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Time to enrich Malaysian art

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SUPER rich Malaysians should lock in some legacy to the country. Give back, tangibly, to enrich, perpetuate and develop our arts, and our own people. At one time, in the go-go days before the 1997 Asian economic firestorm, Malaysia was at the height of exciting changes so reminiscent of America in the 1950s, when the Rockefellers, Gettys, Guggenheims, Mellons helped transform the United States from a cultural desert into an oasis.

In KL, mega-projects had been realised and others were coming on-stream. We now have the RM9 billion Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, a light rail system that links the greater part of the Federal Capital with the suburbs, and the new Federal administrative centre, Putrajaya.

A new creme of jet-owning corporate tycoons, purpose-built national and private-foundation museums and theatres under construction, the Multimedia Super Corridor that would leapfrog Malaysia into the Third Millennium. So much energy and enthusiasm in Malaysians.

But the economic contagion that ravaged Asia's new wealth had destroyed many a fortune and even upset the New Economic Policy formbook.

There is so much for us to do: to research our roots, re-invent ourselves.

In Malaysian art development, after 44 years of Independence, we can look back on the individuals, local institutions and Foreign Government agencies, which had helped to create our raw talents.

These include the British Council, Goethe-Institut, Australian High Commission, Alliance Francaise and Japan Foundation, which provided space, exposure, programmes and exchanges like scholarships, grants and awards, to groom talented Malaysians in the formative years, and even today.

Often, such support is individual-driven.

The British Council's William Emslie, Goethe's Hans Sallmann (1937-92) and Gerhard Engelking, Australian High Commission's Neil Manton and Chris Freeman, AF's Jean Francois Lebranch and Christophe Arnaud (info attache), Japan's Motokatsu Watanabe and Kazuo Endo, among them.

While the British link goes back a long way, the incredible network right to the grassroots is with Australia, where the cultural intercourse changed dramatically with Gough Whitlam's turnaround from the 'White Australia' xenophobia in 1973, and especially from the 1980s when a myriad of programmes started reaching out to South-east Asia.

The Australian Cultural Awards for prominent Malaysians; the biennial Artists Regional Exchange (ARX) started in 1987 (now defunct); the Canberra School of Art artist-in-residency (Wong Hoy Cheong and Redza Piyadasa); and the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1993, 1996 and 1999; the Adelaide Arts Festival; and Asialink.

The South-east Asian Textiles exhibition, and the 1991 International Art Conference on Modernist and Post-Modernist Art in Asia, were landmark events, both held in Canberra.

Manton, now 61, did much when he was the AHC's consul and counsellor (administration) in Kuala Lumpur in 1985-87, and actively promotes Malaysian art in Canberra, and in his capacity as consultant and competition judge.

In art, people-to-people relationship between Malaysia and Australia is excellent, and the traffic is now more two-way.

The artist's residency programmes at the Mara Institute of Technology, Galeri Petronas (Brian Ash and currently Michelin Lee), and the National Art Gallery (Lisa Roet) all have artists from Australia!

Rimbun Dahan, the one-year residency programme started by Hijjas and Angela Kasturi for Australian-Malaysian artists since 1994, offers a unique experience of focused creative enterprise in a salubrious sanctuary.

Like Hijjas and Angela, Engelking, the current Goethe director, opened his residence at Jalan Hulu Kelang on weekends to exhibitions, alternating between Malaysian and German artists.

His predecessor, Sallmann, in Kuala Lumpur from 1984 to May 1990, organised a successful tour for Malaysian art in Germany. Sallman also co-founded the Suria String Quartet and Concert Ensemble with Winnie Cheah-Lim in 1985.

The Japan Foundation (Kokusai Koryu Kikin) established its Kuala Lumpur link in October 1989, and set up the Japan Cultural Centre in 1992. It started the Japan Festival in Kuala Lumpur in 1993, with memorable performances on kabuki and Medea (1992).

Japan's biggest contribution was her five-billion yen (then US\$24 million) donation in 1976 for the Asean Coci (committee on culture and information) to run a series of programmes geared towards "the creation of an Asean identity and community."

On the art aspect, there's the Asean Symposium and Workshop on Aesthetics; the Asean Sculpture Square project; the Asean youth (16-25) workshop and exhibition; the Asean youth sculpture workshop; and the biennial travelling exhibition of Asian paintings, photography and children's art.

The sculpture square project resulted in 37 monumental pieces (including Anthony Lau's replacement for Ariffin Ismail's damaged fibreglass work) in six Asean capital cities from 1981 to 1990.

The Philip Morris Asean Art Award, where the grand finals are alternated among participating countries, has been a great impetus to creating greater awareness of art trends and impulses in the region.

The Fukuoka Art Museum and the Singapore Art Museum have contributed to greater prestige and documentation of Asian art, with an eye more for socially and politically conscious, if "incorrect", art.

The establishment of the two major auction houses, Christie's and Sotheby's, in Singapore with twice yearly bids for South-east Asian art points to a cultural repossession of a legacy lost through plunder or past neglect.

Before the National Art Gallery (NAG) was established in 1958, the onus of co-ordination of art activities was on the Federation Arts Council.

From a RM250,000 gift by Shaw Brothers in 1962 to start the ball rolling for the building of a permanent NAG, the dream of a purpose-built national gallery was only realised last year.

Both the new NAG building off Jalan Tun Razak in Kuala Lumpur and the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation edifice on a promontory in Langkawi was launched last year by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Datuk Ibrahim used his experience in organising two Asian arts fests (for Club Mediterranee) to make his museum the host of the first Langkawi International Arts Festival (Lifa).

The NAG had the generosity of Frank Sullivan, Lee Kar Yeow, Datuk Loke Wan Tho and Australia's John Galvin, who contributed sizeable largesse of works to its treasure trove in the early years.

Sullivan, who was first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's Press secretary, also helped set up the NAG, supported local artists at his own

gallery called Samat, and organised large-scale exhibitions at home and abroad. He deserves a posthumous Datukship at least.

Englishman Peter Harris, who also set up the Wednesday Art Group, helped lay the foundation of art studies, while American Dolores Wharton, who was in Malaysia in 1960 and 1966, had donate her respectable collection of Malaysian art of the 1960s to an American university.

Others like Datuk P.G. Lim, Datuk Kington Loo, Azahari Zain, Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin, Hijjas Kasturi, Datuk Lim Chong Keat, Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard, Tan Sri Azman Hashim and Tan Sri Zain Azraai were major collectors as well as NAG trustees.

Professor William Willetts greatly augmented the scholarship on Asian ceramics.

Petronas leads the way as a true corporate citizen with its unflinching support for art (and even dance-dramas like Jentayu and Puteri Gunung Ledang), with its own art space first at Dayabumi and then its KLCC headquarters.

Maybank also has a dedicated gallery, while Bank Negara has since the 1960s amassed a huge art collection.

Public Bank was the first to have an artist-in-residence (Asa Osman, in 1985-86) and boasts of its own sculpture park, while the then Bank of Commerce (previously UAB) had Syed Thajudeen.

In the early years, the Malayan Tobacco Company (under Peter Claque), Esso, Shell, Dunlop and Lee Foundation provided the much needed funds for competitions and exhibitions.

Foundations like Toh Puan Mahani Daim's Yayasan Seni Berdaftar and the Koid Foundation are now prominent.

Individuals such as Datuk N. Parameswaran and Dr Tan Chee Khuan have also contributed tremendously as collectors and exhibition organisers, Dr Tan also as publisher, especially his own significant research on pioneer artists.

Sadly, Dr Tan is winding up his business as his wife, Khor Siau Bian, who managed his gallery for 11 years, is undergoing treatment for leukaemia.

Artist Joseph Tan is also undergoing chemotherapy for throat cancer.

Artists, either on their own or through their associations, also organised exhibitions overseas to expand their horizon, for research and networking.

The Malaysian Watercolour Organisation, under Dr Wong Seng Tong, has embarked on successful painting expeditions to Sweden and northern India. The Malaysian Artists Association, then under the late Ahmad Khalid Yusof, had made trips to Taman Negara, Tasik Cini, Bukit Cerakah and Vietnam.

A group of artists led by Choong Kam Kow, now the president of the Malaysian Institute of Art, actively takes part in the annual Asian International Art Exhibition circuit, while Yuen Chee Ling has promoted regional women's art through her exhibition entitled Her Presence in Colours.

Hopefully, a day will come when Malaysia can play benefactor more than a recipient, but first a visionary support system for artists will have to be there.

In the new global scenario, it doesn't really matter where one's from - Michelle Yeoh, Zang Toi, Jimmy Choo, Chen Yi-fei, Jacky Chan, Nam June Paik, Arundhati Roy, Gong Li, Zhang Yimou, or Kitaro.

The world's everybody's oyster.