



European Economic and Social Committee

EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE FORUM
“CULTURAL HERITAGE COUNTS FOR EUROPE”
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Speech by Ms Anne-Marie Sigmund,
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Closing session
“TOWARDS AN EU STRATEGY FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE”

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
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Your Royal Highness, Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure for me to address this closing session of the European Cultural Heritage Forum devoted to the discussion of a European strategy for cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage certainly does count for Europe, indeed culture is the leitmotiv of my presidency of the European Economic and Social Committee.

We live today in an enlarged Europe which must face the global challenge. We therefore need appropriate aids to identify ourselves as Europeans without relinquishing our identity in the immediate surroundings in which we live. However, Europe's citizens will not be made into Europeans by rational arguments – they must also be motivated emotionally: they must want to make an active contribution to this process and be able to feel the personal benefit.

The definition of culture as a process, as a form of shared thinking and acting which pervades our everyday lives provides us with the basis for this. Participating in culture in every form creates social realities – and in this way also plays an essential role in social cohesion.

If we define culture as a code of values that apply to the members of a society, or – even more simply – as an acknowledgement of shared values, then it becomes clear that the concept of "culture" always has an implication of "unity", whether it is unity of language, heritage, education systems or interests. Thus culture creates a collective identity in these areas and itself produces social realities; culture determines the situation of a social community.

And a political system that fails to be incorporated into the values of its members necessarily remains fragile.

I believe that cultural identity must inevitably be included in the concept of European identity; this identity by no means conflicts with Europe's cultural diversity, but on the contrary draws certain key characteristics from it. An individual's ethnic, national, religious or cultural affiliation is irrelevant to being a European; but his or her attitude to a given allegiance is not irrelevant. Thus European identity is also, and perhaps even mainly, a political culture of attitudes towards individual allegiances.

I would like to reflect for a minute on the famous quotation from André Malraux, who stressed that "an inheritance is not simply passed down; it has to be reclaimed"¹. By underlining the fragility of what one generation can pass on to another, he warned us against complacency. In this uncertain period for Europe, I believe that we need now to pay more attention to our common cultural inheritance and how it can act as a stimulus to take us forward.

And, importantly, Malraux also taught us about the hermeneutics of aesthetic objects and the preservation of the built environment.

Permit me now to make the link between our cultural identities, our European project and our architectural heritage. It is not by chance that all the Euro banknotes in your wallets and purses carry the pictorial representation of our churches, monuments and bridges.

The bridge is perhaps the most powerful architectural metaphor in our European cultural and political project and I would like to share some thoughts with you about the role and meaning of six bridges.

Mostar, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, takes its name from the Slav root "most" for bridge. It withstood four centuries of conflict and earthquakes before collapsing under shell fire in November 1993. The old bridge in Mostar was destroyed for its symbolic value and was also rebuilt for its symbolic value. The new "old bridge" was inaugurated in July 2004 under the auspices of UNESCO Director-General Koïchuro

¹ "L'héritage ne se transmet pas, il se conquiert"

Matsuura, who noted that the bridge needed to become "a rallying sign, a sign of recognition, the powerful symbol of a plural identity founded on mutual trust".

The Ponte Vecchio in Florence, another old bridge, was initially built by the Romans, rebuilt in the middle ages and embellished by Vasari in the sixteenth century with a corridor linking the Pitti Palace to the Uffizi for the rich and powerful Medici family.

The Pont Neuf in Paris, which despite its name is the oldest bridge in the French capital, was completed in 1604 during the reign of Henri IV, who was married to daughters of the Medici family, whose influence in spreading the artistic and cultural achievements of the Italian renaissance to France and the northern European countries was considerable.

Tower Bridge in London is the late nineteenth century symbol of the British Victorian era's confidence in engineering, trade and empire.

The Øresund bridge, connecting Denmark and Sweden, represents an unprecedented engineering and environmental achievement. In the five years since it opened, on 1 July 2000, it has been a real success story in the social, economic and cultural development of a sustainable trans-border European region.

What these five bridges have in common, and what is important for our discussion here today, is that, over and above their functional architectural purpose of allowing the free, economically efficient movement of people and goods, they also symbolise the greater economic and cultural aspirations of the Europeans who built them. In this sense, and I return to the quotation from Malraux, we must look at our cultural heritage as part of a process that must constantly be re-appropriated.

The sixth and final bridge is the building in which we find ourselves today, which used to house the European Parliament. Today, the European Economic and Social Committee shares this building with the Committee of the Regions. Situated, as we are, between the European Parliament (which you can see through the window behind you) and the European Council and European Commission on the other side of the square in front of the building, our Committee serves as a bridge between the institutions of the European Union and organised civil society.

What does this mean in practice ?

Our 317 members from the 25 Member States represent social and economic interest groups: employers' organisations, trade unions and what we call 'various interests', such as farmers' unions, consumer bodies, the liberal professions and other key civil society organisations.

These players, who mediate between citizens and the state, derive their *raison d'être* from being in touch with the grassroots; they represent grassroots interests, but still feel committed to the common good. Their internal opinion-forming process is characterised by pluralism, diversity and tension. As civil society organisations they are essential as channels of communication that help to shape a European identity.

Our Committee is thus a living bridge between grassroots organised civil society and the institutions of the European Union, across which flows a constant stream of information, opinion, discussion about how best to take the European project forward, allowing for diversity in unity.

At the European Economic and Social Committee we recognise the need to promote the development of a strategy for cultural heritage at European level, to protect these bridges and the values they represent. And we must not forget the essential cultural aspect of our European identity, so that our cultural legacy can be passed down for future generations to reclaim as their own.

Allow me to conclude, Your Royal Highness, Commissioner, Ladies and Gentlemen, by expressing the hope that our Committee can continue to serve, as has been the case today, as a meeting place for exchanges with a view to the European year of intercultural dialogue in en 2008.

Thank you.