On March 8, 1960, France’s first ever Minister of Cultural Affairs, the art critic André Malraux (1901-1976), delivered this influential speech at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. It marked the launch of the organization’s first international preservation project, known as the “Nubian campaign,” to relocate twenty two ancient monuments in the flood valley of the new Aswan Dam, including the famous temple of Abu Simbel, relocated above the new reservoir, and the Temple of Dendur, now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization was only 14 years old and Malraux’s speech and vision helped to shape its sense of purpose in the world. Malraux carefully crafted his text to be read at multiple levels. On the surface, the message addressed to the general public, it presented an image of UNESCO as the only organization able to carry out preservation work on an international scale and to save cultural heritage for the benefit of all mankind. At the level of art history, Malraux rekindled the 18th century idea of the universal value of heritage—and drew harsh criticism for it from figures such as art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), who saw a totalitarian undercurrent in the habit of speaking in terms of collectives such as “mankind.” Malraux also introduced code language to be read by politicians, such as his strategic comparison of UNESCO’s preservation work to the US Federal Government’s Tennessee Valley Authority of the 1930s. The Federal Government used the TVA to do what the state of Tennessee could not: build infrastructure critical to the country’s survival, such as dams and powerplants, and thus promote economic development. Malraux portrayed UNESCO as the international community doing what individual nation sates could not: orchestrate preservation projects at such huge scale that they promoted regional economic development. Under the cover of a purely cultural category of inter-governmental action, UNESCO thus appeared to be promoting development at arms length, if not entirely above, from politics. But in truth, UNESCO didn’t have money, and had to broker deals between governments to make financial gifts and provide technical expertise. Such so-called gifts were the currency and instruments of the Cold War, which pitted the United States and the Soviet Union in a geopolitical struggle to sway the world towards their respective interpretations of capitalism and communism. Egypt was a critical battleground because President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) kept it neutral, or non-aligned. The US had promised to pay for the Aswan Dam but withdrew its funding because Nasser would not align his country. When Nasser convinced Soviet Union to pay for and build it, the US returned to the bargaining table to fund the Nubian campaign, but this time behind UNESCO’s internationalist project to preserve heritage of universal value. Malraux was shrewdly aware of the political role of cultural projects, such as preservation. In the 1920s he traveled to Cambodia, Vietnam, and was arrested by French colonial police for removing bas-reliefs from the 10th century temple of Banteay Srei—a common practice among official colonial archeologists, but banned for amateurs. Furious, Malraux founded an anti-French colonial newspaper. He joined the Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War, and the French Resistance during World War II. Among his most polemical acts as France’s first minister of cultural affairs (1959-1969) was to order the cleaning of Parisian monuments and building facades.

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