

European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards

European Heritage Awards Ceremony

Odeon of Herodes Atticus, Athens – 16 June 2013

Speech

(+/- 791 words)

Mr. President of the Republic,
Your Excellencies,
Dear laureates,
Ladies and gentlemen

It is a great honour to be here tonight.

What better place to celebrate European heritage than under the shadow of the Acropolis in Athens, the city John Milton described as the "eye of Greece, mother of arts and eloquence".

First, I wish to express my gratitude to the President of the Republic of Greece Mr. Karolos Papoulias for honouring us with his presence.

I also wish to thank Europa Nostra, Elliniki Etairia and all the other local partners that have enthusiastically supported this event and made this celebration possible tonight.

This year's ceremony coincides with the 50th anniversary of Europa Nostra – our dedicated partner in organising this prize. Let us all pay a tribute to Europa Nostra and send our best wishes for another 50 years and more of dedicated action in the name of Europe's cultural heritage.

I have the honour to host this ceremony together with Maestro Plácido Domingo. Your presence, Maestro, gives inspiration to pursue our joint work for culture.

Tonight, we pay tribute to the winners of the EU's most prestigious distinction in the heritage field. These outstanding women and men impersonate the excellence for which Europe is known in the field of cultural heritage.

Their work in the area of conservation, research, dedicated service or education and awareness-raising is truly remarkable. Not only do they help save our heritage and bring it to life, but also share their passion with a broad public. I am confident their work will inspire many generations to come.

Let us extend our wholehearted thanks and wish them continued success with their careers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Heritage is priceless. We cannot afford to let it decay.

I am sure that those present here share this view. And I find encouraging that there is growing awareness at all levels about the value of heritage for our society and economy.

This rich tangible and intangible heritage we share in Europe is a vital part of our identity. It plays a central role in promoting local growth and fosters social inclusion. It helps build confidence in local communities. It attracts tourism. It builds bridges between the past and the present, the local and the global.

It is not the place tonight to repeat in figures and examples the ways in which the European Union supports cultural heritage through its various instruments, such as the Culture programme (*and from 2014 on, the Creative Europe Programme for the cultural and creative sectors*), the Structural Funds (*under which Greece has made significant investments*), the Research Framework Programmes or through our cooperation with developing countries and strategic partners.

I'd rather devote a few moments on what we could do better.

The heritage sector, in particular, needs to be better equipped to face the challenges posed by globalisation and digitisation. We could also do more to promote our excellence in cultural heritage outside the EU in countries like China, India or Brazil, which look onto our long experience of sustainable heritage management.

We also need to foster synergies among stakeholders at all levels and raise awareness among the general public and especially the youth.

The European Commission is working to define what more could or should be done at European level in the field of heritage. Last September, we adopted a policy strategy on how better to promote the cultural and creative sectors for growth and jobs (this naturally includes the heritage sector).

We are also engaging in a dialogue with the national authorities across the EU about how actions at national and local level can be best reinforced in different areas such as illicit traffic of cultural objects. Civil society in the area of cultural heritage has been very active and we must support the best of these initiatives and build on them. We look forward to continuing working with the best partners in Europe and beyond.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our cultural heritage is not a given.

To borrow Andre Malraux's words in 'Hommage to Greece' pronounced in 1959, not too far from where we stand tonight:

'Culture is not inherited, it is conquered. Even more so, it is conquered in many ways each of which resembles to those who conceived it.'

At a moment where Europe is in search of a new narrative and a new vision, based on common values and anchored on a shared future, our heritage should remind us of who we are and where we should go.

Let us all join our efforts to ensure that our cultural heritage - this mosaic of faiths, identities and aspirations making up our shared destiny – keeps nourishing the European project with human values and hope for the future.

Thank you for your attention.