

# Showcase of local history

By J. ANU

**T**WO years ago, the Pucuk Rebung Gallery and Museum was conceived by a former banker with an appreciation for fine artifacts and a strong sense of place, history and nationalism.

The place became much more than a tourist attraction, and the ex-banker, Henry Bong, reintroduced many Malaysians to our myriad cultural histories through some of the rarest and most precious of Malaysian antiquities.

From the silver *pending* (belt buckle of the Malay aristocrat) to fine *nyonya* porcelain; from rare antique Kelantan jewellery to even more unparalleled Indian and Malay textiles, from colonial silver to pre-independence memorabilia, Bong's premises at Jalan Tun H. S. Lee offered a taste of authentic Malaysia as was never seen before.

A veritable Aladdin's Cave of ancient treasures, Pucuk Rebung's strength lies in the fact that the quality of the pieces and their historical importance are never compromised even though they have been removed from their usual clinical yet musty museum settings.

In the context of the mass-produced, souvenir-driven, Bali-orientated retail outlets that dot the city and other tourist destinations in the country, Pucuk Rebung plays the considerable role of giving our rich and varied Malaysian heritage the credibility, relevance and pedigree it has always possessed but has seldom received.

"Our land is an ancient one of wonder and history that has always recognised the commonalities and encouraged integration in spite of our diversity, or maybe even *because* of our diversity," Bong observes.

Taking our historical circumstance beyond Malacca, Pucuk Rebung explores our diverse ethnic identities with an eloquence and detail that is seldom achieved in what is undeniably largely a commercial enterprise.

"Since 1997 we have perpetuated our mission to elevate Malaysian heritage, to give our traditional objects of art a world class status through seminars, exhibitions and art and interior design consultancies that reflect that Malaysian identity and rich heritage," he says.

In 1997, Pucuk Rebung represented Malaysia at the Symposium on Asean Cultural Heritage which was themed *Textile Weaving — From Loom to Computer*. Here, they presented a paper entitled *The heritage of Malaysian Textile Weaving and Its Future Directions*.

Their 1998 exhibitions included *Malaysian Heritage* at Sympo '98 in conjunction with the XVI Commonwealth Games Kuala Lumpur; *Glimpses of Malaysian Textile Art — Modernity with a Tradition* at the National Art Gallery; *Islamic Art of the Commonwealth* at Pusat Islam Kuala



**MIX OF OLD AND NEW ... Bong is proud of Pucuk Rebung which has been beautifully designed to incorporate traditional motifs with contemporary utility.**

Lumpur and finally *Aesthetics of Malaysian Communities and Commonalities* in its own premises.

In 1999, Pucuk Rebung was involved in more major projects; firstly as co-curator of the National Art Gallery's *Art and Nationalism — Then and Now* exhibition and later as an invitee of the Fondazione Satirana Arte at Pavia to show classical Malay textiles.

Most recently they were involved in a jointly organised exhibition with Malaysian Airports Berhad at the KLIA Satellite building entitled *Malay Heritage and Malaysian Culture*.

This year also marks the opening of Pucuk Rebung's subsidiary outlet, Pucuk Rebung Malaysian Heritage & Style.

Located at Level 3 of Suria KLCC, the new edition of Pucuk Rebung is a swanky, shining beacon to the establishment's success.

For the offshoot, the existing directorship of Pucuk Rebung which consisted of Bong and his partner Terence Tay is now joined by Tengku Anisah Tengku Abdul Hamid, sister of the Raja Perempuan of Kelantan.

While the inaugural premises, housed in a beautifully untouched turn-of-the-century shophouse, consummated the total effect of bygone nostalgia, Pucuk Rebung Malaysian Heritage and Style aims to 'reinvent' our rich heritage in relation to the rapid progress and modernity that is seen to threaten it.

What better setting than the world's tallest and most modern building in the world?

Within this mammoth steel and glass construct, Pucuk Rebung's world of indigenous woods, of delicate jewellery and precious *songket* — all the lost things of a gentler time — prevail.

"Our philosophy has always been to both retain the essence of traditional craft practice as well as to actually contemporise it; to give it a place within our contemporary lives," says Bong.

The shop design revolves around the classical architecture motifs of a traditional Malay house which Bong describes as a 'domestic abode of some pedigree.'

The existing features of the building itself, like an awkward drop ceiling that could have been an imposition, has been used to incorporate a classical Malay feature like the *lis angin*, a traditional ventilator which was used to bring in air and light.

The frontage is flanked by *serambi*, raised verandahs on either side of the entrance that make for ideal window display.

The central area leads to an ancient doorway, its path inlaid with *meranti* symbolising the traditional mat which may have fronted an audience hall in a noble house.

"The design philosophy is aimed at showing connoisseurs of fine things how heritage and history can be stylishly incorporated into our contemporary settings."

Another key objective of the business is the revitalisation of traditional arts and crafts that are aimed at ensuring that the art form not only survives but evolves with dignity.

"We are not a curio shop; we call ourselves a museum because we offer fine museum pieces for sale and we realise the value of information. We would also like to put ourselves forward as an authority on Malaysian heritage from the classical and colonial eras right up to contemporary times.

"Pucuk Rebung is especially committed to exploring the confluence of influences — indige-

nous, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western — with Islam and the old Malay world as a starting point or cornerstone, of course," he carefully adds.

And the establishment is nothing less than a treasure trove of fine things, which raises the question: How legitimate are the means by which dealers actually come into the possession of such fine things?

"We have been collecting for more than 30 years from collectors, descendants, auctions and even private homes," Bong says.

"If I saw something in Kelantan, for example, we would get the right person to approach them. There is a lot of etiquette, of *adat* involved in the negotiation. As for the legitimate ownership of a piece, we go to extreme ends to authenticate ownership."

According to Bong, before Pucuk Rebung actually purchases an object, they not only require a history of the piece — from its origins to its make and use — but also a letter of authenticity and a declaration of ownership from the seller which makes them liable for any subsequent controversy.

And the history of a piece is extremely important, Bong stresses.

"If you take art seriously, you must eventually move beyond its aesthetics and begin to consider an object's historical relevance... and that is the extra dimension we would like to give to our artifacts at Pucuk Rebung."

● Pucuk Rebung Malaysian Heritage & Style is located at Lot 305, Level 3, Ampang Mall, Suria KLCC and Pucuk Rebung Enterprise occupies 69, Jalan Tun H.S. Lee. Details: 03-382 0769