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**SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SENIOR MINISTER
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING
OF THE EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY LEE MAN-FONG
AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM ART GALLERY
ON SATURDAY, 3 JANUARY 1987 AT 2.40 PM**

It is said that in the beginning was the Word. That may be so but I also believe that truth is never complete and so I would like to add another truth and it is this: "In the beginning was also the Picture".

I have evidence from pre-history to back my proposition. Long before writing was invented the most powerful medium of human communication was painting. Those of you who have seen reproductions of paintings and engravings found on the walls and roofs of deep caves in Northern Spain, France and Southern Africa will be aware that long before writing was invented early man communicated very powerful emotions and longings not by way of the written word but by way of visual images. Leaping from the walls of these caves are almost three dimensional bisons and masked, prancing figures which students of cave painting have dubbed "The Sorcerers". These vivid and often startling paintings from over 20,000 years ago suggest that early man sublimated his emotions visually rather than verbally.

These paintings were invariably found in deep caves where no natural light penetrated and so the artists painted by the light of weak oil lamps. According to experts on cave art, these paintings were not simple decorative works

of art for early man but powerful magic to ensure fertility in the bison, ox, mammoth and reindeer he hunted and also to ensure success in the hunt. What was depicted on the walls, the painter believed, could be made to happen in the real world.

For the cave artist, painting was a way of reassuring himself emotionally, in a fearsome and dangerous world, that through painting he could control his environment.

This may be a somewhat odd way of introducing Lee Man-Fong and his exhibition of paintings but since everything that could possibly be said about one of Singapore's most talented and respected artists has already been said by so many people, I felt I had to make a new approach for a discourse on his paintings.

I cannot claim to be a close student of Lee Man-Fong's paintings and his artistic evolution. Nor, for that matter, can I claim to be a qualified judge of ancient and modern painting -- especially modern painting. My judgement of art has more in common with that of the cave-man spectator than with that of a learned art critique. If a painting catches my attention and holds my interest then, as far as I am concerned, that is art.

If not, then it may well be a great work of art but would be totally lost on me.

Until now I have seen only a few of Lee Man-Fong's paintings in the original. My knowledge of his paintings are from catalogues or prints or compilations in book form.

Even at second hand I find his paintings not only arresting and what is even more important also within my powers of artistic comprehension. Unless you suffer from double vision or astigmatism you will not react to any of

his paintings with, "What on earth is that?" which is the question that sometimes comes to mind with some modern paintings.

Let me make clear that in saying this I am not in any way running down, as is fashionable, modern painters. A painting is not necessarily bad just because you don't understand it.

It is bad only when it looks phoney and dishonest.

The thing that has made Lee Man-Fong one of South East Asia's foremost painters is not simply that he is a traditionalist both in style and spirit but that he is also a traditionalist without being conservative or old fashioned. He is a traditionalist only in the sense that he gives to his paintings a sense of coherence, permanence and the solidity of life itself. He does not confuse you.

This is a refreshing change from painters who project disintegration, chaos, alienation and the feeling that life is nothing except blobs of colour.

That is why I am happy to be here this afternoon to declare open this exhibition by an artist whose paintings have found international patronage. Like all creative painters he has ranged all over the world -- Indonesia, Singapore, India, China, the United States, Egypt and Italy in search of subjects and inspiration. As he himself has written elsewhere, "The world of art is a garden with myriad blooms. I have never encouraged the notion of a single dominant style, nor did I ever attack practitioners of other modes. I believe that any school or style has the right to exist."

The other reason why I am happy to open this exhibition is that the artist has offered a number of paintings on display here for sale. The proceeds from it will go towards the National Kidney Foundation.

In view of this, I hope that, apart from enjoying the paintings on display here, you will also bear in mind that you will be helping some citizen to get a new lease of life through the efforts of the National Kidney Foundation.

I have now great pleasure in declaring open this exhibition of paintings by Lee Man-Fong.

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