



The exhibition, “Van Cleef & Arpels: The Art & Science of Gems” was successfully held at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore from 23 April to 14 August. We took the opportunity to speak with Managing Director South East Asia at Van Cleef & Arpels and ESSEC alumna Ms. Elise Gonnet for an insight into the exhibition and how her time at ESSEC influenced her career path in the Luxury Industry.



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Could you tell us more about the exhibition, The Art & Science of Gems? Why has Van Cleef & Arpels decided to hold this patrimonial exhibition in Singapore this year?

The “Van Cleef & Arpels: The Art and Science of Gems” exhibition continues in the tradition of Van Cleef & Arpels (“the Maison” from hereon) to share its creations with the public. Since the very early years, the Maison has participated in international exhibitions and exhibitions of the Creative Arts, as the jewelry pieces can also be considered as decorative art pieces in their own regard. Occasionally, the pieces exhibited are commissioned or owned by private collectors. These pieces reflect the French tradition of jewelry craftsmanship; in that sense, they are like a painting or other types of works of art. Take for example a Picasso; you might never own one in your life, but you would nevertheless appreciate going to a museum or a fair to see it, and this is certainly the same approach which we have adopted with our jewelry pieces, a tradition which we have continued to uphold. In recent years, we have held exhibitions in iconic museums across the globe such as the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Museum of Decorative Arts) in Paris, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, and in the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Shanghai.

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As we started to explore various locations to host our patrimonial exhibition, the ArtScience Museum became quite an evident choice due to the unique approach they have in any exhibitions which they host. If you have a look at the programming of the museum, they cover a very eclectic and wide array of topics, but with a unique overarching angle of the intersection between Art and Science.

Therefore, extending this concept, jewelry is the “Art”, and Science comes into play with the integration of gemology into the exhibition. Creativity is the intersection between Art and Science, and creativity in jewelry is certainly essential for us not only to root our pieces in the heritage of the Maison, but also to keep innovating, and innovation is key to science.

It is vital for us to keep innovating and pushing the limits of the techniques, such as the Mystery Setting technique. This technique was patented in 1933. Two years ago, we showcased a new technique of Mystery Setting called the Mystery Set Vitrail, which is the most advanced technique which we currently have. The Mystery Setting technique is a very traditional way of setting the stones without any visible metal, but we continue to challenge and improve ourselves not only for the sake of having the most complicated pieces, but also for the aesthetic beauty and rendering of the pieces.

For the patrimonial exhibition, we were extremely lucky to have the opportunity to work with the ArtScience Museum team for the content and storyboard of the exhibition, along with our Heritage Director in Paris, Catherine Cariou.

Through L’École Van Cleef & Arpels, we had the pleasure of being introduced to the world-renowned French National Museum of Natural History, which carries a remarkable collection of minerals and gemstones. This is in fact the first time that the French National Museum of Natural History is participating in such a project, and such a collaboration brings a unique angle of Art and Science.



The co-curation with the ArtScience Museum and contributions of the French National Museum of Natural History has given us the unprecedented opportunity to exhibit jewelry pieces, timepieces and precious objects alongside gemstones and crystals. We can encounter loose stones, gemstones which are already faceted and cut, quite easily. However, it has been an enlightening journey even for us in the Maison to learn about these minerals and gemstones in their original form. That's what is also very exciting about such a project: to learn while we are working with a partner museum, because we were able to showcase the different forms of the minerals and gemstones through the exhibition. We see the crystal in the matrix (the mother rock), the polished stone, the faceted stone, and then the jewelry. In the exhibition, we exhibited more than a century of craftsmanship and beyond that, our short life of a century old jeweler, is, for the first time, juxtaposed with the 4.5 billion year history of Planet Earth. This is thus a very good lesson of humility, and it is also fascinating to see how the human hand can transform the precious jewels of the earth into jewelry pieces and art objects that were showcased in the exhibition.

Van Cleef's development in South East Asia and key challenges

How is Van Cleef & Arpels developing its activities in South East Asia?

We have recently enlarged and developed our network in South East Asia with the opening of our third boutique in ION Orchard in Singapore in November 2015; our very first boutique was opened here in Ngee Ann City in 2007, thus it has not even been 10 years since we first opened here. We now have 3 boutiques here in Singapore, one in Malaysia, and we opened our first boutique in Thailand in December 2015. South East Asia has a fantastic cultural diversity, and with Singapore being at the hub and crossroads of that remarkable diversity which has, by the way, inspired many creations of the Maison in the past, we see that the clientele is extremely well-informed and sophisticated when it comes to the understanding of the craftsmanship and the style of the Maison. Our next big opportunity will be to open in Australia by the end of the year.

In our heritage, we have had pieces inspired by many countries around the world, including countries in South East Asia, and in recent years, in some of our high jewelry collections, we do indeed have some pieces inspired by the region, but our approach would not be to create a piece specifically for the opening of a boutique in a particular country. For the high jewelry collection, for instance, there are several themes which we have had. One of our most recent collections focused on the Seven Seas of the World, which included some of the Seas from the region, thus this is how you might be able to find the connection between our pieces and South East Asia. We feel that what visitors and clients are expecting is to be able to experience and discover the collections just as they would do in Place Vendôme, or in Tokyo, or on Fifth Avenue, and this is a more authentic approach to remain true to who we are. Sometimes the themes of the collections can be linked to the region; for example, we had a collection on the Legendary Costume Balls (Bals de Légendes) of the 20th Century, and one of the Costume Balls we featured was the Oriental Ball celebrated in Paris in the late 60s (Le Bal Oriental, in Paris in December 1969), and this ball was a very extravagant costume ball where Baron Alexis de Rede invited the Tout-Paris, the Café Society at that time, to be dressed as the 1001 Nights characters, and Baronne Marie-Hélène de Rothschild came dressed as a Cambodian dancer. In order to celebrate the revival of these Legendary Costume Balls through the collection Bals de Légendes, we had a ballerina brooch inspired by a Cambodian dancer.

How does Van Cleef & Arpels envision its development in the coming years?

We are not aiming to grow our retail network to a particular size, as we think that we are pretty much at the right size worldwide. South East Asia was probably the last region that we had yet to explore, but we now feel that we have reached a good size and hope that our boutiques will remain as an environment where any client in any boutique around the world can discover and experience all our collections and the spirit of the Maison. As all our pieces are still hand-crafted (in France for the jewelry and in Switzerland for the watches) and it takes more than ten years to train a jewelry or watchmaker, we do not plan to accelerate our retail development too quickly, as we don't wish to have boutiques which are beautiful but with a lack of pieces on display; we prefer to have a more streamlined network of boutiques carrying all the collections for visitors to be able to discover the wide palette of inspirations for the Maison.



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