

Iconically Singapore

Designers of locally themed products have gone from being indie darlings to doing good mainstream business as these items remain popular



Natasha Ann Zachariah

Two years ago, when SG50 stirred up patriotic feelings, local creatives put out a glut of products celebrating Singapore's birthday.

Local icons such as the Merlion and traditional Singaporean foods, such as kueh, were used as motifs on notebooks, crockery, jewellery, postcards, tote bags, T-shirts and recreated as cushions.

These items were popular with Singaporeans, who relished the local connection, and tourists, who bought them as mementos.

The trend of slapping local elements onto accessories did not end post-SG50.

Two years on, more Singapore souvenirs came on the market, as the first wave of designers put out new products and newcomers jumped on the bandwagon.

And these souvenirs have gone from being indie darlings to doing good mainstream business.

For example, at multi-label retailer Naise, which started selling such products in 2013, sales of these products accounted for about 30 per cent of the company's \$5 million revenue last year. Customers include tourists, government bodies and corporate clients.

Naise started with just 10 designers doing Singapore-themed products. Today, it has 80 such designers in its stable.

Even large retailers have muscled in on the scene. Online supermarket RedMart, for instance, stocks items such as a Jerry-can-shaped water bottle by indie label Stuckshop, as well as Merlion-shaped ice-cream moulds by Love SG, a Singapore-centric design label.

Ms Penny Cox, vice-president of commercial and marketing at RedMart, says that Stuckshop's products have sold consistently and have done even better during festive periods and holidays such as National Day.

Young designers are joining in too.

Earlier this year, designer Felicia Ang, 29, launched a series of clocks and stools fashioned after tinned food such as Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup and the Ma Ling brand of luncheon meat under her design label The Outliers.

She says that these types of souvenirs are still trendy post-SG50.

"There's still a demand for these products," she says. "So I thought 'let me do it now.'"

WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

The seeds of the Singaporean trend were sown during an exhibition called Singapore Souvenirs during the 2009 Singapore Design Festival.

Eight designers created 38 new objects, including the Singlish Notebook, which contains Singlish words and phrases and their definitions within its pages, and the Kueh Tu Tu erasers, fashioned after the steamed snack. These items are still popular and sold on various platforms.

The exhibition was started and organised by designer Winston Chai of design studio Triggerhappy, who designed the Kueh Tu Tu eraser.

But the organisation that started to commodify and popularise Singapore-themed souvenirs was online shop The Farm Store.

Set up in 2010 by multi-disciplinary, award-winning design studio Farm, the store carried some of the items from that exhibition, as well as products designed in-house and with other designers.

Other early players include Naise, design studio Stuck and lifestyle shop Supermama.

Then SG50 happened. Lots of design projects celebrating Singapore identity, culture and heritage surfaced, and a wave of patriotic accessories started to hit the shops in the Jubilee year.



Designer Felicia Ang launched a collection of clocks, side tables and stools that are modelled after familiar tin can products here. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG



Student and artist-illustrator Chris Chew began designing Singapore-themed products in 2015 during SG50. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

Stoked by the patriotic zeitgeist, consumers also embraced products that reminded that of the quirky and lovable aspects of Singapore.

At first, The Farm Store had started with a more boutique and curated approach, working with only a few designers. In 2015, it began selling wares from a variety of Singapore designers. Since then, sales had doubled year on year, says brand manager Mabel Low.

That year, Supermama, Stuck and Meykrs, a retail brand and product manufacturer, launched a popular series called Souvenirs From Singapore, a collection of about 50 items including Ang Ku Kueh coasters and

Housing Board flat-shaped erasers.

Supermama continues to build the Souvenirs From Singapore brand on its own, while the original collection was rebranded under Red Republic in January - with Meykrs and Stuck continuing their collaboration on expanding the product line.

These Red Republic items are sold through various retailers including Stuck's own online platform, Stuckshop and is dedicated to selling memorabilia of the Lion City, or "delightful story-telling objects that encapsulate the culture and history of Singapore". Meykrs also has an in-house line of items such as kueh cushions.

Mr Jonathan Hee, 30, who runs Meykrs, says the most popular item is the Ang Ku Kueh cushion. More than 9,000 pieces have been sold since 2015.

NOSTALGIA OVERKILL?

But with mainstream success comes nostalgia fatigue.

Mr Chai, 38, says: "It does feel tiring when producers churn out more nostalgia-themed items."

Still, he acknowledges that the products add diversity to a formerly boring and conventional souvenir market.

He says: "Compared with eight years ago when there was only ei-

ther Merlion magnets or chocolates to choose from, the local souvenir market is more vibrant today."

Supermama owner Edwin Low, 37, thinks the "next wave" of Singapore-themed products will consist of timeless design objects - in fact, "People won't see them as souvenirs." "You'll no longer get flashy, gimmicky stuff. Designers will look at doing well-made items with a considered approach."

He is relaunching the second series of Souvenirs From Singapore in November this year, with new products such as a 1.5m-long colouring scroll featuring familiar sights of Singapore.

Other designers hope that the nostalgic mood is here to stay - at least for a while.

Young illustrator Chris Chew, 23, creates postcards, framed prints, bookmarks and plushies depicting Singapore icons such as kueh, playgrounds and even a samurai woman. Currently doing a diploma in design at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, he started his personal label AtofChris during SG50 with framed prints. Now he has expanded the range to 12 types of products.

"I love creating meaningful designs and hope to trigger sweet memories of the old days. Its a key characteristic of my artwork."

It remains to be seen if the appetite for such feel-good goods will persist into the future. But for now, there seems to be a healthy demand for heritage chic.

Take, for example, teacher Loh Wei Qi, 31, who has bought curry puff-shaped cushions and accessories with Singlish slogans. He has kept some for himself and given away others to friends and colleagues. He says: "The designers have a neat, funky way of showing off our heritage."

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Five great Singapore souvenirs



1 ONE SINGAPORE PORCELAIN PLATE

What: Arguably one of the most successful products by Supermama, these blue-and-white Japanese-made porcelain plates feature icons of Singapore from Lee Kuan Yew to the Merlion. They come in two sizes: 15 cm and 24 cm.

Price: \$42 (15cm) and \$82 (24cm)

Where: Supermama, 265 Beach Road

Singaporean elements make this plate a popular one for tourists and Singaporeans.

About 8,000 plates in both sizes have been sold so far. The series is in its fourth iteration and features 100 icons.

The first batch, depicting 65 Singapore icons, was first launched in 2013. Over the years, some icons have been dropped and replaced with others.

The timelessness of the blue-and-white aesthetic as well as the chock-a-block inclusion of



2 KUEH TUTU ERASER

What: This replica kicked off the "make traditional foods into cute souvenirs" trend in Singapore. Launched by collaborating designers Winston Chai and Yong Jieyu in 2009, this eraser looks like

tutu kueh, a steamed rice flour cake.

Because it is small and relatively inexpensive, it is popular as a keepsake or modest gift.

Price: \$2.90 at The Farm Store; and \$3.10 at Naise

Where: Various retailers including The Farm Store, go to www.thefarmstore.sg; and Naise, go to naise.com



3 SINGLISH NOTEBOOK

What: You can write in this journal and pick up some Singlish along the way. Words such as "cannot make it" or "horrible" are printed with their definitions at the bottom of each page - which makes this notebook appealing to foreigners who want to learn the lingua franca or just plain amusing to the regular Singaporean.

It was designed in 2009 by designer Joo Guan for Azaa, a local design collective. It comes in four colours.

The Farm Store's brand manager Mabel Low says about 10,000 notebooks have been sold in the last eight years through the store's portal.

Price: \$32 at The Farm Store; and \$34.30 at Naise

Where: Various retailers including The Farm Store, go to www.thefarmstore.sg; and Naise, go to naise.com

4 ANG KU KUEH CUSHION

What: This cushion shaped like the traditional Chinese snack is a bestseller for product manufacturer Meykrs. A total of 9,135 cushions have been sold since they went on sale two years ago.

Price: \$29.90

Where: Various retailers including Meykrs Store, go to meykrsstore.com; The Farm Store, go to www.thefarmstore.sg and Naise, go to naise.com



5 PLAYGROUND SERIES BY HINIK

What: In 2015, designer Jarrod Lim, creative director of Hinika, a Singapore-based furniture company, was one of the first to use nostalgic playgrounds as motifs in his designs. Of course, now, images of these playgrounds have been used on tote bags, T-shirts and postcards, among others.

He created a rocker modelled after the iconic Dragon-shaped

playground and fashioned a candle holder inspired by The Pelican in Dover Road, which was demolished in 2012. The Elephant playground finds a new form as a wooden piggy bank.

Price: Pelican Candle Holder, \$69; The Elephant Money Box, \$89; The Dragon Rocking Horse, starts at \$449

Where: Various retailers including Hinika, go to hinika.com or e-mail info@hinika.com; The Farm Store, go to www.thefarmstore.sg and Naise, go to naise.com

Five uniquely Singaporean items

1 KOPI BAG MUG

What: This rectangular mug is designed to hold drinks in plastic bags, a common packaging for takeaway beverages in kopitiam. Designed by a four-person team from design studio Stuck, the mug features a green floral motif that typically appears on the traditional coffee cup.

Price: \$24.90

Where: Various retailers including Stuckshop, go to stuckshop.sg and RedMart, go to redmart.com.



2 MEAL DIVINATION STICKS

What: It can be tough trying to make up your mind for lunch in a foodie paradise such as Singapore. Can't decide on what to eat? Ask the Meal Divination Sticks.

Designed by The Outliers, this product is inspired by the divination sticks used in Buddhist temples where devotees ask a sacred oracle for answers.

Instead of little numbers, there are stickers with names of hawker dishes such as bak chor mee and nasi lemak.

Put the sticks in the holder and pick one at random or shake it until one falls out of the holder.



Price: \$26.90

Where: Various retailers including Naise, go to naise.com and The Outliers, www.theoutliers.sg



3 SINGLISH PASSPORT NOTEBOOK

What: Don't mix up your actual passport with this notebook that looks strikingly similar to the Singapore travel document.

One has the words "Best Kaki" (Best Partner), while the other has the "Most Gunggho" (Most Invincible) on the front. The notebook is designed by Singlish Mamas'hop.

Price: \$7 each

Where: Naise, go to naise.com



4 FIFTY-TWO'S DECK OF PLAYING CARDS

What: Social media agency Protocol designed a deck of playing cards, each featuring an illustration of a Singapore icon, such as Housing Board Flats, the Superpress at Gardens by the Bay and the ERP gantry. The fun is in the ironic subtext. For example, the late founding prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew is the ace of spades, while blogger Amos Yee is featured on one of the joker cards.

Price: \$20

Where: Various retailers including fifty-two, go to www.facebook.com/fiftytwosg and Naise, go to naise.com



5 MERLION CHOUCHOU

What: The Merlion is a popular inspiration for tourists, but this is the first time the beloved scaly fish-lion has been made into a plushie.

Mr Donn Koh, who co-founded design studio Stuck, designed the original Merlion Chou Chou in 2015, just in time for SG50. A chouchou refers to a pillow that a child is attached to.

New versions with different faces have since sprung up and are sold at design retail store Red Republic.

Price: \$24.90

Where: Various retailers including Stuckshop, go to stuckshop.sg; and Red Republic, go to redrepublic.sg

PHOTOS: MEYKRS, PROTOCOL, RED REPUBLIC, SINGLISH MAMAS'HOP, SUPERMAMA, THE FARM STORE, THE OUTLIERS, TRIGGERHAPPY