

Star 2

on Saturday

Living
From farm
to kitchen >4

Travel
Mystical
Yogyakarta >18

Art-erly great

One man shows us what
it's like to live a life filled
with high art and high
aspirations. >2

A visit to one man's home sheds light on the real meaning of national treasures and why we're getting it all wrong.

By LOUISA LIM
louisal@thestar.com.my

COLLECTOR, custodian, conservationist. The real Henry Bong, founder of Pucuk Rebung Gallery-Museum and local arts connoisseur, emerges the moment you step across the moss-covered gates into his three-storey Ken Yeang-designed home – if he lets you through, that is.

"Aiyoh, can we reschedule the interview? My house looks like Ali Baba's cave right now, and I need at least one month to clean up the clutter," he insisted over the phone earlier.

After half-an-hour of intense persuasion, the 58-year-old finally relented, but not without some misgivings.

"We Baba-Nyonyas are known for our hospitality but it's been more than one year since I welcomed my last visitor. My house is so messy. It's so disrespectful to you!" he moaned.

My curiosity was piqued the moment I hung up. I bound up the porch as soon as those massive gates creak open, only to find myself tumbling into his world.

It's a world that is both bizarre and magnificent, other worldly and filled to the brim with Peranakan furniture, Islamic carvings, Christian icons, Chinese porcelain, Kelantanese songket and big smiling Buddhas.

"I hate this house," says Bong, as I gape at the magnificent sight before me. "It's too modern. Too harsh."

So Bong did what any creative soul would do. He ripped his house apart – first by adding wrought-iron banisters from Penang, then hand-painted Vietnamese tiles, and subsequently Corinthian columns – to give it "a softer look."

The Sultan of Kelantan was so impressed by what he saw that he agreed to launch Bong's house under the Sayang Pusaka (love of heirlooms) programme.

"Malaysians are very proud of their culture but their homes are filled with stuff from Ikea. They really don't have anything at all which reflects their roots," Bong says.

Bong's home, though, is a manifestation of his past and present, from the intricately carved Peranakan door right up to 5,000 pieces of traditional Malaysian textiles piled six-feet high in the living room (he wasn't exaggerating about the mess).

"People usually think I'm eccentric. But I suppose you have to burn with a degree of excitement, to operate on a different plane of existence, to do what I do," he muses.

No place like home

It's difficult to describe what Bong does without stereotyping him. The media has dubbed his collection "one of the largest in Malaysia" – an achievement that he proudly bears like a prizefighter.

The Textile Society of Thailand even e-mailed him a request for a tour of his not-so-humble abode a while ago, a request that he is still deliberating because of the current disorder (incidentally, part of his collection is still on loan to the Sultan of Kelantan for an



Heritage keepers: Henry Bong about to open the doors to his world of Peranakan, Islamic, Christian, Chinese and Kelantanese collectibles.

PUCUK REBUNG ROYAL GALLERY-MUSEUM

Lot 302-A, Level 3
Ampang Mall
Suria KLCC
Kuala Lumpur
Tel: (03) 2382 0769/1109
E-mail: prebung@gmail.com

exhibition at the Palace Museum).

"That chair you're sitting on, for instance, was taken from the royal train when I renovated it. It's beautiful, is it not?" he asks, as we kick back in the patio.

These *objets d'art* may take up every square inch of Bong's home, but they aren't the only things that matter. We are surrounded by his other loves, his pets – whole cages, aviaries and aquariums of dogs, cats, birds and fish. A symphony of sound and smells swirl in the balmy evening air as these animals welcome their first guest in over a year.

"This is Pusak," he says, stroking a white kitten in his arms. "I rescued her a while ago. Some of these animals I rescued, the others I bought. They enrich my life in a different way."

But that's another story for another day. Right now Bong is on a mission to elevate Malaysian art forms, particularly cultural and heritage aspects, to world-class standards.

"That's why I left my US\$14,000-a-month job in the banking industry to start Pucuk Rebung 13 years ago. It's a lifestyle institu-



Bong, art lover, contemplating his collection of paintings.

tion which sells you your own heritage," he explains.

Located in KLCC, this museum-cum-gallery is a tribute to the artistic and cultural legacy left by Malaysians across the centuries. Much of this quaint shop resembles Bong's home – fusty and intimidating on the outside, but a

cavern of exotic treasures for those who can look past the initial flaws. But while his shop stocks myriad antiques and collectibles, it's only a fraction of what is found in Château Bong.

"I find it rather strange that some of us go all the way to London to gawk at old things



Puduk Rebung is a tribute to the artistic and cultural legacy left by Malaysians through the centuries.



Bong's museum cum gallery stocks just a fraction of the collectibles that can be found in his home.

when there's such a rich artistic tradition in Malaysia," he says.

A tinge of childlike happiness illuminates his expression as he speaks of his formative years in Sarawak, collecting his parent's things for the heck of it.

"My family was hardly conservative. In fact, my grandma had two husbands, even though she lived in the late-19th century! The women in my family were very strong and progressive. They were the ones who taught me hard work and resilience," he says.

Bong was also around to witness the establishment of the Malaysian Federation on Sept 16, 1963 – a day when he swapped his British citizenship for a Malaysian one.

"To be honest, August 31 doesn't hold much significance for me," he says. "As a Sarawakian, (I find) it's Malaysia Day that matters, and how we got there. Did you know that Sukarno was strongly opposed to the idea of Sarawak joining Malaysia? Therefore, he started an undeclared war on East Malaysia. During the confrontation, I could hear gunfire right outside my house every day."

Bong eventually made his way to the Peninsula in 1972, after being offered a scholarship in agricultural studies at Universiti Malaya.

"East Malaysians, particularly the Peranakans, were a manifestation of 1Malaysia even before it was sloganised. When I came here, all I saw was racial polarisation. It freaked me out," he says.

His forte had always been in history and arts, not agriculture, but the lack of interest did not hinder Bong's early career, and he began working for Bank Pertanian before moving on to other banks.

"At the tail-end of my banking career with the Bank of America, however, I began indulg-



A sample of Bong's textile collection that has been lovingly framed and put on display.

ing in my love for architecture and interior design by designing branches. That's when I started asking myself, What am I doing here? I can do so much more than this by myself," he says.

It took Bong 13 years to answer his calling, and he now does with fervour full-time what he used to do for fun. Does he have doubts?

"Now I wonder if it's the right calling," he wonders aloud. "I should be a multi-millionaire by now, but I'm not."

The cost of cool

The art business is a tough business, Bong feels overworked and underappreciated.

"In this country, art is limited to paintings and sculptures. We really need to enlarge our appreciation of things. Why can't a piece of antique jewellery or pottery from the 18th century also be art?" he questions.

Don't get Bong wrong; he isn't against the modernist movement. In his opinion, however, modernity alone does not make the man.

"I think we're suffering from a form of colonial hang-up," he says.

"We're Anglophiles who, in our quest to appear modern, tend to detach ourselves

from what's old. But you cannot study Picasso for two years and call yourself an expert and come up with abstract paintings that don't mean anything. You have to understand the fundamentals before you can evolve."

Bong tells me how disturbed he was when, several months ago, a visiting friend asked if Malaysia was aiming to become the next Dubai.

"The new generation is quite directionless. All we're doing now is imitate and build one cubic house after another. It makes you want to puke," he says.

"The foreigners appreciate our heritage more than we do," says Bong. "Londoners and New Yorkers are buying from me. Once sold, these things leave the country. I hope we don't end up like Laos. To see the best of their civilisational art, the Laotians have to visit France."

Dusk has fallen. Overcome with restlessness, I scan my surroundings as Bong takes a long swig from a second can of Coke. His home seems capable of frightening the bejeesus out of new visitors, especially after dark. Under the fluorescent lamps, the ancient relics start to take on a menacing glow and my head is replaying scenes from *Amityville Horror*.

The man, however, shrugs of all talk of poltergeists, claiming that it's just the by-product of an overactive imagination.

"I, myself, have never experienced any bad vibes, even though I live among execution swords, tomb carvings, death masks and photographs of those long deceased. You treat them as art, so why should they torture you?" he says, smirking.

According to Bong, there is a long history of connoisseurship in ancient China, proving

that such superstitions did not exist then.

"The Ching Emperors collected Ming pieces and so forth," he says. "I think modern society has just been exposed to too many horror movies. Everything is haunted to them."

Haunted or not, Bong's house has played host to a number of dinner parties, several of which were attended by luminaries, reporters, dignitaries and the occasional Sultan. Nevertheless, if there was one person he dreams of inviting, it is the late Tunku Abdul Rahman.

"I've kept much of Tunku's things, like his customised greeting cards, his letters and his crystal wine decanters," he says.

Apart from Tunku's memorabilia, Bong also owns pieces by Frank Swettenham, the White Rajahs of Sarawak and Tengku Mohammed Ali, the last Sultan of Singapore – none of which are up for sale.

"How do you put a value on such things? There's no way I would sell them, because I'm not like some people who say they would sell their mothers for a price," he says, adding somewhat slyly that he will not name names.

And where will all of these go when he kicks the bucket?

"They will go to a deserving institution dedicated to my descendants and trustees," Bong declares.

"I will only donate it to a museum if it displays credibility or a sign that it values your contribution. There have been so many instances when the names of donors disappeared over time."

"I love my country but I don't know if they feel the same way about me," he says. "At the end of the day, I'm just a guy selling old things."

Follow Louisa Lim at www.twitter.com/lobites.