

**Speech by H.E. George Vella at the Japan Art Festival
Mediterranean Conference Centre
4 September 2020**

Distinguished Guests,

- I am very pleased to be with you this evening to celebrate the long-standing friendship between Malta and Japan through the Arts.
- My thanks go to Mr Joseph Barbara, Mr Yoji Yashuiro, Director of the Japan-Europe Palace Art Association, and all other organisers for the kind invitation extended to me and my wife.
- I commend you on your determination to find a workable solution and adapt to COVID circumstances so that this occasion would not be lost.
- I understand participation this evening would have been much stronger were it not for the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. I would have been very pleased to meet with the Japanese artists who contributed to this rich and varied exhibition.
- I ask you to please convey my best wishes to them, as well as my appreciation for their contribution to this event.
- I was looking forward to this Exhibition, as aside from its artistic value, it is a celebration of the strong friendship that has come to characterize relations between Malta and Japan, particularly at the people to people level.

- These relations are constantly evolving and developing in the right direction.
- Only a few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of welcoming the new Ambassador of Japan to Malta, Ambassador Hiroshi, for his Presentation of Credentials ceremony.
- In turn, this very morning I held two meetings with the newly accredited **resident** Ambassador to Japan, Mr. Andre Spiteri.
- While Mr. Spiteri had been serving in this function with great enthusiasm as Non-Resident Ambassador for a number of years, I am certain that the opening of a resident Embassy in Tokyo will further reinforce the excellent results already obtained.
- My first visit to Japan was in 1997 as Foreign Minister.
- I had the privilege of welcoming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Malta in 2017 and accompanied the then Prime Minister Muscat in Official Talks with the Japanese delegation led by PM Abe. [Bilateral, EU-Japan Cooperation, BREXIT and various regional issues.]
- My links with Japan have been enormously strengthened during my latest visit to Tokyo in October 2019 to represent the People of Malta at the Enthronement Ceremony of His Majesty The Emperor.

- This was a memorable experience which I believe cemented our excellent ties. During that same visit I also had the opportunity to meet His Excellency Prime Minister Shinzo Abe again who shared very important messages with all the global leaders present.
- Aside from the impressive ceremonial aspects of Enthronement, one of the highlights of my visit was a social event organised by the Malta-Japan Friendship Association and Ambassador Spiteri, that saw the participation of dozens of Japanese friends of Malta.
- I never imagined I would meet such a large number of Japanese people interested in Malta.
- The warmth which characterized that particular evening is still very much etched in my memories.

Distinguished guests,

- I am a firm believer in people-to-people relations, and the crucial role these play in reinforcing political and commercial contacts between countries.
- In the case of Malta and Japan, these links are built on the active and dynamic exchanges between businessmen, students, academics, politicians and professionals.
- Since my first visit to Japan in 1997, we have consolidated a much-valued business relationship and discovered new avenues of cooperation in the fields of education, culture and tourism.

- I welcome in particular the increasing numbers of Japanese students and young professionals visiting Malta to improve their knowledge of the English language.
- On a broader scale, I am sure that the years to come will continue to see cooperation and exchanges on regional and international issues of common concern.
- Together we are addressing some of the world's most challenging issues like the COVID pandemic, climate change and the preservation of land and marine environment.
- This is a time to be ambitious on the further intensification and broadening of the Malta-Japan cooperation agenda.
- I am very pleased to give my further contribution to this goal, with all of you this evening.
- Turning to the exhibition of art works, including exhibits from Maltese and foreign guests, organised by the Japan-Europe Palace Art Association, which I will be inaugurating tonight, I wish to thank the Malta-Japan Chamber of Commerce and the Malta-Japan Association for their cooperation.
- I acknowledge the noble aspirations of the Japan-Europe Palace Art Association to strive to create cultural bridges, and transnational exchanges through art.

- Such exhibitions are part and parcel of Cultural Diplomacy and help foster better understanding and appreciation of other countries' culture, traditions and artistic expression.
- The more countries, however, distant geographically, get to know each other, the more they can work together and contribute more towards cooperative security.
- There are several political fora such as ASEM that bring Malta and Japan together, to discuss political relations.
- However Exhibitions such as the one we have today contribute in no small way to strengthen existing relations and people to people relations.
- I wish this exhibition every success, and once again extend my heartfelt thanks to the organisers.

Thank you.

Thank you.