

**W**HEN he was a boy in Penang, Syed Thajudeen Shaik Abu Talib would get hold of paper bags of palaiyakat sarong with pictures of kebaya-clad models on them, to trace the images with his pencil.

"My father would scold me," remembers the veteran artist. "Why waste time, he would say."

Thajudeen's father must have soon stopped complaining for, as the years unfolded, the youngster would go on to be fascinated with many other images of a more ethereal kind.

The 65-year-old artist's work is today known to radiate with the visual inspirations he has drawn from the cultures he has witnessed throughout his life.

Growing up in Malaysia and India, Thajudeen became exposed to many artistic styles in the historic traditions of the two lands.

He was enamoured, in particular, with the art of the Moghuls that captured scenes of daily movements in human life.

Images like that of a king relaxing in his garden, of a cowherd tending his animals, of maidens heaving pitchers of water, stirred him with the richness of their colour and detail.

"They were so beautiful. I felt like painting details like that in my own art."

Thajudeen recently completed a series of oil paintings on *Women In Kebaya*, strongly influenced by the details he had studied in Moghul art.

The series took some six years to complete and is replete with feminine images of beauty with Thajudeen's signature outlines and shapes.

It was recently exhibited at the Ghara Seni Tanjung in George Town, in the very neighbourhood of his childhood and where he had traced on the paper bags.

"In the 50s and 60s, we

## The details of beauty

Veteran artist Syed Thajudeen fuses the great visual inspirations he has encountered in his life with the heritage of his Malaysian homeland, writes HIMANSHU BHATT



Surat Cinta



Girl With Umbrella

could see a lot of ladies wearing the kebaya. There was a certain femininity about the dress.

"It was nice to paint such a local subject with my stylistic influences."

Indeed, Thajudeen's art, with its rich hues and distinctly stylised figurations, has been known to fuse the deep inspiration of his Indian exposures with the heritage of his Malaysian homeland.

Thajudeen was the first Malaysian graduate of the Madras College of Fine Arts where he studied from 1968 till 1974. It was, he says, a fervent period in the rise of post-modern art in India.

Thajudeen was born in the village of Alagan Kulam in south India, in 1943. His parents had landed there when fleeing the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

Thajudeen returned to India in his youth with the intention of studying medicine.

He underwent pre-university education in Madurai ("a city of festivals," he calls it) where he would roam with his classmates, enchanted by the sculptures and architecture of the temples.

"I fell in love with the art," he remembers. "Instead of pursuing medicine, I ended up joining the School of Fine Arts in Madras."

The college required students to go on tours around the great heritage sites of India. Thajudeen went with his mates to see natural landscapes and rivers like that of Varanasi, hills and historic palaces.

He was particularly inspired at that young age by the caves of Ajanta and Ellora where he stood in awe the magnificent art, architecture and sculpture that depicted the ancient mythology of the land.

"The heritage just moulds you," he says. "I went inside the caves and I saw the 32 incarnations of Buddha. His story was depicted in paintings within the cave... I was fascinated."

The artistic textures, with their fine details and colours, which he saw in the Ajanta paintings, stirred him to do a major work on the Ramayana.

The resultant work, which took about three years to complete, is now in the National Art Gallery.

After completing the Ramayana, he was inspired to do a series on old Malacca. Done in three giant panels, the painting depicts the legend of Malacca's founder, Parameswara, and his troops as they observe a mouse deer attacking some dogs.

"You must know your roots," he comments of his creative thrust. "After I did the Ramayana I felt that there is much history in Malaysia that can be explored."

Upon graduating, Thajudeen became an art

lecturer at UiTM in Shah Alam, and encouraged his students to tour the country.

He made them study Malay history, culture and crafts like batik-making and wood-carving.

He tried to instil in his pupils the spirit of discovery that he had gone through as an art student in India.

But in his own years as a student artist, he had still not come to terms with the direction his art should take.

"Until the fifth year of college, I still did not know where I was going," he says.

He then went to Adam's Peak in Ceylon, climbing the picturesque mountain at night to reach the top at five in the morning.

Just as he reached the summit the sun rose over the horizon to reveal clouds below him, set against the saffron light of the sun.

"It was one of the most beautiful experiences," he says.

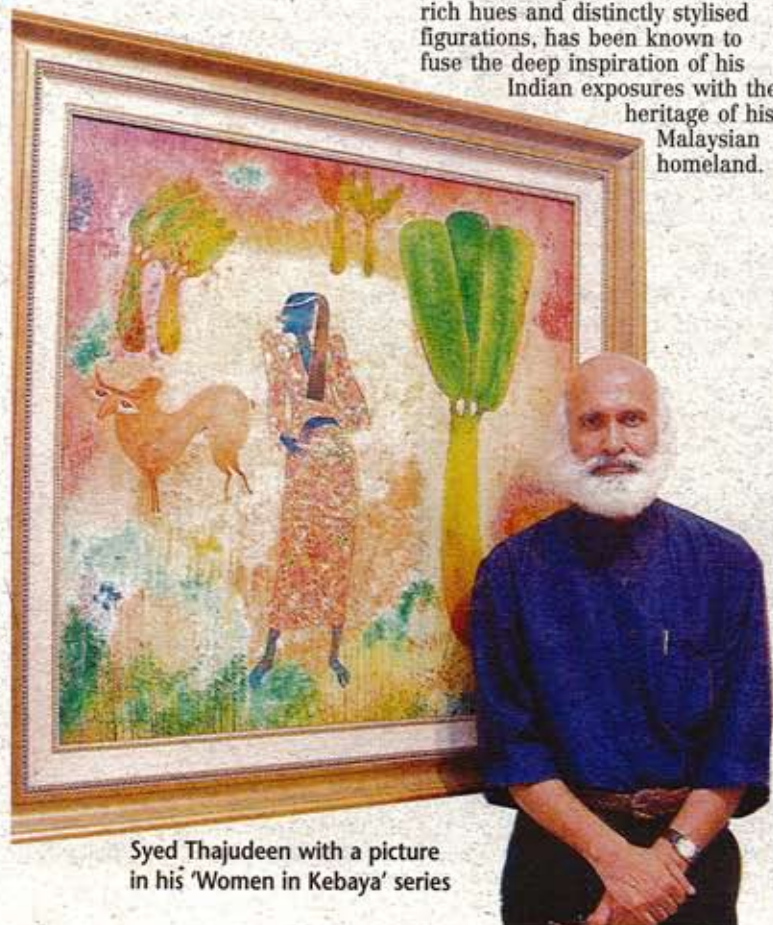
"It was then that I began doing abstract works.

"Each artist has his own creative talent," he now says. "I cannot do like others. They cannot do like me."

"My art is rooted in tradition, in culture. That is why I do not do my paintings fast. I enjoy the details."



Waiting For The Lover In Bajau Kebaya Modern



Syed Thajudeen with a picture in his 'Women in Kebaya' series