

# The League of Nations and Cultural Heritage. For an intellectual history of a notion.

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My paper aims to explore the idea of cultural heritage as it was developed within the League of Nations and its cultural bodies, notably the Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle (IICI, 1925) and the Office International des Musées (OIM, 1926), but also the Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle (CICI, 1922), the Organisation de coopération intellectuelle (OCI, 1922) and the Sous-commission des Lettres et des Arts (1926).

After the fundamental study by Jean-Jacques Renoliet (1999), Martin Grandjean (2018) has reconstructed the network of relations between the member states and their representatives, providing an extremely eloquent « topographie institutionnelle » of the intellectual cooperation at the LoN. Pierre Leveau's book (2017) has offered a detailed picture of IICI's extensive spectrum of cultural activities. For the OIM, studies have almost exclusively focused on its museum policy. Consequently, there is still a lack of studies addressing the issue of cultural heritage within the LoN, framing it in the history of heritage studies, within a broad horizon of intellectual history and political relations.

The idea of heritage was consubstantial to the original mission of preserving a European and Western culture promoted by the LoN and marked by a spirit of solidarity between nations. Nevertheless, the issue clearly presented considerable points of contradiction, thus generating internal tensions within the LoN itself. In fact, the debate conducted within the intellectual bodies of the SdN was heir to national protection policies that, at least since the early nineteenth century, the European states developed to forge their own "identity memories", what are known as "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson).

If, initially, at Geneva the concept of a « common heritage of humanity » was conceived in its ethical sense, with the creation in Paris of the OIM, the question of the conservation of the artistic heritage became more and more specific.

In line with its diplomatic and pragmatic nature, the OIM did not propose any definition of the notion of heritage. Indeed, the term *patrimoine* itself does not appear systematically in its documents until 1931, the year of the Athens Conference on the conservation of monuments (Desvallées, Mairesse (dir.), 2011). By stimulating an intense dialogue between academics and curators from different member states, the OIM sought to harmonize the different experiences and competencies that each country had individually developed in conservation and museology. The aim was not only to build shared conservation practices but to develop a modern heritage culture. Thus, with the LoN, the question of heritage underwent a decisive turning point when the debate on conservation and museums moved from the national level to an institutional organism of international reference. In this way, during the inter-war, OIM stimulated a reflection on the notion of cultural heritage that would spread to its programmatic lines after the Second World War with Unesco.

The OIM has carried out massive comparative work between the various national legislations and policies for the protection of monuments, in order to draw up shared normative documents. The case of Belgium, France and Italy, whose legislative action increased in the first three decades of the twentieth century, are particularly interesting, as they laid down the essential principles for the history of conservation, such as the primacy of the public interest over the private interest, and the protection of the landscape. Furthermore, it is significant that the OIM, as early as 1927, recognized the problem of the protection of « natural beauties » as a matter of « the heritage of humanity », while stressing its universal value.

One of the central issues of my paper will concern the specific « Common heritage of humanity », a locution that we usually trace back to the Conference of Athens of 1931 mentioned above and to the personality of

Euripide Foundoukidis. Nevertheless, this idea (today replaced by a more neutral «World Heritage») has a much longer history within the LoN itself, which we can trace by investigating the intellectual relations that the cultural bodies of the Geneva organization maintained with the university and museum world in the 1920s and the 1930s. In fact, during the international art history congresses, an animated debate took place regarding the idea of a common heritage that clashed with the legal status of individual and national property. This debate early moved to the OIM. Here the universalist idea of heritage was especially promoted by certain representatives of socialist thought - such as the Belgian Jules Destrée, Minister of Science and Arts and first president of the OIM, whose declarations of principle he forged. This precise political stake and the key personality of Destrée deserve to be highlighted.

My presentation will be based on rereading the prominent publications promoted by the IICI-OIM and on some archive documents (<https://digital.archives.unesco.org/en/> - International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IICI) ; Total Digital Access to the League of Nations Archives Project (LONTAD)). It will discuss this rich international debate's main themes and key concepts, terminologies, and most relevant personalities to highlight the birth of the notion of heritage within one of the protagonists of its long history.

## References

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