

## **Speech by Andreas C. Dracopoulos, SNF co-President, at WMF Hadrian Gala**

Dear guests,

It is a great honor to join all of you here tonight and to accept, on behalf of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and all of my colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic, the prestigious 2016 Hadrian Award. I want to thank the World Monuments Fund, and in particular its President and Chief Executive Officer, Joshua David, as well as the Board of Directors for honoring us this evening.

I did some research to refresh my history regarding Hadrian himself and I just wanted to share with you a couple of highlights, which seem relevant this evening as we accept his namesake award. Hadrian is regarded as one of the five good Roman emperors and is known for his substantial building projects throughout the Roman Empire. Perhaps his most famous one was the Hadrian or Roman Wall in the northern border of Britannia. I guess thankfully the Wall, a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site, although some parts of it still standing, cannot be used in the current Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU. Among his most monumental projects was the rebuilding of the Pantheon in Rome and as an avid admirer of Greece, having also become an eponymous archon in Athens and an elected Athenian citizen wanted to make Athens the cultural capital of the Empire; the Arch of Hadrian honors Hadrian as the 'new' founder of the city and can be enjoyed today when you next visit Athens.

Our Foundation is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Since our inception in 1996, as a result of the extraordinary generosity of our late founder and my great uncle, Stavros Niarchos, we have provided support in 111 countries in the areas of Arts and Culture, Education, Health and Sports, and Social Welfare. As part of this global grant making activity we have engaged in a large number of preservation of cultural heritage projects. This, perhaps, may not come as a surprise to anyone, since Greece, in particular, where we have dedicated a significant percentage of our grant-making efforts and the Mediterranean basin, in general, are home to a vast number of archaeological and cultural heritage sites.

However, our view of cultural and civilizational heritage is not limited to archaeological sites. It rather encompasses a large spectrum of all the different manifestations of intellectual activities that collectively constitute what we define as culture or civilization, whether religious, artistic, scientific etc. This broader approach has guided us towards supporting a large variety of projects worldwide that include, among other things, the preservation of religious sanctuaries, of manuscripts, both ancient and medieval, and of historical archives as well as the protection and restoration of newer landmark buildings, such as the 100-year old Parkway Theater in Baltimore.

As climate change continues to greatly impact the environment in an accelerating and alarming fashion, ecosystems are increasingly viewed as heritage sites, and as important and critical components of people's cultural and civilizational identity. Although one may hesitate to consider the protection and restoration of ecosystems as preservation in the traditional sense of the word, we are proud of the work the Foundation has supported, especially in Greece, in the field of environmental preservation. It has rapidly become evident that preserving and restoring the environment has an important role to play in helping ensure that some of the most critical components of our human experience are maintained and protected for the benefit of future generations.

As we have gathered here to celebrate the extraordinary work of the World Monuments Fund around the world over a period of half a century, we also have to be aware of the role and critical presence of new cutting edge and ever innovative and evolving technologies in heritage preservation efforts. Sophisticated virtual reality technology allows us to experience archaeological sites and heritage buildings in an incomparable detail and depth. Technology also offers us the ability to fully and accurately

reconstruct whole sites. What are the future implications of such technological developments? As financial resources for heritage preservation dwindle, and as mass tourism, conflict and climate change continue to heavily impact heritage sites around the world and to demand additional financial resources for preservation and conservation, we cannot ignore the important issue of whether or not we should continue to invest significant resources in preserving, and restoring actual sites. What is their real value in our technology-driven society, when the ways we read and we experience art constantly changes, challenging traditional approaches?

All of us in this room tonight, we were aware and outraged by the systematic and methodical attack and destruction of the important heritage site of Palmyra in Syria. We had the same reaction of outrage and disbelief concerning the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan at the turn of the twenty first century. Religious fanaticism and fundamentalism motivated to a large extent these attacks. But there was also something else at play here, equally important: a sophisticated understanding of the importance of memory, of continuity, of heritage, and of history in creating and maintaining an identity that distinguishes us as humans and allows to establish a connection among generations, and of the critical role that artifacts and physical manifestations of culture play in this process. The more technology and virtual reality enter our world, the more we crave artifacts as a unique manifestation and reminder of our humanity and the importance of generations. The destruction of such sites is an attempt to erase memory to undermine what defines us as human beings, and in doing so it has instigated a reaction and an outrage that emphasized more than ever the importance of preserving our heritage and shared past, the importance of artifacts and the need to continue supporting, more than ever before, since the challenges are greater, the work of the World Monuments Fund. A step in the right direction was the most recent, and long overdue, ruling of the world's highest criminal court, the International Criminal Court in The Hague, that the destruction of antiquities is a war crime.

Last but not least, as you may have noticed in tonight's program the Foundation's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of philanthropic work coincides with the completion of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Athens, which is our largest single grant to date. The project has been designed by Renzo Piano and includes the new facilities for the National Library of Greece, and the Greek National Opera, situated within the Stavros Niarchos Park. We are in the process of handing over the project to the Greek State, which will assume its full ownership and operation. One may wonder how does a state-of-the-art, contemporary project of this magnitude that looks straight into the future relate to the issue of preservation of heritage. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center is and represents many different things. But it is also an attempt, both architecturally and programmatically, to preserve and reintroduce the critical concept of the *agora* as an open, accessible public space for citizens to meet, to form communities, to discuss and to debate; in other words, empower individuals to embrace the notion of community, a notion much needed today.

Renzo Piano's design of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, combined with the extensive free public programming that is attracting thousands of people to the site every day, reflect a systematic effort to preserve a critical, due to the current fragmented state of our societies, aspect of our cultural heritage, that of the public space.

Once again, thank you for the honor tonight.