

# CULTURAL TIES THAT BIND

*Francesco Bandarin leads UNESCO in making culture a tool to bring people together with common purpose. Here, he talks to Mustapha Bouhayati and David Lasserson of Brunswick Arts about embracing the past, present and future value of cultural heritage*

A decade ago, Francesco Bandarin, Assistant Director-General for Culture at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), visited Afghanistan. “I’d never seen anything like it. Everything had been bombed, everything destroyed,” he remembers. “I was confronted with chaos, a shattered ruin like Berlin in 1945.” There, Bandarin met the Afghan Minister of Culture. “In the face of such a catastrophe, I was embarrassed to talk about culture, heritage, and vision. But I was told, ‘No, no. We want this. This is a priority for us. Before everything else.’”

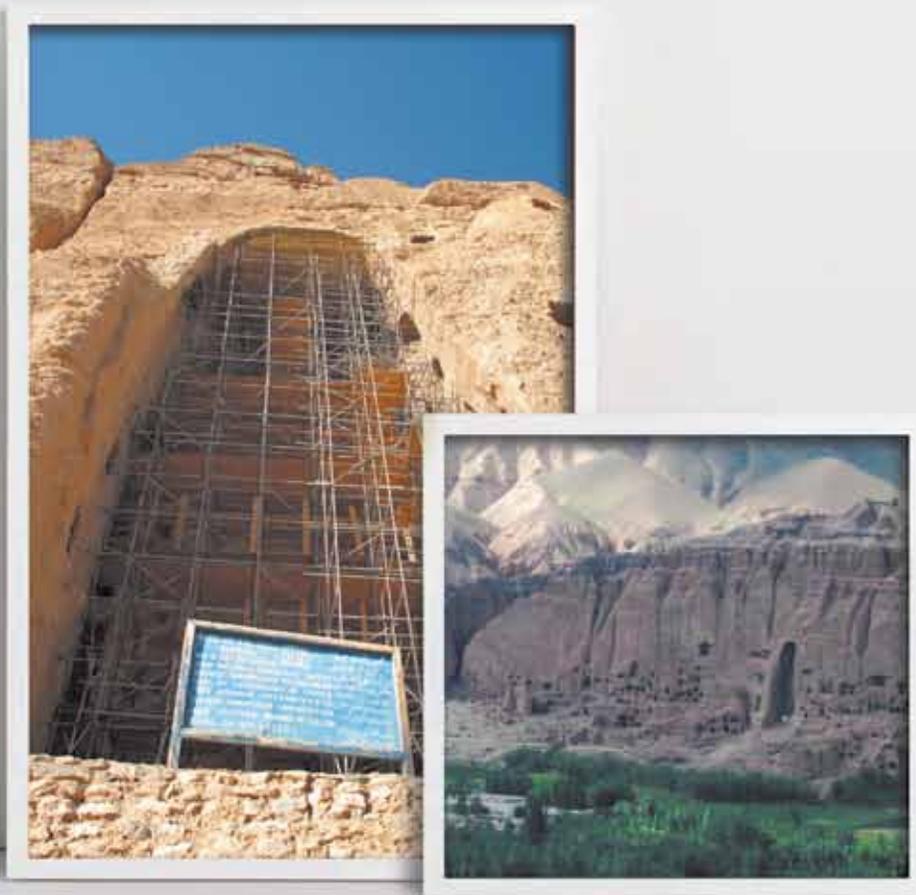
The encounter had a strong impact on Bandarin, and helped shape his vision for UNESCO’s work in protecting cultural heritage worldwide.

In Afghanistan, one of UNESCO’s first acts was to support the government’s efforts to protect the ancient Buddhist sites in the Bamiyan Valley. These had survived centuries of turmoil, including invasions of Mongol hordes, but in 2001 the Taliban destroyed the two iconic standing Buddha statues, set in giant niches in the valley walls. UNESCO established a plan to safeguard the area and has been working with the government ever since. At the latest working group meeting in 2011, success was recognized as UNESCO and the Afghan government agreed that the site might be removed from the “World Heritage in Danger” list by 2013.

“Culture is at the center of public life,” says Bandarin, describing UNESCO’s mission. “It helps people build their identity and their wellbeing. It brings people together and defines a better quality of life.” ➤

The cultural landscape and archaeological remains of the Bamiyan Valley in northern Afghanistan, home to Buddhist sanctuaries, monasteries and chapels, were classified as a heritage site in 2003. Since then, UNESCO has been spearheading a plan to safeguard and consolidate the Buddha niches (far left) and other significant sites within the valley.

Photographs: UNESCO / Ron Van Oers / A. Junaid Sorosh-Wali



UNESCO's efforts are helped by the fact that countries, by and large, have a strong sense of their culture and its importance. UNESCO's expansion since it was founded after the Second World War has also coincided with a remarkable growth in heritage tourism. "Fifty years ago, fewer people went to museums and visited heritage sites. Now, millions of people include them in their travel plans. Heritage tourism is a dramatically important vehicle for mutual understanding, previously reserved for an elite. Heritage has reached the heart of society."

However, such wide recognition of culture's importance brings with it challenging issues of understanding and interpretation. As Bandarin says, "Culture has been described as the most ambiguous term in the English language and it is no more straightforward in any other language. In reality, it has a shifting meaning; it changes from place to place and from time to

time. We [at UNESCO] see it as a positive force in human life and society. But some see it as a negative – think about culturally-motivated ethnic conflicts, where culture can be used to justify terrible things. In our work, we use an essentially *anthropological* definition: culture as the way of life of a people, the way in which you relate to your own society."

In 2010 and 2011 the UN General Assembly issued resolutions that clearly defined culture as an important factor of development. Culture was shown to be an enabler of sustainable and culturally-sensitive programs, and a driver of innovative economic processes.

Today, UNESCO is deeply engaged in the current discussions about the future of the Millennium Development Goals, the basic framework defined in 2000, which is scheduled to be revised in 2015. With that revision approaching, the Rio+20 Conference on sustainable development in June 2012 is an

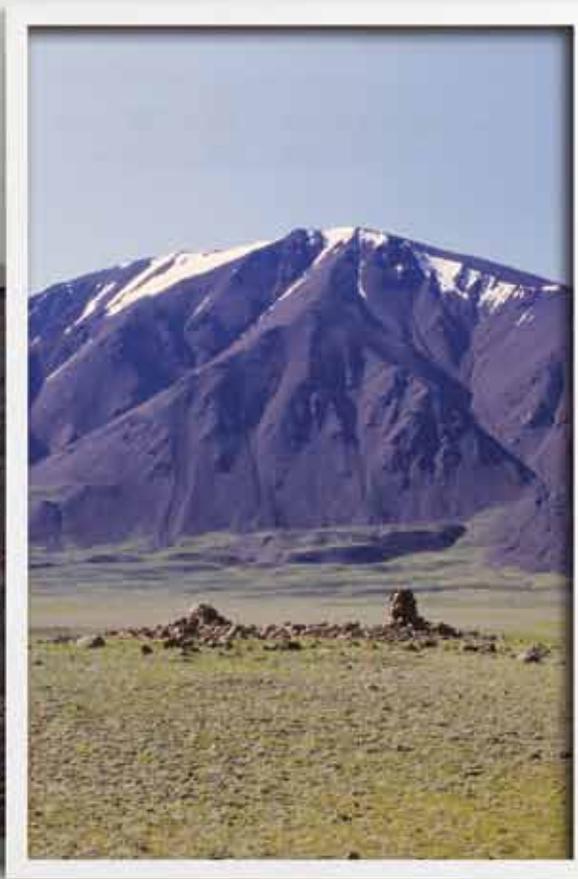
important occasion to promote culture as an economic driver. The work does not stop there. "In 2013, several major international events have been prepared to showcase the role of culture," says Bandarin. From a major international conference on sustainable local development in Hangzhou, China, to the annual ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council of the UN) ministerial review to be held in Geneva next summer, the potential of culture to deliver the Millennium Development Goals is moving to the center of the agenda. Bandarin is adamant: "The time for culture in development has come."

UNESCO has evidence that "culture" can account for between 4 per cent and 8 per cent of a country's economy. "We can go to talk to a mayor and he won't understand – or be very interested – unless we say, 'this is going to bring you jobs.' We have to communicate dual priorities: making projects sustainable, but at the same time creating an economic imperative for the work we do."

Located at the nexus of Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan, the Petroglyphic complexes of the Mongolian Altai represent one of the largest, oldest, and least damaged concentrations of rock art in Asia. They were listed by UNESCO in 2011. The earliest images (below) date from 11,000 B.C. They extend into the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Turkic periods (7th and 8th centuries) and depict scenes from everyday life, evoking historical cultural landscapes.

As well as the art, the landscape and man-made stone structures built on it (below), are included in the listing.

Photographs: Batbold Natsag, Institute of Archaeology, Mongolian Academy of Science

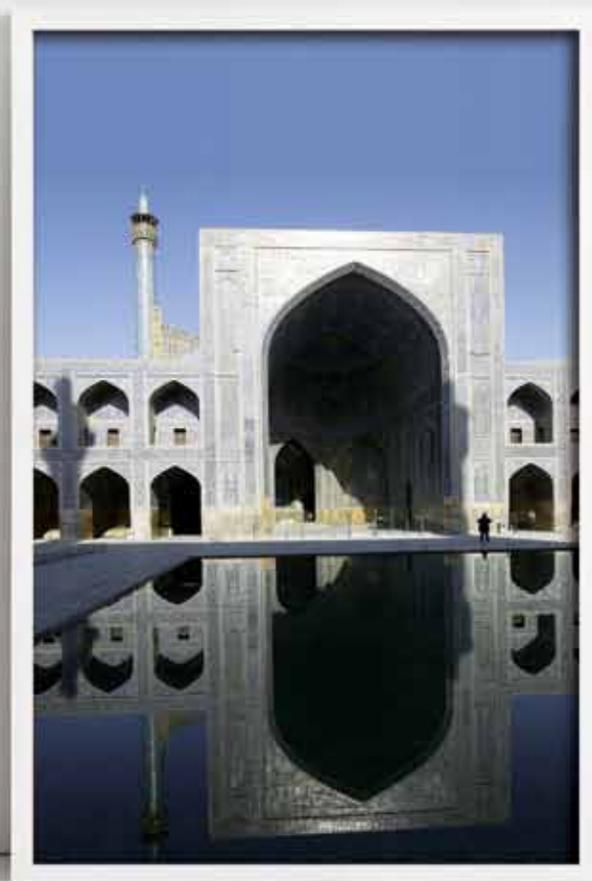


Bandarin says that UNESCO has also been shaping its message to ensure that it is not seen as *passéiste*, or too focused on the past. This has involved rethinking its approach to historic cities, for example. “This is the biggest category of heritage that we care about. Protection of historic cities has traditionally been linked to their artistic and monumental value – they are gateways to understanding the past. But this has little relation to other values that we know are important for contemporary and future society. Ancient and modern cities are living places, with economies and societies that have to evolve.”

In November 2011, UNESCO developed a new strategy for the historic urban landscape, which looks at historic cities not merely as monuments to the past but as developing places that continually need to change. Heritage itself is being redefined as vital to the future, not just the past. ↗

**Shah Abbas of the Iranian Safawid dynasty reigned from 1587 to 1628 and chose Isfahan as his capital, which he magnificently embellished and remodelled. The center of the city was accented by a vast royal square, the Meidan-e Shah. This is bordered by four monumental buildings, including the Shah Mosque (courtyard below), also known as the Imam Mosque, linked by a series of two-story arcades. The site was listed by UNESCO in 1979.**

*Photograph: © OURPLACE The World Heritage Collection*



## UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE LIST: CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION

To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must meet at least one of 10 selection criteria that include:

- ❖ Representing a masterpiece of human creative genius.
- ❖ Exhibiting an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design.
- ❖ Bearing unique, or at least exceptional, testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization that is living or which has disappeared.
- ❖ Being an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape that illustrates a significant stage in human history.
- ❖ Being an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment, especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.
- ❖ Being directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.
- ❖ Containing superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance.

Other important considerations include the protection, management, authenticity and integrity of the site.

[whc.unesco.org/en/criteria](http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria)

**Not all World Heritage Sites are ancient monuments. The Fagus shoe factory in Alfeld, Germany – listed in 2011 – is a 10-building complex designed by Walter Gropius in 1910. Foreshadowing the work of the Bauhaus school and the modernist movement, it is a landmark in the development of modern architecture and industrial design and won Gropius an international reputation.**

*Photograph: Niedersächsisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Hannover*



Will this have an impact on the way we see modern cities? Bandarin is certain that it will: “We take the position that the way ancient and modern cities are defined, preserved, or even designed should be unified instead of being divided, old against new.”

The challenge for UNESCO is to bridge the links between the past, present and future value of culture and heritage, while recognizing the reality that most of society is organized along short-term cycles. “Nothing is long-term in our society: budgets, political decisions – all short-term,” he says. “But conservation only has meaning if it is long-term. Our struggle is always with this tension between the short- and long-term. We invest, and encourage investment. If you don’t do it, you won’t have it in 20 years.”

UNESCO has funds that it puts behind projects, with resources also coming from governments and other public sources. “There is some private, mostly foundation money.

Companies also contribute, through partnerships, often linked to their own marketing and communications objectives. We constantly seek like-minded, socially-engaged companies to work with us.”

Bandarin cites the successful three-year partnership UNESCO has had with luxury Swiss watchmaker Jaeger-LeCoultre and the *International Herald Tribune*.

“I think that we have something very rare among international organizations,” says Bandarin. “The many successes that we have had protecting heritage really can convey a message about the ‘good’ part of the world, and the good that can be delivered through positive, future-oriented, society-oriented culture programs.”

Some 67 years after UNESCO was founded, it continues to play a part in international relations. Bandarin recalls his surprise at the reaction when the Italian government returned the ancient obelisk of

Aksum – taken by Italy’s fascist regime in 1937 – to its original location in northern Ethiopia in April 2005. UNESCO specialist teams undertook the huge operation to return it to its original home.

“The obelisk weighs 160 tonnes, and is 24 meters high. Broken down into three massive blocks of carved granite, it had to be flown from Rome to Ethiopia. Once the aircraft landed in Aksum, the granite blocks were then transported by truck to the Aksum World Heritage Site. It was a big operation,” he recalls.

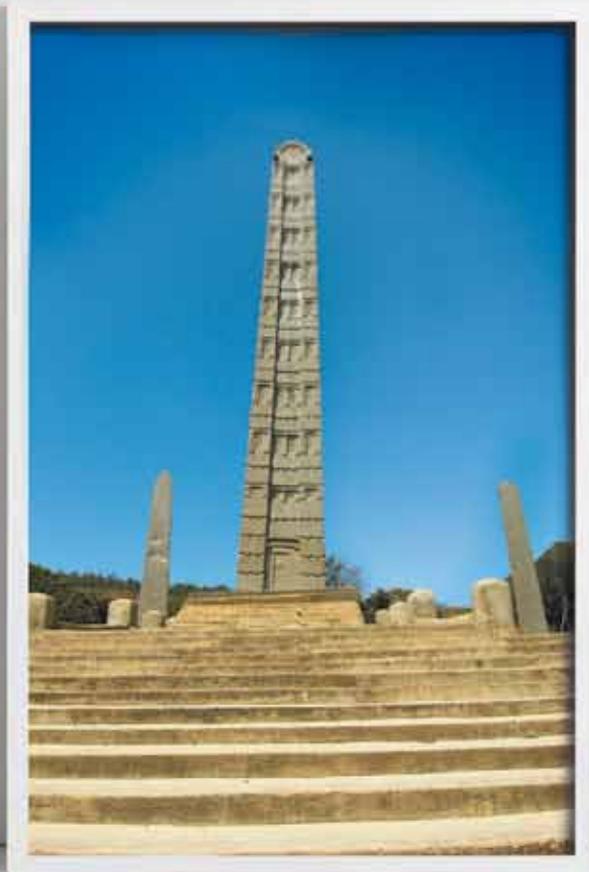
“To begin with, I thought we were simply doing a technical reinstallation of the site. But the outpouring of emotion in the country showed me that in fact this was a peacemaking operation. It was significant – and symbolically represented the end of a war.”

This is the definition of culture that UNESCO conveys within the UN and beyond: culture survives all the tumult, and carries on. 🌍

The ruins of the ancient city of Aksum mark the heart of ancient Ethiopia. The Kingdom of Aksum emerged roughly around the 3rd century B.C. as the capital of a state that traded with ancient Greece, Egypt and Asia. The massive ruins, from the 1st through 13th centuries, were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980.

The obelisk of Aksum, a funeral stele weighing 160 tonnes and standing 24 meters (78 feet) high, is around 1,700 years old. In 1937, the Italian army took it to Italy, where it was erected in Rome. Although Italy agreed in 1947 to repatriate it, the obelisk was not returned until 2005. Below it is shown on its return to Aksum.

Photographs: UNESCO / Francesco Bandarin / Niamh Burke



**Francesco Bandarin** is the Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO. He trained as an Architect (Venice) and Urban Planner (Berkeley) and has pursued an academic career as Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Venice. Bandarin has also served as a consultant for international organizations in the field of urban conservation and development. Bandarin has led the development of UNESCO's network of public-private partnerships for World Heritage conservation.

**Mustapha Bouhayati** is a Director in Brunswick Arts' Paris office. He graduated from the University of Besançon in France with a Ph.D. in American Studies. Before joining Brunswick Bouhayati worked at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and was in charge of the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

**David Lasserson** joined Brunswick Arts in January 2008. He is a graduate of Oxford University and studied at the Royal Academy of Music. Before joining Brunswick he worked as an arts journalist.

**Brunswick Arts** is an international communications consultancy dedicated to promoting and managing the reputation and interests of arts, cultural and charitable organizations around the world.

## THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A HERITAGE LISTING

Inclusion on the World Heritage List is not the end of the story. Indeed, it can become a burden as much as an honor. Countries must apply for a World Heritage listing, and the responsibilities are clear.

Ideally, listing leads to increased protection and conservation for a heritage site. It can focus international attention on a country's care – or neglect – of important historical sites.

Countries with listed sites regularly prepare reports about conservation and protection measures for their sites. They also must submit specific reports and impact studies every time exceptional circumstances occur, or before starting work that may affect the conservation of the property.

These reports allow the World Heritage Committee to assess the conditions at the

sites and, eventually, to decide on measures to resolve problems, including putting a property on the "Sites in Danger" list.

If a World Heritage Site is in danger or in need of repairs, about \$4m annually is available from several sources, including the World Heritage Fund, which receives most of its income from compulsory contributions from countries.

Funds-in-Trust, given by countries to support specific projects, are also available. Additionally, the Rapid Response Facility is a small grants program jointly operated by the UNESCO World Heritage Center, the United Nations Foundation, and Fauna & Flora International. It aims to protect, quickly and flexibly, World Heritage Sites in times of crisis.

**Three Indian railways built in the second half of the 19th century appear on UNESCO's World Heritage List: the Nilgiri Mountain Railway, the Kalka Shimla Railway and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (below), the first hill passenger railway, opened in 1881. Each represents a bold and ingenious engineering solution to the problem of establishing effective rail links across mountainous terrain, often in areas of great natural beauty. All three railways are still fully operational.**

*Photograph: © OURPLACE The World Heritage Collection*

**The Statue of Liberty, proposed by French anti-slavery activist Edouard de Laboulaye and sculpted by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, was placed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1984.**

