

**Opening of  
“The Treasures of Vacheron Constantin –  
A Legacy of Watchmaking Since 1755”  
Exhibition**

**23 June 2011 at National Museum of Singapore**

Talking Points

Salutation

1. Ambassador Jorg Reding and members of the Swiss community.
2. Mr Juan-Carlos Torres and members of the Vacheron Constantin family.
3. Ms Lee Chor Lin, Hairani and other members of the team at NMS.
4. Ladies and Gentlemen.

Why is NMS Co-Curating a Watch Exhibition?

5. A recent letter in the forum page of The Straits Times asked why NMS is co-curating and presenting an exhibition of watches. Since no one from NMS has replied to the legitimate question by the reader, I will attempt to do so.
6. First, I want to assure the reader that the NMS will always be mindful of its core mission, which is to tell the stories of the history of Singapore, in all its aspects. However, in addition to its core mission, the NMS seeks to curate and exhibit shows which touch on different aspects of history, for example, the history of an important national institution, such as the EDB, or the history of fashion or technology or the human civilisation.
7. Let me tell you a story. Many years ago, the great American museum, Guggenheim, curated an exhibition on the history of the motorcycle. I was sceptical. But, when I eventually saw the exhibition at the Guggenheim, in Bilbao, I was blown away by the brilliance of the exhibition. In the same way, I hope that when

people visit this exhibition, they will be convinced that NMS was not wrong to have co-curated and presented this exhibition. I understand that the exhibition will travel from Singapore to China, Spain and other countries.

### The Quest to Tell Time

8. Second, I want to relate this exhibition to a much larger human story. From the beginning of human civilisation, man has sought to measure time. The first clocks consisted of giant sundials or obelisks. The so-called Cleopatra's needle in London, the obelisk in Place Vendome in Paris and the obelisk in Central Park, New York, were all taken from Egypt. Later, man invented the water clock, the weight-driven clock, the mechanical clock, the quartz clock and the atomic clock.
9. By a process of miniaturization, the clock became smaller. As a result, we have pocket watches, wrist watches, watches which are embedded in lockets, pendants and other forms of jewellery.
10. A visitor to this exhibition will be deeply impressed. My own take-away is that, at its best, a watch is a product of a brilliant mind, combined with precision engineering, miniaturization, art, design and superb craftsmanship.

### The Vacheron-Constantin Story

11. Third, any company which is 256 years old deserves respect. A company in the volatile watch industry which is 256 years old deserves great respect. The Vacheron Constantin story began in Geneva, in the year 1755. Geneva was, at that time, an independent city state like Singapore. It was a refuge for protestants who were persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church in countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands. As a result, Geneva enjoyed an influx of religious refugees who brought with them money and brainpower.
12. 1755 was also during the European enlightenment. It is not well known that two of the great thinkers and philosophers of the enlightenment, Rousseau (Jean-Jacques) and Voltaire, were

watchmakers. One of their contemporaries and friends was a watchmaker, Jean-Marc Vacheron. Jean-Marc must have been a very clever man because the Geneva Guild of Watchmakers gave him permission, in 1755, when he was only 24 years old, to open his own workshop. There is a pocket watch made by him, between 1755 and 1760, in this exhibition.

13. A watchmaker may be a genius at watchmaking, but he will not be successful unless he has a partner who is a genius at marketing his products. In the year 1819, the year in which Raffles founded Singapore, Jean-Marc's grandson, Jacques Barthélémi, recruited Francois Constantin to join the company. The company was subsequently renamed Vacheron Constantin. Another person who elevated the company to a higher peak was a brilliant inventor and technologist, Georges Auguste Leschot, who joined the company in 1839. There is a machine, called the pantograph, invented by Leschot, in 1857, in the exhibition. The company was acquired by the Richmont Group in 1996.
14. Let me conclude. We salute Vacheron Constantin because it has survived the French Revolution, two World Wars, the Quartz crisis, to stand proudly today as one of the world's most respected watchmakers. I understand that every component of a VC watch is made in-house, every movement is hand finished, and all engravings are done by hand. We have six master craftsmen from VC who are with us and I warmly welcome them. We also admire VC because it is a champion of the arts and of exploration. We wish VC continued success in the years ahead. I also wish this exhibition great success.
15. Thank you very much.

Prof Tommy Koh  
Chairman  
National Heritage Board