

# Weaving a 'limar' story at the Museum of Asian Art in UM



A visitor walks past a limar textile display at the 'Forgotten Tradition Of Limar Weaving' exhibition at the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. Photo: The Star/Faihan Ghani

The *Forgotten Tradition Of Limar Weaving* exhibition at the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, offers abundant opportunities – for textile enthusiasts and newcomers – to explore the historical narratives woven into centuries-old fabrics.

This free exhibition, running through Aug 24, showcases the museum's limar textile collection, revealing the inspirations behind their unique motifs and featuring vintage photographs of their use in traditional festivals and cultural ceremonies.

It also provides visitors with an opportunity to learn about “limar”, a lesser-known Malay weaving technique using silk, often overshadowed by textiles like songket and batik.

Limar textiles draw inspiration from India's patola cloth, a favourite among Malay royalty and nobility. Historical records, including those by R.O. Winstedt, note that trade with India introduced silk fabrics to Malay courts, becoming the preferred choice for royal attire.



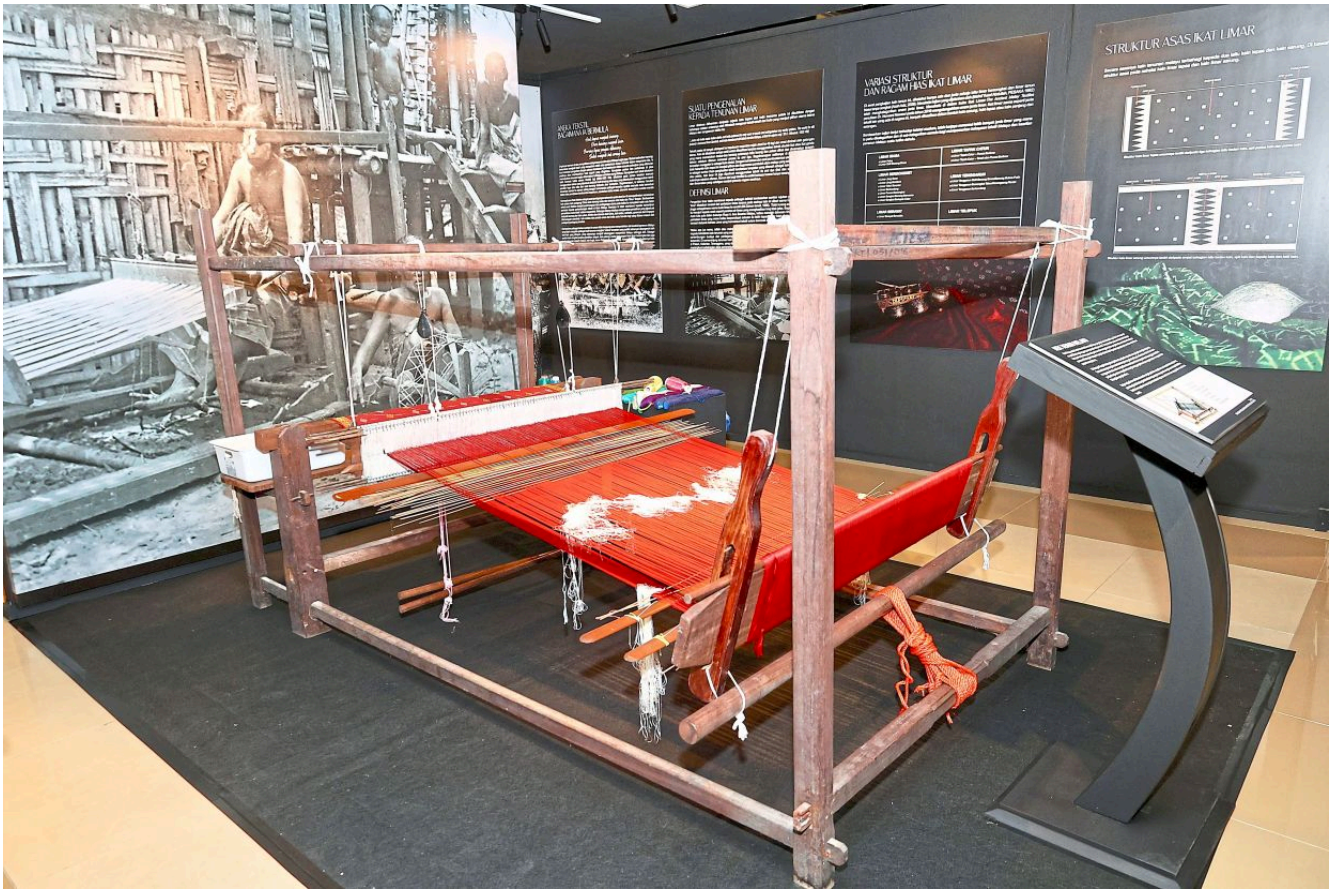
Universiti Malaya's Museum of Asian Art has a collection of 78 limar textiles, mostly from Kelantan and Terengganu, each reflecting diverse decorative arts and production methods. Photo: The Star/Faihan Ghani

Patola textiles, exported to the Malay Archipelago since the 16th century, are famous for their double ikat technique, where both warp and weft threads are pre-dyed before weaving. This intricate art form inspired local adaptations known as limar.

Despite the *Forgotten Tradition Of Limar Weaving* exhibition's compact size, visitors to the Museum of Asian Art can comfortably explore and appreciate over 20 fabric pieces showcasing the intricacies of limar.

The museum has a collection of 78 limar textiles, mostly from Kelantan and Terengganu, each reflecting diverse decorative arts and production methods.

“We must handle these pieces with extreme care during exhibitions, not only because some are borrowed from other museums or royal collections, but also due to their fragile nature,” said Zahirah Noor Zainal Abidin, a curator from the Museum of Asian Art.



A view of the 'Kek Tenun Melayu,' or 'Malay Frame Loom,' traditionally used for creating limar textiles. Photo: The Star/Faihan Ghani

“We also needed to approach the cleaning process delicately to highlight the intricacy of this weaving technique and the historical insights it offers,” she added.

Here are five exhibition highlights:

### **Kek Tenun**

At the museum, visitors are first greeted by a traditional wooden weaving tool called the “Kek Melayu,” used by weavers to create limar. This tool features four pillars resembling a house frame.

“The weaver sits behind the kek and uses the ‘kayu pesa’ to wind the woven fabric in front of him,” explained Zahirah, demonstrating the threading position.

She also notes that limar employs the “tie and dye” technique, where the thread is dyed before weaving. The process involves placing the dyed thread into the kek and then raising it crosswise repeatedly until the fabric is produced.



Exhibition curator Zahirah shows the ‘pucuk rebung’, one of the primary inspirations of the limar design. Photo: The Star/Faihan Ghani

“Original weavers told us it takes a whole day to weave just 3cm of cloth, with an entire piece taking up to three months. This showcases the incredible diligence and craftsmanship needed for a single piece of limar cloth,” she adds, impressed by their persistence.

She invites the public to join upcoming workshops and talks at the museum, where specialists will demonstrate the use of this tool in further detail.

A gallery tour ([register here](#)) is set to take place on June 22 at 2.30pm.

**A status symbol**

Much like their European counterparts, old world Malay society assessed social status by the materials used in clothing, whether silk, songket, or the presence of limar.

“This Malay woven textile is divided into two structures: kain lepas (unsewn fabric) and kain sarung (sewn fabric). The placement of the ‘kepala kain’ or ‘head of the cloth’ around the waist – whether at the sides or back – indicated social status,” said Zahirah.



Raja Permaisuri of Perak Tuanku Zara Salim (second, right) seen at the recent launch of the exhibition. Photo: Bernama

For warriors, the fabrics were often worn to conceal and protect their keris or other weapons.

History enthusiasts can see old photographs in the exhibition featuring the Brooke family from Sarawak wearing limar textiles as part of their cultural attire.

### **Motifs and inspiration**

Most limar weaving motifs are inspired by nature, featuring designs like bamboo shoots (pucuk rebung), “tampuk kesemak” flowers, mangosteen buds, and animal elements such as rooster tails.

“Textile weavers in the old days were inspired by bamboo shoots due to the (Malay) proverb ‘melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya.’ It highlights the importance of instilling good values from a young age, as bamboo shoots are easier to bend, or shape,” said Zahirah.



A view of the collection of accessories, including necklaces, bracelets, earrings, wedding rings, tiaras, and even ankle bracelets. Photo: The Star/Faihan Ghani

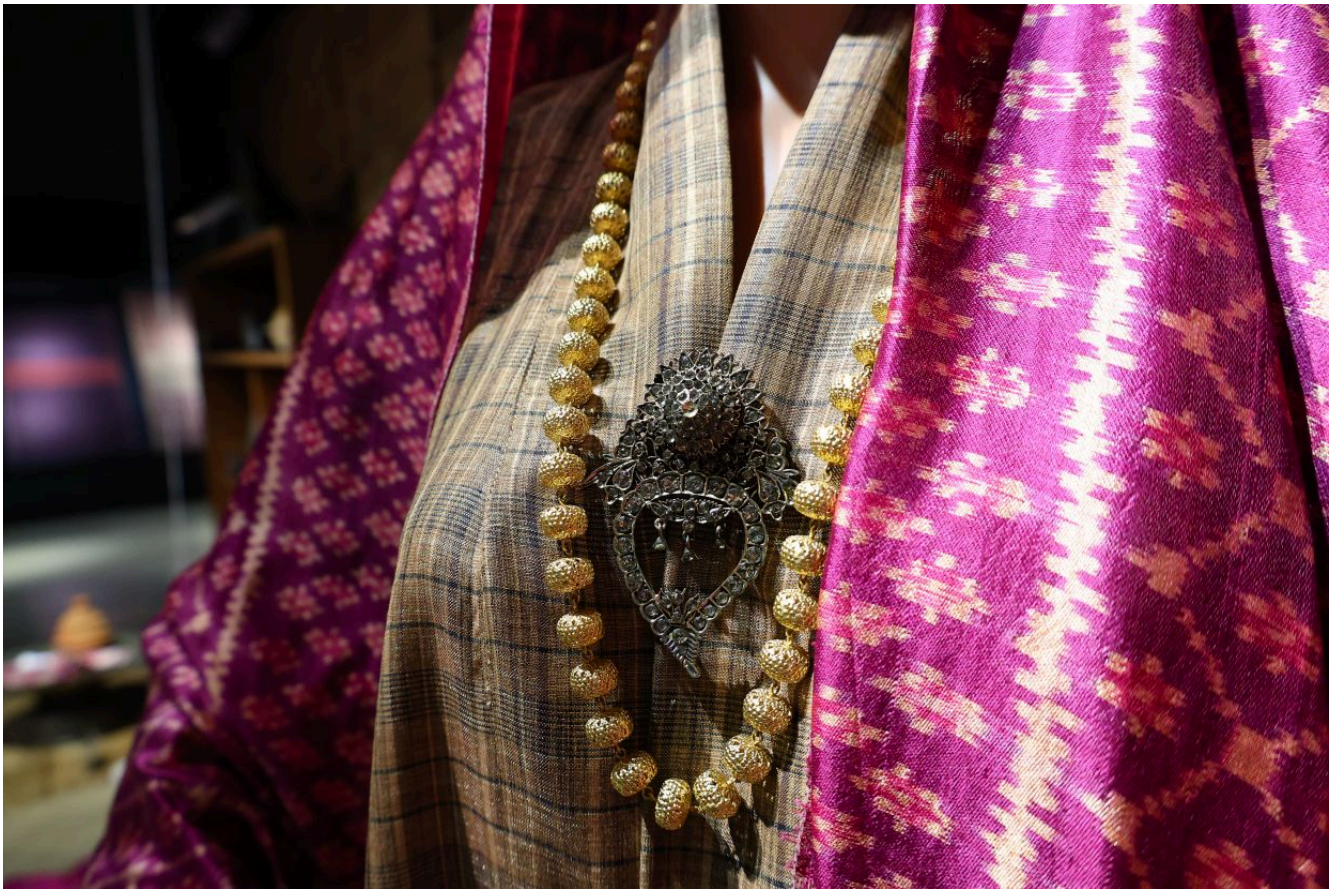
For student visitors, the curator placed plastic versions of these motifs in front of the exhibits, encouraging them to match the motifs with the respective cloths. She also noted that motifs often reflect local surroundings; for instance, textiles near jetties feature waves and sampans.

Aesthetically, 'Kesumba red' (dark red or maroon) is the most popular colour in the museum's collection, frequently used on the "punca kain," or body of the limar textile.

### **Limar accessories**

The museum is also showcasing a range of accessories commonly worn with limar textiles, typically owned by royalty and nobles. These garments are complemented by jewellery like necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.

"Cik Siti Wan Kembang, the legendary Queen of Kelantan, wore her limar collection as her kain sarong, kain kembangan, and selendang, along with a complete set of accessories for official ceremonies," said Zahirah, pointing to her image in the exhibition.



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The display includes accessories such as the Dokoh Emas, Kerongsang Berantai, Sisir Rambut, and Cucur Sanggul Emas, providing visitors a glimpse into the traditional inspirations behind modern accessories, especially those seen during Hari Raya.

### **Ceremonies**

This exhibition not only showcases limar textiles but also highlights significant ceremonies and rituals involving limar throughout various life stages.

Limar cloth was used from birth to wrap babies, during pregnancy to determine the baby's gender and facilitate childbirth, and in the "cukur jambul" ceremony.



An exhibit showing limar textiles utilised in circumcision ceremonies for males in the Malay community. Photo: The Star/Faihan Ghani

It was also used in circumcision ceremonies for royal princes and wedding ceremonies for royalty.

For a grand statement, the exhibition features a limar wedding costume, traditionally worn by royals and nobles on their marriage day.

“Culturally, there are many layers to the limar story, and we hope this show gets people curious and interested,” concluded Zahirah.