

Learning from our European heritage: a call from Mechelen

“Heritage interpretation – for the future of Europe” was the theme of the 6th international conference of Interpret Europe, held in Mechelen, Belgium, from 21 to 24 May 2016. 178 delegates from 26 countries were working on answers to the question: how thoughtful interpretation of Europe’s natural and cultural heritage can contribute to the future of our continent.

Europe is strongly rooted in its recent history

Europe as we know it today is founded on one strong idea: in order to avoid conflicts and the destructive forces of war from ever devastating Europe again, the nations should closely cooperate and partly become interdependent. A Union was forged and successfully developed through the last six decades. It now comprises 28 states aiming to create a culture in order to find a common way of facing the future whilst keeping Europe’s diversity.

Europe on the test bench

Although the European idea has flourished, it now faces a combination of serious challenges. Negative globalisation impacts, terrorism threats and actual attacks, heavy influx of refugees and immigrants, violence and economic uncertainty have become a daily challenge for Europeans. Rising nationalism is resulting in increased border control and a feeling of Euroscepticism is undermining the European idea. At times, Europe is being experienced as a complex of bureaucratic institutions lacking a shared spirit.

The role of European heritage

In 2014, the Council of the European Union recognised cultural heritage as “an important component of the European project” and as “a strategic choice for the 21st century”. The European Commission echoed this sentiment by designating Europe as “a laboratory for heritage-based innovation”. 2018 will be proclaimed the European Year of Cultural Heritage. This is opening outstanding opportunities for all citizens of Europe to reflect upon the roots of the European idea.

Exploring identities through thoughtful interpretation

European Commissioner Tibor Navracsics recently wrote: “Through interpretation, I believe heritage can contribute to the building of communities, not just at local level, but also on national and European levels”. Thoughtful interpretation brings people into direct contact with their heritage, provokes reflection and encourages the search for deeper meaning, inspiring citizens to take ownership of their heritage and to explore the European idea.

Call for a coalition

Interpret Europe feels it is now more critical than ever to reengage with those ideals on which Europe is built: a peaceful society for everyone who lives in Europe, the protection of human rights, the democratic development of active citizenship, the striving for sustainability and the stimulation of a life-long attitude of learning from others and together with others.

Interpret Europe calls like-minded institutions to support the initiative for the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage and provide opportunities for citizens all over Europe to visit their heritage sites in order to reconsider what our shared European values mean to us.