ASP SPEECH 14/12/2009

Hon. Minister,
Your Excellences,
Mr Chancellor,
Perpetual Secretaries of the three Academies,
Academics,
Laureates,
Members of our Jury,
Friends of the Onassis Foundation,

The Onassis Foundation and the influence of ancient Greek culture:

Since its creation in 1975, the Onassis Foundation has brought to life some major objectives explicitly established by Aristotle Onassis in his handwritten will: on one hand, the preservation, dissemination and impact of Hellenic culture which is the keystone of our societies and, on the other, the allocation of International Prizes.

All cultural and other activities of the Foundation aim to support projects with a tangible relation to Greece or the Hellenic civilization which is considered one of the fundamental bases of the common heritage of mankind. Culture, education, environment and social progress are the priorities in the Foundation's agenda.

Among other things, through its program of scholarships and grants, the Onassis Foundation supports the intellectual pursuit of students and researchers around the world eager to find in situ evidence of the Hellenic past or study the contemporary Hellenic Republic in its geopolitical context.

The ambitious project of the conference 'The Athens Dialogues', joined by the Institute of France, crystallizes these goals, that is, meets the challenges of our time after having reread them in the light of ancient Greek culture within a diachronic and interdisciplinary perspective.

The Onassis Cultural Center in Athens, a new multicultural space, will focus on encouraging the production of works of contemporary Greek culture and their influence outside Greece.

The creation of the Onassis Cultural Center in New York, which vibrates all activities related to Hellenic culture, is a demonstration of the scope of this cultural vocation.

These initiatives constitute the evidence of the dynamism shown by a Foundation which is willing to innovate, take risks, acknowledge and support the works and plans that seek the return to ancient wisdom. A valuable wisdom often omitted in our 'globalization' era, a wisdom of tolerance, of living together and exchanging ideas.

We wish to convey to younger generations the certainty that, beyond the borders of nations' interests, beyond the socio-political and religious conflicts, there is an axis that forms a watermark where our common culture has built its artistic monuments, architectural or intellectual, more or less fragile. This axis determines our progress in the humanistic sense. We are here to preserve this heritage and to perpetuate it.

It is in this spirit that today will be bestowed:

The Onassis International Prizes

The Aristotle Onassis International Prize in Law is the first universal prize in this discipline. By its very definition, it promotes the role of law as an instrument of cooperation between companies and nations. We are proud it is awarded to Lord Thomas Bingham. In his approach, we commend his effort to overcome the antagonism observed since ancient times between the 'dike,' the immediacy of moral ethics, the duty of the heart expressed in Sophocles' 'Antigone' and 'Νόμος' (Nomos) which intends to codify the concept of justice. A consolidation that has meaning only insofar as it advances law, again in the humanistic sense. For example, Human Rights whose intellectual property France claims, if I dare say, are of universal value.

Given that the preservation of Greek cultural heritage and its international circulation is a major concern for the Onassis Foundation, our Prize in Humanities intends to reward the two winners ex-æquo, Sir John Boardman and Professor Jean-Yves Empereur for their outstanding contribution in the field of archaeology. Both have worked outside classical Greece and highlighted places and ideas both modern and diachronous. The Onassis Prizes, presented by the Institute of France in a place dedicated to literature, arts and sciences, represent the difficult and invaluable Praise of 'Δήμος' (Demos) and of the Sophists.

The Onassis Foundation and the Institute of France

The Onassis Prizes Award Ceremony in the Dome, the place where the 'Parliament of the Learned' meets, seals the link between the Institute's centenary tradition and our relatively young Foundation.

The adoption of the Onassis Prizes by the Institute is an action of opening, both for the Foundation and for the Institute. The Onassis Prizes are now protected by a bond of hospitality, for which we are grateful. We especially appreciate the work of both Prize Committees, the Academies' Members, the French Academy, the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres and the Academy of Ethics and Political Science whose preparation was chaired by Mr. François Terré for the year 2008.

Thank you, Your Excellences, Mr. Chancellor, Perpetual Secretaries of the three Academies, Academics, Members of our Juries and all Friends of the Onassis Foundation, for having shared this special moment with us.