

GOETHE MEDAL 2015

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR NEIL MACGREGOR

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Time, space and action flow together with momentum: On Goethe's birthday at the Royal Palace in Weimar, Neil MacGregor is being given the great honour of a Goethe Medal. Earlier this year, the much-discussed, influential exhibition *Germany: Memories of a Nation* at the British Museum came to an end. The man who created it "From London with Love" (as an article in *Die Zeit* was titled) generates enthusiasm in Germany; the Goethe Medal is not the only award bestowed upon him this year. This subtle and complex approach to German history from a British perspective rises above the universal clichés while conveying to the German people new ways of seeing their own history. But the impact of the exhibition goes far beyond this. It is a new method of storytelling that breaks away from rigid ways of thinking allowing a more discerning view of the world. It is telling about things, about objects that stand out as relics from the flow of history. And it is about the fundamental question of the importance, the enlightening effect that the museum exhibition, as a cultural practice, can have in politics and society.

But first I want to get to the main reason for any laudation: to the worthy person whose actions and virtues must be described according to the rules of rhetoric. Art historian Neil MacGregor was director of the National Gallery in London from 1987 to 2002, and thereafter until today director of the British Museum. He managed the two national museums very successfully, highly increasing visitor number and transforming them into living houses and global players. So much for the hard facts. What has been discussed less in public tributes is that during his 28-year tenure as museum director, he moulded standards for how a museum is shaped on the inside and which ultimately are the basis for its outward success. Behind Neil MacGregor's ethics as a management figure is a state of mind focused on respect for human dignity, or what we call humanity. Early on, Neil MacGregor implemented forms of participation in internal museum operations, for example a joint breakfast in which *each* of his many employees was able to take the floor and to contribute something from their own perspective that was not only heard but sometimes implemented. His openness, his basic trust in people – especially in a society in which social distinction plays such a major role – led to his almost incredible popularity. They earned him the nickname, or perhaps we should say pet name, "Saint Neil."

Another striking trait of Neil MacGregor is his love of language. He exhibits a keen sensitivity for the nuances and deep layers of European languages. From a Scottish, Calvinist family of physicians, Neil MacGregor learned French and German at school and, on an exchange to intensify his language skills, was sent to stay with a family in Hamburg, not least, as he himself will tell you with a twinkle in his eye, because there he would be relatively protected from "improper" religious influences. This positive and liberal experience as a youth in Germany formed the basis for his lifelong interest in the history and culture of this country. Anyone who has experienced Neil MacGregor personally in

discussions is impressed by his passion for untranslatable words, particularly for German compound words that are not easily taken apart and converted through translation into another language, but are bulky and resistant. He himself cited *Weltschmerz* or *Ichschmerz* as examples of words about which, as was the case when he read Goethe's *Werther* as a young man, one learns something about oneself; something unknown before because there were no words for it. I also recall discussions about Adenauer's concept of *Wiedergutmachung* or the *Marktferne* vaunted in German art circles. In a way, for Neil MacGregor these words, which are able to evoke complex cultural contexts, are like the objects that inspire his stories. In addition to his humanity and his love of language I would like to mention another facet of Neil MacGregor's personality, which may seem natural for an art historian and particularly a museum director, but unfortunately is encountered all too rarely: his belief in the open, creative process! As we all know, during his time as director of the National Gallery he opened the museum to great artists and let them stay there day and night. Certainly artists have always been inspired by masterpieces of past centuries, but in this case a director deliberately activated, stimulated, accelerated this process. Besides the five functions defined by ICOM - to collect, to conserve, to study, to interpret, and to exhibit - while it is now common to see the encouragement of artistic production as the sixth function of the museum, Neil MacGregor was a distinct early definer of this attitude. This culminated in the popular exhibition *Encounters: New Art from Old* (2000), in which numerous international contemporary artists reacted to the collection of the National Gallery. Not all the works that resulted from this experiment were convincing. That was the decisive factor that I learned at the time when I, like so many others, took a "pilgrimage" there: that the idea is to endure this openness of the process along with the artist, to be entirely with the artist, to take up the same risk of failure that the artist exposes herself to every day. The same process also produced magnificent masterpieces including Bill Viola's video work "The Quintet of the Astonished" based on the panel painting "Christ Crowned with Thorns" by Hieronymus Bosch (today fortunately in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen).

Neil MacGregor's characteristics - his love of humanity, of language and the open artistic and poetic process - predestined him for the role he has played in public for many decades: the role of the personal narrator, primarily on the radio, which, indeed, is mediation exclusively via the medium of language without any images. This also means that the quality of precise, dense descriptions of pictures or objects is crucial. As Bruno Latour once said, "explanation does not follow from description; it is description taken that much further." It should be remembered at this point that for German-speaking countries it was the director of the Kunstmuseum Basel, Georg Schmidt, who made modern painting accessible to an entire generation of people with his descriptions of them on the radio. In our time, Neil MacGregor's approach of reaching and educating as many people as possible (millions of them!) through his cooperation with the BBC, the offensive use of all distribution opportunities via the Internet and also in books is unique.

Around the turn of the millennium, the debate in England and America about global strategies of museums was at its peak. When Neil MacGregor became director of the British Museum in 2002, he was faced with the not exactly minor task of enabling the public a better understanding of the world and himself to be familiar with a variety of world cultures. The method subsequently developed by Neil MacGregor of developing a global and art history based on the tangible visual and tactile exhibits from the mighty inventory of his own museum reflected the personal process of appropriation. Serious concerns drove him forward: to break through Eurocentric or imperialistic interpretations of history, to correct the asymmetries that arose from privileging literate societies over the silent majority of illiterate civilizations. One of his most impressive insights from this manner of researching is

that 95% of human history could be “told in stone.” Neil MacGregor’s approach is very timely; certainly we can also feel the zeitgeist when we think of the “material turn,” the new movements in philosophy and art that seek to advance towards a new transcendence. Neil MacGregor understands his historical narratives as “feats of poetic imagination, combined with knowledge rigorously acquired and ordered.” The latter is the foundation, but only through the poetic process, through the subjective narrative, which is always also poetry, can we advance to the unknown. In doing so, Neil MacGregor allows the reader, listener, viewer plenty of room for their own imagination, whether in his sketch of German history in *Germany: Memories of a Nation* or his *History of the World in 100 Objects*. It is very fortunate for Germany that he will play a decisive role in the conception of the Humboldt Forum as a founding director. Neil MacGregor’s attitude to the world that springs from absolute contemporaneity, but points to the future from history, bears witness to his great courage to actively use museums to shape a new, more discerning, fairer image of the world characterized by deeper understanding.