



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

**OFFICIAL OPENING, EUROPEAN MASTERPIECES FROM THE
NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND
NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, 24 JUNE 1994**

It is a great pleasure to be here today to welcome all of you, especially our friends from Ireland, and to open this great exhibition.

This is the first exhibition to come on loan from a national gallery to the Australian National Gallery, and I am delighted that it comes from a Ireland, the country where learning and expression are themselves considered national treasures, the country with whom we share so much history and culture and beliefs, the one so close to so many Australian hearts.

Contemporary Australia is not derivative of any single nation, but there is an awful lot of Irish in the mixture.

Tonight I won't go over the familiar ground of the things we have in common, the singular contribution the Irish have made to Australia or the great bonds between us.

Except to say that this exhibition in a way points towards other realms of experience we share.

Living at a remove from the centres of European art and culture - and for a long time a colonial remove at that - might have meant succumbing to a temptation to be imitative or deferential in our creativity and taste; or perhaps equally, an instinct to be aggressively parochial.

In various ways, to various degrees and at various stages of our history we have resisted this. And in their ways our National Galleries speak for this resistance.

Their collections might be read as the embodiment of the development among us of a love of things which are good, no matter where they come from: Guinness from Ireland, wine from Australia, Velazquez from Spain. And much else from each of us.

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Of course this is the century in which it has become possible as never before to indulge in these things.

One of the great liberating forces for Australians has been the Boeing 747.

It is now possible - not necessarily easy, but possible - for Australians other than the most wealthy to travel to Europe where, among other things - like meeting their Irish relations - they may see masterpieces such as these.

Even more liberating, and more democratic - in this century it is increasingly possible for these works to come to us.

Or for works such as Sidney Nolan's to go to New York, or Aboriginal artworks to be shown in Paris where I saw them just a few days ago. It is a two-lane air highway.

On the evidence of this exhibition, you would have to say that perhaps some people let themselves down by visiting Ireland and not visiting the National Gallery.

It should be unthinkable - like visiting Canberra and not visiting the National Gallery.

Let me congratulate those who have managed the task of bringing this exhibition to us.

The principal curator, Sergio Benedetti, and his helpers, Irish and Australian alike, faced a tremendous challenge - and we are deeply grateful for the courage and skill with which he met it.

I am not sure whether we have ever seen a Velazquez in this country - I am told there may have been one in the 1960s. But since there are so few in the world outside the Prado, it was a bold decision to let even this one painting travel from Europe.

But the rarity and splendour of that one work will not blind us to the value - artistic as well as monetary - of works by Titian, Goya, El Greco, Murillo and Tintoretto.

Raymond Keaveney deserves the greatest thanks for letting them all come to us.

Annita met Raymond when we visited Ireland last year and found him typically Irish, which is to say charming and generous.

And recognising these qualities in him - not to say those of the marvellous paintings in the gallery - she took advantage of his native good will and his need to find a temporary home for these works while his gallery was repaired.

The result of their conversation and one or two letters between them is here before us this evening.

But many others, of course, brought it from conception to reality and I know you would want me to thank them all.

Dr Tony O'Reilly, who has sponsored the exhibition, deserves our most sincere thanks.

I must make mention of my friend, Betty Churcher, for her involvement in yet another triumph.

And we must thank Ireland and the Irish people. Their love of the best in life, the engagement with the human spirit and imagination, their passion for expression, is evident in the making of this collection.

We in Australia never forget the things for which we should thank Ireland - this exhibition of great European masterworks is one more thing.