The falconers’ community should constantly develop and foster the reflection on spiritual and intellectual values associated with their practice. At the moment of the official recognition of falconry as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO the whole widespread community of falconers had good reason to celebrate.

But the justified joy and satisfaction shouldn’t cover the fact, voiced by Patrick Morel in the previous issue of the International Journal of Falconry in Autumn 2011, that this cultural practice continues to be strongly contested, especially on the European ground, where the dominating tendency is to ban all traditional hunting techniques, as happened in the case of hunting with hounds. For many people alien to the falconry community, there is no difference: if hunting with dogs was banned, why should hunting with birds remain?

In the widespread consciousness, falconry is in exactly the same category of practices. Thus, in spite of the UNESCO recognition, in many countries the pressure on hawking is likely to continue. The survival of falconry depends on how persuasively the falconry community will be able to express itself, inscribing its own cultural practice into a larger universe of values shared by members of the diverse societies to which falconers belong, arguing the necessity for preserving this tradition as a universe of values and to foster the proper understanding of how and in what sense falconry is in fact a positive and meaningful legacy, worthy of being transferred to future generations. The legacy of falconry, seen as a lesson of history reshaped by our present endeavours and worthy of transfer to the future, encompasses such heterogeneous, but somehow interrelating elements as universalism, diplomatic management of conflicts, cognitive posture of man facing the world and relationship with transcendence, being a model of perfect love and even giving some hints for a gender perspective.

The initiative of UNESCO, leading to the protection of the immaterial aspect of human heritage and recognizing its value at the highest institutional level, is based on the growing consciousness that not only monuments or artifacts preserved over time shape the cultural landscape of Man. Culture, evidently, means more than just this. Any material object, monument or exhibit item remains meaningless without a living tradition into which it can be inscribed. It makes sense in the context of a tradition and to the bearers of a tradition that those who have inherited it from their ancestors feel deeply interested and concerned in transmitting it to their descendants. Living tradition builds and shapes a community into which a human being can inscribe itself and from which he or she can draw a sense of his or her individual existence, identifying with a larger universe of values, spreading over space and time. Falconry establishes such a community, vehicular of values that can be named, enumerated and persuasively argued. It is not merely a set of techniques destined to tame a bird of prey in order to use it in a hunting expedition or an efficient way to acquire meat. It might have been this at a very distant moment in the past, but it has become much more ever since. Perhaps it is not exaggerated to say that falconry is a state of mind. And if the falconers want to pass this heritage to the future generations, it’s not an archaic technique of acquiring meat that they want to transfer, but this special attitude that became a consistent legacy, transmitted over centuries till it came into our hands. It constitutes an important gift for the future. There is a paradox in falconry. It can be considered as a highly individualistic activity, and at the same time it is a vehicle of a subtle communitarian dimension. While falconry is no longer a mark of social distinction, it still remains an expression of the spirit of independence of those who set and demand the highest standards, both for themselves and for those to whom they bestow their friendship. On the other hand, falconry has a power of creating a community of its own kind. The links of closeness, relationship and friendship built over the falconer’s
As early as in 78, a manuscript of a work by Archigenes of Cypre, entitled Kithit, a work of learning and example, and translated by Philip K. Hitti, this Muslim warrior and courtier living in the times of the Crusades (1095-1188) was the son of the educated emir of Shirar, a miniature state in the vicinity of Aleppo. His life was filled by wars, travels and hunting. As a member of the social elite of that time, he used to maintain close relationships with important figures among both, Muslims and Christians. He was a friend of the great Salah ad-Din and of the king of Jerusalem, Fulk. If we believe Usamah’s own words, he was bound by mutual ties of affinity with numerous European knights. In his autobiographical book, Kithit furnishes a constant background for those social relationships, crossing over an ideological gap that could seem impossible to traverse.

This is also how the most famous falconer of the Middle Ages, the Emperor Frederic II of Hohenstaufen, first discovered his life-long passion. The crucial moment in the history of European falconry was the 6th crusade (1228-29). This is when Frederic II, the Holy Roman Emperor, but also a ruler closely related to the Eastern Mediterranean as the king of Sicily and of Jerusalem, Fulk. If we believe Usamah’s own words, he was bound by mutual ties of affinity with numerous European knights. In his autobiographical book, Kithit furnishes a constant background for those social relationships, crossing over an ideological gap that could seem impossible to traverse.

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But, contrary to the widespread belief, Frederic II was not the originator of this intellectual and cognitive endeavour, closely related to falconry. The adventure started a century earlier. Nevertheless, Adelard was also a naturalist and the author of a book on hawking, De Arte venandi aere acria, where he coupled some ideas borrowed from Antistota’s Latin version, Liber Animalium, with a large practical knowledge of which he was very proud. He maintained at his court a large number of falcons and fowlers that not only took care of the various birds he had in his possession, but also assisted the emperor in the experiments he liked to conduct. Being interested in answering numerous ornithological questions Frederic II implemented a well-planned, systematic research program, which should be cited among the earliest projects of this kind in the history of science. He intended to check, for example, if birds have a sense of smell or if chicks can hatch from eggs incubated by the heat of the sun. De Arte venandi aere acria gathers knowledge not only about falconry and hawking, but also more general ornithological observations. No wonder that this work exercised a lasting influence, circulating in Europe. The sound knowledge it gathered didn’t become obsolete quickly; on the contrary, the falconry books of Frederic II was a “long-seller” of its time, copied and distributed not only during the Middle Ages, but also during the Renaissance.

To Frederic II of these objects, have been offered and accepted as ransom. Would it be an exaggeration to call them Birds of Peace? Falconry and diplomacy went closely together all over the medieval history of Christian-Muslim conflicts and relationships. Independently of the military confrontations, the time of truce was filled both with hunting encounters and exchange of knowledge, artefacts and zoological species used in falconry. An interesting evidence of these close contacts, practised in the Holy Land dominated by the crusaders, is given by Usamah ibn Munquah in his autobiography, Kithit al-War (Book of learning by example). The author of this dialogue, even if this dialogue, rather small in size, occupies a marginal position in the work of the medieval scholar, it reflects the influence exerted in the 12th c. by the Arabic scholar, an empirical domain seen nearly as the opposite in relation to the old type of knowledge, based not on the observation, but mostly on the authority of earlier authors. Novelties, such as those that Adelard could find in search of knowledge, was also, among his other works, the author of a small treatise on falconry. Adelard lived approximately between 1080 and 1152. Before settling down, in 1122, in the English town of Bath, he crossed all Europe and the Mediterranean in search of new ideas. He reached Sicily and Antioch. His figure is well known in the history of European science mainly for his Latin translation of the Euclidian Elements, based upon an Arabic version. Nevertheless, Adelard was also a naturalist and the author of a book on hawking, De arte acupernae. Even if this dialogue, rather small in size, occupies a marginal position in the work of the medieval scholar, it reflects the influence exerted in the 12th c. by the Arabic scholar, an empirical domain seen nearly as the opposite in relation to the old type of knowledge, based not on the observation, but mostly on the authority of earlier authors. Novelties, such as those that Adelard could find...
during his seven years long trip around the Mediterranean, became an impulse for a deep change in the attitude of Medieval Man towards nature and a seed for the new cultural landscape in which the space reserved for traditional male values, virtues, passions and activities has tended to shrink.

The dominant cultural discourse, condemning violence and rejecting “bloodthirsty” hunting practices, brings hidden collateral damage, it destroys the activities that help to positively shape the masculine identity and foster male friendships. Falconry as Intangible Heritage is a legacy of a “wild masculinity” that shapes itself and finds its own vital space of rituals and communication through the codified cultural practices of falconry and hawking. But, what is to be stressed here, falconry, in its gender aspect, is not based on nor does it foster exclusion. Contrary to many other forms of typically male behaviours or activities, it has never been closed to women. It can be argued that at many a moment in history, falconry was a door permitting women to penetrate into the male world that was closed to them in so many other aspects. Late Medieval and Renaissance falconry (in Europe especially) tended to become a sophisticated, courtly entertainment, accessible also to ladies, as observed around 1410 by the Limburg brothers on one of the well-known miniatures from Très riches heures du Duc de Berry (The very rich hours of the Duke of Berry). This explains the proliferation for small species of falcons, such as different species of hobbies and kestrels, or merlin (Falco columbarius), often used by female hunters. Rather than just another typically male cultural practice, falconry is, once again, a point of contact, a bridge over a gap, this time between masculinity and femininity understood as culturally shaped and codified domains.

In conclusion: many reasons can be pointed out as to why falconry should be maintained as a cultural and spiritual heritage. The preservation of this practice is crucial not just to the benefit of a handful of hobbies, but to the benefit of whole societies in different parts of the world. For sure, falconry is lived by many of its practitioners as a local activity, building friendships on a small scale. But at the same time, it is a form of culture that opens a door towards a direct, personal experience of universality, offering an opportunity for cross-cultural contacts. The flight of a falcon opens horizons. It was used as a key, facilitating international and inter-cultural interactions in the past and it still can be used in this function today. Indeed, there is no ideological gap, no difference of creed so great as to divide people, that a common passion for birds of prey cannot put back together again. The decline of the tradition of falconry would indeed belittle the human identity in many aspects. It concerns the relationship both with other men and with the transcendence. It fosters identification, both as a member of a community and of a local one. It opens unexplored paths. In all these domains, falcons can offer a great and surprising lesson of being truly human.