

**Commissioner Vassiliou - Member of the European Commission for
Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth**

European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards

Local Award Ceremony for the Kempens Landscape Association

Wuustwezel, Flanders, Belgium – 19 September 2014

Speech

(+/- 850 words)

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Excellencies,

Dear laureates, distinguished guests,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you this evening to celebrate the cultural and natural heritage of the beautiful province of Antwerpen.

I think, for all of you present here, tonight marks many years of hard work, of personal investment, of hope. I want to congratulate the members of the Kempens Landscape Association for the creativity and inclusiveness of their approach, for their relentless energy, for their vision, courage and dedication. Their idea to take into their care this special landscape, with so much historical and social significance, but also so much natural beauty - has become a reality, engaging the enthusiasm and collaboration of volunteers, local and regional authorities, companies and private owners. You deserve our admiration.

Tonight, we celebrate your own contribution to the worldwide fame of Europe as a continent rich in history and cultural heritage.

The Kempens Landscape Association received the European Union's grand prize for cultural heritage/ Europa Nostra award for dedicated service a few months ago for its unique approach to conserving and managing a variety of built and natural heritage sites.

The EU Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards is the most prestigious prize in the cultural heritage sector in Europe, rewarding the best examples of conservation, research, dedicated service, education, training and awareness-raising.

In Europe, we are privileged to have an extraordinary heritage that has shaped the identity of our continent. Layers of different civilisations have intertwined to make us the Europeans we are today.

And this heritage that has been passed down to us can contribute to growth and jobs but also to making us a better, more open and inclusive society - which is one of the reasons why, at European level, we attach such importance to protecting and promoting our heritage.

Europe's heritage is a powerful instrument; it gives European citizens a sense of belonging.

In its many forms, heritage is one of the best ambassadors of our collective European identity. Ultimately, it is what links the past, the present and the future of our continent: it links us all.

For all these reasons, we have a responsibility to preserve it for future generations and it is only appropriate that we and volunteers reward the excellence and dedication of the professionals who infuse our heritage with new life.

This last aspect is, in my view, especially important, as Heritage ought to be a living thing as part of our everyday life and not just a monument to a defunct past.

We, at the European Commission, are determined to strengthen our support for cultural heritage and are doing so. In addition to the EU Prize for cultural heritage/ Europa Nostra awards, the European Commission supports cultural heritage through its policies and through programmes such as Creative Europe.

This is why this summer I launched an integrated heritage strategy for Europe. Since the start of my mandate, I have felt the need for such a strategic approach in the field of heritage, and I am confident that this initiative will be supported by stakeholders across Europe.

My aim is to start a debate with the Member States and civil society on the best ways to improve on how we work together; in full respect of the rules on subsidiarity. Our heritage is a resource for the EU, an asset for all, and that means that heritage is equally the responsibility of all of us. I encourage everyone here to join this debate.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am sure that partners from other European countries would very much appreciate to learn from your experience, which would be very valuable to them. Your model of governance is particularly inspiring and goes exactly in the sense of a community-based approach that we advocate in the European Commission.

I wish you every success with your application to the World Heritage List and encourage you to continue preserving this magnificent natural and cultural heritage, and promote access to it.

Thank you.