

LIFE & TIMES

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# PLUSH



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## Art in miniatures

LOOKING AT STAMP ART ON WORLD POST DAY

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**A** MAN, hunched over some artwork, looks through a magnifier and examines the images of a Clouded Leopard. Raising his head, he senses that something isn't right. He talks to the artist and tells him to go back to Zoo Negara, observe the animal and redo the paintings. After all, these artworks will eventually become part of a series of postage stamps.

This, in essence, is what happened when G. Ramalingam (better known as Rama) oversaw the process that resulted in a series of stamps on the Clouded Leopard. Even though he retired as the deputy general manager of Pos Malaysia more than 18 years ago, Rama is still able to explain this process and the history of why we're celebrating World Post Day today.

In 1969, the Universal Postal Congress in Tokyo, under the auspices of the United Nations, declared Oct 9 as World Post Day. It marks the anniversary of the creation of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in 1874 which allowed people to write to others all over the world. Since Malaysia became a member of UPU in January 1958, we, too, celebrate World Post Day every year.

**SPECIAL INTEREST**

Shuffling a few sheets of postage stamps, Rama looks for the ones of the Clouded Leopard while revealing that he joined the postal services department soon after he completed his basic schooling. Before the question can be posed, Rama says: "Don't ask me why the postal services department."

No matter what the answer to the question is, Rama's certain that at some time during his 37-year-career, he began to develop a special interest in the production of stamps. The eyes of this 73-year-old grandfather of two light up when he shares: "There are four types of stamps. The first is Definitive Stamps which are issued once every five years or so. Then, there are Commemorative Stamps to celebrate important national and international events. There are also Thematic Stamps which are normally for flora and fauna. The last are Revenue Stamps."

Where the Clouded Leopard stamps are an example of a Thematic Stamp, Commemorative Stamps are the kind produced for a project called 100 Years Of X-Ray. The person whose company was selected to design these stamps was Md Jun Idris, the owner of Hazel Design. The two men take a moment to search their minds when asked when they first met. "1988," they both eventually concur, the year when Rama was the director of operations at Pos Malaysia.

# STAMP OF ART

Creating the artwork for a postage stamp is a challenging undertaking, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



The Clouded Leopard stamps.



G. Ramalingam (left) and Md Jun Idris.

**HARDSHIPS AND LESSONS**

While Rama thumbs through a recent edition of the Standard Stamp catalogue of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei in search of those Clouded Leopard stamps, Jun shares his story growing up in Gombak.

"We lived in a..." he says and pauses to search for the word, before saying: "...*Setinggan* (squatters). There was no electricity. No water." Pointing to a lantern on the shelf behind him, he adds: "We used to use the kerosene lamp for light. And water from the well." Because there was no money

for luxuries, he used the Sabun Cap Kapak soap for his baths. Smiling at my surprised look, because this blue bar of soap is often used to clean laundry, he adds: "Many thought I was *gila* (mad). But that was normal for me."

In spite of all the hardships, Jun cherishes these experiences. In fact, he now collects and displays things, like a kerosene lamp, all around his office to remind him of his childhood. Playing with a lock of his long hair, he adds: "I also loved to collect posters. David Bowie. Bob Marley. I like to look at the design of these posters."



Special stamps to commemorate the installation of the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Dr Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, on May 6, 2015.



After school, Jun pursued a number of odd jobs, from working in a factory to a stint in advertising. However, it's as a despatch clerk that he learnt the important lesson of how to properly communicate with people which resulted in a belief that nothing is impossible.

**SEEN ALL OVER THE WORLD**

When Rama comes across the images of the stamps for the 100 Years Of X-Ray project in the catalogue, Jun shares the process, explaining that the first step involved research. Enlisting the help

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Flora and fauna belong in the Thematic Stamps category.

submitted to Rama and his team at Pos Malaysia.

"(These stamps were) a miniature piece of art that would be seen all over the world," says Jun, describing his sense of achievement when this project was over. Since then, he's worked on more than 100 projects for Pos Malaysia.

The challenges in designing artwork for stamps can be manifold including getting the names of what Jun's creating correct. For the fruit commonly known as beruas, it's imperative that Jun gets the scientific name of *Garcinia hombroniana* right. It can also be tiresome to have to deal with various people from different departments. "Everyone has their opinion," he adds.

Then there was the time he worked on the design to commemorate the 46th National Day. Stamp collectors insisted that Jun's drawings were wrong because there were only 13 lines there when the Malaysian flag actually contains 14 stripes. "They wanted Pos Malaysia to redraw," shares Jun. "This means that the stamps would become collectors' items." Since the photograph he took from which the artwork was created showed that the flag was flying, Jun stood his ground. Also, it's illogical for a flag on a flagpole to remain so flat that every strip is visible. His defence was accepted and the stamps weren't withdrawn.

**WORK OF ART**

When Rama leaves the room momentarily, Jun uses the opportunity to speak of his gratitude for their long-standing friendship. He confides: "Rama is my number one friend. He's humble and never scolds." Maintaining a smile that suggests that he's kept the best for last, Jun then opens a beautiful folder containing some magnificent postage stamps and miniatures. They showcase the designs he created to

**STAMP-MAKING PROCESS**

WHEN approval is given to Pos Malaysia by the relevant authorities to produce a particular kind of postage stamp, it can take anywhere between three and six months to complete the process.

Based on the theme or topic chosen, artists pitch their ideas to come up with suitable designs.

Once commissioned, the artist will prepare the visuals to be submitted to various experts in the specific industry of the chosen theme or topic. They determine the accuracy of the visuals and, if needed, the artist will have re-do the work, based on the experts' feedback. When the experts are satisfied, they'll endorse the visuals.

Pos Malaysia then asks security printers registered with them

to submit a tender to print the postage stamps.

Today, the printing process used is called "offset lithography" where the inked image is transferred from a plate to a rubber "blanket", then to the printing surface.

"Proof sheets" are prepared of the actual postage stamps which are submitted to Pos Malaysia for its approval. Once they're approved, the printer proceeds to print the postage stamps on watermarked paper used by Pos Malaysia.

When complete, the sheets are perforated to the required size, neatly cut, packed and delivered to Pos Malaysia.

Source: Wikipedia and G. Ramalingam

celebrate the installation of the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Dr Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, on May 6, 2015.

Highlighting the classical design of these postage stamps, Jun points out some of their special elements. Usually, it's only the image of the Sultan that's visible and the space above the head is left empty. Inspired by the Royal Crest, Jun decided, instead, to add the *awan larat* motif in his design and says: "That was the design from the *singgasana* (throne)."

Also, a technique called five-colour printing was used when printing these postage stamps. Interestingly, it's one of the few stamps where a ruler's consort is included. No doubt, these

limited edition pieces were sold-out within an hour of being issued.

The door opens and Rama returns with an earlier edition of the catalogue mentioned before. Turning to the page where the Clouded Leopard postage stamps are listed, we pause to admire the work.

As the minutes ticked, I pose my final question: In this technological era, why not use a photograph? Why go through the whole rigmarole of getting an artist to do all that work?

Aghast, Rama looks at me and shakes his head vigorously before concluding firmly: "Any image we accept is reproduced to exact detail by everyone involved. A postage stamp is a work of art."