

Speech by Commissioner Tibor Navracsics at the Digital Day 2019 on making cultural heritage accessible to all

Dear Ministers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to speak to you today. Let me first congratulate the Romanian Presidency and my colleague, Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, for having organised this Digital Day – and especially for having built a consensus around the Declaration on advancing the digitisation of cultural heritage.

I fully support this declaration. It is an important element of the legacy of the European Year of Cultural Heritage that we celebrated in 2018. We need to find ways to make our cultural heritage accessible to all. Digital means have an important role to play in this. Everyone should have the opportunity to discover how they belong to the complex tapestry that is Europe, no matter their socio-economic background.

To make this reality, we are working closely across the European Commission's services, with Member States and stakeholders. We also work closely with Europeana, our digital partner. I am pleased to see how it has been helping us make heritage resources more accessible, engaging citizens with digitised heritage and promoting the use and re-use of digital content for educational purposes. The Europeana migration campaign – helping people to re-discover their roots and make them aware of the value of diversity – is just one example.

Last year, I launched the online platform 'Story maps', developed by the Commission's Joint Research Centre, our in-house science and knowledge service. These free, interactive maps put cultural heritage at users' fingertips, providing them with easily accessible information about EU initiatives in this field. They have already attracted almost 17,000 users. Also last year, the Joint Research Centre released a free and open-source web application entitled 'Cultural gems'. It enables residents and tourists to share and discover hidden cultural treasures in cities and towns across Europe.

These are important steps. But there is more to do. Only 10% of our cultural heritage is currently estimated to have been digitised, and even less is available online.

The EU, Member States, research communities and other stakeholders have to commit and work together to change this. Preserving cultural heritage and opening it up to all parts of society is vital if we are to create a common

sense of belonging – and a European community. This means strengthening Europeana, but also developing complementary initiatives – such as the Cultural Heritage Cloud, proposed in the new Horizon Europe programme. It also means equipping people with the competences needed to use digital content in a confident and creative way. The Digital Education Action Plan that I presented last year goes in this direction, setting out initiatives designed to boost digital skills. These include efforts to get more schools involved in EU Code Week, so that all students from a young age can become creators rather than users of digital technologies, or for example making primary and secondary school teachers more aware of cybersecurity risks.

Innovative technologies, such as virtual or augmented reality, can enhance how people experience cultural heritage. There is clearly great potential here – for museums, for instance. We know well that new and exciting digital technologies can offer a unique, creative and interactive experience and attract wider audiences. It is therefore important to support the development of specialised skills, and to help museum-related professions adapt to the digital world.

At the same time, digital tools such as 3D scanning play a major role in preserving and restoring physical heritage assets. We want to marshal digital technologies to respond to threats to cultural heritage, such as natural disasters, climate change, terrorism or vandalism. For instance, we should help make sure that structural aspects of built heritage are documented through the use of IT tools, including by digitising archival records and using on-site laser scanning. This will boost our capacity to manage disasters affecting cultural heritage.

Our Horizon 2020 programme also makes a significant contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage through cutting-edge research, the development of advanced materials for conservation and the use of advanced digital technologies, including 3D technologies.

But digitisation still focuses mainly on capturing the visual appearance of objects, collections or sites. With heritage being both tangible and intangible, digitally born and digitised, the challenge for the future is to develop more dynamic and personalised digital resources. That is why the European Commission will continue funding research and innovation projects on advanced digitisation and curation of digital assets. Our aim is to support the development of new technologies and methods that will help present cultural heritage in a comprehensive and attractive way. A new Horizon 2020 call for proposals, with an expected budget of EUR 20 million, will be launched by the end of 2019.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Cultural heritage is our bridge to the past – and into the future. And this is not only because we want to connect generations and communities, creating a shared sense of belonging – it is also because heritage often holds solutions to the societal challenges facing us.

To help ensure that we better harness this potential, I have launched a

series of platforms, spaces for discussion and learning involving national governments, key global institutions, experts and young global leaders. The first meeting, focusing on social innovation, in Dublin, took place just last week. Next, we will look at digital heritage, in Prague, in October 2019. I invite you all to join the discussion – this will be the perfect opportunity to take forward the commitments expressed in the Declaration of Cooperation.

Because heritage is so fundamental to our societies and our future, I presented the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage last December. This set of initiatives will ensure that cultural heritage stays high on the political agenda, ensuring a lasting impact of the European Year of Cultural Heritage. It will guide our work at EU level in promoting and safeguarding cultural heritage across many areas, including the digitisation of cultural heritage.

The framework looks at the tangible, intangible and digital dimensions of cultural heritage as inseparable and interconnected. Cultural heritage is the thread that connects us to each other, to our elders and to our children. And this, ladies and gentlemen, is how we find meaning. To digitise our heritage is to provide longevity and depth to this meaning, allowing more people to find they belong to larger and larger communities.

Thank you.