

SPEECH BY THE DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION SERVICES,  
MR. G.G. THOMSON, O.B.E., AT THE OPENING OF THE  
FIFTH PAN-MALAYAN PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION ORGANIZED  
BY THE PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE, AT THE BRITISH  
COUNCIL HALL, ON FRIDAY, JULY 19, 1957 AT 5.30 P.M.

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It is a pleasure indeed to open this 5th Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition sponsored by the Photographic Society of Singapore, and it is a privilege to be associated with an exhibition which has had the largest number of entries of any yet held.

When I think of the 778 entries, I feel the muscular tension of 778 temporary Cyclops as they concentrate their mind and their eye on the small lens within which the whole world is condensed at the moment, and I seem to hear the lapping waters of the dark room as the expectant eyes of 778 artists peer to see whether their dream-child of a picture has been born. The number is indeed one of which to be proud.

I have checked with my military friends and it is literally of battalion strength - fully trained, fully mobilised, and fully operational.

In this year of Merdeka, this is an encouraging response, for if I were asked what hobby contributes most to nation-building, I would put photography high on the list. It is an extrovert form of art. The photographer shows himself in his selection of subject, and in the pattern and texture of detail he finds in the external world. He speaks inner truths by outer images.

This is a stimulus to the mind, an education in sympathy and imagination and a discipline of the eyes as well as a training in the techniques of the camera, the developer and the printer. But above all, it makes for a deeper appreciation of the land in which we live. People who pass by are not irrelevancies, but people of beauty and grace, dignity and character.

A face ceases to be a monotonous sheet, and becomes a page in a book in which are written all the emotions men and women are heir to. The pattern of the man-made and the natural, of building or tree and of individuals, takes on a new significance. By lighting and by your focus you make us see with your eyes. In this way the place in which we live has a new meaning: it speaks to us in the language of the heart.

We become emotionally tied: and that love of country which we call patriotism is given not only a stimulus to grow, but a method of expression. What better school of patriotism could be and what better proof in this Merdeka year, than the exhibition we are here to see today.

I would like to add a word about the group of photographers whom I know best and with whom I have worked closely and happily for the past 12 years. The group has changed little in membership and most of them have with me seen the great majority of the public events of this crowded island, restless in its vitality. They are the Press photographers.

Their task is different to yours. You have time to stand and stare and select your subject: you can wait till the lighting effect and the pose are there; you can choose your vantage point: you can take time to make your print: and make sure that when it

makes its bow to the insatiable eyes of the world, it is well-rehearsed and well-presented.

But time does not stand still for the Press photographer. He must literally snatch the moment of history as it flies - and once the moment is missed, there is no second chance. History sets their pace and makes their pattern: through them, history makes comments on itself and distributes the comments by radio round the world and presents them for history.

A smile, a frown, a wink - or should one add - a curve is literally in the eyes and the recollection of the world. They work to speed. The machines which brook no delay wait for their picture and it is the broad screen rather than the fine grain which they present to the world.

One of our Singapore photographer, Sam Kai Faye has won world fame by his success in the Encyclopaedia Britannia Exhibition. And I would wish that a special section of this exhibition might be reserved for them and a special prize awarded, annually for the best Press pictures.

But to return from what might be to what is, I would like again to congratulate the Society for the incentive and the opportunity it has created for so many men - why should they predominate over women? - to develop their artistic perception and technical ability to an ever higher degree in friendly competition with each other. This is a public service in opening an avenue to citizenship which merits every encouragement.

If I might, this time as Director of Information Services move again from what is to what might be. I hope that it will be possible to offer a prize in a competition for the photograph which best expresses that elusive thing - the spirit of Singapore.

But meanwhile here we have in high quality and rich abundance the fair face - and faces - of Malaya presented to us and it is my duty and my pleasure not to delay the introduction longer and to declare open the Fifth Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition.

JULY 19, 1957.

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