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Speech by Dr. Lee Chiaw Meng, Parliamentary Secretary,  
Ministry of Education, at the Singapore Youth Festival  
1970 Art and Craft Exhibition at 5.30 p.m. Thursday,  
23rd July, 1970 at the Victoria Memorial Hall

An artist has no existence in a rootless society and neither has a rootless society any need for artists. Singapore is fortunate in that it is not placed in such a dilemma. With roots deeply entrenched in three great cultures, Chinese, Malay and Indian, and an extensive influence of Western culture, the Singapore artist has ample scope and incentive for self-expression. However, it is not enough for the artist in Singapore to be merely a painter of pretty pictures. There is a need for him to contribute to the socio-economic growth of the country. Art for art's sake can no longer be the sole criterion for an artist's output. The artistic talent of the country should be harnessed and utilised in the service of industry and technology. While it is not the direct aim of schools to produce the designers and artist-craftsmen for this purpose, it is nevertheless the duty of every teacher to inculcate in his students the correct attitude to the role that art can play in an industrial society.

Art is not a special commodity for the enjoyment of a privileged few. Neither is it a luxury to be indulged in only when more pressing matters have been attended to. Art exists everywhere around us — in the buildings we put up, in our homes, in the trees we plant, the things of daily use, in the streets, and, in fact, in everything that a discerning eye can see. Whether we surround ourselves with a beautiful or an ugly environment is a choice that we ourselves make. The matter is all the more pressing with the acceleration of our industrialisation programme. It is a historical fact borne out by the Industrial Revolution that with rapid industrialisation, a dulling of the senses takes place. The Industrial Revolution was followed by a period when a great deal that was aesthetically distasteful was produced. Mass production and assembly line goods at that time were monstrosities of design. A similar situation can happen in Singapore if nothing is done to prevent it. The Government is aware of the problem and steps are being taken to ensure that Singaporeans of the future will not find the lack of amenities for gracious living. Proper town planning, careful attention paid to designs of public housing and a nation-wide campaign to keep Singapore clean and green are but a few of the projects.

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The question might be asked: "Does the public appreciate what is being done for it?" So far the indications are favourable. Such a question need never arise in the future if the present generation who is now in school is properly guided in its ability to distinguish a good design from a bad one. In the final analysis, the public gets what it deserves. A discerning public will create the conditions suitable for congenial and sophisticated living, and it is with this aim that we should now concern ourselves.

In this Art and Craft Exhibition you will see that the displays are works in which both art and craft overlap. Each enhances the function of the other; the eye for form, colour and texture works in close co-ordination with the hand that wields the tool. The two sections of this exhibition demonstrate the skill and creative ability of our children. It is these young people who will be our greatest hope in the development of a community where technical advancement and the arts can co-exist. A sound art education will equip them to be discriminate consumers if not industrial designers and artist-craftsmen.

An exhibition of this nature has a dual purpose: to show what our pupils are capable of doing, and to act as an incentive to pupils and teachers into making greater efforts. I am particularly pleased that the whole exhibition is built on the theme of "The Years Ahead" and, judging from these praiseworthy efforts, the years ahead should be ones we can look forward to.

I have great pleasure in declaring this exhibition open and in wishing all participants and the organisers every success in their future endeavours.

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