

EXHIBITION OF AUSTRALIAN ART
ADELAIDE ART GALLERY, 17TH MARCH, 1962
SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. P.G. MENZIES

Sir Lloyd, ladies and gentlemen:

I must say at once that Sir Lloyd (Dumas) does me far too much honour, but I certainly plead guilty to the charge that I had a little to do with the origins of this collection. But before I tell you about that I would like to say that I think I am right - am I not? - in telling you that this is the first Exhibition to be put on in this new wing. This is a new and wonderful wing in a Gallery which has always been a distinguished gallery.

I know that many of you when you look at politicians like me, and recall some of the things you've said (Laughter) or that you've heard, and repeated (Laughter) seldom give us any credit for having any of the more civilised characteristics. But I want to tell you that for years, whenever I came to Adelaide, I used to walk along the terrace, come in, sit down opposite John Longstaff's portrait of his wife - the greatest portrait I venture to say that he ever painted - remain there for a quarter of an hour and go out again, if not wiser, better, and if not better, wiser than when I went in.

This Gallery has formed a real part of the life of Adelaide, intimately placed as it is here, with the city, presided over, as it is, by people of distinction in this State. Putting size on one side, I think this Gallery has a special quality and a special position in the life of this State.

Of course, on this occasion, there is another reason why it is appropriate that this collection should be here. No man has had more to do with getting it together, arranging it, than Mr. Robert Campbell the distinguished director of this Gallery. (Applause) And getting this collection together, I want to warn you, has been almost as difficult as winning an election; (Laughter) and much more difficult than picking a Senate team. (Laughter) From the very beginning it was designed to be arranged historically beginning with some of the fine artists, the fine workers of the very early colonial history of the country, one or two of whom had fallen foul of the law, but continued to have their own qualities, running right up to the present time when you get into that period of semi-abstract painting which, I confess, as a miserable philistine, I have never yet understood. (Laughter) So the Exhibition had to run on a line, a theme - the historic development of Australian painting. Therefore as you go around you will see many pictures with which you are familiar; you will miss others that you might have expected to see. It is one of my minor grievances that the modesty of Sir William Ashton, who is one of the selectors of this collection, has prohibited him from having one of his own distinguished landscapes. But still that is very characteristic of him.

The matter began in this fashion. I had some talks, initiated by Sir Colin Anderson, the well-known shipping man, who is the Chairman of the Tate Gallery in London. Now Colin is a great exponent of the very very modern; and I, as everybody knows, am a reactionary and a traditionalist. And so we very happily met - we're old friends. But we were able to meet at opposite poles and gradually make an accommodation in the middle somewhere. He took this matter up; he thought that it would be a splendid thing to have at the Tate a really first-class collection of Australian work. He was prepared to concede to me my old-fashioned ideas in favour of impressionism; and I was able to concede to him his rather boyish outlook, as I thought, on other things.

I took it up with our own Art Advisory Board which, a little known body though it may be, has done splendid work for art and artists in Australia. That Board is presided over, of course, by Will Ashton and it contains other people of whom you know, like Mr. Dargie and Sir Daryl Lindsay, Mr. Pratt, Robert Campbell and, now I'm happy to say, the newly appointed member, a very very famous artist of a more recent vintage, Mr. Russell Drysdale. (Applause) That Board got to work. It laid its predatory hands on the collections of the Galleries; and if you've had anything to do with Gallery Trustees, or Gallery Directors, you will know that to get anything out of them is as hard as getting a very very difficult cork out of a difficult bottle. (Laughter) But we were rather aided on this occasion, of course, by the fact that Robert Campbell, himself, was a Director and accustomed to holding trustees in the palm of his hand; while Daryl Lindsay has been a Director and is equally skilled in this technique. Behind it all there was the frowning look of the Prime Minister who, at that time, had a majority of 32. (Laughter)

Well I want to say that we are deeply indebted to the Galleries for having made this collection possible. You won't have a chance this morning of seeing it as you would like to, but even at a quick glance coming through it's plain to me that this is a most exciting collection of work and that it will make a tremendous impact upon viewers of all sorts of schools of thought when it is put on at the Tate in London. And so it is a happy event.

But in addition to rifling the Galleries it was decided, quite early, after a little discussion, that private owners ought to be put under duress in order to produce some of their treasures. I must say that although there was a divided opinion on this matter I, being accustomed to plundering people, was all in favour of plundering private owners. Therefore I want to say that we are very, very indebted to the owners of some of the pictures in this collection who have generously made them available. In that tribute of thanks, of course, I include myself. (Laughter) I see one of mine not far away from me. One of mine, I say, in terms of ownership - not in terms of creation.

Now the only other thing that I want to say to you ladies and gentlemen, is that it has really been a colossally difficult task to make a choice, because to select is to reject; to offer a preference to one painting of a great painter over another is perhaps to engage yourself in controversy about artistic judgment. Long ago in my sketchy studies of the Latin tongue I learned, and learned thoroughly that "de gustibus non est disputandum" so I'll provoke no arguments on these matters. All I know is that anybody in London of the hundreds of thousands who undoubtedly will come to see these pictures, anybody, looking at them, will look beyond them to the fact that these are not definitive, they are a selection: they illustrate the kind of work that has been done, and that exists. So to the perceptive eye behind every one of these masterly paintings will be a dozen others, a hundred others. They will regard this as giving them a sort of appetiser for a wider knowledge of the work that has gone on in Australia. And I venture to say, without any classification at all as between one school of thought and another, that what has been done in depictive art in Australia in our time, in the last 50 years, in the time of this nation, will stand comparison with what has been done in any other country in the world.

People don't always realise that it takes a considerable force of genius to establish some new technique, or new approach in the world of art. I noticed in the programme that I was given that Louis Buvelot was classified as an impressionist. I have always thought of him as just a little bit before that time. But his paintings had this lovely, mellow, quiet charm that we all know. But when the other boys - as I'll call them for this purpose - like Roberts, that great master, not as yet fully recognised, and Streeton and the others, came back full of the ideas of the impressionists people were, within a few years, being made to understand that the great characteristic of the Australian scene, the Australian landscape, is not darkness, or solidity, or mass, but light, and the play of light, on whatever it falls. This revolutionised the painting that was going on in Australia. It is now of course permissible for people to say, "Well that's rather old-fashioned". But it never will be old-fashioned. Ideas will change, of course, but not to such a degree that these magnificent contributors to a new vision of Australia will ever be regarded as so much folly. Of course not. They stand in their historic period. That is the beauty of this Exhibition: it puts everything into its historic period. So that you may linger over the ones that you like best, or you may, with the eye of history, pass right around and see how something has developed in a new and, in some ways, harsh and hard country, and what beauty has been achieved in the process.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have a singular feeling of privilege in declaring this Exhibition open. (Applause)
