



# Ambassador's Activities

2013

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

at the ceremony to award the insignia of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres  
to Neil Stratford (*Commandeur*), David Cairns (*Commandeur*),  
Terry Gilliam (*Officier*) and Iwona Blazwick (*Officier*)

London, 13 November 2013

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great joy to welcome you to the French Residence for a special celebration.

This evening we've prepared for you an ambitious compendium of the arts: from Romanesque sculpture to contemporary painting, from music to writing, from cinema to acting – all represented by four figures who have done them credit through their exceptional careers.

In honouring the careers of Iwona Blazwick, David Cairns, Neil Stratford and Terry Gilliam, we're also paying tribute to the unbridled creativity that makes London such a welcoming city for so many artists.

All four of you have helped broaden the field of your disciplines by drawing on the European cultural roots we share. France has often been given pride of place, and I thank you for it.

For this very human contribution to our world and our cultural values, I'm happy to present you with the signs of recognition the French Republic reserves for the most sincere servants of the arts and letters.

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*Cher* Neil Stratford,

In you, we salute a herald of medieval France and a guardian of its finest treasures.

From Vézelay to Cluny, your career reflects a vocation – that of a British knight proudly flying the colours of France’s history, defender of an age often obscured by the fireworks of the Renaissance.

While there is something of the contemplative monk about you – the spiritual companion of Narcissus and Goldmund – you are above all a modern-day seeker, thriving in both universities and museums, alongside your wife Jenny, who can boast that she publishes as often as you about medieval manuscripts. The tribute being paid to you this evening is for her too.

Born in London in 1938, you went to school at Marlborough College in Sussex. A charismatic classics teacher, Alan Whitehorn, initiated you so well in the mysteries of Latin that he diverted you for good from the career path taken by your doctor parents. With their blessing, at the age of 20 you left to devote yourself to English literature at Cambridge, in the historic setting of Magdalene College.

You must admit, *cher* Neil Stratford, that there was a certain historical echo here: you spent three years north of the River Cam in the same house where Benedictine monks had sheltered from the temptations of the city to study canon law at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Following in their footsteps, you strolled in the garden where, only recently, the “Magdalene Hoard” was found, a rare collection of medieval coins that is now the pride of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

You speak affectionately of this intimate, hallowed place of study, which confirmed your interest in medieval literature.

*Cher* Neil Stratford,

Like Everyman's, your path of initiation would be strewn with traps and temptations running counter to your destiny.

You succumbed to two of those temptations: firstly, sport – cricket to be precise, which you practised as a virtual professional.

And the second temptation was money, which swept you away from Cambridge after you graduated and set you down in the City of London, where you worked for merchant bankers from 1961 to 1963. Although your brother accompanied you there and flourished, you say it profoundly bored you.

In 1963, you left to join an institution at the height of its revival: the Courtauld Institute, where you came under the influence of the erudite Christopher Hohler. Under the leadership of George Zarnecki, you began a thesis on Vézelay and Romanesque sculpture, which would lead to your 1984 work *La sculpture oubliée de Vézelay*.

At the age of 37, you were plucked from Westfield College, where you were teaching, and offered a job that can't be refused: Keeper of Medieval and Later Antiquities at the British Museum.

For 23 years you contributed to the changes at the British Museum, the first public museum, founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for all “studious and curious persons” and now welcoming six million visitors a year. You persuaded the museum’s three successive directors to support your acquisitions: mainly religious art, icons, ivories and enamels from monasteries that flourished from the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century until their dissolution in the 16<sup>th</sup>. You passionately recreated shrines whose constituent parts had been scattered to the four corners of the globe. And you published those discoveries in your *Catalogue of Medieval Enamels in the British Museum* in 1993.

*Cher* Neil Stratford,

You travel to all the world’s museums to get to know their collections better. But France remains at the heart of your research. You spend whole weeks driving around Burgundy, the cradle of Romanesque art, armed with your camera, immortalizing column heads and vaults in churches emblematic of a style close to your heart. The archives of Mâcon hold no secrets for you!

From this, a reference work emerged: *Studies in Burgundian Romanesque Sculpture*, published in 1998, the year when you left the British Museum.

For 40 years, your expertise has been in demand from the finest French institutions; you’ve been a corresponding member of the Académie de Dijon since 1975, a foreign member of the Société nationale des Antiquaires de France since 1985, a foreign corresponding member of

the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres since 2002 and an associate member since 2012.

You sit on the scientific committees of the Société française d'Archéologie, Vézelay Abbey and the Centre des Monuments nationaux, and you've chaired the scientific committee of Cluny Abbey since being appointed by our Minister of Culture in 2005. In May 2011, this commitment was rewarded with the Grand Prix de la Société française d'Archéologie.

*Cher* Neil Stratford,

We've recently had the good fortune to see you spending half of every year in France. You've been imparting your knowledge in our best schools – the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in 2000, the Ecole Nationale des Chartes between 2000 and 2003 – to students whose calibre you admire.

Thanks to your meticulous works, the full value of French medieval heritage is now recognized.

I'm thinking of your two works devoted to Souvigny church in 2002 and 2005, and your comprehensive survey, *Corpus de la Sculpture de Cluny* in 2010.

You edited and co-wrote an extraordinary work retracing the history of that place, *Cluny 910-2010: Onze siècles de rayonnement*: such a fine promotion of our heritage that President Hollande offered it to Chancellor Merkel when she visited France recently!

*Cher* Neil Stratford,

Through your passionate research, you've enabled us to preserve and disseminate knowledge of a heritage of which we're proud. For this invaluable work, carried out for 50 years in cooperation with the French institutions and universities, I'm happy to award you this evening the Republic's highest distinction for servants of the arts.

*Neil Stratford, au nom du Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication, nous vous faisons Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.*

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*Cher* David Cairns,

Like your friend Neil Stratford, you took on a towering figure in French culture and restored his prestige at a time when he was on the verge of being forgotten.

It's fair to say that the modern Berlioz revival largely began in the UK. His finest successes, today in Parisian concert halls are due largely to the passion of British conductors: from the late lamented Colin Davis, who passed away a few months ago, to John Eliot Gardiner, Roger Norrington and Simon Rattle, to name but a few.

When we look closely at the story of this group of Berlioz champions, *cher* David Cairns, we find that you play a key role in it. Not least, you began Sir Colin Davis's love affair with the composer's music, and you are Chairman of the Berlioz Society, founded in 1952.

I want to say how profoundly grateful we are to you for enabling today's music lovers to enjoy Berlioz.

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Born in Essex in 1926, you were extremely sensitive to music and early on you became aware of the musician's practical needs, the urge to join forces and bring orchestral scores to life.

So in 1950, you persuaded a 22-year-old clarinetist, Colin Davis, to put on a concert performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with you in Oxford. The experience was decisive; a new ensemble was born, and you called it the Chelsea Opera Group...so called because you were living in Chelsea at the time.

This group – in which it seems you sang and played percussion – was a fantastic springboard for the greatest musicians, from Simon Rattle to Kiri Te Kanawa. Colin Davis was its first appointed conductor, performing Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* and *Romeo and Juliet* back in the 1960s.

Since then, the Chelsea Opera Group has continually staged concert performances of what are occasionally little known operas, contributing to the renaissance of works which have since entered the repertoire of the biggest opera houses.

Just over 30 years later, you formed another amateur orchestra with a group of friends, *The Thorington Players*, which you conduct. Many of your concerts are for charity.

Berlioz dominates these two ensembles' repertoire. And indeed, over the years you have forged a steady dialogue with the French composer.

But you weren't immediately won over by him.

In your early twenties, when your sister made you listen to a recording of the *Fantastic Symphony*, the music made absolutely no sense to you.

In 1957, however, Covent Garden produced *The Trojans*. Many people were overwhelmed by the music; there was talk of a modern Berlioz revival. Your interest was kindled. Your

cousin played you an old 78 recording of *The Childhood of Christ*. This time you were charmed by – in your words – “the strange sweetness and the purity of the piece”, and when you were lent what was to prove a decisive book, Berlioz’s *Mémoires*, you became captivated by his personality.

In the 1960s, you set to work on your English translation of Berlioz’s memoirs. The critics were unanimous: your translation was the first to do full justice to the original.

While some people might sit back after such a success, for you it was only the start of a long love of Berlioz. You became the figurehead of the famous “Berlioz revival” in the UK.

Convinced that there were still documents to be explored, you contacted Berlioz’s descendants and unearthed a treasure trove of unpublished correspondence and other texts. You’ve said that you owe Yvonne Reboul-Berlioz a profound debt of gratitude for trusting you enough to let you turn her apartment in the Rue du Ranelagh upside down.

In 1989, the public became acquainted with the fruit of 20 years of research, a labour of love: you published the first volume of your almost 1,600-page-long summa: Berlioz’s biography.

This first part painted an unknown portrait of Berlioz: that of the provincial boy, son of the village physician, struggling to move to Paris and make a name for himself on the Parisian scene and distracted by his romantic impulses.

It won many prizes.

Ten years later, you published the second volume, to equal acclaim.

You devoted it to the genesis of his greatest works, starting with his masterpiece, *The Trojans*, and recount his friendship with Mendelssohn, Liszt and Wagner. You ended with a man

crushed by personal tragedy and haunted by the fear of his music being forgotten after his death.

Critics are unanimous in saying that this landmark book in classical music history will be difficult to surpass.

*Cher* David Cairns,

Berlioz was a musician, conductor, author and eminent journalist for the *Journal des Débats*... Basically you're like him: you've got many strings to your bow.

You've written for The Evening Standard, The Financial Times and The New Statesman, and were chief music critic of the Sunday Times in the eighties, having also been music critic and arts editor of The Spectator.

Your witty, keen analysis is a delight for your readers and your students both in the United States and at Merton College, Oxford.

And you continue to carry the torch: this very evening sees *Romeo and Juliet* at the Barbican, part of a special Berlioz cycle which has been on through November, and for which you took to the stage only last Wednesday to talk about Berlioz and the Romantic orchestra.

*Cher* David Cairns,

Berlioz apparently wanted to live 140 years to see whether his music would finally stir interest. Thanks to you, the job has been done. You have our gratitude for this.

David Cairns, *au nom du Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication, nous vous faisons Commandeur dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres.*

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*Cher* Terry Gilliam,

You need no introduction, even though – as you might expect – it's going to be a pleasure for me to go back over a few juicy and sometimes misunderstood episodes in your life.

What a joy, anyway, to have you with us at the Residence this evening! You've forged such affectionate and close links with France – with people from René Goscinny to Albert Dupontel, from Chris Marker to, more recently, Mélanie Thierry, and from your successes at the Cannes festival to your so-often-expressed love of films like *Napoléon* by Abel Gance and *Les Enfants du Paradis* by Marcel Carné.

Your French adventure began at the age of 25, when you completed a hitch-hiking tour of Europe in Paris and didn't have enough money left to return to the United States. That's when René Goscinny – it was 1965 and he'd just created *Astérix* and *Le Petit Nicolas* – asked you to illustrate a two-page spread in the comic book *Pilote*, of which he was the editor-in-chief... It was a short-lived collaboration, but it earned you a ticket back across the Atlantic!

But your life very quickly took a decisive turn when you decided to leave the USA and settle in London and when, in 1968, you obtained British nationality.

That's when you helped give birth to Monty Python, a group you formed with John Cleese – whom you'd met a few years earlier during his trip to the United States – and your associates Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Michael Palin and Terry Jones.

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This tremendous joint venture – in which of course you were a co-author and one of the actors, but also the illustrator, with carte blanche to choose the animations linking the sketches – gave rise to five years of unprecedented success on television. On BBC1 your programme was dubbed the *Flying Circus*, and your first sketches, which quickly achieved cult status, also hit the big screens in 1971 in *And Now for Something Completely Different*.

The three feature films that followed (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Life of Brian* and *The Meaning of Life*) were all highly acclaimed box-office successes for the group. The last of them won the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury at the Cannes festival in 1983.

Let me point out, too, *cher* Terry Gilliam, that 18 years later, you've become a prestigious jury member of that same Cannes festival. You showed yourself to be particularly generous towards French cinema, because that year – and I have no doubt you played some part in it – Isabelle Huppert received the Best Actress and Benoît Magimel the Best Actor award, while Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste* (*The Piano Teacher*) scooped the Grand Prix.

Your feature films also achieved success, with *Bandits*, *bandits* (or *Time Bandits*), which you directed and produced, and then *Brazil*, one of your films with the greatest cult following today. And *Brazil* enabled you to set yourself apart from Hollywood because, although it meant considerably delaying its release in the United States, you flatly refused to yield to the demands of your American distributor, who wanted to impose a happy ending.

Your relationship with France has been very close throughout your career. Following in the footsteps of Georges Méliès, in 1988 you directed *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, also

a homage to the famous silent film by the French film-maker, who founded our country's first cinema studio. You also embarked on a very personal adaptation of *La Jetée* by the French director Chris Marker, entitled *Twelve Monkeys*, a film co-produced with France, just like *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* a few years later.

A very moving encounter with the director Pierre Etaix was organized in 2010 at the Ciné Lumière of the *Institut français* in London, at the showing of his film *Le Grand Amour*.

In 2011 you decided to move into theatre, directing your own version of Hector Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* (*The Damnation of Faust*). David Cairns, whom I've just decorated, said Berlioz conceived the work for "an ideal stage of the imagination", and yet your staging won critical and public acclaim.

But, *cher* Terry Gilliam, because no success could divert you from your inordinate love of cinema, you returned to the form to direct *The Zero Theorem*, a new co-production with France in which you offered a magnificent role to the brilliant young French actress Mélanie Thierry.

Pending its release, critical success is already on the cards. At the latest Venice festival – otherwise rather morbid in its themes – *Le Figaro*'s headline proclaimed, "the Britons Gilliam and Frears save Venice", with films that were invigorating and humorous, despite their serious subject-matter.

You said not long ago that you're convinced people die when they're no longer able to dream and that, contrary to what most people think, reality is indissociable from the imaginary. Well, the French paper judged you to be "in perfect imaginative health".

*Cher* Terry Gilliam, as far as I'm concerned, I'm convinced you're going to continue making us dream and laugh for many years to come.

I can also tell you that many young French talents constantly claim kinship with you and regularly testify to the respect they have for your work and the influence it has on theirs. Let's cite, among the most famous, Alain Chabat, but also your friend Albert Dupontel, who is so proud that you accepted acting roles in some of his films, like that of the terrible convict in *Neuf mois ferme*, which he was thrilled to come and present to you in London a week ago.

I'll finish with one of my favourite quotes from you. You say, "When I'm not filming I'm not happy... The problem is that when I'm filming I'm not happy either."

*Cher* Terry Gilliam, I hope that this distinction – even if it doesn't make you happy – testifies to our country's deep gratitude for your whole body of work. And please take it as the most sincere encouragement to continue being who you are, so that you can carry on surprising us... however you see fit!

*Terry Gilliam, au nom du Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication, nous vous faisons Officier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres.*

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*Chère Iwona Blazwick,*

In contemporary art, if there's one thing that's been getting collectors, curators and gallery owners excited for several years now, it's emerging art. In this field, London has proven itself to be a unique breeding ground for creativity, and one where you've had a meteoric career that inspires curators all over the world.

From the ICA via the Tate Modern to the Whitechapel Gallery, your path echoes the history of the successive temples of emerging art in London.

But while your name is associated with the London scene, you've also been keen to highlight the French artists we love, like Sophie Calle, Laure Prouvost and, in a few days' time, Kader Attia.

This distinction is a tribute to this pioneering work on behalf of the artists of our time.

*Chère Iwona Blazwick,*

Championing artists who haven't yet stood the test of time means taking constant risks. However, your 30-year career has been faultless, proving the timeliness of your vision and intuition.

Brought up in south-east London, you first thought of imitating your architect parents and then wavered between literature and art history. You chose the best of both worlds and opted for a joint degree in English and Fine Art at the University of Exeter, completing your studies with a thesis on Henry Moore.

This dual talent – writing and thinking up exhibitions – is still your trademark today. Whereas many curators exhaust themselves fundraising and livening up their spaces, you manage to keep the detachment necessary for a high-quality reflexion on “art in progress”. And here we must pay tribute to the stringency of thought you share with your philosopher husband, Richard Noble, Head of the Art Department at Goldsmiths College.

You knocked on the door of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), a bubbling laboratory of ideas which put on exhibitions of Picasso, Georges Braque and Jackson Pollock, without forgetting the first flashes of pop art, op art and brutalist art.

As assistant curator alongside Sandy Nairne, who is today Director of the National Portrait Gallery, you listened to Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Edward Said and Frank Kermode debating art, politics and social issues. You investigated anthropology, psychoanalysis, feminism and literary theory. And above all, you discovered an art that is no longer object-based but ideas-based, sometimes reduced to a pencil mark on the wall, a word or a brick – a revelation that opened up for you an infinite field of aesthetic possibilities.

Your first exhibition, *Objects and Sculpture* in 1981, was a masterstroke, with names that still shine in the contemporary art firmament: Anish Kapoor, Antony Gormley and Richard Deacon.

In 1986, you were appointed Director of Exhibitions, a post you held for six years. In 1991, you offered Damien Hirst his first exhibition in a public art centre. And by exhibiting sculptures based on fag-ends and a colostomy bag in a glass box – with a price tag of £12,000 – you caused a sensation.

The rest is history: with Damien Hirst, contemporary art experienced a tremendous resurgence of interest, and the British art scene was the main beneficiary.

*Chère Iwona Blazwick,*

From 1984 to 1986 you experienced the reality of independent spaces, heading an artists' space, the Air Gallery in London. As is proper, the space had neither a budget nor staff. You painted the walls and acted as a security guard and cleaning lady – a necessary apprenticeship, you've said, rewarded by the festive atmosphere prevailing in the place, where private viewings tended to descend into drunken free-for-alls!

In 1997, Nicholas Serota called you back to the institutional world: the Tate Modern was changing its image and a new site had to be occupied on the south bank of the Thames and a programme put in place before the opening. The new craze was site-specific work: artists creating works commissioned for a given space. You devised the much-talked-about Unilever Series, which gives an artist carte blanche to fill the Turbine Hall every autumn. The first edition in 2000 was a triumph, with the French sculptress Louise Bourgeois, who created three nine-metre-tall towers for the Tate.

In 2001 someone suggested you apply for the post of Director of the Whitechapel, an historic institution in the East End, founded in 1901 with the aim of taking art to the disadvantaged population of east London. It was quite a challenge: abandoning the Tate's prestigious cruise ship to take the helm of a small public gallery that had pioneered pop art in the 1950s and championed the avant-garde under Nicholas Serota's leadership in the 1980s.

You signed the contract, unaware that an ambitious expansion programme had just been validated that would require you to show extraordinary fundraising abilities. The adjacent building, which housed the former municipal library, was up for sale. It was a unique opportunity, but it came at a cost: £13.5 million. The Heritage Lottery Fund supported you, but you also galvanized your artist friends, who donated works of art worth £2.5 million which you sold at auction. Although you spent your first years on a building site of plaster and brick, 10 years later the Whitechapel's influence is unprecedented, with challenging, free exhibitions attracting half a million visitors a year.

In the Bloomberg Commission you established a recognized series. And noticing that the Turner Prize had been won by only three women artists since it was established in 1984, you created a prize specially for them. This year, the MaxMara prize enabled Laure Prouvost to raise her profile; we thank you for this.

*Chère Iwona Blazwick,*

In 2008, Boris Johnson appointed you Chair of the London Cultural Strategy Group.

We're very happy that you've agreed to speak about your exceptional career at the Festival Histoire de l'Art that we're organizing at the *Institut français*.

This distinction tonight reaffirms our deep recognition.

*Iwona Blazwick, au nom du Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication, nous vous faisons Officier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres./.*