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SPEECH BY MR WAN HUSSIN ZOOHRI, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(HEALTH AND CULTURE), AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF
THE CHEONG SOO PIENG RETROSPECTIVE AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM
ART GALLERY ON THURSDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 1983 AT 5.30 PM

It is both a sad and a happy occasion today as I officiate at this opening of the Cheong Soo Pieng Retrospective, the third in the 'Pioneer Artists of Singapore' series of exhibitions launched in 1981.

We mourn the loss early this year of the pioneer artist we honour today, Cheong Soo Pieng. But we are consoled by having around us the artistic works that represent his life's achievement. These aesthetic treasures are indeed mute testimony of the fact that the human spirit lives forever in the art it strives to create.

This Cheong Soo Pieng Retrospective features 200 of the artist's works, including oil, sculptures and Chinese brush and ink paintings. The artist's first retrospective show, entitled 'Twenty Years of His Art', was held in 1967 in honour of his 50th birthday and his 25th anniversary as an art teacher. In his lifetime, he had held solo exhibitions in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, West Germany and London. His paintings are represented in countless private collections.

Cheong Soo Pieng was one of the core group of China-born artists who made signal contributions to the growth and development of visual art in Singapore, both as

practising artists and teachers. Among his company of early pioneer artists were the late Lim Hak Tai, the late Wong Jai Ling, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Huang Pao Fang. Most of our young artists have been students of these veteran artists.

The 'Pioneer Artists of Singapore' series of art exhibitions was conceived of as a tribute to these old artists, bringing into public focus the works of prominent Singapore artists who have made an impact on the Singapore art scene. The origins and history of visual art in Singapore can be traced through a study of their works.

The first exhibition in December '81 featured Liu Kang. The exhibition, which was held for 16 days, attracted an audience of 7,828, including a record attendance of 485 during the inauguration. The second exhibition in November '82, dedicated to Chen Wen Hsi, was equally well received, indicating the prevalence of a heartening general interest in the appreciation of visual art.

The range of artistic effort evident in this year's exhibition is proof of Cheong Soo Pieng's sheer versatility as an artist. His style was constantly evolving, for he was always searching for new modes of expression, working in collages, reliefs, ceramics and sculptures, besides painting which had remained his main artistic interest. The sense of renewal, of artistic energy and vision discovered afresh, is seen in the many phases of his long artistic career. Although he was well schooled in Chinese art traditions, he chose to grapple with and master Western art forms as well. This wonderful spirit of experimentation and renewal through a humble openness to many different influences is something that our young artists should do well to emulate.

In his efforts to achieve a synthesis of Chinese and Western art traditions, Cheong Soo Pieng was one of the first to set the pace in evolving an art form distinctive to this region. In his role as a teacher he had thus exerted a positive and significant influence on our young artists, paving the way for the growth of an authentic Singaporean cultural expression.

In terms of productivity, too, Cheong Soo Pieng emerged an admirable winner - from the time of his adolescent years in Xiamen (Amoy), China, he had worked hard at his calling. During the last 30 years of his life he was in his studio nearly everyday, except when he was away on his travels. His deep commitment to his art was unmistakable in the quality and range of his artistic creations.

We are gathered to pay tribute to this remarkable artist whose spirit and devotion to art will continue to inspire and influence our younger generation of artists. In 1962, the Government of Singapore awarded him the Meritorious Service Medal. Today, we would like to place on record our gratitude for the labour of love he has left us for a heritage.

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