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SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO AND
NTUC SECRETARY-GENERAL, AT THE ASIAN CHRISTIAN ART EXHIBITION
AT THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ORCHARD ROAD
ON TUESDAY, 17 MARCH 1981 AT 5.30 PM

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Every now and then, we come across reports of sales of Rembrandts or Picassos for sums well in excess of millions of dollars each. On other occasions we read about art galleries holding expensive exhibitions of the works of Rubens or Monet to be viewed only by a tiny fraction of the population before they are taken off the walls and sent back to the obscurity of private collections. These masterpieces will then lie in mansions where the company consists of a battery of burglar alarms guarding other treasures with similarly ludicrous prices on their heads. It would thus appear that art persists in remaining the exclusive privilege of the very rich.

If this were so, it would be rather incongruous for a trade unionist to be officiating at the opening ceremony of an art exhibition. I would indeed feel out of place if this afternoon's occasion was one where dealers, financiers and private collectors paraded their bloated wealth by vying with one another for the chance to acquire a status symbol or an asset as a sure-fire hedge against inflation; with the winner collecting his trophy and whisking it away, leaving the rest of us with the memory of a masterpiece. Since I am not in one of the auction houses of London nor am I officiating at the opening of a private showing of a personal collection, I would like to spend a little time speaking about art, religion and the community.

Art is, and always has been, an indispensable need of humanity. It has been said that art is implanted in the soul

of the child, /2

of the child, as in that of primitive man. The many successful spot-art competitions for children organised by our community centres and the great variety of cave-drawings scattered around the world bear testimony to this fact. Art is as effective as articulate speech in communicating ideas and emotions. It is indispensable to civilisation. One could even go to the extent of asserting that it is the art of each race that gives its civilisation its distinct character.

Art reflects the whole manner of life of a period, tribe or nation and the beliefs of a people. More importantly, it is permanent. Our knowledge of the past, of civilisations that have flourished and disappeared, is derived almost entirely from the fragmentary relics of their art. It is not from printed books that we visualise and form our perception of the life, culture and character of ancient Egypt, Greece or China, but from the ruined buildings, carved stones, frescoed walls, personal adornments, half-decayed bronzes and salvaged scraps of paintings. History becomes a living reality to us through art. Similarly, the value of religious art, be it Christian, Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist art, to the member of a faith is much more significant than is usually considered. It brings the follower of a religion closer to the origin of his faith, bridging the span of time and space, and helping him to acquire a deeper understanding of the Truth he seeks.

However, there are other opinions about the purpose of art. One such notion is that superstitious fear of the unknown forces of nature has been one of the main springs of artistic creation in man. It is claimed that primitive man, by the production of his art, tried to placate the mysterious hostile powers which he feared. Those who subscribe to this notion would therefore consider art to be a representation of man's feelings of the physical world around him or of any phenomenon which he could not fathom.

While this might have been so for the primitive man and his cave sketches, it is scarcely necessary to insist upon the over-simplification or even irrelevance of such a notion for

those of us who came on to the scene after the cave-man. I make this assertion because art as we know it, and here I am, not referring to cave drawings, is not merely representation, but it is also interpretation. A work of art expresses the emotions awakened in the artist by intimate communion with his spirit or with nature, and dictated to him by his inspiration. It is not merely a translation of what his physical senses feel, perceive, hear, touch or fear.

If representational truth were the criterion of the work of art, a good photograph would have a better claim to this title than a torso by Michelangelo or a corral of horses by Xu Bei Hong. A photographer may, by his tact in selection, give evidence of a good deal of artistic taste but he has to a large extent accept nature uncontrolled and unmodified. And it is just that power of control and purposeful modification exercised by an artist that brings out the beauty of his inspiration and conveys its inner meaning to the beholder.

Nothing in nature is either beautiful or ugly, for beauty and ugliness are not positive attributes of matter. But matter is invested with these attributes by the artist's emotional reactions to some outside stimulus. The artist has the power to make this emotion visible to others, and to make them share in his inspiration. We become aware of beauty through art and acquire the habit of transferring it from the work of art to the aspect of nature which was the source of its inspiration.

We learn to see beauty in a tree, in a mountain, and even in things which, before the artist had opened our eyes, left us cold and even repelled us. A toothless and haggard looking beggar or hawker becomes a focus of deep contemplation and even attraction under Seah Kim Joo's touch, because he saw his subject emotionally and taught us to see it in the same way. It is doubtful if anyone found anything but dinginess and "ugliness" in the dirt and smell of Chinatown or the Singapore river before Leng Joon Wong, by the work of his brush, invested the dingy cubicle or the murky waters with permanent beauty.

The attempt to interpret rather than to represent is even more difficult for the artist striving to put on canvas, the inner feelings he has for his Creator. Difficult indeed, is an attempt to reproduce with paint a stirring of the emotions, an inspiration of the spirit, the exposing of a soul, or one's closeness with God. It is relatively simple to depict a flower true to form and colour, but how does one start so as to reveal on canvas the purity and truth of one's faith. Artists in this genre therefore consider that the function of a picture is not to display but to suggest; the beautiful is present but it is concealed. After all, a painted twig is important in that it invites one to reconstruct, by exercise of the imagination, a towering tree the sight of which we could derive great delight in; just as a painted figure of Christ or Buddha is evocative since it depicts the inner nature striving for the highest ideal.

This explains why all religious art whatever its affiliation seeks to convey, irrespective of the form, colour or style on the canvas, the same message to the beholder, and that is the essence of "the Way, the Truth and the Life". It is with such a spirit that we should view and interpret all such paintings, be they representative of Christian art, Islamic art, Hindu art or Buddhist art. Such unfettered outlook serves to emphasise that the ability to express one's faith in a Supreme Being is not the preserve of any one culture, race nor religion. The multifarious ways of expressing the sublimation of the human spirit should be enjoyed by all, believers of the faith and non-believers alike. This attitude of mind is not prompted, so much by the desire to propagate one's faith, but rather, it would be vain to think that only Christians can receive inspiration from Christian art, Muslims from Islamic art, Hindus from Hindu art or Buddhists from Buddhist art. If this were so, we would be not much better than those greedy moguls who hoarded the many masterpieces in a bank vault, feeling little shame that their treasures could never be shared with their fellow men because they thought that the masses could not understand aesthetic delights. There is another reason, why we ought to be more aware of forms of religious expressions which differ from our own.

Singapore is a multi-religious society, with the different religions brought in either by missionaries or our forebears to mix with the indigenous cultures. Using this as a foundation we have created a disciplined and cohesive society and this has been a cornerstone of the progress we have made.

However, with growing affluence, quite a number of our people have become afflicted by the epidemic of materialism. They are discarding the religions and hence moral standards of their forefathers in order to devote more time to the worship of wealth. We must reverse this trend so that the acquisition of material wealth is viewed in its proper perspective. This is a common goal for Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other religious followers alike.

However in our eagerness to strengthen spiritual values, we should not jettison the principle of religious tolerance and forbearance, particularly concerning the efforts of others towards the same goal. If we neglected this fundamental principle, society as a whole would rebel, not only against those breaching this standard of conduct, but also towards the very objective we are pursuing. All those inspired with the evangelistic spirit must therefore learn to tread sensibly and sensitively. It is in the interest of the whole society that they do.

Our history short though it may be, has shown that religious freedom and tolerance among our people are pre-conditions for stability and harmony. Singaporeans have shown that they understand there is no room for bigotry in our midst. If it were otherwise, religious strifes and mutual distrust would have sapped all our energies and drive to pursue our national goals. In place of progress and prosperity, bloodshed and carnage would have been the order of the day. We cannot and must not allow this convulsive state of affairs to develop. If it did develop, it would spell the beginning of the end for us all, with both the preacher and the preached, and even society as a whole condemned to perish in a social hell. The lessons of Northern Ireland are too vivid and too real to be ignored. This torment surely could not be the ultimate goal of any religious teaching.

The holding of this Christian Art Exhibition which is open to members of the public serves eminently the objective of reversing the trend of moral decay. It also reaffirms the spirit of tolerance and forbearance which is the essence of the major religions co-existing in Singapore.

I therefore take great pleasure in declaring this Exhibition open.

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