



ESU-Information

UNESCO recognition as a driving force:

Living fairground culture in Belgium and France as intangible cultural heritage strengthens the fairground industry throughout Europe



Brussels Christmas Market on 4 December 2024: Representatives from politics and showmen's associations, including the French Ambassador to Belgium Xavier Lapeyre de Cabanes, the Flemish Minister of Culture Caroline Gennez, ESU President Albert Ritter, the Chairman of the Belgian showmen's association La Défense des Forains Belges and ESU Secretary General Steve Severeys, Brussels Mayor Philippe Close, the Minister of Culture and Tourism of the German-speaking Community of Belgium Gregor Freches, the Belgian Secretary of State for Cultural Heritage Ans Persoons and the Minister-President of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation Elisabeth Degryse, proudly announce UNESCO's decision to recognise the living fairground culture.

Six months ago, a long-standing demand of the European Showmen's Union was fulfilled: the recognition of fairground culture as an intangible cultural asset.

At its 19th annual meeting in Paraguay's capital Asunción on 4 December 2024, UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Intangible Cultural Heritage inscribed the lively fairground culture in Belgium and France on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The UNESCO decision marked a significant milestone for European fairground culture. This honour went far beyond symbolic recognition - it not only strengthened the self-image of the fairground industry, but also provided concrete impetus for the preservation, mediation and public perception of fairgrounds.



At the ESU Congress 2025 in Edinburgh, the exchange on recognising Europe's vibrant fairground culture was a key topic.

"This decision was and is a strong signal for the future of fairgrounds in Europe,' emphasises ESU President Albert Ritter. 'It shows that our centuries-old tradition is recognised as cultural heritage and a vibrant part of social life."

ESU Secretary General Steve Severeys also emphasises the importance: "The UNESCO recognition has created new attention for the fairground tradition in politics, the media and other social institutions. People are once again asking more questions about where our fairgrounds come from, what they mean and the stories behind them. It is being emphasised that we must work together to ensure that the cultural asset of fairgrounds is safeguarded for future generations. This helps us enormously to make the cultural dimension of our work visible."

Since the UNESCO decision in December 2024, the historical and social significance of fairgrounds has come more into focus. Involvement in intangible cultural heritage programmes and events enables showmen and showwomen to share their experiences, provide insights into their work and convey the deeply rooted history of fairgrounds. "We are invited to conferences and cultural encounters to talk about our living traditions. This not only strengthens intercultural exchange, but also helps to convey a realistic and positive image of our industry," says Steve Severeys.

"The UNESCO recognition in Belgium and France also sends out a signal to other European countries. It emphasises how important it is to preserve and promote living cultural forms. For the fairground industry, this is a historic opportunity to consolidate its own identity, inspire young generations to take up the profession and secure the future of fairgrounds in the long term. The

award gives our culture the status it deserves - and motivates us to carry it forward with pride,"
summarises President Albert Ritter.

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