

Speech by Guest-Of-Honour Professor Tommy Koh, Chairman, Asian Civilisations Museum at the Launch of the Exhibition and Catalogue “Chinese Snuff Bottles From The Sanctum Of Enlightened Respect” on 11 July 2007, 7.00 pm, at the Asian Civilisations Museum

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, friends and family of Seok Eng and Denis Low, ladies and gentlemen.

A very warm welcome to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).

I would like to begin by thanking Denis Low and his lovely wife, Seok Eng, for inviting me to be the guest-of-honour on this happy occasion. This is, in fact, an occasion of double happiness because, tonight, we open an exhibition of 355 exquisite snuff bottles from Denis Low’s collection, and at the same time, launch an equally exquisite catalogue of the collection being exhibited. Let me now say a few words about Denis Low and his collection of snuff bottles, about the catalogue and about his contributions to ACM.

First, Denis Low was a successful businessman. He made his fortune in the real estate industry and as a venture capitalist. He began collecting snuff bottles in 1979. As a result of his passion, his meticulous research, his discriminating eye and, I should add, the good advice from the experts, he has a collection of 1,300 snuff bottles which is widely acknowledged as one of the best in the world. Because of the respect which Denis enjoys among his fellow collectors,

he is a director and patron of the International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society and the patron of the Singapore Chinatown Snuff Bottle Society. He is also a director of this museum.

Second, Denis Low is not just a great collector, he is also a researcher, archivist, writer and photographer. He has also been very generous by sharing his collection with the world. Thus, in 1999, the renowned snuff bottle dealer and author, Robert Kleiner, wrote a catalogue of 250 snuff bottles from Denis Low's collection. The catalogue, entitled "Treasures from the Sanctum of Enlightened Respect" was a huge success. In case you are puzzled by the title, I understand that it is the meaning of Denis Low's Chinese name.

In the year 2002, Denis Low decided to write his second catalogue on 333 snuff bottles from his collection. The catalogue we are launching tonight is therefore the third in the series. It is also written by Denis and the photographs were taken by him, his brother Jeffrey, and their good friend, David Chan. The catalogue is co-published by ACM and Laurence King Publishing Ltd of UK. I am very pleased that Denis has dedicated his catalogue to the memory of his mother and father. His father, Mr Low Kee Pow, was one of my favourite teachers and form masters at Raffles Institution. Each year, during the Boy Scout's Job Week, I would visit the family home on Emerald Hill to polish the many silver trophies which Mr Low had won at tennis, a sport in which he had excelled.

There are 355 snuff bottles in this exhibition and catalogue. Some of them are being exhibited for the first time in Singapore

because they are normally kept in one of Seok Eng and Denis' homes abroad. I had the opportunity to look through the catalogue during the past weekend. I was amazed by the variety of materials used, ranging from enamel, jade, glass, porcelain, agate and quartz, to hard stones, metals, and organic materials such as amber. I was deeply impressed by their beauty and the endless ingenuity and creativity of the Chinese artists and craftsmen who had made them. As a student of history, I was also struck by the fact that all the snuff bottles had been created during the Qing dynasty when China was ruled by the Manchus. But, like Kublai Khan during the Yuan dynasty, the Manchu rulers of China had become culturally Chinese. Chinese arts and culture flourished during the reign of the three great emperors, Qian Long, Yong Zheng and Kang Xi.

Finally, I want to express our debt of gratitude to Denis and Seok Eng. They have very kindly donated the rights to and proceeds from the sale of this catalogue to the ACM. The money raised will be used by ACM to strengthen its Chinese collection.

On that happy note, I have the pleasure of declaring the exhibition open and of launching the catalogue.

Thank you very much

Prof Tommy Koh
Chairman
National Heritage Board