

MALAYSIAN FURNITURE

Daniel Maudlin

In both time span and volume of production Malaysian furniture is small scale. The start of furniture production on the Malay peninsular can be dated to as recently as the last quarter of the nineteenth century, whilst manufacture was almost exclusively restricted to the immediate royal court circles of the seven Sultanates into which the peninsular is divided.

Whether in a royal palace or villager's house the most noticeable absence to a European would have been moveable furniture, in particular of chairs. Traditionally, the indigenous Malays did not use furniture, the custom being to sit cross legged upon the floor; royalty sitting upon a cushioned dais. This has much to do with the structure of Malay vernacular timber buildings, the design of which is based upon the free circulation of air. Unlike European dwellings the emphasis is upon a large central space used for various functions throughout the day as opposed to suites of rooms; the interior either being open to the outside or screened with carved lattice work to create a cool, shady environment.¹ In such flexible, necessarily open, space both heavy fixed furniture and moveable pieces would be inconvenient. From the 1870s onwards the British moved into the Malay interior in search of tin and rubber, a process that culminated with the formation of the Federated Malay States in 1896. The most significant event was the signing of the Treaty of Pangkor in 1874. This established the first British Residency system at the Royal Perak Court in which the Resident was to be consulted upon all matters except 'those touching upon Malay religion and custom'.² This brought the insular Malay royal courts into direct contact with Western culture for the first time. The British were not the first Europeans on the peninsular; they followed on from the Portuguese and later the Dutch. The difference was that beyond some trade they had restricted their activities to the coastal Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore.³ The few words for furniture in Bhasa Malay come from Portuguese, for example *peti* meaning chest or strong box. However, it is one thing to know that the *Ferringghi* or foreigners on the coast sit upon chairs and quite another to have them next to you in court. With the relatively recent arrival of the British residents at the royal courts the adoption of furniture was inevitable. This assimilation of Western culture is vividly shown in a series of official court photographs on display at the Royal Perak Museum. In the earliest photograph of the 1890s the Malay court are all seated upon the floor, the Sultan upon a cushion in the centre is flanked by the British resident and his staff seated upon chairs. By 1900 the court are still cross legged upon the floor but the Sultan uses a chair and by the 1920s the entire court have chairs.

Malay furniture production was limited almost exclusively to the royal courts. This is not to say that this was the only class or group to adopt furniture but that these were the only centres of furniture production on the Peninsular.⁴ The mixed race populations

of the Straits Settlements, the growing urban centres such as Kuala Lumpur and the newly founded schools, hospitals and administrative buildings all created a growing demand for furniture.⁵ But this was met by Chinese, Indian and European imports. To quote a colonial government report of 1908;

If the house chosen for inspection be that of a school master or some such hybrid mind it will reveal all the horrors of crocheted anti-macassars, bentwood Austrian chairs and oleographs of Queen Victoria.⁶

Neither was furniture production encouraged by the British for export purposes as in Sri Lanka.⁷ Despite the good quality of the native hardwood, *chengal*, which is similar to Burmese teak and light milk chocolate in colour and texture when polished, the British concentrated upon tin, rubber and later tea production rather than timber. The royal courts, were however, in an excellent position to produce their own furniture to furnish their increasingly concrete-built palaces. Whilst not having a furniture making tradition the royal courts in the late nineteenth century had a long and still vibrant joinery and carving tradition based upon the construction of timber palaces. Palaces were regularly built as each new Sultan would have his own built at a distance from that of his predecessor a symbolic and also practical tradition in a damp environment.⁸ To this end a royal carpenter was an established member of the court. Known as the *Bendahara*, it was an hereditary title held by a minor line of the royal family. As with silk embroidery and silver work their fine carving was jealously guarded and was the preserve of the Sultan. The *Bendahara* would also be responsible for making smaller household items such as hunting traps for birds, fishing tackle boxes or games.

Completed in 1926, the *Istana Kenangan* was the last wooden palace built in Malaysia.⁹ Built by the royal carpenter to the Sultan of Perak it is constructed from *chengal*, using mortise and tenon and tongue and groove joints as well as turned banister rails. Joinery was traditionally held by glue made from buffalo milk curd and timber was either painted or polished with skate skins and camphor oil.¹⁰ For craftsmen accustomed to working on the scale of palaces turning their joinery, turning and carving skills to making furniture was no doubt easy. Importantly, it also stamped a definite Royal Malay identity over alien objects that imported pieces would lack.¹¹ The *Istana Kenangan* was replaced in 1938 with a new concrete palace, *Istana Iskandariah*, on the occasion of the coronation of HRH Sultan Abdul Aziz. The new palace was furnished, and still is, with furniture made by the same men who built the older palace it superseded.¹²

The furniture produced by the royal courts was invariably a hybrid of European form and style combined with local materials, *chengal* wood, and traditional Malay carving motifs. A lack of evidence of printed designs such as pattern books suggest that European styles were copied from direct examples owned by the British connected to the courts.¹³ A piece of furniture being copied in form and then carved to suit Malay custom and taste. Malay carving is either pierced or in flat relief and combines interlocking, stylised foliate designs with central flower motifs such as the *matahari* or sunflower. Cosmic symbols and calligraphy, exclusive quotes from the Qu'ran and Malay religious text the *Jawi* are also common.¹⁴

Under Islamic observance animals and people are never depicted and plant forms are abstracted. The ascetic nature of Islam, though gentler in Malaysia than in the geometric art of the Arab world, means that carvings never cover an object but are confined to details and highlights such as cresting, finials, screens and framed panels.¹⁵ For example, the set of chairs made for guests at Sultan Abdul Aziz's coronation are nineteenth-century Jacobean revival in style. The crested top rail, caned back panel and block and baluster legs are typical of the Jacobean style but the cresting and apron are carved in the traditional Malay *awan boyan* pattern. Similarly, a lounge chair from Kelantan of unknown date, exhibited in the 1974 exhibition of traditional Woodcarving of Peninsular Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, combines *awan boyan* carving with a design from J. C. Loudon.¹⁶ Particularly interesting is a bridal suite from Khota Bharu, made by the royal carpenter Haji Zakana Daud as recently as 1966 for the marriage of HRH Sultana Princess Salarani,¹⁷ as it combines European styles with sections taken from the old wooden palace, the *Istana Jakar*. A deliberate reference to the history and customs of the royal family, the Hepplewhite style wheel back chair, originally painted white, and the bed head board from the suite both employ former circular window lattices that represent the cosmos. The suite was completed with a nineteenth-century dressing table and cabinet, taken from the timber built Summer Palace of her father, Sultan Mohammed IV, carved with the *awan jawa* pattern and *matahari* across the cornice.

These pieces can be contrasted with Anglo-hybrid furniture from the Indian Sub-Continent where Hindu influence results in European furniture types that are much more densely carved. Regional differences in carving exist within Malaysia itself and reflect the differing strength of Islam between the Sultanates. In the eastern and central states where Islam is traditionally strongest carving is strictly abstract in pattern whereas in the north west a figurative element from Thailand exists. Similarly, in the southern state of Johor a Javanese and Sumatran cultural influence sees the presence of animal forms in carving as moral and spiritual symbols. For example, the *itik pulang petang* motif is based on a row of walking ducks, a symbol of obedience.¹⁸

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Regional Furniture Society Bursary Committee and the Furniture History Society, Tom Ingram Memorial Fund for funding my research in Malaysia. I would also like to thank for their generous help and advice Rosli Haji Nor of the Malacca Museums Corporation, Janet Tee Siew Mooi of the National Museum of Malaysia. The staff of the Perak Museum, Taiping, the Royal Perak Museum, Kuala Kangsar and the Royal Customs Museum, Khota Bharu. The Dowdy family, Magnus Renfrew, Jane Campbell and David Jones.

REFERENCES

1. Raja Bahrin Shah, *The Terengganu Malay House*, Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 1988. Some modern Malay homes still have a raised platform or *lantai* in place of chairs and sofas in their living rooms.
2. C. D. Cowan, *Nineteenth Century Malaya*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960.
3. Sir Frank Swettenham, *Footprints in Malaya*, Perpustakaan Negara, 1941.
4. This makes establishing the provenance of Malaysian furniture possible as pieces are generally still in the possession of the Royal Household that commissioned them.
5. R. L. German, *Handbook to British Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: Malayan Civil Service, 1935.
6. R. J. Williams, *Papers on Malay Subjects: Life and Customs*, Kuala Lumpur: Government of the Federated Malay States, 1908.

7. R. Jones, 'Nineteenth-Century Carved Ebony Furniture from Sri Lanka', *Regional Furniture*, x, Dorchester: The Dorset Press, 1996.
8. R. D. Windstedt, *Papers on Malay Subjects: Arts and Crafts*, Kuala Lumpur: Government of Federated Malay States, 1925.
9. Royal Perak Museum, Kuala Kangsar, Perak.
10. L. J. Yuan, *The Malay House*, Singapore: Institut Masyarakat, 1987.
11. It can be argued that as the Sultans, were by the twentieth century, rejecting wooden palaces in favour of concrete built ones with electricity and modern plumbing the adoption of furniture paradoxically saved the Bendahara class and Malay carving traditions from extinction.
12. Royal Perak Museum, Kuala Kangsar, Perak.
13. Rosli Haji Nor, Architect, Malacca Museums Corporation, Malacca.
14. A. H. Nasir, *Traditional Malay Woodcarving*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1987. Other motifs include: tampuk mangiss, the mangosteen; bunga teratai, the lotus flower; bunga ana, the gardenia; bunga bunting or hyacinth.
15. Unfortunately, I was unable to gain access to some of the most impressive examples, such as thrones, as they are still in use in the present Royal Palaces which are closed to the public.
16. J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, Second Edition, London, 1839.
17. The Royal Customs Museum, Khota Bharu.
18. A. H. Nasir, *ibid*.