

The Arts

The riches of our past

The beauty of our heritage and its continued synthesis in the future meet at Pucuk Rebung, a new arts and antiques centre developed by collector Henry Bong. *Sharifah Hamzah* pays a visit.

IT IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE BEST of dreams – turning one's passion and interest into one's work.

One-time banker Henry Bong recently turned over 30 years' worth of diligence and pleasure in collecting antiques and artifacts into a unique arts and antiques centre: Pucuk Rebung – Reflections of Malaysia.

Walking into the place – converted from a prewar shophouse along Jalan Tun H.S. Lee – one cannot help but feel that it is a gallery with a difference, and an extra edge. But then again, Bong has put in almost his lifetime of experiences into it, starting from childhood.

Bong grew up in Sarawak, a scion of a *Peranakan* family that preferred to

live in a Malay house specially built for them by Malay craftsmen.

And in the community, all the families – Malay, Chinese, Eurasian – got along well, giving it a cosmopolitan touch.

"As a child, I observed the pleasures that my father, a senior civil servant, derived from collecting. He collected old coins, plates from the Astana Kuching, and he even had a *tepak sireh* from a royal household in Brunei which he bought from an auction," Bong recalls.

"We also had a neighbour who was married to an Englishman.

"They had artifacts such as the *meriam* and gong in the house, and we kids were allowed to play with them.

"Thus I was influenced by all this, and as I grew up, they became cherished treasures in my eyes."

These artistic influences were enhanced when – as a bank officer with an agricultural bank – Bong travelled to remote parts of the country: "Then I really fell in love with the beauty of Malaysia and our rich heritage." (The colours he uses to decorate the facade of the shop are from the Malaysian flag.)

"During my leisure hours, I would go to auctions, scout the junk stores for antiques, swap with other collectors, and read as much as I could on the subject."

Last year, he decided the time has come for him to put it all together. In

April this year, Pucuk Rebung opened as a treasure trove of Malaysian antiques and crafts.

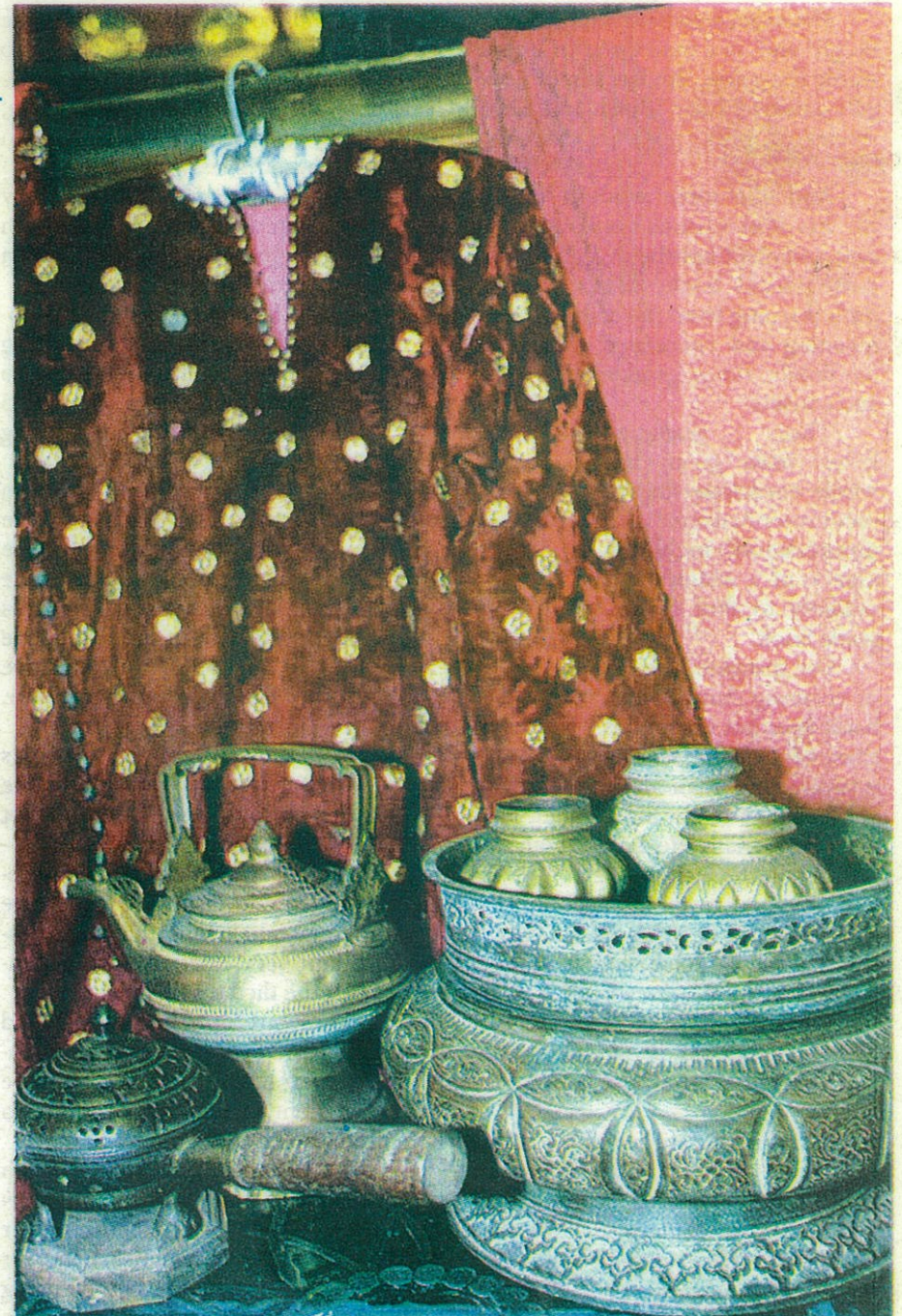
"To me, art is the link between the past, present and future.

"Antiques and artifacts can be creatively blended into the modern setting, and I would like to share what I have with others." Bong used his experience in creative marketing as a banker to gel the corporate identity and organisation of Pucuk Rebung.

Each floor carries its own theme, and the ground floor that first greets the visitors is the *Lantai Teratai* (lotus level). The lotus symbolises the rich, colourful tapestry of *Peranakan*, Chinese and colonial antiques and artifacts that dominate this floor.



Bong with some of the *Peranakan* and colonial antiques on the *Lantai Teratai*.



Rare Malay textiles and silverware can be found at the *Dunia Melayu* and *Warisan Islam* section.

One can marvel at beautiful, intricately embroidered silks, wood carvings from the mansions of old, monied families, ceramics and lacquerware.

The English aesthetics can be gleaned from colonial ceramics, as well as other artifacts that showcase the colonial influence on local craftsmanship.

A few steps up the staircase takes one to the *Dunia Melayu* and *Warisan Islam* section. An outstanding feature here is a comprehensive range of *pending* (belt buckles), dating from the late 18th century till the mid-20th century. There is also a range of *kain tenunan Melayu* – including some rare pieces – silver and gold jewellery, old manuscripts and carvings.

In another section of this floor, Bong has also put together a collection of beads, textiles and carvings from Sabah and Sarawak.

The third floor contains older and rarer antiques, but they are not for sale, being pieces that Bong is too fond to part with. These include a mid-19th century *batil bertutup* (water-holder) that once belonged to Frank Swettenham, the first resident-general of the Federated Malay States.

In the old days, the *batil* held water to be served to guests; floating in the water was a smaller *batil*. This was meant to be used as a drinking cup.

There are also old photographs, including one of the last Rajah of Sarawak, and “independence” trays with the official *Merdeka* crest.

Enthusiasts can also beef up on their background knowledge of each subject and collector’s item. “There is also a good collection of books (for reference),” says Bong.

“I believe strongly that Malaysia has a wonderful, rich heritage, and I see Pucuk Rebung as a way of promoting our culture – as a sort of ‘walk-through’ Malaysia where you can see artifacts of the past as well as the present, as the gallery also features works of our talented, young artists.”

One thing is for sure – a hour or so at Pucuk Rebung is like an educational, enchanting trip into our past and its aesthetic riches, that can be taken right in the heart of town.

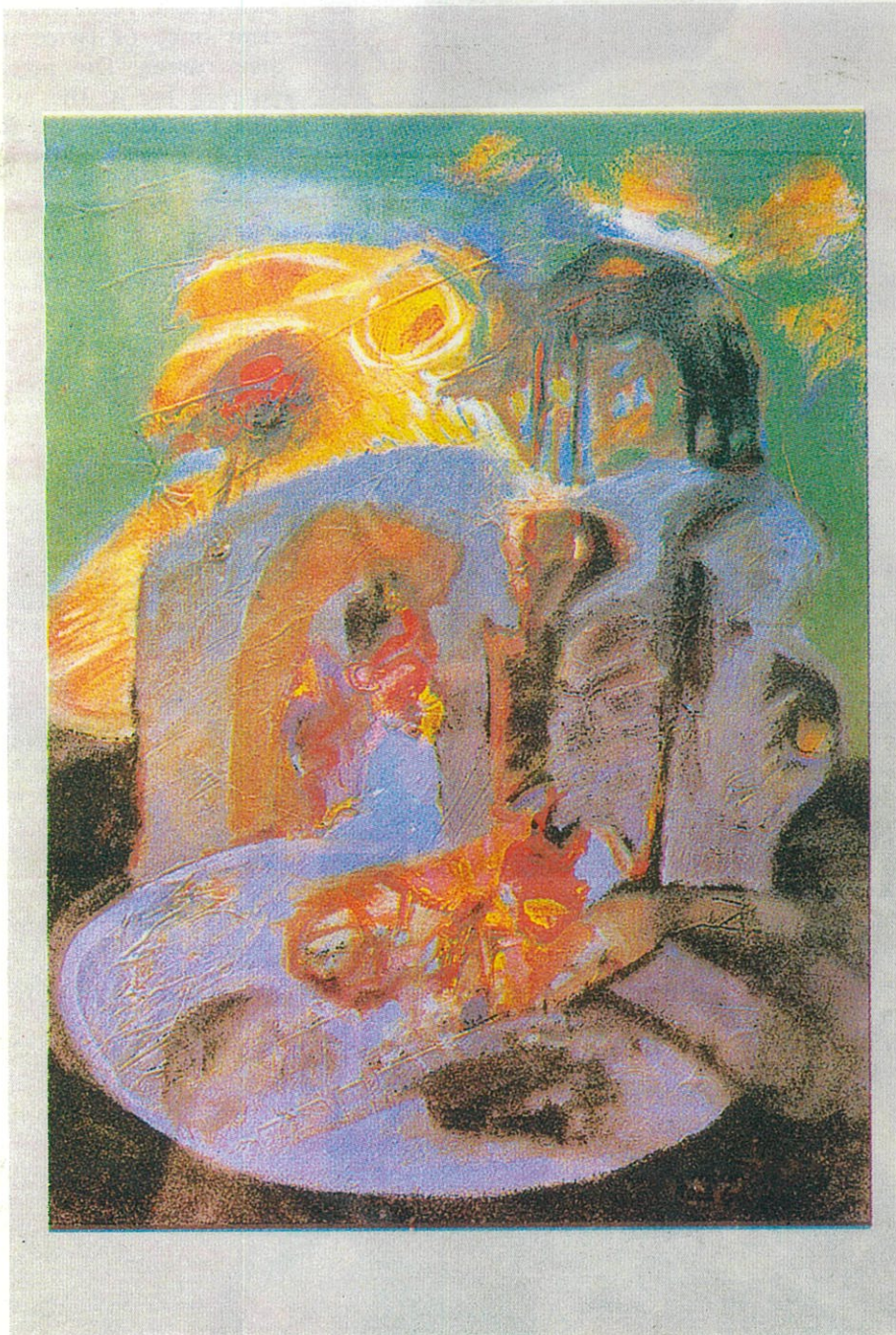
Footnote: Pucuk Rebung is open daily, except Monday, from 11am to 6pm. For more information, call 03-2061769.



A historic photograph of the last Rajah of Sarawak with his hunting group. (The Rajah is seated in the middle of the second row.)



Pucuk Rebung also features paintings by contemporary artists such as the one above from the “Malaysian Women Series” by Magdalene Tai.



“Rock Garden” by contemporary Malaysian artist Melton Kais.



A “batil bertutup” (water-holder) from the collection of Frank Swettenham.