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## Making history

Sharifah Al-Attas

WITH the opening of its Conservation Centre, the first of its kind in the country, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia makes history by marking time. SHARIFAH AL-ATTAS writes.

LABORATORY coats. Quarantine quarters. Treatment tables. Phials and potions.

A hospital? Yes - and no.

"This is Malaysia's first and only conservation and training centre," says Friedrich Zink, head of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia's Conservation Centre. To be opened on Wednesday by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Kuala Lumpur centre focuses on the materials dominating the IAMM collection: paper, textiles, metal, ceramics, glass.

"We have much in common with the medical profession," continues the 56-year-old German. "I'm almost jealous of it because medical professionals can talk with their patients. We can't.

"But we can listen. Objects always have a story. We just need to understand their language.

"That's the purpose of training - so future conservators successfully interpret the words of the objects they see."

Few conservation tools are made specifically for conservation, says Zink. "We use equipment originally for hospitals, human and animal. Our rotation motors, for cleaning artefacts, are from the dentist's!

"A visitor to our laboratory, therefore, will see tools he's familiar with, used in a decidedly unfamiliar way."

When an object arrives at the IAMM, it is received by curatorial/conservation in a 'handling room'. There, it is photographed before, during and after unpacking, catalogued and subject to a condition report.

"Conservation is partly like giving you an identity card," says Zink. "Yours lists name, date and place of birth, height, weight, colour of hair and eyes. So, too, a curatorial catalogue provides information about an artefact - storyline, description.

"Conservation looks at condition: Was it damaged in transit? Is it infested with insects?"

From the handling room, an object may go directly to storage or display; to 'first' first-aid before quarantine, to avoid infesting the conservation area; to quarantine; or to conservation for first-aid and action.

After quarantine, it can go to storage/ display, or for further treatment. What form the latter takes depends on object material and condition.

"A bound manuscript may be damaged by mould," says Zink, "which should be removed before the quarantine room. Quarantine is a period in which to establish there is no danger of further infestation.

"Books, for example, are sometimes infested with silverfish. These will be fumigated in quarantine."

According to Zink, the IAMM's first 10 conservators recently completed the conservation centre's maiden six-month basic training programme. They will now move to specific areas of the museum.

"The training course worked with modern objects, recreating conservation conditions," says Zink.

How many objects has the centre so far conserved?

"Conservation is not an assembly line, on which you're paid by the piece!" smiles Zink. "So it's difficult to say how many objects the centre's conserved.

"Besides, each object is unique in its problems and solutions. So each takes its own time."

He does reveal, though, that the centre has been entrusted with conserving three scrolls from the National University of Singapore; and has treated 50 or 60 objects from the IAMM collection.

The museum, under the direction of Syed Mohamad Albukhary, has signed MoUs involving conservation with two Malaysian universities. "Now," says Zink, "we are working out the conservation curriculum."

Museums are relatively new outside Europe, observes Zink. "Southeast Asia lacks training facilities. In Malaysia, there are many Government and private museums and conservation colleagues doing excellent work. But they've never had the chance for formal training, officially recognised.

"The community here is extremely skilled. But, to date, the possibility of exchanging views was lacking. Our intention is to provide a platform for dialogue within Malaysia's conservation community."

Why conserve?

"A tree without roots is in a precarious position," says Zink. "At the slightest breeze it's threatened with collapse.

"The same is true of society.

"Understanding our past helps us understand our present. Learning the lessons of history helps make a better future."

\* The IAMM on Jalan Lembah Perdana, Kuala Lumpur, is open Tuesday-Sunday, and on public holidays, 10am-6pm. Tel: 03-2274-2020.

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