

# Indian-Malaysian cross-cultural influences

By Ooi Kok Chuen

TIME and Space — these two "worlds" virtually come together for Malaysian artist Syed Thajudeen and his Indian mentor Alphonso Dass.

Joshua S. Paul of Joshua Gallery, Kuala Lumpur's newest gallery, could scarcely have chosen a more apt title for the cross-cultural India-Malaysia exposition which features the two artists.

The exhibition was held at the Balai Seni Maybank, Menara Maybank, Kuala Lumpur recently, with Indian High Commissioner V.K. Nambier doing the opening honours.

The show also featured seven other contemporary Malaysian and Indian artists.

Alphonso was Syed Thajudeen's teacher at the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Madras, where he studied for his diploma from 1968 to 1973. Alphonso was also an alumnus, graduating in 1962.

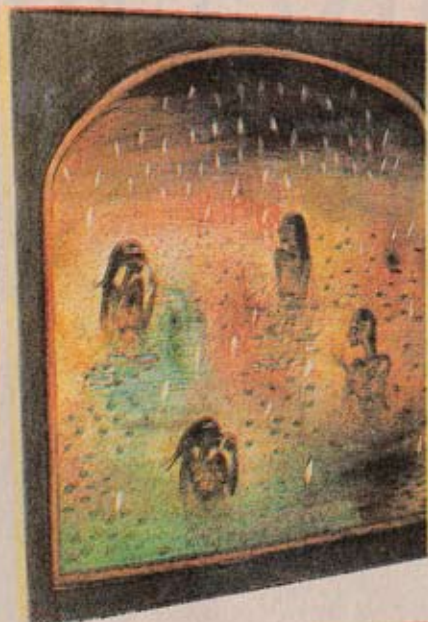
It was a pity that the teacher could not be in Kuala Lumpur to make the reunion complete.

The four other Indian artists whose works were featured were Sunil Das, Laxman Pai, P.N. Choyal and K.M. Adimoolam. Most of them were no strangers to Kuala Lumpur, having exhibited at the now defunct Idreene Gallery (at Hotel Concorde) in April last year.

Laxman held an exhibition at the National Art Gallery in May 1970.

All the artists worked in the so-called western medium, and in the modern idiom.

The Malaysian artists involved were Yusof Ghani, Yong Chien Chin and Chantherun, selected as it



**MASTER AND FORMER PUPIL: A work by the multiple award-winner Alphonso Dass of India shown beside Malaysian Syed Thajudeen's effort**

were to represent the three major racial spectrums.

Syed Thajudeen's works follow his master's concept of space, composition and style, one suffused with a mixture of symbolism and surrealism.

Both the oils of master and former student have a dream-like quality with mythical resonance, and a unity in their formal concern for balance and harmony.

Alphonso's figuratives are masks with shaded configurations, designed for symmetry and with quivering flashes of light.

Syed Thajudeen's historical narratives of the Malacca Sultanate and the ancient epics of the *Ramayana* and to a lesser extent, the *Mahabharata*, hark back to the court styles of the Mo-

guls. There is another facet to his works — some are imbued with almost a religiosity of love and freedom. These are more transparently sensual, his female figures often appearing as water nymphs or Mother Earth icons.

His maidens with slit-eyes cutting right across the face in profile and slightly longish torsos revel in a paradise of frisking deer, birds, water-lily ponds and banana trees.

Fertility and love are unifying themes. Note the works sprayed with spermatozoid squiggles seen as a "harvest" of water-lilies, and banana trees that transform into phallic symbols or vice versa.

Alphonso's works are couched in sedate, monochromatic tones as compared with the subdued

tropical hues of predominantly orange and yellow in Syed Thajudeen's palette.

There is inherent tension in Alphonso's works of shifting, overlapping images, and the litter of man-made objects like the clock, flute or hand mirror. Syed Thajudeen's works, on the other hand, are a paean to rustic tranquillity and subliminal love.

Alphonso has won the Indian Government Ministry of Education and Culture Award, International Culture Centre Award, the National Academy Award (1988) and the New Delhi Kalidash gold medal Gwalior (1968).

Syed Thajudeen, who is resident artist at the Bank of Commerce, was commissioned by the Shell Companies in Malaysia to do work for their 1990 calendar.

Another interesting comparative study concerns the way Madras-trained (Varnam Art College) Chantherun and Bombay-trained (Sir J.J. School of Art) Laxman Pai depict Indian women, with partly hidden/veiled faces and their notions of beauty and love for body ornamentation.

Chantherun's figures of enchanting beauty are often framed in an invisible rectangular format which often takes up the central third of his picture.

The faces in Laxman's works are more blurred, disfigured even. In one effort, coquettish cat-like eyes seem fused to a sinuous bed of flowery profusions in a bout of magical realism. In another work, eyes seem to emerge from the water's edge.

Chantherun's works are culled from the inspiration of the five elements that govern life, a transcendental bliss of swirling cumulus colours with the amorphous visage of a pretty face decked gleamingly in gold finery on the head, ears and around the neck.

The tumult of movement, an irrepressible energy of paint splatters and strokes, has become Yusof Ghani's trademark in his *Siri Tari* "frieze".

Chien Chin unobtrusively questions the "progress" of man as seen in the *Han Chinese*, evoking the chivalry and glory of Chin Shih Huangti's China and his buried army of terracotta warriors in Xian.

Depictions of these "heroes" and stone monument custodians/sentinels stare out of the rice-paper like voices of the past, half-mocking, half-passive.

□ The Joshua Art Gallery is located at 20, Medan Pasar, Kuala Lumpur.