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| Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,  Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of World Puppetry Day **21 March 2021** |

Celebrated since 2003 on the initiative of the Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA – the International Puppetry Association), World Puppetry Day is an opportunity to honour what is an exceptionally rich and ancient art.

The skill of subtle movements. The interplay between gesture and illusion, between shadow and light. The mastery of costume, form and sculpture. The art of dramatization, of concision and symbolism. Technical virtuosity and poetry. The art of puppetry is universal. It is a consummate art.

To paraphrase Paul Claudel, puppets are words which act. Puppets, through this actual narration, can embody the everyday just as well as they can bring to life tales and stories from long ago. An inestimable manifestation of heritage, the art of puppetry – whether the puppets are part of a solemn ritual or set against a modern-day backdrop – is also utterly contemporary.

This is borne out by UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which to date contains 12 different forms of this art. From Cambodian Sbek Thom to Slovak and Czech puppet theatre, each form represents an exceptional concentration of skill and tradition and a shared heritage which must be protected.

This commitment is that much more important today, when this fragile art faces unprecedented challenges.

First and foremost, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has reminded us just how much we need puppets' evocative and inspiring power. At the same time, however, it has also endangered the survival of puppetry, robbing countless puppeteers of the conditions in which to ply their trade, depriving them of their often very unstable income. UNIMA’s efforts to financially support the sector's cultural agents are thus invaluable and must be widely supported.

Beyond the crisis, however, the art of puppetry faces the same threats as those faced by cultural diversity in general. And for this in-person art, the digital transition of cultural life is of particular concern.

It was thus in order to outline a vision for the future and to think of ways to overcome the crisis that last April, UNESCO launched the global ResiliArt debate movement, which brings together artists and culture professionals to reflect on the challenges confronting the sector. Thanks to UNIMA’s support, in 2020, more than 15 debates took place with puppetry experts from around the world. We must now draw lessons from the experience and mobilize collectively to ensure the continued existence and spread of this art form and ensure that it continues to inspire us.

On World Puppetry Day, UNESCO pays tribute to all those who are keeping this ancient art alive with passion and, in these strange times, with courage.