”To Keep, Value And Appreciate”



Colombo Jewellery Stores (CJS) is an iconic brand in Sri Lanka. Spanning three generations, the ethos of its Founder, Thaha Cassim has been maintained to this date. Timeless jewellery collections and unique themes have inspired many, and CJS continues to progress on its path of quality and creativity. Akram Cassim, CEO, is the third generation at the helm of this family business. Focusing on their Sri Lankan identity yet taking the brand international, CJS has taken a step further in the gem and jewellery industry. Akram Cassim speaks about their journey since 1922 and the many milestones achieved as CJS celebrates 95 years.

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CJS was established in 1922 in Galle, and has become a renowned name for exquisite jewellery. Can you tell us about the beginnings of CJS?
My great grandfather was a gem dealer who worked and lived in the Galle Fort. His son Thaha Cassim, my grandfather, decided to move to Colombo and open a jewellery store. He was 22 years old when he started Colombo Jewellery Stores on February 6, 1922 opening his first store in Queens Street in Colombo near the clock tower, just outside the President's House, which was called the Queens House at the time. He subsequently moved to 57 York Street in Fort in 1935. This was where CJS was to really blossom. He then opened a store in Trincomalee during the war years in the 1940s catering to troops who landed there. He worked very hard, to establish it as a prominent store, staying in Colombo all week while going back to his family in Galle over the weekend. He was helped financially by his friends and family in developing the brand. He had a good mixture of friends both Ceylonese and British at that time from all sectors of society who helped him to grow and who remained loyal to him throughout his life. My grandfather used to travel overseas in steamships at that time, promoting the Ceylon Sapphire to the world, travelling regularly to London and Europe, attending jewellery events and auctions. He was an avid race horse enthusiast who would attend race meetings and socialise at the Ascot races and other parties that would follow, expanding his networks of friends and clients worldwide.

My Grandfather’s Vision When He Started CJS Was To Have A Store With Fabulous Gems, Fashionable Jewellery And Never Compromise On Quality. This Has Been Maintained By Both My Father And I…

CJS has grown over the years. Can you tell us about the progression of the company?
The first phase was from 1922 to just before the war, when my grandfather and his partners were managing the business. Then he ventured out on his own to York Street in 1935 where he took only the name, giving everything else to his partners. With this move the business started to grow. He was a very social individual who enjoyed sports, business, fashion and politics and was well-connected to the British and Sri Lankan society families in his era. He started developing unique designs with high quality gems for his clients. The Store also catered to all the cruise ships that used to regularly dock at the Colombo Port, which was just a short walk down York Street to Colombo Jewellery Store.

In 1948 he bought a very rare 12 ray Star Ruby weighing 25 carats, which had one centre with 12 perfect rays, this gem was displayed at the American Museum of Natural History. He started promoting Ceylon gems in USA and was a popular dealer for all precious gemstones from Ceylon. His enthusiasm with horse racing meant that he would travel to all the major race meets worldwide and socialise and establish a growing network of clients. In the 1950s and 1960s he started designing jewellery for ladies to wear at the very popular horse racing events in Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Galle, where fashion and sport went together.

My father joined him in the business in 1954 and, together, they developed an amazing array of designer wedding jewellery and also promoted Ceylon Gems with jewellery events in France, Italy, England, India and even in Iran. My grandfather with the few big jewellery companies at that time were the first to begin exhibiting in Japan. All of them used to work together and were a very cohesive group. CJS also exhibited during the first visit of Queen Elizabeth II at the Queens House in 1953.

CJS is known for unique designs, style and quality. How has this been

maintained over the years?
My grandfather's vision when he started CJS was to have a store with fabulous gems, fashionable jewellery and never compromise on quality. This has been maintained by both my father and I, which has helped us to keep the brand single focused on high quality all the time.

During my grandfather's era he had French and Italian designers as well as designers from India helping him out and that competitive edge was strongly emphasised all the time. My father was involved with CJS for 54 years till his demise in 1976 and over that long period of time established a design ethos for all of us to follow. My father maintained his trends having an amazing array of wedding jewellery designs over the years. He was more conservative in his style and also had to manage CJS in an era that saw a major transformation in the business environment as the country went through a
lot of change both politically and economically where there were many restrictions, quotas and high taxation in the 1970s. He had to constantly change his plans and guide CJS whilst maintaining high standards, making CJS one of the best and most prominent jewellers of his era. He helped to continue his father's legacy for 54 years as well till his demise in 2008. I was fortunate to inherit a store that carried a marvellous history and wonderful staff who helped and guided me in my initial 10 years. I joined CJS in the year 1986 and over the past 30 years, we have continued to grow on our founder's principle of high fashion and high quality as well as outstanding service.

> **We Try And Create Pieces Of Precious Jewellery That Are Different; Jewellery Which Makes You Say 'Wow'… CJS Is Not A Mass Produced Brand Where You Receive A Lot Of Pieces Of One Item. People Like To Spend And Buy Something That Is Unique.**

Designs and trends have changed and CJS has always kept up with international fashion trends catering to the diverse needs of a global clientele. We always have a collection of one- off pieces modeled by our brand ambassador Jacqueline Fernandez, which have become very iconic and fashionable collector's items of jewellery. We try and create pieces of precious jewellery that are different; jewellery which makes you say 'wow'. We have always strived to maintain high quality standards with our jewellery and gems. CJS is not a mass produced brand where

you receive a lot of pieces of one item. People like to spend and buy something that is unique.

What about gems?
CJS has been among the pioneer promoters of Ceylon Sapphires globally over the past 95 years, having displayed gems at all the major jewellery shows, exhibitions and events over the years. CJS had been exporting gems from its beginnings in the 1920s to the 1970s and gradually in the 1980s we developed mainly as a retailer of fine gems, moving away from being a wholesale exporter. We do have our own sources, including certain families that have been supplying to us for a long time and now that the gem market is global and a wide variety of gems from all parts of the world are retailed in Colombo.

CJS went through challenging times but was able to come out stronger. Can you tell us about this experience?
During the riots of July 1983, our store in York Street was completely destroyed.

The fire gutted the building but we did not lose anything of value because my grandfather had built a strong vault in the 1940’s. When this building was finally demolished, the vault was the only room left standing. I suppose there was foresight in that era too. All the customers who had kept their jewellery in the store when it was destroyed got everything back, and were very happy nothing had been damaged. We lost the furniture, fittings, the photographs and its history. My father who had a very positive outlook on life never looked back and converted a little outlet at the Lanka Oberoi as temporary headquarters till his new office was constructed. CJS opened at 1 Alfred House Gardens, Colombo, in May 1984 and this has been our Flagship Store since then.

> **I Felt That Watches Were An Important Addition For A Jewellery Store. Since CJS Was Primarily For Women, By Introducing Watches We Were Able To Cater To Men As Well. This Was In 1992..**

In 1984 when you opened CJS on Galle Road, you were the first to do so.

What was the thinking behind this move?
Yes, no one wanted to have their store or businesses on Galle Road, everyone wanted to be in Fort. Then my father heard about this property and made the decision to move as he believed that Galle Road would develop in the future. There were many who advised him against the move, but he had some vision and reasoning for moving here. At that time there was a hospital across the road – St Michael's – a petrol station in front, and a small store. The then Minister of Finance, Ronnie de Mel, who was a good friend of my father, opened the new store in May 1984. Colombo Jewellery Stores building was something unique at that time. Gradually Fort became inaccessible, specially during the war and for nearly 30 years no one really went to Fort.

CJS is also known for its international luxury watches and brands, can you tell us about this?
CJS has always been a luxury jeweller. Watches and jewellery are a good combination in most high-end stores all over the world they go together; therefore it was a good mix to bring in. My grandfather used to sell watch brands in the 1950s and 1960s till import restrictions were imposed. He also had a beautiful watch designed for him by a Swiss Watch Company where he had his favourite racehorse hand painted on the dial. CJS and watches have a history, these watches were not something new to the brand.

TAG Heuer was looking for a partner to launch the brand in Sri Lanka. I felt it was the right time and decided to go ahead. I felt that watches were an important addition for a jewellery store. Since CJS was primarily for women, by introducing watches we were able to cater to men as well. This was in 1992, when there were many restrictions but the industry has boomed over the years. It has been a good move and TAG Heuer has caught on as a brand. I remember at the beginning no one knew the brand and could not even pronounce the name properly. CJS introduced the brand with a high PR event and a couple of golf tournaments where we promoted TAG Heuer, and over the past 15 years it has become a leading watch brand in Sri Lanka.

We then introduced the immensely popular and hip luxury watch brand – HUBLOT to Sri Lanka in 2013. The demand for the limited edition pieces of the brand over the past three years has been has been fantastic. In 2014, we introduced Bvlgari, which

is a jewellery watch brand popular all over the world.

You were one of the first to introduce branded watches. Now many people are following you?
When we started Tag Heuer 15 years ago, other brands were already here, but no one really had a proper watch store. There were watch repair stores, and of course there were the old established watch outlets, that had not changed the look and feel of their stores to depict the luxury feel that the branded watches they were selling needed.

We opened a TAG Heuer corner at CJS in Crescat as part of the main jewellery store and then we gradually expanded. We subsequently opened an outlet at Odel and established a fully fledged TAG Heuer service centre. The brand started growing, and at the same time with the fluctuations in taxes over the years some of the players moved out and when taxes were reduced others started to move in.

> **As Long As Policy Stays Firm The Watch Industry Will Also Develop, Because For Tourism We Need To Provide A Good Shopping Experience And Watches Are An Important Aspect Of This.**

Competition and variety of choice are very important in developing a vibrant watch market in Sri Lanka. Branded watches, I feel have come to stay. There is a good market in Sri Lanka for all good watch brands but there is a long way to go because many of the major brands are still not available in Sri Lanka. As long as policy stays firm the watch industry will also develop, because for tourism we need to provide a good shopping experience and watches are an important aspect of this.

CJS continues to introduce beautiful and unique themes. Can you elaborate on the thinking behind this?
It was about 15 years ago that I decided we need to advertise differently as a brand. I wanted to have a vibrant and unique brand campaign for our jewellery, a different look and a different feel each year. I generally have an idea in mind of what I want to do each year and together with the agency, we work on it. Every

year I try to think of a different concept.

I had known Jacqueline Fernandez for some time, and when she became Miss Sri Lanka and went to represent Sri Lanka at a TAG Heuer event in Mumbai, I thought she would be an ideal brand ambassador for CJS. She agreed to become the brand ambassador of CJS in 2010. Since then, Jackie has gone to another level in both the Bollywood and the entertainment industry and over the past 7 years the brand association with CJS has been phenomenal.

CJS to date has done 7 campaigns with Jackie, each one has been unique with an iconic jewellery collection that goes well with each campaign. In 2011 CJS launched our association with Jackie with a new campaign called ‘Quite Simply Stunning’, which also introduced her as the brand ambassador.

The following year we celebrated our 90th anniversary and we did a campaign called ‘The Roaring Twenties’. Since that was the decade CJS was launched, we decided to get the entire look and feel of the Art Deco period through fashion. Then we thought of going back to my grandfather and horse racing. He had many racing trophies and photographs that we used to trace dates and retrieved the old newspapers from the National Archives. This showed us the history of the races and the achievements of the horses he owned along with the fashion and glamour of race society of that era, which helped us to launch the next campaign called “Perpetual Grace”, which linked horses with fashionable jewellery.

> **There Are Jewellers Who Produce High Quality Products And Have The Capability To Compete Internationally, But The Rest Of The Market Has A Long Way To Go. This Will Take Sometime Because The Younger Generation Is Less Interested In Becoming Jewellery Craftsmen As They Feel It Is Not A High-End Profession.**

Our next collection was going back to Galle Fort, which is our hometown. We launched the campaign ‘Hometown’, and shot the wonderful photographs in Galle Fort. The next campaign was called “Unforgettable” – aimed to protect the elephants in the wild and to mitigate the human – elephant conflict. I enjoyed

seeing elephants in the wild in our country and they need to be protected for the future generations to enjoy. In the Wasgamuwa park, I identified a conservation group called the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservatory Society who have been doing some excellent conservation work on mitigating the human-elephant conflict. We shot the entire campaign in Wasgamuwa with the elephants in the background. The campaign helped as we were able to come together with other donors fund the worlds 1st Ele Friendly Bus Service that was launched specifically to transport children to and from school in an elephant corridor and help reduce the human elephant conflict in that area. Children in these areas find it very difficult to travel to school because they always encounter elephants. That was an unforgettable experience. In 2016 we introduced Adam Flamer-Caldera to partner with Jacqueline Fernandez in a campaign called “All about Love”.

The 2017 campaign is called ‘Ninety Five’ – in celebration of 95 Years of timeless glamour. We decided on 95 pieces of jewellery; all one-off pieces representing the different eras since the 1920, we launched this last December.

What is your market and can you tell us about your clientele?
Women of all ages, who love elegance and glamour have always been our market. Over the past 95 years we have catered to a vast and varied array of women, and men buying jewellery for women of all ages. We have 4th generation clients now patronising CJS. Some whose grandparents have dealt with the founder of CJS, bringing in their old jewellery to have, modeled or just to have valued and pass-on to the next generation. Most of these designs are classic and are still very chic and fashionable.

We have over the years also been catering to overseas visitors both coming to the country for business and leisure. We have been serving clients travelling cruise ships that used to dock regularly in Colombo since the 1950’s, where our store in Fort then was just a walk down
the street.

The brand has kept up with trends and fashion of each era and has been sort after by people from all walks of life. From Royalty, the Dukes, the Duchesses, Hollywood stars, Bollywood stars, sportsmen, business tycoons, doctors, lawyers, singers,

painters, authors, photographers and political leaders, have all been stars in our shop to buy and enjoy our sparkling gems and jewellery.

Jewellery should be fun to wear and enjoy. I always believe that jewellery should be made in a way that people can enjoy wearing it. It should not be made just to store in the bank; it is not just about handing it down to the next generation, it is about enjoyment. That is what I put into the pieces that we design; the look and feel has to be very trendy. We are currently mixing materials and introducing elements such as wood, leather and a different mix of metals and gems to make the jewellery look unique and stunning when worn.

CJS Jewellery is created to be worn at the many different celebrations of life; from birth, birthdays, graduations, engagements, to weddings, golden anniversaries or just to add glamour to make an ordinary day sparkle. That has been the key of the brand over the years. We create different and unique types of jewellery for all occasions and celebrations of life. We have always maintained quality. We want to create something you can wear and enjoy forever.

> **Sri Lanka Needs More Technical Colleges To Develop The Crafts Industry And To Develop It Further. The Design Element Even In The Handicraft Sector Has Been Neglected In The Country. They Should Be Given The Chance To Develop And The Opportunity To Offer Their Products To The Overseas Market.**

What are your thoughts on the gem and jewellery industry in Sri Lanka?
The gem and jewellery industry has indeed developed greatly over the last few years and will continue to do so. With tourist arrivals increasing the jewellery industry will develop as well. The economy is fairly liberalized now and that helps the market to grow. We need to regulate the trade and take action on unethical aspects of the trade, where fake merchandise is sold to tourists without any action being taken as these damage the brand perspective of Sri Lankan jewellery.

Is Sri Lanka able to compete internationally in terms of jewellery design and quality?

There are jewellers who produce high quality products and have the capability to compete internationally, but the rest of the market has a long way to go. This will take sometime because the younger generation is less interested in becoming jewellery craftsmen as they feel it is not a high-end profession. That is a concern, yet I feel if we liberalise the trade and allow foreign designers and craftsmen to come and work in Sri Lanka, that will give a push to the sector. If you take Dubai for an example, all the work is being done by foreign workers.

Many Sri Lankans would rather work in the Middle East than work here. This lucrative profession should be developed. Sri Lanka needs more technical colleges to improve the crafts industry and to develop it further. The design element even within the handicraft sector has been quite neglected in Sri Lanka. They should be given the chance to develop and the opportunity to offer their products to the overseas market.

If you look at countries like Thailand or even India the design elements in handicrafts are on another level. We need to create designs that are keeping up with changing trends.

You have been at CJS for 30 years. Can you tell us about your experience?
I joined my father at CJS in 1986. I am an accountant by profession and worked initially at an audit firm for a few years. I then studied jewellery design, jewellery display, gem cutting and finally gemology.

I joined CJS when I was only 23 years old and was by far the youngest to work in the environment of a heritage jewellery store. My thinking and styles were different to the generations before me, but my father gave me a free hand to experiment and do what I enjoyed, guiding me when things went wrong.

Most of the clients at that time who came in to place an order for a wedding would speak to my father or my manager who were much senior to me, they thought I was too young and irresponsible to hand over something so precious and dear to them. It took time for clients to start working with me to handle their jewellery. It was a different era then. I had a lot of time to check on the jewellery workshop, displays,

designing and marketing aspects of the store. My father travelled overseas often and it was during that time the customers had to work with me. They were very happy and gradually we built up an understanding.

My Involvement With Colombo Fashion Week Since 2008, Has Helped Me To Create Something New And Exciting To Have On The Catwalk Each Year.

It takes alot of time to learn the ropes of this trade and understand the various and minute intricacies of different client needs, attitudes and requirements as each one has a different design ethos they like.

Travelling overseas to attend jewellery exhibitions and fairs opened up my mind to broaden my understanding of the jewellery industry and the design and marketing trends in the world. Each client have their different perspective. When they come into the store to place an order for jewellery, some come with their grandmother, mother and the entire family, so we have to take everyone’s views into account. Things have changed a lot over the past 30 years in the trade. Those days we used to do everything to orders. We used to do the designs, make it, and the customer was willing to wait for a couple of months. Now most clients want to see something readymade or have something made without having to wait too long.

Today everyone is able to follow the latest fashion trends on instagram or online and this has revolutionised what the client wants and knows. Everything is available in an instant; this has also helped me to market CJS to a greater audience globally over the years.

My involvement with Colombo Fashion Week since 2008, has helped me to create something new and exciting to have on the catwalk each year. Doing jewellery for the ramp has required a different look and feel to just designing jewellery for a showcase. My experience with launching watches has been rewarding and the annual watch fair I visit at Baselworld with the exiting watch brands TAG Heuer, HUBLOT and Bvlgari have given me the opportunity to mix and learn from some amazing market leaders in the entertainment and sports world.

I have truly enjoyed the past 30 years at CJS, and what it has taught me from mixing and learning from the wide range of people from all walks of life and professions I have encountered over these years.

Future plans?
We are planning to refit our flagship store at 1 Alfred House Gardens to create a new and unique jewellery shopping experience when completed. Colombo Jewellery Stores will add more watch brands in the years ahead and also bring in some exiting new ranges of accessories to complement the jewellery, gems and watches we now offer.

We will continue with our “Unforgettable” campaign to protect elephants in the wild by creating a cohesive environment to save elephants by helping people.

We will also gradually expand into some of the latest shopping malls that will be opening soon. CJS continue to create exciting jewellery collections as we have been doing for the past 95 years.





