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Wallace Chan, jewellery artist, on success, finding light in dark and his guiding principle

- Hong Kong-based jewellery artist Wallace Chan had a rock-star reception for a lecture at London's Victoria and Albert Museum typical of his recent trips abroad
- Chan touched upon one of his guiding principles, how 'sometimes we fear the darkness simply because we can't see' and why it is too early to judge him a success



Kate Whitehead

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Hong Kong-based jewellery artist Wallace Chan during an appearance at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, where he shared his thoughts on his own success, why we fear darkness and what guides his artistic endeavours. Photo: Wallace Chan

It was after hours on September 7 at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The domed lecture theatre was awash with a kaleidoscope of shimmering greens and blues – the colours favoured by master jewellery maker Wallace Chan Sai-ying for his signature butterflies.

As the diminutive artist with his Confucian beard took to the stage in his signature [Chinese suit](#), he received a rock-star welcome.

The 67-year-old delivered a captivating 20-minute lecture, supported by notes and striking images of his work, despite not being fluent in English.

As he moved from the lectern to join V&A curator Emefa Cole on deep armchairs, the woman beside me gasped: “Look at his beard, he’s the real deal.”



Chan (right) and Emefa Cole, the V&A museum's curator, speaking in a public talk about Chan's career. Photo: Wallace Chan

By the end of the Q&A, Cole was rapturous. “The V&A was set up to celebrate the best in art and design and you are one of these thinkers. I know you have been honoured as a ‘living national treasure’ in China, but I would go beyond and say that you are a global treasure,” she said.

Chan's V&A appearance was part of events accompanying "The Wheel of Time", his solo exhibition at auctioneers Christie's headquarters on King Street from September 4-10 featuring 150 pieces, mostly on loan from collectors.

'Some people thought I was crazy': Wallace Chan on his jewellery art

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Chan, with his distinctively anachronistic appearance, is a well-recognised personality in Hong Kong, where he grew up.

He has had a number of exhibitions in the city, and in 2015 there was great fanfare over the unveiling of a dazzling diamond and jade necklace that Chan was commissioned to make using an extremely rare, US\$35 million, 104-carat diamond bought by Chinese company



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But the level of excitement surrounding his appearance in London, and before that in cities such as Venice, where he self-funded two major solo exhibitions in 2021 and 2022, is an indication of the international appeal of his art as well as his poet-philosopher persona.



Chan at Christie's headquarters in London, where his solo exhibition, "The Wheel of Time", was held from September 4-10.
Photo: Wallace Chan

François Curiel, the French-born chairman of Christie's Europe who has known Chan for more than a decade, is a fan and a great promoter of his work.

Soon after Curiel arrived in Hong Kong in 2010, a Swiss art collector friend introduced him to this “unusual artist”, he said. A couple of years later, Curiel recommended Chan to the organisers of the Biennale des Antiquaires, an art fair in Paris.

This was Chan’s first exhibition outside Asia and the reaction was “absolutely fabulous”, Curiel recalls.



Chan's V&A appearance was part of events accompanying his solo exhibition. Photo: Wallace Chan

“All the big dealers were there – [Cartier](#), [Chanel](#) – but their traffic wasn’t as intense as the line to get into Wallace’s booth,” he says.

Curiel attributes Chan’s success to his unique style inspired by [Zen Buddhism](#) and his ability to embrace innovation while honouring tradition.

The “Wallace Cut” is a technique that established Chan’s status as a master gemstone sculptor in 1987. He adapted dental drills to make his own tools and came up with a way to create multiple reflections of one carved face within a transparent stone.





One of Chan's proudest creations is the "Secret Abyss" (2014).
Photo: Wallace Chan

Since then, he has come up with a new way to refine and brighten the appearance of jade, created a new porcelain that is six times stronger than the ordinary kind and, since 2007, incorporated titanium in his jewellery and sculptures.

One of his proudest creations is the *Secret Abyss* (2014). Through a 6.5mm opening, he drilled and polished an incredibly narrow tunnel inside a piece of quartz and set 1,111 pieces of emerald in it to form an auspicious cloud pattern.

The centrepiece of the London exhibition is *The Legend Of The Colour Black* – a black diamond shoulder brooch sculpture that features one of the largest known cut black diamonds in the world, weighing 312.24 carats.



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"The Legend Of The Colour Black" is a black diamond shoulder brooch. Photo: Wallace Chan

"The true nature of reality might be more expansive than we can readily perceive," he told the audience at the V&A. The Taoist belief that "everything, big or small, is infinite" resonates deeply with him and serves as a guiding principle for his artistic endeavours, he said.

In the early 2000s, he embarked on a spiritual journey that led him to give up all his possessions and live as a monk for six months.

This period of self-discovery changed him deeply – he says his eyes, even his soul, changed – and he emerged from it with a renewed sense of purpose and clarity.



A close-up of 'The Legend Of The Colour Black'. Photo: Wallace Chan

Like all of his creations, *The Legend of the Colour Black* is accompanied with a story.

The shoulder brooch depicts a deconstructed neuron with synapses made from lightweight titanium and the Wallace Chan Porcelain. A matching form hand-carved from crystal hangs directly beneath it, and within the crystal is a pattern designed to resemble the human brain, adorned with further diamonds and sapphires.

When he first laid eyes on the black diamond, he saw nothing but complete darkness, he says. However, as he continued to gaze at it, he was transported into a meditative state and saw that beyond the black lay white.

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"I feel it is also a metaphor for life because sometimes we fear the darkness simply because we can't see, we don't know what's going on. But if you continue, if you are persistent and you encourage yourself to march on, perhaps at the end of that darkness is light," he said.



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Chan has lived that story. He grew up in [extreme poverty in Hong Kong](#) and persevered and created against the odds.

His works have already found a place in the permanent collections of several prestigious museums, including the British Museum and Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts.

So how does he feel now about his success? He says only history will tell.

“If 100 years after my time on Earth my works are still appreciated and are in museums and institutions to inspire others, then I will call it success,” he says.

CONVERSATIONS (1)



Kate Whitehead

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Kate Whitehead is a journalist and author of two Hong Kong crime books, *After Suzie* and *Hong Kong Murders*. She is also a qualified psychotherapist and recently won the MIND Media Award for the second consecutive year.

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