

ADDRESS BY
HIS HONOUR MR TOM PAULING AO QC
ADMINISTRATOR OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
ON THE OCCASION OF
OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE
HUSI BEI ALA TIMOR SIRA NIA LIMAN –
***FROM THE HANDS OF OUR ANCESTORS* EXHIBITION**
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory
21 November 2008

It is a great pleasure to attend this Official Opening of *Husi Bei Ala Timor Sira Nia Liman - From the Hands of Our Ancestors*.

A year ago, Anna Malgorzewicz, Director of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, invited me to become involved in this exhibition as Patron. It was an honour to continue my long term association with the Museum, having served as Chairman from 1994 to 1997, and I have certainly enjoyed witnessing this important project come to fruition.

In the world of museums, which exist to preserve and document historical, artistic and scientific artefacts and specimens – this past year of preparation has been a relatively short period of time.

It was also limited time considering the international logistics involved with an exhibition of this scale. These included freighting works from the National Collection of Timor-Leste in Dili to

Darwin, as well as arranging for additional works from the Australian Museum in Sydney, and from private collections in Timor-Leste, Indonesia and elsewhere in Australia.

The assassination attempt on the President, His Excellency Dr José Ramos Horta, in February 2008 caused considerable disarray. The entire project was in jeopardy as His Excellency, and his country, recovered from this shocking event. Nonetheless, staff from the Museum and National Directorate of Culture remained committed and worked enthusiastically toward ensuring the delivery of this ambitious collaborative exhibition.

An extensive amount of field work, research, collection documentation, training in object handling and packaging, treatment of artworks and installation of objects has occurred in association with this project.

As I mentioned, not all things go according to plan. I understand another hair raising occasion was the alteration of shipping schedules from Dili to Darwin which left the National Collection of Timor-Leste sitting on the Dili wharf awaiting transport for several weeks. Once this hurdle was overcome, then our Australian Customs and Quarantine procedures added several more weeks to the waiting process.

It was, therefore, with sincere relief that I viewed the items when they finally arrived at the Museum in July and were unpacked.

I was impressed by the calibre of this unique Collection when viewing a pair of magnificent ceremonial house doors, for example. This caused me to ponder the origins of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory and how it is that we have become custodians of these noteworthy artefacts.

The Founding Director of the Museum, Dr Colin Jack Hinton, was appointed in January 1970. His vision centred on Southeast Asian and Pacific culture and especially focused on Portuguese and Spanish expansion and maritime history. Fluent in Portuguese, it is not surprising that he undertook his first official overseas fieldtrip as Director to 'Portuguese Timor'. During that visit in August 1972, he acquired a significant collection of earthenware ceramics from Manatuto, along with Timorese textiles, *tais* and baskets.

These 65 objects formed part of the first 112 objects that entered our Southeast Asian collection – a collection which today totals over 4000 items. Although many were destroyed during Cyclone Tracey in 1975, some early acquisitions remained and tonight you can see some of the artefacts collected by Dr Colin Jack-Hinton displayed for the first time.

Over the intervening years, whilst East Timor was part of the Indonesia state, staff from the Museum - Mike Gunn, James Bennett, Fiona Liebrick and Peter Spillett - undertook field trips and occasionally made acquisitions.

I was especially touched to notice a hand woven betel nut container included in the Exhibition. This was donated in 1992 by Peter Spillett, the renowned Northern Territory historian. It was gifted to Peter by the wife of the Fatumean *liurai* in East Timor as a symbol of enduring friendship and respect.

The collection has also grown due to the generosity of community members who have thoughtfully donated objects acquired in Timor whilst working, holidaying or sailing in the region.

As some of you will recall, in the late 1960's TAA, Trans-Australia Airlines, operated a weekly service to the hilltop town of Baucau and many Darwin residents enjoyed holidays in Portuguese Timor. The Darwin-Dili yacht race also provided a link between our two shores.

The Timor-Leste cultural material held at this Museum has become highly significant following the extensive loss of cultural material experienced in Timor-Leste in recent decades. Unfortunately during times of war, cultural objects and sacred relics often become targets and this case was no exception.

Since 2006, Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture Curator, Joanna Barrkman, has actively worked to increase the collection. Acquisitions have focused on contemporary artworks such as textiles, body adornment carvings and ceramics.

This strategy illustrates the Museum's commitment to documenting our immediate region's rich and diverse cultures. It also provides due acknowledgment to Timorese artisans and emerging artists and, in doing so, provides impetus for them to continue producing their artworks and craft in what are often challenging social and economic situations.

So tonight, for the first time on public display, we will have the opportunity to view many of the Timor-Leste artworks that have been acquired over the past thirty-six years. As mentioned, Museum holdings are combined with works from the National Collection of Timor-Leste and several loans complete the exhibition.

My gratitude goes to the following organisations and individuals who have lent precious artworks for the duration of the exhibition: Australian Museum, Alola Foundation, Arte Moris Art School, Timor Aid, East Timor Development Agency, the Esplanada Hotel, Xanana Gusmão Reading Room, Zelda Grimshaw and Jenni Kanaley.

Furthermore, the inclusion of an interactive touch screen has been provided courtesy of the South Australian Museum, Alola Foundation, Tekee Media, Berlin Ethnographic Museum and Fundação Oriente Museum in Portugal.

I would like to congratulate ConocoPhillips Australia and ConocoPhillips Timor-Leste who have generously supported the publication of a beautiful 180 page tri-lingual catalogue. This catalogue will ensure the longevity of this exhibition and begins an important process of documenting and making publicly accessible the distinguished cultures and arts of Timor-Leste.

Tonight's exhibition has grown out of several exchanges and training initiatives over recent years. The most significant was the *AusAID Australian Leadership Awards Fellowship Museum Training Program* which involved three staff from the National Directorate of Culture working with us to acquire museum skills and experience.

It was through this opportunity for our Timorese colleagues to view the collection in Darwin that the seed was sewn which inspired this exhibition. Once again, the strong interpersonal relationships that characterise our shared region have led to something very special.

Working relationships have been strengthened and there is the lasting benefit of improving existing collections of Timor-Leste cultural material; collections which will serve as a reminder to following generations of our existence, accomplishments, beliefs and challenges.

Nicholas Rothwell, in his excellent review of this exhibition in *The Australian* today has put it better than I ever could.

I would like to share one or two of his well crafted phrases: *The exhibition is artfully constructed to usher its visitors deep into a supernatural world, where reverence for ancestors is expressed in ornate figure carving and architecture.*

He states *this show – swiftly mounted, wonderfully curated – ushers its viewers into an unfamiliar realm. Here, birds are spirit guides for the deceased soul, turtle-shell bracelets protect the wearer from negative energies and crocodiles are arbiters of guilt and innocence.*

And he sums up *When viewed by students, scholars and artists today, these frail objects become more than the mere remains of a past subjected to strong imprints. They have the potential to serve as active vectors of a rebirth..... It is an offering from the Top End to Timor...*

I, myself, believe that tonight's exhibition will remind us of the dignified traditions of our Timorese neighbours and inspire our resolve in the Northern Territory to continue to contribute to the preservation of cultural material in our region.

Thank you.