

WHEN THE Raja Perempuan of Kelantan held a week-long cultural festival in New York in May this year, she invited Henry Bong to organise a parallel expo of a unique collection of Malaysian-Kelantanese textiles on the premises of the United Nations. Bong, who has the rare gift of combining art with interior designing, and is a frequent visitor to the Big Apple where he has a small following of art lovers, gladly obliged.

The 54-year-old art dealer, art historian, businessman and passionate lover of Malaysia's cultural heritage runs an art gallery nesting on the third level of the Suria KLCC in Kuala Lumpur. Probably unknown to many Malaysians, Bong's gallery — called *Pucuk Rebung* — has become a 'must see' for art buffs from many parts of the world. Bong gets visits not only from buyers and art lovers but also from foreign journalists who come — sometimes incognito — to his gallery to study the artifacts and feature these in a number of international art magazines.

Faces of American, European, Japanese and other Asian art collectors are not a rare sight at *Pucuk Rebung*, which many visitors describe as a 'treasure house' of Malaysia's cultural heritage, though Bong prefers to call it 'my museum'.

'*Pucuk Rebung* has become a cultural destination for many tourists coming to Malaysia. We are a museum, if you like, albeit without the bureaucratic red tape and other trappings that characterise a conventional museum,' he says in an interview with *Malaysian Business*. 'We use art to depict Malaysia's history. Our rare artifacts include letters from the three White Rajahs of Malaysia. We even have ceramics from the Bujang Valley dating back to the Sri Vijayan period of 14th Century AD,' he adds.

Bong, who worked with a banking institution for several years and whose background as a banker has served him well in dealing with the commercial aspects of his art collection, has also delivered lectures on the art, culture and history of Malaysia. 'In fact, I shall give a lecture on Borneo's history entitled "Borneo, Bronzes and Brassware" in Brunei in December,' he says.

Bong likes to describe the *Pucuk Rebung* Gallery Museum as a 'venue of cultural reaffirmation', a far cry from the picture of a museum that displays artifacts in glass showcases that are old, creaking and rusting.

Though some of the exhibits in *Pucuk Rebung* are of unique beauty and rarity, Bong's achievement lies in the imaginative presentation of these objects, which, as it were, seem to be welcoming every art lover walking into the gallery and imploring him to stay on until the entire gallery has been meticulously viewed. The collections are presented in a chronological order, starting from the early Hindu Sri Vijayan Buddhist links through the proto-Islamic phase and the Borneo elements to the onset of Islam



Malaysian Art at its Best

Henry Bong's art gallery called Pucuk Rebung is a treasure trove of Malaysian culture, garnering many a following, including foreigners, in the process.

■ By Manik Mehta

and the ensuing conversion.

There are old historic pictures, Buddha statues from the Ayuthia and Rattanakosin era, heavy silver belts and buckles, and countless other objects meticulously catalogued and lined.

While many contemporary art galleries have become commercial vehicles for the art trade, the novelty about *Pucuk Rebung* is that it has designated, at least, 20% of the exhibits as permanent collections, which includes many silver items from the 19th Century Swettenham collection, Sultan Abu Bakar's photographs, pictures of Datuk Onn Jaafar; the father of Malayan nationalism, a rare letter from Tun Abdul Razak recommending Tunku Abdul Rahman to the Bar, a letter from the last White Rajah Charles Brook on the Than question dated March 1, 1933, etc.

'I do get many foreign tourists, including

Americans, at my gallery, asking me to ship some of the objects to them in their native countries,' claims Bong, who has a 'crush' on New York's Metropolitan Museum where he spends hours whenever he visits the Big Apple. His dream is to hold exhibitions of these artifacts in the United States and other countries to depict Malaysia's art, culture and history.

This 'walking-talking presenter of Malaysia's art history', as one American visitor recently called Bong, has organised a number of seminars and exhibitions. Besides the exhibition of Malaysian and Kelantan textiles at the United Nations in New York in May this year, Bong curated the *19th Century Exhibition and Market of Art, Antiquities and Textile Art* at the Castello di Sartirana in Pavia in Italy in 1999, *Art and Nationalism: Past and Present* at the National Art Gallery in

September 1999; and a *Glimpse of the Glory of the Brunei and Kelantan Sultanates* at Istana Batu and Istana Johar in Kota Baru in Kelantan in conjunction with the visit of the Sultan of Brunei to Kelantan in March-April 1999.

Kelantan's Raja Perempuan, impressed by Bong's talent and passion, has been a patron of his gallery. Indeed, Bong was asked to handle the entire interior designing of the old ballroom of the Kelantan palace. 'I studied the architecture of the ballroom. I blended Malayan influences with colonial patterns while conceptualising the interior designing,' he says.

'Henry Bong has this unique talent to combine business and art. While some have mastered the art of business, he has mastered the business of art,' say many Americans who have visited the *Pucuk Rebung* gallery. **mb**



Bong: Dubbed the 'walking-talking presenter of Malaysia's art history'