

European Ceramics for the Malay World

By Rossman Ithnain

I recently came across a cluster of plates exhibited in one of the galleries at the Malay Heritage Centre in Kampong Glam. They looked European to me. These plates, especially the *Asahan* plate, immediately brought back memories of my childhood when my father and I attended many *kenduri* (religious gatherings). At the end of each gathering, food would be served on either an enamel tray or on a large brown *Asahan* serving dish. Rice, with dishes such as *nasi ambeng* (a Javanese dish comprising rice served with other dishes) and *nasi minyak* (ghee and spice-flavoured rice) would be served communal style, with each tray shared by four persons.

Generally, there are two types of European ceramic wares that found their way to the Malay world in Southeast Asia during the 19th to the mid-20th century. These wares are differentiated by the methods of decoration namely (i) transfer printing and (ii) hand decoration by way of sponge printing or painting or a combination thereof. These European (predominantly English, Scottish, Dutch and French) wares were lucrative exports to the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Two European manufacturers were particularly popular with the Malay communities: J & M P Bell of Glasgow, Scotland, and Petrus Regout of Maastricht, Holland.

Established in 1841, J & M P Bell exported large numbers of transfer printed plates/wares to Southeast Asia. The design of Bell's Malay series with its localised patterns resonated well with the Malay market. The series included patterns of places such as Johore, Macassar and Kelantan, animals, *buah* (fruit) including *nanas* (pineapple), *kapal besar* (big ship), phrases such as *terlalu bagus* (exceedingly good), as well as mythical animals such as the *keelin* (qilin) and *burung hong* (phoenix). There are Bell pieces with these pattern names spelled out in Jawi script.

This was a clever marketing tactic since these wares were targeted at the Malay market. The firm, J & M P Bell,

was founded by two brothers, John and Matthew Perston Bell. The older brother, John, later became a ship owner in Rangoon (now Yangon) to further facilitate the export of his Scottish wares to Southeast Asia. This firm was the most successful in the history of Scottish pottery. J & M P Bell wares are either monochrome (red, blue, green and brown) or two-coloured.

Petrus Regout ware was named after its founder and was originally called *Sphinx Pottery*. This Maastricht-based firm went through several name changes and was in business from 1834 till the late 20th century. Wares with floral designs and a crescent moon and star motif were primarily targeted at the Malay market. There were also 'oriental' or 'chinoiserie' designs that appealed to the Malays. Other patterns they used included animals (even mythological ones), fruit, flowers, scenery, geometric patterns and people, all designed to appeal to local tastes. Some of the Petrus Regout wares have markings on their undersides – "Petrus Regout" and "Maastricht" written in Javanese script. I was told that this script was *Aksara muda*, a type of script similar to the 26-letter Javanese *Hanacaraka*, but with fewer letters. These wares were clearly meant for the Indonesian market.

It is not surprising that Dutch wares found favour in Indonesia as it was once the Dutch East Indies. Although meant for the Indonesian market, Petrus



Petrus Regout Sphinx mark and Javanese Aksara mark



Typical blue Asahan plate



A green Asahan plate



Petrus Regout plate with a crescent moon and star in the centre and a floral design around the edge



Popular Petrus Regout pattern

Regout wares with Javanese marks could also be found in Singapore and Malaysia. One specific pattern with a key fret motif was particularly liked. This design came in several colours: brown, blue, red and green. A plate with this motif is commonly referred to as *Pinggán Asahan*. I was told that *Asahan* comes from the Turkish word *sahan* which means plate. The word *sahan* must have found its way into Malay vocabulary and evolved to become *Pinggán Asahan*, referring to Maastricht wares generally. *Asahan* plates, especially the large serving plates (almost like trays) were also popular with the Malays in North Sumatra.



J & M P Bell mark with Jawi script – terlalu baik (exceedingly good)

The transfer printing technique in particular allowed designs/patterns to be produced identically in large numbers, enabling these plates to be sold commercially throughout the world, including the Malay world. I have come across and purchased such plates in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. These ceramic pieces were meant for daily use especially



J & M P Bell plate mark with buah buah (fruits) on it

by middle-class Malay families. Many were large bowls and plates that were heavy and sturdy. The brown *Asahan* plate (a brown plate with key fret motifs) was subsequently copied and produced in China and Japan. The Chinese and Japanese pieces were lighter and more competitively priced than the European ones.

Over time, these daily-use pieces became prized by Malay women.

Malays are house proud and would prominently display these plates as part of their home décor. Being imported European plates, they were a source of pride. These plates would also be used at communal events such as *kenduri*, weddings, celebrations and events at the mosques. On such occasions, the meals would typically be shared by four people. For easy identification, these pieces were marked with the owner's initials on the underside.

Since Malays eat with their hands, small rice bowls were not found in their households. They had no use for them, unlike in Chinese households. Large bowls were meant to serve dishes with *kuah* (gravy) such as curry and *lauk lemak* (having a coconut milk base) dishes. Small bowl-like cups were used for drinking. In the spirit of *gotong royong* (community spirit), families and friends in the community would rally together and contribute cooking ingredients – spices, rice, sugar and utensils such as plates, cups and glasses, anything and everything that might be needed for wedding celebrations and the accompanying communal meals. Such was the kampong spirit of the past. Today, many of these plates are antiques and are found in the region's museums. They are hardly ever used in households any more, nor seen at Malay events.



Examples of European export ware for the Malay world, from various producers

Rossman Ithnain is a civil servant with a passion for collecting things from the Malay world, past and present.

Photos by the author