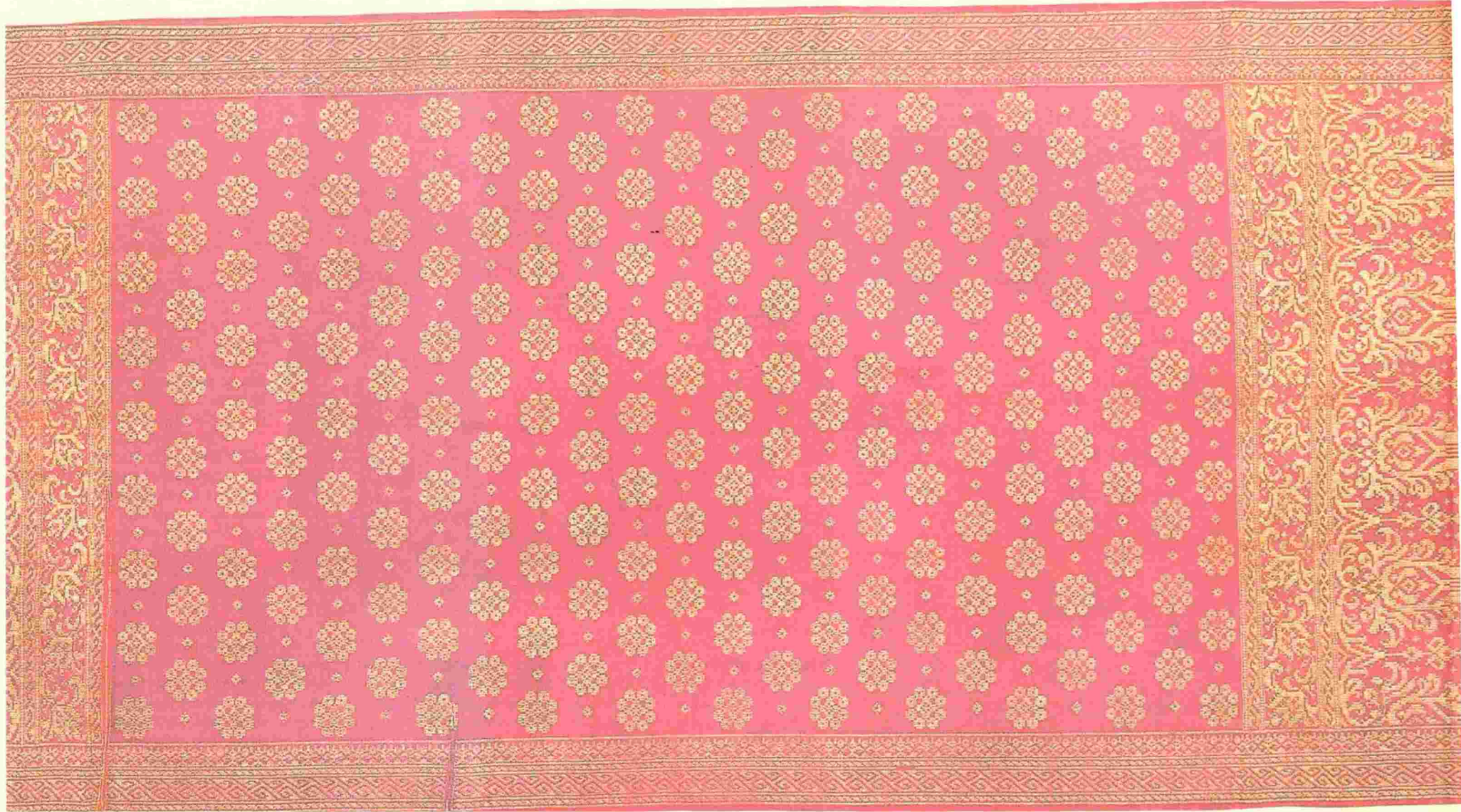


LIFE&TIMES **HERITAGE**



Songket — Silk Shawl. Fuschia. Featuring *pucuk rebung lawi ayam* (bamboo shoot with cockerel's tail) and *bunga tampuk kesemak* (persimmon corolla) motif.

Grandeur of decorated textiles

These vintage textiles, which play central roles in ceremonies and rituals in the Malay culture, will be featured in an exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia next month, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

OBSERVE traditional Malay weddings, especially among royalty or nobility.

"That's when you might see the family's heirlooms in the form of the textiles on display," says Adline Abdul Ghani, 35, curator at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM). The bridal couple's attire would be made of songket, the ceremonial items decorated with tekat and some of the guests' clothes might use fabric called tenun.

Decorated and woven textiles play central roles in ceremonies and rituals in the Malay culture. Exquisite works of art, they add to the element of luxury and attest to the meticulous skill of the artisans.

Recognising their importance, the IAMM is putting together an exhibition called Tradition And Continuity: Woven And Decorated Textiles Of The Malay Peninsula.

Other than songket, tenun and



"A textile is never just a piece of cloth, you know. It's a social statement and it has its own story."
Raja Datin Paduka Fuziah Raja Tun Uda

tekat, the exhibition will also display lesser-known textiles such as limar, kelengkapan and telepuk.

"Such an exhibition helps people of various backgrounds and the young to understand the

Tekat — Betel nut tray box. Velvet embroidered with tekat technique. Featuring *bungakekwa* (*chrysanthemum*) motif.



importance of these beautiful textiles. It helps them appreciate the history and cultural significance of Malay textiles," says Raja Datin Paduka Fuziah Raja Tun Uda, the first Director-General of the Malaysian Handicraft Association and founding member of the Asean Handicraft Promotion and Development Association.

In part, the inspiration to reintro-

duce these textiles to the public was because the techniques involved in making them are a dying art. "Some of them are almost obsolete and many died out in the 1920s because of the decline of royal patronage," explains Adline. Fuziah expands on this when she says that not many people today are



time we start finding occasions to use these pieces.”

Brushing aside the notion that these textiles might be considered “old”, Fuziah says: “If it’s looked after properly, it’ll be as good as new. For my daughter’s wedding, I borrowed tekak items from a friend. She used it during her marriage in 1958. But, it’s so well looked after that it still looked like new in 2003.” In other words, such fabrics are not old, but vintage textiles.

The problem for those wanting to learn the techniques of these art forms is the complexity. “First, we don’t have any written records about these textiles,” says Adline. “Maybe we can find some stories from epics like the one about the warrior queen, Che Siti Wan Kembang of Kelantan. We do a lot of guesswork and seek help from the experts. For instance, from Fuziah, we’ve learnt that the designs after World War 2 are less complicated because weavers were probably displaced and materials too expensive.”

One must keep in mind, Adline adds, that, “weaving is a product of excess and could only be done when the women were free”.

“Like when it was the monsoon or when there was surplus food and money. All the material had to come from overseas. We have no cotton mills and no silk. I’ve seen those rivers in Terengganu. They’re so wide and I’m sure that when ships sailed past, these villagers must have bought all the material from the traders.”

To compound these problems, Adline relates a story about how guarded weavers are about sharing their expertise.

“The other expert who worked with us, Associate Professor Dr Norwani Md. Nawawi of Universiti Teknologi Mara, told us about a

makcik who refused to take part in a weaving demonstration saying it was difficult. But, the next day, she wove perfectly. When Dr Norwani enquired about it, she said, “*Datang dalam mimpi makcik* (it came in a dream).”

Obviously, compiling data for this exhibition was a challenge, which is why IAMM remains indebted to the work of the late Sharifah Azah Syed Mohammad Alsagoff (fondly known as Azah Aziz). “We have dedicated this exhibition to her memory,” says Adline. “She understood and championed the importance of Malay textiles and dress more than anyone else.”

Turning the pages of a beautiful book by the late Azah Aziz titled *Rupa Dan Gaya: Busana Melayu*, Adline says: “She helped us identify many of the textiles in our collection and also entrusted us with several pieces from her private collection. Some of them are featured in this book.”

Furthermore, IAMM values the support it received from Prince’s School of Traditional Arts, London



Limar — Sarong. Silk. Predominantly purple, adorned with *pucuk rebung lawi ayam* (bamboo shoot with cockerel’s tail) motif and *teluk berantai* (chained bays) pattern.

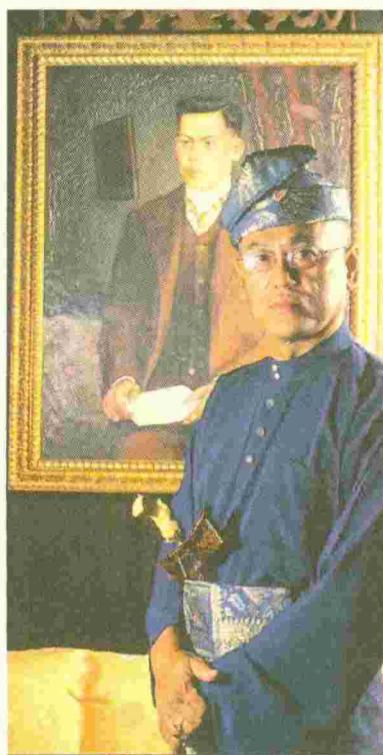


Tenun — Sarong. Silk. Olive brown, featuring yellow, purple and white stripes.



Telepuk — Sarong. Satin decorated in telepuk technique. Featuring *pucuk rebung tunjuk langit* (bamboo shoot pointing to the sky) motif.

(PSTA). PSTA was founded in 2004 by the Prince of Wales as one of his core charities and works on practical solutions to overcome the threat of further extinction of the world’s sacred traditions and traditional artforms. Indeed, Adline proudly shares: “The



The late **Tengku Ismail Tengku Su** promoted songket as a hallmark of Malay culture and identity.

Prince has written the foreword for the catalogue which accompanies this exhibition.”

She then recalls the exhibition hosted by PSTA in London called *Royal Weaves: Traditional Textile Arts Of Malaysia* in June 2011. “I attended this together with the late Tengku Ismail Tengku Su.”

Tengku Ismail used to invite weavers from the surrounding villages in Terengganu to work with him on songket designs inspired by his family’s heritage. In time, he promoted songket as a hallmark of Malay culture and identity. In addition to remembering Tengku Ismail, a special segment of this exhibition will also show how the visual aesthetics of Malay textiles have inspired designers from PSTA.

Fuziah adds: “Textile is never just a piece of cloth, you know. It’s a social statement and it has its own story. The weaver had special skills; the designs and motifs mean something. We must respect its social relevance.” This need for respect comes from answering an all-important question, “Do I have the right to own this?”

“Let me explain,” she says. “When I first started to work and had spare cash, I used to visit pawn shops and buy traditional pieces of jewellery like *Nyonya kerongsang*. One day, my mother asked why I was not wearing what she’d given me. I told her that they were too beautiful and contemporary. My mother said that what I was doing wasn’t right. ‘You’re using something that belonged to somebody and she had to part with it,’ she said. I argued that by buying it, I was giving her money. But, my mother said that it may be the woman had to sell it to feed her family. She might be divorced. So, when buying something like this, I’m also acquiring someone else’s sadness. There was ‘parting’ attached to these items.” Shaking her head, Fuziah says: “I’ve never been back to a pawn shop. And that’s the same way I feel about heirloom pieces like sarong and songket.”

Ultimately, the effort both women have put into this exhibition under-

FINE THINGS

LIMAR
Limar is a single weft-ikat textile from Terengganu and Kelantan. Woven only of silk, limar is the preserve of nobility as it employs costly materials and is especially tedious to create. Sadly, limar has become virtually obsolete.

SONGKET
Songket, woven of silk or cotton, with supplementary metallic yarns, is the ceremonial fabric of choice during royal installations, formal functions and Malay weddings. In Malaysia, songket is produced mainly in Terengganu and Kelantan.

TENUN
In the 16th Century, a master weaver from Sulawesi migrated to Pahang and introduced the art of tenun. Today, his descendant, Nortipah Abdul Kadir, is the sole recipient of the title *Adiguru* (Master) of the Royal Weave of Pahang. Tenun is woven of silk or cotton and features mainly striped or checked patterns.

TEKAT
Tekak timbul is a form of raised couched embroidery. The materials needed to prepare it are metallic and cotton threads, velvet and cardboard. *Tekak* is used to decorate items associated with palaces and special events, such as coronations, weddings and the reception of royal guests.

KELINGKAN
Kelingkan is an embroidery technique. First, the base fabric must be starched and stretched onto a wooden frame. Then, the design is traced onto the fabric with a pencil. Using a stitch known as *tikam tembus*, the embroidery is created using metallic ribbon. When complete, this ribbon is flattened with a smooth stone or cowry shell.

TELEPUK
Telepuk is a method of decorating Malay fabric with gold leaf. At first, the fabric is rubbed with beeswax and a cowry shell to produce a flat and shiny surface. This process is called *gerus* or *calendaring*. Glue is then applied on a carved wood or metal block which will be pressed onto the fabric. A piece of thin, gold leaf is pasted onto the glued areas and left to dry. Once dry, the gold leaf is brushed off and the motifs appear.

lies this: while these vintage textiles have evolved through the ages and can be used in a multitude of ways, the art of making them and the use of these textiles need to be respected to preserve their exquisite quality. Fuziah adds: “Grandeur has to match grandness or else it makes a mockery of the whole thing.”

features@nst.com.my

Tradition And Continuity

What Tradition And Continuity: Woven And Decorated Textiles Of The Malay Peninsula. The Islamic Arts Museum will conduct educational programmes throughout the duration of the exhibition.
Where Special Gallery 2 Islamic Arts Museum Jalan Lembah Perdana Kuala Lumpur
When Open to the public from March 2 until June 30 (open daily from 10am to 6pm)
Website www.iamm.org.my



willing to wear such elaborate garments on a regular basis. “I have a shawl made using the *kelingkan* technique. I’ve only worn it once in my life. When my daughter got married, she agreed to use it as part of her bridal attire. And, that’s it.” Shrugging, she adds: “Maybe, it’s