



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

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## **Protecting our heritage is a shared responsibility**

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Minister,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to be with you today, in the company of so many friends from the Member States, civil society and international organisations. Friends who share a strong interest – rather a passion I would say – for Europe's cultural heritage and with whom we co-operate towards the same objective: how to better protect our heritage and to make our fellow citizens aware of what an extraordinary resource it is for Europe.

What better place to celebrate European heritage than in Athens.

Dear friends,

While some ideals of beauty may be eternal, the works of art and of human ingenuity that convey beauty through time are fragile and hard to replace. Their survival depends on their physical preservation and maintenance. And even when the monuments of the past are still standing, their meaning may be still be lost forever if the knowledge embodied in them is not preserved and transmitted from generation to generation.

Heritage is not a passive inheritance. You have to claim it if you wish to possess it.

To borrow Andre Malraux's words in his 'Homage to Greece' pronounced in 1959: 'Culture is not inherited, it is conquered.'

The relevance of cultural heritage depends on the efforts of every generation to re-discover and re-interpret it. This is a chain of shared knowledge and experience that should never be broken. Only in this way can heritage be a living force, rooting us in our past and helping to shape our future by enriching our sense of identity and nourishing our creativity.

I will never tire of repeating: Europe's cultural heritage is one of its strongest assets. Protecting this heritage and making full use of its potential is a shared responsibility. This is exactly the message that I conveyed again in a public statement yesterday after hearing about the latest collapse on the archaeological site of Pompeii due to heavy rainfall.

Protection of heritage is above all a national responsibility, as heritage is firmly rooted in a territory. But the EU can and must also help. We help by spearheading research on new techniques for heritage restoration and maintenance, through our research

programmes. We fund cross-border cooperation through trans-national projects. Under the former Culture programme, more than 130 cooperation projects in area of cultural heritage received funding totalling 38 million euros. This support will continue under the new Creative Europe programme, with an increased budget of around 9 %.

We provide direct support to cultural heritage and cultural services through the Structural Funds – as was the case for the Acropolis Museum where you will continue your deliberations tomorrow and as was the case of Pompeii.

In the previous programming period, out of the 6 billion euros earmarked for culture-led investments in the EU Member States, around half were devoted to cultural heritage. I hope that national authorities will also take full advantage of the funding opportunities offered by the Structural Funds for the next seven years.

We help raise awareness through new initiatives such as the European Heritage Label and the European Heritage Days and prizes such as the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage.

There is no contradiction between national responsibilities and EU intervention. The value of cultural heritage is both local and collective. Heritage has been forged over time, across borders and communities. It is made up of local stories, which together make the history of Europe. This is why the contribution of civil society in the area of cultural heritage has been valuable and is a sine qua non for safeguarding our heritage.

By discussing cultural heritage today, at the initiative of our Greek friends, we are paying homage to the narrative that links us all together. At a moment where Europe is in search of 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 as Europeans. This is also the key message of the New Narrative for Europe – a vision of Europe through culture - which was presented a few days ago in Berlin and which called upon Europe as a political body to recognise the value of cultural heritage as a powerful instrument that provides a sense of belonging amongst and between Europeans.

I have focused thus far on the multi-faceted value of cultural heritage for Europe and the opportunities it offers for growth and social inclusion. Let me now briefly turn to the challenges.

Integrating heritage to the modern urban landscape, safe-guarding heritage from the negative effects of urbanisation and rural development and ensuring environmental sustainability are key challenges. Moreover, we must better equip the heritage sector to face the challenges posed by globalisation and digitisation. We could also do more to promote our excellence in sustainable heritage management outside the EU. Our expertise is valued by partner countries. We also need to raise awareness among the general public and especially young people about the value of heritage and its organic connection to our daily lives.

We are active at European level in all these areas. Furthermore, we also engage with authorities and civil society across the EU about how actions at national and local level can be best reinforced in areas such as the illicit traffic of cultural objects.

The European Commission wants to be part of the debate on cultural heritage. We are working to define what more could or should be done at European level in the field of heritage to seize the opportunities and address the challenges.

In September 2012, I proposed a policy strategy on how better to promote the cultural and creative sectors for growth and jobs in the EU (this naturally includes the heritage sector).

Later this spring, I intend to propose an initiative on cultural heritage that will illustrate how important a role heritage plays in our societies and economies and how central that role is to the European project. The objective is to strengthen the contribution of the European Union to the understanding and safeguarding of cultural heritage and to start a debate with the Member States and civil society on the best ways to improve our work together.

Our cultural heritage is an asset for all, and that means that heritage is equally a responsibility of all.

This rich, tangible and intangible, heritage we share in Europe is a vital part of our shared identity. It promotes 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.

Your deliberations over the next couple of days will feed into the ongoing debate on cultural heritage at European level, initiated by the Lithuanian Presidency and taken up in force by the Greek Presidency and, I hope, the Italian Presidency. I stand ready to advance this debate in the remainder of my mandate. Because, if we wish to survive as Europeans and protect our culture, our heritage is not a luxury or a cost, but a necessity.