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A French connection in Singapore

By Deepika Shetty

PERANAKAN art for Christian Lacroix costumes.

That is the first exchange that kicks off a 10-year cultural collaboration between Singapore and France.

Christian Lacroix The Costumier, which opened yesterday at the National Museum, is the first project presented under a Singapore-France memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed in Paris less than two months ago.

In return, the National Heritage Board (NHB) is working with world-renowned French museum Musee du Quai Branly to present an exhibition on Peranakan art in Paris in 2011.

Under the MOU, Singapore's NHB and its French counterpart will jointly curate shows to promote bilateral cultural exchanges.

Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui Tuck Yew, Senior Minister of State for Education and Information, Communication and the Arts, who opened the exhibition, said at the event: 'These collaborations will not only allow Singaporeans and visitors here to enjoy world-class arts, events and performances from France, our arts and culture professionals will also get more international exposure and greater opportunities for interaction and learning in France.'

The exhibition of fabulous fashion for the theatre by French designer Lacroix runs till June 7.

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Art Couture

Display of 75 ballet, dance and opera costumes shows designer Christian Lacroix's ingenuity in fabrication

By Deepika Shetty

Ask a Singaporean fashionista, and the name Christian Lacroix conjures up haute couture Paris fashion at its finest. Or images of tai-tais photographed in his expensive gowns for high society magazines. Others may have drooled over his evening gowns in the windows of high-end fashion mall Palais Renaissance in Orchard Road.

But now, Singaporeans from all walks of life have a chance to get up close and personal with the fabulous creations of one of the world's most famous fashion designers.

The National Museum of Singapore last night kicked off a blockbuster exhibition, Christian Lacroix The Costumier.

The 57-year-old French designer is not just a creator of gowns costing thousands of dollars, but he is equally at home designing for theatre.

On show in Singapore, for the first time outside France, are 75 costumes he designed for ballet, theatre and opera productions over 20 years. Accompanying these are 60 sketches showing how he drew and developed a basic idea to costumes worn in performances.

The show, which runs till June 7, gives museum-goers the ultimate walk-in wardrobe experience.

Unlike other displays, glass does not separate the viewer from the exhibits. What you get instead are dramatic costumes together with backdrops of sets created for opera and theatre.

Some costumes do not just sit on a static mannequin - they twirl, they rotate and take you right into the heart of an opera, a ballet or a period drama.

There are even velvet sofas, in red, Lacroix's signature colour, for visitors to rest on and enjoy the visual spectacle.

Singapore designer Frederick Lee, 36, who has designed costumes for stage productions such as Dim Sum Dollies and Cabaret - will be going to see the multi-stage exhibition tomorrow.

He says: 'I've only seen pictures of his costumes and seeing them for real will be fabulous. This will not just appeal to people interested in design, but to everyone attracted to beautiful things.'

He adds: 'We rarely get to see masterpieces like these in Singapore and I feel this will give everyone an insight into Lacroix's genius in fabrication.'

The National Museum aims to attract 50,000 visitors to this show by a designer hailed by The New York Times as a 'couturier unmatched for his theatrical flair'. A couturier is a French term for a person who designs fashion clothes for women.

The exhibition is part of an eight-month celebration of European arts called Encore!. It includes Voilahn!, a French festival that started last Sunday.

National Museum director Lee Chor Lin says: 'This extensive portfolio of Lacroix's stage costumes shows his true talent in stage presentation and creating that luminous illusion that transports us away from the humdrum and problems of every day.'

Productions in which his clothes appeared include the classic opera Carmen and Shakespeare's play Othello.

When asked why the museum picked Lacroix for its first blockbuster of the year, Ms Lee, 46, says: 'This year, we have a great selection of exhibitions lined up covering visual arts, design and history. Lacroix brings together fashion, theatricality and literature. It is a spectacular visual feast rendered in a very modern, yet romantic way.'

The museum would not say how much it cost to mount the show.

However, she added that it took a lot of determination and charm to get this show here.

She says: 'Since our museum is relatively unknown in continental Europe, it took a while to give the assurance that the museum can deliver a great exhibition.'

The original exhibition was curated by France's Centre National du Costume de Scene (National Costume Centre) and the show here has its very own French curator, Ms Delphine Pinasa, who is the Costume Centre's director.

Ms Pinasa admits that given Singapore's weather and high humidity, she was concerned about bringing the costumes here.

But after she made a visit here late last year, she was convinced this was the best place to showcase Lacroix.

Passion for opera shows

She says: 'I had my reservations as it is always difficult to do a touring exhibition with costumes. But when I saw the world-class facilities here, I knew it would work.'

The curator, who has worked closely with Lacroix, calls him 'a humble human being. When he designs for theatre, he totally listens to what the director wants. He always asks how he can be of service. It is not about the money, it is his passion and it shows'.

The National Museum's Ms Lee says: 'It is very inspiring to learn that a powerhouse fashion designer like Lacroix would do these projects purely based on his passion for the theatre and opera, for the opportunity to work with brilliant artists.'

Ms Pinasa has these insights: With Lacroix's sketches, he would even add details such as streets where the fabric could be bought at wholesale prices.

Although Lacroix's couture clothes fetch high prices, designing for theatre was a different story for him, as he came under severe budget constraints, she explains.

He would raid his own wardrobe, pulling out biker jackets and jeans and turning them into something for an opera or a play. He would take wall hangings and transform them into shirts, or an old sari into a gown, she says.

Many of the costumes highlight this with pieces made out of a plastic tablecloth, leftover fabrics, children's toys and even latex, which he used to create the embossed look of heavy embroidery.

Lacroix was born in Arles in the south of France, and studied art history at the Ecole de Louvre. His dream was to become a museum curator.

On the fashion scene, he is best known for romantic reinterpretations of gypsy costumes in hot colours and clashing prints. He created 'le pouf', a puffball skirt that was everywhere in the 1980s.

Famous for his haute couture, his clothes can be bought off the rack here, at high-end boutique Tyan at Palais Renaissance. It is offering his evening gowns from \$2,000, reduced from \$4,000.

Fashion stylist Lionnel Lim interviewed Lacroix in the 1980s during a visit here and was amazed at how down to earth he was.

He recalls: 'He had no airs and wasn't pushy. He is the kind of designer who totally welcomes opinions from his team.'

On the Lacroix exhibition, Lim says: 'He has perfected the art of mixing prints, colours and textures and creating something totally unexpected. He is also meticulous and pays attention to every detail. He is one of the masters of our time.'

deepikas@sph.com.sg

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Costume Party

For the play Chantecler (1986)

The production: Set in a barnyard, this is about a rooster called Chantecler who thinks that a crow makes the sun rise.

The costume: This is for the part of a guinea fowl and is a short-sleeved blouse in black muslin with white polka dots.

The polka dots are Lacroix's way of representing feathers. He completes the look with a red head-dress and pouf at the rear. It was his first commission for a stage production.

For the flamenco performance Arsa y Toma (1996)

The production: Recounts the history of flamenco dance.

The costume: This lagoon-blue dress with black fringes is associated with the kind of flamenco dance used to entertain tourists in the 1950s. Lacroix designed the costumes for the show's star, legendary Spanish flamenco dancer Cristina Hoyos.

For the play Phedre (1995)

The production: About a queen called Phaedra consumed by an uncontrollable passion for her young stepson Hippolytus when she believes her absent husband King Theseus is dead. In a dramatic twist, Theseus returns alive and well.

The costume: At 10kg, Theseus' costume is the heaviest theatrical one Lacroix designed. He used latex rubber and resin core to create embroidered effects on the armour. He won France's Moliere Award for Best Costume Design in 1996 for these costumes.

For the opera Cosi Fan Tutte (2003)

The production: About two female characters and whether they can stay true to their lovers. A cruel tale with a happy ending set in the 18th century.

The costume: Shows Lacroix's style of mixing old and new, and different textures, styles and silhouettes. He uses streetwear such as jersey hoods and pants to add a modern touch.

For the opera Carmen (1989)

The production: Carmen is a gypsy entwined in a relationship with bullfighter Escamillo and soldier Don Jose - whom she ultimately betrays. Set in Spain.

The costume: Worn by Carmen in the very last scene, when she was about to enter a bullring to meet Escamillo. The black velvet dress with gold trim on the shoulder resembles a bullfighter's costume.

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Creative and colourful

The exhibition of fabulous theatrical fashion by designer Christian Lacroix raises the curtain on a 10-year cultural collaboration between Singapore and France.

It is the first project to be presented under a Singapore-France memorandum of understanding signed in Paris less than two months ago.

Under the memorandum, Singapore's National Heritage Board and its French counterpart, Reunion des Musees Nationaux, will jointly curate suitable shows and showcase collections to promote cultural exchanges between the two countries.

The Lacroix exhibition ties in with the launch of Voilah!, a month-long French Festival in Singapore which is part of an eight-month-long European Season of arts called Encore!.

Both Voilah! and Encore! aim to raise the profile of Europe here by showcasing the diversity of the region.

The French Ambassador to Singapore, Mr Pierre Buhler, tells Life!: 'Lacroix is an icon of fashion, of creativity and of colour. Seeing an exhibition like this in Singapore is a great treat for everyone.'

He says the Lacroix show is a fitting follow-up to last year's National Museum blockbuster, Greek Masterpieces, from Paris' Louvre museum.

The three-month show, which ended in March last year, attracted over 80,000 people, exceeding its target of 70,000.

He hopes it will be a similar story for the Lacroix exhibition and says: 'France has a fabulous collection of art, heritage and costumes, some of which can travel. This is a rare opportunity to explore the theatrical side of Lacroix. Through movement, colour and dramatic lighting, the curators have ensured we see this just as he visualised it.'

Mr Buhler calls this a great way to strengthen bilateral cultural ties, but says shows like this are just the start: 'We want to do more. We want to explore partnerships, not just in terms of our classical heritage, but contemporary art, too.'

'One of the areas I am particularly interested in developing are exchanges in performing arts.'

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Rare glimpse of Lacroix's opera, ballet costumes

The exhibition, at National Museum, is shown out of France for the first time, reports
CHEAH UI-HOON

FASHION designers have often designed clothes for the runway that are so theatrical that you wonder if they were designing for real people or for some fantastical stage production. In celebrated French designer Christian Lacroix's case, it's both.

Hailed by The New York Times as 'a couturier unmatched for his theatrical flair', and known for defining the 1980s look with his bright colours and extravagant embellishments, perhaps it comes as no surprise that Lacroix has also been designing for the stage since the 1980s.

The 58-year-old designer's creations for opera and plays can be appreciated in a rare exhibition of 80 costumes as well as 60 illustrations and sketches at the National Museum. This exhibition is shown out of France for the very first time, and it's an exclusive chance to see his work that spans over 20 years in more than 25 stage productions.

It came about thanks to the creation of the very new National Stage Costume Centre in Moulins, France, which was set up two years ago, says Delphine Pinasa, the deputy director of the museum. Even then, it already has some 9,000 costumes in its collection, primarily from national theatre companies Opera de Paris and Comedie Francaise. The exhibition here is just the tip of the iceberg where the costume collection is concerned.

On show are costumes from the very first play that Lacroix designed for, The Chantecler, in 1986, a play where the characters are all animals. That was the year when he was awarded his first award as a haute couture designer. Besides fanciful creations, there are period costumes for operas such as Cossi Fan Tutte, and also modern pieces such as the four evening gowns created for Les Arts Florissants production company. These have practically just been taken off the stage, as the play recently ended its run.

Explaining the difference between Lacroix's stage costumes and fashion, Ms Pinasa, who used to be the costume mistress for Opera de Paris, points out that for the stage, the dress is put together 'for the look'.

Lacroix comes up with the designs, but then the theatre company's workshop puts it together, she says. And instead of sewing a complete dress, for example, drapes and folds can be created with wires or even glue.

And unlike fashion created for the generic model's figure, the costumes are made to fit the actors who will be playing the part. 'And with all the perspiration and movement on stage, some of these costumes have to be touched up often. They also tend to be quite fragile by the time they're retired from the stage,' she explains.

Technically, stage costumes have to be kept in storage for a year before they even get to be exhibited, after their career on stage. The costumes provide a fascinating glimpse of the world of theatre, especially as one can have a close-up look at the details of each costume. The armour for actors in the dramatic tragedy Phedre is shaped out of latex, for instance, while one can see how the rich textures and patterns in the flamenco gowns of the opera

Carmen comes from the mix of various fabrics and different prints. Lacroix received his first Moliere award for Best Costume Design for Phedre in 1995.

But it's not just an exhibition for the theatre enthusiast, of course. For the artist, Lacroix's costume sketches from his own private collection are a delight to behold. As for the fashionista, she'd be able to appreciate Lacroix's great use of colours and contemporary elements added to period costumes even. The draped red gown designed for opera Eliogabalo, right at the beginning of the exhibition, looks eminently wearable, while one can pick up how Lacroix mixed and matched colours in *Così fan tutte* costumes. A jacket over a skirt made of toile netting, a sand coloured coat paired with a dusky blue dress, a jersey hood inserted into a top is how Lacroix has given the 18th century opera a hint of the modern. Not to forget, of course, that these were creations for the theatre.

The most 'extreme' costume in the collection is one Lacroix designed for a play about a carnival, apparently a low-budget production. A costume simply made up of scraps from his own workshop, it's the definition of 'theatrical dressing'; which one should remember, is not always a compliment when paid.

'Christian Lacroix the Costumier' exhibition runs until June 7 at the National Museum, Exhibition Gallery 1, basement. Admission: \$8; free for students with a pass. For related programmes, go to www.nationalmuseum.sg

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