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**Commencement - Introduction by Dr. William R. Wood, James Michener, "A Life with Art", 5/20/1973**

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Dr. Wood introduces Jim Michener: a teenager during WWI, a student, graduate scholar, high school and college teacher during the Depression in the 30s, editor, naval officer in the Pacific theatre during WWII. Michener wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about WWII called *Tales of the South Pacific* on which the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* was based. Wood says that since the Pulitzer Prize in 1847, Michener has written more than 20 books. Wood elaborates on Michener's literary work and talent.

Michener speaks, greeting the audience and notable people present.

The title of his talk is "A Life with Art". He says the title is "with are" not "in art" because most of the audience is not qualified to send their life in the pursuit of an artistic profession. It is one of the most difficult tasks in the world. Only a few have the talent to be a great artist.

Being an artist is a highly specialized life. He says the most difficult arts are the writing of poetry, work in the theatre, and sculpture because it is hard to get a foothold and make a living in those fields. The second most difficult arts are writing plays, the performance or creation of music, and painting. Again it is difficult to make a living. He says being a novelist is much easier than these professions just mentioned. It requires less talent than being a fine poet and less persistence than being a fine sculptor. Being a novelist is about as difficult as being an architect, a popular singer, and other forms of art that are easier to earn income with. Michener says he does not equate himself, as a novelist, with a poet, a great actress, a sculptor, etc.

Michener does not advise anyone to write as he does. He falls in the tradition of Tolstoy, Dickens, Thackeray, Balzac of productive writers who spent their while life producing stories. Michener instead advises the audience to write like Truman Capote or Saul Bellow in the tradition of Henry James, Flaubert, Turgenev: men who just sit down and write out of the great imaginative, creative intelligence of their lives. Michener has been working for three years now on a novel he hopes will be published in two more years. Michener points out that this is a degree of dedication that most of the audience will not be called upon to exert in their entire lives. He recently sent the manuscript in and he reads the reply he received from New York: "Your manuscript rather interesting. Feel fairly certain that with two years hard work we can salvage something." This is life *in art*.

Michener is speaking about life *with* art, though. Life with art is a life spent in connection with art: using it, appreciating it, helping those who are producing it. Life with art is secondary to the problems of earning a living, finding a mate, establishing a home, working and having enough income. But when those are done, there is time left over and he hopes that some of it will be spent in connection with art.

One's personal life should, in a sense, be a work of art; it should have a beginning, culminations, a long development, a certain style. He thinks people should figure out what clothes and hair suit them, how they handle themselves best and then perfect that. A job should be approached with a sense of style, not letting it have a drab, miserable experience with no aesthetic quality at all. In college, Michener admires professors who planned and gave a fine lecture that had a sort of sweep and majesty about it. He respects men who have acquired knowledge with style and apply generalizations they have made for the good of society. These men may be small business owners or men who run garages or school principals but they do it with a sense of style.

Michener encourages those going into business to apply a certain sense of art to it: hire a good architect, have a little daring, make your buildings a little more daring than they used to be. Streamline procedures. Do not be worn down by the inheritance of how someone else did it. Do it your way. Have flair. Flair for life is developed by having a sense of self and a sense of style as to how that self fits into the world. He encourages the development of a strong sense of individuality. One way to do this is to spend some spare time paying attention to what is happening in the arts. Find out what new things are happening in art and who is doing them.

Michener tells an anecdote about a great industrialist who got his company out of a rut by having all of the senior executives eat in the company cafeteria for at least a week, surrounded by avant-garde paintings. The industrialist explained that it helped his company to see the ways the great minds of art were breaking out of old patterns.

Michener thinks Alaska could use 18 or 20 really great architects right now. Alaska is at a stage where so much can be determined. He encourages the input of other cultures to break us out of old patterns.

Michener especially recommends keeping in touch with American music. He thinks more great ideas have been propagated in American popular music in the last 40 years than in any of the other arts, including painting. Michener loves big band music and had found contemporary music "rather thin" until he made himself listen to it. He came away with a revelation that there has been more good American popular music written in the last ten years than there has in the preceding thirty years. Songs like "Both Sides, Now", "Gentle on My Mind", "Scarborough Fair", and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" are ravishing inventions. As pure sound, they are way ahead of the orderly "beat, beat, beat" that Michener listened to in his youth. "Little Green Apples" and "Harper Valley PTA" are delightful frolics. New versions of "The House of the Rising Sun" are staggering in their inventiveness. There ought to be a place for these songs in people's lives and people ought to know what is being done. Michener now finds himself preferring the music of the last ten years to the music of the preceding thirty years which he used to love so well. This is the sort of reeducation that all ought to go through. One's preconceptions and prejudices ought to be reconsidered.

Michener says wonderful new things are being done in American design with fabrics, the use of color and juxtapositions.

Michener hopes at least one person in the room will devote his life to town and regional planning. There is a crying need for thin in America in every city Michener goes into. People with a sense of art, of beauty and balance and what life is all about, need to help cities with their talent.

Michener encourages the audience to keep in touch with good, American books – particularly avant-garde books. Michener listens carefully to his peers about what books he should read. He is planning on reading Joyce Carol Oates soon.

Michener says that he has been shown around Alaska and took a trip to the North Slope to see the developments there. He says no one from the east can possibly imagine an area as great as Alaska north of the Yukon having no north-south road. What he will remember most of Alaska is a rendition of “Carmen” put on by members of the university. This means that there performer4s were trying to be right in the middle of the main stream and wanted to know what the production of an opera consisted of. He heard some marvelous voices.

The great value of a life with art is that it reminds you constantly of the integrity of life. That is what good art does. “Carmen” is not just a bunch of tunes; it is a profound statement about the confusion of youth. It is in a class by itself. Anything that can help you maintain you integrity is of great value. Michener reflects on how many men there are in America that regret not having obeying their conscience. These men lack a sense of American development, of the integrity of the individual, of personal style that could not be corrupted by anything. As the situation in our nation is today, only two men come out looking very well: Treasurer Hugh Sloan and Wally Hickel. If there had been more like these men, simply saying no on the basis of their own understandings, we would be all better off for it.

Art is the process of looking at life whole.

The tape cuts out.