

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,
FOR THE OPENING OF THE FIRST BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE,
FRIDAY 23 NOVEMBER 1973

At last I find myself at an opening ceremony at the Sydney Opera House where I'm not left out in the cold. I hope no one will accuse me of stealing the limelight from Sir Robert Askin. He manages these affairs more lavishly than the Transfield organisation. After all, he provided a fireworks display and a Royal tour for his opening ceremony. This ceremony, I hope, will be just as memorable, for there could be no more fitting place to stage this exhibition than here in this building. The proudest possession of the city in which it stands, it is a measure of the fame that the Opera House has won for Sydney and for Australia, of the central place it holds in the hearts and imaginations of the people of this city, of its relevance to our whole artistic and cultural life, that it should be the natural location for the most important exhibition of visual arts ever assembled in this country.

I hope that will not be taken as an overstatement. I can think of no display of contemporary art in Australia more diverse in its origins, richer in what it offers, or richer in what it promises. Here are representative works from 36 leading artists in 14 nations. There can be no doubt that the Biennale of Sydney, like those of Venice, Paris, Sao Paulo, Tokyo and Mexico City, will take its place among the leading art shows in the world. It can be said today that the Opera House is no longer a local institution. We stand now on international ground. We are hosts to the artists of the world, and this first international exhibition of art may be seen as the most characteristic and fitting event of the opening season.

I welcome those who have come as ambassadors to exhibit here with Australian artists. They are doubly welcome: for the interest and pleasure they and their works will bring us, and for showing by their presence that Australia has joined a community of the highest importance and with the most admirable of aims - the increase of excellence in the practice of the arts, and their widened appreciation and enjoyment by all communities.

This may not be the occasion to strike too nationalistic a note, let alone boast about the achievements of my own Government. Nevertheless, I think there are two points I should stress. One is that Australia is by no means without distinction in the fields of international art. Our artists are widely known and admired, and I recall my pleasure a few weeks ago when I heard of John Armstrong's important prize at the Biennale in Sao Paulo. The significance of exhibitions such as this is that the work of our own artists may be seen with that of equally eminent artists from overseas. The community of spirit, the humanity common to all artistic creation, may be felt and shared directly. The result must be to enrich our own artistic experience and stimulate the energies and perceptions of artists themselves.

My second point concerns the responsibility of the Governments to the arts. I suppose nobody will contradict me if I remark that neither Opera houses nor large works of art come cheaply these days. The Australian Government has tried to ensure that the funds available will produce the maximum benefit to the cultural life of the country. Nothing could be more welcome in achieving this object than to have the active aid of industry and commerce: not only at the level of this impressive event, but in smaller yet immensely valuable ways.

Governments, however, have a deep and continuing responsibility. Elsewhere today I announced two notable decisions by the Australian Government. I have approved a grant of \$20,000 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales to help clear its outstanding debt of \$75,000 on the purchase of the self-portrait by Pierre Bonnard. This grant is conditional on the Government of NSW providing the balance. In addition, I announced grants to Australian artists totalling \$258,000, which we have approved on the recommendation of the Visual Arts Board of the Australian Council for the Arts. In the same way, my Government, through the Australian Council for the Arts, is happy to be a minor partner in financing this event in collaboration with the Transfield organisation.

The works here are in every sense contemporary ones. I noticed in the catalogue a painting by David Aspden called "Some Other Blues". That struck a chord with me. Indeed to my untutored eye it bore some fleeting resemblance to our celebrated acquisition for the National Gallery. I know how distressing it must have been for many of you to see that purchase greeted in some quarters with derision and incomprehension. Quite ignorant comments were made by people who ought to know better. Do not think for a moment that I put myself forward as an authority in these matters. I merely say this: In "Blue Poles" we acquired an acknowledged masterpiece, and I am proud that we bought it. Generations of future Australians will thank Mr. Mollison and the National Gallery for what they have done. The point is that there remains an invincible element of philistinism in all societies, including our own, that exhibitions like this will help to break down. The fact that none of these works are judged, and that no prizes are awarded, reflects the fact that in the highly experimental world of modern art comparisons between individual works are difficult. There must always be a place in art for what is challenging, provocative, unconventional - even baffling. Indeed it may be said that these have been the essential qualities of all true art for all time.

This Biennale is a community event. Just as one hopes that the Opera House itself will draw its audiences from the widest possible community, I like to think that events such as this will multiply and involve people of all ages and interests. This will happen, not because the Government becomes an ever more generous patron of the arts, but because the example of Mr. Belgiorno-Nettis and Mr. Salteri will be followed by others inside and outside the commercial world. I commend their efforts unreservedly. They and the Transfield organisation are to be congratulated on bringing this event - the first, I hope, of many - to the Australian people.