

European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards

European Heritage Awards Ceremony
Burgtheater, Vienna – 5 May 2016

Speech

(1274 words)
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Your Excellencies,

Dear laureates,

Distinguished guests,

What a great setting for the ceremony of the EU Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards!

The wonderful Burgtheater, with all the beauty and art it contains, reminds us of the rich heritage we share as Europeans and the thread of stories and traditions that connects us. The glorious frescoes of Gustav Klimt indeed enrich the flavour of the classical and Roman past with new artistic sensitivities and vision.

This is not a paradox. Experiencing and reinterpreting the past through art, philosophy, science and our daily life has, for centuries, enriched the culture and heritage we share as Europeans.

To borrow Umberto Eco's words: 'This is what constitutes the basis of the European cultural identity: an enduring dialogue between the literatures and philosophies, musical and theatrical works. And it is this identity that is the foundation of a community that resists the biggest barriers, that of language.'

This balanced vision of European culture – in its unity and diversity - is something I treasure and which I have worked to promote during the last five years.

But tonight is as much about people as it is about culture. Tonight, we celebrate individuals who are contributing to the worldwide image of our continent as a place of culture and heritage. Our winners were selected among a list of 160 projects involving 780 organisations from 30 countries. Competition was intense, proof that the European cultural heritage field is dynamic.

Be it conservation, research, dedicated service or education, training and awareness-raising, our laureates work with an incredible passion and talent.

Dear winners,

You are the ambassadors of European heritage! Let me warmly congratulate you for your work and for sharing your vision of Europe. You are proof that Europe is a continent with enormous talent, energy and skills.

Dear friends,

This Prize is just one of the ways in which the European Union supports cultural heritage. Our new Creative Europe programme for the next seven years supports cooperation, networking and exchange of best practice; the EU structural funds offer great opportunities for integrating heritage in the broader development vision of a region or a city; the Horizon 2020 programme grants significant support for research and digitisation.

But what I want to talk about tonight is not numbers and technocratic issues. It is about realities and vision; it is about what we could do jointly for heritage in Europe.

Now is the time to act – when public budgets for culture and heritage are being slashed and when the challenges are many: growing fragmentation of audiences, globalisation, technological change, negative effects of urbanisation and rural development and environmental sustainability.

At the European Commission, we are working to define what more could or should be done at European level to seize the opportunities and address the challenges for cultural heritage in Europe. We want to help the heritage sector move with the times and that includes opening up to new management models, professional skills and modes of communication.

Cultural heritage contributes to achieving the objectives of many public policies and is in turn affected by them. This is why I intend to propose next month an integrated approach to heritage in Europe, just as I did a couple of years ago for the cultural and creative sectors.

There are a host of new EU instruments that need to be better known and mobilised. Opportunities should not be missed. The contribution of heritage to growth and job creation needs to be highlighted and established on the political agenda.

Its importance for building a shared European identity must be re-affirmed in the current political context.

And beyond all this, I want to support the heritage sector's modernisation efforts. Because I strongly believe that people – professionals, volunteers and citizens - should be the main beneficiaries of heritage policies, alongside physical sites.

I wish to focus on innovation and heritage: innovation in reaching out to new audiences; in taking up new technologies; in managing historical cities and rural landscapes in a sustainable way; innovation in how heritage contributes to the well-being of citizens as part of their daily life and in how communities take ownership of heritage management as part of the sustainable development of their societies.

Since the start of my mandate, I have felt the need for such a strategic approach in the field of heritage. Time has shown that there is an active – and growing - interest on behalf of the Member States and civil society.

I want to start a debate with the Member States and civil society on the areas mentioned above and on the best ways to improve the way we work together at all levels: European, national, regional and local.

There are a wealth of good practices that can be shared and a variety of new management models that we need to first map and then disseminate. Protecting our cultural heritage is a shared responsibility.

I am confident that this initiative comes at the right moment. I count on the support of all stakeholders across Europe – public and private.

Our cultural heritage is an asset for all.

This rich heritage we share in Europe is a vital part of our collective identity. It reminds us of who we are as Europeans. It promotes growth and fosters social inclusion. It attracts tourism. It helps build confidence in local communities.

We need the people of heritage and culture, and all those who believe in their power, to speak up and relay this positive message about the place of culture in the European project and

its contribution to European economies and European societies. This is especially vital now during the difficult times of crisis we are facing, and when we are about to elect a new European Parliament.

This is why artists, intellectuals and scientists responded to the call by President Barroso for a New Narrative for Europe. In the manifesto they adopted in Berlin in the beginning of March, they stressed loud and clear that "Europe, as a political body, needs to recognise the value of cultural heritage".

In a time of crisis, it is only natural to be tempted to succumb to self-doubt. A New Narrative for Europe reminds us that we, Europeans, have all the resources to be at the forefront of the knowledge society. It is a strong message of optimism and an invitation to believe in and engage with the European project as a political and cultural project.

But for that to happen we cannot afford to neglect the huge repository of knowledge and inspiration represented by our cultural achievements and heritage. Culture and cultural heritage have indeed a place in the European narrative and can shape our minds and our vision for the future.

As it is the last time I participate in my capacity as European Commissioner for Culture in this awards ceremony, let me say that working in the field of cultural heritage, and in particular

with Europa Nostra, has been one of the most rewarding experiences I had as Commissioner of Culture. I therefore take this opportunity to warmly thank Maestro Plácido Domingo and Sneska – and, through them, Europa Nostra and its devoted members - for our wonderful cooperation during the past five years. I thank you, dear friends, for the inspiration you have given me and I wish you much success for the future.