

Europe in a shifting reality: Redefining the role of cultural heritage

François Matarasso, a talk given at the Greek EU Presidency conference, *Heritage First! Towards a common approach for a sustainable Europe*, Athens, 6 March 2014

Two gross of broken statues

In August this year, Europeans will mark the centenary of the start of the First World War, a conflict that, depending on your view of history, could be said to have continued until 1945, or even 1989. In 1920, horrified by the results of industrialised warfare, Ezra Pound published [Hugh Selwyn Mauberley](#). It includes these lines:

There died a myriad,
And of the best, among them,
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
For a botched civilization,
Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,
For two gross of broken statues,
For a few thousand battered books.

Shortly afterwards, [Pound](#), an American poet who had, like his friend [Eliot](#), come to Europe for its culture, abandoned England and moved to Paris and then Italy. In the process, he abandoned what he saw as the failed compromises of democracy for Fascism. That would let him down too, but at even greater cost, to himself and others.

Ezra Pound was a difficult poet and an even more difficult man. Much of his thought and conduct is indefensible. But he is not a bad ghost to summon at this feast, to remind us that there are those who would place little value on 'two gross of broken statues, and a few thousand battered books', and also that culture and heritage can be difficult, challenging and contested—and that is part of their importance.

'Heritage First?'

The aspirations of [this conference](#) are admirable. Its objectives to promote recognition and understanding of the value and role of cultural heritage; to raise awareness of the benefits of integrating it into sustainable development policies; to encourage coordinated, collaborative action to make the most of cultural heritage in socio-economic development; and to advocate for a common European strategic framework for cultural heritage are all vital to the future of our societies, our shared European identity and our cultural heritage itself.

But when so many of our fellow citizens do not know how they will house or feed themselves tonight, and when the failures of our economic and political systems bring millions onto the streets, those who believe in the value of heritage must begin by explaining why anyone should care about those broken statues and battered books. We must be able to answer Ezra Pound's bitter derision. We need, in short, a renewed story of our European cultural heritage and its place in our lives, individually and collectively.

Heritage is culture disconnected from its purpose

That story begins in recognition that heritage is culture disconnected from the purpose that led to its creation. Whatever we think of a Neolithic stone circle today, the one thing we can be certain of is that it is not what its makers thought about it. To be recognised as heritage—and therefore to be cherished and protected, valued and visited—cultural artefacts must acquire a second meaning, compatible with whatever meanings their creators intended. Heritage must speak to people in the present about things that matter to them: otherwise it will not be seen, or protected.

Europe is fortunate in the length and continuity of its history. That history has given us an exceptionally rich material and immaterial heritage: not just the theatres at Delphi and Athens, but the mythology of the society that built them and even, in a few precious cases, the actual texts that were spoken there. Those texts have been translated, performed and recreated in many languages that the original authors would have considered, literally, barbarian. They would have been wrong. That [Agamemnon](#) and [Oedipus. Lysistrata](#) and [Medea](#) walk regularly on European stages is proof of their universal human value.

The same is true of almost every period of our history, from the stone circles on islands in the Atlantic Ocean to the musical legacy of [Abbey Road](#). Whatever it meant at the time, this heritage matters because of what it means to us today.

Cultural heritage as a resource in a crisis

And, because culture is a carrier of values, the most important part of that legacy is the ideals our ancestors invented, developed and bequeathed to us, encapsulated in stone, paint, metal and words: ideals such as democracy and justice, faith and humanism, philosophy and theatre, community, hope and courage.

At the start of the 21st century, after a period of relative peace and security, Europe once again faces great uncertainty. There are fundamental threats, some of which we can prevent, others only mitigate. Spectres some had naively hoped banished for good are reappearing on the edges of the scene: fascism, racism and xenophobia feed on poverty, hunger and fear.

It will take a great effort of will, imagination and cooperation to get through the crisis that has already been unfolding for several years. Every part of society, including the heritage and cultural professions, faces challenges that will only be overcome by working together and reaching beyond narrow sectoral or national interests. The objectives of this conference lay out a coherent path, and the speakers in the working sessions will present some of the steps already taken.

But to make real progress, the profession must articulate a new story that speaks to those who do not already see the value of cultural heritage. It must find new meanings, new

interpretations, new resonance in this extraordinary legacy that speak to today's Europeans in today's crisis.

A small boat on a dark sea

The [logo of the Greek Presidency](#) represents a small boat on a dark sea, suggesting the journey of exploration and transition on which the citizens of the European Union are now embarked. In the words of the Presidency, this 'shared course of democracy and participation' draws on ideals that 'forged our past and are now the common inspiration that leads our course'. Cultural heritage could be the breeze that fills that white sail.

In a [speech](#) given the year he won the Nobel Prize, Albert Camus—a better guide in dangerous waters than Ezra Pound—spoke of himself as being embarked, as an artist, in the ship of his time. He might not like the conditions or the smell, but he being where he was he must row with the rest. Camus own 'battered books', one more of the inexhaustible treasures of our common cultural heritage, show Ezra Pound to have been wrong, in page after page after page.

The dreams, hopes and visions expressed in our cultural legacy, the imagination and skill, the knowledge, craft and beauty, the wisdom and moral authority—these make us Europeans and make us human. The common ground of European cultural heritage, in all its complexity, in its darkness and its light, is not just a resource for us on this journey. It is why the journey is worth making at all.