



# Ambassador's Activities

2012

Distributor: French Embassy in the UK  
- Press and Communications Services -  
58 Knightsbridge, SW1X 7JT London  
E-Mail: [press@ambafrance-uk.org](mailto:press@ambafrance-uk.org)  
Web: [www.ambafrance-uk.org](http://www.ambafrance-uk.org)

---

Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to award the insignia  
of *Officier* in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur*  
to Goéry Delacôte, Chief Executive of the "At-Bristol" science centre

Bristol, 13 March 2012

Lord Mayor,  
Councillor Janke,  
Mr Moore, Mr McIlwarth,  
Sir William,  
Vice-Chancellors,  
Madam Honorary Consul,  
*Cher* Goéry Delacôte,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a huge pleasure today for me to come to At-Bristol, indisputably one of the best science centres in the country. My visit just now left a very strong impression on me. And what could be more symbolic than for me to award you the insignia of *Officier* in the *Légion d'Honneur* here, surrounded by your friends, colleagues and many other prominent figures – you who have had such an atypical career and have worked for decades to pass on the scientific culture and informal science education to the greatest number of people, and particularly to the young?

But this evening is also an important and moving occasion, because you've brought us together to say goodbye. At the end of this month you'll be leaving your post as Chief Executive of this science centre, where you will have spent seven years. At over 70, you're going to return to France – certainly not to go into what would be a well-deserved retirement, but instead to develop a network of about 20 “Exploradômes” along the lines of the first scientific education centre for young people that you created in 1999 at the *Jardin d'acclimatation* in Paris. This ambitious project will be driven by your talent and your vast experience as a scientific curator, gained in particular in San Francisco on the west coast of the United States, and then in Bristol.

Before awarding you the insignia, allow me to retrace the exemplary career which has made you the extraordinary educator you are today. Born in Anould in the Vosges during the Phoney War, your parents gave you the first name Goéry, possibly in memory of the founder of the nearby town of Epinal. From a very early age, you were naturally drawn towards physics; you showed no particular appetite for the literary disciplines, and were very successful at mathematics but found it too abstract; but deep down you were dreaming of biology! After joining the *Ecole normale supérieure* in Rue d'Ulm in Paris at the age of just

18, you refused to sit the postgraduate teaching exam in physics – despite it being an obligatory part of the degree course – and chose instead to dedicate yourself to higher education and research. You joined Pierre Aigrain’s solid state physics laboratory in 1960 to prepare a thesis there on the conduction properties of organic molecular crystals. Who would have thought that a study of doped phthalocyanine would one day lead you to take charge of the Exploratorium in San Francisco and subsequently At-Bristol?

With your thesis under your belt, you went off to teach at Algiers University, then Paris Diderot University, and continued your research. At the same time, you took an interest in education sciences and in particular how practical, hands-on learning changes young pupils’ understanding of physical phenomena.

In 1979 you were asked to join the team led by Maurice Lévy devising the *Cité des sciences et de l’industrie* in La Villette at President Giscard d’Estaing’s behest. This opportunity was to be decisive in shaping your future career, as it gave you the chance to visit equivalent sites like the Exploratorium in San Francisco, run by Frank Oppenheimer, also a physicist, and younger brother of the famous Julius Robert. You chose to put special emphasis on interactivity and favoured a thematic, multidisciplinary approach, bringing in the humanities and social sciences.

In 1982, the head of the CNRS – France’s national scientific research centre – asked you to become its director of scientific and technical information, and you took charge of the project leading to the creation in 1988 of the Scientific and Technical Information Institute (INIST). This institute went on to sign a partnership with Google to make 13 million bibliographical references freely accessible online. Once again, you helped create a top-class tool key to disseminating scientific and technical information.

While very busy with your work at the CNRS, you also became chairman of the board and scientific director of France’s national institute for pedagogical research in 1985.

In 1991 you were selected by the Exploratorium’s board to take charge of that incredible museum in San Francisco.

For 15 years you were in your element. First of all, you were totally seduced by the west coast (although you still prefer the energy of New York). Secondly, you're passionate about the way the Americans work, so different from our own. And finally, you relished the huge challenge of giving the Exploratorium a new boost and making it the best science museum in the United States, and even the world – the prototype for interactive museums. To that end, you fused Oppenheimer's method with your own experience, seeking out excellence, defining an international strategy and creating a technical platform for developing modern, interactive displays. It would become a model for mini-Exploratoriums the world over, including in Asia, Latin America, Europe and several US cities. Under your impetus, visitor numbers grew in a decade to more than 600,000 a year.

But your time on the west coast came to an end, and you arrived in Bristol in 2005 to take charge of At-Bristol, this centre for public access to scientific culture whose slogan is "Bringing science to life!" Visitors are invited to explore and to ask themselves ever more complex questions as their visit progresses, questioning their own mental processes themselves. The centre had experienced recurrent financial difficulties since it opened in 2000, but very quickly you took the measures required to balance the establishment's budget. Today the museum receives more than 200,000 visitors a year, including 40,000 school students, and has a turnover of £4.5 million, with no state funding. To operate, it seeks support from foundations and local businesses, as well as using its own resources.

At-Bristol has a strikingly large number of interactive exhibits, and this is where its real strength lies. Among so many innovations and initiatives, I want to single out the importance which, to your credit, you attached to creating a workshop to maintain and develop portable exhibits, attracting the best exhibit designers in the country and giving scientists regular opportunities to come and explain to the public at large the significance of their research. Your imagination, your great ability to assemble teams that are passionate about what they're taking on, your managerial skills and natural ease in finding and convincing people to contribute to what is one of the UK's foremost centres, have given At-Bristol a completely new lease of life. When you leave it today you can do so with a sense that you've accomplished what you set out to do.

In both San Francisco and Bristol, your work has helped bring about a revolution in scientific and technical museography. Fortunately, science museums in France, too, have benefited

from these new kinds of exhibitions, and it's all the more encouraging that this is thanks to a fellow Frenchman with a brilliant, remarkable international career that does credit to our country's excellence in this field.

It is to your sheer enthusiasm and your several-decades-long career – devoted to bringing science to a wider audience by treating subject matter in as entertaining a way as possible – that Prime Minister François Fillon wanted to pay tribute when he suggested to President Sarkozy, the Order's *Grand Maître*, that you be honoured with this magnificent promotion in the *Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur*.

For all these reasons, the French Republic, through me, would like to pay a well-earned tribute to your extremely eminent career. Goéry Delacôte, *au nom de Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Officier dans l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur*./.