

# National pastime

● Picture by HARIS HASSAN

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## Treasures of a nation's past

By J. ANU

Pictures by  
HARIS HASSAN

**T**ake Central Market, for example. Literally hundreds of masks – almost all Balinese – hang from rails like grotesque bunches of mutant rambutans.

Reclining nudes from the Philippines; exquisite dancers of the *Menora* executed in prime Chieng-Mai wood, snuff bottles from China; more wooden cats, dogs, rabbits, monkeys, *garudas* and in more colours than the mind can ever comprehend; more Buddha heads in more varied expressions than is reverent ... even ancient Burmese and Cambodian artifacts (however dubious their origins) – they are all there.

All, except for the real Malaysia, that is.

And as one of the primary tourist destinations in the city – a venue that should house Malaysiana proudly – aside from the odd example of *batik* and *songket*, a *kompang* here, some pewter there, it is almost as if Malaysia lacks a history that is truly worth exhibiting here.

All of which is compounded by the fact that most inquiries into the origins of each item is at best sketchy and at worst simply



COLLECTABLE MALAYSIANA ... the main shop area (top) is a veritable Aladdin's cave. A wide range of fabrics testify to the rich weaving traditions within the region.

shrugged of with gross indifference.

Which is precisely why the opening of Henry Bong's Pucuk Rebung Enterprise has been a much talked and written about event in the city.

An Aladdin's cave of some of the most beautiful artifacts, fine

antiques, serious craft and contemporary aesthetics, Bong's gallery of select objects d'art attempts to give our rich and varied Malaysian heritage the credibility and relevance it has always possessed but seldom received.

Very simply, there are three factors that make Pucuk Rebung

so delightfully special.

First and foremost is the range of fare that the gallery boasts, from the *gerbang depan*, the ornate gateway of a prominent Kelantanese *orang besar's* house, and a range of *pendings* (ancient Malay belt buckles) worn by sultans and *panglimas* to tissue-fine

pieces of *Patolas* – fine Indian fabrics – its rich hues augmented by the passage of time.

There are pieces from the old Straits era, monogrammed silver that came from Frank Swettenham's own service, Sienna-tinged photographs of three Malay youth enlisted in the *Kampeitai* circa the Japanese occupation and of a group of robed Muslim religious men, the one in the mid-centre foreground holding the leash to a smiling Dalmation.

A letter written by one of the latter Brookes of Sarawak dealing with "native" problems in the state is flanked by Peranakan gilded panels and in the corner is a cupboard containing fine, fine pieces of Peranakan *baju* – some of the exquisitely embroidered pieces belonging to the owner's mother.

"I want to deal with Malaysia as an entity which, until recently, has been represented by a mere one or two icons like the Sultan Abdul Samad building," Bong explains.

After nearly 30 years as a private collector, he realised that Malaysia, unlike neighbouring Thailand or Indonesia, does not possess a history which has a constant run of significant events and traditions.

"The beauty of our cultural heritage is that it is a constant synthesis of the various 'idiosyncrasies' even, that makes us so

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# An exhibition to make Malaysians proud

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absolutely charming - the Malay world, the rise of Islam, the early Indian presence, the strong Chinese involvement, the rule of three major and diverse European Imperialists, the Japanese Occupation, the links with ancient neighbours - Siam, Java, Aceh, Palembang ... the list is endless and evidence of the mix undeniable," he exclaims.

Since the whole concept of a *Bangsa Malaysia* is something that was already established centuries ago, Bong is curious as to why Malaysians today are so unaware of the cross-cultural influences in the past - "The harmonious empathy of which is obvious in the shared motifs" - from the swastika motif on some traditional carvings or the Yin-Yang symbol on traditional eye-shaped *pendings* to something as elementary as the *tapak sirih* or the Malay influenced *Baba-Nyonya* dress.

"We shared and accepted each other's symbols or beliefs or at least incorporated them into our own beliefs and rituals."

Then there are the objects which each ethnic group may have brought with them. They may be made in China or India or Indonesia, but they remain undeniably Malaysian in that they became part and parcel of local life.

"The Chinese, of course, brought their own artisans from China, but the Indians, especially on a more contemporary level, have few artifacts which do not originate from India - many of them being here to make their fortunes but always having the intention of returning to India."

Thus Bong feels that even sarees from India are an important component of his concept of Malaysiana.

Bong admits that it is a difficult job compounded by the very complexities of different beliefs but it is that more exciting because it proves that we are all the more harmonious in our multi-nationality.

"Very simply, I would like Pucuk Rebung to help establish Malaysia as a serious cultural destination not only for tourists but especially for Malaysians - to create an awareness of our histories and place it side by side with the contemporariness of our present brand of aesthetics."

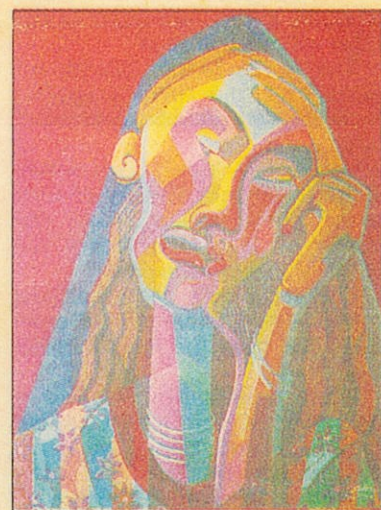
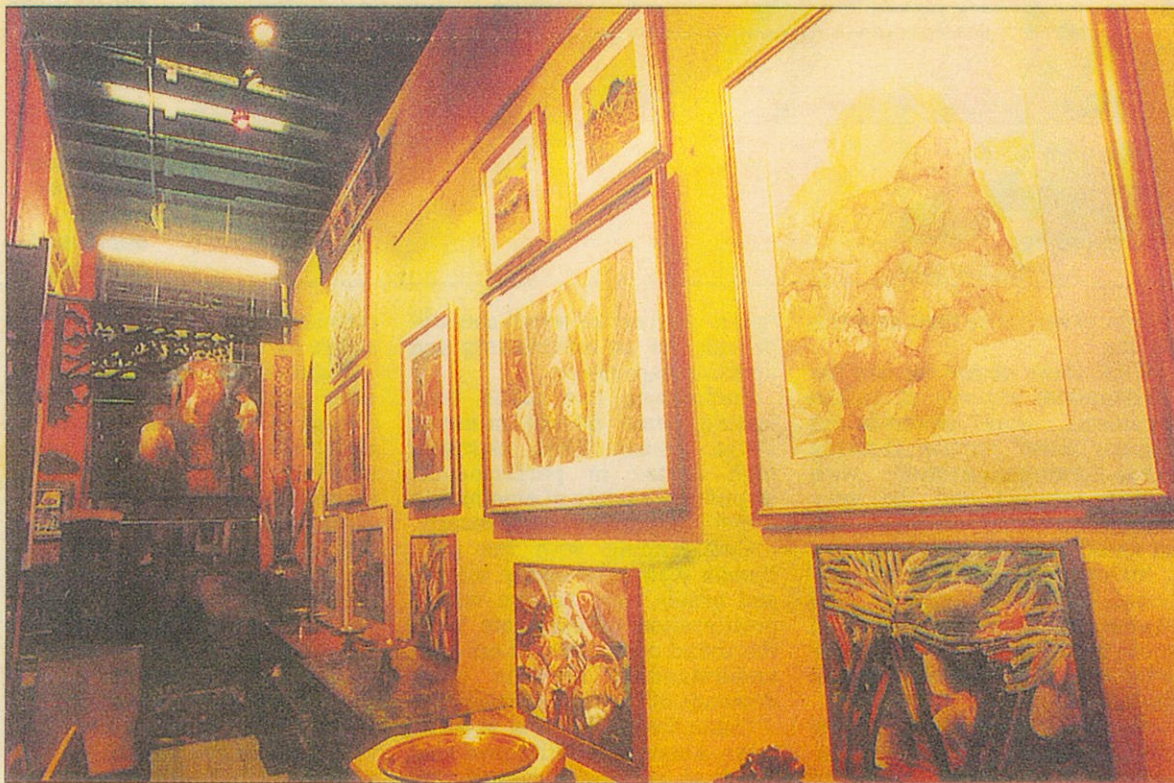
And Bong is obsessed with achieving what he terms as a truly Malaysian Style.

"I went to a hotel recently where I saw huge lacquer panels from Vietnam - depicting padi fields, no doubt, and Vietnamese conical hats that tried to pass off as Malaysian, to masquerade as Malaysiana," Bong frowns, shaking his head.

"And I wait for a time when major international events can be held at surroundings which are Malaysia rather than the OK Corall."

Rather than looking at Bali or Myanmar or Thailand as a cheaper and alternative source of decor, Bong hopes that what could even be described as 'a lack of National Pride' be replaced by his ambitions for the Malaysian Style.

"It is actually quite grotesque, our current obscene shows of wealth born of attaining success



**EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN ... (clockwise, from above) contemporary art sits comfortably in Pucuk Rebung; the stairway to the second floor is marked by various collectibles; examples of fine Malay antiques - pendants in the foreground and silver in the background; an example of Pucuk Rebung's contemporary art, 'Pondering' by Muthan Kais.**

too quickly - we have lost our souls and the genteel pastimes of so-called civilisations."

Bong believes that the way to enlightenment - of realising the potential in our own cultures - is to make Malaysiana chic again, and let us see things for their very beauty. A piece of *songket* must be appreciated for its pure beauty and only then for its place in the history of Malay craft.

And if Pucuk Rebung is anything to go by, Bong seems poised to realise his ambitions.

Originating from Sarawak, Bong's interest in collecting beautiful things began at the ten-

der age of 10 as he explored his Peranakan heritage through the eyes of his father who Bong describes as a collector of sorts.

A banker for most of his working life, Bong decided to open Pucuk Rebung last year and went into business with like-minded lovers of beautiful things, Terrence Tay and Esther Gerah.

The gallery-cum-museum has been opened for a few months now. And since then, what he has done, to coin a cliché, is to present us with Malaysia in a nutshell.

Bong describes the general lay-out of the three storey shop-

house in Jalan Tun H.S. Lee: "The ground floor gives you a general feel of the range of material available here - from contemporary paintings to fine China and Peranakan jewellery as well as period furniture each of which has its own personal history."

And on its red, blue and yellow walls (the patriot's interpretation of the colours of the Malaysian flag) is a showing of contemporary Malaysian art as well as some foreign treasures - a Norma Abbas here, a Matisse there ... seriously.

Upstairs on the first floor, a whole room is devoted to the

works of art from the Malay and Islamic worlds as well as artifacts from indigenous cultures of this region. The rooms also boast an impressive range of fabrics and silver.

The second floor will soon be Bong's version of a walk through Malaysian history chronicling our communities - their practices, the Colonial era, the Japanese occupation, true Malaysian heroes like P. Ramlee and the Tunku and little fragments of Bong's own rich Peranakan past.

And finally there is Henry Bong himself.

Little of what Pucuk Rebung aims to achieve and has become would have happened without his commitment to and intense quest for beautiful things and a Malaysian style. The result ... an Aladdin's cave of Malaysiana.

■ Cover picture shows Henry Bong (in black) and Terrence Tay in front of a Kelantanese *gerbang depan*.

Pucuk Rebung is at 69 Jalan Tun H.S. Lee, Kuala Lumpur; enquiries call 03-206-1769.