

**Presentation Ceremony of  
the 2<sup>nd</sup> Costa Carras European Citizens Award for  
the Safeguard of Endangered Heritage**

European Cultural Centre of Delphi, Greece

10 April 2024

**Speech by Stéphane Bern  
Laureate of the Golden Award**

*Madame la Présidente de la République,*

*Mesdames et Messieurs les Membres du Jury,*

*Chers amis défenseurs du patrimoine,*

*Chère Lydia Carras et chère Sneška ,*

*Mesdames et Messieurs, Chers amis,*

It is a great honor to find myself here before you to receive this prestigious European Citizens Award, above all here in this fabulous site of the ancient city of Delphi.

First of all, I would like to thank the jury and both Europa Nostra and Elliniki Etairia, the founders of this European Citizens' Award for the safeguard of endangered cultural and natural heritage which carry the name of Costa Carras. It is an immense but beautiful responsibility to follow in the footsteps of Costa Carras whose entire life and work were dedicated to heritage and its protection. The name of Costa Carras stands for fifty years of tireless fighting in favour of cultural heritage and its surrounding environment in Europe. Vice-President of Europa Nostra and visionary founder of ELLINIKI ETAIRIA, Costa Carras showed us how to protect and safeguard heritage which cannot continue to exist without the support of people.

For all lovers and defenders of Europe's cultural and natural heritage, Costa Carras is a model and an example. As a true humanist, he had a vision and passion, not only for Greek heritage but also for the heritage of Europe as a whole. I fully share his strong belief that we have the DUTY to work tirelessly in support of Heritage, in order to leave it in a better state for future generations.

As you may know, Greece is my second home where I have been living during summers for twenty-four years. I am particularly happy to share this year's Costa Carras Awards with the Archilogos Cultural Association of Paros that I have been supporting ever since I settled on this beautiful Cycladic island. I express to them my

sincere congratulations for their action. Warmest congratulations also to the very brave Turkish NGO, Haydarpasa Solidarity for Society, City and Environment.

As a lover of Greece, as an ardent defender of French heritage and as a European, I am very honoured to be awarded the Costa Carras European Citizens Award. This serves as great encouragement to continue the voluntary action that I have been carrying out for seven years, at the request of the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, and with the assistance of the French NGO – la *Fondation du Patrimoine*, to safeguard each year the nearly 120 monuments in danger that are reported by the public. It is also the public that participates in their restoration thanks to the National Heritage Lottery, inspired by the British model of the Heritage Lottery Fund which I was able to initiate with the *Française des Jeux*.

Thanks to this initiative, since 2018, we have collected more than 280 million euros and selected some 875 monuments or sites in danger - castles or religious heritage, 20th century heritage, the homes of illustrious people, industrial or workers' heritage, gardens or archaeological sites... we have not forgotten any type of heritage.

In all regions of France, and overseas, we help classified heritage or unprotected, heritage which belongs to local authorities, associations or individuals. To date, more than 65% of these sites have been saved, the others are being restored, and we have just announced the first sites in danger among the 118 monuments which will benefit from help from the Mission Bern in 2024.

**I therefore dedicate this Costa Carras Award to all of my compatriots who have realised that we are all collectively and individually custodians of our cultural heritage.**

*Je ne cesse de répéter sur tous les tons, dans les médias particulièrement, que le patrimoine n'est pas seulement l'affaire de l'Etat. Nous en sommes tous les gardiens, les dépositaires, individuellement et collectivement. Ce que je m'efforce de dire aux élus locaux – auxquels j'appartiens aussi depuis trois semaines – c'est que le patrimoine n'est pas un luxe, c'est une nécessité, ce n'est pas un coût c'est un investissement. Le patrimoine est porteur d'identité, c'est un facteur d'intégration et de cohésion sociale, c'est un trait d'union entre les générations, c'est aussi un vecteur d'activité économique dans les villages où il est parfois la seule richesse touristique, autant que le premier contact avec l'art, l'histoire et la culture.*

I keep repeating in every way possible, particularly in the media, that heritage is not just a matter for the State. We are all its guardians, its custodians, individually and collectively. What I am trying to say to local elected officials – which I have also become three weeks ago – is that heritage is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It is not a cost; it is an investment. Heritage is a vector of identity, it is a factor for integration and social cohesion, it is a link between generations, it is also a source of sustainable economic activity in many villages where it is sometimes the only touristic asset. Finally, it is for citizens their first contact with art, history and culture.

Let me make a confession: it is thanks to my work on television that I earned this affectionate name of “Monsieur Patrimoine”, as my compatriots call me. By hosting history programmes in places where history was written, or by presenting the people’s “favorite villages” while discovering the state of dereliction and degradation of local heritage, I became aware of the importance of defending our treasures, a cultural and historical wealth that 90 million tourists come to visit each year in France.

But if we want to ask the French or anyone else in Europe to defend their heritage, we must start by doing it ourselves. And this is how I agreed to take over the responsibility for the former royal military college of Thiron-Gardais in Le Perche which the public authorities of the Department of Eure-et-Loir could no longer maintain. This gigantic restoration project was my own heritage laboratory. It allowed me to understand the challenges of defending heritage, to measure what sacrifices this implies, but also to enjoy the happiness it brings. This has given me legitimacy and credibility to then launch a forceful public appeal to my fellow countrymen to save our endangered heritage. The Collège, hidden in the middle of the French *Perche*, attracts more than 13 000 visitors between May and September. The public also comes to admire a two-century-old giant sequoia labeled as a “Remarkable Tree”, as I strongly believe that botanical and arboreal heritage ought to be given equal importance as architectural heritage. In order to further disseminate the history that is communicated in the museum that I created in the old classrooms of the Collège, I set up the Association for former Royal and Military Academies in 2022, allowing academic exchanges between the different campuses to rejuvenate their heritage and promote their history.

My dedication to the revival of the Royal Military College of Thiron-Gardais, and to the promotion of my country’s heritage as a whole, have garnered recognition at both national and European levels. It has been honoured with numerous awards, including the [European Heritage Award / Europa Nostra Award](#) in 2018, in acknowledgement of my endeavours to safeguard heritage and rescue historical monuments in France. I want to once again thank again the European Commission and Europa Nostra for this recognition. I am also so happy that together with Europa Nostra and the Centre européen de la musique, we saved the Villa Viardot in Bougival, a prominent “lieu de mémoire” for European cultural and musical heritage from the 19th century.

Today, my aim is to raise awareness of endangered heritage across Europe. I began with television programmes focused on French heritage, but now I go on and broaden my vision to encompass the preservation of Europe’s rich and diverse heritage through books and radio podcasts. In 2016, I established the Stéphane Bern Foundation for History and Heritage, affiliated with the *Institut de France*, which awards a History Prize and a Heritage Prize to honor a collective action in favor of heritage every year. Among the award winners, the French heritage organization, “*Veilles maisons françaises*”, one of the founding member organisations of Europa Nostra, was awarded for its educational project to offer French Heritage kits to school pupils. The Association for the medieval castles in Alsace and the Association for Open Churches were also given accolades for their work.

Since I began my voluntary presidential mission, I have been able to note with pleasure the collective awareness of the importance of heritage preservation. Everywhere, public opinion is rebelling against arbitrary decisions to destroy jewels of the past in the name of so called modernity. I am so happy to say that the fights we are waging are regularly crowned with success.

I often like to quote our great national poet Victor Hugo who rightly stated that “*there are two things in a building: its use and its beauty. Its use belongs to the owner, its beauty to everyone, to you, to me, to all of us.*” Preserving heritage is everyone’s business. It is our roots, our history, our past, but if we succeed in maintaining it, to pass this heritage on to future generations, we will have accomplished our duty. Because we must never forget, as Churchill said, “*that a people who forget their past have no future*”.

*Merci de votre attention.*