



By Accident or Design

During the inaugural Royal Selangor Design Week in Kuala Lumpur, three of Asia's biggest names share with ZARA ZHUANG their thoughts on their craft, creativity and composing greatness



JAMY YANG

The founder of Yang Design and Yang House trained in industrial design in Germany. Though his projects run the gamut from Boeing aircraft interiors to Royal Selangor's Serenity pewter tea sets, he does not see his work as being vastly multidisciplinary.

Design is...my way of life. To me, design and living aren't distinct entities. I think I lack sensitivity towards language or music, but when it comes to form and lines, I have great interest.

Quality design...isn't measured by price. I've collaborated with Jet Li's One Foundation to design its disaster relief tent and water bottle for underprivileged communities. These aren't expensive — on the contrary, there are strict controls on cost — but it's still good design.

A misconception I've encountered is...designers are the same as artists. There's some overlap, but I think their purposes differ: Artists stay honest in self-expression, but designers work to fulfill user needs.

The tastes of mainstream Chinese consumers...still lean towards more complex designs. China didn't go through industrial revolutions like the West, so its approach to aesthetics wasn't influenced by movements such as Bauhaus, which emphasised simple designs that could be easily mass produced. We find it hard to see the value of minimalist-inspired items and we think: It's so simple, there must have been little done to it, so it has to be cheap.

My creations have spawned knock-offs...but I look at counterfeiting positively. From another point of view, it means the imitator approves of your perspective. Since I have little power to stop them, I change my mindset: It's still a way to promote a new aesthetic among mass consumers.



FREEMAN LAU

The founder of Hong Kong's KL&K Creative Strategics is the force behind Watson's Water Bottle — its curved shape an accessible piece of award-winning design. Lau's interest in tea also led him to create the 5 Elements Tea Set with Royal Selangor.

Design to me is...my life, though it's kind of cliché. I don't have other hobbies, but starting with design has led me into other things — for example, from designing packaging for tea brands, I went on to understand tea more and I grew to love tea.

When I hear "good design isn't cheap and cheap design isn't good"...I disagree. The Watsons water bottle is cheap — it even comes with the water. But the concept of price is important. Good design depends on your intention and I believe good design has to be widely used.



A misconception about how we work is...it happens quickly and is hassle-free and the approval process is just a yes or no. Sometimes clients think getting a designer to do a design job is like buying a product from a supermarket. Successful design takes commitment from clients — there's time involved, discussion and sacrifice of some convenience.

To become a great designer...you can't love just design; you have to love something else. Design is just a skill to express what you love. Thirty years ago, design was like a craft — I can make a logo or name card for you — but now, everyone can do that. We have to redefine the design value.



NATHAN YONG

The founder of Nathan Yong Design, Folks Furniture and Grafunkt gained international fame when he began collaborating with Ligne Roset eight years ago. He created Royal Selangor's Vapour collection with pewter, walnut and marble, and he considers his Line collection,

comprising credenzas, consoles and cabinets, some of his best work.

My design style involves...

questioning the basic necessity of an object's existence. When I was in [Temasek Polytechnic], I designed my own T-shirts and I put a question mark on the back like the Riddler (from the Batman series), because I find questioning most important. I try to strip everything down to its essence and do away with distractions or decorations. Design is about communication: The easier it is for people to see how it's used, the better the product.

The saying: "Good design isn't cheap and cheap design isn't good"...is quite true, but "cheap" is relative. In general, for a designed item, there's a lot of thought going into it to make it better and that would add to the cost.

A recent design trend in Singapore I took part in...

was the SG50 trend. I designed a chest of drawers with each drawer painted a different shade. It's still a functional chest of drawers, but when you see the colours, you know it's HDB flats. There were many items modelled after playgrounds and kueh-kueh appearing; a lot of designers started creating with that veneer, but I think it was too much — it was just visual.

When I started retailing furniture I designed...

I knew at that time Singaporeans weren't supportive of local design. We've always been a trading country, so we see things coming from abroad as better. But in recent years, we have more designers working with international brands. It proves it doesn't matter where an item is made — if it's good and has value, there will be demand. **✎**