

**Local Award Ceremony for the Agate Rooms
Catherine Palace, Puskin, Russia
12 September**

**Speech by Alexander Fürst zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn
Vice-president of Europa Nostra**



***Excellencies, Honoured Guests, Dear Colleagues and Friends,
Dear Olga Tarantinova and dear Cousin Wladimir Tolstoy,***

It is magnificent to be here today with you amid the splendour of the Agate Rooms in Tsarskoye Selo for the local ceremony of the Europa Nostra Awards 2014.

Just by walking through these rooms today, it is wholly apparent how well-deserved this Award is. Not only has the meticulous work of the conservators revitalised the spirit of these rooms – with all their exquisite embellishments – but also allows us a rare glimpse back through the past.

Surviving the destruction of the 20th century and the devastation of the Second World War, the Agate Rooms have remained in their original form, although badly in need of restoration. The remarkable work accomplished here, which we celebrate today, has conserved the original red and multi-coloured jasper columns and wall plates of the original design by Scottish architect Charles Cameron, which gives the room its characteristic appearance.

The architectural historian Howard Colvin described these rooms as ‘some of the most exquisitely elegant interiors in 18th century Europe, and seeing them returned to their full glory today, it is hard not to agree.

Now, before I explain to you the reasons why our Jury decided to award the Tsarskoye Selo State Museum on their project’s achievements, please allow me to tell you a little bit more about Europa Nostra.

Europa Nostra celebrated its 50th anniversary last year and we represent on a European level a large number of local, regional, national and European organisations committed to the safeguard of cultural heritage.

As the leading European non-governmental organisation we bring together civil society organisations who work actively to safeguard Europe’s cultural heritage, both man-made and natural, tangible and intangible.

Our European network is a citizens’ movement, and our activities reflect our activist nature:

- we promote excellence and the power of example through our European Heritage Awards together with the European Union,
- we raise our voice and campaign to save endangered heritage, for instance in our “7 Most Endangered” programme together with the European Investment

Bank Institute, to help communities to save their heritage sites and find solutions for ensuring their viable and sustainable future,

- we lobby to put cultural heritage high on the agenda of the Council of Europe based in Strasbourg and also of the European Union Institutions, especially the European Commission and the European Parliament.

We are the largest network in the field of heritage and represent over 250 non-governmental and non-profit heritage organisations from Greece to Sweden and from here in Russia all the way to Portugal. I am happy to welcome, among our guests today, also a few of our members from Russia.

We also have 150 associate organisations – cities, universities, public bodies and private companies and over 1500 individual members. We represent the Voice of Europe's Cultural heritage and our President probably has the best voice in the world: Maestro Plácido Domingo.

To be correct, I am talking about the best male voice. This summer I had the privilege to hear Plácido Domingo at the Salzburg Festival in Verdi's "Il Trovatore". He was accompanied there by the best female voice, your most impressive Anna Netrebko!

Europa Nostra and its members believe that culture and cultural heritage are vital ingredients for the cohesion and the stability of Europe's society, for the sustainability and prosperity of our economy - especially now in times of political and economic crisis, and for a better quality of life and living environment for all Europeans. No matter whether we have ancestors who have lived in Europe for centuries or whether we are "newcomers" to Europe, Cultural heritage belongs to all of us. And it is therefore our joint responsibility to take proper care of it. Only if Europeans of all generations and all backgrounds - ethnic, religious or social - work together can we make sure that our cultural and natural heritage stays vital and relevant and is safeguarded for future generations. That is what is at the heart of our organisation - and if you are not a member already, we urge you to do so and join our European family.

Now... this past spring, Europa Nostra held its Annual Congress in Vienna. The absolute highlight of the Congress was the European Heritage Awards Ceremony on the 5th of May in the famous Burgtheater, in the presence of around 1200 heritage representatives.

Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, and Plácido Domingo, our President, presented our prestigious European award to 27 winners coming from all over Europe. We were most delighted that the Agate Rooms in Zarskoje Selo were among them, as a proud winner of a Europa Nostra Award for 2014.

So today we are here for the local ceremony to celebrate this well-deserved award with all of you in Saint Petersburg. Let me quote the jury:

"The Jury particularly noted the quality of the science in this important project. Geological materials like jasper present special problems to the restorer: it is an unusual stone, where an unscientific approach could cause permanent damage. The results speak for themselves."

And let me add this: it is rare in the modern world that we are allowed to look so clearly into the past as we are now. This 18th-century building has remained almost untouched by the upheavals of the last two centuries, and undistorted by harmful, misconstrued renovations. The rooms and their furnishing that we see today are as breath-taking in their authenticity as they are in their craftsmanship, and exist nowhere else in the world as they do here.

We congratulate the conservators on their meticulous, scientific approach to restoring the rooms with the utmost historic accuracy, especially with such difficult to handle materials.

But – beyond the restoration itself, this project has an aspect that resonates deeply with the values that Europa Nostra strives to promote. That despite the social and political upheavals of the past, careful work and great dedication can keep the spirit of a historic site alive, for us to enjoy, as we are now. This project is proof of the possibility – and distinct need – for authentic preservation. That through the expertise and commitment of people such as you here today, we have the opportunity to step back in time for a moment to experience an age long passed, and to preserve its legacy for generations to come.

Once again, congratulations for this momentous achievement!

Before I come to an end, let me stress that all Europeans are as proud as you can be about what has been done here, the restoration of an exceptional piece of our common cultural heritage. And this is only part of the outstanding work that has been carried out in Russia in recent years to safeguard and restore your treasures - treasures, which have been and will always be a very essential part of our European culture, of a common heritage which enhances our European identity, which unites us and makes us proud of belonging to one European family, to our Europe, to Europa Nostra.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you will certainly have realised that I am a passionate European. So allow me to add a personal remark in light of the dangerous political crisis we are experiencing at the moment.

I want to urge all culture circles in this country to continue a close dialogue with their counterparts in other parts of Europe - just as you are doing with this ICOM conference here. A dialogue, which can help to turn the current course of negative relations between Russia and the rest of Europe back into a positive interaction on all fronts.

As I said before, it is our common culture, our common art and our common cultural heritage that gives us our European identity and helps us to live united in a peaceful, prosperous and beautiful Europe.

Thank you