

Nationalism in art

Sharifah Hamzah checks out an exhibition which explores the meeting point between art and nationalism

Nationalism, or feelings of love and pride for one's nation and heritage, can be manifested in many ways, and artistic expression is one of them.

A current exhibition, *Art And Nationalism - Past And Future*, traces the many artistic interpretations of nationalism in Malaysia from the early days to the present, and their contiguous evolution.

"The meeting point of art and nationalism creates unique forms of motifs, symbols and shapes which convey emotive expressions. And these continue to be used through time till they become a part of the nation's identity," says Haned Masjak, who is curating this exhibition together with Dr Mohammed Najib Dawa from Universiti Sains Malaysia and Henry Bong, of Pucuk Rebung Gallery-Museum which specialises in antique Malaysian arts and contributes many of the pieces displayed here.

The exhibition has been planned in such a manner that it takes the visitor on a historical journey aimed to provide an understanding of the symbols and manifestations of the country's heritage. Even before one steps into the exhibition hall proper, one gets to view artifacts from the indigenous world.

An ancient Greek map begins the journey by showing that the Malay Peninsula has always occupied a strategic position among sea routes between the East and West, and this has been responsible for our great maritime tradition and exposure to various cultures.

The first part of the exhibition traces the influence of the ancient kingdoms, such as Srivijaya and Langkasuka, on the artistic heritage and the early movements of people to present-day Malaysia.

"From very early, we can find common links of designs and symbols between places in the region and the Malay Peninsula," explains Bong. "The drums exhibited here

were found in Borneo as well as Annam, which is present-day Vietnam. Langkasuka gave us the Buddhist heritage and the *putus masa* motif which can be seen here in a *songket* of a much later date - the 30s or 40s.

"The extent of the early Malay world stretched from Formosa in the East to

craftsmen and artists, as well as in wood carvings and embroidery displayed in this section.

"Within the tolerant Islamic sultanate of Malacca, the Peranakan comprising the Nyonya and the Baba, as well as the Chitty, flourished. The Peranakan style incorporates very strong Malay elements into the immigrant core, creating a unique case of cultural assimilation," says Bong.

Thus in fact, there were already, at this juncture in history, commonalities between the various communities.

For instance, partaking of *sirih* (betel leaf) was popular among the

Malays, Nyonya and the indigenous communities, and here one can see a range of *tepak sirih* (betel leaf container) with designs influenced by various cultural preferences.

Another interesting item is the *cerek basuh tangan* (kettle for washing the hands during meals) which was used by both Malays and the Nyonya.

Here, Bong has juxtaposed



The kettle for washing hands ... made in Shanghai (left) and in the Malay Peninsula.

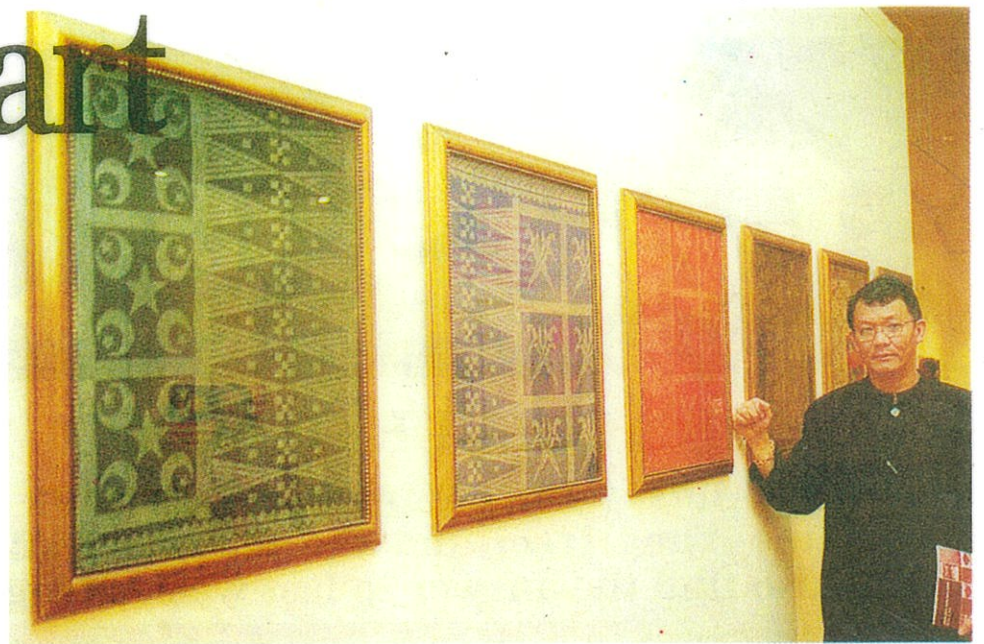
Madagascar in the West. They were not only bound by linguistic links, but also motifs like the *bunga pecah lapan* (eight-petalled floret) which is a textile motif found in Yunnan as well as all parts of the Malay Archipelago till today.

"This shows that even at that time, the Malay mind and indigenous world were actually accumulating, assimilating, modifying and recreating new expressions all the time; it was culturally progressive, as well as dynamic in establishing a great maritime tradition."

One then moves on to the artistic heritage that shows the influence of Islam and other cultures in creating a plural society, as well as the era of the Malay sultanate.

The ancient kingdom of Malacca established itself as a hub of international maritime trade, and for this part of the exhibition, Bong has grouped together ancient royal *songket* to show the splendour and refinement of artworks of the Malay kingdom.

The Islamic influence is pervasive in the shapes as well as motifs in works by both Malay and Nyonya



Traditional motifs ... Bong with antique *songket*.

one made by a Malay craftsman in the classical design against another commissioned by a Nyonya family and made by a craftsman in Shanghai with its decidedly Chinese influence.

The exhibition then moves to a section illustrating the western influence of colonialism and the resistance to it.

One of the negative effects of colonialism is that it engendered in the colonised subjects a need to feel thoroughly modern with the accompanying propensity to reject traditional and old-fashioned items. In this exhibition, Bong gives the visitor an insight into the change of the shape and form of the Malay *cerek* (kettle) from the old classical shapes to a virtu-

al European copy.

At the same time, colonialism brought about a strong need to assert one's identity and self-governance, which sparked nationalism, and ultimately independence.

An interesting fact was that the *keris melintang* (crossed knives) was a symbol of resistance or a struggle against the colonial rulers, and in this exhibition, there are *songket* and silver bowls bearing the motifs.

Post-independence has brought the self-confidence to assert new and abstract expressions of art, as well as the need to question, ponder and even criticise more perplexing issues and developments, and this is most clearly shown in the artworks.

If there is one thing that the curators wish to emphasise, it is that the history and cultural richness of Malaysia was developed over a long period; in this respect, we are not a new country.

And all the common traits that existed between the communities can be used as a foundation in creating shared Malaysian values.

Bong adds: "Perhaps we should ponder for a while to revisit the past and think of what we are really made of in order to refine our quest to be truly ourselves - with our own sense of aesthetics and ownership."

The *Art And Nationalism - Past And Future* exhibition is being held at the National Art Gallery till Sept 30.



The *keris melintang* ... a symbol of resistance against colonialism.