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## Stamp of identity

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WILL stamps become obsolete in the face of frenetic advances in communications technology where e-mails and SMSes are fast replacing handwritten letters?

And haven't courier services such as Pos Malaysia Bhd's PosLaju (however not laju it might be), FedEx and DHL also been fittering the traditional postal market away?

A special grade lecturer in graphic design and digital media at UiTM doesn't think so. Professor Datuk Raja Zahabuddin Raja Yaacob, who has a task most philatelists can only dream of, believes postage stamps will be around for a while yet.

They are still an important source of income for the country while the commemorative ones serve to document important moments in history. Furthermore, stamps often serve as a symbol of the nation's identity, he says.

A stamp collector himself, Raja Zahabuddin, who turns 55 today, has been designing commemorative stamps for Pos Malaysia since 1982.

"We've not actually looked at it that way (stamps becoming obsolete)," he admits. "I will bring this up to the board at our next meeting."

He was referring to the Malaysian Stamp Advisory Board on which he is a committee member. He's also the chairman of the Stamp Design Committee.

Raja Zahabuddin also wants to present his design committee with suggestions on how stamps could be used to project the identity of the country.

"Take, for example, the British stamps," he says. "The country's name isn't even printed on them. Even if the subject on the stamp is just a silhouette of the bust of the Queen, we automatically know it is a British stamp.

"Why can't we have that also? We can use the tengkolok or the Chap Mohor, something that is synonymous with Malaysia."

The veteran designer notes that works of Malaysian artists have yet to be used on stamps as well.

"Definitive" stamps - those that are in normal use - currently in circulation feature agriculture as a subject. Designs are changed every five years with the next one being due in August 2004 where the subject will be Malaysian birds.

Raja Zahabuddin designs the entire package - stamps, first day covers and brochures, presentation pack covers, posters and special cancellations (special purpose post marks).

The commemorative stamps he has designed include those which mark the International Year of the Homeless (1983), the 33rd International Conference of the Commonwealth Parliament (1984), and the official opening of the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Mosque (1988) in Shah Alam.

He also designed stamps covering the installations of the IX Yang DiPertuan Agong (1989), the X Yang DiPertuan Agong (1994) and the XII Yang DiPertuan Agong (2002). Then there are designs for occasions like 30 years of Asean (1996), 100 years of the Conference of the Malay Rulers (1996), Malaysian Artifacts and Arts (1998), and the coronation of the ninth Sultan of Selangor (2003).

The UiTM don was asked to design stamps to commemorate the 10th anniversary of Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur in 1982 but that was not a personal commission - he had tapped the capabilities of his UiTM graphics students for that. The students were asked to come up with several designs to be submitted to Pos Malaysia.

"We submitted three designs, with a monorail as the subject. They (Pos Malaysia) liked it," he says.

Other stamp designers, most of whom were from the advertising agencies, were also invited to make submissions.

As a stamp designer, Raja Zahabuddin explains, he not only has to come up with the design concept but also to source appropriate pictures and determine the text to be used.

One rule in designing local stamps is that no image of people could be used as a subject except for heads of state or government. However, an exception was made for the national scholar Zainal Abidin Ahmad, better known as Za'aba.

"I don't know why the exception, but if I were to use an image of a person other than the heads of state or government in a design, it would be an art work."

An avid photographer who does not believe in digital cameras ("digital is not pure photography," he declares), Raja Zahabuddin takes his own photographs with his trusty SLR camera, a Nikon FM2.

Upon being commissioned by Pos Malaysia, he says he only needs a week or less to come up with some kind of idea as to what would appear on the stamps. Time is usually needed only for such things as sourcing for photographs and other particulars.

"Once we received approval for a picture only two weeks before going to print."

In his early stamp-designing years, Raja Zahabuddin had to do it the hard way - manually superimposing images by cutting and pasting them on boards.

These days, with computers, he starts by conceptualising a design in a thumbnail size, measuring 30 mm by 40 mm, which is the actual dimensions of the stamp. The word "Malaysia" in Times font is the first to be added.

"Previously when we didn't have computers, I had to do letter transferring. Now, I simply typeset on the computer."

Then, he would blow up the thumbnail image by between five to 15 times to add the artwork. When this is done, the image is reduced back to the thumbnail size.

The stamps are printed at the Percetakan Keselamatan Negara. "They are like cheque books. Security printing is needed."

Many jobs are commissioned at "the last minute" and as such cannot be sent overseas for printing. Also, there are too many commemorative issues in a year. For overseas printing, a design is sent to the printers at least six months ahead of the date of issue.

"You can tell the quality of print. The difference is in the finishing," he says. Overseas printing used to be carried out in the UK, Holland and New Zealand.

Despite being a member of the Perak royal household (the late Sultan Idris Shah was his first cousin), Raja Zahabuddin says he could not hide his nervousness when he had to present his work on the stamps to commemorate the 100 years of the Conference of the Malay Rulers to the Sultans.

"My knees went weak when I entered the conference room where they were meeting. The designs were passed from one Sultan to another. Some Sultans were represented by the Tengku Mahkota. Menteri Besar of the respective States were there too.

"When it reached the then Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad, he looked at me as if to size me up.

"Then he asked, 'Pakai komputer?'. I nodded and he said, 'Bagus'. Boy, was I relieved! There were no complaints. Everyone said it was cantik.

Raja Zahabuddin says, however, that his most satisfying job to date was to design the entire package to commemorate the official opening of the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Mosque in Shah Alam.

"I was the first person to take a photograph of the mosque before it was officially opened. The mosque was also specially lit up one night before the official opening so that I could take night shots," he adds, obviously still thrilled by the privilege.

So good were his pictures that the architect of the mosque dome made a request to purchase all of the slides.

"The pictures were used in an article in Malaysia Airlines' inflight publication Wings of Gold," he says. "It so happened that the architect read it on board a MAS flight. He contacted the publisher and asked to buy all the slides. I sent the slides to a Birmingham address and a week later got a cheque for RM4,500."

Raja Zahabuddin has also acquired a "celebrity" status of sorts. He had dropped by a post office to buy first day covers, when "someone pointed me out as the designer of the stamp".

Philatelists lost no time in requesting for his autograph on the covers.

"I asked one of them why, he said that it (the cover) could fetch a good price later."

Imagine what Raja Zahabuddin's first-day cover on the 100 years of the Conference of the Malay Rulers could be worth now if it had been autographed by all the Sultans!

Twenty years ago, when he was first commissioned to design stamps, he was paid RM5,000.

Now, he says, commissions can be quite lucrative. Payment to designers depend on how and what is used in designing the stamps.

"For example, payment also depends on the kind of illustration, although I believe the rates should be standardised.

"Some people don't understand what illustration means. It is not simply a drawing, or a photograph or silkscreen. It's the concept and idea."

As a stamp designer, he is critical of some designs which would not get past the Stamp Design Committee.

"As a designer, I look out for these flaws."

He cites the stamps featuring Malaysia's second Prime Minister, the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, as an example.

"There were too many words on the stamps and one would not be able to read the text even by using a magnifying glass.

"If it had gone to the design panel, we would not have approved it."

Another flaw in design which he has noted is of envelopes that are far too small to fit in the brochures.

Raja Zahabuddin is also an artist, with his photo-montage works currently on display at UiTM Art Gallery.

Of his three children, only Raja Zefrli, 22, a mass communications student at UiTM is showing interest in pursuing a career in art and design. Raja Zulfiz, 20, is studying computer science also at UiTM, while Raja Zahira, 17, has just sat for her Form Five exams.

Raja Zahabuddin has certainly turned stamp-collecting and photography into something more than just a hobby.

But he still pursues one activity with no thought whatsoever about pecuniary rewards, and which sometimes takes him away from his wife Datin Zuraidah Jamaluddin.

"I like fishing, especially deep sea," he reveals. "It teaches patience. As an educator, I need to be patient when dealing with students. Fishing allows me to practise deep concentration and discipline. Otherwise I return empty-handed."