

Discours à l'occasion de la remise à Mme Riitta NELIMARKKA
des insignes d'Officier dans l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres
le 17 juin 2016

Chère Riitta, cher Jaakko [son mari], Monsieur le Maire [s'il est déjà arrivé], Mesdames et messieurs, chers amis,

Bienvenus à l'Ambassade de France où je me réjouis de vous accueillir aujourd'hui autour de Riitta NELIMARKKA qui est une grande artiste et aussi une grande amie de la France.

Dear friends,

The French authorities have decided to award Riitta Nelimarkka the distinction of *Arts et Lettres* that was first instituted in 1957 by André Malraux who was then Minister of culture. It may be worth mentioning that on occasion Malraux actually decided to revive an ancient tradition as *Arts et Lettres* is the continuation of the Order of Saint-Michel that goes back to 1469.

The goal of the distinction of *Arts et Lettres* is the following : « *to recognize individuals who have distinguished themselves by their creations in the artistic or literary field or by the contribution they have made to the promotion of Arts and Literature in France and worldwide* ».

Dear Riitta,

My duty today is to demonstrate that you are such an individual so that you can be rightfully award this distinction and I must say it is a very pleasant task.

Pleasant may not be easy for me.

Describing your art with words is somewhat a challenge. It is an art to be experienced, not to be described. It is a world of colors, bright and enchanting, A world where the forms seem modest, sometimes naïve even childish. A world of sensibility and sensitivity which may be in turns joyful, humorous and also melancholic.

This, nevertheless, I believe is a superficial impression, I would say an optical illusion. Your art for real is the fruit of many thoughts served by an impressive technique. Looking at some of your works, I came to think of the great French poet Paul Verlaine and more precisely of what another French writer Valéry said when trying to capture the essence of Verlaine's poems which he admired very much. Valéry¹ said that Verlaine was a « sophisticated primitive artist, like there had never been before, and in reality somebody very skilled and conscious. »

However there is an important difference about Verlaine and you, Riitta Nelimarkka. Verlaine was an accursed poet while you are a blessed artist as your art has already been acknowledged in Finland and abroad.

¹ « un primitif organisé, un primitif comme il n'y avait jamais eu de primitif, et qui procède d'un artiste fort habile et fort conscient. »

Dear Riitta,

In Finland, you are one of the major artists living and working right now. You have received a number of awards for them, both in Finland and abroad.

Your artistic production is extremely rich and diverse: on the side of literature, you published 20 children books and a number of books of poems. You also create seven animated films, you work on animation films together with your husband Jaakko and receive numerous distinctions for them. You are the author of more than a hundred paintings, drawings and tapestries.

Sure sign of success, your works can be seen in Finnish embassies and in the residence of the President of the Finnish Republic. And in your manor in Bonga near Loviisa Everybody always feels welcome when coming to visit you.

After graduating 1972 as an arts teacher, you continued your academic carerer with a master in 1998 and a doctorate of fine arts in 2001 on the best possible subject.

You explored other artistic domains. You have also an ear for music – you studied piano at the Sibelius Academy. Your art is attuned to music. I remember the concert “Petits preludes” I had the chance to attend some months ago in Musiikkitalo.

Meanwhile, you werre also raising your three boys and continuing to study,

As for France, we were fortunate to have the pleasure to cooperate with you on several occasions. Paris often features in your works because the city has a special place in your heart. You studied painting there, and it’s also a family tradition since your grand-father also studied painting in Paris at the beginning of the XXth century. You enjoy learning French. You worked with Claude-Louis Michel 2011 on a Franco-Finnish animation film “les sept frères” and the movie got an award.

The French Cultural Institute hosted in the spring and summer of 2015 an exhibition of some very fine artworks with drawings, woolen reliefs and photomontages from the Seven Brothers visiting Paris monuments. I remember the Open Doors in September 2015, you personally lead the visitors through this exhibition.

In the spring of 2015, you together with the French Institute you organized a culinary and artistic experiment in Bonga Castle under the name “Papilles Art”. On this special occasion, a cook created a menu that looked like your art works. As always, you were a delightful and spirited hostess and the evening left wonderful memories to the participants.

Dear Riitta,

I have fulfilled my mission to the best of my abilities and there is no doubt that this distinction is very-well deserved. In France, we say that a small drawing is much better than a long speech. Today, on the occasion of this ceremony and much better than any speech, we have many wonderful paintings on display, as you were kind enough to bring here a few of your latest works. I also want thank you for that. Your art speaks for itself.

Mme Riitta NELIMARKKA, au nom du Ministre de la Culture et de la Communication, nous vous faisons Officier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.