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**Address by Irina Bokova,  
Director-General of UNESCO  
on the occasion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Europe Lecture on  
“Protecting cultural heritage in times of conflict”**

**The Hague, Kloosterkerk, 13 June, 2016**

H.R.H Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy for Development,

Ms Jet Bussemaker, Minister for Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands

Honourable City Councillor, Ms Ingrid Van Engelshoven,

Excellency Ms Silvia Alejandra Fernández de Gurmendi, President of the *International Criminal Court*,

Dr Sada Mire, Lecturer at University of Leiden,

Ms Sneska Quaadvlieg-Mihailovic, Secretary-General of *Europa Nostra*,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you, and I am deeply honoured by the presence of so many Distinguished Guests – H.R.H The Princess Laurentien, a close friend and a strong partner to UNESCO - Ms Silvia Alejandra Fernández de Gurmendi, President of the *International Criminal Court*, your presence tonight is also a strong symbol of our joint commitment and we had a fruitful exchange this afternoon – Dr Sada Mire, representing also the community of experts and archaeologists...

I thank the Municipality of The Hague, *Europa Nostra* and the authorities of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for this initiative.

I feel especially privileged to speak in this splendid Klosterkerk, which dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which was a starting point of the artistic renaissance that gave birth to such world-known artistic creations as the illuminated manuscript, the *Hours of Margaret of Cleves*.

This church has a fascinating story to tell.

It has been abandoned -- it has been used as a munition store -- it has served as a hospital – it has provided shelter for a cavalry company -- it has been damaged and some suggested it should be torn down.

And yet, it has somehow withstood the trials and tribulations of time... remaining a longstanding companion and symbol for the people of this city, for the people of the Netherlands.

I believe this carries a strong message about the power of culture and heritage to resist, to suffer and rise again... and whenever culture is reborn, people rise with it.

This story reminds me of the marvellous novel by Pulitzer Prize Laureate Donna Tartt, about the famous painting *The Goldfinch* by Carel Fabritius, which is in the Collection of the Mauristhuis Museum, not far from here.

*“People die, sure,” writes Donna Tartt “But it’s so heart-breaking and unnecessary how we lose things. From pure carelessness. Fires, wars. The Parthenon, used as a munitions storehouse. I guess that anything we manage to save from history is a miracle.”*

I see this as the core message of this *Europa Lecture*.

We need to stand together and try to save as much as we can from history -- we need to respond to those who seek to destroy heritage, by sharing even more culture, even more knowledge, respect, and care.

This resonates with UNESCO’s mandate, echoing the values that guide all our action, to protect cultural heritage as a source of belonging and meaning, as a bond for the humanity we all share.

Conflicts are changing shape today -- culture and identities have moved to the frontline of new wars.

We see the systematic violations of human rights, the persecution of people on cultural and religious grounds.

In Mosul, Christian houses have been marked and their inhabitants forced to flee.

We see the intentional destruction of the past, with cultural landmarks bulldozed in Palmyra, in Mosul, in Bosra, in Aleppo...

We see archaeological sites looted on industrial scale, in Dura Europos, in Apamea -- fuelling illicit trafficking, financing terrorism.

Fundamentally, I would say, we are seeing a new global struggle for the hearts and minds... especially *young* hearts and minds.

This features coordinated attacks against the symbols and institutions of creativity and free thinking – schools are destroyed, universities are bombed, journalists are beheaded...

These attacks on people, on heritage and on minds, are part of the same global strategy which I have called “cultural cleansing”.

Responding to this challenge calls for new strategies to build peace and fight back, because I am convinced we can.

This must start by being clear about the threat we face.

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage is a *war crime*, which is used as a *tactic of war*, to disseminate fear and hatred.

In Syria, all six World Heritage sites have been damaged by fighting -- 60 percent of the Old City of Aleppo has been destroyed.

On 25 April, UNESCO sent a rapid assessment mission to Palmyra, confirming the heavy damages to the Museum and the archaeological site – the temples of Bel, Baal-Shamin and the Arch of Triumph destroyed.

In Libya, at least eight religious sites have been damaged or destroyed.

In Yemen, the fabled Marib Dam and the Old Cities of Sana'a and Sada'a have been severely damaged by bombing.

There are many responsible for this cultural and human tragedy, and UNESCO condemns all destruction, no matter the instigator.

The main victim is always the people.

Violent extremists target culture, because they know it weakens the social fabric, it destroys capacities for resistance.

I believe this is the mark of a genocidal project -- and recent attacks around the world show this violence knows no borders.

In January, we confirmed the destruction of the Monastery of Deir Mar Elia in Mosul, the oldest Christian monastery in Iraq.

Following this destruction, Father Paul Thabit Habib from Erbil said:

*We see this as an attempt to expel us from Iraq.*

Iraq's Christian population has dropped from 1.3 million in 2000 to 300,000 today.

But the attacks target not only Christians -- they persecute with the same means Muslims, Yezidis, Shabaks, Turkmens.

This should remind us all, the destruction of heritage is inseparable from the persecution of people.

This is why we consider the protection of cultural heritage today as far more than a cultural issue.

This has become a humanitarian imperative, and a security issue.

It is also a development and recovery issue over the long-term.

I saw this for myself in Mali.

When I first visited Timbuktu, with French President François Hollande, it was just ten days after violent extremists had been pushed back -- I remember the suffering of local communities when they saw their mausoleums destroyed... some had been there for more than eleven centuries.

I promised we would rebuild them and we did.

Last July, I went to Timbuktu to launch the restitution of the 14 mausoleums, and I saw how heritage can lift people and communities, mobilize and unite them.

Across the globe, we see rising mobilization, linking the humanitarian, the cultural and the security dimensions of peacebuilding.

We are connecting the dots between peace operations, humanitarian emergency responses, and other actions undertaken for heritage.

This is the spirit of the agreement I signed earlier this year with the *International Committee for the Red Cross*, to integrate culture into humanitarian operations.

This is the goal of the UNESCO agreement with Italy, to establish a *Task Force on United4heritage*, bringing together military and culture experts.

We have created a broad coalition, with ICOMOS, ICCROM, the *World Customs Organization*, the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*... to support States and strengthen legislation, introduce new laws, bolster institutions and capacity.

Last year's landmark Resolution 2199 of the United Nations Security Council on the financing of terrorism, banning the trade of cultural goods from Syria, calls on UNESCO to lead this fight.

We are bolstering coordination between States, among law enforcement agencies, museums, auction houses.

Let me say single out here cooperation with the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The Netherlands is a longstanding champion for UNESCO – a vital partner in its action to protect cultural heritage, especially during armed conflict.

It was here, at The Hague, that the *1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* and its two Protocols were adopted.

Right after the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2199, the Netherlands was one of the first countries to share its counter measures with UNESCO – including an education programme for Customs and Police throughout the country.

Let me also recall the vital support the Netherlands has given to the implementation of the 1970 UNESCO Convention against illicit trafficking of cultural property.

All this is essential to send a clear message that it is immoral, it is unethical, it is simply not right... to trade in looted objects.

This was the message I shared when I met the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, and the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker -- because we need to join all the dots, as in the example of the recent Act adopted by the United States Congress, on strengthening border controls and imports of cultural goods.

The European Commission has launched a study on the feasibility of harmonizing European Legislation on imports, and I believe this is also something you are following closely at the *Europa Institute*.

We sent the same message last week, in Brussels, during the *High Level Conference on the Protection of Heritage as a Force for Resilience and Peacebuilding*.

The European Commission has just issued its New Strategy on Cultural Diplomacy, highlighting a strong vision that culture is at the heart and centre of diplomacy today.

In this context, I wish to praise the *Heritage Act* adopted by the Netherlands this year as an example to be followed by other UNESCO Member States.

This leadership has never been so important.

Today, in Iraq and Syria, ordinary citizens and museum professionals are risking their lives to protect their culture.

Their work must be recognised and supported.

We are focusing on building capacity.

We are helping to train armed forces.

We share precise coordinates for the protection of Heritage Sites, to prevent them from being targeted under the provisions of the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property during Conflict*.

We published a *Heritage Passport* for French troops and other peacekeepers in Mali – this provided a very precise map of the heritage that was there – for every soldier and official to carry in their pocket.

More and more troops are trained in the protection of heritage.

This is the case with the French Armed Forces, for Instance.

We can do more to integrate the protection of heritage into the mandate of peacekeepers – this was done with Mali for the first time, and must be taken further.

The question of impunity is also essential, and this is an issue we are very serious about.

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage is a war crime, according to the Rome Statute of the *International Criminal Court* and it must be punished as such.

I am deeply honoured by the presence tonight of Excellency Ms Silvia Fernandez de Gurmandi, President of the *International Criminal Court*, which is a strong symbol of our cooperation.

We started working, after the destruction of the mausoleums in Mali, with the Chief Prosecutor of the *International Criminal Court*, Ms Fatou Bensouda, and the authorities of Mali and Niger.

The first suspect of such war crimes in Timbuktu, Mali, has been transferred to the *International Criminal Court*, and the trial should take place during the summer, in August.

This sends a resounding message against impunity, including today in Syria and Iraq.

I speak here about the rule of law, about training and education, about protecting heritage as a beacon of human values... because I am convinced 'hard power' is not enough to prevent violent extremism.

We must engage young people -- we must teach about the values of heritage, explain why it is important – we need to win this battle of ideas also.

This is the spirit of the campaign #unite4heritage I launched at the University of Bagdad last year.

When a World Heritage site is destroyed anywhere in the world, we all suffer, we are all diminished, even if such sites belong to another religion, to another period, to another culture.

This recognition helps us realize we all belong to the same family -- and it is precisely this that extremists seek to destroy, because they are well aware of the power of culture to bring people together.

I remember the Foreign Minister of Jordan telling me last year something his son had told him in the face of cultural cleansing:



*“You know, Dad, I think extremists destroy heritage because heritage delegitimizes them, because they are afraid of history.”*

I think this is true. Violent extremists are afraid of history, because of the lessons it carries.

This is why we have to preserve it.

And I believe we can.

We are appalled by the loss of cultural heritage, but our efforts are bearing fruit.

‘Blood antiquities’ have been seized all across the globe, smugglers have been arrested, statues have been returned, to Iraq, to Libya, to Egypt, to Syria.

UNESCO celebrated last year the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inscription of the rebuilt old bridge of Mostar on the World Heritage List, destroyed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Only three years after they were levelled, the Mausoleums of Timbuktu have risen again, as a symbol of the power of culture.

Earlier this month, in Berlin, I opened the Expert meeting on the safeguarding of Syria’s heritage, with the Minister of State to the Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, with more than 230 Syrian and international experts from all sides joining forces to define priorities in emergency safeguarding measures.

Of course, every situation is different, and what applies here may not be suitable elsewhere.

But everywhere heritage has its chance. Peace has its chance.

Here, in this KlosterKlerk, we choose to believe in the power of culture to build peace, we choose to unite for heritage.

And I am deeply grateful for this. Thank you.