

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION
'CAMINO A LA MODERNIDAD, THE PATH OF MODERNITY:
MEXICAN MODERN PAINTING'
14 NOVEMBER 2009, 4.00PM AT THE SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM**

Salutations

Your Excellency, Madam Margarita Zavala, the First Lady of Mexico,

Madam Ho Ching, wife of the Prime Minister of Singapore,

Your Excellency, Antonio Villegas, the Ambassador-Designate of Mexico to Singapore, and Madam Claudia Gonzalez,

Ms Teresa Vicencio, the Director-General of the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature of Mexico,

Madam Marina Medina Avila, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Mexico,

Minister Lui Tuck Yew of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts,

Ms Jane Ittogi, Chair of the Singapore Art Museum,

Mr Tan Boon Hui, Director of the Singapore Art Museum,

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, and Amigos,

Warm Welcome

1 On behalf of Minister Lui and the NHB family, I extend a very warm welcome to all our guests to the opening of this spectacular exhibition of modern paintings by some of Mexico's iconic artists.

The Guest-of-Honour

2 I would like to begin with a few words about our distinguished Guest-of-Honour. Madam Margarita Zavala is the spouse of President Felipe Calderon and the First Lady of Mexico. She is a role model for the young women of Mexico. She is a lawyer and had studied at Mexico's best law school. She is the first First Lady of Mexico who had served as a member of the Mexican Congress. Apart from looking after President Calderon and their three children, she is very involved in helping her husband in his work. She is also the President of the Advisory Board of DIF, a government agency which helps to strengthen families in Mexico. Please join me in giving our Guest-of-Honour a warm round of applause.

Mexico's Connections with Asia

3 Mexico, Canada, the United States, Chile and Peru are the five economies on the eastern rim of the Pacific Ocean, which are members of APEC. Mexico's connections to East Asia, however, precede 1989, when APEC was formed, and go back several hundred years. Let me share with you a few examples. The Mexican Silver Dollar was used for over 200 years as the international currency for trade between Asia and the rest of the world. Many of the spices, fruits and food which have become part of the Asian cuisine have their origin in Mexico. The list will astonish you because it includes: chilli, sweet potato, papaya, tomatoes, corn, avocado, chocolate and vanilla. If the saying, "we are what we eat", is true, then I can say that we are all Mexicans!

Mexican Arts and Culture

4 I had the privilege of serving as Singapore's first Ambassador to Mexico, when I served my second term as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, in New York, from 1974 to 1984. The Singapore government paid me one salary and gave me three jobs: I was concurrently Ambassador to the UN, Mexico and Canada! I would like to share with you a few lasting impressions I have formed about Mexico, its people and its culture. Mexico is a beautiful country, with snow-capped mountains, powder sand beaches, a salubrious climate, a rich history, a joyful and happy people, good food and music,

and a culture which is a fusion of Aztec, Mayan, Spanish and North American influences. For the Mexicans, culture is a way of life. Some of the cultural experiences which I will never forget include visiting the Mayan temples in Uxmal and Chichen Itza (in the Yucatan Peninsula), attending a concert at the Folklorico Mexico, and visiting the world class National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

The Path to Modernity: Mexican Modern Painting

5 Mexico has produced many great artists. They are exposed to the world, but remain securely anchored in Mexican history, culture and iconography. We are truly fortunate to be able to host this exhibition of 70 paintings by the masters of Mexican modern art. The artists represented include Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Rufino Tamayo, to name just three.

6 I would like to conclude by acknowledging our gratitude to the Embassy of Mexico, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Mexican National Council for Culture and the Arts, the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature, the Andrés Blaisten Museum and other private lenders.

7 I am confident that the people of Singapore will respond enthusiastically to this beautiful exhibition.

8 Muchas gracias.

Prof Tommy Koh
Chairman
National Heritage Board