

06/11/2000

Ib's timeless gift to art world

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LANGKAWI, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad waxed lyrical yesterday on the passion of one man whose persistence and dedication to a dream led to "Malaysia's timeless gift to the international art world".

That man he spoke of is Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, gifted Malaysian artist and sometimes art impresario, and the "gift" is the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation's museum ensconced on the north-western littoral fringe of Langkawi.

"People with a lesser degree of commitment would have given up," he said.

"It is altogether fitting that the opening of the Ibrahim Hussein Foundation Museum coincides with the culmination of the inaugural Langkawi International Festival of Arts (Lifa), the foundation's first project," said Dr Mahathir as he launched the museum on the former forest reserve land on the Gunung Macinchang enclave overlooking Pantai Pasir Tengkorak.

Dr Mahathir had followed the museum's development since the Kedah Government, with the blessings of the Federal Government, agreed to earmark the land for the foundation.

In 1992, Dr Mahathir formally launched the museum foundation at Kuala Lumpur Hilton, and the occasion was also used as a springboard for a series of promotions to generate funds for this non-profit, non-governmental organisation.

With only architect Datuk Lim Chong Keat's drafts and a mock marquette to show, the RM10 million proposed museum project went through a trying period of bureaucracy, legal landmines and financial constraints.

Only Ib, as the 64-year-old artist is better known to friends, and his able muse and wife Sim, knew what it was like to have persevered with steely resolve all these years, especially when the first foundations were only laid as late as 1997.

In late 1998, the first six modules with some 16,000 square metres of exhibition space of the proposed 14 modules were established with most of the basic infrastructure in place.

Part of the cultural centre housing Ib's living quarters with an open deck on a choice rocky promontory, about 10 minutes' walk from the museum proper, is also operational.

The museum was built with minimal disruption to the ecological heritage of the environs.

With several of Ib's major works bequeathed to the museum and the rich heritage of natural resources and wildlife, it is truly a living museum-in-the-rainforest.

Even the place itself is testosterone-charged with potent aphrodisiacs like tongkat ali, rancang besi, derhaka guru, mak mertua and perapat, not to mention wild (sleeper) orchids.

It is also the natural habitat for a menagerie of colugo (kubong), monkeys, civet cats and flying squirrels besides some 2,000 species of birds including eagles and hornbills.

In the Andaman Sea, which it faces, whales, turtles and the Indo-Pacific dolphins have been spotted regularly.

The opening was also an eye-opener to the kind of pursuit of creative excellence among Lifa participants of various disciplines.

Adding to the gaiety were cameo performances from Balinese topeng

dancers I Nyoman Kariasa and I Wayan Sira, the woodwind quintet of the Cebu Youth Symphony Orchestra as well as Lewis Pragasam on drums and John Kaizan on his shakahuchi.

Others who had performed during the 10-day spell were the Spanish doyenne of flamenco La Chunga with Paco Prada (sans his guitar), the Thang Long "mua roi nuoc" (water puppet theatre), Aida Redza and Dancers, flautist Andrea Griminelli with his gold-tipped muramatzu flute, and Filipina Ingrid Sala on the ivory keys.

Most of the artists created in their own inimitable and diverse ways works inspired by the island, its natural beauty and people and enchanting fables.

The works of the Lifa artists are shown on the lower tier, while the upper tier is devoted to more recent works by Ib.

Although all art-making materials were supplied, some artists prefer more local materials such as black sand and burnt rice (Chuah Chong Yong) and the 550-million-year rocks (Eddie Lui).

The Gapena congress and a photography exhibition led by Eric Peris were also part of this first Lifa.

The festival, a celebration of the arts and nature, will alternate with the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace show, which is held every two years.

Ib, first in establishing his museum and now this "global village" celebration of life, has again painted something spectacular and as meaningful, beyond his canvas - with strokes of care, sharing and excellence, and a spirit that is as pure as the blood spilled by the legendary Mahsuri more than seven generations ago.

Lifa is organised by the IHMCF with the support of the Kedah Government and the Langkawi Development Authority, with the New Straits Times as one of the major sponsors.

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