

Passion Play

Passions, the brainchild of its Managing Director Jonathan Tee, is one of the established players in the local secondary watch market.

BY DAVID KHOO

From humble beginnings selling curios and antiques, Jonathan Tee's passion for collectibles has grown to include two boutiques and an Internet business portal selling an eclectic selection of new and used collectible watches. To date, he has traded timepieces with private clients and international dealers hailing from more than 70 cities in 50 countries, including Greenland and Bhutan.

According to Tee: "Internet interest accounts for a large part of my business. Even the customers who visit my boutique, regardless of whether they're local or regional, make it a point to visit the website before popping by. An estimated 100% view my website almost every other day to do 'research'."

But that's not to say his boutiques are merely storefront facades for the sake of appearances. Shifting from his ground floor location at Funan Digitalife Mall to the current 1,000 sq. ft. second floor site, his flagship boutique boasts a warm and inviting ambience that is bigger and better organised, with a cosy 'Haute Gallerie' VIP corner to conduct more private discussions.

Unlike at some high-end boutiques, visitors to Passions never have to worry about feeling intimidated as they browse the selection of timepieces, watch-related magazines and accessories at their leisure. The second boutique, at Chinatown Point, sees mostly Chinese-speaking towkays and boasts a large selection of Rolex watches to cater to its clientele.

"The boutique at Funan Digitalife Mall attracts the professionals, intellectuals and more serious connoisseurs who go for the pricier, high-end pieces," he relates. We certainly appreciate the sweet irony of a store that trades in highly mechanical instruments in a building that deals almost exclusively in digital reality.

Rather than banking solely on the latest trends in the world of horology, Tee is quick to emphasise the importance of personal relationships in his business model. He's built up such a level of trust with his long-time clients that they don't balk at buying a big-ticket timepiece based on pictures and his description alone! This is no mean feat since most overseas buyers who aren't able to physically view the item to ascertain the authenticity of the timepiece are essentially taking a leap of faith.

Tee intends to grow the business beyond Singapore. "I plan on expanding regionally, with satellite shops in Kuala

Lumpur, Bangkok and Jakarta over the next three years. After that, it'd be interesting to try my hand at the auction business," he enthuses.

Apart from the horological time-telling wonders like the Datograph (A. Lange & Sohne) on his wrist, Tee also appreciates another medium for creative engineering expression – the rarefied realm of super-cars. "The guys who collect watches, cameras, fine art and exotic cars form a small community and most of them collect two if not three out of the four!" he observes. So it's no wonder he has managed to effectively carve out a fulfilling business from his life's passions.

He's worked hard to get to where he is too, lest you think he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. "Back when I first started (in vintage timepieces and curios) 15 years ago, there was no Internet, no online databases to rely on as a resource tools. It was a gritty, hands-on business that saw interaction with pawnshops, *garang-guni* (rag-and-bone) men and flea-markets, and I put in a lot of effort to work my way from the ground up." Most importantly perhaps, it's the *passion* that keeps the wheels of his well-oiled business spinning smoothly... **TC**

