

Compete Only With Yourself



A name that has stood the test of time, Vogue Jewellers has been a symbol of trust, quality and repute in Sri Lanka. Having been in the

industry for over 55 years, Vogue Jewellers continues to innovate and set the standard under the helm of Anura Hemachandra, Managing Director. A business started by his father in 1962, Anura Hemachandra began his journey in the company at a very young age. He continues to drive his father's vision and legacy through their day to day practices. He believes that one should only compete with oneself to ensure that the best is delivered at all times.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | **Photography** Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Since being established in 1962, Vogue has become a renowned name in the industry known for authenticity and quality. Could you tell us about the history and journey of the company?

Vogue Jewellers was started in 1962 at 74, 1st Cross Street, Pettah by my father, Sarath Hemachandra, our Founder and Chairman, and my mother Chandra Hemachandra, the current Chairperson.

Back in the day, Pettah and Fort were the business hubs and Sea Street was the place known for gold. My father always wanted to do something different. As such instead of Sea Street, he selected 1st Cross Street and started the business with one employee. He managed to establish the name 'Vogue' and the business began to grow.

In 1964, my father bought a 40 perch land on Galle Road in Colpetty and initiated the construction phase of a building for business purposes. At the time, Colpetty was purely a residential area and he was instrumental in converting Colpetty into a business area. Many people criticized his idea of opening a jewellery showroom in the heart of Colpetty and many advised him about taking such a big risk. However, he courageously went forward and took on the challenge by believing in himself and opened Vogue Jewellers head office at 528, Galle Road, Colombo 3. This was the turning point for him and from here the real journey began.

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Of course there were ups and downs, but he steadily moved forward with the support of my mother. I joined the Company in 1978 soon after my G C E (A/L) examination. I didn't have any title; at first I had to learn the very basics, day-to-day jobs such as assisting the Company sales staff, training in the workshop and other departments of the business.

As years went by, in 1994 we opened our next branch, the Nugegoda showroom, at a time when Nugegoda was converting into a business hub. In 1996, according to my father's idea, we opened our Kandy branch in D S Senanayake Veediya. Sadly, in May 2001, my father passed away leaving a great void and loss to Vogue. In the latter part of 2001, the Negombo branch was opened and the Kandy showroom was relocated to Kotugodalla Veediya.

In the year 2002, Vogue Colpetty showroom was further expanded by adding another floor. In 2005, the Kurunagala outlet was opened in Parakumba Veediya and in 2007 another floor was added to the Colpetty head office making the total square area to 6,000 sqft. I think Vogue showroom in Colombo is the largest jewellery showroom in town. In 2013, the Kandy showroom was relocated to the Kandy City Centre adding a touch of sophistication to the outlet.

Even though my father passed away, the expansion and recognition of the company is proof that his vision and legacy lives on.

Why was the jewellery store named 'Vogue'?

The name was created by my father. Before he started Vogue Jewellers, he worked at his elder brother's establishment, which at that time was a famous jewellery company in Colpetty and Fort. My father travelled to countries such as Italy, France, Germany, UK and Japan to obtain training and also to do further studies in gem and jewellery. Upon his return to Sri Lanka he wanted to start a business on his own with a completely different name. The definition of vogue is 'in fashion'. Hence, he thought why not name the business Vogue.

The story of how the logo was developed is an interesting one. During an overseas travel he had been passing his time observing the clouds as there were no inflight entertainment systems onboard in that era. While he was looking out at the clouds, he had visualized a beautiful fairy floating and moving through the clouds. This is how the 'Vogue Lady' came into being.

You became actively involved in the business in the 70s. Can you tell us about this long experience?

Back in 1962, when my father started the business in Pettah, he had a very small store and one employee. The business grew steadily and then we opened the head office in 1967. The business continued to grow, but in 1972 my father fell ill and he was diagnosed with encephalitis. Fortunately, Dr Darrell Wyman was able to save his life but my father never regained his physical strength. He was able to properly run the business only for ten years. This was a very difficult period for us. I was only 14 years old and I was in Grade 9. I sat for my Advance Level examination in 1976 and I repeated the exams in 1977 since my family wanted me to become a doctor and my results were not sufficient to enter the medical faculty. During this particular time, I started to visit the showroom and I would walk around the place. I knew that the business was not doing very well. We had only about six employees. At first I did not do anything, I only observed. Later, I gradually started assisting the sales division personnel by carrying the bill books and jewellery boxes to them. I would listen and observe how they dealt with the customers. I also helped in the workshop. I did the gold melting, because it was very important. My father could not do this because of his lack of fitness. I would stand by the furnace and help the goldsmith with the melting of the precious metal.

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I used to sit at my father's table and learn various aspects about the jewellery business. For example, how to test gold. Those days we didn't have gold analyzers like today. If a craftsman or a customer brings in an item, we have to make sure that it is 22 karat gold or any other standard. To ascertain this we had only the traditional rubbing stones. This is known as 'ura-gala' in Sinhala.

I learnt how to test and identify gems as well as value gems. The most difficult

process was to test and examine diamonds. In those days we had only a magnifying glass and a pair of tweezers. Only through experience could we identify and grade the diamonds.

As my father was not able to concentrate completely on the business, employees started to relax. Clients were not properly attended to and the stock levels were not maintained. I obtained a small loan from Bank of Ceylon and ensured that our stock levels were good. We started from that point. We did not have air conditioners at the time; only fans. Therefore, we installed air conditioners to make the clients comfortable. Gradually stocks started improving and sales picked up. Then we started advertising. We started advertising on TV and we sponsored films. There were only Rupavahini and ITN at that time and we sponsored a Sinhala film that was shown every week.

Very slowly, we managed to establish ourselves in the market, especially in the bridal jewellery segment. I put my entire effort and concentration into the business. In fact, I gave up a medical scholarship, which was offered to me by Romania through the Higher Education Ministry at that time. I had to refuse as I was concentrating on Vogue. This was a turning point in my life. I am very happy that I took that decision. This is my experience. We are still batting on and we will continue to do so.

Vogue Jewellers is known for fashion forward designs inspired by rich Sri Lankan culture. Could you tell us about the philosophy of your collections?

From the beginning, we have always been introducing fashion forward designs. However, in the process we never forgot our culture and heritage and we gave the utmost respect to these aspects. In the early 1960s, our late Chairman introduced the wire lasso to the market.

Furthermore, he introduced the illuminated chandelier earring, which was worn by then fashion icon, Yvonne Gulamhussain at the 31st night dance. The bulb, which was hidden inside the earring was illuminated at midnight when the lights went off in the dance hall. This was an instant sensation and soon became the talk of the town.

Vogue Is Always Proud Of Its Sri Lankan Heritage And We Continue To Reflect This In Our Jewellery Through Novel And Innovative Pieces.

Apart from these pieces we created the Gara Yaka (devil mask) the Gurula (eagle) Pendant where the wings move, and the Kadupul flower brooch, which was presented to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth during her visit to Sri Lanka in the late 1970s, which were based on our cultural aspects.

The Tusker collection, which is the first branded 22 karat jewellery collection in the country was introduced in 2015. This was also based on the traditional role of the elephants in our culture, its elaborately ornate dress and majestic body. The individual pieces are quite heavy (more than five sovereigns) with gold chains, which are accompanied by a specially designed gold 'Tusker Coin'. A custom made jewellery box with a LCD screen has been designed for this collection as well.

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Authenticity and integrity is part and parcel of the Vogue Jewellers brand. How have you maintained this?

We never copy designs from anywhere; locally or internationally nor do we copy other people's ideas or strategies. We create our own designs and convert them into classic pieces by studying the new trends and by taking ideas from the latest international fashion trends. The uniqueness of our jewellery is the passion, creativity and the drive for perfection by our designers and craftsmen.

We have been strictly instructed by our late Chairman and also the current Chairperson, my mother, not to sell any product, which is not up to Vogue standards and not to earn a cent unreasonably under any circumstances, no matter the profits. We follow this principle and abide by the same at all time with utmost respect.

Our Products Are Well On Par With The Products Available In The European Countries, Australia Or Japan Which Are Approximately Three Times Higher Than

Our Prices.

Every piece that is shown to the customer is quality-checked by me. I conduct the quality checking personally. Our in-house quality assurance officers do the first check; they will rectify any errors that they have identified. The final product is then given to me for the final approval. Even with the gems, I do the final checking before it goes to the client. There is a saying, "you get what you inspect, not what you expect." I believe in this theory. I make sure that what the customer receives has been thoroughly checked as we sell valuable items. It is a treasure that the customer will value and keep for their children as well as future generations. I have to make sure that the customer gets a product of high standard.

Our collections are not the cheapest as our products are designed by international award winning designers and manufactured by highly skilled craftsmen who do not work for low wages. As the final quality check is personally done by me, my services and time spent on these items are also costly and we use the best quality diamonds (accompanied with the GIA International Certification above 0.30 cts), sapphires (accompanied by GRS International Certification above 3.5 cts and GIC Certification below 3 cts) and one cannot expect these high standards at a cheap price.

Our products are well on par with the products available in the European countries, Australia or Japan, which are approximately three times higher than our prices.

Basically, our belief is not to compromise quality and standards to offer cheap quality products under any circumstances to anybody.

Bridal Jewellery has been your forte; it is what Vogue is known for. Could you tell us about this?

Yes, we are proud to be known as the bridal jeweller in Sri Lanka and it contributes in the recognition of the brand.

Over the last five and a half decades, we have been catering mainly to the bridal market. It is a constant market. As a country with rich traditions, the wedding

ceremony plays an important role. The Sri Lankan custom is to gift a necklace to the bride and exchange rings.

Even though we deal with evening wear, gem set jewellery and many other segments, we never compromise on the bridal market.

Vogue Jewellers showcases Sri Lanka's largest collection of bridal jewellery with the greatest variety. Vogue Jewellers has won the highest trust and confidence, generation after generation for more than five decades for 22kt gold and diamond bridal jewellery. We give the best customer service and lifetime warranty certificate to win every bride's heart stating, 'With You Forever!'

We Can Find The Capital, Raw Material, The Machinery And Tools, However Finding The Right People Has Become A Major Challenge... If This Trend Continues, We May Have To Import Talented Craftsmen And Other Employees...

Every bride is special to Vogue when they come and select their bridal jewellery. We have the most awarded designers in the country who will make each bride feel special with exquisite jewellery on their special day.

Seasonally, Vogue releases the latest tends to the market to suit every bride's budget; Etern3 as well as the Tusker Bridal Jewellery Collection to name a few. The Etern3 Necklace Collection is the first three-in-one necklace collection in 22 kt Gold for brides to wear on their wedding day and thereafter.

Vogue customers are generational. What are your thoughts about this?

Of course, many of our customers are generational. Even in the present day I have clients who come to me and say that my father made the necklace for them and that they want the same design redone for their daughter or granddaughter. We are very grateful to those clients because even during our difficult period they continued to patronize us and did not leave us. They continue to patronize Vogue and they are still with us.

Even when our stocks were low they kept coming to us because of the trust and the relationship that we had built with them. We always respect and remember them. We are grateful and thank them, it is because of them that we are here today. If not for our clientele how could we have survived?

What experience do you strive to create for your customers?

We cater to all segments of the market with no discrimination whatsoever. Apart from this, we experience an increasing inflow of Chinese clients to our showrooms, searching for gems such as blue sapphires, pink sapphires and other such varieties. We are known for the best customer service in town and in fact our sales team is quite talented, skilled and experienced. They are not just sales personnel, but they can be called consultants.

This is the reason why when a client walks into our showrooms they will always leave with a pleasant experience and will always want to come back.

Vogue collections are designed as well as manufactured by master craftsmen. Could you tell us about this?

Most of our craftsmen are from the Southern part of the country. Hailing from generations of craftsmen, they have acquired excellent skills in crafting unique items of jewellery. I proudly say that they are the best in town with master craftsmanship skills, which gives the product the 'life'. In other words, we do not have to talk about our products. The product will speak for itself. That is what I call 'life', which is injected to the product by our master craftsmen.

In terms of craftsmen, their families have been working in the industry. In the past their fathers used to work for us, and they were very good craftsmen. Today, their children are also working at Vogue. However, the question is the future. From the father to the sons they have passed the skill, but their children are quite different. Due to modern technology as well as equipment their thinking is different. They are impatient and they crave for overnight results. However, previously, craftsmen would have their fullest concentration on the job at hand as there were less distractions. Previously, they had enough time and a peace of mind to fully concentrate on what they were doing. Their main priority was the job at hand; money came afterwards. Therefore, it was with those principles that the previous

generation of craftsman worked.

The young generation is very different. They get distracted in various ways and are influenced easily. They are not willing to sit in one place, in a workshop, and learn the trade. We should have a modern and sophisticated institute that would attract young talent. We do not have this type of facility in Sri Lanka. It is the Government's responsibility to set up a good gem and jewellery institute in a nice environment that is conducive for learning. Children these days are not interested in continuing with tradition.

We can find the capital, raw material, the machinery and tools, however finding the right people has become a major challenge. I am not being negative, but this is a fact in every area of employment in the country. And if this trend continues, we might have to import talented craftsmen and other employees from countries such as India and China to sustain the jewellery industry.

Our designers are internationally awarded and recognized. There are many international awards won by them and our designs are elegant, trendy and fashionable.

Having learnt the steps of the industry from the beginning, what are your thoughts on the market and the many new players coming in?

At the time we started the market was not as competitive as it is today. There were only a few jewellery stores, today there are about 2,500 in the country. We too face competition. The most important aspect is, and I will give this advice to everyone; do not worry about what the other person is doing. Be aware of it but don't worry about it. Do not try to overtake others. You must become your own competitor. That is what is important.

There Is Nothing Called Business Life And Personal Life... Always Remember, You Earn To Live; And Not Live To Earn.

My principle has always been that we do not have competitors. We only have friends in the industry. We do our best. What we always think is, how can Vogue

become better than what it was yesterday and on how Vogue can become better tomorrow. This means that we are competing only with ourselves. How can we get better? What can we offer to our client? What are the fine finishes we can get? What new trends can we introduce to the market? This amount of concentration and commitment takes a lot of time. If you keep on worrying about other people, about what others are doing, you are wasting your time and you will not be able to develop new business ideas or be creative within your business.

What are your thoughts on the gem and jewellery industry in Sri Lanka?

When compared to 2011, although there is a gradual increase in revenue, I cannot answer positively with regards to this question where the future is concerned. Sri Lanka doesn't have a proper training centre for our own craftsmen, an institution with high standards where parents are encouraged to send their children. Most of the skilled craftsmen have gone overseas based on personal needs and now there are only a very few diamond setters left in the country.

As far as the gems are concerned, on many occasions, we come across gems which are not cut according to the correct specifications. The stone is not cut to get the proper lustre, which will give the 'life' but they try to preserve the weight of the stone so that they can earn a few rupees in comparison. When the client takes it overseas, the stone will be condemned and labelled as a lifeless stone. This will give a bad reputation to the Sri Lankan gem industry. If we proceed in this manner, this situation will worsen.

If the Government could intervene and then pay further attention towards this industry, by helping us establish a highly sophisticated training institute with foreign expertise to train our craftsmen to international standards, then the future of the industry will be brighter than at present.

What are the future plans for Vogue?

Let the future decide the future.

Message to the readers?

I ask everyone to please have patience. Do not try to be millionaires overnight.

There are four aspects that you have to balance in your life; family life, business life, your health and spiritual life. All of these four areas have to be balanced immaculately. If one of these things go out of balance you will not be in a comfortable situation.

There is nothing called business life and personal life. They are inter-connected with each other. If one's personal life is good, then only will his business life be successful. Yet, if one's personal life is a mess, his business life too will be a mess. Then you will become a laughing stock in society and will not gain respect. Always remember, you earn to live; and not live to earn.





