SPEECH BY SIR JOHN BOARDMAN

Mr Chancellor, Mr President, Excellencies, Academicians, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It is for me an exceptional honour and pleasure to be rewarded in this way by a Foundation based in Greece, the country where I have spent several happy years, and whose history and art have been my object of study for so long; and that this should happen here in the most civilised city of the modern world, and guardian of the scholarship of the ancient world. Athens – Paris – the perfect pair.

Yet in some ways it is even more extraordinary for me that I should be rewarded for doing what I have always enjoyed doing, what I have always chosen to do, and what I find it quite impossible to abandon, even for the pleasures of retirement.

How this came about is difficult to say, but it has made me think.

When I was about 8 years old my father took me to the British Museum where we saw the Assyrian and Greek sculptures; then to the Victoria and Albert Museum where I was much moved by the colossal cast of Michelangelo's David. Perhaps these had some effect. At my school the master who taught us Greek started his first lesson by demonstrating the Greek alphabet, and in the second lesson wrote up on the board lines of Homer, and showed us how we would soon be reading and enjoying the Iliad on our own. It was breath-taking. Yet the first hardback book that I bought for myself was on Chinese painting. Sadly, my father did not survive to see me even start learning Greek, but my family has always been an essential element of my career, not least my wife, a strictly non-academic artist, who helped me to understand how to use my eyes and hands effectively.

Schooldays spent in wartime London were exciting in various ways, but then, in Cambridge, I discovered that there was even more to ancient Greece than Homer, that there was an art, that there were means of getting closer to these remarkable people by studying their land and arts, as well as their literature. In those days general familiarity with Greece

and Greek art was by no means as common as it is today. The first time I ever left England was to go to Greece. The first night I ever spent out of England was in 1948 in Paris, near the Gare du Lyon, en route to Marseilles.

In the mid-1940s Greece was still, in a way, at war. I have been privileged to watch it re-invent itself into a modern state; to watch Athens grow from hardly more than a moderately sized town into a great city embracing the whole Attic plain; to watch its museums re-open – to work in them and later to send my pupils to work in them.

But Greece is far more than the land of Greece itself. As an archaeologist excavation took me outside Greece to Greek sites at Smyrna, and, later, to the coastline of Libya. Part of the achievement of ancient Greece took place in what is today Turkey, and especially in Italy. An archaeologist learns more quickly than the student of Greek literature, that any serious study of Greek antiquity is boundless, following the readiness of Greeks, ancient and modern, to travel and establish themselves far from their homeland, to which, nevertheless, they always return. In early days in Greece I met an old man on Naxos who said he has been with Kitchener at Khartoum, with his father who was selling lemonade to the British troops at a price lower than the Egyptians, a modern parallel to the Greek commercial successes of antiquity, and indeed of today.

The Greeks were always ready to acknowledge their debt to the civilisations of Egypt and the east, but the return traffic became no less influential and, for a scholar of art and archaeology, of absorbing interest. A visit to Afghanistan in 1978 made me begin to look more closely at what Greeks had carried east, with Alexander and later, and the profound influence they had on the arts and way of life of Central Asia and north India.

The English have always been fascinated by the orient, in their poetry, their travellers, their empire-building. Many of the politicians, travellers and translators were also scholars, deciphering the scripts of Mesopotamia or Asia, excavating especially in India, exploring too the physical relics of what was otherwise the purely historical record of Greeks in Asia, even a Greek kingdom in Asia, areas which have been especially well studied by French archaeologists.

Voyages of scholarly exploration have to take place in libraries, museums, and on the ground. Two weeks only in Persia opened my eyes to what the Persian Empire achieved, and also to how much of it was, in

architectural and sculptural terms, due to the influence and presence of the foreigners, including, conspicuously, the Greeks. A longer trip, with my daughter, here tonight, across China and its deserts, carried me beyond, yet not quite beyond, the Greek sphere of influence, and finally has made me turn my experience and method with interpreting Greek art and archaeology, to consideration of the arts of China and its dealings with its western neighbours, related so closely to the eastern neighbours of the Greeks.

With the years, the pleasure gained from all this, the pleasure indeed even of sharing it with others through teaching and publication, has indeed increased and diversified. So it does seem a little strange to be actually rewarded for having been able to do what I always wanted to do, f rom which I have gained so much enjoyment. It is no little satisfaction to know that my family, including my wider family of pupils, have shared this pleasure and experience – a way of life that the years have not diminished for me, but have so considerably enhanced.