

PRESENTATION OF AWARDS TO SCHOOLS OF ART
AND ARCHITECTURE, ROYAL MELBOURNE INSTITUTE
OF TECHNOLOGY, MELBOURNE

10TH APRIL, 1964

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies.

Sir and Ladies and Gentlemen :

I am pretty good at giving things away, but I regret to say to those who are waiting to get the awards in their clutches that they have to listen to me for a few minutes first. This seems to be the drill.

When you said, Sir, just towards the end of your remarks that you hoped the day would never come when a lot of data was fed into one end of a computer and a painting in oils came out at the other, I wasn't half so surprised as you were. I've seen quite a few of late that looked as if they had been produced in exactly that fashion. (Laughter) However, I am never controversial about these matters. I won't go further than that.

But it's quite true, Sir, that here we celebrate the marriage of science and art. This is a very great technological institute, very well known all over Australia, and in a technological age, it has a very great deal to contribute to the life of the country. But art has its own place and, I hope, an enduring one, and however scientific we become, I hope we will never quite lose our sense of beauty, our sense of capturing in some form or another something that we can live with and enjoy and something that we can pass on to succeeding generations as part of the proof that we are civilised.

A lot of people think that civilisation is best expressed by supersonic aircraft, by the telephone which never stops ringing and on which you sometimes get the caller, television, in which my taste I am happy to say, is of the lowest. These are all very useful things to have around but they are not any necessary proof of civilisation. But here, particularly in this section, you are dealing with matters of a different kind, matters I think which will recommend us to our successors even more than some of the applied scientific affairs with which we become increasingly familiar.

Architecture, as I was reminded just before I sat down, is the father or mother - or is it both? (Laughter) - of all the arts. I suppose that's because the primitive Eskimo built an igloo and left a permanent mark on architecture, or somebody else leaned something up against a cliff and left another permanent mark on architecture. I am prepared to admit that architecture is one of the great and enduring arts, today a science, an engineering feat. All I venture to say is that I hope it will never lose its conception that in addition to being a scientific affair and an engineering enterprise, it is a contribution to art, whatever the form of the building may be.

One of my troubles about that, if I may say this to my architectural tutor, is that I do think nowadays that we are tending to lose a little individuality, that we are tending to internationalise architectural design. I sometimes fear that in fifty years' time, it will be very hard except by

looking for some water, some stream, some lake, to distinguish one city from another. This, I think, would be a tragedy.

You take London, which is already beginning up in the city to incorporate some of what I will call the international ideas on architecture. Well, when I first knew it, indeed as a great deal of it still stands, London has character, a character of its own. Quite true that the buildings tended to be lower; quite true that a place like Bush House could at one time be referred to enthusiastically as a skyscraper when it wasn't. But London and Portland Stone and the whole quality and character of the architectural landscape had a unique quality, I think, of its own.

I remember many, many years ago we were having lunch with James Bone (Muirhead Bone's brother). James Bone was the London Editor of what was then called the "Manchester Guardian" and a brilliant writer and essayist, and he said to me, "What is your most vivid impression about London." I said, "Oh, Portland Stone. Look at it. Washed white and brilliant where the weather takes it and full of dark velvety shadows where the weather doesn't take it, maturing so quickly, getting a quality, a patina of its own so soon." He said, "Man, your observation is right." He said, "This is it." "Well," I said, it is almost to me a thumb-print of the London scene." He promptly then, to my immense satisfaction, pulled down a book that he had written, in which he had used that very expression, a book called the "London Perambulator". It is so good that it has never been a best-seller. (Laughter)

Do you see what I mean? It will be a poor day when any nation loses its own character and becomes merely part of the general mass of mankind. It will be a poor day when our own architecture in Australia doesn't possess some quality of its own which indicates to us and to the onlookers something of the feeling and spirit of Australia. It's all right to say, as no doubt people do occasionally, that the Georgian architects of Nash, Adam, so on, the Adam Brothers, are now outdated and they didn't know much about the problems of lighting and all this kind of thing, but they did, and those like them, make a contribution to the century of good taste which nobody has quite succeeded in destroying. It has disappeared in many places, but there it is. It is something that you don't see anywhere else.

And the same, Sir, if I may say so, goes about art, about depictive art. Let's take painting. Now, I have no feeling of resistance to any form of experimentation in painting. Some I understand and some I don't. I suppose that occasionally applies to the painter himself, for all I know, but there it is, and so be it that he has learnt the elements of his craft, so be it he does know about drawing and about putting on paint and about getting a sense of modelling and composition - give him all that and he is a free man to investigate any field that he likes, and I do hope again that we won't develop into a state of affairs in which a particular composition, a particular abstract, a particular whatever-it-may-be looks as if it might have been painted anywhere in the world. In other words, that this is just part of a uniform international movement.

Let's have our own character in our work and see that it interprets something of our own feelings, our own environment, our own upbringing, our own sense of our own nationality. I am not a great believer in uniformity. I would hate to think that

the time would come when neither our buildings nor our pictures nor our sculptures could be distinguished from the buildings and pictures and sculptures of any other country in the world. Let's have a bit of good, healthy individualism on this matter.

And I think the right way to bring that about, if I may say so, is to do what you do here, to have people taught; those who were enthusiasts, those who want to do these magnificent things, to have them taught the elements, and it is essential that they should be. Nobody could make a speech that anybody would listen to unless he understood the language that he was using and had understood its composition, how it is made up, how it balances itself. These are all part of the rudiments of the kind of education that ultimately enables a man or woman to get up and make a speech, or to write something that may be understood and enjoyed, and similarly, you cannot, at your peril, neglect the basic training in any of these arts.

Now, Sir, you said quite rightly that I have suffered considerably from artists in my time. There are two classes of portrait-painter for example. One is the chap who really legitimately gets you to sit for him. If he is an imaginative, gay character, he chatters to you and you chatter to him and in the meantime he gets down some resemblance to you on canvas. There is the other and more earnest fellow who poses you in the chair and then says: "You see that knot on the window over there? Now, if you wouldn't mind..... that's right, put your head back a bit, yes.....just watch that." And as you watch that (Laughter), you go to sleep. I may say I am not a bad sitter because I do stay awake. On each occasion when I've been sitting for a portrait, I have devoted the whole of the time to preparing a speech on the Budget. (Laughter) On one occasion, I composed an entire policy speech under the influence of Ivor Hele. This is, I think, a good thing.

But I was told by one portrait-painter that he had to paint a famous general, and the famous general wanted to be painted in a rather heavy uniform and it was very hot weather in a very hot country and the famous soldier nominated after lunch for the sittings. He had a good lunch and he would come in and sit and in three minutes he would be asleep. It is very difficult to paint a sleeping man. The artist said, "Well, I wonder whether you can bring your personal assistant with you, Sir?" having had three awful failures, you see, "and talk with him and this will help to keep you awake and give me a chance." So the personal assistant came the next time and sat there, and in three minutes they were both asleep. (Laughter) The artist then said, "Sir, I am terribly sorry, could I have just one sitting after breakfast?" and he had one and, without mentioning any names, you may see it in the War Memorial at Canberra. One sitting.

The other experience, of course, that I have had is being sent portraits by people who have never seen me (Laughter) but who have looked at alleged photographs of me in the Press. These arrive at quite a steady rate at my house a couple of times a year, and these are very embarrassing because they are not always good. (Laughter) I must confess that I have only been modelled - if that's the right word - once and that was when I had to come up here and sit for Victor, you see, on several occasions, and he put me in a chair, perched me up a bit, had a look, got this great mass of stuff and slapped it around and then began to do this and that. He seemed to me, I being of an ample build, to devote too much time to putting bits on (Laughter)

and too little time to taking bits off. But still, after a couple of these sittings, I thought that he had a most encouraging head, but the next time I came up, he had done two more. He was practically running a raffle with himself as to which one of them he regarded as being the best. (Laughter) But I must say that he was quite civil about it. I enjoyed it. Each time I arrived downstairs, I received a warm welcome from such students as were around, and when I left, I received an equally warm farewell. And therefore I have, in a sense, suffered from people of this kind but I remain their friend and I remain their admirer.

I, for one, am tremendously proud of the stream of Australian art in all its stages, going back to the original work done in the beginning of the nineteenth century - yes, it's old-fashioned to us, you see every leaf on every twig - but it had a quality of its own. It now has tremendous historic interest. Then we have moved on there through the influence of the impressionists and have come on now to a later stage with other influences and I really believe that if you were to mount a perfect and well balanced historical exhibition of Australian painting and Australian drawing, you would have just about as interesting piece of history as you could find. I know that we did it up to a point in the exhibition that went to the Tate Gallery in London. But a comprehensive one. It would be splendid. All the people who like the very old-fashioned would be down that end of the gallery and people like myself who have a secret and not-so-secret passion for the impressionists would be about here and all my more modern and up-to-date friends, one or two of whom I see here today, would be up at this end of the gallery. But we could move around and get to know each other and feel that we were looking at something of historic interest.

There are many things for which we think we may be remembered but for which we may turn out to be forgotten, and I believe that art is long and art is enduring, whether it is the art of the architect or the art of the painter or the art of the draughtsman, of the decorator - all these varied forms that I have been glancing at this afternoon, this is something enduring. It doesn't disappear with yesterday's newspaper, it doesn't find the fate of something that is written on water. I believe it endures and your business here is to see that those who come through here, through this division of this Institute, will be all the time aiming to make their contribution to something that has an enduring quality and an enduring character.

And I know that the work here is done well, the instructional work here is on a very high level and I am therefore delighted to have been with you this afternoon, to have stood for a few minutes between those who have been awarded the prizes and the prizes that they will receive. I am told - I hope rightly - all I do is to hand over an envelope. This seems to me to be an admirable idea because you can't put anything heavy in an envelope but you can put paper that folds, so I hope it works out that way. Thank you very much.
