

NEWS

Henry Bong and his favourite Merdeka Day poster at the gallery.



All things Merdeka

TREASURED ITEMS: The Pucuk Rebung Gallery in Kuala Lumpur has arranged a display charting the country's progress from the colonial period to independence and nationhood. It is on display until Malaysia Day, Suzanna Pillay writes

AT the entrance of the Pucuk Rebung Gallery in Lucky Garden, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, a small collection of photographs and objects sitting inside two regal-looking display cabinets piques the curiosity of passers-by.

Containing mementos of the road to Merdeka and thereafter, one of them houses the actual proclamation of Malaysia on 16 Sept, 1963, when the British Crown Colonies of North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore joined Malaya to be known collectively as the Federation of Malaysia.

"We have always been a gallery that highlights Malaysia. Malaysia wouldn't be Malaysia without Merdeka and Malaysia Day," said chief executive officer and founder of Pucuk Rebung, Henry Bong.

"This is why I have put up two

cupboards containing photos and pieces that reflect the richness of where we came from, the history our colonial past and the English colonial influence on the people at large, nationalism, the road to Merdeka and the Proclamation of Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963."

Weaving their own spell and tying the objects of the collection together are some beautifully woven *songket* which reflect these developments in Malaysian history.

"The *songket* is part of our Malaysian heritage that binds and unites us in our shared history, identity, present and our future, as the country keeps on growing."

Pointing to a *songket* with roses and violins embroidered in gold, circa 1950, he said the rose symbolised the English rose while the violin reflected the colonial legacy in our

music' and its use in Malay *keroncong* music.

But, relations with our colonial masters was not always rosy. Resentment and rejection of British arrogance and insensitivity often led to displays of extreme patriotism, as in the assassinations of some British high officials and the rise of nationalism.

"Nationalism has been noted among all communities, but the Malay art forms capture that spirit with the iconic portrayal of the kris, either on its own or as a crossed pair that symbolises *semangat perjuangan*.

"The crossed kris motif had appeared on the peninsula's ancient tin coins, and the simplest pre-Merdeka textiles and *sampin* worn by men and warriors. It was also incorporated into the logo of the



dominant Malay party."

Sabah and Sarawak took different routes prior to joining the Federation of Malaysia.

"However, what many people are unaware of is that prior to gaining independence from the British, Sarawak, North Borneo, Malaya and Singapore shared a one-dollar currency note with the impression of a fishing boat with sails on one side

The original Proclamation of the Formation of Malaysia, dated Sept 16, 1963. Declaring the merger of the British Crown Colonies of North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore with Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia, it carries Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj's signature.



Mementos from **British Colonial Malaya**: A miniature Union Jack, circa 1950s, custom-made for hand waving, a Straits Settlements Civil List 1920 (centre) and a range of publications dating back to colonial times.



Merdeka and thereafter on the road to nationhood: On the left, fuchsia 'songket' with the fishing boat motif, circa 1950, an Ban woman's headgear from Sagu Tinggi, Sarawak, and a corset from Rawai, Sarawak, circa 1930s. On the right, a turquoise 'songket' with silver 'bunga raya' motifs, circa 1960s; and a miniature sterling silver 'wan bukan' from Kelantan. Below it is a Kelantan-made contemporary 'Keris Semenanjung' and the forward to the book, 'Malaysians', published by the Shell Company in commemoration of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, containing paintings depicting the country's ethnic diversity by artist Hoessein Enas.



Rise of nasionalism leading to independence: A red 'songket' or 'sampin' woven with a criss-crossed kris with a European-style crown, circa 1950s. On the left, a deep purple 'songket' (top) with a criss-crossed kris motif under a five-pointed Islamic star, a silver-coated plate and a bowl, circa 1940s, which also carries the criss-crossed kris motif, and a 19th century 'Keris Semenanjung' with five 'toks' or curves, indicating that it belonged to a Malay ruler's son.



Reminders from the Japanese Occupation 1942-1945: A collector's book, featuring the Japanese flag on its cover, that contains copies of the 'Pening Shimbun' newspaper.



Brunei and Sulu Sultanates, Brooke Dynasty of White Rajahs in Sarawak and British Borneo: On the left, a very rare 18th century miniature bronze cannon, a small 20th century Sulu brass gong and a depiction of the first residence of the first Rajah of the Brooke Dynasty, Sir James Brooke, carried by the 'London Illustrated News'. On the right, a rare 18th century bronze dragon gong rests on top of a blue 'songket sampin' with the crest of Sarawak of British Crown Colony era, circa 1950s, purportedly woven for the Police Constabulary as part of their ceremonial attire.



and the image of British Queen Elizabeth II on the reverse side."

Issued by the Colonial British Board of Commissioners of Currency, Malaya and Borneo, it remained legal tender from 1952 to Jan 15, 1969.

"The fishing boat was used as the symbol of the Alliance Party (a coalition comprising

Umno, MCA and MIC) from Oct 30, 1957, to 1973 when it became the Barisan Nasional or National Front," said Bong, while gesturing to a fuchsia songket, circa 1957, that bears this motif.

A turquoise songket, circa 1960s,

with bunga raya motifs is also on display.

Bong said the national flower was chosen by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj in 1960, three years before the formation of Malaysia.

"The hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) is not native to Malaysia. It is believed to have been brought from China by Chinese traders in the 12th century. Tunku's enlightened mind must have been paying tribute to the old established trade relationship with China and potential future links."

NOTE: The Merdeka display will be on until Sept 16 at the Pucuk Rebung Gallery, 18, Lorong Ara Kiri 2, Lucky Garden, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur 59100. Tel: 03-2094 9969

To find out more about the Merdeka collection, watch a video on the collection at www.rnst.com.my.

What do you think?
Send your views to rsunt@rst.com.my



Henry Bong's favourite piece in the collection is this brass Malaysia Commemorative Tray in the Peranakan-etched style, which bears a crest of Malaysia, without Singapore. Created in the late 1960s, it was commissioned by a wealthy Peranakan family to celebrate the birth of the Federation of Malaysia.



Special pre-Merdeka moment, Nov 1, 1956: Original photo of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj giving a salute from a car at Independence Memorial in Malacca while being flanked by Perak menteri besar Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang Abdul Wahab Toh Muda Abdul Aziz (right) and Selangor menteri besar Tun Dr Abdul Aziz Abdul Majid, after the trip to London to secure independence for Malaya.