

PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG,
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM
AT THE OLD ST JOSEPH'S INSTITUTION
ON SATURDAY, 20 JANUARY 1996 AT 7.00 PM**

I accepted the invitation to open the Singapore Art Museum to underline the new importance the Government places on the arts, values and social graces in Singapore.

The Singapore Art Museum is the first of a series of museums developed by the National Heritage Board in the new Arts and Heritage District. In ten years' time, Singaporeans will have five outstanding museums at the foot of Fort Canning to visit, a state-of-the-art Performing Arts Centre at Marina Bay to enjoy the best of domestic and international performances and a heritage area stretching to the Singapore River to renew our ties with our history.

The commitment to build an Arts and Heritage District as well as the Arts Centre marks our desire to make our country's development more balanced and rounded. After the initial years of preoccupation with economic development, it is time now to have our senses touched and stimulated by aesthetics and creative works. Improvements in material well-being must be accompanied by, or at least lead to, more refined behaviour and a keener appreciation of non-economic needs.

As Singapore develops and becomes even more open to the influences of external cultures and trends, as Singaporeans travel and absorb different values, we as a people should be even more aware of who we are and where we came from. Heritage and culture hold a people together, make them a distinct society and provide them the moral strength.

We are a new country but one born of old civilisations. We are people who have come from at least three different ancient civilisations. These deep roots endow us with rich values and traditions. They belie the short history of modern independent Singapore, and give us the gravitas as a nation.

This Museum and the museums to come, the Arts Centre and the historic sites in the Heritage District should evoke in Singaporeans an appreciation and understanding of the old civilisations we all belong to, and the part of the world we are in. They link us to the richness of our past and to our neighbours.

Singapore's location in South East Asia had made this island the confluence of Indian, Chinese, Malay and Islamic and western cultures. South East Asia has been a meeting ground of commerce, culture and civilisation for more than 2000 years. Brian Harrison, the historian, described South East Asia as always having been part of something bigger than itself. "The really vital theme of its history is the theme of 'culture-contact' - the story of the successive waves of cultural and commercial influence and of the repeated challenge to the people of South East Asia to relearn, to readapt and to reinterpret"¹

¹ Brian Harrison, South East Asia, A Short Story

Through the rise and ebb of the Indianised kingdoms of South East Asia, the looming presence of the Chinese dynasties, the spread of Islam and the influence of the European metropolitan powers, Temasek, and later Singapore, was always in the middle of great currents of history and culture. Today, Singapore continues to play this role as a meeting ground. Singapore has been and must always be a "part of something bigger than itself".

The paintings that adorn these walls are testimonies to the rich cultures we come from. Their creators have very naturally assimilated the influences from their exposure and education and brought out from within themselves their heritage. Their spirit and internal synthesis of the varied strands of civilisations are more articulate than my words can express.

Like the artists whose works you exhibit, the museums in this Heritage District must be cosmopolitan, presenting the influences of the great cultures Singapore has absorbed. For Singaporeans, the museums must impart to us humility of where we stand amidst the vibrant cultures around us. For visitors to Singapore unfamiliar with South East Asia, the exhibits may interest them to travel the region to absorb the richness of the cultures here.

In this way, the museums return to the historic role Singapore has played through the ages - as an entrepot. Not just as an entrepot for goods but as an entrepot for art, culture, civilisation and ideas. It is the classic role of a city-state and one which we are well poised to perform.

The Singapore Art Museum is housed in a beautifully restored work-of-art from Singapore's past. You have a great challenge to enhance Singapore as a

confluence of ideas and give Singaporeans the panache of a refined, educated people.

I congratulate the Boards and staff of the National Heritage Board and the Singapore Art Museum and I have special pleasure in declaring open the Singapore Art Musuem.

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