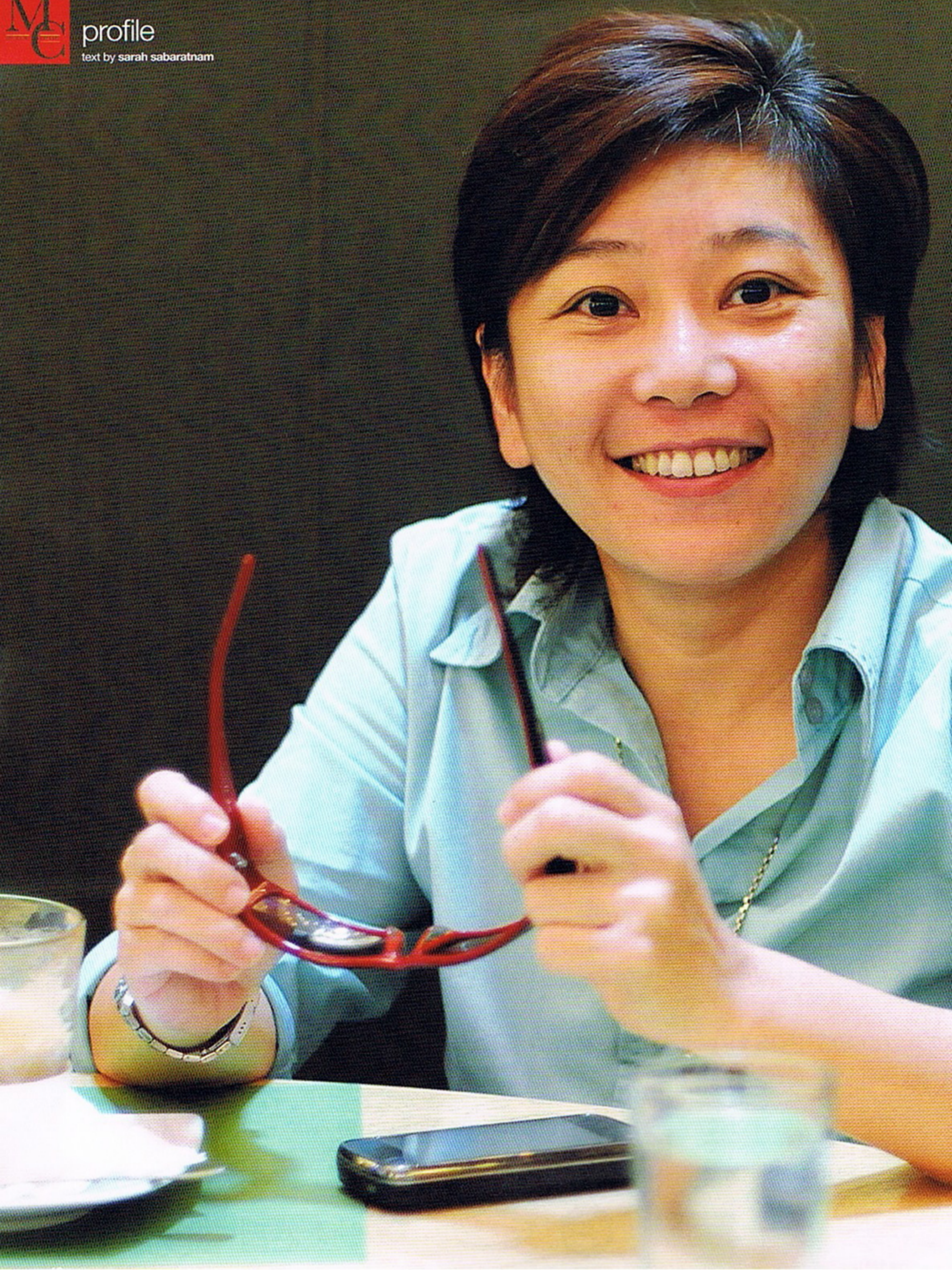




profile

text by sarah sabaratnam





SHARING TRADE SECRETS

Weaving in and out of the jewellery-designing industry, Wendy Lor has finally accepted the fact that her “hatred” towards her trade actually stems from her immense love for it. Realising this has led her to sharing her skills in an industry where artisans jealously guard theirs.

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Jewellery enthusiasts the world over are always enthralled by designs with a difference. In the last couple of years, many of them have shown a growing interest in collections from a workshop in Puchong, Kuala Lumpur, belonging to Wendy Lor Artisans International Sdn Bhd.

The news was rife and passed by word of mouth that its proprietor Wendy Lor, 42, designs and produces the most exquisite, customised pieces, based on client specifications. The designer of fine jewellery has such insight, they say, that she will interview and “read” her client before embedding elements of her client’s personality into heartfelt treasures.

What’s more, the designer is so innovative she has been able to integrate tools and programmes never before used in jewellery-making, to design and produce pieces that were impossible in the past.

Wendy has inspired such curiosity and drama that a couple of clients from Europe actually hopped on a plane and landed in Malaysia to meet her and

talk about their desired pieces in person.

“Not all my clients are that dramatic though,” she quips, with a hearty laugh. “Most of my overseas clients — new and old — contact me through email.”

SOLID EXPERIENCE

Wendy has even raised eyebrows in certain circles in the engineering industry. She is the first jeweller to invest in Solidworks, an expensive engineering software used by engineers around the world to design and build buildings, cars, space ships, and such. Wendy uses it to design some of her more challenging pieces.

Hers was also the first company in Malaysia to purchase and use Solidscape T76+, a rapid prototype machine from the US which prints wax models.

Wendy says her innovative use of different tools would not have been possible if she did not have years of experience sitting on the workbench of various jewellery shops. Behind tinted glasses or in windowless rooms, she learnt everything from designing, to casting moulds, crafting pieces and setting gem stones. Having learnt the trade from scratch and mastered the processes enabled her to look for new ways to not just simplify the production of jewellery but to also venture beyond the existing borders of the trade.

“You could say I am the first woman master artisan in my field to not only conceptualise and design jewellery but to craft the mould, produce the piece and deliver it to your doorstep.”

What sets WLA apart are Wendy’s designs, which when personalised, are no longer just a piece, but an experience.

Wendy usually interviews her clients to get a sense of who they are before designing for them. Then she incorporates four important elements which she calls the four quadrants of the piece: the experience of luxury, the experience of having your mind tickled by the piece, and the joys of having



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sentimental and spiritual values incorporated into the design.

She cites the example of a wedding band she created for a couple who came to see her. She found the groom to be very loving when it came to caring for his fiancée. The bride-to-be, although an independent, go-getter career woman, enjoyed the attention and care her future husband showered on her.

For him, Wendy made a wedding ring that could

be opened up like a case. Inside, her wedding band sat snugly. It symbolised how safe the bride feels in her groom's arms and how much he enjoys protecting and loving her. The couple was over the moon about the design, and you can be sure more people heard about Wendy Lor.

So innovative are Wendy's designs that she has had to create patents for some of them. For instance, her message bands are the first of their kind: the message is hidden within the inner layer of the ring. This means the ring has two layers, an inner and outer one. When the outer layer is removed the message inside can be read.

"This is what I mean when I say our pieces will tickle your mind," says Wendy. "We delight in challenging people mentally with our creations."

In Malaysia, Wendy offers the luxurious experience of going to her clients' house to meet and design pieces for them. For those living abroad, who make up 90 per cent of her customer base, all communication takes place instantaneously and seamlessly through email.

And it is through email that one corporate giant contacted her, asking her to design miniature cars in precious metals. Why her?

"I believe because our pieces emphasise quality and detail. We also finish the pieces well."

She says many of the values she holds dearly about jewellery-making she learnt from her father, a jeweller himself, like his father before him. Her father mentored her in the discipline and values needed in the trade, emphasising on workmanship, precision and above all else, integrity.

When it came to the pieces Wendy designed, her father would always look for the finishing. "My father would not be interested in the design. He would always flip the jewellery over and check the finish. To him, this was important."

Wendy was educated in Chinese schools in Malaysia before her parents sent her to study in Singapore. It is there that she struggled to become

articulate in the English language. Determined, she read book after book to improve her command of it.

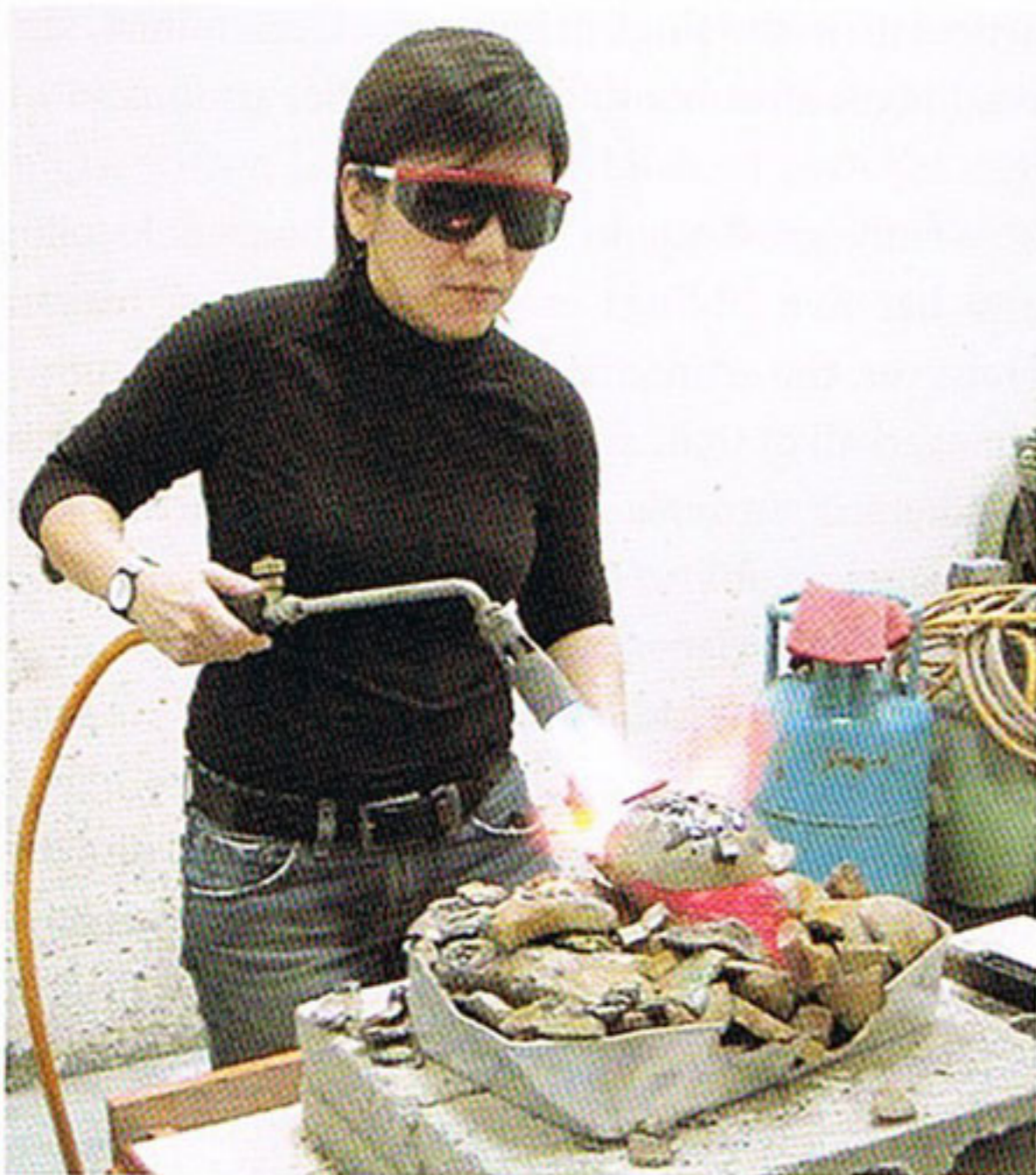
Wendy grew up in a wealthy household; she and her five siblings each had their own maids. However, the economic downturn of the late 1980s changed all of that, and Wendy ended up having to put herself through college, while supporting her two younger siblings.

A MODEL STUDENT

Having secured a place in the National Junior College of Singapore through a church scholarship, Wendy excelled not just in her studies, but also in

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singing and table tennis.

She was awarded Colours (an award for outstanding sportsman in each respective game amongst all colleges and secondary schools in Singapore) for table tennis, badminton and squash for two consecutive years.

Wendy worked for a year after college, from 1988-1989, as a soft furnishings coordinator in Singapore to save money to further her studies.

Being a woman, Wendy was not expected to take over the family business, much less walk in her father's footsteps.

Thus, it was unexpected when she ended up in Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia, to study Visual Arts and specialising in jewellery.

While there, she put her love for cooking to good

use and made dinner boxes for students on campus to help raise funds for her tuition fees.

Later, she got a job as a waitress but alas, this was not enough to pay her fees. Wendy had to leave her studies unfinished due to financial challenges, and return to Malaysia.

Instead of moping around, she went to work in her father's jewellery shop. Slowly, he began to show her the tools of the trade.

“My father taught me soldering. I learnt how to make a chain that is exactly one tael long, no more, no less.” Her father also taught her forging, and how to pay attention to details.

“Those days everything was done with hand tools. You really had to be very meticulous.”

The more time Wendy spent with her father in his workshop, the more interested she became in jewellery-making. Soon she realised her experience would be limited if she stayed in her father's shop.

In 1991, to broaden her horizons, she went to work for a local gold ornament manufacturing company based in Taman Maluri, Kuala Lumpur, as an apprentice, earning RM330 a month.

“I looked at the RM330 and decided — I am being paid to learn. To think of it as earnings was depressing. I looked around for opportunities. I realised I could speak English, but the other craftsmen could not.

“I also saw many manuals lying around and I began to read them. Soon I learnt how to repair the machines in the workshop and more importantly, how to run the workshop.”

In 1992, she accepted a job at a local jewellery company as a designer. However, due to her hands-on nature and natural ability to work with tools and machinery, she ended up in its workshop.

A CLOSED TRADE

She was made very aware of the rarity of women in the industry while there. The experienced male

artisans, probably taken aback by the only young, female apprentice among them, told her to get a desk job.

They couldn't accept the fact that a young female, just out of school, could do what they had been doing for years.

What Wendy was more concerned about though was that despite her willingness to learn, very few artisans would share their trade. Most were not willing to allow her to be an apprentice, and even those who did were reluctant to share more than needed.

"They would shut their drawers when I walked up to them."

Wendy, undeterred, looked for other avenues to learn and found one in Singapore.

In 1993, she joined a Singaporean jewellery manufacturing company as a supervisor. It also offered to pay interested candidates to take up casting and wax modelling courses from The Jewellery Industry Training Centre (JITC).

There, her instructor, a well-travelled American jeweller named Gregory Burke took notice of her determination and willingness to work extra hours just to learn, and took her as an apprentice.

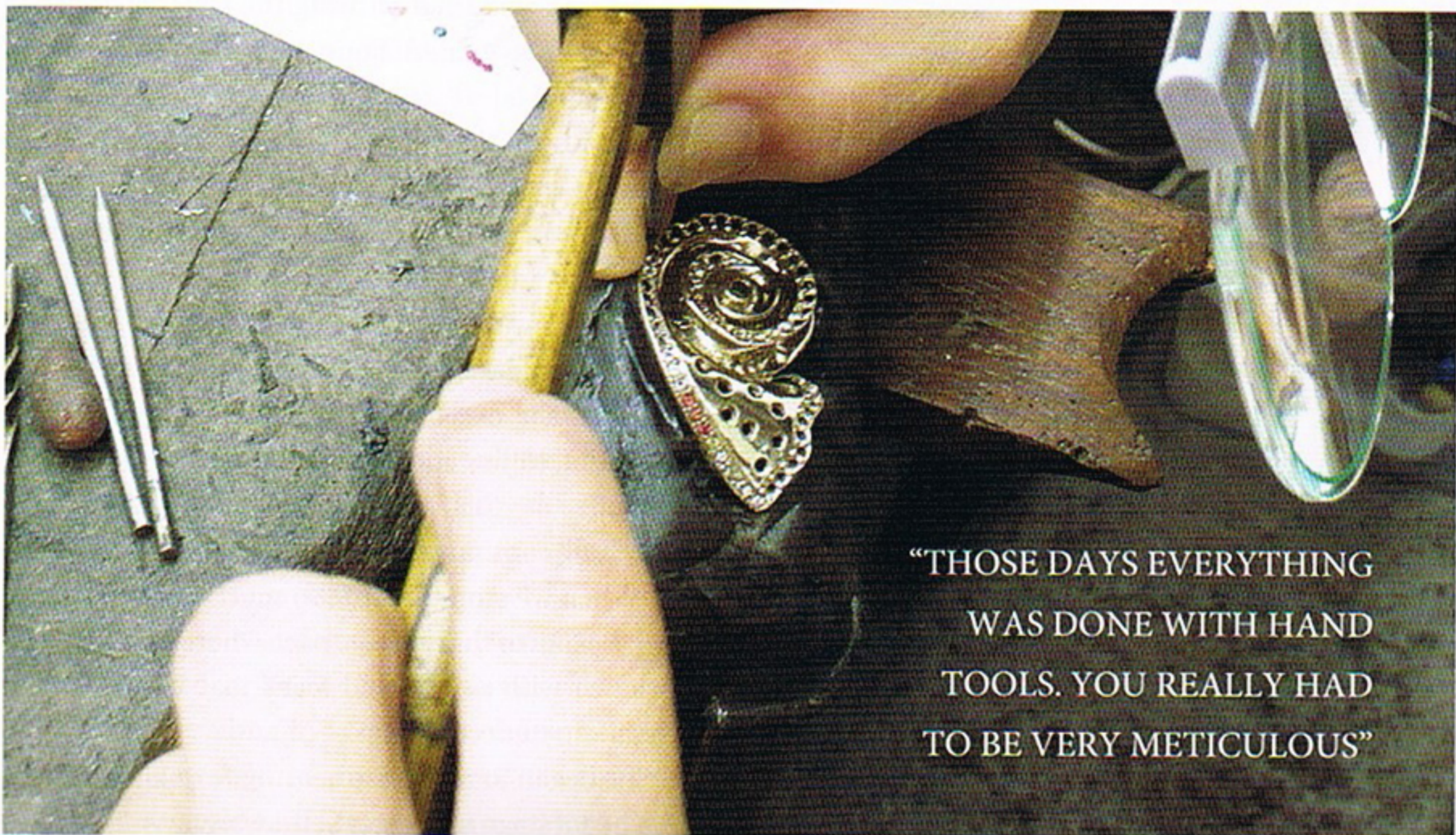
He taught her gem-setting, a new terrain for Wendy.

In 1992, Wendy came back to Malaysia and returned to the last jeweller she had worked for. With her experience, she joined as a wax model maker and went on to become a supervisor.

She introduced new processes and tools, such as improvising the usage of Aqua Gas in the jewellery workshop. (Aqua Gas is a machine that separates hydrogen and nitrogen from water and is used to cut huge metal sheets in the metal industry.)

She worked with Aqua Gas owners to design a smaller tool which the jewellery workshop could use to solder up to 20 pieces of metal at one time.

The conventional ones could only solder one piece at a time. With the new improvised tool, productivity at jewellery workshops increased by



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50 per cent. At the end of 1995, Wendy was ready to move out on her own, and started her one-bench workshop in Shah Alam, Selangor.

This was short-lived due to the infamous 1995 Shah Alam flood which destroyed the workplace and all her tools.

All was not lost though as she was invited to rejoin her previous employer. So in 1996, she joined them for the third time and helped them set up systems for their manufacturing arm.

Meanwhile, the Aqua Gas owners wanted Wendy as their jewellery consultant to penetrate the jewellery industry with the modified Aqua Gas torch.

That was how she came to be marketing the modified torch to the local jewellery industry.

It was during this time, from 1998-2002, that Wendy reached a sort of plateau in her life and began looking inwards.

While she knew she had an immense passion for jewellery making, all those years in windowless rooms were beginning to take a toll on her.

She was also tired of being the faceless designer while others gained fame and riches from her designs.

In 2003, at the age of 35, Wendy decided to quit the industry as she had come to hate it so much.

“But even then, I realised that I hated it because I loved it so much,” she says.

The following year, Wendy decided to dabble in sales and marketing, and like everything else she touched, she excelled in it, clinching deals others could not, selling industrial tools.

While in the marketing line, Wendy’s soul searching continued.

“When we stop thinking so much, we learn to be still. I came to this empty space where I learnt to be in touch with myself and learnt that I was beating myself up unnecessarily.”

She began to recognise her innate qualities as she reached a stage of greater self-awareness.

TRUE CALLING

“I realised that life is actually very simple but we complicate it by thinking too much. Now I allow life to unveil itself and I consciously choose how I want to participate in it.” It is at this point of awareness that Wendy says she found her true calling in life – to teach and share her knowledge about jewellery-making.

In her many years learning the trade, Wendy found many artisans unwilling to share their knowledge. Furthermore, many of them sat behind tinted glasses and could not be pinched. Because they could not be pinched, there was no competition in the industry, thus the artisans were paid poorly.

Wendy says if this continues the sun will set on the jewellery industry in Malaysia, because not enough people are learning the trade through proper apprenticeship.

“A master should always be willing to share. If you are not willing to share, you are not a good master.”

It is with this in mind that Wendy decided to venture out on her own again. “In order to teach and share, one has to be known. To be known, one needs a brand – a name, to piggy back on.”

This is how Wendy Lor Artisans International Sdn Bhd came to be; to Wendy, it is the platform she has been looking for to share her knowledge. Today WLA is an innovative outfit and a market trend leader, with an annual turnover of RM2-3 million.

Wendy expects that figure to grow by 13-15 per cent in the next five years. To date, she has not just taken on apprentices but her apprentices have turned into master artisans.

With corporate and individual clients from all over the world in her portfolio, the world is her oyster. Wendy aims to keep on evolving as there are always new ways of doing things.

Her philosophy in life will ensure just that.

“WHEN YOU THINK YOU KNOW A LOT, YOU STOP LEARNING. WE MUST ALWAYS BE IN A STATE OF OPENNESS. SEE YOURSELF AS EMPTY, AND YOU WILL KEEP LEARNING”

She says, “When you think you know a lot, you stop learning. We must always be in a state of openness. See yourself as empty, and you will keep learning.”

To emphasise her point about evolving with the times, Wendy whips out her Nokia N97, and begins drawing a design. “I used to do this on paper, but now with this, I can design anywhere, anytime, the moment I am inspired. It won’t get wet and it won’t get lost.”

Aside from designing individual pieces, Wendy has also produced three very unique collections with the themes Rhythm, Swirl and Jewels of the Sea. These can be viewed at <http://www.wendylorartisans.com/gallery.html>.

As a keen diver, some of her pieces are naturally inspired by the beauty beneath the sea. In fact almost all her pieces resonate with the incandescent and fluid qualities of water.

Despite her success, Wendy remains unassuming; there are no airs about her and she tends to wear her heart on her sleeve. In the face of the vulnerability she displays, by being open and transparent, she remains observant and sharp, able to study those around her within minutes of meeting them.

This remains one of her key gifts which she has been able to assimilate into her craft.

Guided by her lineage, driven by her passions and devoted to detailed craftsmanship, Wendy hopes to continuously push the boundaries of conventional jewellery-making, while she shares and encourages others who are passionate like her to develop their skills. 