

SYED THAJUDEEN

The storyteller artist

By Siti Wajihah Kholil

Syed Thajudeen Shaik Abu Talib is one of Malaysia's best lyrical and romanticism artists. He was born in 1943 in Alagan Kulam, India, where his parents lived during World War II. At the age of eleven, he joined his family to live in Penang where he grew up as a boy from primary school until secondary school.

His talent was already apparent at a young age, even though at the time, he did not realise it. In Standard Four, the teacher had assigned homework to the class where all the students were required to write a story as well as draw the pictures from the textbook. With a pencil and a notebook, he drew a crocodile and a monkey for the task. To his surprise, he discovered that the teacher had displayed his drawing on the board.

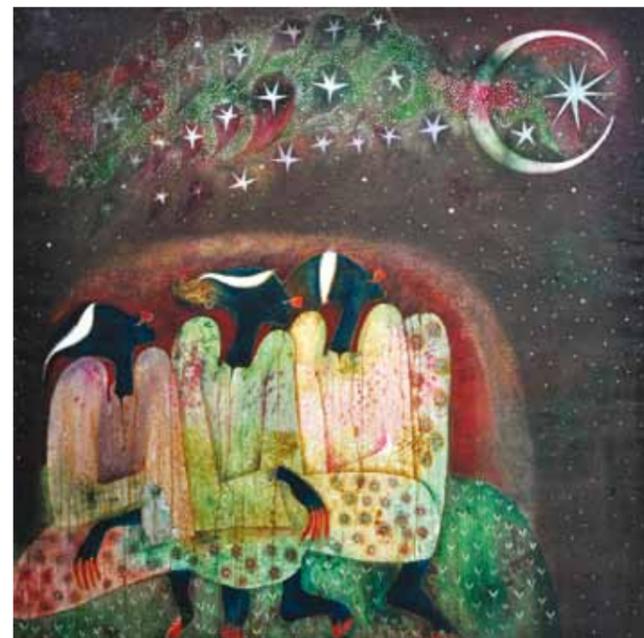
Thajudeen became more involved in art during his secondary school. Back then in the 50's and 60's, women in Malaysia wore kebaya. This struck his interest in the beauty of the garment and how it accentuates a woman's figure, which led him to start sketching women in kebaya. Gradually, he developed a great attraction towards batik and sarong designs. He was captivated with the stunning patterns and colours. Every time when his parents bought a batik or a sarong, he would collect it and trace the pattern out of fascination for its colours and flowers. "At the time, the hibiscus was the most popular flower in all the land, very prominent. It was beautiful," recalled Thajudeen.

Despite his parents' objections, Thajudeen's passion for art was too great. He became the secretary of an art club and joined art competitions where he always won. In 1965, the Penang Museum was launched by Raja Tun Uda Al-Haj Raja Muhammad, governor of



Penang at the time, and held an open show where participants were able to submit their artworks. Thajudeen's art piece was exhibited and published in the catalogue. He was appreciated for his creativity and this sparked his interest in pursuing art even more.

Initially, Thajudeen was sent to India to study medicine, following his father's wish. As he travelled around India, he discovered abundant architectural beauty and culture. His soul was calling out to art. After some time, he went back to Malaysia and convinced his parents to allow him to study art. With his parents' blessings, he studied art for six years at the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Madras, India from 1968 to 1974. At the time, he was the only Tamil Muslim in the community to study art.

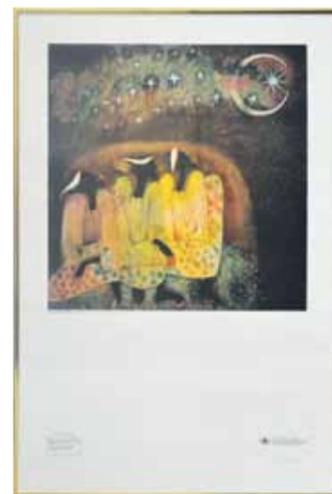


Moon of Ramadhan, 1997
Oil on canvas
127cm x 127cm

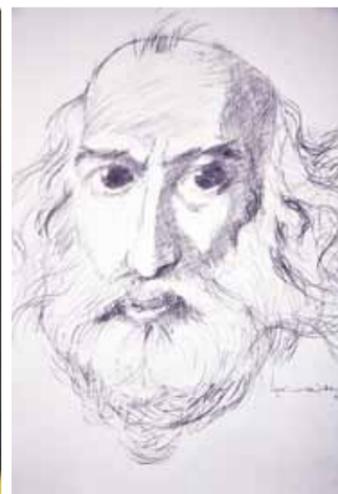
Moon of Ramadhan

Moon of Ramadhan, 1997 oil on canvas is one of his notable art pieces yet. Behind the story of the painting comes a very spiritual side of Thajudeen as a person. Coming from a Muslim family, he strongly believes that the moon plays a very significant role in Islamic history and life. Going back to the olden days, travellers in the Arabian desert needed the moon and the stars in the skies to navigate their way. Even today, Muslims need the moon to calculate the month, including the month of Ramadhan, as well as the time for prayers. "It's a tribute to the moon as the moon is a Muslim's companion," said Thajudeen. Having done a lot of paintings on this subject in different forms, he enjoys portraying how the first moon begins, how it grows and descends while surrounded by the stars. The skies and the galaxy are amongst his greatest fascination.

With the Moon of Ramadhan, you can see so many colours but it is not direct. You have to closely observe the serene of the moon crescent and the sparkles of the stars. The scene of the ladies sitting and admiring the skies radiates a sense of tranquility and has a romantic feel as well as spiritual. He described how he created layers and layers of colours and said that only those who truly observed the painting would understand it. The Moon of Ramadhan should lure its audience, as there are so many hidden elements. "I wanted to portray divinity and a sense of spirituality, especially to Muslims as we are all entangled with the moon," explained Thajudeen.



Promotional poster printed by National Art gallery



Self portrait on paper



Lord Buddha, 1971
Oil on board 17cm X 21cm

Styles and other masterpieces

Many of Thajudeen's art pieces incorporate literature, music, dance, sculpture and philosophy, showcasing his vast knowledge on the subject matter; mostly dealing with women and love, sharing the same archetypal symbols and metaphors. His romantic treatment of the subject and rich colours depicts his influence from the Ajanta cave painting of Maharashtra and the Mughal.

Despite being highly criticised for his obvious Asian influences, overtly use of colours as well as for painting human figures, which is scorned by Islamic fundamentalists, Thajudeen has convinced his detractors otherwise. His masterpieces are now an important element of Malaysian art and its history. Striving to preserve it, he tells the Malaysian epic tales and history through lyrical and poetical colours.

Thajudeen's Kebaya and Waiting for the Lover series are his widely popular artworks, emoting the joys of love and femininity in its truest form and beauty. Some of his known works include the founding of Malacca by Parameswara and his travels, the Malacca Sultanate series, The Eternal Love between Hang Tuah and Puteri Gunung Ledang, a three-year project. Currently, Thajudeen's works adorn the walls of Petronas Gallery, National Art Gallery of Malaysia, Singapore Art Museum, corporate buildings and many private homes in Malaysia and abroad.

Thajudeen has the unique ability to tell his art through a blend of colours in a lyrical and poetic manner. His colour combination and background base shows his Indian background, fused with Malay cultural elements. He is indeed Malaysia's hope in preserving its national history, epic tales and heritage.