

**[TO BE EMBARGOED TILL AFTER DELIVERY]
[PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]**

**SPEECH BY DR LEE BOON YANG
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION, COMMUNICATIONS & THE ARTS
AT OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE
ASEAN MUSEUM DIRECTORS' SYMPOSIUM 2007
ON TUESDAY, 3 JULY, 9.30AM AT
GALLERY THEATRE, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE**

Miss Alissandra Cummins, President, International Council of Museums,

Ms Corazon Alvina, Director of the Philippines National Museum &
President of the ASEMUS,

Mr Mark Jones, Director, Victoria & Albert Museum (UK),

Excellencies,

Museum Colleagues from the region and Singapore,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to join you in this ASEAN Museum Directors Symposium 2007. It is the first time that such a distinguished panel of Directors from renowned ASEAN and international public and private museums have assembled to share their knowledge and exchange ideas and experiences. This Symposium is organised in conjunction with the 40th anniversary of ASEAN. It heralds the formation of a new networking forum and knowledge exchange among participating Museum Directors.

Multiple Roles of Museums Today

2. Since the late 19th century, museums have played key roles in promoting a country's national history and identity. Back then, the chief mandate of museums was simply to preserve, present and promote the history and culture of a country or region and its people. The focus of museums then were largely inward-looking, concentrating their energies on collecting artefacts and artworks, displaying them in their galleries and serving as gatekeepers of history, heritage and culture.

3. Today, museums are undergoing a transformation. Many museums are reinventing and repositioning themselves to become more vibrant and dynamic institutions. Museums are no longer dull and dusty repositories of artefacts and artworks, or mere exhibitions spaces. Today's museums are constantly striving to serve the needs of heritage specialists and the man-in-the-street by conveying meaning and sharing of experiences through exhibits to promote understanding and encourage a discourse. The way we process and use information and learn about our heritage in a world of pervasive digital technology supported by always-on TV and anywhere, anytime media and affordable global travel has changed our lives dramatically. Museums must now compete for attention and audience, both locals and tourists, through innovative presentations of their collections and exciting

curation to offer a memorable experience. Successful museums are those that have met these challenges head-on and transformed themselves into iconic cultural landmarks in cities around the world.

4. The modern museums play many different roles in society and contribute much to nation building. Let me outline some of these roles.

Museums as Centres of Learning

5. Firstly, museums are centres of experiential learning and important partners in education. For example, the Queen Sirikit Great Science Museum in the Pathum Thani province north of Bangkok organises interactive exhibitions and interesting public programmes such as school camps. Its objective is to facilitate greater understanding and appreciation of science and technology among the young.

6. In Singapore, museums work hand-in-hand with schools and offer opportunities for experiential learning outside the confines of the classrooms. Museum visits are thus important component of the curriculum of our schools. Many public programmes like cultural fairs, performances, public lectures and workshops on culture and heritage are also organized and held in our museums and heritage institutions.

Museums as Tourism and Lifestyle Destinations

7. Secondly, museums around the world are shaping themselves to be cultural destinations, attracting millions of international tourists. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Louvre in Paris and Victoria & Albert Museum in London are outstanding examples of successful museums that rank as top tourist attractions. Each year, millions pass through the doors of these world famous institutions to enjoy priceless masterpieces like the Mona Lisa, and chic fashion shows like the ongoing *New York Fashion Now* at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Nearer to home, we have the Palace Museum in Beijing, Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore's very own Asian Civilisations Museum. These Asian cultural institutions are fast becoming "must-sees" in the itineraries of cultural travellers around the world.

8. Recently, thanks to Hollywood, museums are also taking centre stage in popular culture. They have played pivotal roles in blockbuster movies like *National Treasure*, *Da Vinci Code*, and more recently *Night at the Museum*. My colleagues at NHB told me that the American Museum of Natural History enjoyed record attendances of almost 16,000 visitors in a day after the screening of *Night at the Museum*. Therefore, museums can also become a part of pop culture attracting even more visitors.

Museums as Facilitators of Cultural Exchange

9. Thirdly, the sharing of home-grown museum collections certainly raises the profile of a country's unique heritage and culture. Such collaboration among museums also play an important role in enhancing cultural exchanges and add diversity and vibrancy to a museum's programming. In this respect, I am pleased to note that Singapore museums have embarked on such international collaborations. Last year, the Singapore Art Museum mounted an exhibition on South East Asian art at the acclaimed National Art Museum of China. This year, the Ayala Museum in the Philippines was host to the Asian Civilizations Museum's exquisite Peranakan collection held in conjunction with the visit of Singapore President S R Nathan to the Philippines. We are keen to work with our partners worldwide to facilitate such cultural exchanges.

Museums as Gateways to Cultural Understanding

10. Lastly, and I believe most significantly, museums should also serve as important cultural gateways to foster peace and harmony. Today, we live in a world facing the constant threat of international terrorism fuelled by radical and fanatical religious ideologies. There is a greater need than ever before to forge closer and stronger cross-cultural respect and understanding. Singapore, as a multi-racial and multi-

religious society, is keenly aware of the importance of racial and religious harmony. Without racial and religious harmony Singapore could never attain the level of progress and prosperity which you can see around you. Our museums have important roles to play in fostering awareness of our history and cultural identity as well as promote racial and religious harmony.

11. Recently, the National Museum of Singapore presented a 2-month long festival, *Under the Crescent Moon*, which featured exhibitions, performances, films and lectures on the rich heritage of the Arab world and the Turkish people. In 2005, the Asian Civilizations Museum presented a fascinating exhibition, *Journey of Faith*, showcasing artefacts such as items in Roman catacombs during the early Christian era, paintings by Raphael and ceremonial regalia of the Popes, all of which came from the great collection of the Vatican. In fact, the permanent collection of the ACM, which focused on the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim cultural artefacts, serves as a reminder of how these great religions had contributed to shaping the values and progress of different Asian societies. I see this role of the modern museum as a very important mission. I urge you to place greater effort in bringing about deeper understanding and mutual respect between cultures, religions

and civilizations. This is one way for museums to contribute to a more peaceful and harmonious world.

Integrated ASEAN Programming

12. I am pleased to announce that the National Heritage Board will be embarking on an Integrated ASEAN Programming for its museums over the next three years. Today's symposium marks the first of many joint ASEAN initiatives. "Celebrate ASEAN!", a core theme of 2007, will resonate with activities carried out in NHB museums such as the *Youth ASEAN Stamp Exhibition & National Stamp Collecting Competition* organized by the Singapore Philatelic Museum, *The Big Picture Show* at the Singapore Art Museum, and *Common Threads - ASEAN Textile Traditions & Transformation* at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

13. This thematic festival is targeted at fostering greater understanding and appreciation of ASEAN and Asian cultures. This approach will continue in 2008 and 2009. We hope that these thematic cultural festivals will foster stronger mutual understanding and respect among Singaporeans and our ASEAN and Asian neighbours. They also help us to bring a slice of Asia's rich and diverse cultures to Singapore.

Creation of an ASEAN museum network

14. The ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium is an ideal platform to explore the creation of an integrated museum network among ASEAN museums. Establishing such a network will enhance ASEAN's standing in the world as a unique and culturally vibrant region with a wealth of heritage and the arts. The network could enhance and foster stronger cultural relations and cooperation. It could also aid ASEAN community building through the cultural exchanges and sharing of experiences through this network.

Conclusion

15. On this note, I wish all of you an enjoyable and fruitful discussion. To our overseas participants, I wish you a pleasant and memorable stay in Singapore.

16. I now declare the ASEAN Museum Directors' Symposium 2007 open.

12-Nov-07 11:44 AM