

# Pens of distinction

It's a pity elegant handwriting is almost a lost art when there are still craftsmen who labour to make the most exquisite writing instruments.

By TIONG KEAN KOK

**T**HE description alone is enough to make one's mouth water: "a jeweller's dream, the rare conch pearl, also known as the rose pearl of the Caribbean with its silky coral pink hue fires the imagination of the designers with its subtle yet striking colour... (and) surrounded by diamonds set in two spirals of 18-carat white gold and two Akoya pearls for an enchanting effect."

This ostentatious beauty actually refers to a pen. But this is no ordinary tool designed for scribbling on paper. It is Caran d'Ache's latest collector's item, the Perles de Caran d'Ache.

This perfect marriage of fine writing and jewellery also boasts no fewer than 160 diamonds spiralling gently along the slender body of the pen and has the distinction of being the esteemed Swiss luxury house's first limited edition for women.

Caran d'Ache, well regarded as the go-to brand for fine arts instruments, is

known for its fountain and ballpoint pens. It turns common stationery into the most exquisite possessions where even the mechanical pencil can be a coveted piece of bling. That it started out humbly as a pencil factory makes its current position as a much sought after status symbol all the more remarkable.

Established in 1924 by Arnold Schweizer in Geneva where it is still based, Caran d'Ache finally made its presence felt in South-East Asia with store openings in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore recently.

## The right stuff

CARAN d'Ache's master craftsman Niklaus Muller gives an insight into the world of precision pen making.

**What main qualities should a pen craftsman possess?**

An open and artistic mind, a sense of the aesthetic and to be able to identify luxury and fashion trends, as well as with the brand.

**You started with Caran d'Ache as a technician. How did you eventually become a craftsman?**

Caran d'Ache was a small company then with limited human resources. I was required to not just design the machines but also the pens that came out of the machines! I eventually decided to pursue design further.

**When did you retire?**

Officially in May 2005 but I have never really retired as I have continued to be involved in all sorts of projects and consultancy work with Caran d'Ache.

**What do you love about your job?**

I get to work on different type of projects and meet all sorts of people whether it is the artists, the designers, the suppliers and so on. You can learn so much from every one of them.

**What is the most challenging aspect of your job?**

To create the right buzz, the opening of the tiny Kuala Lumpur boutique saw the launch of Perles de Caran d'Ache, which is a unique piece priced at RM288,000, and a showcase of the La Modernista Diamonds that the Guinness World Records declared as the most expensive pen in 2001 when it carried a whopping price tag of £169,000 (RM895,700 at present conversion rates) when it went on sale in London.

The specifications for the La Modernista are equally beguiling: this one-of-a-kind fountain pen is made of rhodium-coated solid silver components, boasts an 18-carat gold nib and is covered all over in diamonds and rubies. La Modernista is created to pay homage to Antoni Gaudi, said to be the most famous modernist architect.

The made-to-order work of art carries a price tag of ... RM1.48mill!

But lest you think that these pens are all

»Every step in the pen-making process is meticulous and controlled«

NIKLAUS MULLER

The Perles de Caran d'Ache pen is a jeweller's dream, with a 'nightmarish' price of RM288,000.

Each and every project couldn't have succeeded without team work. As the leader of my team, my challenge was to coach, direct, advise, motivate, analyse and listen.

**What satisfaction did you get out of the job?**

Seeing the beauty of the end result and people buying the products that you had worked so hard on.

**The amount of precision, detailing and effort is astounding. Why do you think the Swiss are such innovators when it comes to such craftsmanship?**

The lack of raw material in Switzerland probably pushed us to develop these qualities to differentiate ourselves from our bigger neighbours.

**The first pen you designed is the Madison. Technically and aesthetically, what sets it apart from the other collections?**

It was the first luxury pen for Caran d'Ache. The technical challenge was to be



Pen master craftsman Niklaus Muller.

show and no substance, Caran d'Ache invited its veteran craftsman, Niklaus Muller, 70, to its boutique recently to give an insight into the intricacies of pen-making.

Muller first joined Caran d'Ache in 1961 as a technician before his passion for craftsmanship saw him rise through the ranks to eventually become a chief craftsman. Although formally retired now, Muller continues to enjoy his role as the brand's ambassador of sorts.

During his appearance in Kuala Lumpur, Muller is quick to stress, in line with Swiss tradition, that "every step in the pen-making process is meticulous and control-

led. The human element is vital in ensuring that only the highest quality is achieved."

As Muller demonstrates a run-through of the manual process, it becomes evident just how delicate the whole thing is. It requires the utmost precision, God-like patience and an obstinate ambition for perfection. Every item is also submitted to rigorous checking, where no detail, however small, is spared.



Caran D'ache La Modernista is a one-of-a-kind fountain pen made of rhodium-coated solid silver components, boasts an 18-carat gold nib and is covered all over in diamonds and rubies.

the design.

**How has the demands of pen craftsmanship evolved or changed over the years?**

People are becoming more and more appreciative of the human element that goes into making a pen and are looking for more than just the pen that writes. They are looking for an emotional link.

When I point out that no sane person would pay an arm and a leg for a pen just to write with it, Muller grins and replies, "These are pieces of art. A pen collector is also someone who appreciates artistic pieces."

Justifying the price tag too are the materials used, and everything is of the highest standard (see 'Sum of some parts'). "Great consideration goes into the choice of materials to ensure that our products are highly resistant, long lasting and beautiful," says Muller.

"Everyone knows that we make the best nibs, the best ink cartridges and so on. For example our ballpoint pens can write up to 640 A4-sized papers continuously. Our ink is also a

house trademark: one of its most distinctive qualities is that it doesn't wear off in UV light and remains visible after a long time."

Apart from the above limited editions, Caran d'Ache's permanent pen collections include the Hexagonal Collection (inspired by the hexagonal shape), the Madison Collection, distinguishable by its sexy, slim shape, and the timeless Leman Collection.

■ The Caran d'Ache boutique is located at Pavilion KL shopping mall. For more information on the brand call 03-2141 6421, or visit [www.carandache.ch](http://www.carandache.ch).

## Sum of some parts

HERE are some of the commonly employed materials that make Caran d'Ache writing instruments so lust-worthy:

**Eighteen-carat yellow gold/ white gold**

The gold used is certified by the Office of Precious Metals and carries its hallmark as well as the personal mark of the craftsman.

**Silver**

Silver-plated elements are 999/1000 fine.

**Platinum**

Rare, pure and durable, platinum is the most exclusive precious metal with a purity that enhances the diamonds.

**Rhodium**

A rare metal in the platinum family, it is 10 times more expensive than gold but with the advantage that it is resistant to oxidation, ensuring that it always keeps its beautiful sheen.

**Chinese lacquer**

A natural product from China, its use involves a highly complex art inspired by the great Eastern masters. It comes in blue, black and red, and the colour lasts longer than synthetic lacquer.



Philippe de Korodi, the new CEO of Caran d'Ache, believes that a pen reflects an owner's personality more than a watch.

# The write man

Stories by SANDRA LOW  
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**A**S I settled down into a window seat in the swanky Caran d'Ache suite on the 30th floor of Basel's Ramada Plaza – the tallest building in Switzerland – I couldn't help but feel that the Swiss brand that I was there to find out more about was just as impressive as the view from my vantage point.

What started out as a pencil factory in Geneva more than 85 years ago has grown, and now produces the only luxury writing instruments in the country.

In fact, Caran d'Ache Maison de Haute Ecriture (house of fine writing instruments) has often been called the Rolls Royce of writing instruments.

Little surprise, therefore, that on my itinerary was a trip to Baselworld – the world's biggest and most important watch and jewellery fair held every spring in Switzerland's third-largest city. Caran d'Ache was showing its newest collection for 2009, and that alone said plenty about the brand.

Having arrived in Zurich the day before on Emirates (the international airline of United Arab Emirates which

The new CEO of a brand regarded as a Swiss institution talks about selling prestigious writing instruments.

made the long trip a delight thanks to a wide choice of inflight entertainment and top notch desserts), I was eager to discover the brand's newest wares. I would also have the chance to meet with Jacques Hubscher, president of Caran d'Ache, in Basel and visit its factory in Geneva – it was a whirlwind tour of three Swiss cities, all in two-and-a-half days!

First on the agenda, though, was a chat with the man who sits in the driver's seat, Philippe de Korodi, the new CEO of Caran d'Ache, took over the helm from his predecessor, Silvio Laurenti, last May.

It is obvious that he is extremely proud of the brand: "Caran d'Ache is really an institution, with a history that goes back to 1924. All Swiss children are familiar with our pencils and colour pencils, and I grew up with the brand," the 45-year-old says.

But the company he spearheads today is vastly different from the one that made pencils when he was a child. Now, Caran d'Ache's business is divided into its fine arts business

(mainly coloured pencils) and writing instruments (which include fountain pens, and ballpoint and rollerball pens). Korodi says the company is placing more emphasis on writing instruments because there is a growing market for them across the world.

Like world-famous Swiss-made watches, Caran d'Ache has developed a reputation for quality and craftsmanship. Despite the similarities, Korodi believes that timepieces and writing instruments are vastly different because, "The same watch can go on any wrist and you use it to see the time. But when you write, you put some of your own personality on paper, so it is a very intimate object."

When Korodi joined the company, he noticed another peculiarity among owners of writing instruments: "When we receive pens from customers for repair, we see little traces of 'life' on the pen, such as scratches.

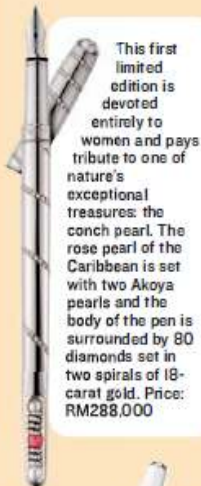
"We never automatically re-polish the pens, as many people want to

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## Penned in style



Specially designed for the female customer, Perles de Caran d'Ache, under the Harvest Collection, offers a stunning collection of pens designed around the Akoya pearl, diamonds and 18-carat gold nibs. Its accessories come in calfskin leather. Prices range from RMI4,500 to RMI4,500.



This first limited edition is devoted entirely to women and pays tribute to one of nature's exceptional treasures: the conch pearl. The rose pearl of the Caribbean is set with two Akoya pearls and the body of the pen is surrounded by 80 diamonds set in two spirals of 18-carat gold. Price: RM288,000



Secret Journey II, the latest of a collection of three highly innovative and enchanting designs by the brand, honours Chateaubriand, the 19th century French writer and diplomat who had a great love for art and culture. Each comes with a secret message for the owner to unlock. For true connoisseurs, there are 30 units of the limited edition Secret Journey trilogy which each contain three fountain pens. Prices range from RM34,000 to RMI26,000.



The latest offering in the supreme divinity theme is the Hindu God, Shiva. Hand-made in solid silver, the pen boasts intricate details. Prices range from RM 32,800 to RM36,900.



A pristine white pen joins the Les Couleurs du Leman collection that pays tribute to colour. The purity of white together with the absoluteness of black creates a modern classic. Prices range from RMI,280 to RM2,320.



The brand's signature hexagonal shape is revisited in the latest Ecridor Rotation – dedicated to all lovers of architecture and innovative design. Its cascade of guilloché facets plays with the idea of symmetry. Just like the reflection of mirrors, its geometric shapes intertwine in a glittering spiral. Prices range from RM575 to RMI,195.



## Swiss success

CARAN d'Ache has a special link to the worlds of design, painting and writing, as its name is a reference to the most important tool in drawing.

This Swiss company was founded in 1924 by Arnold Schweizer, who acquired Ecridor, a Geneva pencil factory, and then founded a new company – la Fabrique Suisse de Crayons Caran d'Ache.

He was inspired by Russian Emmanuel Poire, a caricaturist who signed his work with the pseudonym, Caran d'Ache, which means "pencil" in Russian.

Today, the company is the country's only manufacturer of pencils, colour pencils, fine arts materials and luxury writing instruments.

A youthful 70-something Jacques Hubscher, president of Caran d'Ache, is a sprightly man who gives away the nature of his business in an instant – he always carries a handful of pens in the inner pocket of his jacket!

"Today, I am carrying with me three pens. Yesterday, I had six!," says the charming Hubscher who has lost count but believes that he has more than 100 writing instruments in his collection.

Hubscher remembers receiving his first Caran d'Ache pen when he was only 15-years-old and says, "Originally, my family was in the corn business, and my father bought some shares of the compa-

ny and then we increased participation in the business."

So, how has the company changed from its early days?

"We started by producing pencils before World War II. Since we had expertise in writing instruments, we invented the world's first all-metal clutch pencil (the

first lead holder to feature the now-ubiquitous spring clutch mechanism), named the Fix pencil. I believed that we should diversify and that's when we focused more on producing writing instruments," Hubscher recalls.

"Over the years, the company has adopted new technology in its production and I am confident that if we remain inventive, take care of

our customers and produce good quality products, then we will survive," he says.

Hubscher makes it a point to play an hour of tennis every Friday and golf during the weekends, and says that he finds it relaxing visiting his factory in Geneva.

"I believe in discussing things with people who have their hands in the dirt (the ones who are doing the work in the factory) and while I am learning from them, they also like to hear what I think of their work. It is a question of appreciation and respect for people who work with you," he says.

And it looks like his recipe for success has been written in gold!



Jacques Hubscher always has more than one pen in his pocket!

By SANDRA LOW  
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# Money talks

For the first time, Kuala Lumpur will play host to a congregation of high net worth individuals and provide a ritzy backdrop for business networking.

**D**O what others do not". An enterprising young Malaysian and his British friends were brainstorming over drinks recently when they came up with an innovative scheme.

Tan Wei Ming, 33, who is partially based in London and has numerous business interests including hotel consultancy and a luxury French skincare brand, was discussing the recession in Europe with his business partner, Guy Holland (with whom he runs a London-based bespoke furniture design company). The two, along with other buddies, wondered how companies could explore expansion plans without taking on too much risk.

"We thought it was a great idea to create a platform to allow companies to increase their revenue in a very short time," says Tan. "In the hotel consultancy work that I do, we are engaged directly by hotel owners, who are high net worth individuals. Very often I get a request from these clients for introductions to other high net worth individuals," he points out.

Tan says he always assumed that these individuals would know each other but that wasn't the case, and he realised that there was a need for formal introductions.

Tan and his friend then set out to do research on putting together something that allows such meetings. After speaking to many business owners, they found that there are many large scale business summits or exhibitions that attract a large audience, most of whom were not serious business contenders. Also, these events do not offer a conducive environment for someone to "talk shop".

"The trend now is to have smaller events and parties for about 20 or so people. A good host would invite a group of people with similar backgrounds or business interests. Generally this more intimate set-up is favoured as it is more focused and cost efficient," Tan says.

According to him, the Asian region has 2.8 million high net worth individuals who are collectively worth US\$9.5trn (RM33trn), and 20,400 individuals within this group have a net worth of at least US\$30mil (RM104.8mil), making Asia-Pacific the third wealthiest region after Europe and North America.

As such, the idea for the High Net Worth Summit 2009 (HNWS), the first and only global networking platform for high net worth individuals, to be held next week at the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Kuala Lumpur, took root.

It says on the invitation card that guests are carefully selected from a rolex of high net worth individuals, worth US\$30mil (RM105mil), to ensure the right mix of people.



Living the high life? The Asian region has 2.8 million high net worth individuals who are collectively worth RM33trn. Left: Tan Wei Ming

"We have looked around and there is nothing similar to this event.

"The HNWS – to be held over four days – offers three important avenues: a formal networking platform where we will assist in pairing up

specific individuals or individuals from similar industries, access to the latest luxury showcase, and a celebrity charity gala dinner," says Tan, who is project director.

The luxury showcase will include the best exhibitors have to offer, from private jets to jewellery, yachts, stationery, watches, cameras, couture gowns, and exclusive limited edition items available for purchase by guests at special prices.

As for the charity angle, Tan says, "There were many causes that we looked at but we chose to work with the Pride Foundation, which aims to enhance awareness on breast cancer and the treatment and care of patients. I lost both my grandfathers to cancer."

After two days of serious networking, attendees will be entertained at the charity gala

evening by two-time Grammy Award-winning American R&B and soul singer, Peabo Bryson.

Also in attendance at the Charity Gala evening will be Datuk Michelle Yeoh, Datuk Jean Todt, Hu Jun (who starred alongside Tony Leung in the highly acclaimed film *Red Cliff*), and Jackie Chan.

Tan says that there are 500 confirmed attendees, the majority of whom are business owners, from North America, Europe, Australia and predominantly South-East Asia.

Tan's biggest challenge was getting the right message across when word about his event went out.

"People think that this is an extravagant and over-the-top event but it's not. When we say it is a high net worth summit, a lot of people had the preconception that it would mean a day filled with millionaire guest speakers," he points out.

For wealthy individuals, a slump in the economy is an opportune time as "this is the time for them to come out and meet more people.

"The money is still out there but there is a change in spending patterns. This is the time to

## What's on

June 16-18

- The Luxury Showcase
- Pre-arranged business meetings and appointments

June 19

- Recreational and commercial activities including private jet viewings, special test flights, yacht and property viewings, golfing and art gallery visits
- Celebrity Charity Gala dinner

### Admission fee

For US\$4,500 (RM15,730), guests will receive one four-day pass to The Luxury Showcase, 20 pre-arranged business meetings, four nights' full-board accommodation at the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur, inclusive of airport limousine transfer and one seat at the Celebrity Charity Gala dinner.

Alternatively, guests can pay US\$3,500 (RM12,235) for one four-day pass to The Luxury Showcase, 20 pre-arranged business meetings, and one seat at the Celebrity Charity Gala dinner.

Private jet packages can also be made available for all guests flying in from London, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Mumbai and Dubai (subject to availability).

» The money is still out there but there is a change in spending patterns. This is the time to make bargain purchases, from art pieces and property to planes, for investment»

TAN WEI MING

make bargain purchases, from art pieces and property to planes, for investment," Tan says.

And even if you don't boast a net worth of millions of dollars, you can still participate. Anyone with US\$3,500 (RM12,235) to spare and lofty ambitions can still carve a path to a bright future by rubbing shoulders with the right people at the HNWS.

■ For more information about HNWS, contact ECM Services Sdn Bhd at 03-8023 0820 or Pride at 03-2144 9932 / 9952.

### > FROM SM4

keep the traces of time on their writing instruments. With watches, people usually want them back in perfect condition."

However, unlike the timepiece industry which boasts over 250 brands, many of which are Swiss-made, Caran d'Ache is the only writing instrument manufacturer in Switzerland.

"We need competitors because they challenge you to improve. However, our brand has such a rich heritage and strong history, so they automatically show in our creativity," says Korodi, who previously managed Swiss chocolate brand Lindt & Sprungli, Nestle and Geneva-based confectionary company Favarger.

He believes the most important selling points for writing instruments are that they are pleasing to the eye and also allow for a certain "level of comfort" when in use.

"There has to be ergonomics... then when you start writing, you need a flow of ink that is suitable to your liking," he explains. "Some

## Putting pen to paper

like a speedy fluidity and some like the fact that the pen will not go quicker than one's thoughts."

That is why the brand offers a variety of different pens.

According to Korodi, Malaysians prefer the rollerball and ballpoint pens, people in Hong Kong like the rollerball while the Japanese love ballpoint pens. In parts of Europe, love for the fountain pen seems to have been rekindled.

"The choice of pen depends on what one is looking for... the fountain pen will have a unique calligraphic effect.

"If you want to be practical and write quickly, then the roller or ballpoint would be a good pen.

"Your choice might also depend on the price, as fountain pens are more expensive," he explains.

Korodi says that one of the items on his

to-do list is getting more women to buy fine writing instruments. Currently, Caran d'Ache's customers are 80% male but the brand's latest collection unveiled in Basel is bound to change the numbers.

The stunning Perles de Caran d'Ache in the Harvest Collection is especially designed for women; its fountain, roller and ballpoint pens are embellished with a row of five Akoya pearls. There is also matching leatherware in soft calfskin.

Does he believe that the writing instrument will survive the Internet age?

"It's true that people are communicating more through e-mail and writing less. However, most people you see around you will have a mobile phone and/or PDA and most likely, a pen in their pockets or bag," he points out.

And Korodi certainly leads by example; When not working, he unwinds with his



Asians seem to prefer the rollerball and ballpoint pens whereas Europeans like using fountain pens.

family and pens poetry – with his Caran d'Ache, of course!

■ The Caran d'Ache boutique is at Pavilion KL. For enquiries, call 03-2141 6421