

## **Critical Role of Cultural Heritage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges and Opportunities**

### **Global Consortium for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage**

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The sustainability of cultural heritage is one of the grand challenges of the contemporary world. The goal of the consortium is to enable the global university, education, and research community to make a transformative contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage, through broad educational programs, major collaborative research initiatives, and effective advocacy and engagement.

Cultural heritage is the essential record of human existence and identity. It is the thread of continuity for which people search when the rhythm of everyday life has been disrupted. Cultural heritage has long been recognized by scholars in constructing and reconstructing political, social, aesthetic, environmental, technological, and religious history. It is often connected to natural heritage. It is preserved in museums and collections, libraries and archives, communities of practice, places of worship and civic participation, architectural and archaeological sites, monuments, and entire cities and landscapes. It is woven into the fabric of our contemporary communities and day-to-day lives, manifested in language, performance, traditions, and other non-material expressions of our existence.

Within cultural heritage circles, different individuals and organizations prefer various terms to explain the work necessary to protect and extend the existence of heritage. "Preservation," "safeguarding," and "sustainability" are perhaps the most common. While the Consortium consistently uses the term "preservation," we recognize the legitimate and important distinctions between these terms and the ideas they imply.

As cultural heritage professions working in diverse communities of practice, **we attest to the critical role of cultural heritage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:**

- **Cultural heritage is a sum of human creativity and expression.** Across time and space, people have created artefacts and performances during their lives. Famous artists and architects have created grand works, but cultural heritage does not emerge solely from professional artists. Nor does it live only in galleries and museums, and other formally recognized cultural institutions. Rather, cultural expression lives within and around us all.
- **Cultural heritage captures the spirit of the time.** Intangible cultural heritage is a uniquely powerful tool for capturing this zeitgeist, it expresses human aspirations, it empowers civic expression, and it speaks to a hopeful future. Individuals use intangible cultural forms to comment on what is happening around them.

- **Cultural heritage embodies the identity of communities.** It makes visible histories, belief systems, values, traditions, and lifestyles. It speaks as much of the future as it does of the past, and therefore it can unite people or separate them. Hidden histories, dark heritage, and sites of conscience complicate these identities. Cultural heritage is frequently contested, reflecting larger social tensions.
- **Cultural heritage produces economic benefits for communities.** The creative economy and tourism create economic opportunities. Whether caring for a heritage site, developing tourist experiences, or marketing products with an explicit link to heritage, this sector has tremendous potential for innovation.
- **Cultural heritage inspires creatives of different kinds.** Artists and performers in search of new creative forms of all kinds have sought inspiration from cultural heritage. Whether incorporating ancient motifs in a new building design, writing a new poem about a heritage site, or riffing off a fairy tale to plot a new novel, cultural heritage fuels creativity.
- **Cultural heritage supports the physical well-being of communities.** Participating in community arts and speaking heritage languages provide documented health benefits and a range of social benefits.
- **Cultural heritage fuels discovery.** Preservation and conservation require new techniques and technologies, and they demand human skill. It inspires new analytical insights and critical reflections, and the application of science to innovation that lead to novel interpretations and uses, products and services.
- **Culture heritage is a human right connected to free expression and the participation in cultural life of their communities.** Cultural heritage provides critical information about the past. Communities preserve cultural heritage to remind themselves of their origins, their histories, their identities in the present, as a resource in the present and their way forward into the future.

Each of these critical realizations entails **challenges and opportunities** for the future of cultural heritage:

- **Emergency preparedness.** Natural disasters--Earthquakes, landslides, flooding and fire—pose an imminent danger to all material heritage and the intangible heritage that surrounds them as communities are dispersed and re-configured. Negligence in this area has proven particularly destructive.
- **Climate change.** As the environment continues to evolve, natural challenges will multiply and appear in new locations. Climate change will expose collections, sites, and intangible heritage to new threats.
- **Human destruction.** War, cultural cleansing, theft, and illicit traffic in heritage artifacts threaten cultural heritage, often in dire circumstances.
- **Mass migration.** The heritage of migrants is destroyed, re-imagined and transformed as new communities are shaped by new diaspora encounters and experiences in refugee camps that acquire an air of permanence as refugee cities.

- **Professional training and standing for cultural heritage fields.** Establishing an agreed-upon curriculum for conservators, cultural heritage managers, and heritage studies students has proven challenging, as has providing professional accreditation for these professionals. The field is multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and this fact further complicates our efforts.
- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion of cultural heritage professions.** Historical inequities have resulted in a lack of equality, diversity, and inclusion in heritage fields, and special efforts must be made to transform this situation.
- **Advocacy.** Most cultural heritage organizations operate without steady and adequate funding to ensure sustainability. Legal regimes are uneven and often limited in scope, protecting only some cultural heritage. The public generally appreciates the treasures of heritage, but not its less dramatic elements. Nor does the public understand the sustained work necessary to preserve cultural heritage.
- **Discovery and critical inquiry.** Preservation and conservation and their underpinning science result in the development of new methods, and new kinds of analogue and digital data to provide new insights to support this work. At the same time, engaging diverse non-Western heritage traditions will internationalize our practices as will developing a broader, more embracing network of professionals and organizations dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage.
- **Communities.** Dialog and debate about cultural heritage management must increase between researchers, practitioners, and community members.
- **Equity.** Difficult questions can arise around who decides what cultural heritage is preserved, by whom and for whom. How are traditional practices regulated? Where should artifacts reside? How should heritage sites be connected to the communities around them? And most importantly, who is making these decisions?
- **The Digital Age.** From born digital collections to the digital data revolution, cultural heritage will be transformed and is transforming our very ideas of what is heritage, how we preserve new forms of heritage, who owns it and how it can be ethically shared.

The Consortium meeting will provide an unparalleled opportunity to discuss this common vision and develop a framework for our collaboration going forward.