

Malay silverwork show in London

1ST TIME: London's Victoria and Albert Museum showcasing private collections of R.O. Winstedt, R.J. Wilkinson

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A COLLECTION of Malay silverwork will be on a year-long exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum here starting tomorrow. It features some of the most intricate ornaments, bowls, *kris* and betel nut vessels. Replicas of the Perak ceremonial regalia will be also on display in the exhibition entitled "Silver from the Malay World".

Most of the collection is from three prominent scholars and administrators, who were stationed in British Malaya, at the turn of the 20th century.

Although R.O. Winstedt and R.J. Wilkinson are best remembered as Malay scholars and lexicographers, nothing was known about their private collections of rare silverwork they had bequeathed to the museum.

Other silverwork on display is from Cecil Wray, son of Leonard Wray, director of the first museum in Malaya in 1883.

Assistant Curator of the South & Southeast Asia section at the museum, Chan Sau Fong, said: "We have an amazing collection of silverwork from Malaya, Indonesia

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A '*kris*' and its *sheath* from the collection of R.O. Winstedt. Pix courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum

work from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam; some 200 objects but we have chosen 40 pieces for this exhibition."

After discovering the collection, Chan travelled to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to see the collections there. She decided to put on display the collections which have associations with two famous Malay scholars, but had never been published.

The Malay region has a reputation of producing intricate metalwork with silver-smithing as a traditional court craft until the late 19th century.

Malay sultans summoned the most skillful silversmiths and provided them with European silver coins or Chinese silver ingots to melt down and turn into exquisitely crafted utensils for ceremonial and daily use. Small boxes for tobacco and betel nuts resembled European watches and snuffboxes, but are decorated with lotus flowers and twisting stems in the Malay tradition.

According to Chan, Malay silverwork was first on display in London in 1886 at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, held in South Kensington.

"Since the display of the Royal Regalia of the Perak sultanate featuring elaborate handcrafted patterns inspired by nature, there was a lot of interest. The museum then commissioned Elkington & Co to produce electrotype copies of the



A bowl and its cover from Malaysia, dating back to the 18th or 19th century.

Perak regalia the following year for students and artisans to study the designs."

On display is a copper-gilded armband depicting a dragon head, worn during the coronation of every new sultan in Perak.

According to Chan, most Malay silverwork do not have hallmarks or inscriptions.

"When you do find them, they are quite rare. One object from Brunei has Malay *pantun* inscribed on it."

Another item on display is from Wilkinson's collection: a large gold belt buckle, which belonged to one

of the chiefs of Perak dating back to the 18th century.

"We have also included some gold items to show the filigree technique used as decorations on the objects.

"And of course, gold and silver indicate rank in a society."

Although there is no official opening for the exhibition, there is a workshop for curators, which will be held in early November.

The "Silver from the Malay World" exhibition will be held at the Silver room of the museum from July 15 to March 16 next year. Admission is free.



A replica of an armband used by the Perak regalia, made by Elkington & Co in 1887.