

01/08/2002

Dr M's idea set to aid rural craft

Deborah Loh

SHAH ALAM, Wed - Traditional craftsmanship in making decorative panels may see a revival if the idea to have production centres in every district becomes a reality.

The panels, normally made of wood or tile, bear intricate designs of Islamic or Malay cultural motifs. They embellish the walls, ceilings and pillars of many a grand building, such as mosques, palaces and mansions.

But a cheaper, faster and less painstaking technique using plaster of paris to produce the panels has now been discovered.

It started with a visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the Royal Mint of Malaysia, where he saw plaster of paris being used to make moulds in the minting process.

"The Prime Minister then got an idea to use plaster of paris to make decorative panels. He saw it as a means to turn the cottage craft industry into an entrepreneurship," said Royal Mint managing director Datuk Megat Wahab Megat Abu Bakar.

However, plaster of paris did not prove lasting. Although it could be as hard and as heavy as rock after setting, it would crumble over time.

"What we needed was a bonding agent," Megat Wahab said.

And on Dr Mahathir's visit to Morocco in April, the "secret ingredient" was found.

"We visited craft centres where they made panels out of tile, wood and plaster of paris," said Megat Wahab, who was in the Prime Minister's entourage. Wood fibre, processed into soft cotton-like mesh, was used with plaster of paris. The craftsmen would pour liquid plaster into rubber moulds, spreading it to fill every curve and crevice of the design, and then place the wood fibre on top and press it into the plaster.

"When Dr Mahathir saw this, he suggested we use oil palm fibres," Megat Wahab said.

Sure enough, it worked. But first, the mint sent a team of its staff and designers back to Morocco to conduct more research.

"Our designer and Sirim Bhd worked on it using oil palm fibres ... and here is the result," Megat Wahab said while Royal Mint design consultant Yahya Ibrahim brought out two panels he designed. One was a panel with khat (Islamic calligraphy) and the other was a bust of a sculpture.

The advantage of plaster of paris over wood and tile is the speed at which the finished product can be completed.

While craftsmen must chip away at tiles or carefully scrape away wood shavings, plaster of paris is merely poured into pre-fabricated moulds and sets in about half an hour.

"Because it is poured into moulds, you can customise the moulds into any design you want," said Megat Wahab. "Imagine how this one product can serve numerous clients - mosques, government buildings, houses, hotels, even pre-fab casts for accident victims."

The craft is a big cottage industry in Morocco but is slow and labour-intensive, done completely by hand.

"Here we have the technology to produce the craft quickly. Technology might also be the way to save the traditional arts, which are slowly dying along with the older generation of craftsmen," Megat Wahab said.

With the know-how and technology available, the question now was how to create an industry out of making plaster of paris panels.

Megat Wahab said a big problem was that handicraft in Malaysia was a

part-time industry with a very select market.

His idea is to implement the concept of "one district, one product", an expansion of the "one village, one product" model used in Thailand to help the rural poor.

Each district would thus have a plaster of paris craft centre.

"Going by districts, there will be a wider market for the craftsmen to cater to. Also, with over 100 districts nationwide, more entrepreneurs and jobs can be created."

Megat Wahab said the Prime Minister would soon be briefed on his ideas.