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SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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Speech for Prof. Hong Lin Ken, Minister for Home Affairs, at opening of the March Art Exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall on Friday, 19th March 1971 at 5.30 p.m.

We have moved from a frontier pioneering society of a new settled city-state. But we have still a long way to go in abandoning the almost wholly commercial values that characteristically have marked frontier settlements all over the world.

Our pioneering forefathers, and their immediate descendants, were illiterate, or semi-literate, and were pre-occupied in turning a swampy island into a commercial city. Status in society was measured solely by the possession of wealth. Art hardly had any place in such a society.

To-day, the rough features of our migrant settlement have been worn out by a way of living, in which leisure and enjoyment of the finer things of life are gradually receiving greater appreciation. It is inevitable that such a society should begin to spend time and money to acquire copies of the masterpieces of foreign art. A few fortunate ones may have sufficient means to buy originals. But, it is also time to be aware that we also have our local talent, which requires nurturing and recognition. We should not live on the assumption that with a population of about 2 million people, we are unlikely to produce great artists. Indeed, many great European artists of past centuries emerged in countries with populations not much larger than our present population. On the law of averages, we are as likely to produce a few artistic geniuses that will withstand the test of time throughout the world.

In art recognition comes slowly, and often after the life time of the artist. The Ministry of Culture can organize exhibitions like the one I am privileged to declare open to-day. It can provide encouragement and increase public awareness of local artists. But it cannot make great artists out of them nor confer upon them enduring fame. In art as in music, greatness must come from the artist himself. What nature has endowed in him, he must improve by patient toil and effort. Success, when it comes to our artists, will be an individual achievement, but it will be acclaimed as our national heritage to inspire new generations to greater artistic achievements, and to fill pride in our cultural development.

I have pleasure in declaring the Exhibition open.

Date: 19th March, 1971.

Time Issued: 1400 Hours.