

INSIDE



City all set to welcome Rotarians

# LIFE & TIMES

TIMES EXTRA



Picking out the Golden Chef

## The heart of who we are

**I**F, by a terrible accident, the Malaysian race was wiped out tomorrow, what would an explorer in years to come learn about us?

Sure, the buildings and bridges could impress him or her greatly. But a truly enterprising discoverer would realise that to reach that point of progress, there had to be more to us to start with.

Thankfully, the uncovering of that older past would be made easy by a small but significant museum in the heart of Kuala Lumpur city.

The Pucuk Rebung Museum and Gallery is, according to owner Henry Bong, a collection of "cultural and artistic reflections of Malaysian endeavours."

A popular starting point in Malay history is the rise of Malacca from a quiet fishing village to flourishing entrepot. But a 16th-century Italian map at the museum, which is a later version of Greek cartographer Ptolemy's map of 1 AD, shows a significant existence far earlier.

Not only is the Malay peninsula documented as "Golden Chersonese", which means "Golden Leaf", but on the east coast is a town marked "Prumula", which we know today as Terengganu.

"We were fabled for our gold, which is why we were called the golden leaf. Also, the map shows that maritime trade with this area is very old."

But it was silver that attained a strong presence in the royal Malay court.

In 1910, H. Ling Roth, curator of the Bankfield Museum in Britain wrote:

*Malay silverwork! ... One or two collectors are rich in a few specimens. Two connoisseurs are opulent in the possession of over one hundred and fifty pieces and will part with none. Can we blame them? Such treasures are as rare as fairy visits...*

Because of its aristocratic associations, such work was eagerly sought after by status-conscious colonial officials and historians.

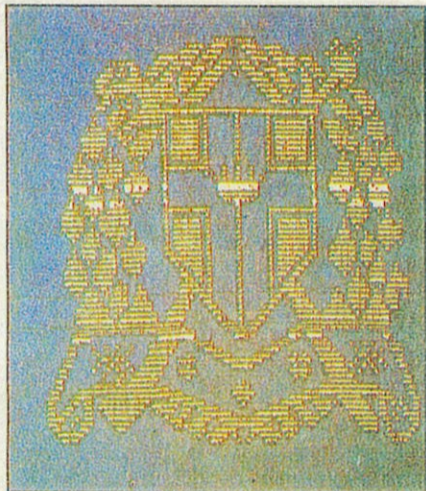
Among the Pucuk Rebung silver collection is a *batil bertutup*, (see pic) or a covered bowl, from the Frank Swettenham collection.

This water-holder would be placed on a handkerchief on the palm and offered to the drinker. Floating inside would be a small silver bowl (*batil*) used to scoop and drink the water.

Although the old Malay world is central to the museum, the items, which number well into the thousands, show the layering of other influences that came here and melded with local practices and ingenuity. The result was a culture uniquely Malaysian.

For example, the *jeremi* design on late 18th-century *patola* cloth or *kain cindai* (see pic) from Gujarat, India is also found on a Malay *kain timar* woven 100 years later.

Just like the intricate designs on fine woven silk, ours is a marriage of cultures that have enhanced and enriched each other over the years. SHARON NELSON discovers this legacy at the Pucuk Rebung Museum and Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.



CREST OF THE WHITE RAJAH ... Detail of a 'kain songket', probably worn by Rajah Brooke's palace guards. The crest design is scattered all over the cloth. Circa 1930s

The items at Pucuk Rebung, some of which date back to the first millennium, are all owned by the gallery.

The aim, says Bong, is to educate. Thus, every item is thoroughly researched in terms of its historical contribution as well as its individual importance.

Bong, an ex-banker, started collecting over 30 years ago, while still in his teens. Two years ago, the 45-year-old gave up a stable job with a considerable salary to set up Pucuk Rebung.

The artifacts extend into contemporary paintings and select craft. The museum has a permanent collection, but most other items are available for sale. Bong and his partner Terence Tay also work with interior designers to provide a Malaysian identity at home as well as in the office.

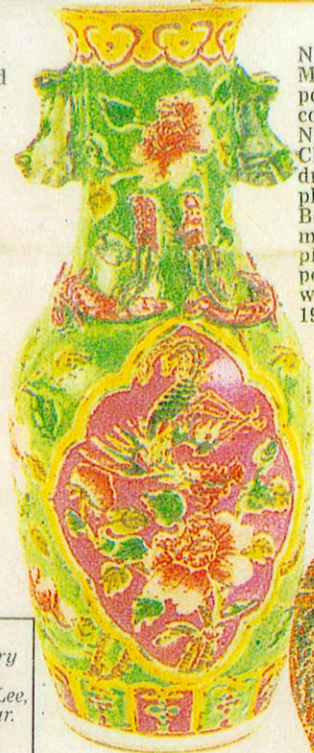
Pucuk Rebung Museum and Gallery is located at: 69 Jalan Tun H.S. Lee, 50000 Kuala Lumpur. Tel: 03-2068769 Tel/Fax: 03-2061769



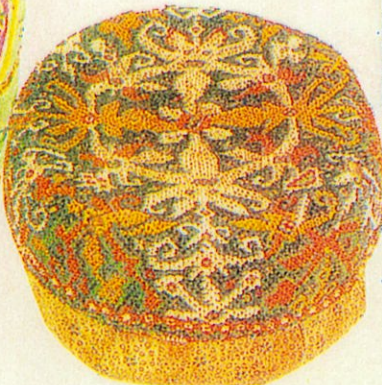
'BATIL BERTUTUP' (covered bowl) ... Made in Kuala Kangsar. Circa 1880s



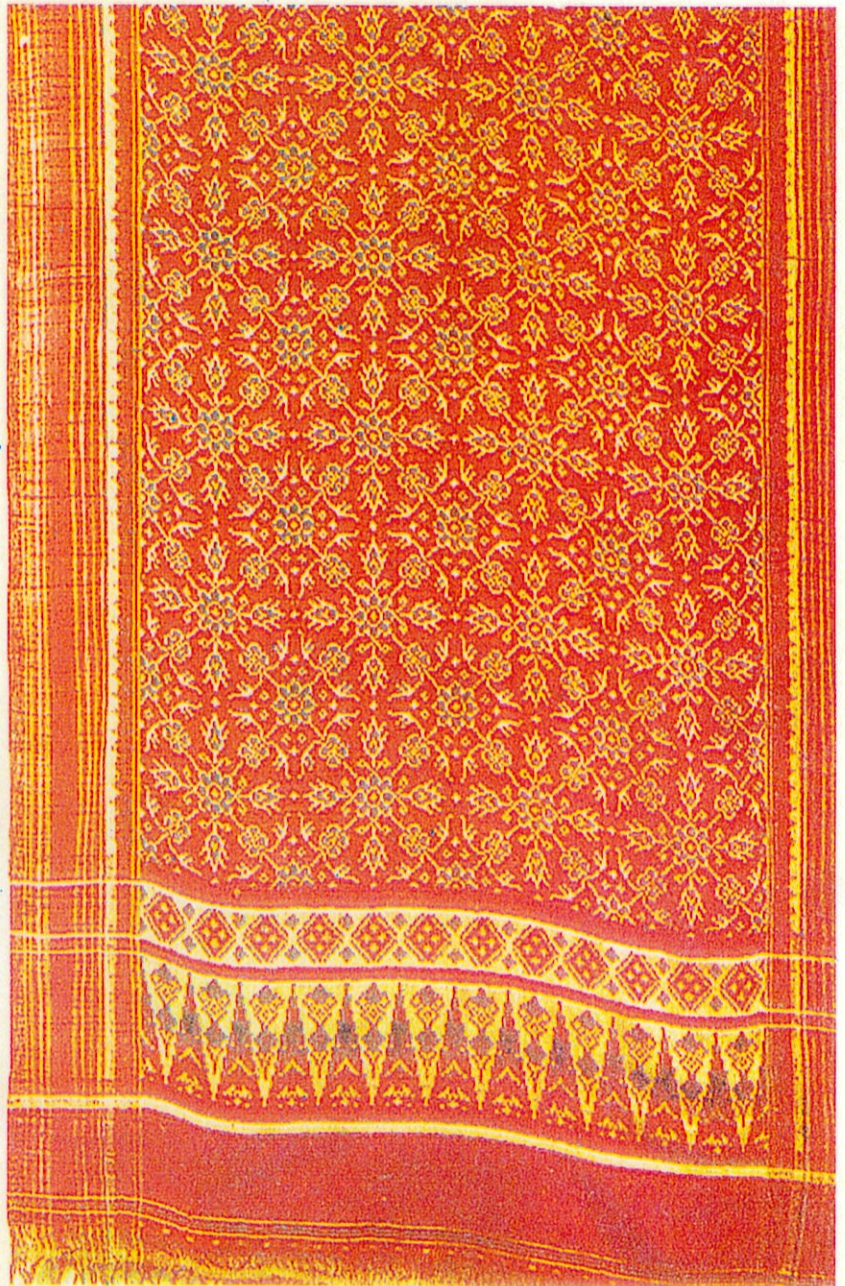
'TOK PISANG' (spirit of the banana tree) ... Made by the indigenous Orang Asli (Mah-Meri group) of Peninsular Malaysia. Contemporary



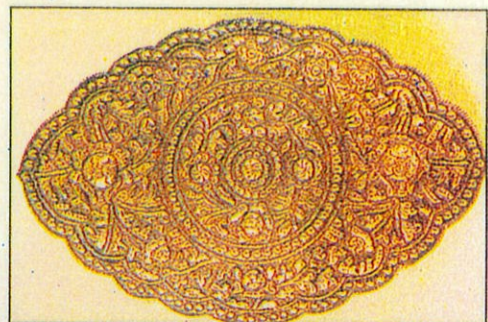
NYONYA VASE ... Made from Chinese porcelain, but commissioned to Nyonya taste. In Chinese iconography, dragons are male and phoenixes female. Because Nyonyas are matriarchal, phoenixes were a popular design as were peonies. Circa 1900.



BEADWORK 'TEPAK SIREH' (betel quid container) ... Crafted by the indigenous Orang Ulu of Sarawak. Circa 1930s



'PATOLA' CLOTH ('kain cindai') ... Trade item from India, late 1700s. This was made using the rare double-ikat technique, where the pattern is produced by tying and dyeing both the warp (longitudinal) and weft (latitudinal) threads. Pictures courtesy of Pucuk Rebung Museum and Gallery



SILVER 'PENDING' ... Worn by Malay royalty but crafted by Chinese silversmiths brought here specially to work the metal. Circa 1900

NYONYA 'PENDING' (belt buckle) ... Made from silver dipped in gold. The Nyonyas (Straits Settlement Chinese) only wore silver for mourning. Circa 1890

