CULTIVATED TERRITORIES

The Mediterranean: a Card to Play

Culture as a Strategic Asset: Cohesion and Influence

MINISTÈRE
DE L'EUROPE
ET DES AFFAIRES
ÉTRANGÈRES

Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité

AViTeM

Agency for sustainable Mediterranean cities and territories

İZMİR
BÜYÜKŞEHİR
BELEDİYESİ

CULLETTIVITÀ DI CORSICA
COLLECTIVITÉ DE CORSE

Vitrolles
vivre ensemble

MÉTROPOLE
NICE CÔTE D'AZUR

Foreword

“Art and culture can become key players in territorial planning, just like urban planners or developers, in order to support transitions.” (Maud le Floc’h, at the Vitrolles Open Forum, May 2025). AVITEM (Agency for Sustainable Mediterranean Cities and Territories), as lead partner, has set up the “Territoires Cultivés” project with this in mind: culture as a driver for territorial transformation .

Launched in October 2023, the project echoes the principles of the New European Bauhaus, which combines aesthetics, sustainability and inclusion in territorial transformation. It forms part of the “Clés en main” call for decentralised cooperation projects launched by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

It brings together three French local authorities–the Collectivité de Corse, the City of Nice and the City of Vitrolles–with the Metropolitan Municipality of Izmir in Turkey.

This project has made it possible to the establishment of a partnership with the École de Condé, with the aim of giving an operational and educational dimension to the challenges and prospects for action discussed during the various open forums. Students on the school’s Master’s programme in “Research, Design, Innovation and Development’ were thus tasked with devising demonstration projects illustrating the link between culture and territorial transition.

“Territoires Cultivés” is therefore a project for the sharing of expertise between several French and Turkish local authorities –led by AVITEM–and for the educational and professional application of these ideas.

Each partner organised the following:

- Nice Forum: 28-29 November 2024
- Vitrolles Forum: 23-24 May 2025
- Corsica Forum: 19-20 June 2025
- Izmir Symposium: 4-5 September 2025

The aim of these events was to foster dialogue between professionals in the fields of the environment, urban planning and culture, and to draw on the practical experience of these four local authorities to collectively produce guidelines and commitments that formed the basis of the "Manifesto of Mediterranean Cities of Culture and Ecology". This Manifesto, co-drafted with the support of the group of associated experts and the AVITEM project team alongside the partner stakeholders, was signed at the Izmir Symposium and is intended to serve as a framework for a network of territories and stakeholders, designed to expand to include as many signatories as possible.

The programme is therefore part of a process that will extend beyond the current project, the ultimate aim being that the network thus established can thrive and develop, thereby ensuring the continuity and evolution of initiatives beyond the project's boundaries, notably through a Cultivated Territories II project.

This project will therefore have enabled:

- to deepen reflection on culture as a driver of territorial transition by fostering concrete links between culture and planning for sustainable development;
- to collectively draft a Manifesto, a commitment endorsed and signed by the partner local authorities and open to all. This document invites cities and institutions to cooperate, integrate cultural approaches

into planning and mobilise artists, residents and local authorities to build collective initiatives;

- to identify concrete examples of cultural and planning projects in the partner regions with a view to establishing living labs;
- to use this identification process to prepare applications for the next phase of the programme, Territoires Cultivés II, the aim of which will be the operational implementation of these living lab initiatives.

In parallel, the project also involves producing transferable booklets that serve as "guides to collective action". These documents are co-produced by the AVITEM project team and the expert group "POLAU and associated experts", comprising: Maud le Floc'h (cultural planner and director of POLAU), Jean-François Chougnet (historian and cultural administrator), Valérie Astesano (director of culture and heritage, Vitrolles), Amine Benaissa (architect-urban planner, consultant), and with the support of Cleo Smits (cultural operator).

These publications build on practical experience and discussions arising from the forums and the Symposium.

They are structured around four booklets:

- **Booklet 1: Mediterranean culture as a card to play**
In the context of international reconfiguration: how can the Mediterranean's long cultural history be a determining factor in the region's future positioning?

- **Booklet 2: Culture as territorial engineering**
How can the cultural sector contribute to the ecological transition of territories?

- **Booklet 3: Towards a laboratory of cultural projects and transitions**

This booklet outlines the design of experimental projects in each partner territory, providing exemplary illustrations of collaboration between actors in territorial transition (planning, ecology) and cultural actors.

- **Booklet 4: 3 Forums, 1 Symposium**

A summary of the round-table discussions, exchanges and opening addresses

Summary

Introduction

If you ask *ChatGPT* about "Mediterranean culture as a playing card", this is its response.

It suggests creating a card titled "The Mediterranean Sun"

Visual description:
A blazing sun at its zenith illuminates an azure sea. Olive trees sway in the wind, a fisherman in a boat casts his net, and vineyards climb up a white hill. In the background: a Greek temple, an Andalusian square, a minaret, Byzantine mosaics.

Cultural significance:
A symbol of light, fertility and intercultural dialogue (Latin, Arab, Berber, Greek, Ottoman...), this card represents the diversity and unity of the Mediterranean basin.

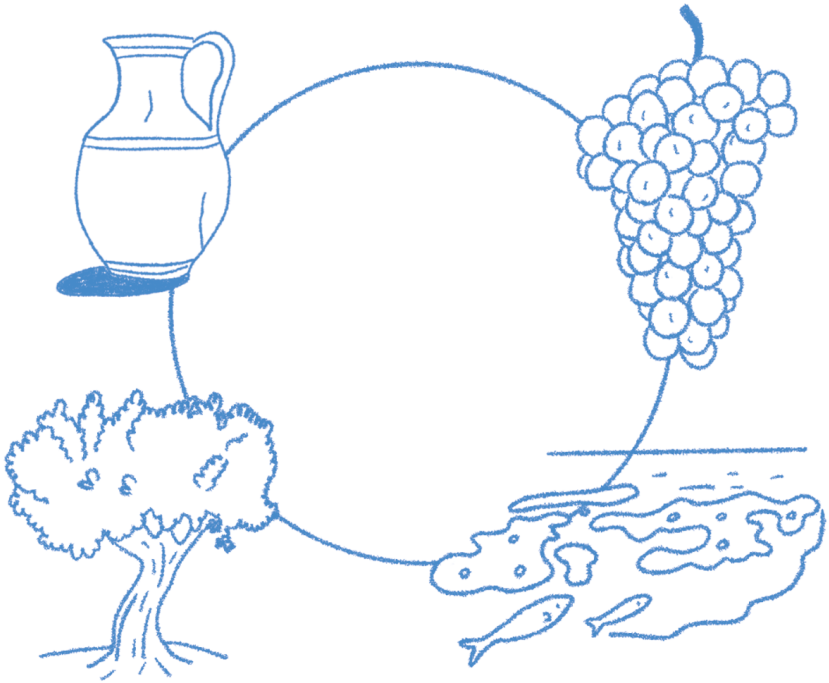
Special ability (in a fictional card game):
"Alliance of Shores": Allows two civilisations to unite, creating a cultural exchange that increases wealth or wisdom.

Associated elements:

- Spices & Herbs (thyme, saffron, coriander)
- Art & Music (oud, flamenco, mosaics, ceramics)
- Food (olive oil, flatbread, grapes, grilled fish)

While somewhat simplistic this answer may be, it aptly illustrates the Mediterranean imagination through its clichés of landscapes and food, but also its rich blend of cultures across both shores. It highlights the diversity and unity of the Mediterranean basin.

Nevertheless, the seemingly simple question of how the Mediterranean is represented is quite revealing, as evidenced



by this anecdote recounted by Edgard Morin: “Geographical maps, and by extension our mental representations, prevent us from seeing the Mediterranean. I realised this in Valencia, where, having to give a lecture on the Mediterranean, I asked for a map of it. The map, sought everywhere, was nowhere to be found: there were maps of Europe, Asia and Africa, but no map of the Mediterranean. And yet, for thousands of years, this sea was the cradle of civilisation and carried within it the fullness of civilisation. During the Roman Empire, it was literally the centre of a temporarily pacified world. It was the lands that surrounded the sea. Then, from the 16th century onwards, it came to be known as the sea in the midst of the lands, the Mediterranean. This name was a consequence of the

development of continental civilisations. Today, that fullness has become emptiness; the sea has become a border."[1]

One might add that, depending on the country one is in, the cartographic representation will shift in perspective. Thus, in Tbilisi, at the National Museum, the Mediterranean extends as far as the Caucasus and excludes the Iberian Peninsula. In Venice, at the Correr Museum, the focus shifts, but without reaching as far as Gibraltar. In Lisbon, Madeira and the Azores are included...

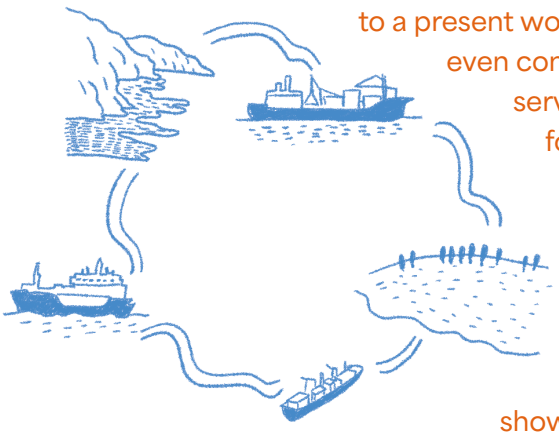
Geographical map, playing card?

1 Edgard Morin, *Confluences Méditerranée* - n° 28, 1998-1999
https://iremmo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2805.morin_.pdf

The Mediterranean region is not merely a question of geography

The Mediterranean derives its unity solely from the movement of people, the connections this entails, and the routes that lead to it. Lucien Febvre wrote: "The Mediterranean is made up of routes. [...] The important thing is to see what such a network implies in terms of connections and a coherent history, and to what extent the movement of ships, pack animals, vehicles and people themselves makes the Mediterranean one and, from a certain point of view, uniform despite local resistance."[2] Notably that "movement" in Braudel's (1902-1985) work, considered over the long term, refers to physical circulations as much as intellectual, or even spiritual, ones.

The discovery of a Mediterranean "unity" is a relatively recent phenomenon. Major military-scientific expeditions in the Mediterranean have helped to reveal a shared past, in contrast to a present woven from contrasts, and even conflicts. Archaeology has often served to bolster colonisation, for example in Algeria, in the name of a history (generally Roman) that is partly shared with Europe.[3] As François-Xavier Fauvelle, professor at the Collège de France, has shown, this has given rise to



2 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* [1949], vol. I, pp. 253-254.

3 Zahia Rahmani and Jean-Yves Sarrazin, *Made in Algeria, généalogie d'un territoire*, Marseille, Mucem, 2016

clichés that are difficult to shake off: it is artificial to contrast a supposedly "white" and Mediterranean Africa with a "Black" or sub-Saharan Africa that is supposedly entirely different.

In fact, "the Mediterranean is a myth, the Mediterranean is an image. It is not a geographical entity," says the Bosnian-born essayist Predrag Matvejević (1932-2017). One cannot, Matvejević adds, "determine its boundaries, nor on what basis. They are neither historical, nor ethnic, nor national, nor state-based. It is a chalk circle that is constantly drawn and erased, which waves and winds, works and inspirations expand or restrict."[4]

At the Nice Forum (28-29 November 2024), Jérémy Guedj, in a contribution entitled "Functions of the Mediterranean", referencing a text by Paul Valéry (a leading figure of the Mediterranean University Centre), highlighted the possibilities and difficulties of defining the Mediterranean, before asking what it means to be Mediterranean and what the Mediterranean can be, today and tomorrow. At the Izmir Forum (4-5 September 2025), İlhan Tekeli, founder of the Izmir Mediterranean Academy, recalled that the concept of "Mediterranean-ness" was established as a marketing tool by and for post-Second World War mass tourism

From a geopolitical perspective, it is important never to limit the Mediterranean region to countries with a coastline. Thus, Portugal strongly asserts its Mediterranean character, despite its location beyond the Strait of Gibraltar. The Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro (1911-1997) defined it in a striking phrase: Portugal, Mediterranean by nature, Atlantic by its position.[5] On the other side of the Strait, Mauritania—which has no direct link to the Mediterranean basin—has in recent years been one of the active partners in the Western Mediterranean 5+5 Dialogue.

4 Predrag Matvejevitch, *Mediterranean Breviary*, 1987, p.17
5 Orlando Ribeiro, *Portugal o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico*, 1945

Differences have sometimes been exaggerated. Thus, in his book, *La Méditerranée, une géographie de la fracture* (*The Mediterranean: A Geography of Division*), published in 2001, the geographer Bernard Kayser (1926-2001) argues that it is "no more a geographical entity than a cultural area". To justify this reasoning, he outlines the divisions, differences and physical, geographical, economic and demographic contrasts that exist in the Mediterranean.

Conversely, we have witnessed a certain trivialisation of the concept. Since the late 1990s, a strand of geographical research has begun to use the term "Mediterranean" to describe areas other than the Mediterranean itself–seas that have generated relatively closed yet powerful ecosystems (the South China Sea, the Caribbean, the Baltic, etc.). The numerous works on the Mediterranean published over the last thirty years offer a spectrum of highly contrasting positions in this regard. Proponents of the "exception" ("the Mediterranean is the Mediterranean; there is only one Mediterranean") are opposed by those for whom the Mediterranean"s distinctiveness is compatible with a broader concept of the "Mediterranean" ("the fact that the Mediterranean is a unique space is not contradictory to positing it as a universal model").

To think about the Mediterranean is to challenge the notion of the sea as a border; it is to resist an overly simplistic dichotomy between North and South; it is to understand the Mediterranean as both one and many, as a "plural unity", as the Italian sociologist Franco Cassano (1943-2021) puts it in *Il pensiero meridiano* (*La pensée méridienne*, Éditions de l"Aube, 1998). Cassano begins with the observation that the Mediterranean basin has lost its status as a "subject of thought" to become an "object of thought".

Jeremy Guedj, Founder of the Mediterranean Chair, also embodies this desire to move beyond the Mediterranean as an object; it is a Mediterranean that thinks for itself, that becomes a subject. “ “The Mediterranean is envisaged here as a space for exchange, encounters and reflection, where the intellectual and the sensory meet. The name of the chair– Mediterranean Chair of History–reflects this orientation: the Mediterranean is not a secondary object; it is the source and the starting point of historical analysis.” (Summary of the Nice Forum)

The South must therefore once again assert its right to emancipate itself in order to promote an autonomous model. This involves breaking a long sequence in which the South has been described, imagined, spoken of and thought of by others.

In this context, artists play a vital role in renewing our relationship with the Mediterranean and giving shape to a vision of a Mediterranean that is both a subject in its own right and pluralistic. It was in this spirit that the Mediterranean Youth Orchestra was founded in 1984. This ensemble embodies the ambition to bring together young talents from across the Mediterranean basin within a symphony orchestra, in a collaborative endeavour. The aim is to foster dialogue between the artistic expressions of the entire Mediterranean region, to blend rhythms, melodies and tonalities, and to move beyond the traditionally d opposition between North and South. By bringing together artists from all walks of life, the orchestra thus promotes an exchange based on reciprocity.

A young generation of researchers proposes to pluralise the Mediterranean, to reflect a Mediterranean region

that is multifaceted depending on the vantage point from which one chooses to observe it. One does not speak of the same Mediterranean depending on whether one observes it from Algiers, Cartagena, Marseille or Cairo.[6]

Similarly, we do not speak of it in the same way when considering the context of insularism, as demonstrated by Sébastien Quenot, senior lecturer at the University of Corsica and holder of the UNESCO Chair "Devenirs en Méditerranée" (Forum de Corse, 19 and 20 June 2025).

A vague concept, culturally and even more so geopolitically, the Mediterranean is –alas– not vague when it comes to the environment.

The Mediterranean is the most polluted sea in the world. Every day, nearly 630 tonnes of plastic waste are dumped into it and accumulate there, mainly in the south, due to prevailing currents. Stakeholders working in the field of the circular economy around the Mediterranean basin joined forces to form a network, Circe.med, in early 2024, primarily to combat plastic pollution.

The Mediterranean Sea is indeed one of the planet"s key hotspots for biodiversity. It is home to around 10% of the world"s recorded species, despite accounting for just 1% of the world"s ocean surface, and contains remarkable habitats (Posidonia seagrass beds, coral reefs, etc.).

Viewed from a distance, it also takes on an undeniable coherence.

As the geographer Yves Lacoste pointed out in 1999 in the introduction to issue 94 of the journal *Hérodote*, discourse on the Mediterranean is primarily led by the countries on its northern and, in particular, western shores.

6 See Guillaume Calafat and Mathieu Grenet, *Méditerranées. Une histoire des mobilités humaines (1492-1750)*, Paris, Seuil, 2023

Indeed, it is often from even further afield that the Mediterranean concept develops most readily. One of the most important museums in Europe to bear the name “Mediterranean” is the MedelshavsMuseet in Stockholm (founded in 1954). In the academic sphere, the Zentrum für Mittelmeerstudien at the University of Bochum in Germany is one of the most renowned centres. There, the term “Mediterranistik” is readily used, and the research conducted there is the subject of a dedicated journal.

The image of the Mediterranean as a space of singularity stands in contrast to that of a plural, diverse, sometimes vague and intangible Mediterranean. Far from being homogeneous, the Mediterranean appears above all as a space of flows and circulations. As Jérémy Guedj points out, “to think of the Mediterranean is to envisage a space where reality mingles with the imaginary, where reverie rubs shoulders with experiences that are sometimes painful, and where this space constitutes a veritable cradle of creation and multiple voices” (Nice Forum)

Nevertheless, although the Mediterranean cannot be viewed as a uniform whole, it is shaped by shared imperatives, which are, however, experienced and interpreted in different ways depending on the territories, societies and cultures that make it up.

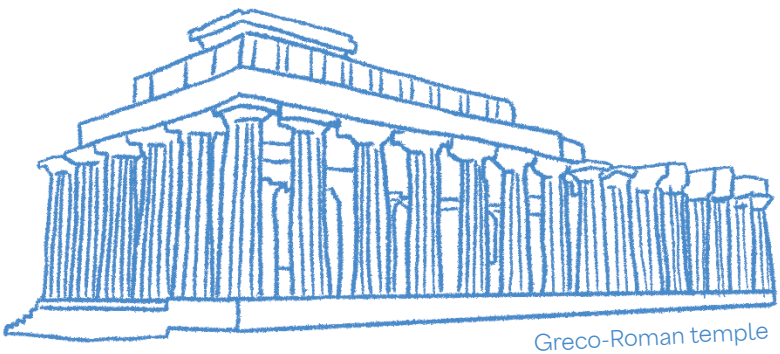
The geographer Augustin Berque, who worked extensively in Marseille, foreshadowed this new paradigm with the words: “Being is created by creating one’s environment, in a dynamic process.” In the Mediterranean, the real key therefore lies in relationships of exchange, within which culture plays a central role.

The Mediterranean region is not merely a matter of heritage and museums

Whether singular or plural, *the* Mediterranean becoming widely recognised, even becoming a given in terms of museums and heritage; it is far less established when it comes to contemporary creation.

As the epicentre of the museum world, the Mediterranean has given rise to major cultural institutions. Even today, Mediterranean museums lie at the heart of crucial geopolitical issues. Sometimes at the risk of limiting, of limiting our understanding of the Mediterranean too much to its heritage dimension.

The concept of the–Western–museum is inseparable from Greco-Roman antiquity and its spread across the Mediterranean basin. Sanctuaries of the Muses, the *Mouseîon* of ancient Greece were, originally, temples dedicated to them. The one in Alexandria remains the most famous of them all. This model (or rather this reference), which we now know to be more mythical than real, would mark the genesis of modern museums by combining theoretical knowledge with material artefacts.



Greco-Roman temple

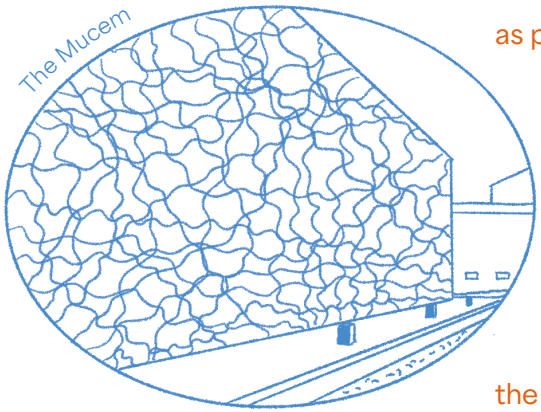
As chance archaeological discoveries became more frequent, the European elite—and particularly those on the Italian peninsula—developed a passion for antiquities during the Quattrocento. In Rome, the Capitoline Museums began housing their first collections of antiquities as early as 1471, although they were not opened to the public until 1734. The following century saw the establishment of the Uffizi in Florence, initially with limited access before officially opening to the public in 1769. The museum phenomenon really took off in the second half of the 18th century, mainly in Northern Europe (Germany, Great Britain, France). It was also in the 18th century that a genuine scientific revolution and museological revolution took place with the discovery of the buried sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii. European archaeological missions spread across the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, such as the German Archaeological Institute in Rome (1829), the French School of Athens (1846), the French School of Rome (1875), the British School at Athens (1886) and the British School of Archaeology in Egypt (1905). The French network across the Mediterranean was completed with the establishment of institutions in Cairo (1880), Damascus (1922) and Istanbul (1930). A genuine Mediterranean cultural diplomacy then took shape, reaching its zenith with European colonial expansion in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, leading to the creation of new institutions such as the Bardo Museum in Tunisia (the museum commissioned by the French protectorate was established by decree in 1882, thus becoming the first institution of its kind in North Africa and opening its doors in 1888), the Greco-Roman Museum of Alexandria, established on the initiative of the Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Botti (1892), the Istanbul Archaeological Museum-İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzesi, founded by the painter and archaeologist Osman Hamdi Bey (1891); and, more recently, the Archaeological Museum of Rabat (1932). These institutions reflect the colonial reality, caught between a desire

for scientific preservation and cultural appropriation. The 20th century upended this entire colonial Mediterranean museum ecosystem and was accompanied by a slow process of museum reappropriation. Independent Algeria established the National Museum of Antiquities, Morocco developed the Archaeological Museum of Rabat, and Tunisia expanded the Bardo Museum...

In the 2000s, museum projects in the Mediterranean began to take shape on the northern shore. One example is the project unveiled in February 2009 by the architect Zaha Hadid and the Calabrian authorities for a new leisure and museum district dedicated to this theme in Reggio Calabria. A project wich was never realised.

In Catalonia, projects began to flourish from the late 1980s onwards. A case in point is the creation, under the auspices of the Catalan Government, of the Catalan Institute for Mediterranean Studies, which would later give rise to the European Institute of the Mediterranean. In 1995, it organised the first Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum, which took place within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference between the EU and its southern partner countries. This initiative was largely situated within the framework of exchanges between the 10 countries of the 5+5 Dialogue of the Western Mediterranean (established in 1990, but particularly active from 2001 onwards). However, this did not lead to the development of any lasting cultural institutions. Of these political initiatives, the only lasting effect was the reorientation of the Museu Marítim de Barcelona, which opened its programme to events on themes relating to Mediterranean societies. The only one to see the light of day was the modest Museu de la Mediterrània in Torroella de Montgrí, which was inaugurated in 2003.

The only one of this generation of "mega-projects" to have come to fruition, the Mucem (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations) looks to the other shore. Opened in 2013 in Marseille



as part of the European Capital of Culture programme, it has raised a novel (and difficult, fraught with pitfalls) question that is not defined by geographical or chronological boundaries, but by the answer(s) to the question: What is Euro-Mediterranean culture? The museum sought to use its collections (and contemporary art) to highlight that, regardless of nationality or "tradition", everyone's culture is the result of successive waves of immigration, which are all too often quickly forgotten. A line of inquiry that still resonates as a call for solidarity, at a time when the terms "civilisation" and "cultural heritage" are often exploited for nationalist and imperialist ends.

In the Maghreb, the revival of museums is now helping to bolster the soft power of states. Situated at the crossroads of the African, Mediterranean and European worlds, Morocco is capitalising on its historical heritage and the vitality of its contemporary scene to become a hub for cultural and diplomatic relations between the continents. In response to the proliferation of these private initiatives, museum policy (reporting directly to the sovereign) took a new direction in the 2010s, with the creation of the National Museum Foundation and the opening of the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI) in Rabat in 2014. Announcements of museum renovations and openings have followed in quick succession, with 14 sites now open and a project for the City of African Culture-Museum of the Continent currently under construction in Rabat, which will feature a conservation centre, a laboratory, an art "s residence and a pan-African training

centre dedicated to conservation and restoration professions, all due to be operational in 2027. Weakened by political instability, Tunisian museums are gradually recovering. Severly affected by the terrorist attacks of 2015, the Bardo Museum was abruptly closed in 2021 following the dissolution of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and did not reopen until 2023. The National Museum of Carthage is slow to begin its renovation, supported by European funds. On the Maghreb contemporary art scene, Algeria has suffered a string of setbacks. In Algiers, uncertainty remains over the future of the MaMA, the national public museum of modern and contemporary art, which appears to have been suspended. In Oran, the new MAMO, inaugurated in 2017, is also largely inactive. Having served in turns as a Byzantine church, then a mosque, then a museum, and once again a place of worship since 2023, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul bears witness to the emblematic significance that Mediterranean museums can take on in different geopolitical contexts.

In Cairo, “pharaonic” soft power is on the rise with the opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) in November 2025. While the project aims to reaffirm Egypt”s central role, it is above all a key priority for President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi. The “Golden Parade of the Pharaohs”, the festivities marking the 2021 transfer of the twenty-two royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to the regime”s other major project, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC), gave an idea of the importance of the issue of memory.

Mediterranean museums of the 21st century serve as much as tools in international diplomatic relations as they do as instruments of propaganda in the service of the powers that be.

It must be acknowledged that contemporary art does not yet occupy a recognised place in the assertion of these identities.

Globalisation and contemporary migration flows are challenging traditional narratives of identity. The question of Mediterranean identity is beginning to permeate cultural policies, seeking to offer a dynamic and contemporary vision of Mediterranean cultures. Thus, the ΕΜΣΤ (National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens) is developing a curatorial approach—by Katerina Gregos, which is open to society. The same is true of new museums that are beginning to emerge. Examples include the recent Malta International Contemporary Art Space (MICAS) in Malta (2024) and Istanbul Modern, which opened in 2004.

In line with this trend towards less "state-led" museum initiatives, we can also cite the example of the MAMAC in Nice, which is deeply rooted in its local area, promoting local artists and Mediterranean exchanges. Similarly, the Arkas Museum in Izmir and the Bodrum Museum illustrate private and regional approaches, fuelled by local dynamics. Indeed, the Arkas Museum, established by the eponymous foundation, is an example of local patronage: it develops a narrative rooted in the Aegean and pluralistic identity of the region. The Bodrum Museum, or Museum of Underwater Archaeology, is the result of a local initiative dedicated to promoting maritime heritage. Its collections and excavations have been carried out thanks to the involvement of archaeologists, divers and local residents, reflecting a decentralised, participatory approach to heritage that is rooted in the local area.

Artistic initiatives are also taking up the baton. In 2003, Michelangelo Pistoletto (born in 1933) received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. On this occasion, the project "Love Difference—Artistic Movement for an Inter-Mediterranean Policy" was presented; it was launched in April 2002 and coordinated by his foundation, Cittadellarte. A large mirrored table in the shape of the Mediterranean basin, surrounded

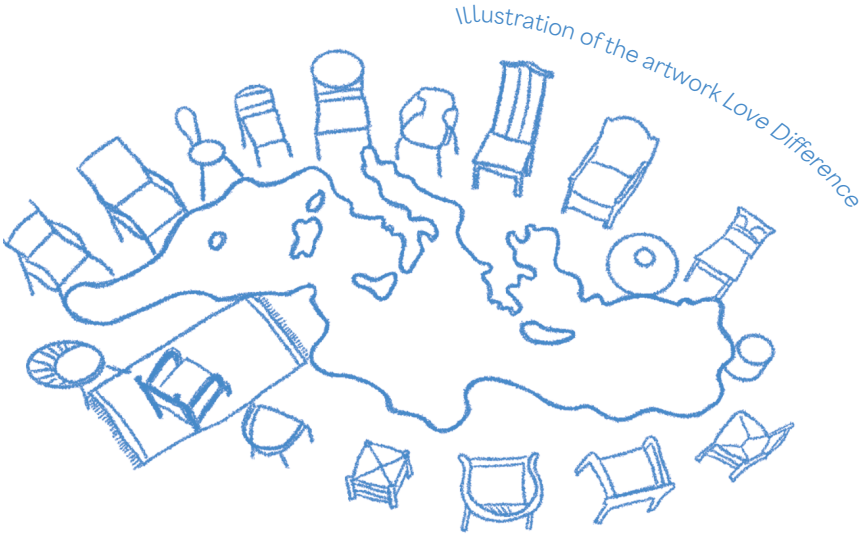


Illustration of the artwork Love Difference

by chairs from each of the coastal countries, is Pistoletto"s work symbolising "Love Difference". Various versions were produced in the years that followed. "Love Difference is a name, a slogan, a programmatic statement. The movement combines the universality of art with the idea of political transnationality and focuses its activities on the Mediterranean region, as it reflects the problems of global society. On the one hand, differences between ethnic groups, religions and cultures are today the source of terrible conflicts; on the other, the supremacy of power creates a dramatic situation, leading to standardisation and the levelling out of differences. [...] Uniformity and difference are the two opposing concepts that represent the greatest source of conflict in today's global reality. A policy that leads to the "love of differences" is essential for the development of new perspectives within society."[7]

The difficulty of establishing a sustainable "Mediterranean" contemporary art biennial reflects the challenges facing the emergence of contemporary art. The two largest biennials in

7 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Love Difference Manifesto*, 2002.

the Mediterranean region, Venice (1895) and Istanbul (1987), have never focused specifically on the Mediterranean area. A pioneer in the field, the Biennale of Young Creators from Europe and the Mediterranean (BJCEM) was launched in 1985 in Barcelona. Its most recent edition, the20th(which has been known as Mediterranea since 2013), took place in spring 2025 in Gorizia-Nova Gorica, European Capital of Culture. Despite some interesting editions, it has never managed to establish itself as one of the leading biennials on the contemporary art scene and has never been able to organise editions on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. And yet, as Hélène Guenin, Director of the MAMAC in Nice, pointed out at the Nice Forum (28-29 November 2024), contemporary artists from around the Mediterranean play an essential role in raising awareness.

Beyond contemporary creation, reflection on the dimension of vernacular cultures (traditional diets, often referred to by the Anglicism “diet”, landscape culture, water management that conserves resources, etc.) is ultimately very much absent, even though it constitutes a particularly rich reservoir of responses to the climate crisis.

Faced with rising inequality, the ecological crisis and the resurgence of hunger, the Mediterranean must reclaim its historic role: that of a space for exchange, balance and innovation. A global laboratory where health, sustainability and food justice come together. This, at any rate, is the case made by the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM). Traditional diets, based on plant diversity, moderate protein intake and local roots, hold part of the solution. The Mediterranean model, long designated as “intangible cultural heritage”, must now be recognised as a driver of global sustainability: nutritional, climatic and social. Vernacular cultures, undermined by technological, productivist and consumerist models “from elsewhere”, represent a highly contemporary cultural challenge.

In this regard, discussions at the Corsica Forum (19-20 June 2025) highlighted how vernacular and ancestral know-how can become drivers of sustainable regional transition. These narratives, rooted in local traditions, do not look to the past, but open up paths to a shared future, fuelled by transmission and innovation. They contribute to the emergence of new cultural and social practices, capable of renewing our relationship with the living world and placing it at the heart of contemporary transformations.

In the 20th century, the Mediterranean region established itself as a hub for museum institutions, carrying the legacy of a long history spanning from antiquity to colonial and then decolonial dynamics. Cultural diplomacy, deeply embedded in museum policies, thus became a tool of state soft power.

However, towards the end of the century, initiatives such as the MUCEM began to emerge, showcasing stories of migration and a diverse Mediterranean region with a focus on the South. Local initiatives with a transnational dimension are also developing—the Mediterranean Youth Orchestra being one such example.

These projects demonstrate that diversity—of origins, sounds, and so on—forms the foundation of a shared culture, transcending national boundaries to foster new supranational dynamics and create a Mediterranean culture.

Indeed, the Mediterranean is emerging as a space for reflection on current cultural transformations, notably by revaluing vernacular skills, no longer as static legacies of the past, but as resources for the future, bringing innovation and new perspectives. Culture is becoming a space for future projects.

The Mediterranean region, a place of possibilities

"The peoples and their religions have fought fiercely against one another in these lands, but far more often they have intermingled, cooperated, and exchanged songs, stories and recipes for spit-roasted lamb, goat"s cheese, stuffed cabbage, squid"s ink risotto and ćevapčići. In short, everything is equally authentic and inauthentic in our Mediterranean world," writes the great Croatian author Ante Tomić (*The Children of Saint Margaret*) so beautifully.

The Mediterranean has never been so central, due to the sudden outbreak of conflicts (Israel-Palestine, Libya, Syria, Ukraine...) and the manifold consequences of climate change; yet at the same time, the Mediterranean project–or rather, the Mediterranean projects–are at a standstill. The Mediterranean suffers from a combination of relative economic marginalisation (even as the digital sector develops at breakneck speed), a cosmopolitanism challenged by the migration issue, and limited innovation.

"The Mediterranean metropolises look at one another and find themselves beautiful, in a state of self-absorption!" (Amine Benaissa, quoted in the Carnet des carnets, Avitem).

The Mediterranean can, however, remain or once again become a place of possibilities.

- ## In the context of international reconfiguration

Edgard Morin, in one of his visionary texts, demonstrated that "there can be no true communication unless there is not only mutual understanding of differences, but also, beyond those differences, a sense of shared identity. The preliminary

problem lies in the need to accept and acknowledge the paradox of a Mediterranean identity despite the differences and conflicts of religions, cultures, history and economic circumstances. Hence the need for a number of equally preliminary conditions." Among these, he highlighted "the strengthening of the Mediterranean sentiment and consciousness within the Euro-Mediterranean countries, which calls for the establishment of a permanent body for consultation and dialogue not only between the European nations bordering the Mediterranean, but also between the specifically Mediterranean provinces or regions within those nations, and the development of Mediterranean citizens" movements."[8]

The "Euromed Partnership", also known as the "Barcelona Process", had raised high hopes. It was established in 1995 in Barcelona, on the initiative of the European Union and ten other states bordering the Mediterranean Sea (Algeria, Palestine, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey). The number of partner countries has expanded several times and now includes the twenty-seven EU Member States and sixteen states from the southern Mediterranean, the Levant and the Western Balkans.

8 Edgard Morin, text from 1998, cited above.

It should be noted that in the Barcelona Declaration, the Euro-Mediterranean partners set out three main objectives for the partnership:

- the establishment of a common area of peace and stability through the strengthening of political and security dialogue;
- the creation of an area of shared prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and the gradual establishment of a free trade area;
- bringing peoples closer together through a social, cultural and human partnership aimed at fostering understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies.

Since 1995, the region has been rocked by violent armed conflicts, not only in the Middle East but also in Europe (the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 2001, Ukraine from 2022 onwards), confirming the analysis that what happens in the Mediterranean does not stay in the Mediterranean.

The free trade area has seen only tentative attempts, reduced to a set of principles linked to sustainable development. These principles now form the inspirational foundation of the new Mediterranean Charter, particularly regarding the dual green and digital transition. The focus is on creating employment opportunities, particularly for young people, on the role of women and the private sector, on cooperation in the energy sector, and on the migration issue. Finally, the cultural objective remains, but is subject to terrible threats, foremost among which the management of migration flows is undermining the ardently desired “rapprochement”.

After four decades of institutionalised Mediterranean cooperation, the time has come to assess the results of this partnership. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership was born in a very different global context, at a time when the European Union harboured

a more ambitious vision of itself, its role and its relations with its Mediterranean neighbours. The countries of the South harboured different hopes, in a region where relative peace and close multilateral relations prevailed. This is why, today, a far less optimistic outlook prevails in the countries of the South, marked by a pragmatic approach, whilst a European tendency towards a minimalist approach seems to prevail.

This highlights the fragility—but also the necessity—of a framework for cultural dialogue in such a threatening geopolitical context.

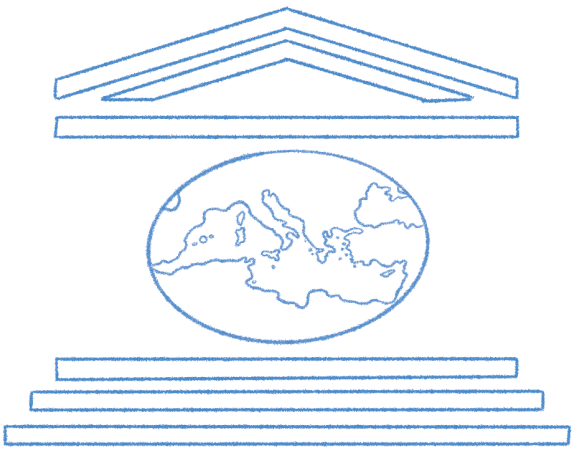
On a more positive note, the European Ocean Pact announced in June 2025 states that, through the forthcoming proposal for an "Ocean Act", EU Member States will be encouraged to shift from a national approach to one at the level of the maritime basin.

On 16 October 2025, the European Commission published a proposal for a new "Pact for the Mediterranean", which will aim to strengthen partnerships between the European Union and 10 countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean region, building on their mutual interests. An action plan is announced for 2026. The pact is based on the principles of co-ownership, co-creation and joint responsibility. It adopts a practical approach, centred on concrete initiatives that will bring added value to people and economies on all shores of the Mediterranean. The aim is to create mutual benefits, ranging from clean energy production to unlocking private investment. This objective will be achieved by mobilising regional projects that create opportunities for citizens and businesses, with a particular focus on young people, women and small businesses.

Significantly, the pact is open to engagement with partners beyond the southern Mediterranean, including the Gulf, sub-Saharan Africa, the Western Balkans and Turkey.

In fact, a number of civil society organisations of all kinds across the region have reacted with a mixture of hope and caution. The cultural dimension is mentioned only in very general terms: "The shared Mediterranean space begins with its people: it is a shared cultural, historical and human space." The text focuses primarily on the heritage dimension.

"The Mediterranean possesses a cultural and natural heritage, both tangible and intangible, of impressive richness. With over 60 UNESCO World Heritage sites and a dynamic contemporary architectural and artistic scene, the southern Mediterranean region offers a powerful testament to our shared roots and provides a foundation for future cooperation through culture, sustainable cultural tourism—particularly culinary traditions—education and heritage-based development. (...) Cultural heritage sites and museums can become spaces for reflection and dialogue open to diverse communities, thereby offering opportunities for cultural resilience and cohesion. Art, music, traditional crafts and cinema have the capacity to promote mutual understanding, diversity and socio-economic development. The pact will encourage initiatives, such as the launch of a high-level dialogue on cultural cooperation, which will also place an emphasis on cultural heritage."



This text undoubtedly falls short of expectations but demonstrates an openness that goes beyond the mere promotion of heritage (notably, there is a focus on vernacular heritage). There is an urgent need to advocate for a dynamic of contemporary creation in the public sphere.

Finally, the role of local authorities and their diverse forms of cooperation is mentioned but not sufficiently highlighted. The 6th Cultural Summit of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) was held from 26 to 28 September 2025 in Barcelona, as part of the3rdUNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies, "Mondiacult" 2025. It reaffirmed the call for a dedicated "Culture Goal" in the UN"s post-2030 Agenda. In the Mediterranean, the network of so-called "decentralised" cooperation is one of the factors helping to unblock inter-state initiatives that are all too often stalled.

- **Within its territories to contribute to "living together"**

  Cultural diversity is now an internationally recognised fact. The idea of an international convention on the subject, launched by France at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002, came to fruition twenty years ago. In October 2005, UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

  With this text, states elevate cultural diversity to the status of the common heritage of humanity and affirm that its protection, promotion, enrichment and preservation are essential conditions for sustainable development.

  But this project can only flourish within a spirit of "living together", a quest for new forms of solidarity. In this sense, the community remains an indispensable resource for coming together, for moving forward, for providing guidance, and

for sharing both difficulties and bonds of solidarity. The word “community” must therefore remain in our vocabulary; indeed, it is only in France that it is used with such reluctance, inevitably associated with “communitarianism”.

To achieve this, a close link between urban planning—one might almost say “urbanity”—and contemporary creation is a necessity, but also a tool for greater social cohesion.

Cultural diversity is built in conjunction with citizenship.

A growing concentration of the population in urban areas, particularly in the major conurbations along the southern and eastern coasts. On average, 70% of the population of the Mediterranean basin lives in towns and cities, compared with just over 50% in 1960. The report *The Mediterranean in 2050: A Blue Plan Outlook*, published in January 2025, states that, between 1960 and 2015, the urban population had already increased 2.8-fold (rising from 116 million to 333 million). “It could increase by a further 1.5-fold by 2050, reaching 484 million (compared with a 1.3-fold increase in the total population).”

Adding that “The population growth expected in the coming decades will therefore require us to take the issue of “environmental carrying capacity” and the spatial al limits to planning and development more seriously. All the more so as this will be compounded by extreme vulnerability to climate change and rising sea levels (+40 cm).”

- **In the relationship between environments and their components**

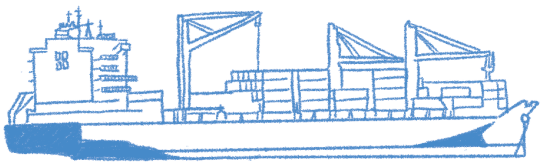
  The Mediterranean is not only a region of economic opportunity but also one of great socio-environmental vulnerability; any strategy must significantly involve civil

society, scientific expertise and local governance mechanisms in order to effectively address this complexity.

The Mediterranean Sea accounts for 25% of global maritime traffic and lies at the heart of global trade in the commercial, energy and digital sectors. In this region of heavy traffic, states have increased the level of marine protection by regulating shipping in the Gulf of Lion, as well as by creating a low-sulphur emissions area, known as a SECA zone, covering the entire Mediterranean Sea. This zone was established on 1 May 2025 following approval by the International Maritime Organisation. The Commission will support the development of a blue economy strategy for the maritime basins of the eastern Mediterranean, which currently lacks a specific cooperation framework, modelled on the WestMed initiative.

The aforementioned "Plan Bleu" report emphasises that "In the South and East, the sustainability of these major cities will therefore become a pressing issue in ecological, social and economic terms. Against a backdrop of favourable economic development, they will undoubtedly be able to offer their inhabitants living conditions approaching those of the North; however, this will have significant impacts on the local environment that must be taken into account.

The most likely scenario is that living conditions will deteriorate, particularly due to the effects of crises linked to climate change, water scarcity and food insecurity."[9]



9 Report *The Mediterranean in 2050: A Blue Plan Outlook*, p.41.

All the more reason to develop cross-disciplinary approaches between art and urban planning. The European Union"s "New Bauhaus Facility 2025-2027" calls for this: it aims to "promote the development and scaling up of innovative solutions for neighbourhood revitalisation", through a "sustainable and inclusive" design- . This specifically targets solutions based on the circular economy, the creation of carbon sinks, energy and water efficiency, and so on. The initiative emphasises an approach that aims to "transform places together with communities".

The Mediterranean is a palimpsest in crisis–it is a multifaceted geomorphological, environmental and socio-cultural entity, a trade route, and a hotbed of conflict: climate change, migration, tensions between neighbouring countries (see Avitem, Carnet des Carnets).

In this context, the "cultivated territories", outlined by the four forums held in 2025, present themselves, on their own pragmatic scale, as a perspective:

- strengthening communities and fostering their networking
- linking culture, urban planning and ecological transition
- concrete actions: "living labs".

In an increasingly unstable geopolitical context, the need for cultural dialogue is becoming a strategic imperative. In this regard, the Mediterranean Pact serves as a key reference point, proposing a broad-based cultural approach open to the recognition and promotion of heritage, including vernacular heritage, whilst fostering a dynamic of high-level dialogue, notably through the revitalisation of culture. The aim is indeed to affirm culture as a fully-fledged objective of the Mediterranean Agenda, in close collaboration with local and regional authorities.

In an increasingly urbanised Mediterranean region facing the effects of climate change, culture is finally emerging as a cross-cutting lever, capable of addressing the growing challenges of territorial transitions.

Mediterranean?

There is no shortage of ideas, even leading to the creation of new words. " Méditerraner" is a verb coined by a small group of curators (the journal Tête-à-tête, which published an issue under this title in 2019) that embodies a desire for openness, movement and plurality at a time when borders are hardening and insular identities are being brandished on all sides. Its inspiring definition is reproduced below:

"**méditerraner:** INTRANS. VERB.

1. To feel a deep attachment to the shores of the Mediterranean, to feel at home there, to live from this contemplation, to feel nostalgia for it. It is his way of travelling; he returns every year and spends his summers 'méditerraning'.
2. To experience both otherness and proximity simultaneously, to cobble together shifting identities. To inhabit the very space of the border, to make it permeable. MAR. To coast from one culture to another. To reach Ithaca, Ulysses spent a long time 'mediteranising'. SPEC. To cross over, to pin all one's hopes on the other shore, to migrate.
3. FIG. To conceive of the world as an archipelago. To reject the homogeneous, the linear, and prefer the complex, the discontinuous. By extension, to embody or propagate this way of thinking regardless of its geographical roots."

But then, how does one "Mediterraneanise"?

The Mediterranean, a fluid concept, can be operational provided we do not turn it into "one big thing", that is to say a unitary bloc, but rather a plural space, built upon commonalities, yet which must ultimately remain a flexible space for cooperation,

with a variable geometry. Decentralised cooperation is a suitable approach, based on project-led cooperation. It is the project(s) that will shape the Mediterranean!

In terms of cultural exchange, the dominant model has been the "tourism-heritage" model. In fact, the Mediterranean has, above all, existed as a coherent tourist area... The 2025 Mediterranean Pact outlines a tentative step in this direction, which is to be welcomed. Can we go further, incorporating vernacular know–how as cultural fields–as a Mediterranean substrate that serves both as a reminder of history and as a harbinger of the future, a source of opportunities and resilience in the face of climate change? We can and must combine them with contemporary creation.

We must also develop the link between culture and ecological transition within the framework of Mediterranean cooperation.

This vision of pooling resources, co-production and strengthening cooperation mechanisms at local level offers hope for a fresh perspective on our Mediterranean regions.

Credits

These documents were produced under the overall coordination of AVITEM, lead partner of the project, in partnership with the Nice Côte d'Azur Metropolis, the City of Vitrolles, the Collectivity of Corsica, and the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality.They were funded through the "Clés en main" call for projects launched by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

They were written by the expert committee led by POLAU: Maud Le Floc'h, Valérie Astesano, Jean-François Chougnet, Amine Benaïssa, with the support of Cléo Smits.

Lead author
Jean-Francois Chougnet

With contributions from Marie Baduel and Sevinç Ünal (AVITEM), and the expert committee

Editorial coordination
Sevinç Ünal

Edition
March 31, 2026
AViTeM - avitem.fr

Editorial design
Studio Bonne Feuille (Audrey Desanti & Milène Mahérault)
studiobonnefeuille.com

Illustration
Tara Keogh - tarakeogh.com

MÉTROPOLE NICE CÔTE D'AZUR

Vitrolles vivre ensemble

İZMİR BÜYÜKŞEHİR BELEDİYESİ

CULLETTIVITÀ DI CORSICA
COLLECTIVITÉ DE CORSE

AViTeM
Agence des Villes et Territoires Méditerranéens Durables

MINISTÈRE DE L'EUROPE ET DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES
Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité