



Opening address

Monseigneur, Mister Mayor, distinguished representatives of UNESCO, ICOMOS, Europa Nostra, dear participants from Europe and from other continents, dear friends,

It is a pleasure and an honour to welcome you all to the 6th international Interpret Europe Conference. It is the first time that we gather in Belgium and we could not have done this without the generous offer of Herita: Flanders Heritage Association, to organise this conference. Kristl, allow us to thank you and your team for all the efforts that Herita has done to make this event possible. Thank you.

When it was decided that we would come to Belgium for our annual conference, we knew that with Brussels a proverbial stone's throw away from Mechelen, Europe had to be at the heart of our conference theme. What we could not foresee back then was that by addressing heritage interpretation in the context of the future of Europe, this theme would have such an outstanding significance by the time we would meet.

Two months ago, the Paris attack still fresh in our memories, Brussels was also brutally shaken by acts of terrorism. This deed of violence not only hit the country of Belgium and its people, it was also an assault on the heart of European values. One month from now, one of the most influential countries in Europe will have a referendum on whether it should remain a member of the European Union or not. The migration crisis is shaking the foundations of Europe with far more than one million refugees last year. Extremism, Euroscepticism, nationalism and protectionism threaten the core values of Europe, such as the democratic rule, freedom of speech, the independence of the judicial system, the right to privacy ... We could go on but the point is clear: the future of Europe is not something that can be taken for granted. It never has been and it probably never will be. The positive side is that this urges Europe to constantly reflect upon its strengths and weaknesses, upon its values and upon its cultural forces in order to secure its place in the world and in order to provide the best of worlds for its citizens and for its visitors.

In 1942, during Europe's darkest moments, Stefan Zweig, an Austrian and a Jew, a celebrated writer and a cultural humanist, but above all: a European, wrote his literary testament. Immediately before he committed suicide, he reflected on his life span that covered the period of the end of the 19th century to the middle of the Second World War. In this book "The world of yesterday: memories of a European" we find the glimpses of what it is that Europe has to offer to itself and to the world.

Despite the atrocities that Europe brought upon itself, it has this incredible unique way of accessing its own cultural resources across the nations of the European continent and to bring forward an enormous quality and diversity in domains such as music, literature, architecture, philosophy, science, law and politics, to name but a few of those that matter to our lives on a daily basis. In the

words of Stefan Zweig, this is what got betrayed when Europe fell victim to a narrow-minded nationalism. He takes his beloved Vienna as the focal point when he writes:

“Only the coming decades would show what crime against Vienna was committed, as they sought to violently nationalise and provincialise this city, whose meaning and culture were founded in the meeting of the most heterogeneous elements, and in her spiritual supernationality. For the genius of Vienna – a specifically musical one – was always that it harmonised all the national and lingual contrasts. Its culture was a synthesis of all Western cultures. Whoever lived there and worked there felt himself free of all confinements and prejudice. Nowhere was it easier to be a European, and I know that to a great extent I must thank this city that at an early age I learned to love the idea of the common good as the highest of my heart.”

What counted for Vienna at pre-nationalist times also counted for Paris. It counted for Rome, for Amsterdam, for Prague, for London – and it counted for Brussels.

All over Europe we find the traces and roots of Europe’s heterogeneity, its oppositions, its diversity, but also of its genius, its harmonising vision, its culture of synthesis. With some justification we can call these traces “our European heritage”.

It is at moments of great importance, when the future is at stake, that it becomes natural to reflect upon who we are, upon what it is that really matters to our lives. With the problems that Europe is facing, in the context of a globalised world, amidst other nations and cultures that strive to play their part on the world economic and political scene, Europe is consciously putting forward its rich heritage to define itself and as a means to give sense to its future.

In 2014, for the first time in its history, the Council of the European Union acknowledged 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 a few months later by proclaiming Europe as “a laboratory for heritage-based innovation”. To stimulate reflection on the importance of heritage for the European dimension of our culture, the European Heritage Label has gained, and is continuing to gain, more momentum and importance as a distinctively European award with a distinctively European approach to heritage. As recently as 19 April 2016 it has been publicly announced that 2018 will be the European Year of Cultural Heritage.

What these and other initiatives reflect is that there is a widely shared belief that Europe in its core is not about its institutions as such. What is expressed is a deeply rooted belief that the idea of Europe lays in its culture that spans thousands of years, that is reflected in its cultural productions, in its science and philosophy, in its landscape and its monuments, in its search for truth no matter what the consequences are, in its belief of personal freedom to pursue the best, the most aesthetic and the most valuable that mankind can produce. And all of them are not confined within the borders of nations but have a universal meaning. So what is needed is not just the preservation of what was. What is needed is the tapping into this rich cultural reservoir that Europe has produced in order to recreate, to innovate, to improve, to explore and to surprise.

However, although Europe became aware of those values after two devastating wars, it now seems to have lost its connection to its past again. It is as if Europe has forgotten what it stands for, that it has forgotten that it is still alive and capable of great things. This is where heritage interpretation enters the scene.

Our conference “Heritage interpretation – for the future of Europe” wants to stimulate thinking on how interpretation can unleash its qualities in order to support the ideas Europe has set for itself. Those ideas without which Europe might lose its character and soul: a peaceful society for everyone who lives in Europe, the acknowledgement of human rights, the democratic development

of active citizenship, the striving for sustainable development and the readiness for lifelong learning.

Heritage interpretation has all qualities that are needed to raise such topics. It gets people into direct contact with the legacy of their past. It relates them to their heritage and provokes reflection. It turns experiences into sources of inspiration and creativity. Therefore, we are sure that heritage interpretation can support Europe in its search for an identity; not by promoting European decisions but by encouraging its citizens to search for deeper meanings, to take ownership of their heritage – and to take ownership of Europe.

Our subject is challenging. Many of us are working at parks, museums and monuments where the link to Europe is not always obvious. We are, therefore, very delighted that so many people saw the necessity to contribute to this conference.

This conference would not have been possible without support of our partners: the city of Mechelen, the Lifelong Learning Project InHerit, Alden Biesen, Visit Flanders, the Flemish Commission for UNESCO, and of course Herita: Flanders Heritage Association. We are very grateful to all of them. However, all who have joined an Interpret Europe Conference before know that the success of this conference will be in the hands of its participants.

Just recently our event received an endorsement from Tibor Navracsics, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. He sent us a statement saying:

"Through interpretation, I believe heritage can contribute to the building of communities, not just at local level, but also on national and European levels. Bringing citizens closer to their heritage is about bringing them closer to each other, and this is an important step towards a more inclusive society."

Let this quote be the lighthouse we are steering for.

Monseigneur, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, we herewith declare the conference "Heritage Interpretation – for the future of Europe" open.

Thank you.

Thorsten Ludwig and Willem Derde