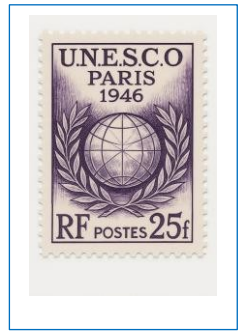




UNESCO: from a founding stamp to a weakened institution

Jacqueline
BERGERON



In 1946, in the aftermath of the war, France celebrated the birth of UNESCO with two commemorative stamps engraved by Albert Decaris (1901-1988), a master engraver and key figure in French philately. His design depicts a globe surrounded by laurels, a universal image of peace. Two values were issued: a blue 10-franc stamp for local mail and a purple 25-franc stamp for heavy and, above all, international postage. This choice was not insignificant: it reflected the desire to give UNESCO a truly global reach by facilitating the circulation of ideas, knowledge and exchanges across borders.

These two stamps are not simply philatelic items: they are the tangible reflection of a founding ideal. The choice of face values, one geared towards everyday exchanges and the other towards international correspondence, already reflected the ambition of an organisation capable of connecting peoples, transcending borders and circulating knowledge as easily as posting a letter. They embody the optimism of an era when it was thought possible to build peace through education, science and culture.

Seventy years later, the contrast is striking. UNESCO has been weakened by the withdrawal of major funding — notably from the United States — and by governance dominated by diplomatic power relations. The World Heritage Committee is at the heart of this criticism: according to a WWF report (2019)¹, nearly half of the decisions relating to natural and mixed sites deviate from the scientific recommendations of the IUCN, while researchers (Meskell, Bertacchini, 2013) have shown that experts are gradually being replaced by diplomats on this committee.

The role of civil society has also been reduced. Since the adoption of the 2017 regulatory framework (*Directives concerning UNESCO's partnership with NGOs*), NGO partners no longer have the right to speak directly at conferences and are confined to the role of "observers". The scientific and associative community, which was supposed to be at the heart of UNESCO's mission, has thus been marginalised. Added to these weaknesses is an image crisis. The current Director-General has been criticised for her weak response to the US withdrawal. *Le Canard Enchaîné*² summarised this decline ironically in its 21 August 2025 edition with the headline: "*UNESCO is looking for an Airbnb*," revealing that the organisation is even considering renting out its own buildings to compensate for its lack of funds. This is a cruel symbol of the gap between the universalist spirit engraved on the 1946 stamps and the reality of an institution that is now weakened.

These stamps are therefore a striking testament to this belief. With their dual face value – 10 F for local exchange, 25 F for international exchange – they affirmed a simple conviction: peace is built by facilitating the free flow of knowledge and ideas at all levels. Today, as UNESCO struggles to defend its scientific independence and marginalises civil society, these small printed vignettes remind us of the strength of the founding project. They express the original ambition: a universal organisation dedicated to dialogue between peoples. And they highlight, by contrast, the gap with an institution that has become fragile, where the universal is overshadowed by diplomatic and financial compromises.

¹WWF Report (2019) — *Our natural world at risk: UNESCO World Heritage sites at risk due to committee politicisation*
This report indicates that nearly half of natural and mixed World Heritage sites are subject to significant industrial pressures, and denounced the sometimes overly flexible application of IUCN scientific recommendations

. [WWF+2wwfeu.awsassets.panda.org+2](https://www.wwf.org.uk/our-natural-world/our-natural-world-at-risk) . It also shows that the World Heritage Committee has delayed or blocked certain inscriptions on the List of World Heritage in Danger despite the recommendations of the advisory bodies.