

House of treasures for history buffs



By **Azmi Anshar** - July 7, 2017 @ 9:42am



The eclectic collection includes this model of a Malay sailing ship

THIRTEEN years ago, enterprising Malaysians stumbled on a fabulously eclectic collection of Chinese, Malay and other Asian artefacts, many stretching back 6,000 years to China's pre-dynastic era.

How did this happen? A modern-day foreign treasure hunter brought into Malaysia eight containers of these artefacts in 2004 and hooked up with people behind the Asian Heritage Museum (AHM) Group to start a unique Asian museum with investors' money and the government's financial support via purchase of his artefacts.

However, the treasure hunter inexplicably went rogue in 2006, absconding with four containers of artefacts and leaving investors in the lurch after the government turned down his offer to sell his artefacts. In his haste, he abandoned four containers containing about 2,000 artefacts, which were duly seized by Customs and police, but salvaged by the AHM Group after they secured legal rights to the artefacts' ownership through a Kuala Lumpur High Court order in 2010.

The collection is startling to say the least: a coral encrusted bronze mission bell, probably the largest in the world, meant for California in the 18th century, 4m high Dabu Dabu drums from the Malay Archipelago, 300-year-old models of Malay sailing ships, a 1.5m long extra-large ancient keris.

The history buff in you already salivating? Try this for size: 300 rare shipwreck ceramics pieces, many from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and Song Dynasty (960-1279) with the potential of augmenting current knowledge of the historical maritime trade of China. There are also jade and bronze figurines and ceremonial swords that the treasure hunter unearthed from the forests and caves of the region.

Some of these were probably hidden and left behind by a notorious Asian pirate called Limahong who, on the run in 1574 from the Ming Emperor Wanli, hoped to conquer the Philippine Islands and crown himself the king.

If Limahong and his raggedy band of 3,000 pirates had no appetite to challenge an army of 40,000 sent by the Chinese emperor, his plans to set up his own kingdom in the Philippines was scuttled by the Spanish.

After a year-long war, the Spaniards chased him out in 1575, but they were probably unaware of the hoard of treasures near the battlefields, until the treasure hunter unearthed them not long ago. None of the treasures were ever put on display, but they will be soon.

The public got a glimpse though on May 8, 2010, when the AHM Group donated 28 high-value artefacts to the National Museum on the request of then Arts and Culture Minister Tan Sri Rais Yatim, attesting to their legality and authenticity.

Rather than unload all the treasures to recover its financial losses, the AHM Group decided to create a world-class, innovative, multimedia and story-based museum in Kuala Lumpur to promote peace, moderation and understanding in Asia.

The museum, opting to use the latest technologies to make visits entertaining and educational, will be at Carcosa, built in 1896 by Sir Frank Swettenham as his official residence. It will also allude to Zheng He's great 15th century voyages of peace and lessons learnt from "bad heritage", such as World War 2 and other wars, and of Asia's glorious past.

To raise some much-needed funds for the museum through the sale of certain artefacts, AHM went through an exhaustive process of authenticating the Chinese artefacts through master authenticator Wang Zhong-xin, a highly respected expert from Beijing's Palace Museum. After carefully examining the pieces, Wang enthusiastically proclaimed many of the items to be not only authentic and of museum quality but also priceless, while some were prehistoric.

The AHM founders were naturally ecstatic: here was a chance to recoup their investment but the museum's mission turned out to be long, frustrating and arduous. The problems they faced ranged from difficulties in raising funds to convincing sceptics about the project's viability.

After organising several exhibitions and authentication events in Kuala Lumpur last year with an auction house from China, AHM had an epiphany: why not set up an artefacts trading centre for buyers and sellers, with a big premium on privacy, based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 1970 Paris Convention on cultural property and respect for China as the place of origin of the artefacts?

Thus was born the Artefacts Trading and Performing Arts (ATP) Centre at Seri Negara, next to Carcosa. Formerly known as the King's House, it was built in 1913 as the official guest house of the Governor of the Straits Settlements.

ATP will promote artefacts as works of art, hold performing arts, ranging from local culture to western music recitals, and create special galleries for Sarawak and Sabah to promote their cultural diversity and eco-tourism and for national integration. It will conduct history and nature walks and also allow bookings for events and functions.

What AHM is doing at Carcosa and Seri Negara comprise a new and exciting tourism product that promotes the nation's capital as a destination for an innovative peace museum, culture and performing arts centre and a hub of knowledge, expertise and trading in Asian artefacts.

ATP is targeting an Oct 1 opening, while the museum is expected to be ready next year after the necessary funds are raised.

The museum projects would not have been possible if it were not for the foresight of Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar, who saw the national and strategic interest and the great social value of promoting multicultural goodwill and peace. With his support, AHM was able to secure the tenancy of this iconic heritage site.

The two projects are helmed by management and think tank analyst and newspaper columnist K.K. Tan, a former government-linked council chief executive in the early 1990s.

Such was AHM's potential and importance that it secured, as key advisers, council chairman Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin Tuanku Muhriz (founding president of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs and patron or trustee of several cultural, educational and charitable organisations), Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam (economist and former senior civil servant) and Datuk Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman (Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya and social activist).

In the newly-refurbished establishment of Carcosa Seri Negara's valuable contribution to national history, a significant first exhibition will be held — a Merdeka Exhibition called "Jalan Merdeka" to commemorate the 60th year of independence from the British.

With the collaboration of the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd and a host of sponsors which may include government-linked companies, the exhibition is slated between Aug 31 and Sept 30.

The exhibition is made more meaningful by the fact that Carcosa and King's House were venues where events significant to the country's history took place. In King's House, the Federation of Malaya Agreement was signed in 1948, followed by much discussion about that entity's constitution between 1955 and 1957, before it became the site for hosting visiting heads of state.

For now, both buildings are in a state of neglect. They were abandoned for many years and funds are needed to repair, restore and refurbish them. In order to get Seri Negara ready for "Jalan Merdeka", AHM and the NST are seeking special sponsorship from organisations with a strong interest in promoting national unity and patriotism.

In the meantime, the prospect of a grand epicentre of historical Merdeka reflection and perspective from all comers should be enticing, not just for the historical buffs, but also any Malaysian who needs to learn our much-vaunted birth and eventual roots of nation-building.

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