product. Indeed, this is a craft that requires not just skills but a lot of patience.

"It may be a painstaking process but the end result is truly rewarding. The feeling of completing such beautiful writing instruments – be it a fountain pen, a ball point or a rollerball – is simply wonderful," added Muller.

The process goes as such: First there's the technical research into the best raw material to use, followed by the making of the pen by a manufacturer according to the exact specifications.

The brass tubing is then shipped to the workshop to be turned

into a writing instrument, after which it is shaped into the basic form of the pen by machine. From then on everything is done by hand, and every relief, indentation and embossing has to be carefully beaten and polished into its desired form and standard.

The surface has to be absolutely smooth and not even a microscopic imperfection is permitted, before the next steps, lacquering and enamelling – applied by hand – are done.

Any grain of brass or dust, said Muller, must be dusted off or it will affect the smooth finish. Like everything else made in Switzerland, the pens have to be precisely and perfectly made and of the highest quality.

Then final stage is the 'white-gloves' test, where the finished products will be examined under the trained eyes of the quality controller, using a magnifying glass. If any imperfection is found, the products will be discarded as damaged goods and the whole laborious process will start all over again.

During the interview, Muller showed me some of Caran d'Ache limited edition pens and explained in great detail how much work went into creating each piece.

Naturally, it made me appreciate them even more. More than fabulous writing instruments, they are indeed a work of art.

Being the only manufacturer of elegant writing instruments in Switzerland, it's easy to see why people are always eager to do their apprenticeship with the company. Which in turn explains why Caran d'Ache has never had a problem finding craftsmen or training one.

A chat with Caran d'Ache managing director for Asia Pacific Olivier Walthert, revealed that the company has seen a steady growth in Asia recently.

He said the company started in 1924 as a manufacturer of colour pencils. But it was only in 1997 that it decided to venture into luxury pen making and small leather goods – though it still manufactures colour pencils of the highest quality. ■

