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The gold medal for deception: How a professor created an international award out of thin air

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The gold medal for deception: How a professor created an international award out of thin air

By

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InvestigationIn 2016, Florent Montclair stepped into the spotlight when he received the Gold Medal of Philology, a sort of Nobel Prize for the discipline. In fact, the award was created by Montclair himself. It took an investigation by Romanian journalists to uncover this hoax, which is now the subject of a judicial inquiry in France.

The ceremony took place on June 8, 2016, in a reception room at the Assemblée Nationale. In the few photographs that captured the moment, there is Pierre Joxe, a minister under former president François Mitterrand, Claude Bartolone, president of the Assemblée Nationale, Luc Montagnier, who received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2008, and Jean Jouzel, who received the Nobel Peace Prize with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007.

Also seated on the red velvet chairs was a cohort of leading researchers, gold medalists in their fields from France's National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), as well as several MPs and Geneviève Fioraso, who served as higher education and research minister from 2012 to 2015. In the middle of this distinguished group, there was one unknown figure: Florent Montclair.

In front of a beaming Bartolone, this 46-year-old literature professor, living in Montbéliard in the eastern Doubs département and employed by the Université de Franche-Comté (which later became the Université Marie et Louis Pasteur, UMLP), was presented by Joxe with the Gold Medal of Philology – the philology equivalent of the Nobel Prize, just as the Fields Medal is for mathematics. This discipline focuses on the study of language through the analysis of ancient texts.

The prestigious award is presented by the International Society of Philology, a century-old academic society affiliated with the University of Philology and Education in Lewes, Delaware, in the United States. The recipient is chosen by a panel of around 200 academics from around the world and Montclair, the first French laureate since the medal was established in 1967, joined a roster of eminent linguists, semioticians and literary criticism specialists such as Morris Halle, Roman Jakobson and Umberto Eco, to name just a few.

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