

EuroMed2012 Conference on cultural heritage

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Speech by Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou

Distinguished guests,

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here today at this Euromed conference on Cultural Heritage. I would like to thank the organisers for inviting such a great variety of stakeholders and practitioners from the cultural heritage world.

But above all, I would like to thank you, the participants, for being here. Such an impressive attendance is a very clear sign of the continuing importance of cultural heritage to our cultures and our societies, and of the determination to protect and preserve it for future generations.

Culture is an essential ingredient of what makes us who we are. Our shared heritage is part of what makes us the proud citizens of one or the other nation-state, as well as Europeans, citizens of a civilization with a long, rich and often troubled history, a present fraught with both challenges and high hopes, and a future, that it is our exclusive responsibility to shape and take forward.

Heritage tells us who we are and where we come from.

But heritage is also about how we proceed into the future. Where we stand affects what we see. Heritage doesn't belong simply to the past. And not only because, as the old maxim says, if we are able to see further, it is because we are standing on the shoulders of giants.

Even if its roots stretch back into the distant past, heritage is alive today in our knowledge of it, in our understanding that our own local and national heritage is part of a larger European heritage, which has also created a greater community of people to which we are proud to belong.

This is why the treaty of Lisbon entrusts the EU with the task of safeguarding and enhancing Europe's cultural heritage.

Because knowing and understanding the expressions and contributions of different civilizations at different points in time allows us better to understand, and advance, civilised values today.

That is why I believe that our common European heritage is one of the strongest assets we have in Europe. An asset that is not confined to the past, glorious as it may be, but lives very much in the present, evolves and changes with the times.

In fact, the very definition of heritage is changing. Cultural heritage today is no longer limited to monuments and sites: it also includes archives, museums and collections, as well as traditions and customs, natural and cultural landscapes.

It is not limited to "ancient" monuments, either, but includes several symbols of 20th century history. It is not just our definition of heritage that is changing. We live in a time when new technologies are having a far-reaching impact on the very way in which we produce access and distribute cultural products. In the digital era, the possibilities are almost infinite. Time and space are not the insurmountable constraints they used to be. Or so it seems.

Because we must not forget that by its own nature cultural heritage is essentially fragile and finite.

But science and technology can help here too. They can make an important contribution not only to the conservation of heritage, but also to the promotion of new and exciting forms of public engagement with it. This is what you have already been discussing over the last few days, and it is a crucial issue.

My warm welcome goes therefore to the scientists and experts in different fields who are with us today, and whose work aims to improve the interdisciplinary cooperation between science, art and humanities.

They are developing new ways of preserving our heritage and of making it more easily accessible by all our citizens. We are all very grateful to them for this.

Europe too can make a contribution. We support science and exchanges between scientists, including culture-related projects, with our Framework programme for research, and in particular through the Marie Curie Actions.

But the EU has also an important role to play in supporting and raising awareness of our shared cultural heritage, always, of course, in close partnership with Member States.

As Commissioner for culture, I fully subscribe to the objective of making sure that our extraordinary cultural heritage should be properly protected, preserved and made accessible to as many people as possible.

In the virtual world, we are promoting digital access to Europe's heritage through Europeana, the EU digital library that is both a celebration and a consolidation of European cultural identity on the Web. By providing a single, multi-lingual point of access to digital cultural material, it acts as a gateway to Europe's culture for a global audience.

And when it comes to the real world, over the past five years, in addition to the projects funded under the Culture programme, the European Regional Development Fund has allocated billions of euro for cultural projects in Europe. These have included the protection and preservation of sites, the development of cultural infrastructure and support for cultural services.

We justly take pride in our individual national traditions and cultural riches. The EU's role is to point out how interconnected our national traditions are. Only a European dimension can help to bring to the fore our shared identity, the extent to which the cultural heritage of each Member State and region adds up to create the sense of belonging to a European community.

This is why the EU is also a very active supporter of awareness-raising actions. The European Heritage Days, which the European Commission and the Council of Europe support together, attract every year to our monuments and buildings more than 25 million visitors.

These figures prove the tremendous interest that Europeans have in their culture.

And as part of our efforts to raise the visibility of cultural heritage, we support the EU Prize for cultural heritage/Europa Nostra awards. With it we highlight best practices in the field of restoration, research, education, training and awareness-raising in Europe.

I should mention also our new initiative to put more emphasis on the European dimension: the European Heritage Label. It is awarded to historical sites across Europe that symbolize the European integration process.

I am sure this Label will prove an excellent way to make people more aware of our European history and heritage and to involve them in it. And it has great potential to contribute to the sustainable development of regions, in particular through cultural tourism.

Last but certainly not least there is what is possibly the best-known European event in the area of culture: the European Capital of Culture.

As we have seen in the last twenty five years, this title is not only a wonderful opportunity for a city to present its richness to the world - it is also a time when a city can renew and recreate itself. It can invest in restoring its cultural heritage. And it can involve its inhabitants in culture and create a greater sense of community and ownership.

In fact, I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the city of Paphos on receiving the European Capital of Culture title for 2017. I am confident that the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite will make the most of this unique opportunity.

All these different EU initiatives that I have just outlined confirm the importance we attach to safeguarding and communicating our heritage and to engaging and empowering Europeans to take ownership of it.

They also bring to the fore the important role that our cultural heritage can play in Europe's economic prosperity; no other world region holds such a rich inheritance, reflecting the way in which Europe has been the cradle of so much of the world's development.

But we are still not reaping the full benefits and spill-over effects of culture in Europe.

We still have not managed to integrate culture sufficiently into a new economic paradigm, or into our reflection about how to exit from the current crisis.

This is a challenge we are trying to address within the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth in the European Union. I seek all opportunities to make the case that culture – both in its creative and heritage aspects – has the potential to deliver economic growth and highly desirable knowledge-based jobs.

Acting on my proposal, the College of Commissioners adopted on 26 September a strategy for Promoting Cultural and creative sectors for growth and jobs in the EU. The Commission is calling for a wide range of actions aimed to promote the right conditions for the cultural and creative sectors, including cultural heritage, to flourish.

And as we look to the future, I am working to ensure that the next EU funding period 2014-2020 will live up to our cultural ambitions for Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I spoke earlier about local and national heritage being part of a larger European heritage. Let me go one step further and extend that notion to the whole Mediterranean area - the cradle of civilisation, as it is often called. There was a time when the Mediterranean was known in Latin as "Mare Nostrum", a moment when all the peoples in the region could call it "our sea".

There is no doubt that the regions bordering it all share a rich common cultural, historical and artistic heritage.

I am familiar - we all are familiar - with the extraordinary cultural and artistic heritage created by different civilisations, different ethnic groups and different communities living in close contact. We all have learnt that when we are able truly to appreciate such an extraordinary legacy, then we can also better understand how interconnected all these civilisations are.

This is why the EU promotes cultural relations and exchanges with our neighbours in the Southern Mediterranean. Because of the potential of the shared Euro-Mediterranean heritage to foster cultural awareness and mutual understanding which should be harnessed for the common good.

It is for all these reasons that at the EU level, culture policy has been steadily gaining importance also in our external relations. For these reasons and because of culture's potential for the Euromed region's socio-economic development we have been directly supporting the heritage economy through a succession of programmes: the latest, Euromed Heritage IV, began in 2008 and will end this year.

These programmes support cultural heritage in all its many forms, including for instance ancient theatre and manuscripts, traditional architecture, Phoenician maritime routes, heritage education, etc.

This has been a direct contribution to job creation and economic growth and the social development of the South Mediterranean region.

In light of such results, I truly hope that work on a new Euromed Strategy on Culture Strategy can resume in earnest in the near future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unfortunately, the fact is that much of our heritage is under threat – from environmental degradation and climate change, from socio-economic pressures and the accelerating pace of urbanisations, from the strains of global tourism and from forgery on trade in stolen artworks.

But we can avert these threats, through the use of technology, coupled with creativity and foresight. Over these days, you must have heard and you will hear even more many concrete examples of how this can be achieved.

We must not forget that the preservation of cultural heritage is our common responsibility. And it is in our interest. If we want to embrace the future and move towards more sustainable forms of growth, we need to learn to use our assets in the field of culture more effectively.

Events like this Conference can allow us to make significant progress. I hope you have found your participation worthwhile and that you are enjoying your stay in Cyprus. I will be looking forward to receiving the conclusions of the Conference.

Thank you.