

# Redefining the museum

*The Pucuk Rebung-Gallery Museum is testimony that a museum need not be a stuffy sarcophagus of taxidermised relics but a venue of cultural reaffirmation, writes OOI KOK CHUEN.*

**I**F this review sounds somewhat like an advertising stunt, take comfort that it is at least a deserving one.

For the Pucuk Rebung Gallery-Museum offers so much to the culture-conscious Malaysian, speaking with an inner voice which echoes the soul of the centuries-old Nusantara.

With its numerous exhibits that appeal to intellect, senses and soul, Pucuk Rebung has redefined the museum nomenclature and reinvented it into something more personal.

Almost everything about the cosy set-up strikes a traditional chord due to the innovative use of certain objects like the "merbau" counter and local materials like marble, meranti, kempas and Kelantan tiles.

The sum effect is that the atmosphere triggers certain elements in our collective memory which gives us a sense of revitalised "feel-good" confidence.

On a guided tour by Henry Bong, the Pucuk Rebung group's managing director and driving force behind this win-win marriage of cultural reaffirmation and commerce, I was overwhelmed.

Not so much by the rarity and sheer beauty of some of the objects but more by the clever juxtapositioning of the disparate matrix, by the way these objects talk to the different parts of me so much so that, several times, I had to swallow a lump in my throat.

The 3,800 square feet of exhibition space at Lot 302A (Level 3, Ampang Mall, Suria Kuala Lumpur City Centre) is well pigeon-holed into sections, chronologically depicting various glorious periods of history — the early Hindu Sri Vijayan Buddhist links, the proto-Islamic phase, the Borneo components, the advent of Islam and the conversion, the Malay core and Islamic arts collection, the Chinese

links... right up to Independence with its more contemporary works.

A veritable signpost to the exhibition is a 16th century Italian map based on Ptolemy's 1st Century AD map of the Golden Chersonese/Malay peninsula.

Certainly a more remarkable choreography of sights, smells (jasmine, cempaka or kenanga) and sounds (piped ethnic music) when compared to the arrangements found at its previous three-storey shophouse at Jalan Tun H.S. Lee in Kuala Lumpur where it was first established three years ago.

There is an interesting array of textiles, old vintage/historical photographs, martaban jars, *tepak sirih*, silver belts/buckles and pillow-ends, manuscripts, Nakorn-Sithamarat silver, the *subang* and the *kerongsang* with its Persian-inspired tulips, statues of Buddha dating back to the Ayuthia and Rattanakosin periods, shaman Bornean shields, *rebab* and silver congkak.

Yet reminders of the present slip in coyly and inobtrusively, creating a subtle contrast, like paintings which evoke ancestral indulgences, exquisite glass "sculptures" by the Penang-based landscape architect-turned-oneman 'Orrefors' Wong Keng Fuan and blower Saifudin as well as fashion accessories and hand-tooled jewellery inspired by our rich Malaysian cultural heritage.

Pucuk Rebung is able to provide a sumptuous feast for the eyes while exuding the quiet sophistication, romance and mystery of the old Malay world, aptly described by Bong as "a Tanah Melayu budaya playground, a pastime environment virtually holding court."

"We have the ability to create works like these because we understand what we have inherited and are willing to share it.

"The indigenous people like the orang asli, Ibans, Kenayan/Kenyah

have, within their own world, developed spectacular art."

In this, the gallery-museum is a testament that history is not something moribund and that museums are not stuffy sarcophaguses of see-only objects or taxidermised relics in rigor mortis.

Here, the objet d' arts tell us, especially when we are on the cusp of a full-blown globalisation movement, that we should not be apprehensive about ourselves or our past for therein lies our strength to move without blinkered perspective into the future.

Yes, we find that as we struggle with survival, we have lost so much — we seem to have forgotten, or chosen to forget, who we are, what we are, where we come from, how much we are connected in one way or another en route to becoming what we are today.

We are all hybrids, like it or not, and to pretend in the sacrosanctity of a monolithic whole, that culture is something xenophobically monolithic or ethnocentric is to delude ourselves.

Here, the cliché 'no man is an island' has taken on new meaning and fresh currency.

Pucuk Rebung itself puts it most succinctly in its mission credo:

"As in all things of beauty, culture and art, there are no walls; only bridges. We celebrate our cultural diversity as all Malaysians past and present, then and here, and we articulate and develop it in the lifestyle of our people. To create, to share, to revitalise ...that is the universal language of timeless art, all adapted from the entire cultural landscape of the country and presented totally as ours and that transcends all borders and social, religious and class levels."

Adds Bong: "What we give you is the unabridged version of the text."

To retain its aura, Pucuk Rebung has dedicated at least 20 per cent of the exhibits to its permanent col-



OF LIKE MINDS ... Tengku Anisah Tengku Abdul Hamid, Henry Bong

lection. This intrinsic collection includes pieces of silver from the 19th century Frank Swettenham collection; photographs of Sultan Abu Bakar or Sultan Ibrahim with the royal military force; photograph of a debonair Datuk Onn Jaafar, father of Malay nationalism; a letter from Tun Abdul Razak recommending Tunku Abdul Rahman to the Bar; a letter of the last Sarawak White Rajah Charles Brooke on how to handle the Iban problem dated March 1, 1933; a photograph of the White Rajah and his assistants in the middle of the jungle with their hunting dogs; and an Iban dragon boat head with an elephant trunk linked to the old Hindu macaras.

What sets Pucuk Rebung apart is not so much the linear, genealogical concept but its Post-Modernist eclectic interface approach which gives the visitor a total human artistic experience.

You get a Kelvin Chap painting of symbolic totem-pole keliriengs amidst Bruneian bronzes and

brasswork, with paintings by Sylvia Lee-Goh and Magdalene Tai acting as colourful repast to quaint Peranakan artefacts.

"It's almost like when you put some classic furniture together with some fabulous modern paintings, say a Picasso with a mummy's mask, a Han Dynasty horse or a bronze," says Bong.

"You see civilisation and mankind's artistic achievements and they are not very different whatever the time periods they come from. If they are great, they are great — they live together and co-exist."

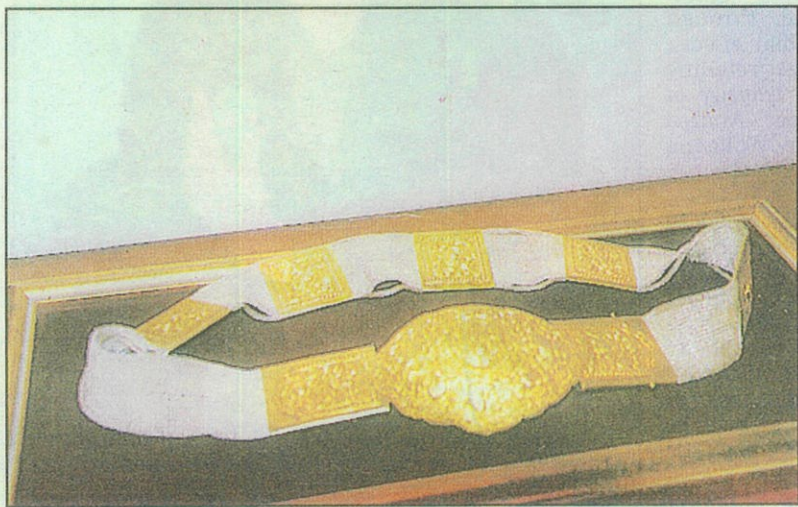
You see how the celestial Chinese dragons are adapted into the more earthy 'nagas' and understand better how people of the past balanced and managed power the way China did in the 15th and 16th centuries in order to check the ambitions of Ayuthia.

"The Chinese have been around even before the Sung Dynasty. The Sui annals recorded movement of an emissary sent down to Ch'ih-t'u, the Red Earth in the 6th Century, bearing 5,000 gifts and recorded the court life of a king dressed in pink silk with gold jewellery who boasted of 40 ocean-going ships," quotes Bong.

Bong also has some interesting theories about certain aspects of history, like how a cross found in a 17th century bronze piece indicated the presence of the Spaniards in Borneo.

The textile collection is magnificent, comprising songket which included one with gold thread, *nyonya kebaya*, batik jawa, cotton, robia, patola cloth (cindai), and *kelenkang*.

The ceramic repertoire includes export ware from the finest kilns in China and Japan and the more garish concoctions commissioned by the then nouveau-rich sinkeh.

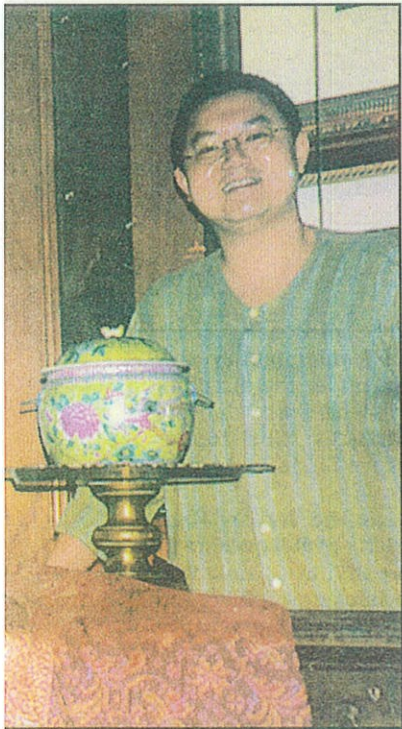


ARRESTING ... Belt with buckle worked in gold



TREASURE TROVE ... The gallery contains many quaint and exquisite pieces

# seum nomenclature



ig and Terence Tay

made good.

A whole gamut of modern hand-crafted artefacts based on the mood, colours and intrinsic lines of the original will form the next big thrust of Pucuk Rebung's growth — product development. Whatever the medium, no two objects will be the same in terms of details.

So here, right in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, you can find a living museum that gives us epigraphic clues of our multi-faceted beginnings and our future.

Pucuk Rebung has organised several seminars and exhibitions and its clients include hotels, prominent individuals, major corporations and even museums.

Among the notable exhibitions it curated are the 19th century exhibition and market of *Art, Antiquities and Textile Art* at the Castello di Sartirana in Pavia in Italy in September 1999; *Art and Nationalism: Past and Present* at the National Art Gallery in August-September 1999; and *A Glimpse of the Glory of the Brunei and Kelantan Sultanates* at Istana Batu and Istana Jahar in Kota Baru in Kelantan in conjunction with the visit of the Sultan of Brunei to Kelantan in March-April 1999.

It is no coincidence that the vision and passion of Henry Bong and of his original partner Terence Tay are shared by the equally knowledgeable Raja Perempuan of Kelantan who has consented to be the gallery-museum's patron.

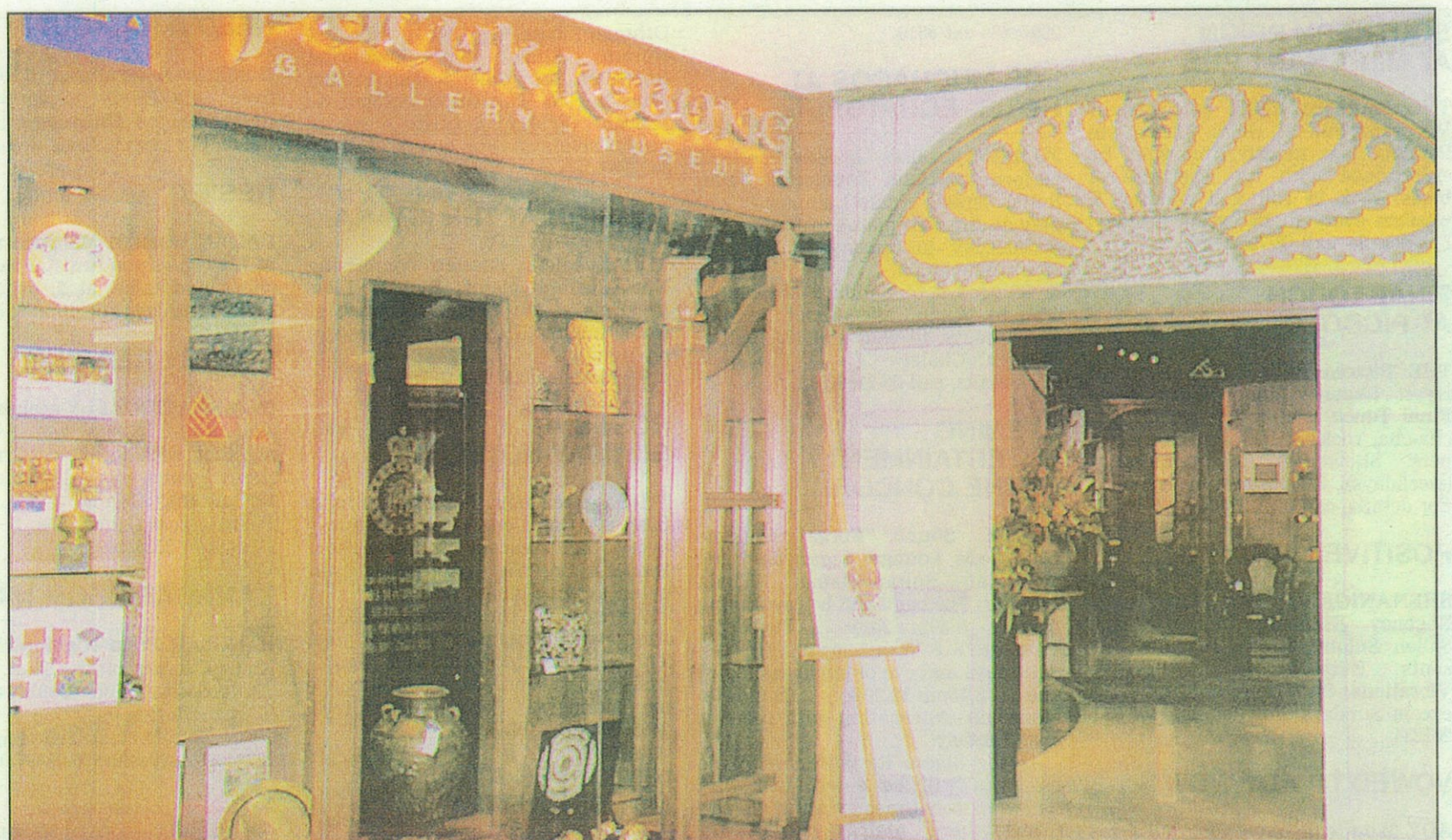
Indeed, her sister Tengku Anisah Tengku Abdul Hamid is seeing to the day-to-day running herself as a business director.

Pucuk Rebung Gallery-Museum is at Lot 302-A, Level 3, Ampang Mall, Suria KLCC.

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COSY SET UP ... The Gallery-Museum is aesthetically appealing



QUIET SOPHISTICATION... The entrance to the Pucuk Rebung Gallery-Museum