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WATCH WHISPERER

Every timepiece speaks to him, sharing their innermost secrets and history. In mere moments, Eric Ong can tell the authenticity of a watch, what needs fixing and how to go about restoring it to its tiptop form.

Ong remembers the first time he saw the insides of a watch. "I was in my late teens and was curious so I took apart a cheap old watch, but didn't know how to put it back together, so I ended up 'killing' it," he laughs.

But that first look into its complex heart intrigued him and started him on his craft. He found Bonfield in 1985, which remains one of Singapore's few independent watch restorers. "I started as an apprentice and learnt about watchmaking and fixing first," he recalls. Back then, he said, there was no local specialist training. "Everyone started out learning how to make the tools for the trade and moved on to being 'watch technicians'. The complications and art came later."

Ong moved on to train under Swiss watchmasters, making an impression with his dedication to perfection and detail. "My aim is to – as far as possible – bring a watch back to its original state or factory specifications," Ong says. "The parts are so minute and everything must come together precisely. It is engineering, physics and art," he adds.

Each watch is carefully disassembled in a "clean room" to its many component parts. Ong then works on polishing, finding replacements or soldering back broken pieces. Every tiny cog, pivot and screw is then cleaned and polished before the watch is put back together again. One memorable project took him four years as he sought the precise parts needed.

Ong takes on each project as a personal challenge. For him, every watch has a story and is associated with coming of age, personal growth or a success story. He says: "When I finish a project, the satisfaction of giving back a piece of a person's memory is beyond money."