

Delicate pieces of history

By Melanie Chaili • melanie@mmail.com.my
pictures by Azneal Ishak

THE first Peranakan antique auction of its kind not only promised a plethora of exquisite pieces but transported bidders and viewers to the golden era of Peranakan culture.

When auctioneers Henry Butcher sought the expertise of Henry Bong, a bona fide Peranakan and Malay antiques specialist, Bong told his team: "This is a very emotional trip we are going to take."

Also known as Baba Nyonya, Peranakan or Straits Chinese are descendants of Chinese immigrants who settled in Malacca, Penang, Singapore and Indonesia, and married local Malays. The mixed race union resulted in a Sino-Malay cultural hybrid evidenced in their creole language, fusion cuisine and colourful culture.

With more than 90 lots including furniture, textiles, porcelain, jewellery and silverwork, "Treasures of the Peranakan World & Straits Chinese" was a thoughtfully woven auction that had no shortage of arresting narratives.

One such specimen was a set of pink famille rose porcelain ceramics once owned by the family of Yap Ah Loy, the Chinese Kapitan responsible for Kuala Lumpur's development as a mining and commercial hub.

Commissioned in the mid-19th century, the small dining set is extremely rare thanks to its customised nature — the Yap

surname is inscribed throughout each piece.

"The base is marked with the trading company Yap Ah Loy set up in Kuala Lumpur," said Bong.

Acquiring the Yap pieces and other items from a private collector was no easy feat. "You have to balance correct temperament with emotional attachment because they've grown very attached to it. It's a big enough set to do a little serving and entertaining and to eat out of those plates are quite something."

Other collectors discovered parting with a family heirloom was easier said than done. For some, parting with a piece of *komcheng* (ceramic container) that reminded them of their grandmother brought on an unexpected melancholy.

After all, family heirloom is the only link between the past and the present.

More than just decorative items, the Peranakans took their tableware seriously, not surprisingly since food is such a huge part of their culture. Bong said it was common for each family to have at least four sets of tableware.

One set at the auction was commissioned for a matriarch's birthday, evidenced by the crane, a symbol of longevity, as its main feature.

"This was for somebody beyond 80 years old so they are celebrating a big red letter day — just by the motif, you know its purpose," Bong said.

From birthdays to solemn occasions like death, Peranakan people did it all in style. With a mourning period that lasts at least 100 days, it was reflected in their sartorial choices where vivid colours of the kebaya took a backseat, replaced with a blue and white sarong paired with a white kebaya top.

Tableware too is replaced with blue and white porcelain although families who want to use it outside of mourning usually do so with a small carving of the Chinese character for "life" to counter its morbidity. For funerals, coffin cloths are made to reveal the social status of the deceased. The auction's only pall, also known as *kain kotak*, is a stunning hand embroidered piece that showcases the intricacy of Peranakan stitching.

Described as rare and important, the early 20th century Malaccan textile was made for someone who was of great age and stature in the community. The elaborate fabric features subdued hues of lavender, honey, light jade green and powder pink, departing from the usual vibrant tones to denote a sombre occasion.

Other textiles at the auction include window and door valances boasting the refined handiwork of Nyonya ladies. According to Bong, beadwork and embroidery were the only two items that Peranakans produced themselves using French Rochelle beads, commonly found on the beloved beaded shoes or

kasot manek. "It is said no girl is fit for marriage unless she knows how to embroider and sew," he said.

Some favourite motifs are the phoenix, bats, deer and peony. The peony and phoenix are often depicted to close similarity with the rose and peacock — both flora and fauna motifs celebrate femininity.

"The phoenix and peony are female attributes and icons, so the Peranakans, like Malays, are matriarchal," said Bong.

In many ways, the Peranakans' affinity with the finer things in life was a reflection of their social status in colonial Malaya. Known as the King's Chinese because of their loyalty to the British Crown, the Baba Nyonya community were predominantly English educated who assumed administrative and commercial roles.

However, things took a turn for the worse during the 1930s Great Depression when many lost their fortunes and were unable to recover their wealth. Their colonial associations too, proved to be of

little benefit when the country prepared for independence.

"You can see the rise in Malaya in the mid-19th century and into turn of the century in the 1930s, there was the decline where things became simpler — people don't make beaded shoes but later on it became fashionable again," said Bong.

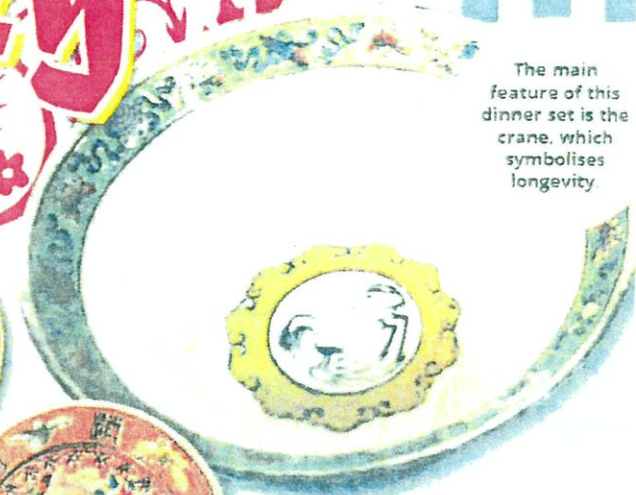
From ceramics to furniture, bed accessories and literature, the auction provided a cradle to grave perspective into a Baba Nyonya person's life.

Once on the brink of losing its unique cultural heritage, Peranakan culture today's well and alive thanks to a gradual sartorial, gastronomic and pop culture revival.

"This auction gives you a chance to collect to be proud, collectors and families have allowed us to have the privilege and pleasure to be the owners and next custodians of these exquisite items," said Bong.



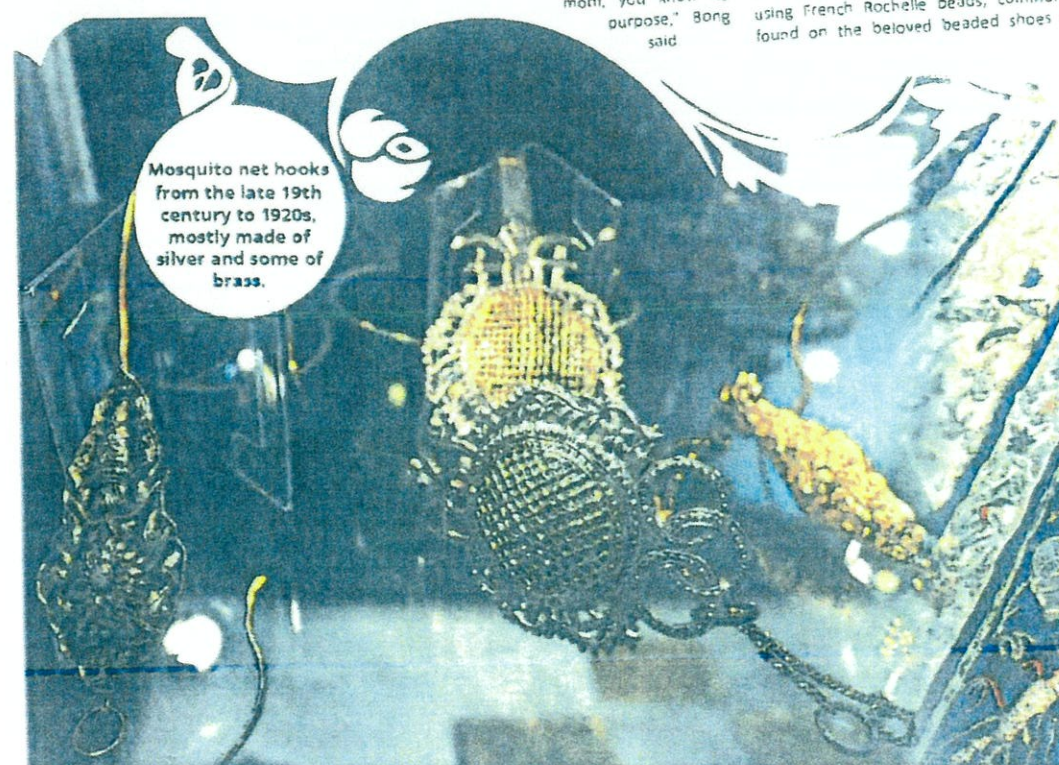
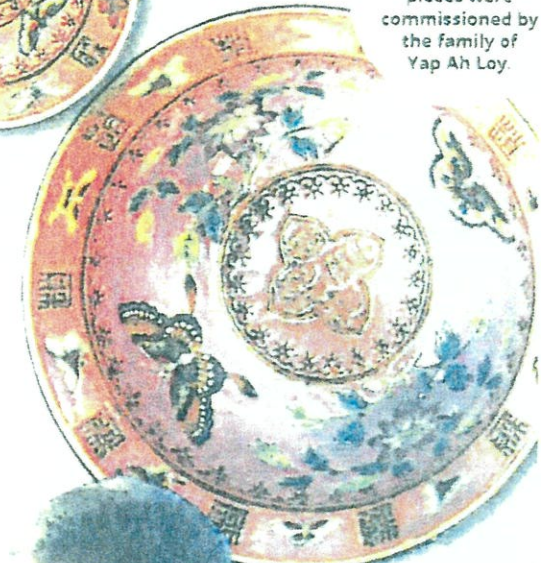
Bong with Henry Butcher's Anna Yusoff.



The main feature of this dinner set is the crane, which symbolises longevity.



These pink famille rose ceramic pieces were commissioned by the family of Yap Ah Loy.



Mosquito net hooks from the late 19th century to 1920s, mostly made of silver and some of brass.



A close-up of an elaborate hand-embroidered 'kain kotak' from the early 20th century, which is used to cover a coffin.



To acquire objects with high sentimental value, Bong had to balance the right temperament and emotional attachment when dealing with consignors.