Following is the speech by the Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Raymond Young, at the opening ceremony of the "Fantastic Creatures from the British Museum" exhibition today (January 19):

Mr (Andrew) Seaton, Dr (Andrew) Burnett, Dr (Alexandra) Villing, Mrs (Nancy) Lee, distinguished guests,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the opening ceremony of the "Fantastic Creatures from the British Museum" exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

The most important element of our cultural policy is to provide an environment that encourages deeper appreciation of culture and the arts in the community, and to do this, we bring some of the best performing and visual arts programmes from around the world for our 7 million population and to the 30 million people who visit Hong Kong every year.

For this purpose, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, on top of presenting its own collections, maintains close collaboration with overseas counterparts, and one of our renowned partners is the British Museum.

The British Museum is without doubt one of the world's greatest museums of human history and culture, with a collection of over 8 million artefacts from around the world. On top of organising exhibitions as well as educational and promotional activities, the British Museum has an active programme of exciting touring exhibitions, giving overseas audiences the opportunity to discover more of its valuable art and historical collections.

We are indeed delighted that in the past two decades, we have had a number of chances to see the Museum's rich treasure here in Hong Kong. Back in the 1990s, the "Chinese Jade Animals" exhibition allowed us a glimpse of the Museum's rich collection of ancient Chinese jade animal carvings. The "Egyptian Treasures" exhibition in 1998 caused a sensation in the territory, attracting an attendance of nearly 300 000 people. Ancient Egyptian mummies and over 200 pieces of related artefacts were on display. In 2007, we were honoured to host the last leg of the
touring exhibition "Treasures of the World's Cultures", held in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the British Museum.

This year we are going to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the 50th anniversary of the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the 20th anniversary of the Friends of the Hong Kong Museum of Art. To mark these meaningful events, a series of exciting exhibitions will be launched this year. Our collaboration with the British Museum in presenting the "Fantastic Creatures" exhibition is a highlight to kick off the series of special exhibitions to be held later this year.

The "Fantastic Creatures" exhibition features a dazzling array of some 170 artefacts of mythical creatures from all over the world, which include the dragon and phoenix of China, the unicorn and centaur in Western mythology, and the demigods of ancient Egypt and Greece. All these fantastic creatures carry symbolic meanings and give the audience an insight into the historical developments, social customs and religious morals of different cultures. Both entertaining and educational, this thematic exhibition is not to be missed.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to the British Museum for its generosity in loaning us its valuable collection of artefacts. Without its professional advice and support, the "Fantastic Creatures" exhibition would not have been possible. My heartfelt thanks also go to the Friends of the Hong Kong Museum of Art for offering free coach services to the visitors during the exhibition period. I look forward to continuous and deeper collaboration with the British Museum in our mission to enrich the cultural lives of the people of Hong Kong. Lastly, may I wish the exhibition a huge success.

Thank you.

Ends/Thursday, January 19, 2012

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