



Speech by Christian Corne, EHTTA President

Ladies and gentlemen, mayors, councillors, thermal town representatives and dear friends from the cultural routes,

First of all, a big thank you to the towns of Royat and Chamalières for welcoming us, and for having, a year ago almost to the day, agreed to respond, along with the Route of Spa Towns in the Massif Central and the European Network of Historic Thermal Towns, EHTTA, as well as eight other towns and cities, to the latest call for offers from the European Commission's Culture Programme.

This was an opportunity that absolutely had to be taken before the new 2014-2020 programme named "Creative Europe" was implemented. And this opportunity was taken on as a priority by our network of towns in the Massif.

This decision was not made at random. In fact, for fifteen years our towns have been attempting to embark on an innovative adventure – I would even say it was unique at the time – where thermal activity joins quite willingly with tourism, and where tourism leans on the shoulders of thermal heritage: a heritage brought to the fore not just to promote it, but to provide it with other key interpretations than just the medical.

Over all these years, these towns and cities have managed to invest in new ideas and original paths. To quote the famous phrase, which so perfectly characterises the prophetic nature of this approach, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it".

Therefore, we propose that visitors visit the built heritage that harks back to the great period of investment for thermal activity, but to also learn about less tangible forms of heritage, in particular those that tell the story of the famous figures, artists, heads of state and more who made our spas' names.

Some of these people were decision makers, others invested in terms of capital, others in terms of creation and design, producing through their presence an example of European dialogue in the form of "Cafés of Europe", to use the term put forward by the Belgian town of Spa.

It is these “Cafés” – the concept of which has been taken up as a consequence of the informal meetings in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the Enlightenment, then the Revolutions, as well as the Grand Tour brought together philosophers, scientists and decision-makers – that we have put steadfastly at the heart of our response to the European Commission, adapting them to the present day.

It is therefore a part of this common European history that today we are going to retrace through images, the photograph, drawings, sound and literature. It is a story told in chapters, from Café of Europe to Café of Europe, with seven other thermal towns sharing ideas, concepts and even a vision of Europe, and preparing its translation into concrete actions in such a way as to complement each other. Together, they are building a coherent project, which is part of the priorities of the European Union and the Council of Europe, who three years ago accorded us the prestigious cultural route award.

In Enghien-les-Bains last July, we began to bring together speakers who have aided us in defining a complex notion which has a profound influence – generally and specifically – on our ways of knowing, thanks to the arrival of virtual technology: digitalisation. Digitalising heritage indeed makes visible heritage that had disappeared, or enables us, such as here even, in Royat thanks to the e-tinerance project, to enhance the discoveries made by the tourists and ‘curists’ who we receive, and who can download images and further information on their mobile phone, following an interactive path.

For its part, the town of Ourense brought together archaeologists who traced for us the origins and particularly the sacred and legendary aspects of our towns and cities. This spirituality, which has taken various forms throughout the course of history, speaks of our belonging to the first instance of European unity: the Roman Empire. However, it continues on from then, including the pilgrims of the Middle Ages, as well as modern pilgrims and present-day walkers, all the while adopting approaches tying alternative therapy to slow tourism.

For this Café of Europe today in Royat-Chamalières, we are once again entering into historical and geographical imagination. In other words, we are going to travel without moving, but by receiving the keys to interpreting creators and designers! The “journeys”, to use this meeting’s title, will only truly exist indeed if this encounter enriches our vision of the Other and attests to our common destiny as Europeans.

Today, we will be researching stories from the past to understand our present; in this sense, we always need archives, prints, writings and the like, which make up our memory.

The first explorers, the first diplomatic journeymen were both writers and scientists: ethnologists, geographers, anthropologists... They had “the desire to grasp the real world

and the will to create a text, narrative or descriptive – providing information on time, articulating events, replacing their simple juxtaposition with syntax. Routes and Journeys, Observations and Cosmographies: in this alone, the diversity of their titles demonstrates the variety of their approaches”, wrote Yves Hersant, in one of the works, a collection of travel stories from the 15th and 16th centuries.

To this, Marc Wiltz, the moderator of the second round table, and whom I thank for being among us, adds the importance of the symbolic dimension. I quote: “If the “category” of travel geography is obvious for all who touch on travelling and on the books that bring it to life, others intervene beforehand, such as that of mythology surely, or the dreams of childhood, those of the family or of breaking up, those of expectation, fear or conquest, for which geography thus becomes the stage and revelation space from Ulysses to themselves.”

In an era when the prevailing motto is “If the message does not spread, it is dead”, the travel story or travelogue can help us to reconcile life in real time towards which everything pushes us, with the historical world in a shared time, which we need to transmit our memory to younger people.

But these Cafés, places of the imaginary and imagination, are also forward-looking places, from which the European Commission is awaiting suggestions for Europe 2020.

Finally, these Cafés are public spaces that allow us to examine how our towns were able to innovate in the past, in terms of town planning, medicine, and culture in the larger sense, by creating a culture of health and contributing to the health of culture.

Furthermore, as the following Cafés of Europe will show, our towns and cities are musical, appeal to artists, have become centres for cinema and, with new approaches open to the wider public, are extending the time of a thermal social life, originally reserved for the elite.

I had the chance to say so when opening the Café of Europe in Enghien-les-Bains, but I wish to emphasise it again: our public, inhabitants and visitors, ‘curists’ and tourists, are the democratic elite from whom we work today, alongside the European Institutions, who I thank for the support they have given us.

I wish you all enjoy this European Café, and a host of images between “Journeys and Memory”.

Thank you all again,

Christian Corne

EHTTA President