

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF ICOMOS

Dear Colleagues,

The 15th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS will take place from 17 to 21 October 2005 in Xi'an. This old imperial city reflects both the glory of the past and the dynamic vigour of today's modern China. Our Chinese ICOMOS colleagues and the authorities of Xi'an City are working hard to ensure that our General Assembly will be an unforgettable event and look forward to welcoming you and to showing you their achievements in the preservation of their cultural heritage. The present issue of *ICOMOS News* introduces the programme of the General Assembly developed in the past months together with our Chinese hosts. The title of the scientific symposium is: *Monuments and sites in their setting – conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes*. All over the world questions arise on how to deal with the environment of monuments and sites. Such questions are not only of particular interest to China, where large-scale economic development continues at breathtaking speed and our colleagues are faced with unprecedented challenges in all fields of monument conservation. Under these circumstances the *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China*, edited by Zhang Bai, President of ICOMOS China, will of course play a major role in our discussions. Besides, I hope that a host of contributions to the symposium will come from the members of our National and International Scientific Committees.

This second General Assembly in Asia – after Sri Lanka in 1993 – will enable our members to become acquainted with the outstanding cultural treasures of China in general and with the cultural heritage of the Province of Shaanxi in particular. The latter is a region where I was active for more than a decade in my former function as Curator General of the Bavarian State Conservation Office. The opportunity not just to visit these monuments and sites but to actually take part in their preservation in close co-operation with the Museum of the Terracotta Army and the Office for the Protection of Cultural Properties in Shaanxi Province has been one of the outstanding experiences of my career.

Since its accidental discovery in 1974 during the digging of a well shaft the famous Terracotta Army of the First Chinese Emperor Qin Shihuang (259-210 BC) has fascinated millions of people all over the world and, like the Great Wall, has become a synonym of the outstanding achievements of Chinese culture. Considering the fact that these sculptures were in wet soil for over 2000 years the analysis and the preservation of the polychromy of the Terracotta Army has been an extraordinary challenge to modern conservation science. Whereas at the beginning of our co-operation the structural consolidation of the partition walls between the individual rows of terracotta figures was a main problem, attention quickly shifted to the almost unsolvable problems of the polychromy. The results of the long years of Chinese-German co-operation can be found in the new ICOMOS series *Monuments and Sites (The Terracotta Army of the First Chinese Emperor Qin Shihuang, vol. II, 2001)*. The state of research on this topic was also presented in 1999 at an international conference co-organised by ICOMOS Germany and published in the same ICOMOS series (*The Polychromy of Antique Sculptures and the Terracotta Army of the First Chinese Emperor, vol. III, 2002*). Part of our projects in Shaanxi Province was the rescue operation for the grotto temple of the Great Buddha (Dafosi) in Binxian (published in the *ICOMOS Journals of the German National Committee, vol. XVII, 1996*). The grotto with the Buddha presented extreme challenges and new methods had to be applied. Despite the difficult task to be mastered, in the course of the five years of research at Dafosi it was possible to develop a conservation programme – since then successfully completed – that protects the grotto and its three main figures against collapsing and the dangers of earthquakes. The experiences gained from saving the Great Buddha of Dafosi were a crucial prerequisite for the attempts started in 2002 by an international ICOMOS team to save the remains of the Bamiyan Buddhas, which had been blown up by the Taliban.

Dear Colleagues, I hope to have the opportunity to provide you with some more information on this international co-operation when we all meet in Xi'an and the Province of Shaanxi on the occasion of the General Assembly. As President of ICOMOS it is an honour and a pleasure to heartily invite you to this General Assembly, which I am sure will be organised in an exemplary way by our host Zhang Bai and his colleagues. After all, at this 15th General Assembly the 40th anniversary of ICOMOS will not only enable us to look back at the history of our non-governmental organisation, which began with the Venice Charter, but also to look ahead to a future where we all should combine our efforts to fight for the preservation of the world's cultural heritage.

Michael PETZET
President of ICOMOS