

IT has been 16 years now and designer Eric Choong, 42, thinks his baby is ready for greater things.

He is putting the finishing touches to a branding exercise that will see his holding company, Eric Choong Kuala Lumpur, helm five other names, the existing Eric Choong Couture and Eric Choong Brides, Eric Choong Prêt à Porter and Eric Choong Homme (both of which will be launched soon) and the already up-and-running Eric Choong Flowers.

"It's time to change," says the soft-spoken designer. He is wearing his regular work-day ensemble which comprises a striped blue shirt — piped at the seams — underneath a long-sleeved brown sweater. A pair of black adidas sneakers, thick black-framed specs and blue jeans complete his nerdy boy-next-door look.

"For the past 15 years, my service has been given with a very personal touch. So much so my clients would rather wait for me to return from abroad before they schedule a meeting," he says.

Choong is relaxing on a large earth-toned sofa in one of the two showroom units of Pavilion Residences, a six-star development project in the middle of the Golden Triangle in Bukit Bintang.

He is scheduled to hold a special viewing there of his collection this Thursday for invited guests.

"Things have changed. The industry is constantly changing. People have to trust the brand. It's like Armani, Gucci and Christian Dior."

He now plays the role of a creative director overlooking a team of designers. But one suspects that, like an anxious parent, letting go is easier said than done for him.

"The team helps me with a lot of research work. I still do all the designing. I still see a lot of my customers too. After all Eric Choong Couture and Brides are two very important labels for the company," he adds.

It took him two years to arrive at this decision. During this time he was hardly seen at social events, raising questions if the designer was closing shop.

Instead he travelled, learned tai qi, attended a five-day management course in China and even went for a Buddhist retreat in India. He also found the time to rekindle an old passion of his.

"I have always loved painting. It was through painting that my mother spotted my creative inclinations and signed me up for art classes when I was seven.

"But for almost 25 years I had not picked up a brush. This time I did a lot of traditional Chinese brush paintings using the lotus flower and bamboo trees as recurring motifs."

It was his mother, a well-known hair and makeup artist in her days, who sat him down one

MORE THAN JUST A NAME

He is no longer satisfied with a mere label or a company bearing his name. Eric Choong is now a brand, he tells RACHAEL PHILIP



day and said: "Either you quietly look after your customers or take it (the business) to another level."

"I thought, if I don't do it, the previous 15 years would have been wasted, what I have learnt would have been wasted," he

says.

This month, he would be launching Prêt à Porter while Homme will be making an appearance soon. He tells his regular fans there is no reason to feel short-changed.

Prêt à Porter, as off-the-rack as it sounds, will instead be a collection of very limited pieces, maybe three to six of each design, in different colours, cut and sewn with the same kind of workmanship his customers are

used to. In fact, he calls it "semi-couture".

"This is the way things are heading actually. Some of my customers actually asked for a prêt-à-porter line as they do not have the time for me to make them a gown. They need it quickly."

Homme, on the other hand, creates only bespoke dress shirts and suits for men.

Choong, who studied at the Hong Kong Institute of Fashion Design, was nominated by the Malaysian Tourism Board, as one of Malaysia's Top 10 Designers back in the 90s. He has represented the country at international shows in Singapore, Hong Kong, China and Belgium.

This year he was nominated as a "KL Six" designer by the Malaysian International Fashion Alliance. This distinguished coterie comprises the country's six most promising and already celebrated Malaysian couture designers.

His clients include Sheila Majid, Camelia, Paula Malai Ali, Soong Ai Ling and Gloria Ting. The late Datin Seri Paduka Endon Mahmood was also a fan.

Choong places Karl Lagerfeld and Valentino on his list of talented designers. "I follow their strategy. Work hard and always learn. Be humble."

He advises women to make sure they are comfortable with whatever they are wearing. "Do not let the dresses carry you. You carry the dresses."

An easy tip to follow, he says, is to try and match the colour of your handbag with shoes and belt, if you are using one.

For this week's viewing, he has gathered his classy and elegant party range made from luxurious fabrics such as chiffon, satin silk and silk organza.

"It's a little bit vintage with some modern touches. Very feminine yet simple. The colours are vibrant but nothing garish," he says.

It seems like Choong has created a business empire, ranging from high-end clothing to trousseaux, events and flower arrangement.

For sure he is encouraged by the way Eric Choong Flowers is flourishing. An old friend was brought in to run to store. Choong is not involved in this division of the business.

"It's doing quite well. People are coming in because of the Eric Choong name," he enthuses.

The Pavilion Residences will hold its official launch this Friday, a by-invitation-only, glitzy black-tie evening event. For passers-by, the event will be a feast for the eyes as what is happening inside the show gallery during the launch will be projected 'live' on the building exterior. The Pavilion Residences logo will also be projected, changing colour every 15 minutes to creating street presence and excitement.