VALÉRY FRELAND

Pour la deuxième année consécutive, le dîner de Gala de La Biennale Paris sera donné au profit de l’Alliance internationale pour la protection du patrimoine dans les zones en conflit (ALIPH), présidée par Thomas S. Kaplan, philanthrope et collectionneur. Le Directeur exécutif d’ALIPH est depuis septembre 2018 un diplomate français, Valéry Freland. Il est responsable de la mise en œuvre de la stratégie et de la gestion de cette nouvelle organisation internationale basée à Genève.

For the second consecutive year, the Gala Dinner of La Biennale Paris is being organised in aid of ALIPH (Alliance internationale pour la protection du patrimoine dans les zones en conflit – International alliance for the protection of the cultural heritage in combat zones), whose president is the philanthropist and collector Thomas S. Kaplan.

Valéry Freland, a French diplomat, has been executive director of ALIPH since September 2018. He is responsible for implementing the strategy and management of this recently founded international organisation based in Geneva.

Pourquoi avez-vous accepté ces fonctions au sein d’ALIPH, en quoi consiste votre rôle ?

Ce poste est au carrefour de mon expérience et de mes passions. Gala fait biennal trente ans que je travaille dans les domaines de la diplomatie et de la culture, en Europe, aux États-Unis ou dans le monde arabe, et j’ai pensé que ma connaissance du terrain, mes réseaux, ma sensibilité pouvaient être utiles au développement de cette toute jeune fondation qu’est ALIPH. Le rôle du directeur exécutif est de contribuer à la définition des objectifs d’ALIPH, sous l’autorité du Conseil de fondation et de son Président, Tom S. Kaplan, d’animer l’équipe, modeste, du Secrétariat – nous fonctionnons un peu comme une start-up – et d’assurer la gestion courante. Cela implique de mettre à profit tout particulièrement une sensibilité diplomatique. Quand on touche au patrimoine, on touche aux identités, et naturellement, à des enjeux politiques.

Why did you accept this position with ALIPH and what is your role?

This post arises from my experience and reflects my passions. For almost thirty years I have been working in the fields of diplomacy and culture, in Europe and the United States as well as in the Arab world. So I thought that my knowledge of the field, my contacts and my observations might be useful in developing the newly founded organisation that is ALIPH.

The role of the executive director is, first, to help define the objectives of ALIPH, under the authority of the Foundation Council (Conseil de fondation) and its president, Tom S. Kaplan; secondly, to mobilise the modest team of the Secretary – we work a bit like a start-up, and briefly, to supervise its everyday business. Besides scientific expertise, which is provided by other institutions within ALIPH such as the Scientific Committee, presided over by Jean-Luc Martinez, President-Director of the Louvre Museum, it is also especially important to use my diplomatic sensitivity. This is because when one touches a nation’s heritage, one also touches its identity, and of course there are also political issues.

Pourquoi nous expliquer pourquoi ALIPH est une Fondation de droit suisse et quelle est sa vocation première ? ALIPH est créé en réponse à la barbarie et à son exécution, c’est une réponse à la destruction massive, ces dernières années,

Can you explain why ALIPH is a Foundation governed by Swiss law and what is its main objective? ALIPH was created as a reaction against barbarism and it is a response to the massive destruction of the heritage in the conflict areas in the Middle East and the Sahel which has taken place in the last five years. Its aim is to help protect the cultural heritage, whether material and immaterial, including both objects and buildings, in crisis and post-conflict areas. ALIPH’s aim is therefore to protect museums and their collections, archaeological sites, historic buildings and places of worship with heritage values, as well as artistic activities and crafts, from being destroyed. ALIPH supplies both scientific expertise and financial support.

Created on the initiative of France and the Arab Emirates, ALIPH was set up in Geneva because of the international environment of this world capital of humanitarian activities, and because Swiss law governs foundations ensuring both efficiency and rigour. Geneva also hosts an important network of foundations and potential donors, many of them in the field of culture. The Swiss authorities have strongly supported this initiative, since ALIPH has signed a headquarters agreement with them which offers the foundation the same immunities and privileges as those granted to the various prestigious international organisations with headquarters on the shores of Lake Geneva.
‘ALPH’s aim is to help protect the cultural heritage, whether material and immaterial, including both objects and buildings, in crisis and post-conflict areas’

In which countries are you planning to invest as a priority, what are your objectives and what kind of action will you take?

ALPH has a mission to intervene in all conflict or post-conflict areas in every continent. And we have a wide definition of what a conflict area could be. For us, it embraces interstate conflicts, civil wars, asymmetric conflicts, terrorism, violent conflicts and other crises leading to instability. Today the regions in which we are most involved are mainly in the Middle East and the Sahel, and in particular in Iraq and Mali where terrorism has hit those countries hard over the last few years.

We have decided to devote US$ 30 million over the next three years to protect the cultural heritage in these areas. If we can do more, financially, we will. But there is no doubt that intervening in such areas is a challenge in terms of accessibility, security and the visibility of the project undertaken.

Last May, for instance, at the Museum of Jam in Afghanistan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the local population risked their own lives as they ran into action against devastating floods and Taliban attacks. The rehabilitation of the cultural heritage of the old town of Mazar is also a challenge because of the extent of the destruction and the landmines. Nothing can be done without spending time and money clearing the mines.

Which countries have suffered the most serious damage to their cultural and national heritage?

Access to conflict areas is often difficult and, if impossible, and this severely limits accurate assessment of the damage. Nevertheless, thanks to satellite imagery, we have a fairly detailed view of the damage caused to buildings and monuments in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Damage assessment became much harder when it concerns the movable heritage, such as collections, libraries and archives, not to mention the intangible heritage of traditions, music and other forms of expression. In the case of the movable heritage, we have styling experts in the various fields, the Timbuktu manuscripts... as well as in Syria and Iraq where the looting and deliberate destruction of collections have often been filmed and broadcast on the web for propaganda purposes, giving their enormous symbolic value. But we know that the images and actions ongoing on the internet are only part of all the destruction that has occurred.

During periods of crisis, especially to poor countries, people find it more difficult to command and purchase, but they are not in a position to当代 communities, to contribute to the local economy, to link the population, to preserve the heritage of the region as well as serving as an education centre, and it will also be a powerful symbol of the victory over ignorance and intolerance.

Do you see any solutions to the problem of cultural heritage in risk areas?

How can we help communities protect their cultural heritage?

How do you think we will be able to work with countries which are already affected by crises or whose priorities may be other than cultural?

Indeed, it may sometimes seem ridiculous to concentrate on the protection and rehabilitation of the cultural heritage when human lives are at stake and entire communities are confronted with violence, famine or disease, perhaps also being refugees. But very often, when talking to politicians or to the people concerned on the spot, we notice a desire to protect their heritage, partly because it is part of their identity, but also because it contributes to a better image of society. One must not underestimate the power of symbols. Protecting and recovering a country’s heritage restores the link between communities, contributing to local employment and securing peace.

In fact, successful protection is protection which involves the local population and, supported if necessary by international operators. This is the case, for instance, with the rehabilitation project of the Tomb of Askia, in Gao, Mali, where the CNRenne association is cooperating with the Malian Ministry of Culture. There, evidently, the support and commitment of the local population will be decisive.

What are your current activities in regard to places and works of art which you are in the process of restoring or saving?

Before its first call for project proposals launched in January 2009, ALPH had financed five projects of various kinds, for instance in Iraq and Mali, in order to bring about the construction of cultural sites destroyed or damaged in the conflicts.

The rehabilitation of the Mausoleum Museum is a flagship project of the foundation, which has received nearly US$ 1.7 million to assess the situation and plan the rehabilitation. This phase is being run by the Smithsonian Institution and the Louvre, in close collaboration with the Mausoleum Museum and the Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage. Exploratory missions have been carried out to survey the status of the site and to secure it, enabling the damage to the museum and its collections to be assessed. The measurements have been taken to prevent further damage, such as strengthening the floors in some rooms. The reopening of the museum in years to come will be significant for the local population; it will help to preserve the heritage of the region as well as serving as an education centre, and it will also be a powerful symbol of the victory over ignorance and intolerance.
Quelles sont vos dernières actions concrètes vis-à-vis d'œuvres ou de lieux d'art que vous vous employez à restaurer ou à sauver ?

En amont de son premier appel à projets lancé en janvier 2019, ALIPH a financé cinq initiatives de nature variée, notamment en Irak et au Mali, pour permettre la reconstruction de lieux culturels endommagés ou détruits par les conflits. La réhabilitation du musée de Mossoul est un projet phare de la fondation, qui a octroyé à ce stade près de 500 000 USD pour l'évaluation de la situation et la planification de la reconstruction. Cette phase est menée par la Smithsonian Institution et le musée du Louvre, en étroite coordination avec le musée de Mossoul et le Conseil irakien des antiquités et du patrimoine. Des missions exploratoires d'évaluation et de sécurisation ont été menées sur le terrain, ce qui a permis d'estimer les dommages du musée et des collections. Des mesures de sécurisation urgente (comme la consolidation des sols et des structures) ont également été mises en œuvre afin de prévenir de plus amples dégâts. La réouverture du musée dans les années à venir sera importante pour la population locale, et il contribuera à préserver le patrimoine de la région, servira de centre d'éducation, mais aussi de symbole puissant de la victoire sur l'ignorance et l'intolérance.

Autre exemple d'action concret financée par ALIPH : la réhabilitation du monastère de Mar Behnam à Kidirî, dans le nord de l'Irak, détruit par des explosions perpétrées par Daesh en mars 2015. Depuis la fin de l'année 2017, des travaux ont été menés par l'association Fraternité en Irak, dans le respect de l'esprit et de l'authenticité des lieux. Les tunnels permettant d'accéder au mausolée ainsi que les coupoles intérieures et extérieures du mausolée ont été reconstruits. La réhabilitation de ce lieu de pèlerinage à la fois pour les Yazidis, les chrétiens et les musulmans survivants contribue au vivre ensemble des communautés.

Travaillez-vous plus particulièrement sur des sauvegardes en collaboration avec le gouvernement français ?

La France est naturellement un partenaire majeur, eu égard à son engagement au sein d'ALIPH, mais aussi à son expertise dans le domaine patrimonial. Nous travaillons ainsi avec de nombreux opérateurs français, ONG ou institutions culturelles. Et je crois qu’ALIPH peut contribuer à systématiser, professionnaliser l’intervention en faveur du patrimoine dans les zones très complexes que sont les zones en conflit. Là, on ne doit pas seulement faire face à des enjeux patrimoniaux, mais également sécuritaires, diplomatiques, politiques.

Mais ALIPH travaille avec des partenaires venus du monde entier : pour notre appel à projets du premier semestre 2019, nous avons reçu 50 projets, portés par des institutions issues de 19 pays et en concernant 24 autres. À travers nos soutiens, nous tentons de favoriser l'échange d'expertise et de bonnes pratiques entre acteurs d'horizons géographiques très variés, à l'occasion d'un projet commun de protection. Nous voulons contribuer à l'émergence d'une force mondiale de protection du patrimoine !

Another example of an activity financed by ALIPH is the rehabilitation of the Mar Behnam monastery in Kidirî, in the north of Iraq, which was destroyed by explosions perpetrated by Daesh in March 2015. Since the end of 2017, restoration work has been carried out by the association Fraternity in Iraq, respecting the spirit and original character of the place. The tunnels leading to the mausoleum have been rebuilt, as have the interior and exterior cupolas of the mausoleum. The restoration of this pilgrimage destination shared by Yazidis, Christians and Sunni Muslims is helping these communities to live together peacefully.

Do you work particularly with the French government when dealing with conservation projects?

Naturally France is a major partner in view of its involvement with ALIPH, but also because of its expertise in the heritage field. So we are working with numerous French organisations, NGOs and cultural institutions. And I believe that ALIPH can help to systematise and professionalise interventions in aid of the local heritage in very complex areas such as conflict zones. There you have to deal not only with heritage affairs but also with matters of security, diplomacy and politics.

But ALIPH works with partners from all over the world: our invitation for project proposals launched in January 2019 attracted over 50 applications, put forward by institutions from 19 countries and involving 24 others. Through our support, we are trying to develop the exchange of expertise and good working practices between contributors from widely differing parts of the world, while developing a common project of protection. We want to contribute to the emergence of a world power for the protection of every national heritage!