

# Syed Thajudeen's tribute to women



PASTORAL AMBIENCE ... A close-up of 'Irama dan Lagu' (1995, oil on canvas)

By Ooi Kok Chuen

ARTIST Syed Thajudeen Shaik Abu Talib weaves lyrical tapestries of human desires - the joy of togetherness, and the melancholy of yearnings - in his oil-on-canvas paintings.

His works ooze with the scent of a woman and marks his life-long devotion to a theme very close to his heart - love.

"We have lost that human touch in this age of fast-food and fast sex. There is no time to love," said Syed Thajudeen, whose distinctive well-trimmed silvery-white beard reveals a neat, fastidious nature which goes with his immaculate dressing.

"God gives us this feeling of love and in a way, we are getting it through women. Hence, this exhibition (called *Paintings On Love*) is a tribute to women."

The exhibition at the Pelita Hati Gallery of Art in Kuala Lumpur is Syed Thajudeen's first solo in 20 years. Though the paintings displayed span the last 2½ years, love has been a leit motif in his repertoire since he started formal art tutelage at the Madras College of Arts and Crafts (1967-74).

A romantic, the 54-year-old bank executive is an cybernetic '90s.

In rediscovering love - its purity, sanctity, intimacy and universality - he has re-enacted a charming paradisaical fugue, one where deer and buffaloes roam and birds flit about freely, and where a day is an eternity.

Sometimes, there are slivers of eroticism as in an Oriental version of bathers (nymph-like women wading waist deep in a waterlily pond).

The luscious colours exude a quietly seductive quality, more than just coy nubile maidens in rustic surroundings.

Sinuuous figurative lines with the gentle mudras (symbolic hand gestures); puckered lips and elongated limbs and upraised shoulders; honey-hued yellow ochre backcloth exuding an antique, mystical aura; firefly glow in places with the illusion of space and highlight - these set the mood and woo the viewer into a nocturnal, private tryst.

His figures are stylised, distilled from various sources such as the Ramayana caricatures from which the wayang kulit adaptation is derived, the School of (Cheong) Sookpieng, the Cubistic-Modigliani distortions as well as Mughal miniatures in terms of style.

His large canvas (381x183cm) of five sarung-clad musicians called *Irama dan Lagu* evokes the pastoral ambience and even the tropical feel of Le Mayeur.

It's a mesmeric visual music, and the work is also faintly reminiscent of the fresco of musicians found in Aurangzeb in India.

Syed Thajudeen was born in Alagan Kulem, a hamlet 64km from Madurai in Tamil Nadu in India in 1943 when his Malaysian-born parents were there during

the war. When he was 11, he rejoined his family in Penang where they ran a canteen for immigrants quarantined at Pulau Jerajak.

After his Cambridge examinations, Syed Thajudeen returned to India in 1967 supposedly to pursue a course in either engineering or medicine.

"I had wanted to go into film-making," he recalled. But he eventually took up fine art. The kind of historical narratives and cinematic grandeur in his works belies his celluloid ambition.

His canvas takes on an "epic" mural in the nine-panelled *Malacca Sultanate* series, the two-piece Merdeka series and the Ramayana "frieze".

In his re-creation of six Malaysian fables commissioned by Shell Malaysia for its 1990 calendar, he combines folklore and fantasy in a surrealistic vein.

Such works are no flights of fancy. For the *Malacca Sultanate* series, he did research on 15th-century coins, head gear, ornaments and wrist bangles.

Such discipline and commitment are a credit to his Madras art college mentor Dr Alphonso Dass. It was in Madras that he sold his first painting entitled *Dr Faustus on the fall of Man*.

There were other indelible influences from his sojourn in India - the in Madurai, the spirit and forms of the Mahabalipuram and the Chola temples, and most of all, the "granite canvases" of the Ajanta caves with its "moss" colours which Syed Thajudeen seems to have "transplanted" onto his canvases with cotton daubs of yellow ochre, with patches of crimson lake.

His earlier works including the *Spermatozoid* series are concerned with the origins of life, the struggle and journey, and fate.

"Inside the womb, there is darkness. The space is infinite. It's a journey ... into the unknown," he said.

There are a few interesting new elements in his new works on love, excluding the *Prayer* series.

The picture-within-a-picture window casement is a scenario for the purportedly mundane things that couples do together indoors as well as the Malay architectural facades and ornamentative patterns.

Another is the infusion of local motifs and designs from the *Nusantara* textiles tradition in the kebaya or sarung. The promise of this Indianish-Islamic syncretism cannot be over-stated.

On his return again from India in March 1974, Syed Thajudeen lectured part-time on textile design and figure drawing at the Institut Teknologi Mara until 1976.

He had a stint in advertising for a year, first with Mulberry and then Trang. He then joined United Asian Bank as resident artist, working in a similar capacity when Bank of Commerce took over.

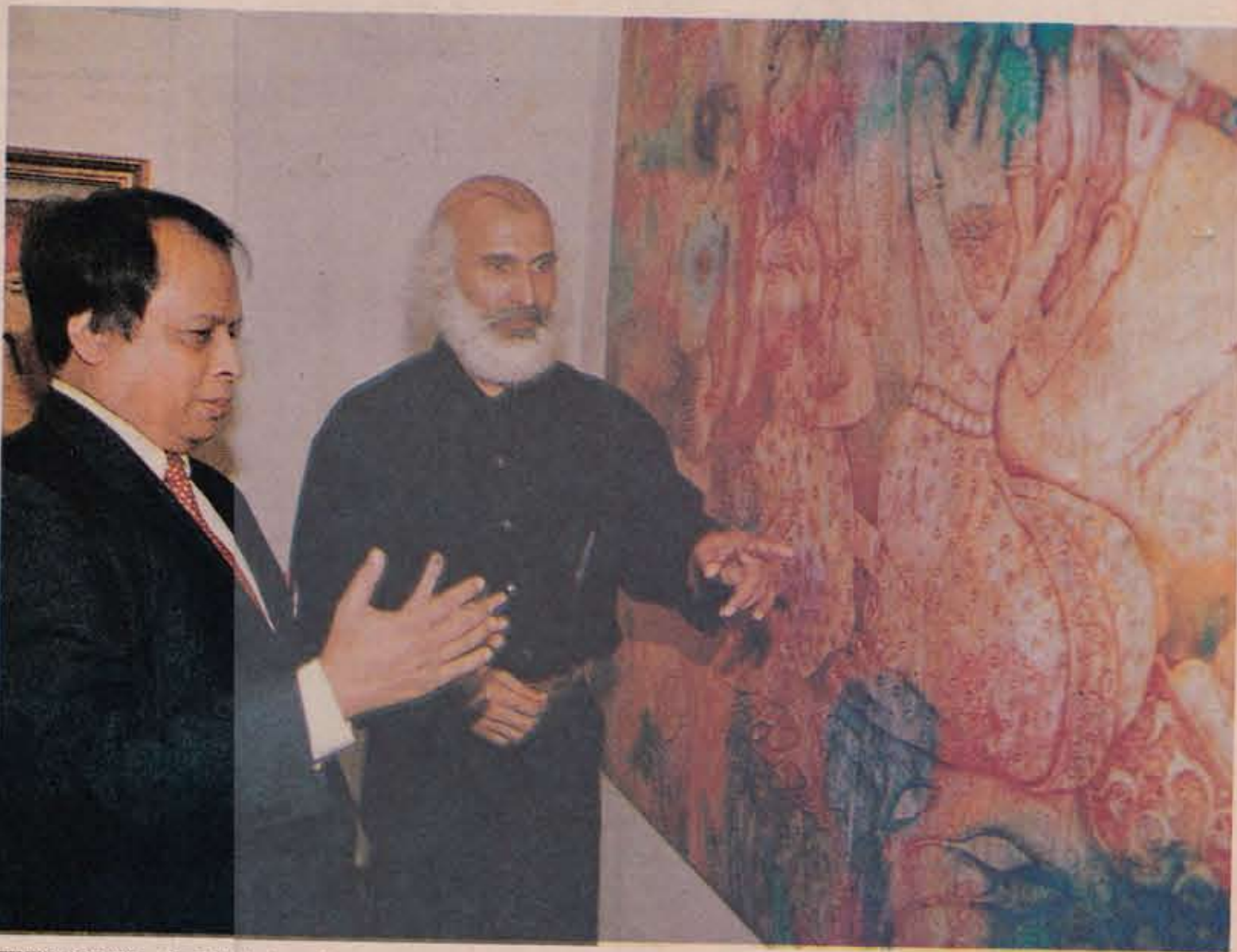
Obviously, Syed Thajudeen has gone from strength to strength in the intervening 20 years between his first two solos in 1975, first at the Penang Museum Art Gallery in May and in then in August

at Frank Sullivan's Samat Gallery.

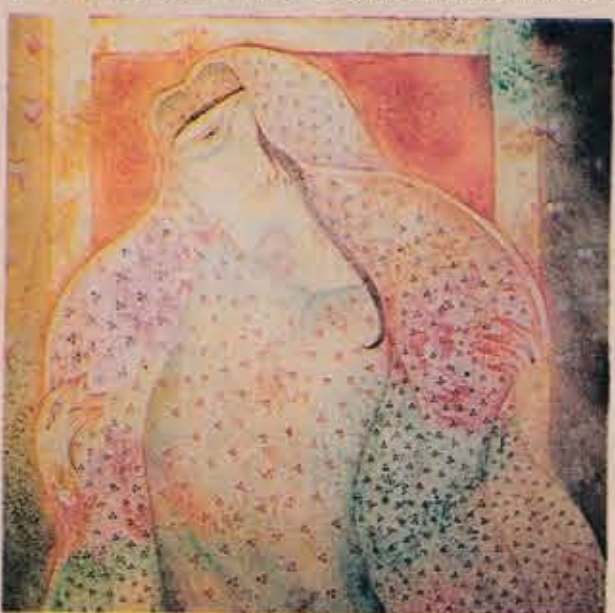
"I didn't sell any work in the Samat exhibition," he recalled.

Today, Syed Thajudeen's works are collected in the National Art Gallery, the Singapore Art Museum and are also in the private collections of Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin ("he was the first in Malaysia to buy my works"), Toh Puan Mahani Daim and Hijjas Kasturi, among others.

Paintings on Love can be viewed at Pelita Hati Gallery of Art, 3 Persiaran Titivangsa 3, Kuala Lumpur, until March 20. It was officiated by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism secretary-general Datuk Ismail Adam.



FINER POINTS ... Syed Thajudeen discussing one of his works with Ismail. Pictures by YIP HEE KHEONG



STYLISTED ... Another work by Syed Thajudeen