European Commission

Innovation &
Cultural Heritage

20 March 2018,
Royal Museum of Arts and History,
Brussels

Conference Report

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1. General context

Culture and cultural heritage are given high priority as part of the current European policies. Year 2018 marks the first European Year dedicated to cultural heritage. The aim of the European Year of Cultural Heritage is to encourage Europeans to discover and engage with cultural heritage, and to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space. European cultural heritage has potential to construct elements of a positive European identity, when acknowledging its composite nature, its inner differences and the related local/regional/national values. A recent Eurobarometer survey shows that more than eight in ten European citizens think cultural heritage is important to them personally and eight in ten think cultural heritage is important for the European Union.

In connection with the European Year of Cultural Heritage, the European Commission Directorate General for Research and Innovation, in close cooperation with Directorates General for Education and Culture and for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, organized a high-level Horizon 2020 conference "Innovation and Cultural Heritage" in Brussels, 20 March 2018. Combining innovation with heritage in the title of the conference points to the fact that cultural heritage has an inspiring and creative role in present European societies and communities. Research and innovation are needed to better protect cultural heritage from natural or man-made destruction. As outlined by Director Jean-David Malo (European Commission, Directorate General for Research an Innovation) in his opening speech to the conference, innovation in the context of cultural heritage has manifold meanings. It means technological, social, policy, entrepreneurial, economic or methodological innovation.

The conference brought together around 300 European politicians, curators, scholars and entrepreneurs to discuss policy developments, best practices and future challenges in the field of cultural heritage. The one-day programme consisted of two high-level panel discussions including Commissioner Carlos Moedas in charge of Research, Science and Innovation and Commissioner Tibor Navracsics in charge of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, as well as a closing address by Commissioner Mariya Gabriel in charge of Digital Economy and Society, which all focused on the future of European policies in cultural heritage and cultural heritage research. Professor Gábor Sonkoly held a keynote speech, in which he presented the conclusions of a Policy Review "Innovation in Cultural Heritage Research – For an integrated European Research Policy" (https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1dd62bd1-2216-11e8-ac73-01aa75ed71a1, written by Gábor Sonkoly and Tanja Vahtikari) launched at the event. In addition, the conference programme included three scientific sessions ("Cultural Heritage beyond Borders", "New Partnerships for Cultural Heritage" and "Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age"), which demonstrated the great variety, methodological richness and multi-disciplinary nature of the ongoing EC-funded heritage research.

2. European cultural heritage research post 2020

2.1. Heritage and innovation

Commissioners Moedas, Navracsics and Gabriel all highlighted the role of cultural heritage – the achievements of our predecessors – as a source of innovation, energy and inspiration for future European projects. Commissioner Moedas located innovation in cultural heritage in the intersections between old and new, between physical and digital, and between disciplines. In his vision for post 2020, Europe needs to keep the leadership in cultural heritage research and innovation, but the vision also needs to go beyond that point. It should be equally about finding creative uses of the past to change the future. Europe also needs economic innovation in the area of cultural heritage. Commissioner Gabriel stated that cultural heritage can play "a catalytic role" in job creation and economic growth, as well as in sustainable development and in fostering social cohesion.

There was a wide consensus among the panelists that social sciences and humanities should be a crucial component in the future innovation processes. Commissioner Navracsics pointed to the importance of education combined with innovation. Christian Ehler, member of the European Parliament called for "breaking up the silos", e.g. how to get cultural heritage into a broader conversation with creative industries. Cultural heritage has the ability to set societal phenomena in broader contexts. At the same time, as pointed out by Professor Didier Viviers, it is important to invest in the basic research about cultural heritage.

"Cultural heritage is a limitless source of innovation where traditions meet with cutting-edge technologies," stated Commissioner Moedas. Some of these cutting-edge technologies were presented at the conference, e.g. the use of nanotechnology in gels to restore paintings or developing a high-resolution 3D model for the optimal restoration of the Holy Aedicule in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Israel. The impact of heritage, as reminded by Professor Pier Luigi Sacco, is also about behavioral change, cognitive restructuring and emotional response.

Commissioners Navracsics and Moedas with Paul Dujardin, CEO and artistic director of Bozar in the 1st Round-table discussion: European Policies for Cultural Heritage

2.2. Holistic cultural heritage research and its funding

The Policy Review "Innovation in Cultural Heritage – For an integrated European Research Policy" concludes that the future European research on cultural heritage needs a holistic and critical research agenda and an inclusive interdisciplinary approach. In reference to the next framework programme of research and innovation, Commissioner Moedas pointed out that it is important that cultural heritage, humanities and social sciences are embedded in every instrument of it. According to Professor Gábor Sonkoly, due to their institutional and thematic fragmentation the previous and on-going European research framework programmes have not been able to exploit the full potential of cultural heritage research. A more integrated approach is needed, and cultural heritage needs to be adequately placed in the post 2020 European research agenda with a clear focus and a scale which can bring about change. Also Mircea Diaconu, member of the European Parliament and the EP rapporteur on the European Year of Cultural Heritage stated that Horizon 2020 was too fragmented, and that the next programme should mention cultural heritage in the title of one of its thematic clusters. Europe is built on border-crossing cultural networks – a concrete initiative on part of Professor Gábor Sonkoly was the creation of a European network of critical cultural heritage studies' chairs, which could advance critical and co-creative methodologies to cultural heritage, as well as interdisciplinary approaches. The founding of critical cultural heritage studies' chairs would need appropriate funding.

Overall, there was a wide consensus concerning the urgency to increase the budget for cultural heritage research for the next framework programme of research and innovation both as a separate thematic area and on a wider scale. Commissioner Gabriel stated that forwarding EC investment in cultural heritage research within the framework of FP9 "is an absolute necessity if we want to preserve our traditional world-leading role in cultural heritage related activities like conservation, traditional crafts, cultural and creative industries and cultural tourism".

Mr Nica (CoR), MEP Diaconu, Mr Jahier (EESC), Mr D'Haussonville (general director of the Chambord estate) with MEP Ehler in the 2nd Round-table discussion: The Future of European Cultural Heritage

2.3. Collaborative European cultural heritage

The collaborative approach to cultural heritage, was a recurrent theme at the conference, as it is in the scholarly literature. Cultural heritage innovations can also be found in new partnerships for cultural heritage: e.g. between SSH and science or between heritage professionals and local communities. With regard the former, Commissioner Moedas stressed the importance of a bottom up approach. Instead of imposing co-operation from above on researchers from different disciplines, the idea of mission driven research could encourage bottom up joining forces around a common problem related to cultural heritage.

According to Commissioner Navracsics it is ultimately up to the local communities and artists to harness the energy of cultural heritage, as the ultimate goal of the European Year is to make local communities revitalize themselves through cultural heritage. The local level can face problems to achieve this goal, because of bureaucracy, lack of financing, citizens' participation, quality of services, or sustainability of measures, as Alin-Adrian Nica, 1st Vice-Chair of the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) of the Committee of the Regions noted. There can happen, however, also relatively quick positive changes in the local population's appreciation of cultural heritage, as shown by Andrijana Filinaite, Chief specialist of cultural heritage at Kaunas Municipality in reference to the city's modern heritage. By introducing the case of Aarhus, the European Cultural Capital of 2017, which focused on less-well-known aspects of Danish culture and regional co-operation, Rebecca Matthews (Chief Executive Officer Aarhus 2017 Foundation and European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017) made an impressive case for collaborative and embodied cultural heritage, and showed how cultural heritage innovation can be built from below.

Several speakers raised the alarming issue of the growth of populist-nationalist narratives in Europe. Christian Ehler, member of the European Parliament, pointed to the fact that the totalitarian systems want to claim an ownership of heritage in order to manipulate how the present is set into historical proportions. Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group of the Committee of Economic and Social Committee saw that proper investment in cultural heritage can act as an effective counter-balancing force to populist-nationalist narratives, and pointed to the importance of humanistic approach and research on cultural diversity in the future.

Ms Filinaite, Chief specialist of cultural heritage at Kaunas Municipality speaks in the session: New Partnerships for Cultural Heritage

2.4. Digitalization of European cultural heritage

As with any aspect of digital media, the digitalization in the field of cultural heritage is not univocally positive or negative. One of the key questions presented at the conference was how to best use the opportunities provided by digitalization in the valorization of cultural heritage. Several presentations, based on ongoing Horizon 2020 funded projects, showed the manifold advances of digitalization for conservation, presentation and consumption of heritage. One such project is GIFT, which develops mobile applications to enhance citizens' engagement with physical heritage in museums. For example, with one app visitors will be able to create their own "playlists" to museum exhibitions, which they can then share with their friends. The aim of GIFT is to make people relate to both the material and the digital environment in a hybrid way (https://gift.itu.dk/about/). Overall, as pointed out by Professor Sofia Pescarin, the perception of Museum is changing – the contemporary audience expects both stability and flexibility from museums, which should have "attractivity without losing credibility". Technology and exhibition design can help in the creation of new spaces, not only for consumption of heritage but also for its critical reflection. Key to digital forms of active engagement with heritage, as with any form of heritage, is storytelling, a point highlighted by Professor Pier Luigi Sacco.

The idea of hybrid virtual museum experience combined with storytelling offers one promising response to the often expressed concerns that digitalization may cause differentiation, loss of sense of community and overt individualization. Digitalization can be an effective instrument of democratisation of cultural heritage as it opens new forms of access, e.g. by allowing entrance to previously closed heritage places or museum collections, or by allowing memberships in heritage communities without physical presence in a locality. Virtual reality is an increasingly important part of museum experience and accessibility, but it needs resources for curation. In addition, more research is needed concerning the use of digital heritage by the different social, cultural and professional groups, which takes into consideration the social effects of virtual realities and the visibility of actorship in the processes related to cultural heritage practices (Innovation in Cultural Heritage Research – For an integrated European Research Policy). On this matter Commissioner Moedas pointed out that the more we are getting to the digital / artificial intelligence future, the more important humanities will be. Professor Antonia Moropoulou underlined the importance to cultural heritage of culture-driven digitalization vs. technology-driven digitalization.

Museums hold vast collections and only a fraction of them are on display. Collection mobility continues to be an important element of a shared European heritage. A Europe-level example of sharing collections is the recently founded House of European History, as shown by Taja Vovk van Gaal, Creative Director of the House of European History. Developing an online exhibition seems crucial in the museum's effort to "come out of Brussels". Christian Ehler, member of the European Parliament pointed to the fact that digitalization in itself is transnational, and this could be Europe's pronounced role in cultural heritage. The portal Europeana.eu serves as an excellent example of this. It currently offers access to more than 50 million artworks, artefacts, books, videos and sounds from all across Europe in all official languages of the Member States. Commissioner Gabriel proposed taking Europeana to the next level and she argued that "through digital, we can truly harness the crucial role that cultural heritage plays in fostering social cohesion, promoting a more innovative and creative economy and contributing to a stronger role for Europe's soft power across the globe."

Professors Sacco, Pescarin and Baglioni with Deputy-Director General Bury in the session: Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age

Professor Lykourentzou in the session: Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age

3. Concluding remarks

Cultural heritage is an inspiring, even though sometimes a conflictual resource for the present and the future. Dealing with several different time scales (past-present-future) and overlapping levels of sense of belonging makes it also an inspiring field of study. European research on cultural heritage needs properly scaled funding instruments, real European infrastructures and innovation –on part of both those who finance the research and those who conduct it. Cultural heritage is part of European creative cities and rural landscapes. It has had the leading role in the process of urban regeneration and it continues to be a major transformative force in our cities and regions. It is important that the European initiative to cultural heritage adds something significant and concrete to the national level. And while cultural heritage is very much part of the story of European success, it is also fundamentally a global phenomenon. From a global perspective, investment in cultural heritage can be effective conflict prevention and resolution.

Commissioner Gabriel delivers her keynote at the end of the conference

Professor Yildiz (moderator) and Ms Matthews with professors Moropoulou, Lama and Civantos in the session: Cultural Heritage beyond Borders

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The high-level Horizon 2020 conference – organised by the
European Commission Directorate General for Research
and Innovation, in close cooperation with Directorates
General for Education and Culture and for Communications
Networks, Content and Technology – has showcased the
dialogue between contemporary European society and the
most promising innovations in the field of Cultural Heritage
that European policies and funds have supported.
The conference was part of the programme of the European
Year of Cultural Heritage and has contributed to its legacy
by launching the public discussion about the objectives
of European research and innovation policy for Cultural
Heritage beyond 2020.

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