



SARAWAKIANS at the booths, from left: Diana Teh, Melinda Omar (Fashion Designer), Hamid Som, Vicky Fong (the writer and WITS Fashion Choreographer) with Rosemarie Wong and her daughter (of Ranees Artisan Gallery).



WITS Organisers and Speakers from left: Dr. Sitthichai Smachat, Mr. Edric Ong, Y.M. Raja Datin Paduka Fuziah, Dr. Surapee Rojanavongse, Ms. Donya Veerasilpa, Dr. Richard A. Engelhardt and Dr. Ghada Hijjawi-Qaddumi.

Showcasing Sarawak at the World Ikat Symposium 2018

BY VICKY FONG

Led by Mr. Edric Ong, the President of the ASEAN Handicraft Promotion and Development Association (AHPADA), Society Atelier Sarawak and Advisor to the World Craft Council – Asia Pacific Region, a delegation from Kuching travelled to Khon Kaen in North-eastern Thailand recently.

Many visitors are drawn to this city just 55 minutes by plane from Bangkok for leisure, social and cultural events. We were there to participate in an event which comprised a 3-day forum, exhibition, workshops, field trips and a Gala dinner fashion show featuring the works of 13 ikat designers.

On arrival, we were warmly welcomed and transported to the Rachawadee Resort and Hotel, the venue for the event. It was in this charming spread of bungalows in lush green surroundings that the World Ikat Symposium (WITS) 2018 was held from 4th to 6th December.

What is WITS, one might ask?

The first World Ikat Symposium was held in 2016 at the University of London. In 2017 it was held twice, firstly in September in New Delhi, India and then subsequently in Kuching, Sarawak in December.

For 2018, the selected host was Khon Kaen, Thailand which boasts a traditional industry specialising in silk ikat.



DR. Ghada Hijjawi-Qaddumi, President of the World Crafts Council Asia-Pacific Region presenting Rosemarie Wong from Ranees Artisans Gallery a WCC Award of Excellence for a product by the weavers of Rumah Kerapa Spak, Betong.

The objectives of WITS is to foster cross cultural exchange of ikat through a variety of activities and workshops, promote trade opportunities on the basis of local identity and sustainability and develop connections between ikat communities and members of the World Craft Council (WCC).

Ikat is a distinctive style of weaving deemed to be one of the oldest forms of textile decoration in human history. Produced in many traditional textile centres around the world, different communities of ikat weavers have their own techniques of dyeing and weaving the yarn, with patterns ranging from simple motifs to the complicated

and elaborate. It is at events such as WITS that ikat producers gather to exchange ideas and showcase their works.

The Grand Opening Ceremony of WITS 2018 was graced by Mr. Somsak Jungtrakul, the Governor of Khon Kaen; Dr Surapee Rojanavongse, the President of THTA and Chairperson of the WITS Organising Committee, Mr. Edric Ong and other VIP guests.

The morning ceremony saw Ms Rosemarie Wong from Ranees Artisan Gallery, Kuching receiving a WCC Award of Excellence for Handicraft in the Asia Pacific Region, for her submitted craftwork entitled 'The Magic of Upcycling'. Her recycled fan covers turned into decorative receptacles were made by the weavers of Rumah Kerapa Spak,

Layar in Betong. The delighted Wong, a first class honours graduate in fashion design from London, supports individual artisans and the underprivileged community through their involvement in producing gifts. Her exhibition booth at WITS 2018 proved to be a popular stop with the international visitors.

Other recipients of the WCC Award of Excellence from Sarawak were Nancy Ngali (natural indigo dyed cotton textile), Senia Jugi (bamboo basket) and Azran Arip (Pihan Rattan Bag).

Extensive publicity at the event was courtesy of a Thai television network that featured the opening as well as visitors to the international ikat exhibitions, sale booths and hands-on workshop on natural cold dye.

The intellectual highlight of WITS was the symposium, whose facilitator was Malaysia's very own Y.M. Raja Datin Paduka Fuziah b. Raja Tun Uda, with session speakers hailing from various corners of the globe.

Topics addressed included the global heritage of ikat, Thailand's own ikat legacy, the market for ikat



SEATED with Mr. Somsak Jungtrakul, Governor of Khon Kaen, Edric Ong (right) said, 'I feel proud and honoured that we can showcase our beautiful Iban ikat silk textiles from Rumah Garie longhouse at WITS 2018 and furthermore, that our talented fashion show choreographer Vicky Fong and her backstage assistant Diana Teh are able to present a show on an international platform. Yes, we can!'

textiles and crafts education.

One of the international speakers was the curator of the Tun Jugah Foundation Museum and Gallery, Ms. Janet Rata Noel who touched upon the importance of sustaining pua kumbu and the art of weaving as an iconic symbol of the rich Iban culture.

My own personal role in WITS 2018, besides producing this article for the benefit of our readers, was to serve as the official choreographer for the Gala Dinner Fashion Show held on the first night. With barely 2 days to prepare, me and my assistant, Diana Teh, are most grateful to the supporting team from the Thai Handicraft Promotion Trade Association (THTA) for their warmth and assistance.

The 36 models in the show were all students from Khon Kaen University who have little or no experience in the field of catwalk. Nevertheless, they were very attentive to my choreography directions notwithstanding the language barrier. The show turned out beautifully and the attractive student models could even be mistaken for professionals on the stage.

Of the 13 fashion and textile designers, two were from Malaysia.

From Kuching was Mr. Edric Ong who is a renowned eco-fiber textile and fashion designer. His presentation at the Opening Round of the WITS fashion show was his collaboration with Nuansri Promjai of Thailand whose hand-knitted natural hemp designs were combined with up-cycled leather jackets hand-painted by Bidayuh artist, Abot Gudang. EO collection also featured the unique Iban pua kumbu textiles by the women of Rumah Garie longhouse in Ulu Kapit, Sarawak and their signature handcrafted hats in rattan and bamboo by Senia Jugi.

The second designer from Kuching was the stylish Melinda Omar, who showcased her brand 'Melor' with a collection of exquisite elegant wear applying pua kumbu in a contemporary manner. One of the interesting programmes for delegates was a field trip to the silk producing villages, where we were able to experience the local culture and witness the weavers at work.

Such was our experience with WITS 2018 in Khon Kaen, that we would highly encourage others with a knack for textiles and culture to sign up for WITS 2019, which is due to be held in Jakarta.



THE Sarawakian team at WITS 2018 in Khon Kaen, Thailand. From left: Shelly, Rosemarie Wong, Melia Linggi, Edric Ong, Elaine Chan, Emilie, Janet Rata Noel, Vicky Fong, Melinda Omar and Hamid Som.



IKAT menswear by designer Kecha Lawongsa from Thailand and modelled by students of Khon Kaen University.



MELOR fashion by Melinda Omar from Kuching, showing how an ikat jacket is capable of blending harmoniously with a white evening gown.



EO Fashion by Edric Ong featured a combination of pua kumbu, eco fiber and Sarawakian motifs.



SILK ikat fashion from designer Gunjan Jain of India.