

Heritage of a rich diversity

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When I met Henry Bong three years ago, he had just set up Pucuk Rebung Gallery and Museum and was talking eagerly about how he planned to elevate Malaysian traditional objects of art to world class status.

Back then, the gallery, which specialised in Malaysian and Malay artforms, was housed in a two-storey shoplot in Jalan Tun H.S. Lee in Kuala Lumpur's bustling old Chinatown. A former banker, Bong had amassed a tremendous collection of artifacts that spanned several centuries of Malaysian and South-East Asian cultures and lifestyles, and was overflowing with ideas about how he would like to use them not only for commercial but for educational purposes as well.

The collection of fine traditional textiles alone was worth a king's ransom, and there were antique jewellery such as silver *pendeng* (belt buckles worn by Malay aristocrats of old), and intricately-crafted gold and silver necklaces. A hoard of other priceless lifestyle accessories from the past complemented the lot. In short, he had a collection that would do a museum proud.

Most of the goods undoubtedly came with a hefty price tag, but Bong, managing director and founder of the enterprise, didn't seem to be really concerned with mass sales. He said he wanted each item to be more than just a piece of antique to the person who finally bought it. In other words, he wanted buyers to appreciate the historical and cultural value that came with each piece.

"Our mission is to celebrate the rich cultural diversity and aesthetic richness of all Malaysians past and present by preserving, articulating, appreciating and further developing the heritage and lifestyles of our people," Bong had explained.

"I don't see why Malaysians have to go out and buy cultural objects and antiques from other countries when we have our own heritage right under our nose. We therefore want to promote our own traditional and artistic arts and crafts. We want to make it stylish for people to indulge in all things Malaysian."

The man's enthusiasm was so overwhelming, and backed by the fact that he had personally started the collection back in the 1960s and that he had researched the background of most of the artifacts, it wasn't difficult to believe that he could pull off whatever plans he had drawn up.

Pucuk Rebung Gallery and Museum has seen some — in Bong's word — "exciting" changes since then. For starters, it now occupies a spanking new, 3,800 sq ft, purpose-designed premises at Level Three, the Ampang Mall in upmarket Suria KLCC.

And where the partnership was then just the duo of Bong and businessman Terence Tay, there is now the supportive and royal backing of the Raja Perempuan of Kelantan, Tengku Anis Tengku Abdul Hamid. Her sister, Tengku Anisah, is actively involved in the daily running of the gallery.

Recently, Bong and company subjected the gallery through a thorough redesign, and came up with a concept that offered "quiet sophistication, romance and mystery of the old Malay" in a form more akin to that of a museum set-up.

Don't be intimidated by the closed-off glass showcases, though. Unlike the normal museum where things are usually out-of-bounds for touching (and most people do have itchy fingers, don't they?), the displays can be taken out for closer inspection.

And the focus is not confined to "Malay" but "Malaysia," which is reflected in the inclusion of arts and crafts from Borneo and also those used or produced by the past Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia.

Seeing the merit in giving the gallery a greater sense of history, the collection was re-organised and then displayed in sections according to chronological order where possible.

This begins near the entrance with the earliest period, the era of Indian traders and Buddhist missionaries way back in the fifth century AD; and artifacts of that age, one of which is a well-preserved stone *lingham*, adorn this space. Artifacts from the Sri Vijaya and the Majapahit Empire are also featured further inside.

"There is a division between different periods, different cultures, but everything comes together because they are all part of the Malaysia as we know it today," Bong explained. "That is why this Buddha figure, for example, is here."

Where the chronological order could not suit the purpose, the traditional and cultural criteria were adapted, and it is through this that the presence of a large, raised section that displays an amazing collection of textiles, from the rich *songket* to the gossamer fineness of the Nyonya *kebaya* cloth, is rationalised.

Of course, no gallery worth its salt wouldn't have a collection or two (in Pucuk Rebung's case, there would definitely be more) of old Peranakan furniture, and two very elaborate sets of the three-piece table-and-chair combinations are presently on display for sale.

Sabah and Sarawak are represented by such crafts as the Iban carvings of hornbills and door steps, old Kenyah/Kayan bead baskets, and the Bajau *kain darstak*.

Since part of Bong's mission for Pucuk Rebung has always been to educate, he has taken pains to put each item in its cultural and historical perspective by including captions with the displays. "We hope to finish the captioning soon," he said apologetically of some displays that were without these explanatory text.



KING'S RANSOM: Pucuk Rebung Gallery and Museum has a tremendous collection of artifacts that spans several centuries of Malaysian and South-East Asian cultures and lifestyles. Terence Tay (left) shows off some of the gallery's finer textiles.

A lot of the items on display are also marked as being on permanent collection. "These are meant for educational purposes to show our historical development. Unless there is a very good reason, like an institution wants it for educational purposes, I won't let go of these pieces," Bong said.

Entrance into the gallery cum museum boasts a door with intricately-carved decorations that once adorned an opulent Malay house in the 1930s. It beckons visitors into the sumptuous interior, where new discoveries await those with a penchant for knowledge of the culture and history of the Malaysian world.

The gallery might prove intimidating for the timid soul who only wants to have a look, but Bong quickly assured that everyone will be welcomed warmly by the staff.

"The staff have been trained to be very helpful yet discreet," he said.

To retain the old world charm of its Chinatown beginnings, Bong persuaded the owner of one of the shops in Petaling Street to part with his showcase. An old piece dating back to pre-war times, the showcase was given a little touch-up before it was installed. It is now a showcase for a mix of contemporary and old jewellery.

All in, Pucuk Rebung Gallery and Museum is an enticing discovery in the bustle of KLCC. But hang on lest you think everything here is only about history or antiques.

As another of its mission is to contemporise old designs — cloth and jewellery especially — to make them as fashionable now as they were a few hundred years ago, there are displays of new things as well.

New glassware are artfully placed alongside old brassware and wooden crafts from bygone days, and more recent textiles (*songket* and cloth for *baju kurung* or *kebaya*) set among cloth from the heydays of the Peranakan.

Wong Keng Fuan, a Penang-based artist cum craftsman is currently producing a range of jewellery and decorative glassware exclusively for Pucuk Rebung. Then, there are new paintings by local artists which depict local lifestyles as they were in the past and as they are now.

Pucuk Rebung's next venture, said Terence Tay, is to go into interior decorating using new pieces built according to old designs. With Bong's dogged determination and assisted by his capable people, it won't be long before that becomes a reality.