



**Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier  
at the European Heritage Awards Ceremony  
in Berlin on 22 June 2018**

European cultural heritage – to those who consider themselves progressive, this term may sound terribly boring and backward-looking. It conjures up images of old stones, stuffy museums and interminable guided tours given by staff who reel off long lists of dates and royal lineages.

However – as I am certain this event will clearly demonstrate – cultural heritage is in fact a crucial subject if we are to ensure the future is good to Europe and worth living for all Europeans.

This has been made painfully obvious in the past few months: Europe urgently needs to regain its focus. It needs to agree on what it wants and what it can do, it has to make certain of its own strengths and capabilities, it has to acquire new self-confidence, it has to strengthen its cohesion, it has to take its political future in its own hands.

If, to this end, we want to rediscover the values for which Europe and the community of Europeans stands, Europe's cultural heritage is a key point of reference, a wellspring of inspiration and strength for the future.

In Europe, crises have repeatedly provided the impetus for renewal. Time and again people have been driven to hone their abilities and develop new instruments. Often, new forms of political organisation and social coexistence have emerged, frequently inspired by older sources, by Judaeo-Christian traditions, ancient philosophy and Roman law, sources which have constantly been infused with new life. Time and again, our common heritage has served as inspiration and encouragement, yardstick and lodestar.

This can perhaps be most clearly seen in art and architecture. The Romanesque masterpieces along the Rhine and in Burgundy would have been inconceivable without the Roman structures that preceded them. The spread of Gothic art from Paris to Rostock, the height of

modernity in the twelfth century, would in turn have been inconceivable without the Romanesque works that went before. And the Baroque style which flourished in Europe from Portugal to Lithuania again borrowed elements from antiquity – and in Spain also from the Muslim heritage. And yet, time and again, that which is created constitutes something totally new. Similar developments can be traced in European music, in literature and in the visual arts.

Europe is a continent of constant renewal, not although but because it is also a continent of remembrance, of historical awareness. Each time it is people who are the heart of our reflections: What is the human being? What should human beings be doing in this world? What can people believe, what can they know, what can they hope for? How should people live together, how can they coexist? Europe, and European culture, has always sought to make humans the measure of all its endeavours. It is a quest that will never end.

But the opposite – hubris or an absence of benchmarks – can lead to the most terrible errors and atrocious crimes. We know that the Europe of temples and cathedrals is also the Europe of witch hunts and concentration camps. The latter is a very German contribution to European history. European history always provides solace and serves as a grim reminder, it is both a warning and encouragement.

There are of course a number of quotes from Goethe which form part of Germany's cultural heritage, even when taken out of context. Even if we think we know them all too well, they are still capable of putting things in a new light, even if, like this one, they have been pressed into service by witty lawyers giving workshops on inheritance matters, with no concern for their real meaning. These famous words come from Faust, Part I:

“What you inherit from your father  
must first be earned before it's yours.”

If we apply this quote to cultural heritage, it has much to say about cultural education and policy.

“Earn it.” In other words, understand the value of the things you have, things you were first granted through no merit of your own. Try to imagine how they came about, the thoughts and ideas that led to what you see today. And try to understand the story that is being told – the colourful story, full of twists, by turns cruel and tragic, but equally often proud and noble, a story told in Europe by every church and every town hall, by each palace and landscaped park, by the monasteries, the fortresses, the bridges and market squares, the towers, the railway stations and the grand hotels.

“Earn it,” reminds us our inheritance is not a gift. These words exhort us to learn about it, to prove ourselves ready for it. They mean we should become familiar with all those things that have had a

profound influence on our old and yet still young continent. If we wish history to serve as a useful guide for the future, we must first conserve our heritage. We must take systematic steps to preserve our cultural heritage. There is nothing backward-looking about that, either. The preservation of our cultural heritage is in fact a creative step that enriches our understanding of ourselves and strengthens our ability to meet the challenges of the future.

Cultural heritage may appear boring at first glance, but look closer, and you realise it is not. It is a source of fascinating stories, not just about the past, but also about us, today. And it makes you curious to know how things will go on from here. It places us under an obligation to pass on a vibrant legacy, a good Europe, to our children and our children's children.