

Patrimoine collectif des Nations/Patrimoine commun de l'Humanité

At the origins of the debate on the conservation of World Heritage

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Abstract

The climate between the two world wars was a critical moment for the emergence of a debate on issues regarding the conservation of world heritage. In particular, all the innovative ideas that began to take shape in the early 20th century were amplified until they took on an international dimension. A fundamental role in this sense was played by the League of Nations and the whole series of organisations, such as the *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle* or the *Office International des Musées*, which at least partly formed the basis for the establishment of Unesco. The role played by the Office International des Musées, later inherited by Unesco, was decisive in triggering an intense exchange between scholars and technicians belonging to the various member states in the field of museology and cultural heritage conservation. As a result, in these decades initiatives on the restoration and conservation of monuments flourished, and among them above all *La Conférence sur la conservation des monuments* held in Athens in 1931. The political and cultural climate linked to this conference now represents a defining moment in understanding the start of an international debate on issues regarding the emergence of the concept of world heritage and its protection.

Keywords

UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, Restoration, Conference of Athens.

The first two decades of the 20th century were undoubtedly a pivotal time for the debate on issues related to cultural heritage and its protection. This was the period in which the concept of world heritage slowly seemed to take shape and, moving beyond simple national borders and different geographies, it began to take on what could be called an international dimension. The liveliness of this debate, which was not without conflict, and the proliferation of initiatives, albeit often elitist, show us how the instrument of intellectual cooperation played a prominent role at the very beginning of a broad-ranging heritage awareness¹.

The pilot institution of this very broad movement was the League of Nations², which organised seminars, discussions and conferences on various topics³. It did so, first and foremost, based on the instrument of intellectual cooperation. To this end, among a multitude of satellite institutions the League of Nations above all created a few fundamental organisations: the *Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle* (CICI, 1922), the *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle* (IICI, 1925)⁴, the *Organizzazione di Cooperazione Intellettuale* (OIC, 1922) and the *Sottocommissione di Lettere e Arti* (1926).

It is important here to highlight that the IICI was a sort of sub-organisation of the CICI, created three years earlier

in Geneva, and that the institute ceased its activities in 1946, passing on its legacy to Unesco. This transition is well documented in a volume from 1999 by Jean-Jacques Renoliet, with the exemplary title *L'UNESCO oubliée*, which is still a reference for climate study and initiatives concerning issues of heritage and its conservation⁵. These institutions also attempted to use conferences as a tool to enliven debate, which would remain mainly elitist, as already mentioned by the author elsewhere, never reaching the point of guaranteeing a debate that extended to the broadest social categories⁶.

From a certain point of view, the idea of defining universal values, such as the heritage of humanity, architecture or archaeological sites, started with the foundation of the CICI, whose first president was Henri Bergson and whose first members included Marie Curie, Paul Valéry, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Francesco Ruffini, Henri Bergson and Gilbert Murray. Members appointed *ad personam*, who joined and left this commission.

The CICI soon set up national commissions and in 1925 made the French historian Jules Luchaire director of the *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle*⁷, making Paris the real headquarters of an operation that had the ambitious aim of “gagner les intellectuels à la compréhension mutuelle” between the nations and la solution “pacifique des questions internationales”. The undertakings of the CICI quickly had to not only denounce the lack of realism that characterized its actions but also offer the stage to many other initiatives, as *La Conférence d’Athènes sur la conservation des monuments* of 1931 and its subsequent fortune would demonstrate⁸. Until 1946 the *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle* reflected on cultural issues, playing a leading role in international cultural diplomacy and also dividing itself into in specific sub-organizations, including the *Office International des Musées* (hereinafter referred to as OIM).

Immediately after the Second World War, both the IICI and the OIM ceased their activities and Paris lost its role as the headquarters of international relations, passing it on to New York with the creation of the UN, while Unesco would in some way take over the role of the two organizations⁹.

At the inauguration of the IICI in January 1926 Vittorio Scialoja, President of the Council of the League of Nations, praised the cultural diversity that vitalised the Institute and “contributes to the common heritage of humanity”¹⁰.

The idea of “universal heritage” as elaborated and defined within the League of Nations and its cultural bodies¹¹, also following the lines drawn by the studies of Annamaria Ducci, provides us with numerous considerations above all regarding transformations that this concept would undergo over time, but also of the use that would be made of it after World War II.

As Massimo Giuntella mentioned in his book *Cooperazione intellettuale ed educazione alla pace nell’Europa della Società delle Nazioni*, the CICI favoured forms of discussion that structured interpersonal relationships and brought together different knowledge through conferences or seminars¹².

It is no coincidence that soon after its foundation the CICI launched a number of important inquiries which addressed the idea of heritage conservation, from the conservation of antiquities and monuments to the conservation of printed materials, the photographic reproduction of works of art, comparative legislation relating to archaeological excavations, and the protection of landscapes.¹³ These initiatives represented the basis of the

Roman Conference on Scientific Methods in 1930¹⁴, and the subsequent Athenian Conference on Monument Conservation, as well as the Madrid Conference on Museography in 1934¹⁵ and the Cairo Conference on Archaeological Excavations in 1937.

The Roman debate was chiefly enlivened by foreign scholars, in particular Henri Focillon¹⁶, the results of which could be found in the Conclusions published in volumes 13-14 of *Mouseion* and shortly afterwards in the *Manuel de la Conservation et de la restauration des peintures* from 1939 published by the *Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle*.

The first step in broadening the debate on heritage and its codifications, which would later lead to the Conference of Athens, was once again taken by the League of Nations with the establishment of the aforementioned *Office International des Musées* and its journal *Mouseion*, to whose history Annamaria Ducci has dedicated much time¹⁷. It is no coincidence that the incomplete proceedings of the 1931 Conference of Athens also appeared in the journal *Mouseion*, later collected in their official form with 450 copies edited by the *Office International des Musées* and published by the *Institut de Coopération Intellectuelle*.

A key player in the events of that period, as mentioned above, was once again Henri Focillon who, in the Commission of the League of Nations, linked international cooperation, museums and heritage. This link led a historian like Dominique Poulot to write that the concept of the universal heritage of mankind was formed at that juncture (a French concept, therefore)¹⁸, with Michela Passini offering a collateral interpretation in her *La Conférence de Athènes sur la conservation des monuments d'art*, written on the occasion of a discussion about exchanges between Paris and Athens between the two wars.

It is not without cause that Henri Focillon was attributed a key role in the path leading from the two speeches of 1921 and 1923, the one at the League of Nations and the one on *La conception moderne des Musées*, to the Congress of Rome, which in turn led to the Conference of Athens. On the other hand, Focillon planned the *Office International des Musées* as early as 1926, which he then directed together with a select committee made up of Jules Destrée, Julien Luchaire, Richard Duperrioux, George Oprescu and Hélène Vacarescu. The very privilege given to intellectual cooperation opened the door to other key players, in particular architects (such as Gustavo Giovannoni) and architectural historians (such as Louis Hautecoeur), but even more so to the world of the *professionnel*¹⁹ as testified by a survey held in 1932 on the training of restorers.

Leveau's studies focus on this moment in the history of conservation in Europe, in particular the volume from 2017 entitled *L'institution de la conservation du patrimoine culturel dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres* which, further clarifying the scenario outlined in the aforementioned volume by Jean-Jacques Renoliet, decisively focuses on the role played in just two decades by the OIM, and later by Unesco, in triggering an intense exchange between scholars and technicians from the various member states in the field of museology and cultural heritage conservation.

The shift in the debate on conservation from national to international level between the two wars appears very clearly in correspondence between Destrée, Foundoukidis and the leading figures of the Conference of Athens during its organisation and then the printing of some papers. An initial attempt at this shift, but with very different aims, was made at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889 with the *Congrès international pour la protection des œuvres d'art et des monuments*²⁰.

All these issues, from training to methods of investigation and methodological, legal and operational aspects would be explored at the Conference of Athens in 1931, as already illustrated recently by the author of this paper²¹.

The term heritage appeared to be consolidated in the text of the Conference Conclusions, especially when it came to aspects relating to international collaboration (Article VII)²². While the term *patrimoine* does not appear in the volume's index but *monuments d'art et d'histoire* or *monuments historiques* continued to be used, it recurs very frequently in the contributions as an adjective: from *patrimoine artistique* which is repeated several times right from the introduction to *patrimoine collectif des Nations* or *patrimoine commun de l'humanité* in the various contributions.

It is however above all the correspondence and the *Procès Verbaux* of the Conference now conserved in the Unesco archives in Paris that underline the term's consolidation in dialogue among intellectuals, *professionnel* and scholars involved in the debate. This is confirmed by Michela Passini's cited paper from 2018 on the possible anticipation of the term world heritage and the role of Euripides Foundoukidis, secretary general of the OIM and catalyst of the Athens initiative. It was in fact Foundoukidis who referred at the conference to a "new conception that has been emerging for some time and that tends to consider certain art monuments as belonging to the common heritage of mankind"²³, echoing reflections that in French circles lead back to figures such as Destrée, Luchaire or Focillon. Such reflections had already emerged during the 11th International Congress of Art History held in Paris in 1921, also recalled in the construction of the *Conférence sur la conservation des monuments* as an anticipatory moment of the debate at international scale. The Conference of Athens was in fact supposed to "unifier les mesures de classement, de sauvegarde, de protection et de conservation des monuments dans le différents pays"²⁴, as well as offer "une prospection générale des problèmes de conservation des monuments d'art et d'histoire ... un programme d'étude international"²⁵.

This very ambition for the internationalisation of the principles of safeguarding and conservation, anticipated in the 1930s, was incorporated into the subsequent codifications that led to the affirmation of the expression "world heritage". A concept that already formed the basis for the founding Constitution of Unesco in 1945, which was then then reaffirmed by the Florence General Conference in 1950, the Hague Convention four years later, and definitively sanctioned with the 1972 Unesco Convention on the Protection of the World Heritage.

¹ Pierre Gerbet (edited by), *La rêve d'un ordre mondial: de la SDN à l'ONU*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale éditions, 1996.

² Massimo Giuntella, *Cooperazione intellettuale ed educazione alla pace nell'Europa della Società delle Nazioni*, Padua, CEDAM 2001; Susan Pedersen, *Review Essay: Back to the League of Nations*, «The American Historical Review», 112 (4), 2007, pp.1091-1116.

³ Corinne Pernet, *Les échanges d'informations entre intellectuels: la conférence comme outil de coopération intellectuelle à la Société des Nations*, in François Vallotton (edited by), *Devant le verre d'eau. Regards croisés sur la conférence comme vecteur de la vie intellectuelle 1880-1950*, Lausanne, Editions Antipodea 2006, pp. 1-10.

⁴ The publication that provides a better explanation of the context that gave rise to initiatives such as *La Conférence de Athènes sur la conservation des monuments d'art* of 1931 is the volume *l'Institutions pour l'étude scientifique des Relations Internationales* of 1929, published in French, English and German by the Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle.

- ⁵ Jean Jacques Renoliet, *L'UNESCO oubliée. La Société des Nations et la Coopération intellectuelle (1919-1946)*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne 1999.
- ⁶ Susanna Caccia Gherardini, *Prima di Atene. Cooperazione intellettuale e illusione elitaria, atmosfera de La Conférence d'Athènes sur la conservation des monuments del 1931*, «Restauro Archeologico», 1, 2021, pp. 2-15.
- ⁷ Annamaria Ducci, *Europe and the Artistic Patrimony of the Interwar Period. The International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations*, in Mark Hewitson, Matthew D'Auria (edited by), *Europe in crisis. Intellectuals and the European Idea 1917-1957*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2012, pp. 227-242; Martin Grandjean, *Les réseaux de la coopération intellectuelle. La Société des Nations comme actrice des échanges scientifiques et culturels dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Université de Lausanne 2018.
- ⁸ Françoise Choay, *La conférence d'Athènes sur la conservation artistique et historique des monuments*, Besançon, Les Éditions de l'Imprimeur 2002; Françoise Choay, *La conférence d'Athènes sur la conservation artistique et historique des monuments*, Paris, Éditions du Linteau 2012.
- ⁹ The same archives of these Institutions and their sub-organisations are conserved at Unesco.
- ¹⁰ Vittorio Scialoja, *Discorsi alla Società della Nazioni*, Rome, Anonima Romana Editoriale 1932.
- ¹¹ Marie Caillot, *La SDN et la protection du patrimoine culturel: l'œuvre de l'Office international des Musées durant l'entre-deux-guerres*, Mémoire de master recherche 2e année Relations internationales. Histoire Paris, Institut d'études politiques, directeur du mémoire Maurice Vaïsse, 2011.
- ¹² Massimo Giuntella, *Cooperazione intellettuale ed educazione alla pace ...*, op. cit.
- ¹³ Commission International de Coopération Intellectuelle, *Procès verbaux, 1922-1929, SDN*, Geneva. Cf. Pierre Leveau, *L'institution de la conservation du patrimoine culturel dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres*, Dijon, Office de Coopération et d'Information Muséales 2017, p.7.
- ¹⁴ Susanna Caccia Gherardini, *Prima di Atene. Cooperazione intellettuale e illusione elitaria*, op. cit. and relative bibliography. In particular on the Roman conference, cf. Marco Cardinali, *Roma 1930: Conferenza Internazionale per lo studio dei metodi scientifici applicati all'esame e alla conservazione delle pitture*, in Marco Cardinali, Beatrice De Ruggieri, Claudio Falcucci (edited by), *Diagnostica artistica: tracce materiali per la storia dell'arte e per la conservazione*, Rome, Palombi Editore 2002, pp. 233-249; Marco Cardinali M., Beatrice De Ruggieri, *Il pensiero critico e le ricerche tecniche sulle opere d'arte a partire dalla conferenza di Roma*, in Maria Ida Catalano (edited by), *Snodi di Critica. Musei, mostre, restauro e diagnostica artistica in Italia (1930-1940)*, Rome, Gangemi Editore 2008, pp.107-150.
- ¹⁵ Gianluca Kannés, *Vittorio Viale e la partecipazione italiana alla conferenza internazionale di museografia di Madrid del 1934*, in «Palazzo Madama. Studi e notizie», year II issue 1, 2012, pp.70-79; Jean-Baptiste Jamin, *La Conférence de Madrid (1934). Histoire d'une manifestation internationale à l'origine de la muséographie moderne/ The Madrid conference (1934). History of an international event at the origin of modern museography*, in «Il capitale culturale. Studies on the value of Cultural Heritage», n.15, 2017, pp.73-101.
- ¹⁶ On Focillon see above all the works by Annamaria Ducci and relative bibliography: Annamaria Ducci, *Henri Focillon, l'arte popolare e le scienze sociali*, in «Annali di Critica d'Arte», vol. 2, 2006, pp. 341-389; Annamaria Ducci, *Una questione di tatto: Berenson e Focillon*, in «Studi di Memofonte», XIV, 2015, pp. 98-135
- ¹⁷ Annamaria Ducci, «Mouseion», *una rivista al servizio del patrimonio artistico europeo (1927-1946)*, in «Annali di critica d'arte», n. 1, 2005, pp. 287-314.
- ¹⁸ On the development of the concept of heritage at least the following should be mentioned: Jean-Pierre Babelon, André Chastel, *La notion de patrimoine*. Paris, Liana Levi 1995; Dominique Poulot, *Le patrimoine universel: un modèle culturel français*, in «Revue d'Histoire Moderne& Contemporaine», 1, 1992, pp. 29-55; Dominique Poulot (edited by), *Patrimoine et modernité*, Paris et Montréal, L'Harmattan 1998; André Desvallées, *À l'origine du mot patrimoine*, in Dominique Poulot (edited by), *Patrimoine et modernité...*, op. cit., pp. 89-106; André Desvallées, *De la notion privée d'héritage matériel au concept universel et extensif de patrimoine*, in Martine Cardin (edited by), *Médias et patrimoine: le rôle et l'influence des médias dans la production d'une mémoire collective*, actes du colloque international organisé par la Chaire Unesco en patrimoine culturel et l'Institut sur le patrimoine culturel, Université de Laval/Unesco 2003, pp.19-36. For a general overview of the issue cf. also Astrid Swenson *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2013.
- ¹⁹ Pierre Leveau, *L'enquête sur la formation des restaurateurs dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres: transformation d'un métier et reconnaissance d'une profession (1929-2011)*, CeROArt [Online], n.9, 2014.
- ²⁰ As regards the Congress, see the *Procès-verbaux sommaires* edited by Charles Normand in 1889 and printed in Paris that same year.
- ²¹ On the climate that led to the Conference of Athens, cf. Susanna Caccia Gherardini, *Prima di Atene. Cooperazione intellettuale e illusione elitaria...*, op. cit.
- ²² «The Conference, convinced that the question of the conservation of the artistic and the archeological property of mankind is one that interests the community of the States, which are wardens of civilization». Office international des musées, *La conservation des monuments d'art et d'histoire*, Paris, Publication de l'Institut de Coopération Intellectuelle, Imprimerie Polyglotte Vuibert, Paris 1933, p. 450. It is important to emphasize here that it was E. Foundoukidis who personally ensured the broad circulation of the *Conclusioni*, see for example the list of recipients: *Envoi des documents OIM.60.1931 et OIM.61.1931*, 27 November 1931. Unesco Archive, Paris, OIM, VI, 17, 17.
- ²³ This text takes up a "radio speech", in which Foundoukidis announced the programme of the Conference of Athens. Mentioned in Michela Passini, *La Conférence d'Athènes sur la conservation des monuments...*, op.cit.
- ²⁴ Marcel Nicolle, *Suggestions en vue du programme de la conférence d'Athènes*, 1931. Unesco Archive, Paris, OIM, VI, 17, A.
- ²⁵ *Lettera di E. Foundoukidis a Paul Clemen*, 5 August 1931. Unesco Archive, Paris, OIM, VI, 17, 31.67B.