

*Speech by Federal President Thomas Klestil for the inauguration of the World Congress "Enter the Past – The E-way into the Four Dimensions of Cultural Heritage" on Wednesday, April 9, 2003 in the "Festsaal" of the Wiener Rathaus*

Mr. Mayor,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure to inaugurate this World Congress here in the magnificent setting of the Vienna City Hall. In fact, this year marks the 130th anniversary of this impressive Neo-Gothic building designed by Friedrich Schmidt, which is one of the most important examples of Viennese Historicism.

The choice of this venue reflects in several ways the ideas of the topic of your Congress, since the philosophy of Historicism was to embark on a journey into the past. Vienna, with the grandeur of its Ringstrasse boulevard, constitutes an example for the vitality of Historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which developed a special aesthetics of its own from the styles and the art of bygone ages.

In architecture, painting and sculpture, the artists of this period so deeply committed to progress, were inspired by the styles of earlier periods - Gothic, Baroque, Renaissance and classical Antiquity.

However, this gathering takes us far beyond the 19th century and leads us to deliberate on the fundamental question of how we should approach history in general. Current events demonstrate that – despite strong international concern - the cultural heritage of humanity is once again exposed to unforeseeable threats. Tragic examples are the complete destruction of the two 1500-year-old Buddha statues in Afghanistan or the threat to the most important archaeological sites by the war in Iraq.

Invaluable documents containing the oldest known form of writing and the first concept of the rule of law are menaced by this current military conflict. Let us not forget that the history of Mesopotamia marks the beginning of our own European civilisation.

I, therefore, call on the international community to seek effective protection of the most important excavation sites. Wherever this makes sense, I will support all endeavours to keep the treasures of antiquity in Iraq and to prevent any plundering of these sites. Every effort has to be undertaken that the treasures of Mesopotamia do not become the object of international trade in antiques. Furthermore, assistance must be provided at all levels to museums in Iraq to facilitate their reconstruction, wherever necessary.

I mention these facts since I feel that they highlight one particularly important role the study of history ought to play: to demonstrate that the way we deal with our past has a decisive influence on present attitudes. However, the way we deal with our past in turn largely depends on the technical means of historical research. There can be no doubt that this field has made dramatic progress in recent years – a breathtaking development, which is at the very heart of this Congress. Indeed, modern computer technology allows us to embark on journeys into the past in an unprecedented, concrete and realistic way.

Thus, the old fictitious concept of a "time machine" has meanwhile become a virtual reality.

And I would even dare to say that it has become quite difficult to make our children aware that dinosaurs no longer exist in reality. Computer screens enable us to visualise periods of the history of our planet, formerly left to our imagination.

But what does this mean? It means that, to a greater extent than ever before, it is now within our power to confront large parts of the population with whatever view of history we may choose to present. This implies that it is our particular responsibility to remain deeply committed to the truth and to treat the sources of historical research with utmost care, even though I am fully aware that "historical truth" is a most relative concept.

Nevertheless, we should not only concentrate on potential risks but also make good use of the great opportunities that are offered by electronic archives and the processing and analysis of historical documents:

- ?? Reproductions of outstanding quality that help us to protect valuable originals;
- ?? the collection and management of huge amounts of data and access to historical sources;
- ?? and last, but not least, the chances offered by networking to promote close cooperation between universities, research centres and libraries.

Moreover, there is yet another dimension to the electronic management of our cultural heritage which I should like to highlight in particular: the pre-eminent role of the World Wide Web as a mediator of culture, with all its implications for education and the promotion of democracy. We all know from our own experience that searching the Internet for a quotation, a date or a historic personality will in most cases yield countless results within seconds.

Critics may object that accuracy of detail, as for example numerous results after a world wide web search, may not be equated with "education" or "knowledge". Other critics argue that surfing the Internet threatens the culture of reading books.

These objections should be taken seriously. However, entire libraries have now become electronically accessible. Virtually all of the literary works of Cicero, Shakespeare, Goethe or Kafka can be accessed via computer.

Hence, modern electronic tools providing access to information significantly contribute to the democratisation of education. Education, in turn, forms the basis for a well-functioning and stable civil society. And this is to a large extent due to the efforts of historical research and the important basic work it performs.

It is in this spirit that I wish this Congress most successful deliberations. And it is with great pleasure that I now declare open the Congress "Enter the Past".