

# Interview with the Italian Minister for Culture and the Arts Giuliano Urbani

by Alexander Sergiyevsky

*Philosophy, modern science, liberalism and capitalism all originated in Europe and have developed there as the fruition of the input of the many different civilisations which have flourished on our soil. Also the continent is highly urbanized with 80% of the population now living in cities where there is a heavy investment of human and financial capital.*

May I begin by inviting you, Minister, to give to the readers of Herald of Europe a brief outline of the policy direction of the Italian Ministry for Culture and the Arts?

Italy is the custodian of one of the richest and most diverse cultural heritages in the world. This cultural heritage is the legacy of the many different civilisations that have flourished on our native soil over thousands of years. And of course there is the outstanding natural beauty of the country itself. As evidence of this one only has to recall that Italy boasts some 37 sites designated by UNESCO as part of the world's cultural heritage. In recognition of the significance of this legacy, Article 9 of the Italian Constitution lays an obligation on the State to protect its natural environment and its artistic heritage. The Ministry of Culture and the Arts is the body charged with the implementation of this policy. Its remit covers the management of museums and archaeological sites, the initiation of restoration programmes for monuments and works of art and the supervision of planning developments. The Ministry also manages libraries and the State archives, provides subsidies for the performing arts – film, theatre, opera and classical music and has a duty to supervise national sports organisations.

It is said that more than 40% of the world's art can be found in Italy. This must naturally engender a sense of national pride but perhaps there is also a worrying aspect given the magnitude of the problem of protecting and conserving the works themselves. The guardianship of such a treasury must require very large investment. What do you see as the best way of securing the necessary funding?

There are no precise estimates of the extent of Italy's cultural heritage although it must be one of the most significant in the world. Italy has allocated to the protection of these cultural riches only 0.17% of its GDP whereas other EU countries such as Spain and Germany, with a cultural heritage which is certainly smaller than ours, have allocated almost double that amount in their domestic budgets.

Because of this, the Berlusconi Government has decided on a new measure linking development of the nation's infrastructure with the protection of its artistic heritage and cultural activities. Some 3% of the funds allocated for the construction or improvement of motorways, ports, airports and railways will be invested in our cultural heritage and associated activities. Such a scheme will bring an undoubted return in the tourist sector.

**It would appear that the State does not have the resources to protect the whole of the heritage within its responsibility. The Italian government has taken a decision to privatise a number of its monuments and cultural institutions. What are the most significant arguments put forward by the proponents and the opponents of such a move?**

Since 1994 the private sector has been involved in the running of museums by providing services such as cafes, restaurants, guided visits and audio-guides. From 1994 to the present day, the leasing out of these services has contributed 61,574,164 euros to State funds. This has been a significant benefit in safeguarding our national heritage. Having seen the positive benefit of co-operation with the private sector in the management of artistic and archaeological treasures, the Berlusconi Government has decided that businesses and local authorities should play a part in improving the national heritage by entering into public-private partnerships. We are currently drawing up plans for the first two enterprises of this kind. The first is for the Egyptian Museum in Turin whose collection of Egyptian artefacts is one of the most important in the world, second only to that in Cairo. The second is for the establishment of a Roman Maritime Museum in Pisa to display the well preserved remains of a dozen or more naval vessels from the period of Imperial Rome which were brought to light during excavations at San Rossore railway station. The State would still retain responsibility for safeguarding the cultural heritage but we think it is appropriate and desirable for the commercial sector to make a contribution to promoting the arts just as it did in mediaeval times and during the Renaissance.

**How do you see the role of your Ministry in the cultural education of the younger generation? Do you believe the Government should have a specific policy in this area?**

As part of the preservation and valuation of art and architecture, it is our duty to enable our young people to enjoy their cultural heritage and to inculcate an appreciation of the arts. This is why the Ministry is committed to providing a wide range of educational aids – catalogues, audio-guides and multi-media presentations – to help everyone to have an understanding of the legacy of our historic past. We also have to ensure that the many teachers of art history in Italian schools are equipped to give the best possible instruction to their pupils. Our teaching clearly produces results. One of the leading art critics of our day, Sir Denis Mahon, once said that in any museum in the world he can instantly identify Italians by the way they look at the pictures. They have been immersed in art from such a young age that their ability to recognize and appreciate art is almost innate.

**How would you compare the role of your Ministry with the Ministries of Culture in England, France and Germany?**

The difference lies in the way in which these four States interpret the art of government. France and Italy both adopt a more centralised approach and the scope of their Ministries is similar; they both have responsibility for the arts and performing arts on a nation-wide basis and local organisations are more or less excluded. Conversely, the German Ministry of Culture has very little authority as the Lander have direct responsibility for most cultural matters and the Ministry only lays down general rules for guidance.

**The European Union will eventually be a single cultural space. What problems do you see arising from this? Is tolerance a problem at the moment?**

Europe is unquestionably a single cultural space. That is why, through the current President of the Council of Ministers, I made a proposal to my colleagues that we should mark the enlargement of the Community by promoting the identification of shared and individual values. The initiative, named Agenor after the mythological father of Europa, would invite each member State to identify its own particular contribution to European civilisation – maybe an artist, a philosopher, a musician, a cultural movement. The idea is to encourage reflection on what it means to be part of Europe. The proposal was well received by my Ministerial colleagues and I hope it will be furthered during the Irish presidency of the Council of Ministers.

**What meaning does the word Europe hold for you? How do you see its place in the world?**

Philosophy, modern science, liberalism and capitalism all originated in Europe and have developed there as the fruition of the input of the many different civilisations which have flourished on our soil. Also the continent is highly urbanized with 80% of the population now living in cities, where there is a heavy investment of human and financial capital. Europe meanwhile is proving to have a sense of unity that goes far beyond monetary union. It meets all the conditions needed to be a major player on the world stage, able to speak on equal terms with the superpowers of the twenty first century – the United States, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and India.

**What part does America play in Italy's cultural life? Does it influence the life-style of young Italians?**

In the 1950s Italy began to become acquainted with and to enjoy modern American literature. At the same time, Hollywood films were becoming increasingly popular in our country. Since then, American culture has become a reference point for all Italians, both young and not so young, to measure themselves against. Books, films, comic strips and rock music «made in the USA» are all hugely popular, to the extent that more and more English phrases are becoming part of our everyday language. This takes nothing away from our culture, on the contrary, it enriches our dialogue with a greater choice of expressions.

**In the years 1950 to 1970 Italian cinema enjoyed world-wide recognition. What is the current status of Italian cinema and what role does the Italian Government play?**

Today, after a period of stagnation, Italian cinema is enjoying a resurgence of excellence. New directors are finding their way with films of marked originality and their success is reflected in the prize awarded to Emanuele Crialesè's "Respiro" in France and the films of Matteo Garrone "L'Imbalsamatore" and "Primo Amore". I am also delighted to see the success of the type of film that Italy has always excelled in producing. For example, "La Leggenda di Al, John e Jack" was warmly received in Russia and that gives me as much pleasure as the recognition given to Andrei Zvyagintsev's "Il Ritorno" at the last Venice Film Festival. The Government supports and promotes Italian cinema by part financing films of national cultural interest and by concluding agreements for co-production and co-distribution with other States, including Russia.

**How do you see cultural relations developing between Russia and Italy? In Russia there is a great interest in Italian culture – its life-style, music and fashion. You were in Russia not long ago to honour certain Russian intellectuals for their contribution to Russo-Italian cultural relations. In the course of this visit, Italian and Russian writers and publishers were brought together for the first time. How did that idea come about? What bi-lateral meetings and cultural events can we look forward to in the spheres of literature, theatre, cinema, music and the arts?**

It was an extremely positive moment. Italy was one of the major contributors to the Tercentary celebrations in St. Petersburg, assisting in the restoration of monuments and mounting performances and exhibitions. In return, the Italian public has had the opportunity in recent months to attend major cultural events organized in collaboration with Russian institutions. Every performance by the Mariinsky orchestra at La Scala under the baton of Valery Gergiev was rapturously received and the Maly Theatre directed by Lev Dodin appeared in many cities throughout Italy. There were also unexpected pleasures like the Moscow Helikon Opera whose performances at the Ravenna Festival were given to great acclaim and the outstanding production of «Notte Egiziane» by the Fomenki opera at the Teatro Valle in Rome. My colleague at the Ministry of Culture in Moscow and I reviewed these exchanges and we are currently examining the possibilities for further similar events. The meetings between Italian and Russian authors and editors were extremely productive and should lead to interesting collaborative initiatives for promoting literature in each others countries, with particular emphasis on new talent. Work is also in hand for a major exhibition celebrating five hundred years of Russian-Italian partnership. The plan is to display some 160 works by such artists as Titian, Raphael, Giotto, Giorgione, Caravaggio, Boccioni, Balla, Modigliani, Carra, Rublev, Levitsky, Repin, Kandinsky, Malevich and Chagall. They will be shown first at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome from February to October and will then travel to Moscow to be exhibited at the Pushkin Museum in the first six months of the year 2005.

**I wonder if you could tell us something about yourself, in particular your background, career and interests.**

First of all I am not a politician but a man of politics. Until 1994 I taught Political Sciences at Milan's Bocconi University. In this observation post I became aware at the beginning of the Nineties, that these were difficult times for our country and that representation of the Italian electorate had reached crisis point. Political power as we had known it was starting to crumble, its institutions tottering under the assault of judicial investigations. In this worrying climate, a reform was to be introduced by means of referendum which would have distorted the shape of Italian politics. A system of majority voting would have replaced proportional representation. The only party organisation to have survived the thrusts of the legislature was the Democratic Party of the Left, heir to the Italian Communist Party. Thanks to the new system, with a mere 30% of the vote, this party would have been able to gain an absolute majority and form the new Government. Few people were aware of this risk so I decided to bring it to the attention of someone who could represent those moderate Italians who are always the majority in our country. I found that the business magnate Silvio Berlusconi was willing to listen. He decided to give birth to a new political movement, Forza Italia, which I saw come into being and have belonged to ever since. In only six months Forza Italia was able to organize itself and gain the support of millions of Italian citizens. It won the election of 1994 and, together with the Northern League and the National Alliance, it saw off the challenge of the Left. Today, united once again, we have returned to Government thanks to the support of all those Italians who believe in liberty, economic progress and in the authentic values of solidarity, democracy and tolerance.