

ICOM FRANCE  
COMITÉ NATIONAL FRANÇAIS DE L'ICOM

# What definition do museums need?

Proceedings of the ICOM  
Committees' day

PARIS, GRANDE GALERIE DE L'ÉVOLUTION (MNHN), MARCH 10, 2020



# What definition do museums need?

Proceedings of the ICOM  
Committees' day

.....

*Paris,  
Grande galerie de l'évolution (MNHN),  
March 10, 2020*



# CONTENTS



**TOPIC . . . . . p.7**

**OPENINGS . . . . . p.13**

By Bruno David

By Regine Schulz

**PRESENTATION OF THE MEETING'S OBJECTIVES . . p.23**

By Juliette Raoul-Duval

**INTRODUCTION . . . . . p.31**

By François Mairesse

**CONTRIBUTIONS FROM NATIONAL  
AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEES . . . . . p.43**

Introduction by Marie-Laure Estignard

Retranscription of the morning session

Synthesis chart by Florence Le Corre

**CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES:**  
**PANEL DISCUSSIONS .....p.111**

Legal introduction by Marie Cornu  
"Thinking of the museum as a legal category: what are the issues around definition?"

Lexicological introduction by Jean-Louis Chiss  
"Some linguistic remarks on the definition of "museum""

First panel discussion: What is the purpose of a museum definition by ICOM?

Results of the ICOFOM survey by Marion Bertin

Second panel discussion: How to develop a shared vision: What unites us?

**CONCLUSIONS ..... p.159**

By Juliette Raoul-Duval

**RECOMMENDATIONS .....p.167**

By ICOM France, ICOM Germany, ICOM Europe, and ICOFOM







# Topic



WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## Topic

**T**he Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) held in Kyoto on September 7 decided to postpone its vote around the “new definition of the museum”, which had led to intense debates that were widely reported in the international press.

To be described in a few words and inspired by a rather critical vision of some 20<sup>th</sup> century museums - especially Western ones - the “new” definition proposed to shift the centre of gravity of museums: from institutions conserving collections and dedicated to the transmission to the public of their artistic, historical, scientific and natural heritage, the museum became a multi-purpose institution, serving human rights as a whole. A proposal breaking away from the definition that had hitherto appeared in ICOM’s Statutes as well as the regulatory texts of many member countries, distancing itself from the professional anchoring of the organization, and which caused a postponement of discussion.

A large majority of the members realized that beyond the words they were discovering, it was their common vision of the museums of tomorrow, their missions and their own ethics that were being called into question.

Among the 4,000 present representatives of ICOM’s national and international committees out of the 44,000 that the organization has in 135 countries, many left with a sense of urgency to redefine, not so much the word “museum”, but what links museums together and their perspectives for a shared future: “definition” is an operational tool, not a parable; as a tool, it must be simple and consensual, and obviously free of misunderstandings, unclear terms or gaps. Managing to define what brings museums together in a common project is another challenge, a decisive one for a world organization that represents them: what makes a museum singular today and distinguishes it from other “polyphonic and inclusive” places, such as those being created every day in all regions of the world (cultural centres, performance halls, etc.)? In what way the “collections” and the specific work they require, are precisely what makes the meaning of museums and the strength of the social

bond they create? What new skills and qualifications are today the basis for professional excellence that guarantees the public's trust in museums to transmit their history? What updating of the Code of Ethics, the common culture of museum professionals, is made necessary by these changes at work?

Since Kyoto, these questions have taken place, sometimes intensely, within the many committees of ICOM and even beyond, with other professional museum organizations and among cultural actors, journalists, associations, public officials...

It is the fruit of this work that ICOM France intends to collect, in March, in Paris. Of course, it will express different and even divergent convictions and proposals. Among the 135 member countries of ICOM, there are so many different cultural models! It is not about trying to harmonize. It is about moving in the same direction and carrying values that bring people together. This is what has united ICOM for over 70 years, and allows professionals, whatever their position in their organization and the position of their organization in their country, to dialogue and to practice their profession.

The working day was devoted to giving the floor to the representatives of the national and international committees and the alliances who have led discussions with their members over the past six months: expressed positions, expectations and proposals for the future. Round tables compared the approaches and restart the prospective approach.





# Openings



WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?



## Speech by Bruno David

### President, Museum national d'histoire naturelle

**M**adam President of the French Committee of the International Council of Museums, dear Juliette Raoul-Duval,

Dear colleagues and friends,

I am delighted to see so many of you this morning in the auditorium of the Great Gallery of Evolution on the site of the Jardin des Plantes, which is, as you know, the historic site of the French National Museum of Natural History.

It is a great honour to host you within our walls. I would like to welcome you all for this ICOM Committees' day attended by a wonderful range of players, which promises to make our discussions as fruitful as they are enthralling.

Dear friends, the reason we are here today is to discuss an issue that generated a great deal of debate at the ICOM Extraordinary General Assembly held in Kyoto last September: the definition of museums.

It is an issue which gave rise to much intense debate, clearly revealing disagreement among ICOM members. I thank Juliette Raoul-Duval for having worked to postpone this vote in order to give the members of the various committees time for dialogue and discussion in the hope that we can converge.

Whatever the point of view defended, the aim of today is to create the conditions for a cordial and peaceful debate on this crucial definition, crucial because it conditions the very framework of our museum activities.

This is also why I would encourage us not to fall into the trap of polemic or partisan posturing. As museum representatives, our role on behalf of the public and society is too important for us to fall into disunity.

However, avoiding being trapped into posturing does not mean

avoiding substantive issues. This day should enable us to find a balanced position that does not weaken ICOM but rather reaffirms and strengthens its role. For this to happen, I am convinced that we need to face up to what divides us. We must face up to this antagonistic situation in order to learn collective lessons shared by all.

And to get to the heart of the matter, allow me to speak to you about what I know well, namely a science museum.

At the Muséum, the core of our public service mission is to study the planet and living things (including Man) from their origins to the present day. To make an inventory of nature and understand it in depth, in order to get to know it better and contribute to the sustainable preservation of this common heritage of humanity.

The naturalist collections of the National Museum of Natural History are home to millions of specimens collected over several centuries. These collections, on which we base our research, are not a heterogeneous assemblage as was the case in the days of the cabinets of curiosities where passionate people accumulated objects without ordering them in any particular way, other than by their aesthetic sense.

In a natural history museum, scientific knowledge has over the centuries enabled collections to be coherently arranged so as to deliver a meaningful and even universal message to our visitors, that of the history of life and the planet.

This coherence in the collections also needs to be clearly understandable in our presentations to the public. It is, in fact, supported by a discourse that signals the intention of the exhibition, whether it is temporary or permanent.

- If it is a museum labelled as such by ICOM, this discourse must mobilise real knowledge.
- If it is real knowledge, it must be collectively validated and periodically reviewed in the light of the progress of scientific research and the scientific approach.

And this is perhaps where a first disagreement will arise: the direct

consequence of this approach is that it is difficult to present a revisable scientific discourse and an identity discourse conceived as immutable side by side, as if they were part of the same epistemology.

It would be misleading for the public to equate scientifically screened knowledge with a personal (opinion) or mystical interpretation, however respectable they may be. There is a difference in nature and not only in degree.

This in no way means that beliefs or identity claims that can offer enlightening points of support should be silenced or made invisible. All that is required is to put in place the means to identify what is testimonial, and what is knowledge-based museum discourse, which overhangs it.

We should not use the same signage to put perspectives that are fundamentally not equivalent on an equal footing. Even more so, science should not be substituted by another discourse. I am talking about science museums.

This is the very vocation of ICOM and our common *raison d'être*: to promote reliable knowledge and disseminate it to the widest possible audience.

A vocation that the universalist approach favours because it takes into account and encompasses all particularities.

Today, it is this clearly defined principle of universalism that I wish to defend to you. A principle of the universality of knowledge which is at the very foundation of the scientific method.

Dear colleagues, science is not an archipelago made up of a multitude of points of view of equal legitimacy. It is a massive continent whose contours may change, but which remains the same continent. A continent that we continue to discover day after day and that reminds everyone of what we have in common.

If museums become nothing more than juxtapositions of testimonies, then we are simply preparing to expropriate science from these places, and the ghettoization of representations will replace knowledge conceived as a public good.

Finally, and I will finish with this, science does not use adjectives: there is no French, Italian or Chinese science; there is no Western or Eastern science. The place of discoveries or the origin of the men who make them should not be a pretext for qualifying science. It must not be the object of any particular claim or succumb to the sirens of relativism. The transmission of knowledge to the younger generations is at stake, as is the health of our political systems and democracies.

Thank you for your attention and I now give the floor to Regine Schulz, President of the ICOM Advisory Council.

## Speech by Regine Schulz Chair, ICOM Advisory Council

**D**ear Juliette Raoul-Duval, dear Bruno David, dear colleagues of ICOM France, dear Markus Waltz,

Thank you very much for arranging this conference on “Museums, today and tomorrow? Definitions, missions, ethics – Synthesis of the work of national and international committees and the alliances of ICOM after Kyoto

I am very glad to be here with you today and to have the chance to listen to your ideas and take part in your discussions. It is great that many colleagues from very different national and international committees participate in this conference and meet with legal and lexicographic experts.

At the beginning of this meeting, I would like to remind you, why a new standing committee was established to discuss the previous ICOM definition, which has been updated last time in 2007. Not everybody was and is convinced that we will need a new definition, considering how successful the previous was, and is being accepted and also adopted by many countries worldwide even in their own legislation and regulations.

However, we are living in an ever faster changing world, with new challenges, expectations and opportunities, and museums are part of it. I remember many discussions dealing with questions such as:

- Do we need museums in the future anymore?
- Is there a lack of visions for the future and how to overcome it?
- Can and will digital access replace physical access to the collections in the future?
- How to deal not only with material, but also immaterial culture?

or

- How can we define the role of museums in a way that museums can continue to be meaningful and significant for future generations and societies?

The discussion on the definition of the term “museum” should take

into consideration the different interests of its stakeholders. As far as I can see there are three very different approaches to deal with the task and to come up with a new or modified definition of the term “Museum”:

- 1<sup>st</sup>/ An identity-based approach, which widens the definition and focusses more on the vision and mission of museums.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>/ A functional approach focusing on informative, instructional and educational aspects of the definition

and

- 3<sup>rd</sup>/ A delimitation approach, which results from the controversy of commercial contra none-commercial goals.

The definition of MDPP was very much identity-based and wanted to include aspects of an attractive vision into the text. This was for MDPP more important than functional or categorizing aspects. The criticism was mostly driven by the functional approach on the basis of the experiences, needs and situation of many museums worldwide.

A decision where ICOM goes is linked to this discussion, to its mission, vision and definition. If we do not find a way to build bridges between the ideas and needs of our members and the way to and a vision for the future ICOM can and will split up. This we have to avoid. But this discussion also made and makes ICOM a vivid living organization. I never saw such hot debates in ICOM for many years, and this is a positive outcome.

I am now looking forward to the discussions and hope that we all will learn from one another.







# **Presentation of the meeting's objectives**





## Introduction and context by Juliette Raoul-Duval President, ICOM France

**W**elcome everybody, there are many of you present for this meeting.  
Thank you to Bruno David and the MNHN (*National Museum of Natural History*) for hosting us. Thank you to Regina Schulz, Chair of the Advisory Board of ICOM, also here with us.

We are pleased to welcome you to Paris; I would like to warmly thank the partners with whom we organized this first “Committees’ day”: ICOM Europe, ICOM Germany, ICOFOM, our Italian friends... we worked together and especially Alberto, Luis, Markus, Bruno represented by Marion.

Many of you already know how the project of this first “Committees’ day” came about, I’ll only remind you of a few steps: Kyoto and the call for a vote concerning a “new definition of museums”, raising many questions on both form and content. Regarding the form: there was less than 5 weeks during the summer to consult with the members. In content: ambiguity of the language used or omitted, position of the collections and its related tasks in the background, a shift in the very nature of our professional organization to the point of including the register of human rights at large ...

This summer, with the partners I just mentioned and the support of several dozen committees, we suggested that the vote be postponed to allow more time to analyze the changes that were proposed and the evaluation of their consequences.

But because ICOM’s status doesn’t allow for the cancellation of an Extraordinary General Assembly already decided upon, the debate was held. It was lively. In Kyoto on September 7<sup>th</sup>, a vote (more than 70 %) postponed the adoption of the text.

It was immediately announced that the “new definition” would be put back on the agenda for a next ICOM General Assembly. It was also immediately decided, by all the signatories who requested the postponement, to pursue their reflections with their respective committee members.

All those who were engaged in this discussion, all - both *for* and *against* (the definition) - have,

I think, felt that it was not just a quarrel over words.

In fact, what was fascinating for us and dividing us out of passion was the vision of our professional reality.

- Vision of what museums are: their history, their role in society, the ideals they stand for, their weight in the construction of future social bonds, that is, all around the world since our organization exists in 135 countries around the globe.

- Vision of what ICOM is: ICOM does not have exclusivity over the definition of what museums are. The term 'museum' is not a protected designation. But we were surprised that the Kyoto debate resonated loudly throughout the cultural landscape, within institutions and even in the press (we prepared a press review, it speaks for itself). ICOM's definition has authority and holds weight, far beyond ICOM and its members. We can be proud of this, but it also obliges us; a jurist and a linguist will speak to us shortly about the meaning and weight of a "definition" in this context.

- Vision of what a definition is: the words that we add and those that we remove, the order in which we put them, everything has a certain meaning and weight, it's not an exercise in literature, it's a framework that gets straight to the point, that orders and hierarchizes. It's this hierarchy of priorities that we'll have to work on in the next two years.

We are not debating a universal definition, but rather one that will provide a sustainable structure for the future of our organization and that will be able to bind our members together beyond their differences. Because we can all agree that those who do not share the same definition of their profession find it difficult to unite in the same professional organization. For ICOM to persist into the future, we are obliged to get along. In Kyoto, some have seen the moment when ICOM was about to reach a breaking point due to crucial misunderstandings. This must be acknowledged and overcome together.

There is no room for controversy.

We, the organizers of the day, were said to have wanted to divide and oppose a “statutory” working group officially appointed by our president... Let’s not in return make such assumptions about our colleagues from the MDPP2 – a committee which I have agreed, under certain conditions, to be part of.

The Presidents of the MDPP and ICOM were invited, as well as all the members from the Executive Board and Standing Committee. Some are present or represented among us. The initiative finds its place in the necessary debate that the president calls for.

It is up to us today to convince that we are gathered here to unite together. You are, we are, the presidents of committees, national or international, all elected by members... To assemble, to inform and to facilitate a dialogue between the members is our mandate.

And it is doable: fortunately there are many things we probably all agree on, even within that definition.

For instance, I bet none of us think that museums should not be inclusive. For decades, almost everyone has put the public at the heart of their work. The *Musée de France* law of 2002 - almost 20 years ago – puts the democratization of access to the museum as a top priority, and 3 years ago the report “museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” called to further strengthen this aim. For this to happen we must diversify the range of what we offer and seek attractiveness. If that’s what we call “polyphonic” (the word is inappropriate and caricatural) who doesn’t do it? and even, who doesn’t try to excel in it?

As for *being inclusive* and *attractive*, or providing well-being, these are keywords of all culture and leisure activities: stadiums, concert halls, cultural centers, etc. How is this unique to museums ? The essence of a definition is to say what belongs to us “it its own right”.

Many have been moved by the fact that the terms, which characterize the museum’s occupations in their own right, are being overshadowed or even disappearing: conservation, education, scientific work.

Some surveys have been in circulation to question members on the relevance or acceptability of one word or another, or even the absence of another.

But we all know that terms, in isolation, reveal only part of their meaning. Between words, it is their connections that we hear and the logic that these connections carry. Their significance.

Therefore, a few days ago, the MDPP2 embarked on a new dialogue. It is our turn, elected representatives of the members, to nourish this dialogue. By consulting members and making proposals, not just on words but on new and forward-looking content and projects.

The proposed timetable is short. It is part of the dialogue to say whether we find it too short.

The challenge is that we leave this evening convinced that what unites us *exists* and that we belong to the same professional community.

Speaking and debating, especially between people who do not share all the same opinions, is only useful if after today we know better and more concretely the strategies we want to bring together into the future. Museums around the world are undergoing major, sometimes even radical, transformations. Technologies, the obligation to find incomes, hosting distant audiences, the instrumentalization in cultural diplomacy, the commitment to sustainability, all this requires new skills and cooperation every day.

Museums have changed so much in the past twelve years that it is legitimate to update their “definition”. But they are going to change so much in the next twelve years that the question is how to anticipate which ICOM professionals will recognize as the organization that represents them. Which ethics consolidate us?

Much is expected of us. We are even expected to stand firm, so to say. Some already say that this is the occidental ‘pensée unique’ day.

So I would like to ask everyone, especially the moderators and spokespeople (thank you), to search

ardently throughout the day, not for what is controversial but for what forms the basis and consensus. And

if by tonight we haven’t finished finding our base - it’s very likely that we won’t plus 18 months before

a new vote surely won't be too much - we will each have to go back with tasks to do, methods to produce pass on the expectations of our members.

This is what we can bring to the MDPP2, whose task is difficult and which we must support.

This is the direction I want to give us for this day.

I thank, in advance, all of you who have agreed to do so and I commit to making accessible the publication of our debates to everyone.

Good day to all of you.





# Introduction



WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## Definitions and missions of museums

**François Mairesse**

**Professor, University Sorbonne Nouvelle,  
holder of UNESCO Chair on the study  
of museum diversity and its evolution  
(CERLIS, CNRS, Labex ICCA)**

**M**useum definitions were around long before ICOM started developing its first definition. They have existed for at least three centuries. I would just like to refer to the definition of George Brown Goode, an ichthyologist, deputy director at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and one of the first “modern museologists”. His definition dates from 1896, and describes the museum as:

“an institution for the preservation of those objects which best illustrate the phenomena of nature and the works of man, and the utilization of these for the increase of knowledge and for the culture and enlightenment of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

Brown Goode highlights both the importance of objects and the research that underpins museum work. In this respect, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an important moment for the professionalisation of the sector, notably through the creation of the British Museums Association. The very principle of professionalisation implies reflection on what essence of museum work is, and therefore the nature of the museum. Brown Goode’s approach is not the only one, but it underlines the scientific aspect of the museum, as Bruno David mentioned in his introduction to this day.

The institutionalisation of ICOM in 1946 required the drafting of Statutes, which in turn obliged the organisation to specify who its members were (it was a non-profit association under the French 1901 law). As ICOM brings together museum professionals, it was

<sup>(1)</sup> BROWN GOODE G., “The principles of museum administration”, *Report of Proceedings with the papers read at the sixth annual general meeting, held in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 23-26 July*, London, Dulau, 1896, p. 69-148.

therefore appropriate to define this institution in its broadest sense, so as to include natural history museums as well as museums of fine arts or ethnography. In the first definition,

“The word “museum” means all collections of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material open to the public, including zoological and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except those which maintain permanent exhibition rooms” (Article 2, Section II, 1946)<sup>2</sup>.

The museum is therefore first defined on the basis of its collection. It also includes a number of institutions that are not always entitled “museum” but are integrated within ICOM as museums: zoological parks, botanical gardens, etc., in short, what would gradually constitute a growing list (including science centres or restoration centres) evoking the museum world gathered around ICOM.

This definition has been changed many times (1951, 1961, 1974, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2007). Some moments have undoubtedly been more decisive than others. One of these major moments is linked to

(2) L'ensemble des définitions de l'ICOM est repris dans Mairesse F. (Ed.), *Définir le musée du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Matériaux pour une discussion*, Paris, ICOFOM, 2017.

(3) Personal conversation with the author, January 2020, and unpublished article: “When it was necessary to prepare the IXth General Conference, which was to be held in Paris and Grenoble, the Executive Council decided to adopt the theme “The museum in the service of man, today and tomorrow” and to invite as keynote speakers political personalities: two French ministers, German and Soviet ministers, a former minister of Dahomey (now Benin), Stanislas Adotevi, and the designer of the new national museums of Mexico, Mario Vazquez. After an inaugural speech in Paris by the French Minister of Culture, Jacques Duhamel, who took liberties with the orthodoxy of his own ministry, followed in Dijon by that of the Minister of the Environment, Robert Poujade, who announced a new concept called an ecomuseum for museums related to nature and the environment, the sessions in Grenoble heard, among others, from Mario Vazquez, who called for museums to be made first and foremost for the people and to free themselves from the constraints imposed by the European tradition, and then from Stanislas Adotevi, who called for the de-Europeanisation of cultures and museums in Africa.

This succession of non-conformist points of view encouraged a group of young participants from many countries, especially from Europe and North and South America, to call, sometimes vehemently, for a modernisation of the museum, its missions and practices, and also for a modernisation of ICOM, its structures and the status of its members. The majority who remained attached to tradition reacted vigorously and there were fierce debates between conservatives and progressives, which were finally arbitrated by the outgoing president, Arthur van Schendel, and the new president, Jan Jelinek”.

the 1971 crisis within ICOM. According to Hugues de Varine, its Director at the time, while things did not come to blows during the 1971 General Assembly in Grenoble, we were not far from it<sup>3</sup>: the younger generations of curators were then vigorously calling for change, considering that the museum had to adapt to society. It was probably a time of relatively similar tensions in Kyoto, although ICOM has changed a great deal since the 1970s. On the other hand, Varine recalls that the definition itself, which resulted three years later from this desire for transformation, was adopted with a broad consensus (as were all ICOM definitions). The 1974 definition is well known. It has very significantly transformed the definitional landscape of the museum, and overall it has not changed much since then:

“A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.” (1974)

We find here notions that seem fundamental to us, notably the fact that the museum is “in the service of the society and its development”, or that it is a “non-profit” institution. This definition seems to have been unanimously accepted for a long time; however, it was contested fairly quickly, notably by the British association, which in 1998, after having adopted the ICOM definition, decided to part with it in order to produce its own definition:

“Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society. This definition includes art galleries with collections of works of art, as well as museums with historical collections of objects.” (1998)<sup>4</sup>

The Museums Association thus places people at the heart of the institution: “Museums are for people”, which marks a desire for change with regard to the previous definition, still largely marked by “society”, “material evidence of man and his environment”, and

(4) Website of the British Museums Association:  
<https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>

research. The last transformation within ICOM, in 2007 and with a broad consensus, was also the result of a rather long process which involved many members of ICOM (those able to work in English), and in which ICOFOM invested a great deal, notably by producing a monograph (*Towards a Redefinition of the Museum?*<sup>5</sup>). The 2007 definition is well known – it is still in use today and does not appear to have changed radically from the 1974 version.

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”

Indeed, it is essentially the notions of the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity that have been added. On the other hand, one element, which is perhaps more fundamental than was imagined at the time, has been removed: the famous list of institutions recognised by ICOM as museums, which included nine detailed categories. It was notably this list that made it possible for the national committees to identify the institutions whose professionals could become members and those that did not fit into the general framework or for which discussion was needed. This list also made it possible to stress the limits of the general definition (because of its general character), and the fact that in order to adapt it, it was easier to work on the list in order to specify the members ICOM wished to include, rather than trying to cover all museum forms through an abstract general definition.

The 2007 definition also illustrates the continuity between all the definitions previously considered by generations of ICOM professionals: if we take the terms used in the previous definitions (in *italics* and dated in brackets), we can see this principle of continuity at work, linking us with previous generations.

“A museum is a *non-profit* (1974), *permanent* (1951) *institution* (1961) *in the service of society and its development* (1974), *open to the public* (1946), which *acquires* (1974), *conserves* (1951), *researches* (*studies* (1951)), *communicates* and *exhibits*

(5) MAIRESSE F., DESVALLÉES A. (Dir.), *Vers une redéfinition du musée ?*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2007. English translation in 2010, Spanish translation in 2019.

(1951) the *tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment* (1974) for the *purposes of education* (1961), *study* (1961) and *enjoyment* (1961)”.

The 2007 definition is therefore the result of a long process of sedimentation between these different moments of evolution and has taken into account all the discussions of professionals on the principle of the museum, in a harmonious manner and with respect for the generations of professionals that have succeeded one another.

The process implemented from 2016 onwards under the leadership of Jette Sandahl led to the creation of a committee (MDPPI), along with a whole series of reflections, notably those initiated within ICOFOM (which has organised some ten symposia around the world and produced several monographs on the definition<sup>6</sup>). The definition suggested by the MDPPI in Kyoto, as we know, is radically different from the previous ones. If we try the same exercise as for the 2007 definition, we obtain:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces, for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens *in trust for society* (1974), safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and *access to heritage* (2007) for all people. Museums are *not for profit* (1974). They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, *research* (1951), interpret, *exhibit* (1951), and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

The exercise of identifying terms previously used by ICOM reveals a strong willingness to change, to say the least, since only five terms (out of nearly one hundred) come from previous definitions. Emilie Girard, for ICOM France, carried out fairly similar work

(6) In addition to the monograph already cited, refer to de BRULON SOARES B., BROWN K., NAZOR O. (Ed.), *Defining Museums of the 21st century: plural experiences*. Paris, ICOFOM, 2018 and de CHUNG Y. S. S., LESHCHENKO A., BRULON SOARES B., *Defining the Museum of the 21st Century. Evolving Multiculturalism in Museums in the United States*, Paris, ICOFOM/ICOM. These monographs can be downloaded from ICOFOM's website.

more focused on immediate history, examining how the proposed definition discussed in Kyoto reflected the 269 proposals for definitions that had been submitted in 2019 by members or by national or international committees during the call for proposals made by ICOM during that year.

Museums are democratising (5.2%), inclusive (9.3%) and polyphonic (0.4%) spaces (23.8%), for critical dialogue (7.4%) about the pasts (plural, 0.4% - singular, 13.4%) and the futures (plural, 0.4% - singular, 20%). Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts (0.4%) and challenges (3%) of the present (13.4%), they hold artefacts (4.8%) and specimens (1.1%) in trust for society (31.6%), safeguard (6%) diverse memories (14.1%) for future generations and guarantee equal rights (1.9%) and equal access (11.5%) to heritage (46%) for all people (17.1%). Museums are not for profit (23%). They are participatory (8.2%) and transparent (5.2%), and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities (13.8%) to collect (12.3%), preserve (26%), research (37.2%), interpret (7.4%), exhibit (34.9%), and enhance understandings (8.2%) of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity (1.9%) and social justice (0.7%), global equality (4.5%), and planetary wellbeing (0.4%).<sup>7</sup>

Some generic terms (society, preservation, study, exhibition) were widely used by contributors; however, many others (including a number of the most discussed terms such as “polyphonic”, “social justice”, etc.) seem to reflect very little the proposals of ICOM members.

What would be the reason why the Kyoto definition does not really reflect the proposals made by the members, nor the previous definitions? The difficulty of interpreting this proposal as a strict definition has been mentioned several times, underlining its character as a “mission statement” or “value statement”. It is interesting, in this respect, to take one of these “mission statements”, such as the one currently presented by the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg (which was once directed by Jette Sandahl). It can be found on its current website, and has a somewhat revealing family resemblance to the Kyoto definition:

“The aim of the Museum of World Culture is to function as a platform for dialogues and reflections, where many different voices

(7) See the website of ICOM France: <https://www.icom-musees.fr/index.php/actualites/proposition-de-la-nouvelle-definition-du-musee>



can be heard, and controversial and contentious topics discussed – a place where people can feel at home and reach across borders.”<sup>8</sup>

These polyphonic and reflexive principles evoked in the Gothenburg Museum mission statement were welcomed by Peter and Leontine van Mensch who presented it in a book published in 2015<sup>9</sup> (*New trends in museology II*), stressing that while the Gothenburg Museum, like any classical museum, continues to work with collections (which are apparently very well developed, judging by its digitised inventory) and to exhibit them, its mission, as expressed through this sentence, breaks away uniquely from this approach in order to affirm its social commitment. This kind of mission statement is absolutely consistent with the principles of a museum such as the Museum of World Cultures, and many other institutions could claim the same, although mission statements differ from one museum to another. The definition of a museum’s mission statement, in the management of organisations, aims to formulate, in a short paragraph, the nature of an enterprise, and the values and objectives that its leaders and the organisation want to set for itself and share with its stakeholders. The mission statement is presented as a roadmap, a statement of the main objectives and goals to be achieved, within the framework of strategic management<sup>10</sup>. This strategic logic does indeed seem important to highlight for museums. However, it differs greatly from what is expected by ICOM for its own definition.

In conclusion, if ICOM’s definition is first and foremost a rather classical definition, this is because it fits into a text that has legal status. It very clearly aims to link ICOM members, to define who can be affiliated, and not the objectives of the organisation or those of each museum. It also helps ICOM national committees to better answer the question of who can become a member of the organisation and who cannot. It is also linked to a certain number of legal texts: this definition is found in many national laws (as Michèle

(8) See the website:

<http://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/en/varldskulturmuseet/about-the-museum/>

(9) MENSCH P & L. VAN, *New Trends in Museology II*, Celsje, Museum of Recent History, 2015, p. 15.

(10) MAIRESSE F., *Gestion de projets culturels. Conception, mise en œuvre, direction*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2016, p. 26-31.

Rivet has shown in an important article on the place of the ICOM definition in national laws<sup>(11)</sup>) and especially within UNESCO, which adopted it in its 2015 Recommendation, a fundamental text for a large number of Member States that do not have museum legislation. It therefore no longer belongs entirely to ICOM, so to speak, but also to its various stakeholders.

The very notion of a definition, as it is understood here for the Statutes, is not directly linked to strategic reflection – which depends on the contexts in which each museum is working. Strategic management and definitions are two fundamental elements in thinking about the museum and its evolution, but it seems important to differentiate between them.

(11) RIVET M., “ La définition du musée : que nous disent les droits nationaux ”, in MAIRESSE F. (2017), *op. cit.*, p. 53-123.





# **Contributions from national and international committees**

.....

WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## Introduction

### by Marie-Laure Estignard

#### Director, Musée des arts et métiers

A few weeks ago when considering how the committees would be involved in the new museum definition, we had no idea that we would receive so many responses, leading us to organise this morning's event. Thirty-eight committees (26 national and 12 international) sent us contributions. Half of these committees are represented in this room today and will speak directly; the other half have sent their contributions in text or PowerPoint format, which have been summarised by Florence Le Corre and Laure Ménétrier<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, presenting these 38 contributions in more or less the same way may take some time. The format is the same because we asked committees to present themselves by number of members for national committees or in terms of their missions for international committees. Each committee was then asked to share how it has worked on the new museum definition internally, and finally, to identify the main points raised in terms of agreement and changes to the definition.

All contributions are very useful and comprehensive, and make it possible to hear from everyone. The responses are really interesting, but there are so many that we are obliged to limit presentations to 7 minutes per committee, and we will, unfortunately, be unable to take any questions during the contributions. There will be an opportunity to discuss these questions during the roundtable sessions this afternoon.

We will be inviting each national and international committee to speak directly or asking Florence or Laure to represent them. For your information, we received the final contribution less than 10 minutes ago and three others during the night! Please be patient with us.

(1) Prior to the presentations of the committee contributions by Florence Le Corre and Laure Ménétrier. The absent committees have sent their contributions to our reflections. It would take too long to read each text. Committee texts are presented in a summary format, emphasising the most important terms in a factual manner, without any interpretation. Please note that the texts demonstrate the need to include the terms “acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit”. In addition, all committees talk of “tangible and intangible heritage” or “collections”, whereas few mention “artefacts and specimens”.

## **ICOM Switzerland – Helen Bieri Thomson, member of ICOM Switzerland**

ICOM Switzerland has 1,700 members for around 1,100 museums. Our members represent all museum sectors, from museum custodians to directors, communications managers, curators, caterers and more. We are a bilingual national committee with 40% French speakers and 60% German speakers. Our three main objectives are to encourage international contacts, strengthen ethical practice in museum work and above all, provide high-quality training, for which we have an extensive programme. Our annual conference is held in August. Last year, we were caught off guard by the new museum definition and were not really able to respond at the time.

Following the Kyoto General Assembly last September, we talked to our members and decided to survey our 200 or so members who attended the event, using the same survey as ICOM Germany. We have also planned our annual conference in August 2020 around the sole theme of the new museum definition.

In response to the question, “To what extent does the wording of the current ICOM museum definition correspond with the definition of a museum?”, 86% of respondents were satisfied or relatively satisfied with the current definition, compared to 10% of respondents who believed that the wording did not correspond well or at all to how they considered museums should be defined today. If we compare this to the definition proposed in Kyoto, the results are inversed, with 9% of respondents saying that the definition corresponds well and 22% who considered that it corresponds quite well, representing a total of around 30% of respondents who were relatively satisfied with the Kyoto definition. However, 59% of respondents were not convinced by the wording presented in Kyoto.

The survey also ranked the aspects considered the most important in the new definition. The top items corresponded to the current 2007 definition, with 80% prioritising “museums hold artefacts and specimens in trust”. The aspects with which our members agreed the least include the idea that the purpose of museums is to contribute to “global equality”, “social justice” and “planetary wellbeing”.



In summary, after analysing the results of this survey as a committee, we believe that the museum definition should be normative and limited to defining museum admission conditions. It should represent the smallest common denominator for all museums in the world. We do not consider this denominator to be restrictive, but instead a means of giving institutions greater freedom and as much room for manoeuvre as possible. We believe that ICOM should represent the values of museums but not impose a strategy upon them. We therefore consider this new definition too limiting and exclusive. It would *de facto* exclude a certain number of museums and would no doubt mean the end of ICOM.

In Switzerland, the articles of association of many museums specify that the institution must remain politically neutral, which runs counter to this new definition as it requires political engagement. Should ICOM decide to transform the proposals underpinning the new definition into a sort of “mission statement”, we would question the necessity of such a procedure. We believe that it is each museum’s responsibility to define its own mission. This is true of the example of the Gothenburg Museum of World Culture, cited by François Mairesse. However, we do believe that the role of ICOM is to promote discussion and conversation around the themes mentioned in the new definition. The aim would be to raise awareness, and to encourage and support museums to engage in these various fields, such as ecology, social issues and politics. To finish, we would like to reiterate the fact that we reject the proposal presented in Kyoto, and that we are very happy to see discussions now taking place on new and proper foundations.

## **CECA – Marie-Clarté O’Neill, President**

CECA is the Committee for Education and Cultural Action. It is a very large committee with around 2,000 members. The geographical distribution of our members is relatively standard for an international committee, with 69% European members and the remainder spread across the other continents. As President of the committee, I intend to balance this spread across continents. Members of CECA come from two different professions, with cultural mediation professionals and an increasing proportion of academics, researchers, training professionals and more. Due to

the sheer size of the committee, we have decided to decentralise our organisation with six elected regional coordinators and forty-five national correspondents chosen by the coordinators who relay information to members of the network.

Firstly, let me explain how CECA has been working on the proposed definition. We were involved from the outset in the discussion group comprising various committees. After Kyoto, we launched a survey of our members, primarily focused on issues concerning society and the public. Some countries organised discussion groups through day-long events, while others decided to collect opinions more periodically, in each case via the national correspondents.

The results of the survey are as follows. In *ICOM Education* no. 29, we published a trilingual article summarising the opinions collected through this survey, taking into account geographical location. The summary on the functions of a definition and how that should affect the wording shows that members of CECA believe that a definition should be short and precise. It should use functionally specific terminology as it needs to be included in both national and international legislation. It is also used for the allocation of funding and the regulation of public policy. Language must be simple, as the definition has international value and must be able to be translated without over-interpretation or mistranslation. Finally, the definition should differ from a declaration of intent or statement of values.

This summary includes other vital points, firstly concerning the necessary stability of an institution. The very high number and intensity of missions assigned to museums could not be managed by a flighty or temporary institution with no geographical, social or political identification. Work therefore needs to be done to structure and strengthen these institutions.

Secondly, it is worth asking what museums have to offer or the nature of what they have to show. Professionals in contact with the public are well aware of the specific role of museums in providing evidence. Firstly, through the presence of original objects. It is important not to underestimate the importance of bringing people into contact with original objects, compared to using digital tools. Secondly, through the informed interpretation of intangible heritage. Our role is to one of consolidation. This impacts the types of professional expertise required. The survey clearly shows

that those responsible for cultural mediation, interpretation and education are very concerned at not having to provide purely social expertise, which they do not consider themselves qualified for. This would be to the detriment of their role of providing evidence.

The absence of the term ‘education’ in the definition led to many reactions. The third vital point in this summary is to consider education as a central function of a museum. We know that the term education is controversial and subject to debate. It can be interpreted in different languages as education, mediation or interpretation. At CECA, we have adopted the etymological definition of the term education, which comes from the Latin “*ducere*”, meaning “to lead”, and from “*e*”, meaning “outside”, and therefore to grow, to go beyond oneself or “to branch out”. Essentially, education becomes an objective and not a means, as cultural mediation or interpretation are.

In some regions, the educational role is clearly expressed as central and a crucial way of supporting school education. We received responses on this point from Africa, Austria, China, the USA and more, although everyone agreed that school education and museum education use different methods.

Another vital point in this summary is to consider educators as historical and contemporary prophets of a museum’s social responsibility. Educators are very comfortable with some of the terms used in or which underpin the new definition. Terms such as interactivity, critical freedom, universal accessibility, wellbeing, inclusion and co-construction are in everyday use by educators. However, educators are in constant contact with the community and see all too clearly the potentially negative consequences of planetary ambitions. They are neither realistic on the ground nor considerate of local specifics. The terms cited above do not have the same meaning in every country, and may not exist everywhere in this form.

Our survey very clearly shows that museums are far from being outdated institutions; on the contrary, they are fundamentally contemporary institutions. On the one hand, the number of museum visitors shows an upward trend, which is a sign that modern society approves of museum institutions. On the other hand, museums are identified as places of critical dialogue for reinterpreting the past,

giving meaning to the present and creatively building the future. Educators believe that this is a sign of considerable modernity and that there is no need to change a museum's missions in order to stay within this dynamic. This active approach is common to all the countries we surveyed across all continents (Singapore, Zambia, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Austria, France, etc.).

## **ICOM Slovakia – Text by Jasna Gaburová, President, presented by Florence Le Corre, ICOM France Board Member**

The ICOM Slovakia committee has 240 members. Before Kyoto, the new definition had not been fully approved by its members. When put to the vote, some were for and others against. Following the Kyoto General Assembly, members received a questionnaire for sharing their opinion on the issue. The results show that museums relating to national minorities were in favour of the new definition. Nevertheless, most members propose reworking the definition. In addition to the terms “acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit” that it would like to see in the definition, ICOM Slovakia has a positive view of the notions of democracy, political independence, critical analysis of the past, rights and equal access to heritage for all. However, the committee rejects the terms democratising, inclusive and polyphonic, social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing. Moreover, it specifies that museums are not competent for playing a political role, especially on issues such as conflict, human dignity and social justice. Furthermore, museums must be distinguished from cultural centres.

## **ICOM Luxembourg – Guy Thewes, Vice-President**

ICOM Luxembourg became a national committee in 2017. It has, at this date, 129 individual members and 21 institutional members in a country with a population of 625,000 and around 70 museums. The main activities of ICOM Luxembourg consist of the four annual meetings of its executive board and its annual General Assembly. Action towards its members focuses on professional

development of the sector, in particular, the organisation of conferences featuring international experts, and training days. The main event is International Museum Day (Luxembourg Museum Days), which is a great success with the general public, drawing in 18,000 visitors in 2019 (i.e. 2% - 3% of the population). ICOM Luxembourg have just signed an agreement with the Ministry of Culture in order to increase financial resources and means for action.

Information on the new definition only arrived in early August 2019 through ICOM Europe, when our members discovered the reactions of ICOM France and ICOM Germany. After attending the Kyoto Annual Meeting in September 2019, discussions were held by the executive board, representing around a dozen museums.

ICOM Luxembourg considers that the current 2007 definition perfectly corresponds to the needs of our museums and reflects their identity. This definition distinguishes museums from other cultural venues (cultural centres, performance venues, private galleries, etc.) and affirms our unique contribution to society. It emphasises the need to acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit both tangible and intangible heritage to future generations for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. The committee believes that these functions are still fundamental to a museum. Other museum ambitions, such as accessibility, a participatory approach, social inclusion, and democratic or environmental engagement, have their place in each museum's mission statement or statement of objectives rather than in the general definition.

In this new definition, many unclear terms would leave the door open for diverging political and ideological interpretations. The notions of democratising, equal rights, human dignity, social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing are values rather than objective criteria within a definition. If ICOM adopts the new definition, logically it would need to use value judgments to exclude museums operating under notoriously authoritarian regimes, which would not meet the standards for transparency, polyphony and democratic inclusion.

ICOM Luxembourg therefore proposes that the text developed by the Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) should remain a vision rather than a definition. It could be adopted as an ICOM charter of intent, expressing our shared values and societal commitments, alongside the existing definition.

## **GLASS – Anne-Laure Carré, Board Member, on behalf of Teresa Medici, President**

I am speaking on behalf of the President of ICOM-GLASS, Teresa Medici, and am using the presentation given by our international committee at the Toyoma Glass Art Museum last September.

ICOM-GLASS is an international committee founded in 1946, with 144 individual members from 32 countries, and 22 institutional members. It also has 359 non-voting members, 43% of whom are registered with ICOM-CC and 21% with ICDAD. Like other international committees, the highest number of voting members come from France, Germany and the United States. The committee organises at least one annual meeting, and the next one will be held in October 2020 in Coburg, Germany. It also organises joint meetings, especially with ICDAD and ICFA, and with other representative organisations in this field, such as the International Association for the History of Glass (AIHV). The committee publishes the *Reviews on Glass* journal in English and French, in electronic and paper format, as well as an annual newsletter.

ICOM-GLASS received no spontaneous feedback from its members regarding the new definition. We forwarded to our members the ICOFOM questionnaire sent to all international committees in November 2019 and only received four responses before the January 2020 deadline. It would therefore appear that ICOM-GLASS is not the right forum for this discussion and that our members are engaging via their national committees. The ICOM-GLASS executive board has therefore not defined an official position, but I would like to share the main points of the contributions we received. All highlighted the very political nature of the new definition and were concerned at the potential removal of a primarily “professional” definition, which is widely used by national legislations and enjoyed a consensus.

On behalf of ICOM-GLASS, we would like discussion to continue through the national committees.

## **ICFA – Sophie Harent, Secretary**

The new definition was discussed with the ICFA executive board rather than with committee members. The definition was only mentioned in passing at the first meeting of the recently renewed board of directors in Amsterdam in late January 2020, and was not on the agenda. It didn't really seem to be an issue. Nevertheless, discussions revealed clear hostility from members of the executive board towards the major part of the new definition. Firstly, they consider the terms used inadequate, especially "polyphonic", "inclusive", "social justice", etc. They believe that this definition is exclusive, too political and too ideological, unlike the message it seeks to convey. Greater neutrality is called for, as well as greater simplicity in the definition. The fundamental question raised by many within the executive board is why it is useful or necessary to change the museum definition currently in force. Members feel that there was a consensus and therefore wonder why there is a desire to change it completely. In addition, members of the executive board do not consider it essential to promote and highlight the term "collection" in the future, which can seem as restrictive. On the contrary, the term "artefact" seems to be appropriate to encompass all types of collections. This proves that there are potentially quite significant differences within the ICFA executive board, especially depending on the languages of different members. The "cultural centre" aspect proposed in the definition is vigorously rejected. However, the participatory nature and consideration of all members of the public are considered important aspects that are perhaps not sufficiently clear in the 2007 definition. It is mainly on this point that the ICFA Committee considers it useful to develop it further.

## **ICOM Georgia – Text by Inga Karaia, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICOM Georgia was founded in 2007 and has 517 individual, institutional and student members. After the Kyoto General Assembly, the committee sent an online questionnaire to its members, whose responses were discussed by the executive board.

The results of this questionnaire and discussion show that 46%

consider the new definition appropriate and 48% inappropriate. It is considered too complex, when a definition should be short and structured. Many terms are superfluous and redundant, such as “equal rights” and “equal access”. In this presentation, we would like to emphasise that legal language is not the same in all countries, but that this legal notion is nevertheless considered important. According to the Georgia committee, the following terms should be included in the new definition: “education”, “institution”, “democracy”, “inclusivity”, “dialogue about the past and future”, “accessibility”, “participatory” and “transparency”. It also proposes replacing “conflict” by “challenge”, and removing “acknowledging”.

## **MPR – Matthias Henkel, President**

Of course we need a new reading of the definition. We also have to draw the distinction between a definition, a mission and a vision. That is why we do not have one problem but three challenges:

- The function of a definition is to be a basis on which all museums can agree.
- The function of a mission is to be supported by the majority of museums.
- The function of vision is a future goal that many museums can pursue.

Our *old* museum definition consists of a wonderful range of activities: collecting, preserving, researching, presenting, interpreting, making relevant information available, promoting, collaborating, documenting; it deals with the tangible and the intangible. And of course, in the age of the virtual, we need to think about the definition of the original. Would it not be an interesting approach to surround each of these activities with a corona of guiding questions? For example: What? Who? How? Towards whom?



Otherwise: If we were to make a radical cut, we would at the same time lose our universally known and respected brand essence. That means: ICOM would lose its global significance.

ICOM-MPR was founded in the late 1970s. It has about 600 members and almost 70% of them are from Europe. We basically believe that the role of communication about the future of increasing importance for museums – and that museums should be more topical than political.

## **ICOM Belgium – Sergio Servellón, Vice-President**

We hereby submit our feedback for the “Committees Journey”, convened by ICOM France and ICOM Germany, with the support of ICOFOM and ICOM Europe, regarding the adaptation of a new museum definition.

Although Belgium is a small country, its ICOM national committee has 1500 members from two organisations: one Flemish and one Walloon. We decided to split the discussion into two sessions, one methodological and one conceptual. This choice can be explained by what we have already heard today, or what could be called the ‘Gothenburg paradigm shift’. I think it is a strategic error to discuss the core of the core, when we have not yet resolved what this core is.

That is why, we first had a methodological session. This first session was needed to determine the kind of input to be gathered and how it should be processed. On 15 January 2020, we organised an ICOM Belgium Convention and five recommendations came out of this session.

- Our first recommendation is a very simple question: Who is this definition for? Is it the general public, our governments, the museum community itself or the members of ICOM? This needs to be mandated by consensus. We need to focus on the goal of this definition.

- Secondly, we need to measure the impact of any new definition on different regions and institutions. It is clear that we all face legal implications with this definition, which is why we are asking ICOM to carry out an impact study for any definitions that would come out of this.
- The third point is that we need transparency on the “contribution from national committees and international committees” to the new MDPP2 committee. We want to know what this means methodologically. For Belgium, MDPP2 has no free mandate. We need transparency on how the information collected is summarised. We have to specify the methodology followed.
- Additionally, we want to know what the original five propositions made by the MDDP1 were and how they came about.
- Finally, we need to know what process will be implemented from now on.

Conceptual sessions on the definition are planned. On 5 June, Bruno Brulon Soares has been invited by the Université de Liège together with ICOM Bruxelles-Wallonie. On 15-16 June 2020, Flemish, Brussels and Walloon associations will follow the ICOFOM survey. There will be additional sessions in order to provide ICOM Belgium’s feedback.

## **ICOM Israel – Text by Nava Kessler, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICOM Israel has 1,600 members, who met in roundtable sessions to discuss the new definition. A definition committee was then created and a survey distributed to members. These discussions on the museum definition attracted significant interest in the Israeli press. Discussions and the creation of a committee on this issue have concluded that a large majority of members consider the current definition good, but that the new definition is imprecise. ICOM Israel believes that it is important to include the idea of a museum as a permanent venue, in addition to the terms “education”, “social mission” and “professional management of collections”.

## **ICOM Netherlands – Arja van Veldhuizen, Board Member**

ICOM Netherlands is a large and growing committee in a relatively small country, and has 5,300 members. Our policy on the board is to organise activities with members and cooperate with other parties in the Dutch museum field. We focus on encouraging members to look beyond borders and use ICOM to become inspired by international perspectives. In Kyoto, ICOM Netherlands initiated the launch of ICOM Family, a platform for connecting with colleagues worldwide.

First, after Kyoto, we noticed that there are a range of different opinions on the museum definition in the Netherlands. We decided with the ICOM NL-board to have a Museum Definition Working Group, and we published a fact sheet in November and an update in February. We want to increase discussions among Dutch museum professionals – ICOM and non-ICOM members. We are doing this using a ‘grassroots’ approach, involving our more than 5,000 members. We will finally collect their different views and opinions. We partner as much as we can with other organisations in the Dutch museum landscape and ask them to put the discussion on their agenda. By doing so we are reaching out to a wide range of museum colleagues.

We attended the Heritage Arena ‘Game Changers’ on 29 January 2020 at the Reinwardt Academy to explain the issues around the new definition. We held a work session for ICOM Netherlands members on the museum definition on 6 February 2020 at Museum Catharijneconvent, in Utrecht. These discussions will continue during other events. There will be the Museum Knowledge Day of the Dutch Museum Association, titled ‘Is the museum a clubhouse with a collection?’ at Museum het Valkhof in Nijmegen, on 23 March 2020. The ICOM Netherlands General Assembly will be held on 25 May 2020 in Breda. There will be an invitation to members to give voting advice (via an online tool) prior to the ICOM Netherlands General Assembly 2021.

During the successful work session on 6 February, an introduction was given explaining the prestigious nature of the ICOM definition, and the way in which the ICOM committee works. Then, two

statements were presented by two colleagues with very different opinions on the question. During this session, we gathered the opinion of members by asking them six different questions.

Our observations so far are that we have as many opinions as members. These opinions seem to depend a lot on the type of museum and the role of the member in their museum. It seems to be a difference between more object-focused museums and museums where stories and narratives told with objects are most important. There may also be a generational issue. The question of who the definition is for seems to define part of the opinions: is it for policymakers, museum professionals or the general public? This discussion triggers reaction among our members: suddenly ICOM seems to matter for them.

Our message for this meeting is that ICOM Netherlands only has 5 votes out of more than 800 in June 2021. Consequently, our opinion has a modest impact on the result. So we think that we have to use the delay in the vote to take advantage of the unique opportunity to explore our own profession. At the 6 February session, we told our members to be open-minded, to postpone judgement, to explore arguments used for and against and to explore the different sub-themes, seen from different perspectives. So, you are not going to hear the opinion of ICOM Netherlands yet. We diverged first. We will converge again before June 2021.

## **ICOM Germany – Markus Walz, Vice-President**

ICOM Germany is a national committee of 6,500 members. Most of them are individuals. Institutions prefer the museum associations organised in our 16 federal States.

After Kyoto in October 2019, there was rapid reaction from a very important monthly journal on national and international contemporary politics. The author said that the MDPP proposal represents a liberal and neo-liberal discourse and presents social diversity as the new norm for ICOM. Between October and December, we had our first experience with online activism, with an open letter demanding more dialogue. This open letter had 294 supporters, including 75 German members of ICOM. In parallel, we received an

invitation to a roundtable discussion at the Jewish Museum Berlin, on 30 January 2020. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, member of the Executive board of ICOM was in favour of the “new position”, and I was in favour of the “old position”.

In February, two national conservative daily newspapers published commentaries. One was asking whether critical museology was ready to be musealised itself. The other said that Museums have to change, and so does their definition.

In December, we carried out our first survey of members, which reported in February. It was a questionnaire on opinions of the current definition and the MDPP proposal. We received 302 valid questionnaires, representing 4.6% of all our members. We asked our members which terms used in both definitions they considered the most important. The result is almost all the terms in the 2007 definition are considered “an important part of the definition” according to more than 80% of respondents. On the contrary, just a few words of the MDPP proposal are considered an important part of the definition, for less than 66.6% of respondents, such as “for society” and “equal access to heritage”. Finally the terms “global equality and planetary wellbeing” are those least considered important in this generally unpopular proposal.

It is interesting to note the difference between what is considered important for a proposed mission statement or proposed definition. For a mission statement, the words of the MDPP proposal are more frequently considered important, for less than 66.6% of respondents. Which makes us think that, even if the proposal becomes a mission statement, there is still work to do on it.

With regard to overall acceptance of the definition, ICOM Germany had roughly the same result as ICOM Switzerland. The current definition is considered very suitable or quite suitable for more than 80% of respondents. The MDPP Proposal is considered suitable for less than 50%.

My message is that our members are interested in a contemporary vision, some like the spirit of the new wording, but they are satisfied with the current museum definition.

## ICOFOM – Marion Bertin, Secretary

ICOFOM is the international committee dedicated to the theoretical approach to museums and museology, focused on developing a research field incorporating the numerous disciplines that structure museum practice. Since its creation in 1977, ICOFOM has actively participated in the museum definition as a historical, social and cultural process, and in in-depth deliberation on the topic. Other themes underpin ICOFOM's work, including museology and technology, the social and political role of museology, and museology as theory and practice, etc.

ICOFOM is another very large international committee in ICOM, featuring around 2,000 members, with large international representation. The same is true for the ICOFOM board, elected for the 2019-2022 period, whose President is Bruno Brulon Soares (Brazil) and Vice-President is Anna Leshchenko (Russia). The executive board comprises two elected members who are also members of ICOM France: Marion Bertin (Secretary) and Daniel Schmitt (Treasurer). The outgoing president is François Mairesse.

ICOFOM is split into two sub-committees: ICOFOM LAM (for South America) and ICOFOM ASPAC (for Asia-Pacific region).

Pivotal work forming the backbone of ICOFOM and ties between members includes the project led by André Desvallées from 1993, entitled "Terminology of Museology", which, at the request of ICOM, led to ICOFOM's involvement in discussions on our current museum definition from 2003 to 2007. Noteworthy publications include *The Declaration of Calgary* in 2005, and *What is a museum?* in 2007, led by François Mairesse and André Desvallées, which present theoretical perspectives from ICOFOM members on the museum definition. In 2009, an edition of the *ICOFOM Study Series*, published by Nelly Decarolis and François Mairesse, looked at the topic of "Museology: back to basics", in which ICOFOM authors discussed key museological concepts. This led to the publication of *Key Concepts of Museology* in 2010, led by François Mairesse and André Desvallées, which was translated into multiple languages. A major by-product of this work, the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de Muséologie*, was led by the same authors and published in 2011. ICOFOM therefore

has a longstanding and fruitful involvement in reflection on the museum definition.

Under the leadership of ICOM, since 2016, ICOFOM has actively participated in plans for a new museum definition by organising international conferences on the theme “Defining the Museum of the 21st Century” in eleven countries. This has led to numerous publications on the topic, presenting a panorama of international museums and bringing together stakeholders from these eleven countries, in particular from Europe, Latin America and North America. These publications are all available online on our website.

Following the Kyoto General Assembly in 2019, ICOFOM administered a questionnaire to consult its members and the members of other national and international committees in order to gather their opinions on the new definition proposed by the ICOM executive board in July 2019.

ICOFOM would like to bring its journal *ICOFOM Study Series* in line with the highest standards of academic production, while maintaining its high publication rate and organising more conferences. Moreover, ICOFOM is considering an inclusive policy to promote the diversity of contexts and approaches at a global level. ICOFOM, ICOFOM LAM and ICOFOM ASPAC will therefore be organising meetings across all continents. Finally, ICOFOM is considering creating museology discussion forums in regions where there is no access to university-level education specialized on museology, in order to pursue our global vision of current museums world.

## **ICOM Bangladesh – Text by Jahangir Hussain, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

In 2018, ICOM Bangladesh organised a workshop on the museum definition, and then another in February 2020 on the same subject. The committee proposes a new definition that includes the following aspects: a museum is a space, the notions of “non-profit”, “work with and for communities”, “sustainable development”,

“enjoyment”, and “environmental improvement” are considered important. However, the committee here uses the terms artefacts and specimens, rather than tangible and intangible heritage, or collections.

## **ICOM Croatia – Darko Babić, President**

ICOM Croatia was established in 1992 and counts 123 individual members and 36 institutional members, which might sound low, but if you compare it with the size of the country and its population, it is respectable. It is one of the biggest ICOM communities in South-East Europe. ICOM Croatia members include a wide range of museums and people working in art museums, natural history or ethnography museums, art galleries and museology and museum studies professors. ICOM Croatia represents the nationwide museum sector very well, and is by far the strongest and most influential museum association in Croatia.

From the beginning, ICOM Croatia encouraged its members to contribute to the MDPP initiative, including participation in a workshop organised in 2018. Discussions from these workshops have been integrated into the general contribution of ICOM South-East Europe, which was submitted to MDPP in June 2018. While ICOM Croatia members still applaud the ICOM initiative to update the existing definition of museums for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they consider that the transparency and participatory approach have been significantly jeopardised by the lack of communication from the MDPP in the months before ICOM Kyoto 2019. The process for developing a new definition is still unclear, and we regret the lack of transparency and that we do not have a clear idea of how this has happened.

Moreover, Croatian public institutions and owners of museums, including cities, counties, the Ministry of Culture, etc. have already asked us about this new definition, and it may adversely affect ICOM's influence. In recent years, ICOM Croatia has succeeded in getting the current definition included in the new Croatian Museum Act. The new ICOM museum definition, as proposed in Kyoto 2019, might not be possible to include the same way in Croatian museum legislation.



From the perspective of ICOM Croatia, the proposal is not a definition because a definition is supposed to distinguish something from everything else, making it unique. Secondly, members are concerned that the Kyoto definition could encourage heritage institutions or other cultural centres that do not comply with the current definition to declare themselves museums and request funds, consequently reducing funds for current museums. Thirdly, incorporating the Kyoto museum definition proposal into any legal document (especially the National Museum Act) would be practically impossible.

To conclude, ICOM Croatia's members are in favour of developing a 21<sup>st</sup> century museum definition. In order to respect the museum tradition and the position of museum professionals, it is important to have a transparent definition-making process and not the vision of museums of a closed circle, as happened in Kyoto.

## **INTERCOM – Emilie Girard, Secretary**

INTERCOM is the International Committee for Museum Management, focused on studying the theories, challenges and practices associated with management and leadership in a museum context. The committee has around 700 members from all countries around the world and all professional categories. This year, INTERCOM is jointly organising a conference with ICME and ICOM Azerbaijan, at the National Carpet Museum in Baku from 14 to 16 October 2020.

The question of the museum definition was not raised with the executive board until we received the invitation from ICOM France. This gave us the opportunity to launch consultation with INTERCOM members, asking them to share their thoughts, reactions and suggestions. To date, we have not finished analysing members' feedback.

Nevertheless, INTERCOM would like to highlight the fact that the legal impact of changing the definition may vary according to each country and that it is therefore important to be aware of this point. We do not want to become prisoners in a debate of for and against. It seems important for discussion of the definition to be broad enough

to reflect all streams within ICOM in order to maintain the precious unity of our organisation and its role among museum professionals. We therefore need to continue to build dialogue between ICOM members about the definition. INTERCOM is determined to play a very active role in discussions.

## **ICR – Text by Irena Žmuc, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICR is the International Committee for Regional Museums. This committee believes that it is very useful to update the current definition, which must be easy to understand for everyone, including the general public and politicians. The definition must apply to all types of museum. The new definition must allow for variable readings, and it is important to know who is using the definition and how it will be used. The definition must be relevant for all communities, must meet the needs and interests of these various communities, and must also be taken into account in various State and committee legislations. The terms that seem important for ICR are “inclusivity”, “responsibility”, “responsiveness to change”, “access for all people” and the “digital aspect”.

## **ICOM Ireland – Dr Hugh Maguire, Chair**

You will be aware of the English-language colloquialism, ‘A camel is a horse designed by a committee’. This is one of the conflicting ideas the definition debate is representing ICOM. It is an unnecessarily confrontational issue for ICOM as an institution. It is confronting ICOM and its extensive membership. One so-called ‘lofty’ reason for the United Kingdom and the tortuous Brexit debate and one of its reasons for a departure from the European Union was the growing sense among the British population that Brussels and membership of the European Union was not relevant to day-to-day existence. There is a parallel with this debate. There is an element in an equally rancorous debate which is highlighting or implying that ICOM itself is represented by Paris-based liberal intellectuals discussing a definition which is of no day-to-day relevance for the operational reality of numerous small museums

on the ground. It is as if in wishing to embrace and be inclusive the actual debate is becoming exclusive and removed.

Ireland is small and ICOM Ireland's membership is very small as well. We have something like 50 to 60 members. The Irish Museums Association is significantly bigger but not huge by international standards. Of those 60 members, as I think was mentioned by my Dutch colleague, it is safe to say that most members in Ireland are members for travelling abroad and getting free entry to museums abroad, most Irish museums are free. We have to accept the fact, tasteless as it is, that membership of ICOM internationally is very much determined by the free entry provided by the ICOM card. A professional membership for a not very professional reason.

We have created for ourselves an overly complex definition and yet, as we all know in this room, museums have existed certainly in Western culture since the Renaissance. If as a profession and a discipline, not to say organisation, following five hundred years into existence, we cannot define ourselves, it is very hard for the government officials which issue funding to take us seriously. If ICOM members cannot define the organisation in the duration of a short taxi ride between this museum and the nearby Gare d'Austerlitz, that cannot be a definition.

ICOM is not the only organisation in the world facing changes: universities are facing changes, governments are facing changes, the published media, general press and newspapers are facing changes, libraries, even more than us, are facing changes. We talk about the digital world. Most museums still have tangible objects and we have museums of tangible objects. Libraries by their very nature are more challenged by the digital world than we are. I am certain that if someone leaves this building and tells their taxi driver that they work in a library, he or she would have an idea of what they're speaking about. If we as ICOM embrace a definition that is so everything and so all-over the place, all encompassing, no taxi driver is going to pay us any attention and may well consider that we are 'half-baked'.

I agree, as does the Irish National Committee, with what my colleagues said earlier that this proposed so-called definition is more of a mission statement. It is a strategic plan. It is not a definition.

No-one in Ireland, no one on our committee, no one with whom we have consulted would disagree with the inspiration and the sentiments behind the definition with which we are presented with. We all believe in democracy, we all believe in accommodating spaces, we all believe in inclusivity and we agree wholeheartedly with all the aspirations presented to us. But we cannot agree, however, that it is a definition.

The ‘definition’ is all too encompassing and tries to tackle too many issues. One almost anticipates references to the promotion of veganism. The definition is trying to tackle so many issues, political, cultural and social and otherwise, that it has ceased to be of any practical use. I would concur with my colleagues from Luxembourg and say that the political nature of this definition is presented in such a way that rather than engaging people it actually alienates. There are elements in the definition, notably ‘democratisation’ with which you and I agree. How could we not! But is it not naïve to use such terminology in a definition which will be employed in countries and regimes which may not encourage democracy. How can a government office, or the civil servant, be seen to support an organisation that is pushing democracy if its own political system is itself possibly anti-democratic? So, I would urge reflection, I would urge that we retain some core principles notably that museums are “non-profit”. In my country, this is hugely important because certain officials, and boards, think that museums should be like the popular Guinness Storehouse in Dublin, which is the most visited attraction in the city. Profit making and part of a bigger corporate enterprise, there are many that perceive museums should be part of a comparable visitor attraction package, generating incomes and profits. The same expectations are not placed on libraries or public parks.

So, in summary, and in this short presentation, we have to keep “non-profit” in there somewhere and we have to distinguish clearly between what should be a succinct definition and what has become a strategic plan and a mission statement.

## **ICOM Ecuador – Text by Juan Carlos Fernández-Catalán, President, read by Teresa Reyes i Bellmunt (President of ICOM Spain)**

Let me begin by sharing warm greetings from ICOM Ecuador. On the basis of previous conversations, I would like to submit our participation in discussions of the new museum definition proposed by ICOM International.

First let's remind ourselves of this proposal based on work by the MDPP:

“Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.”

As we all know, the decision to adopt a new definition has been postponed until the ICOM annual meeting in June 2020 in Paris.

Our proposal is to incorporate the notions of equality, environment, social responsibility, and humanitarian and social objectives into this definition. We also believe that it must include stakeholders, i.e. the museologists, museum managers or other individuals who are responsible for interaction between objects and visitors, in order to highlight the fact that museums have a pre-eminent educational role. They succeed in their mission by reaching the people who visit them and feed off the knowledge of collections.

Other aspects could also be included in the definition, such as:

- conservation of permanent collections of objects with special

tangible or intangible value or interest,

- the notion of public service: communication, passing on memory and building one's own identity, taking ownership of content (museums as a mirror). This involves paying special attention to language and discourse around an object or space, and giving the public an opportunity to speak,
- informal and alternative education,
- study, research,
- experimentation, willingness to work with artists and the public (who create museum spaces),
- intellectual pleasure, reflection (transgression, generating debate), contemplation, inspiration, escaping reality and everyday life,
- promoting museums as a social space for interacting with others,
- museums opening their doors, stepping outside of their confined space, opening up to the public (abandoning the notion of "white cube").

I hope that we have been able to make a modest contribution to this important ongoing work. Goodbye and I wish you a very successful day.

## **ICOM Spain – Teresa Reyes i Bellmunt, President**

ICOM Spain currently has 1,289 members, of which 1006 are individuals (78%), and 283 institutions (22%). ICOM Spain did not set up working groups, but spontaneous comments were offered by members, particularly in internal meetings or workshops, and on social media.

We would like to underline that for most members, the proposed definition is a declaration of principles rather than a definition as such. A definition needs to be more concrete and concise. If further clarifications are considered necessary, these should be included in an annexe or explanatory development. A definition should seek to do no more than adequately describe what is defined. There is a

certain vagueness here in the definition of what a museum should be. The proposal, as it is written, could define almost any type of cultural or civic venue, from a library to a theatre or exhibition hall of a cultural centre. Not all institutions that explain and interpret heritage are or should be considered museums. The search for political correctness may be detrimental to its universality, compromising its normative power and legal utility. Aspects that have facilitated the inclusion, with variations, of the ICOM definition in the heritage and museum legislation of many countries.

We think that museums need to be designed by and for society. The new definition should include society and enable better interaction with it. The definition should focus on the relationship between the museum and its immediate context. It is essential for any museum, regardless of its size and location, to take root in its community. Relevant concepts that need not to be lost have disappeared, such as “education”, “enjoyment”, “open to the public” and “permanent institution”.

Finally, we suggest the need to work in a broader and more representative way, in order to reach a consensus on a museum definition that satisfies the majority of the groups involved. All this before putting it to a vote. The latest roadmap provides little time for the committees to consult their members. We propose extending the period for collecting and managing the survey. Perhaps it would be appropriate, in addition to everything proposed in the roadmap, to add an international congress with the participation and representation of all the committees, to finish agreeing on concepts and setting the definition. This could be done once the MDPP2 has compiled and summarised the committee contributions. We are aware that this would probably delay the vote on the new proposal scheduled for July 2021, although we believe that the extra year for its implementation could be used to finish closing the new definition so that it could be voted on at the next Extraordinary General Conference scheduled a year later. It is very important to reach a consensus together.

## **DEMHIST – Text by Remko Jansonius, Secretary, presented by Florence Le Corre**

DEMHIST is the International Committee for Historic House Museums. It sent a questionnaire comprising four questions to its members in February-March 2020. First, what are the strengths of the current definition? Second, which aspects could be improved in the current definition? Third, which three keywords define a museum? Finally, each member was asked to give their own museum definition. The committee is awaiting responses which will then be sent on to feed into the discussion.

## **ICOM Austria – Text by Bettina Leidl, President, presented by Laure Ménétrier, ICOM France Board Member**

ICOM Austria is one of the largest national committees with over 2,500 members. The main actions carried out within ICOM Austria intend to protect cultural heritage, tackle the trafficking of cultural goods and promote sustainable development measures to fight climate change.

Following discussions within the committee on the issue of the new museum definition, ICOM Austria regrets the absence of the following keywords: “permanent institution”, “collections”, “study”, “education”, “tangible and intangible heritage”. The committee also regrets that the proposed new definition is like a mission statement. It supports the emphasis on the social role of museums, and especially its importance for climate protection. Finally, ICOM Austria would like the new definition to be approved by a very large majority of ICOM members, and for it to be developed in a transparent and constructive manner as part of a shared process.

## **CIMCIM – Frank Bär, President**

CIMCIM is ICOM’s International Committee of Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music. It has about 250 members



representing around 120 collections on all continents and was founded in Paris in 1960.

There was little spontaneous feedback on the new museum definition text from CIMCIM members, and what there was was not positive. The subject was put on the agenda in the President's end-of-year message in 2019. Due to restricted resources, no dedicated meetings have taken place so far. Instead, the board has decided on a structured survey.

The starting point is the impression that the new museum definition, as based on the UNESCO sustainability principles of 2015, contains a lot of well-intentioned elements that describe current situations on one hand, and on the other hand situations to be strived after in the future. It sounds like a mixture of a definition and a mission statement. Accepting the entire text as a definition is a way of checking whether your institution is a museum or not – and this is where the potentially serious danger for ICOM as an organisation lies.

So, we tried first, from a methodological standpoint, to tentatively accept all notions in the text as well-intended and legitimate. Secondly, we tried to distinguish between elements for a definition and elements for a mission statement. To this end, we ran an online survey from 12 to 25 February this year. Like other committees before us, we split the text into distinct notions. Participants were asked to tell us whether a particular notion is a definition or a mission statement, or neither, or, finally, if the notion is not sufficiently clear. For around 200 surveys sent to our members via the e-mail addresses in the IRIS database, we received 40 responses, which is a participation rate of 20%. This is generally the kind of participation level for CIMCIM surveys.

Here, you see the different notions according to a calculation of hypothetical majorities, divided into outright majorities, where a notion gets more than 50% and relative majorities where a notion gets the most votes of the four choices.

Using this, we can compose a hypothetical definition text and a hypothetical mission statement text. For the sake of time, I will do this in the more encompassing versions of a relative majority. I have to stress that what I am going to show you is not an official or

unofficial CIMCIM proposal for a new museum definition text. It is a proposal to feed into general discussions.

“Museums are spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. They hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society and safeguard diverse memories for future generations. Museums are not for profit. They collect, preserve, research, interpret and exhibit understandings of the world.”

This is very reminiscent of the current museum definition, but some things have been added and changed. Remember: a museum definition says what a museum is and what it is not.

If we apply the same procedure to a possible mission statement text, we get this:

“Museums are democratising and inclusive spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities.”

Remember: a museum mission statement is much more about what museums should strive after, than about what they currently are. It is not the same thing as a definition.

Here, I have to admit that in composing the survey, I missed out the notion of “enhancing understandings of the world”. Apologies for this.

Two elements didn’t make it into these hypothetical texts. The notion of “polyphonic spaces” was the only one that got a simple majority vote for being unclear. I was not really surprised to learn this, as “polyphony” and “polyphonic” have quite well-defined and almost sacred meanings for musicologists and musicians, and obviously for them, applying this term to museums is not obvious.

Finally, the statement that museums are “... aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing” is, in my opinion, already formulated as a mission, not a definition. So, here the question was: “Do you think that museums are able to contribute to these goals?” A great majority said “yes”, few said

“no”, and a good number of participants wrote thoughts about it.

I have not yet had time to review and structure these comments. The same is true of the 28 in part very detailed free comments on the new museum definition text, and we don't have the time to do this here and now. They will serve as a resource for further thinking. A more comprehensive report will be published in the CIMCIM Bulletin in autumn this year.

Let me finish with a thought about a possible procedure agreed as a recommendation by CIMCIM's board. First, we have to acknowledge all the work that has been done by MDPP and all those who initially contributed to advancing the new definition draft. Secondly, we have to analyse which portions of the text are apt for a definition and which portions would be better situated in a mission statement. Thirdly, we have to continue the discussion on this basis, coming diligently to a (new) definition proper, and talk within ICOM about its further goals and mission.

## **ICOM Latvia – Text by Juris Ciganovs, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICOM Latvia organised its General Assembly in January 2020, which included discussion of the new museum definition. The committee believes that the definition should distinguish museums from other cultural institutions. Moreover, ICOM Latvia thinks that all additional aspects proposed in the new definition to supplement the current definition are values, which should therefore appear in the Code of Ethics. According to ICOM Latvia, the following terms should be kept in the definition: “the museum is a permanent institution”, “sustainable development”, “non-profit”, “in the service of society”, “socially-oriented missions”, “museum open to the public and accessible to all” and “education and enjoyment”.

## **ICOM Turkey – Text by Meliha Yaylali, member of ICOM Turkey, read by Burçak Madran, member of ICOM Turkey**

The Turkey national committee was founded in 1956 in a declaration of the Turkish Council of Ministers based on the UNESCO convention. The official code of ICOM Turkey came into force in 1970. ICOM Turkey is overseen by the government and the Ministry of Culture. In 2020, ICOM Turkey has 290 active members.

Our country contributed to ICOM's "revision of the museum description" with a workshop organised by ICOM Turkey, in Avanos, Nevşehir, on 20 April 2018. The workshop was organised to evaluate contemporary museology in Turkey from its start to the present day, and also to prepare a comprehensive report on the "museum definition" to be presented to ICOM. The 50 workshop participants were members of ICOM Turkey, representatives of private museums, professionals and executives of the museums administrated by the General Direction of Cultural Heritage and Museums, the representatives of museum studies departments of universities and museum-related NGO's. The report of this workshop was published in Turkish and in English and sent to ICOM.

Recently, ICOM Turkey organised a second meeting on the new alternative museum definition announced by ICOM in Ankara, last February. At this last meeting, a group of 25 participants from the ICOM Turkey executive board, representatives of state and private museums, of universities and NGOs evaluated the new museum definition and prepared a primary report to be sent to ICOM. The new museum definition proposed by the ICOM Executive Board was examined at this meeting on 6 February. The keywords, concepts and functions needed in a museum definition were evaluated. Questions such as "What is a museum?", "What is its function?", "For whom does it exist?" were discussed. For now, Turkey has contributed to the revision of the new museum definition with these two meetings. Based on the last meeting, ICOM Turkey's opinions can be summarised as follows: The new definition text is too long. The new definition is not clear, some expressions such as "polyphonic", "critical dialogue", and "conflicts" are confusing. Moreover, these are political expressions. The new definition

does not define a museum. It does not emphasise the relationship between a museum and the tangible and intangible heritage which distinguishes it from other cultural institutions. The new museum definition does not include fundamental terms and concepts such as: “education”, “training”, “intangible heritage”, “restoration and conservation”, which need to be included in a museum definition. ICOM Turkey has defined a series of keywords which we propose to be included in a new museum definition.

In conclusion, we consider that the new museum definition should be accepted by the entire international community, with the agreement of the majority of member countries. It should be free of political expressions and take into account the various sensibilities of different countries. The new definition should include fundamental concepts that emphasise the distinctive features of museums in relation to other cultural institutions. The work launched by ICOM for the new museum definition should also be carried out in a transparent, participatory and democratic way and should be open to the knowledge, approval and contribution of all member states. Countries taking part in the new definition process must absolutely be informed about the process and developments.

## **ICMAH – Burçak Madran, President**

ICMAH, the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History, was created in 1948 by Georges-Henri Rivière and is one of the oldest and probably most inclusive committees in the museum world. ICMAH currently has 1,670 individual members and 111 institutional members from 94 countries.

ICMAH played no official role in the MDPP process, but since the announcement of the new museum definition, we have received spontaneous feedback from our members, particularly during the Kyoto conference. We recently sent out an online survey to collect more precise feedback from our members in order to produce an analysis to return to ICOM, but we have not yet received all responses.

ICMAH’s approach to the new museum definition is twofold. We’ll start with the development method. First it was noted that the process was fully transparent with proposals communicated online. However,

the time between announcing the new definition on the basis of these recommendations and the period required for approval was too short. Second, we strongly believe that a participatory methodology should have identified the most used terms and concepts from the 269 proposed definitions. A summary could have been produced online showing the frequencies and percentages. It would have been preferable for this sort of analysis to be clearly demonstrated by the MDPP in order to substantiate the choice of terms and leave no doubts about the new definition. In light of the quick yet efficient work of ICOM France, ICOM Europe and various national and international committees in Kyoto, it would appear that the frequency of the terms subject to discussion and debate was far from justifying their use in the new museum definition.

Next, with regard to the terms and concepts, we believe that the world needs greater humanitarian and environmental reflection to save our future. But do these terms openly define museums? These are vital mandates not just for museums but for all institutions, NGOs, governments, groups and charities, working in the service of societies in their own way. We would like to emphasise that our main field of interest and mission is to define what a museum is. Now we are facing another concern, namely whether or not to accept some of the concepts proposed, which directly or indirectly have very political meanings that could cause problems in certain regions of the world. This kind of museum definition could probably not be applied to a number of countries. I come from Turkey where we have discussed “polyphony” at length. Five years ago, I opened a very “polyphonic” museum with Turks, Armenians, Kurds and Greeks in the same place. Three months later, the museum was closed. It is therefore very difficult to talk about “polyphony” in some world regions and under some circumstances. These political terms should be excluded, both for reasons of legislation and of our authority as museum professionals.

Finally, a museum definition should be shorter and more focused. It should speak to everyone, including the authorities responsible for museums. It should be non-political, meaningful and help promote museum functions and professions. Finally, this new definition should include terms from the current definition and new museological terms, preferably leaving all these other missions to a new ICOM Code of Ethics.

## **CIDOC – Text by Monika Hagerdorn-Saupe, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

CIDOC is the ICOM International Committee for Documentation. Its executive board met in Geneva in February 2020 to discuss the new museum definition.

For CIDOC, the new definition contains some very positive aspects, but overall, it primarily defines the missions of museums rather than what museums are. The committee requests that the objectives of the new definition be specified and that the fact that the terms selected will have legal value in some countries be taken into account. Work on the definition should therefore consider this legal aspect. The definition must be short and enable museums to be distinguished from other cultural venues.

## **ICOM France – Juliette Raoul-Duval, President**

ICOM France has 5,500 members, including 400 institutions. It is one of ICOM's largest national committees, and contributes €550,000 to the international organisation's annual budget. Members come from all museum professions and the number of members is regularly increasing. New membership applications are assessed by an *ad hoc* commission that makes its decision on the basis of professional criteria. We have a strict interpretation of what it means to be a museum professional.

ICOM France has an executive board that meets 5 times a year, comprising 30 members. Fourteen of them are members by right, representing museum institutions and other museum professional associations. Sixteen members are elected by all members. ICOM France's members are closely involved in the committee's activity via the website and social media pages, and the organisation of many public debates on current issues (changes to the profession, museum professions, restitutions, risks, etc.).

Let me now present the position of the French national committee regarding the "new museum definition". The national committee

signed the invitation to postpone the Kyoto vote on the museum definition. It believes that the new definition requires time for reflection and that a consensus should be reached regarding a common vision for the future of museums. The main aspects debated in France are firstly the language, which is very vague, the removal of fundamental aspects from the definition (“permanent institution”, “collections”, “enjoyment”, “education”), the rushed process, the lack of reference to the Code of Ethics, politicising aspects of the definition, and the underlying changes to membership criteria. However, there are some points on which we are in agreement and which open up room for consensus. We agree with the idea that museums have and will have an important social role to play, and we obviously share the idea of museums being inclusive. However, there are inescapable divergences, including the removal of professional language, the separation and ranking of collections and members of the public, the trivialisation of museum missions, political assumptions, especially in the MDPP1 report, and the undercutting of the universalist approach.

We believe that the definition which could be voted on has not found a consensus and that any definition should arise from a consensus among all members. The definition to be put to a vote in September did not take into account the summary of member feedback from Emilie Girard’s analysis of regulatory uses of the definition to be considered in the 269 definition proposals. The French national committee believes that the ICOM museum definition is a tool that must be used by all member countries and that this regulatory usage should be preserved. The ICOM definition is a world reference, positioning ICOM as a major global organisation built upon its Code of Ethics. The ICOM museum definition cannot be separated from its Code of Ethics.

I would like to say something about the engagement of not only professionals, but also cultural stakeholders and the French press with regard to this new museum definition. During the Kyoto General Assembly, the French delegation received many messages of support from museum professionals, cultural stakeholders and the national press, including museum institutions, well-known cultural figures, museum professional associations, the national press and social media.



Since Kyoto, the main professional associations have continued their reflection. In September, the *Association Française des Conservateurs* (AGCCPF – French Curators Association) started considering the “redefinition of museums”, drawing on its “*Livre blanc*” (white paper) to establish a “French” definition that includes the concept of inalienability to which France is committed. This initiative was presented alongside others at a press conference at the SITEM international museums trade show on 29 January, and appeared in an article in Edition 539 of 14-27 February of the *Journal des Arts*. National and specialised newspapers and radio have been significantly involved in the debate, with 16 articles and radio programmes identified by ICOM France. Other professionals have organised or taken part in a number of public meetings, including FEMS, AGCCPF and FFCR. ICOM France has continued extensive dialogue with its partners and members, at its General Assembly in Paris in October, during its three executive board meetings (September, October and January), on its website and by forming an *ad hoc* working group responsible for preparing the “Committees’ day” on 10 March. ICOM France expressed its positions and opened them up for debate throughout the second half of 2019, with 6 letters sent to the President of ICOM International between June 2019 and January 2020, and discussions with a number of interested cultural stakeholders, with whom we sent 13 positions. ICOM France will continue discussion between professionals with a national debate on 29 April 2020.

In conclusion, France has an ambitious museum policy and believes that museums have a responsibility for sharing the memory of arts, sciences and societies. This conception is underpinned by professional rigour, which ensures high-quality scientific discourse. ICOM is a forum for sharing these skills. It is the largest global network of museum professionals and we would like it to reinforce this professional approach.

## **ICOM Portugal – Text by José Alberto Ribeiro, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

In November 2019, ICOM Portugal organised a meeting of 150 people, working together to think about the museum definition, in addition to working groups for follow-up. The conclusion is that it

is important to differentiate the definition from a list of missions and a vision. The proposed definition is considered too long, and should focus on the essence of museums. Moreover, the museum definition should be considered on the basis of the current definition and should contain the following terms: “permanent institution”, “tangible and intangible heritage”, “education”, “inclusivity”, “accessibility”, “participatory”, “study, enjoyment and reflection”.

## **ICOM Greece – Text by Teti Hadjinicolaou, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

In December 2019, ICOM Greece published an article on the museum definition in the national committee’s bulletin, and launched discussion during its General Assembly in 2020. Responses to discussions were sent via the questionnaire drawn up by ICOFOM. ICOM Greece is also drafting a questionnaire and responses are expected by the end of March. Using the responses to this questionnaire, a round-table session and workshop will be held in April 2020. An article was published on this subject by the ICOM Greece committee in *Museum International* (vol. 71, No. 181-182, page 64).

Discussions concluded that while it is necessary to change the definition, the foundations of the 2007 definition should be retained. A museum is not a cultural centre; the definition must be short; the legal value of the terms used must be taken into account; the proposed declaration of the role and missions of 21<sup>st</sup> century museums should be drawn up on the basis of UNESCO recommendations. Finally, the term “education” should be included in the definition and it is important to remember that the definition applies to all types of heritage and therefore museum.

## **ICOM Azerbaijan – Text by Rema Zeynalova, Secretary, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICOM Azerbaijan sent a questionnaire to museums in the country and an extraordinary executive board meeting was held to discuss

responses. The conclusions are that the current definition should be retained with a few additions, and that two points should not be forgotten: inclusivity and safeguarding the memory of various communities for the future.

## **AVICOM – Text by Michael Faber, President, read by Florence Le Corre**

AVICOM is the International Committee for Audiovisual, New Technologies and Social Media. AVICOM proposes that the new definition should build on the UNESCO declarations and contain the following terms: “permanent institution”, “managed by professionals”, “inclusivity”, “sustainable development”, “non-profit”, “accessible for all”, and “a museum must work with the past for the future”.

## **ICOM Poland – Text by Jolanta Gumula, member of ICOM Poland, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICOM Poland organised a conference with Polish museum directors during which it created a ten-member committee to discuss the museum definition. A publication by the *National Institute Museum and Public Collections* containing the reactions of some professionals is also under development. Members sent spontaneous reactions, many praising the idea of reviewing the definition but regretting the lack of debate, participation and information on work to overhaul the definition, even before the vote. They find the new definition unclear and ambiguous, open to debate, too long and not easy enough to understand. It lists missions; it is not a definition. Members also regretted that the role of collections is not mentioned: ‘What is a museum without a collection?’, asks the Polish committee. Finally, it is important to remember that a museum is an institution and that the notions of critical dialogue and democracy need to be taken into account in this discussion.

## **COSTUME – Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset, President**

The International Committee for Museums and Collections of Costume was created in 1962 and currently has over 400 members, two thirds of which are European. The number of members is constantly increasing, reflecting the creation of new fashion and costume departments in museums and the diverse professions associated with these objects.

COSTUME was unable to discuss the potential new museum definition in Kyoto in September, as the letter informing us of this debate arrived during the summer, preventing us from adding this discussion to our agenda or even from collecting enough opinions, as we lacked information on this project. We can say that most members present in Kyoto were surprised by this news and expressed concern. Above all, they were not sufficiently informed to take a stance either for or against, within such a short timeframe.

In order to be able to follow discussions in a constructive manner and take part, the COSTUME committee emailed its members the questionnaire developed by ICOFOM in late 2019, asking individuals to send their responses directly to ICOFOM. We have therefore yet to receive any feedback on this questionnaire. However, we do intend to develop our own questionnaire, prior to which we will be sending links to the current museum definition, either by email as a reference document and/or by publishing them online on the ICOM COSTUME mini-website.

In conclusion, this important subject will be discussed during our General Assembly in late June/early July 2020 at the Palace of Versailles. This will give us the opportunity to collect initial thoughts, reactions and feelings from members of the international COSTUME committee during the annual meeting, which we will then share with the ICOM community.

## **ICOM Ukraine – Text by Kateryna Chuyeva, President, presented by Florence Le Corre**

ICOM Ukraine organised discussions in 2019 and the recently elected executive board will continue reflection on plans for a new definition. It highlights that a museum must be a permanent non-profit institution open to the public. This committee believes that the basic data in the current definition of collections should be retained. It is important to include the concept of heritage protection and close attention must be paid to the legal aspects of the definition.

This is an extract from what this committee says about the very high value of the legal aspects of the museum definition:

“Taking into account the experience of totalitarian and post-totalitarian past of our country, we feel bound to warn that purely formal compliance with functional criteria does not prevent museums from being transformed into a propaganda instrument for totalitarian and anti-human regimes. This is why it is important to provide a definition not only with a basic core, but also with a lawyer, in addition to the functional signs, that would express the essential landmarks and values for which a museum should serve in a free and democratic society.”

## **ICOM Burkina Faso – Text by Jean-Paul Koudougou, member of ICOM Burkina Faso, read by Laure Ménétrier**

The definition is very long and general, which results in a vague understanding of the specifics of a museum. Indeed, many recommendations in the MDPP report clearly state that all aspects cannot be taken into account but that the definition should be concise enough to identify the specifics of a museum, and open enough to take into account other aspects associated with objects and the values promoted by the museum institution.

The status of museums as fully-fledged institutions is not clearly and explicitly mentioned. The absence of concepts such as tangible and intangible cultural heritage and “enjoyment” is regrettable.

The new definition takes into account new paradigms of cooperation and democracy, and major changes and challenges facing museums that need to be incorporated into their missions.

However, in the light of continued sensitivity regarding issues associated with decolonisation, the restitution of cultural property, illegal trafficking and identity politics, the new definition appears to open the door to legitimising potentially “fraudulent” acquisitions whose ownership could be justified by the duty to “safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people” and “work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.”

There is no urgent need to change the definition if the new one does not truly express what is expected of an institution and fails to obtain unanimous support, as is currently the case. The 2007 definition only needs amendments, such as taking into account some concepts such as cultural democracy, equal rights, improving understandings of the world and respect for the diversity of cultural expressions.

## **ICOM Estonia – Text by Agnes Aljas, President, presented by Laure Ménétrier**

ICOM Estonia has 250 members. There is a lack of consensus between members of the board who hold contradictory positions. Some believe that the new definition is too political and lacks neutrality, but there is no consensus on this point. Nevertheless, ICOM Estonia approves the idea of changing the current definition to take into account the changes and challenges facing our society. ICOM Estonia would like to highlight the difficulty of defining what a museum is due to the plurality of museums in the world. It believes that the definition should be a tool to help museums

find their place and support them in their operation. The definition must also help us take a position on phenomena such as financial pressure, and to make ourselves available to societies and their development in order to promote universal access to culture.

## **ICMEMO – Max Polonovski, Board Member**

ICMEMO is the International Committee for Memorial Museums, primarily in remembrance of crimes committed by States, meaning that the neutrality aspect is very important to us.

Discussion of the proposed new museum definition in Kyoto was extremely heated, and could even be considered violent. We witnessed a very large majority opposed to this new definition, with a small minority nevertheless very much in favour. This was a debate that stirred passions, linked to the very principles of the mandate of our committee, where political neutrality is essential to allow the survival of our institutions in the countries involved. The President of ICOM Czech Republic, who is a member of our committee, recently resigned for political reasons. Dariusz Stola from the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, POLIN Museum, in Warsaw was recently ‘divested of his position’ by the Polish government. Peter Schäfer, Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, has also been sent on his way. All these people are in sensitive positions, and it is therefore essential for us to remain totally neutral. We need to pay attention to these aspects with this type of definition that has ideological and political resonance.

Overall, within ICMEMO, we had the same reactions as our colleagues. We were open to a “new wording” - a new way of presenting things in order to bring them up to date, but even more attached to retain our unique quality.

## **ICOM Italy – Daniele Jalla, Board Member**

ICOM Italy has 2,600 members, compared to 80 in 2001. The unique feature of our committee is its organisation into regional sections to increase debate, and its thematic committees. Since 2014, following

a long battle by ICOM, the current ICOM museum definition has been included in the State law on museums and the ICOM Code of Ethics has been taken into account in creating the national museum system. It is important to understand that this definition is a fundamental aspect, and I do not see how it is possible to build a national museum system based on a definition that starts with polyphonic spaces. We are a country of music and poetry, but I'm not sure that applies to museums.

ICOM Italy discussed the museum definition well before the Kyoto General Assembly. A working group was formed and organised several regional meetings and a national conference in May 2019 in Milan, where François Mairesse introduced us to the topic. We discussed the current 2007 definition, from which three words emerged. First, the term “accessibility”, which already appears in the 1960 UNESCO recommendation on museums. Second, “participation”. This is nothing new as we have been discussing this theme since the 1970s, and it has given rise to forms of museums such as ecomuseums, which are institutions and institutes like other museums. Third, the only term that generated debate and is worth highlighting is “sustainable development”. However, museums were created as an instrument of progress and development, meaning that it is essential to take this notion into account.

We opposed the new definition proposed in Kyoto for several reasons. Firstly, there is the issue of the surprising and anti-democratic method. A definition should not be pulled out of a hat, ignoring ICOM's seventy year history. Changes to the definition, debates in ICOM, discussions of the nature of the definition, etc. constitute a historic memory, which was missing from this decision. This may lose us time. Next, we considered the form of the text to be chaotic and situationist. There is both too little and too much. It is incredible to see an ICOM General Assembly tear itself apart with a 70% majority in favour of postponing the vote on the new definition, which had never happened before. What is the state of the ICOM presidency to have created such a situation? Never before had we witnessed this great a division on an issue so fundamental to ICOM. There is therefore a problem of methodology. Finally, let us not forget the connection between the definition and two other aspects. First, the UNESCO recommendation. We are not independent of it and cannot just invent something else when UNESCO



has a recommendation on museums written in 1960 and then in 2015, which we need to take into account. ICOM contributed to this recommendation. How did the executive board approve the new definition without recalling this recommendation in 2015? This appears to be a memory lapse. Second, the relationship between the definition and the Code of Ethics, the structure of the code and the structure of the definition, since the two form a single whole.

In conclusion, we suggest starting discussion with the current definition and fully accepting its structure, i.e. the four aspects that make up the definition: museum identity, target audience, functions and purposes. These are the four aspects that define a museum institution in line with the Aristotelian system which Van Mensch has reminded us to use in our discussions since 1993. This is a normative text for ICOM, but thanks to the general global opinion of ICOM, the text actually has the value of moral law for all States. We must therefore accept our immense responsibility to not draw up manifestos. What we have here is neither a vision nor a mission, but a manifesto. Some museum organisations do work with manifestos, such as the Museum Association in the United Kingdom. They are public summaries of strategic reflection that provide food for thought.

I propose defining a method, since the information that has emerged this morning has created a general consensus of opinion. However, there are different approaches: some discussed terminology, others the form and others the length. If we use the definition as a starting point, we must decide whether or not we like the structure. To come back to what one of our colleagues said earlier, she would like to answer her children's question, "What's a museum?", using the ICOM definition. This question is reminiscent of that asked by Marc Bloch's son, "What is history?". However, the ICOM definition is not suitable for children. If anything has changed in museums, it is the centrality of people, whether in terms of participation or accessibility. Museums are no longer centred on collections but people.

If we start with more moderate objectives and if we like the structure, we will need to answer the following questions: what is a museum? What is a museum's target audience? What are the functions a museum must achieve? What are its purposes? We can discuss these four parts and reach a reasonable conclusion.

# Synthetic chart by Florence Le

Response from

<i>Committee name</i> <i>Number of members</i> <i>Representative present or</i> <i>signatory on document sent</i>	<i>Events, questionnaires, discussion of</i> <i>definition</i>
<p><b>ICOM Germany</b></p> <p>6 500 individual members</p> <p>Markus Walz, Vice-President</p>	<p>309 questionnaires sent in Dec. 2019: 302 responses from different regions of Germany</p>
<p><b>ICOM Austria</b></p> <p>2 500 members</p> <p>Bettina Leidl, President</p>	<p>Letter about new definition sent to the Executive Board and during Kyoto</p> <p>Letter from Austrian committee about new definition since Kyoto</p> <p>Numerous responses from members after Kyoto</p>
<p><b>ICOM Azerbaijan</b></p> <p>Rema Zeynalova, Secretary</p>	<p>Questionnaire sent to museums</p> <p>Extraordinary board meeting: discussion of questionnaire responses</p>

# Corre, ICOM France Board Member

## national committees

### Conclusion of discussions

### Terms/concepts identified in addition to "acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits"

#### current definition:

yes: 80%;

#### new definition:

yes: 47.4%

very or quite suitable: 36.1%

no: 13.1%

For 80%: terms of 2007 definition are important, including: open to the public

At least 66%: in the service of society and its development; equal access to heritage; non-profit; enjoyment

Fewer than 50%: contribute to human dignity and social justice; enhance understandings of the world

Fewer than 30%: democratising; polyphonic; conflicts and challenges of the present; interpret; equal rights; global equality and planetary wellbeing

New definition: complicated terms; list of missions but not terms appropriate for a definition

MDDP: contributions of ICOM Austria not taken into account; lack of transparency, time, discussion; a majority is required to adopt the new definition

Legislative aspects need to be considered since the definition is a reference for Austrian museum governance. Museums differ from other venues

Essential terms missing from new definition: permanent institution, study, collections, education, tangible and intangible heritage

Include: role of museums in society, inclusivity, climate protection, taking into account communities

Keep current definition with additions

New definition proposed

Essential terms: Non-profit; permanent institution; in the service of society and its development; open to all members of the public; inclusivity; safeguarding the memory of various communities for the future

---

<b>ICOM Bangladesh</b> Jahangir Hussain, President	Workshop in 2018  ICOM Bangladesh General Assembly: decision to organise a workshop in Feb. 2020 with various museum stakeholders and art historians  another meeting on the definition
<hr/>	
<b>ICOM Belgium</b> Alexandre Chevalier, President Sergio Servellón, Vice-President	Meeting in Jan. 2020  Several discussion sessions in 2020, including one in June to follow up ICOFOM survey
<hr/>	
<b>ICOM Burkina Faso</b> Jean-Paul Koudougou, Board Member	
<hr/>	
<b>ICOM Croatia</b> 123 members; 36 institutions  Darko Babić, President	Discussion of definition at 2018 and 2019 general assemblies  Workshop in 2019  Contributions to the ICOM South-East Europe workshop
<hr/>	

---

Definition terms need to be precise

New definition proposed

Legal aspects to take into account

Museum = space; inclusive; non-profit; work with and for communities; sustainable development; enjoyment; environmental improvement; contribute to human dignity, social justice, global equality and environmental wellbeing; specimens and artefacts

---

Working method for new definition is unclear:

- Specify target audience for this definition: general public, States, museums, ICOM members?
  - Have we measured the impact of this new definition on States?
  - Need for clarity and transparency on method and discussions
- 

New definition unsatisfactory, very long, does not characterise museums, not very open to management of objects

But: properly takes into account new paradigms for cooperation, democracy, major changes and challenges

Does not properly take into account issues associated with decolonisation, restitution of cultural property, illegal trafficking and identity politics

---

Essential terms: Tangible and intangible heritage; enjoyment; cultural democracy; equal rights; enhance understandings of the world; respect for the diversity of cultural expressions

---

Current definition is suitable

Review definition: yes but: MDPP work was carried out without communication or leaving members enough time for reflection. The reactions of members and institutions reflect this

The proposed definition is not a definition

Be aware of economic consequences (State subsidies) and legal consequences if the definition changes.

Museums are different from other types of heritage

---

---

**ICOM Ecuador**

Juan Carlos Fernández-Catalán,  
President

---

**ICOM Spain**

1006 individual members; 283  
institutions

Terese Reyes I Bellmunt, President

Roundtable session in 2018 (conclusions sent to  
ICOFOM)

Members' comments in meetings and on social  
media

Events, meetings, discussion platform

---

**ICOM Estonia**

250 members; 11 institutions

Agnes Aljas, President

Spontaneous reactions from members

Roundtable sessions after Kyoto

ICOM questionnaire sent to members

April 2020: roundtable sessions

---

**ICOM France**

4 900 individual members; 450  
institutions

Juliette Raoul-Duval, President

Debates in 3 board meetings, in general assembly  
in Oct. 2019

Working group to organise event on 10 March  
2020

National debate on 29 April 2020 (cancelled due  
to COVID-19)

19 letters, including 6 to ICOM President and 13  
to cultural stakeholders

---

---

Additions to new definition: equality, environment, social responsibility, humanitarian and social objectives; education; passing on memory; building identity; debates; enjoyment; museum professionals; mediation; collections; preservation; study, research; social space; entertainment

---

New definition is a declaration of principles and not a definition. The definition must be concrete, precise and distinguish museums from other cultural institutions

Choose a universal rather than political approach

Consensus between all members is vital

---

Essential terms: Education; training; museum designed by and for society; interaction with communities; museums are autonomous and independent spaces; fun space; open to the public; non-profit; continue with transparency

Concepts that are important but not required in the definition: human dignity, social justice, global equality, planetary wellbeing

---

Varied positions on executive board.

Current definition criticised: does not take into account new museums, societal challenges of museums

New definition: many in favour but with some reservations: too political; no professional aspects; not neutral; not a definition

Many need a tool for everyone to understand what a museum is, its role, its work; regulatory aspects are important.

---

No: democratising, polyphonic spaces, critical dialogue, acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present; contribute to human dignity and social justice; global equality; planetary wellbeing

But: these are important notions

Some believe the notion of conservation should be kept

---

Continue reflection: include fundamental values of museums again; refer to Code of Ethics; prioritise professional rather than political approach; general consensus (all committees) is vital; leave time for reflection

New definition: needs clear but professional language; unacceptable to trivialise museums; take into account regulatory use of the definition

---

Reincorporate the fundamental values of museums into the new definition: permanent institution, collections, enjoyment, education

Important: social role of museums; inclusivity; professional approach; no separation between collections/public; universal approach

---

<b>ICOM Georgia</b>	Online questionnaire
517 members	Discussion of responses by executive board
Inga Karaia, President	
<b>ICOM Greece</b>	Workshop on definition in 2018
Teti Hadjinicolaou, President	Response to ICOFOM questionnaire
	Article on definition in Greek national committee bulletin in Dec. 2019
	Discussions at General Assembly in Jan. 2020
	New executive board developing questionnaire: responses by end of March 2020
	Roundtable session and workshop in April 2020
<b>ICOM Ireland</b>	Consultation of Irish public cultural bodies underway
60 members	
Hugh Maguire, President	
<b>ICOM Israel</b>	Roundtable sessions
1 600 members	Creation of definition discussion group
Nava Kessler, President	Survey sent to members



---

New definition:

yes 46%

no 48 %

Definition is complicated; must be short; terms need to be structured; superfluous and redundant terms (equal rights, equal access); careful because legal language is not the same in each country

Essential terms: education; institution; democracy; inclusivity; dialogue about the past and future; accessibility; participatory; transparency

Replace "conflicts" by "challenges"; and "equal rights and access" by "inclusivity" "accessibility"

Delete "acknowledging"

Artefacts and specimens are problematic terms

---

ICOM museum definition = officially recognised basis for operation of museums in Greece;

Need to change definition ;keep foundations of 2007 definition; a museum is not a cultural centre; definition must be short; legal value of terms used

Proposed declaration on role and mission of 21st century museums in line with UNESCO recommendations and conventions.

Essential terms: education; institution; in the service of society and its development; research; promote knowledge of history; mutual understanding, cultural exchange, peaceful coexistence of peoples; tangible and intangible heritage; collections;

---

Proposed definition is a list of missions, a strategic plan; confused terms

Continue discussions

A museum is non-profit

Avoid "polyphonic" and "democratising"

---

Current definition is good for vast majority of members

New definition is too imprecise

Essential terms: museum = permanent venue; education; social missions; professional management of collections

---

---

<p><b>ICOM Italy</b></p> <p>2439 members; 168 institutions</p> <p>Adele Maresca, President</p>	<p>Debates before Kyoto</p> <p>Working group and national conference in May 2019</p> <p>Letter to Suay Aksoy in June 2019: request for democratic process to draw up definition</p> <p>Confirmation of this position in Kyoto.</p> <p>General Assembly of Italian museums association in Dec. 2019: ICOM Italy's position approved.</p> <p>Conference in Dec. 2019 in Rome: presentation about definition</p>
--	---

---

<p><b>ICOM Latvia</b></p> <p>Juris Ciganovs, President</p>	<p>Discussions in General Assembly in Jan. 2020</p>
--	---

---

<p><b>ICOM Luxembourg</b></p> <p>129 individual members; 21 institutions</p> <p>Guy Thewes, Vice-President</p>	<p>Discussions in executive board</p>
--	---------------------------------------

---

---

### Current definition in Italian State law on museums

Regrets undemocratic working process for new definition; methodology should be decided on together for this work

New definition: is a manifesto rather than a definition.

Definition must be clear, brief, and easy to understand for everyone.

Important terms are missing from the new definition, which is already long.

Need to rethink the definition that applies to different types of museums and provides legal protection in all countries

Need to review the definition AND the Code of Ethics; take into account UNESCO 2015 recommendation on Museums

Do people have a central role in museums?

Very important terms: accessibility, participation, sustainable development .Museum: permanent institution; space; longevity of collections; non-profit; accessible to all; in the service of society; sustainable development; cultural heritage (instead of humanity); communicates and passes on; takes responsibility for (rather than "acquires" ); research; education; enjoyment; cultural landscapes; promote knowledge, critical thinking, participation and wellbeing of the community

Do not keep: specimens and artefacts (prefer the term "collections" )

---

### The definition must distinguish museums from other cultural inst.

All additional aspects proposed in the new definition are concepts and values suitable for the Code of Ethics

Museum: institution; permanent; sustainable development; non-profit; in the service of society; socially-oriented missions; open to the public; accessible to all; education; enjoyment

---

Current definition is very suitable: It distinguishes museums from other cultural venues

Defines the fundamental values of museums

Terms: accessibility, participatory method, inclusivity, engagement for democracy or the environment, democratising, equal rights, human dignity, social justice, planetary wellbeing: missions or values?

Definition: must contain museum criteria not values

Note: the new definition may exclude non-transparent, non-polyphonic and non-inclusive museums

---

---

<b>ICOM Netherlands</b> 5 302 members Arja van Veldhuizen, Board Member	Executive board decisions: working group (3 members) ongoing; update on definition published in Nov. 2019, reviewed in Feb. 2020  Discussions with all professionals (including non-Icom) and museums in the Netherlands  Discussions: Jan. 2020  Work session on 6 Feb. 2020 : members asked 6 questions  Dutch Museums Association event in March 2020  Members will give their opinion at the Icom Netherlands General Assembly in May 2020
---	--

---

<b>ICOM Poland</b> Jolanta Gumula, Board Member	Polish museum directors conference: creation of discussion group (10 members)  National Institute for Museums and Public Collections published article in <i>Muzealnictwo</i> sharing reactions of professionals
--	--

---

<b>ICOM Portugal</b> José Alberto Ribeiro, President	Meeting of 150 people in Nov. 2019  Work on new definition in small groups
---	--

---

---

Approach to definition varies by type of museum and role of members

Issue of museums that conserve objects/museums where objects tell stories

Who is definition for?

Conclusion: take our time, postpone the vote, consider our practices, take into account all opinions in order to merge them

---

Spontaneous feedback from members: very good idea to review definition but lack of debate, participation, information on work to overhaul the definition, even before the vote

New definition: unclear, ambiguous, open to debate, too long, not easy to understand. It lists missions: it is not a definition

Role of collections? A museum without collections?

Should draw up a list of conditions without which a museum is not a museum

Difficulty finding a definition for all types of museums

---

A museum is an institution; critical dialogue; democracy; collections?; critical thinking, debate; conservation?

Term "polyphonic" not precise enough and unsuitable.

---

Distinguish between definition, mission and vision

New definition is unsuitable: reconsider museum definition on the basis of the current definition; extend to socio-democratic and citizen values

Essential terms: permanent institution; tangible and intangible heritage; education; inclusivity; accessibility; participatory; research; enjoyment; reflection

---

---

**ICOM Slovakia**

217 individual members; 23  
institutions

Questionnaire sent after Kyoto

Jasna Gaburová, President

---

**ICOM Switzerland**

1 700 members

Survey with over 200 responses

Helen Bieri Thomson, Board Member  
Philippe Büttner, Vice-President

---

**ICOM Turkey**

290 members; 8 institutions

Workshop with members of ICOM Turkey,  
museum staff and directors from the General  
Direction of Cultural Heritage and Museums, and  
private museums and museologists on new  
definition in April 2018

Meliha Yaylali, Board Member

Meeting about the new definition in Feb. 2020:  
what is a museum? What is its purpose? Who is it  
for?

---

**ICOM Ukraine**

Kateryna Chuyeva, President  
Anastasiia Cherednychenko, Vice-  
President

Newly elected executive board continuing  
reflection

Negative reactions to new definition from museologists

Before Kyoto: new definition not accepted

After: new definition accepted by museums for minorities. Request to remove some terms; rework definition, since it does not take into account different types of museum; regulatory aspects need to be incorporated

Positive aspects of new definition: democracy, political independence, critical analysis of the past, rights and equal access to heritage for all

Negative aspects: political terms in new definition, such as democratising, inclusive, polyphonic, social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing; museums are not competent to play a political role (conflicts; human dignity and social justice); a museum is not a cultural centre

Current definition: 86% agree; 10% disagree

New definition: 30 % agree; 60 % disagree

A definition must be normative, different from a recommendation

Promote discussion rather than a limiting and exclusive definition

Rework definition to make it apolitical

Keep following terms:

80%: museums conserve specimens and artefacts

80% - 61%: non-profit; for the future; equal access; transparency; debates

38% - 23%: human dignity; democratising; understandings of the world; wellbeing; social justice; global equality

New definition: too long; unclear; vague terms (polyphonic, critical dialogue, conflicts); expressions of a political nature; does not distinguish museums from other cultural institutions; does not include fundamental aspects of museums

34 keywords proposed

Need for transparent, participatory and democratic discussion

34 keywords proposed including these terms excluded from the new definition: education, training, intangible heritage, restoration and preservation

Conserve data from the current definition

New definition must distinguish museums from other cultural institutions

Legal aspects of the definition must ensure museums are independent from the political authorities: new definition must be studied by lawyers

Essential terms: non-profit, permanent institution, open to the public

## Response from International

<i>Committee name</i>	<i>Events, questionnaires, debates</i>
<b>AVICOM</b> Michael H. Faber, President	
<b>CIDOC</b> Monika Hagedorn-Saupe, President	Board meeting in Feb. 2020: discussions about new definition
<b>CIMCIM</b> 250 members Frank Bär, President	Some spontaneous feedback from members Survey sent to members: 40 responses from 200 questionnaires sent
<b>CIMUSET</b>	Asked members to react after Kyoto



## Committees and Regional Alliances

<i>Conclusion of discussions</i>	<i>Terms/concepts identified in addition to "acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits"</i>
<p>Definition must be short, precise with no confusing terms</p> <p>Follow UNESCO declarations</p> <p>New definition proposed</p>	<p><u>Essential terms</u>: permanent institution; professional management; inclusivity; sustainable development; non-profit; tangible and intangible heritage; accessible to all; work to understand the past for a decent future</p>
<p>New definition: positive aspects</p> <p><u>But</u>: defines museum missions not museums. Could be incorporated into ICOM documents but as a list of missions</p> <p>Definition must be short and focused on the fundamental aspects that distinguish museums from other cultural institutions; careful of terms selected that have legal value in some countries</p>	
<p><u>New definition</u>: Confusion between definition criteria and values: properly differentiate between the two</p> <p>A definition is not a list of missions; it must distinguish between museums and other cultural institutions</p> <p>All proposals must be heard</p>	<p>The term "polyphonic" is unclear</p> <p>"aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing": these are missions but it is interesting to incorporate into the definition</p>
<p>Current definition is not ideal</p>	

---

<b>DEMIST</b> Remko Jansonius, Secretary	Questionnaire sent to members in Feb./March 2020: - Strengths of current definition? - What should be improved in current definition? - 3 keywords that define museums? - Your definition of museum?
---	--

---

<b>ICFA</b> Sophie Harent, Secretary	Work on new definition in Jan. 2020: sent to ICOM President
---	---

---

<b>ICMAH</b> 1 670 individual members; 111 institutional members Burçak Madran, President	Spontaneous feedback from members Recent online survey Opinion on new definition; differences between current and new definition 5 keywords required in definition
---	---

---

<b>ICOM CECA</b> 2 000 members Marie-Clarté O'Neill, President	CECA was involved in the new definition discussion group Regional survey in Oct. 2019; discussions in Spain, Brazil, Singapore; Individual feedback (countries) Summary article published in <i>Icom Education</i> , 29
--	--

---

---

New definition is satisfactory

34 members proposed a new definition.

Essential terms: non-profit (but organisations may break even); intangible heritage; preservation

---

Why change the definition?

New definition: political and ideological; no distinction between museums and cultural centres

Necessary: neutrality; simple language;

Term "collections": not essential for some members

Important terms: accessibility, inclusivity; safeguard diverse memories for future generations; non-profit; collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world

Inadequate terms: polyphonic, inclusive, social justice

---

Definition should be short, targeted, for all, non-political, apply to everyone. It should promote museum professions

New definition should include the terms from the current definition and add new museological terms

To decide on the new definition: transparent process, time for reflection, participatory approach.

Values and missions: for the Code of Ethics?

Museological terms are essential

The following terms are values and not museum definition criteria: democracy, inclusivity, polyphony, equal rights, human dignity

Remove "polyphonic"

Other important concepts: humanitarian and environmental aspects: in definition?

---

A definition is not a set of values; must be short, precise, contain specific terms; must help structure a museum; easy to translate; included in some countries' legislation; used to regulate public policy; work in museums by professionals; social responsibility of museums;

Education: central function of museums

Important terms: museum is a contemporary institution; accessible to all; inclusivity; interactivity; critical freedom; universal accessibility; co-construction

Planetary ambition: no

---

---

<b>ICOM COSTUME</b>	ICOFOM questionnaire sent to members in late 2019: awaiting responses
400 members	ICOM Costume questionnaire under development
Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset, President	Discussions planned for General Assembly in July 2020

---

<b>ICOM GLASS</b>	ICOFOM questionnaire sent in Nov. 2019 : 4 responses:
144 members, 22 institutions, 359 non-voting members	Concern about political dimension of new definition
Anne-Laure Carré, Board Member (on behalf of Teresa Medici, President)	Professional development of staff not mentioned: concerning Annual meeting in Oct. 2020

---

<b>ICMEMO</b>	
Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel Vice- President	Discussions
Max Polonowski, Board Member	

---

<b>ICOFOM</b>	
2 000 members	Since Kyoto, questionnaire for all ICOFOM members and all committees
Marion Bertin, Secretary	

---

---

Continue discussions

---

Political neutrality: extremely important aspect for definition

New definition: majority opposed, but small minority very favourable; is a list of missions

Vote requires at least 50% of members

Process must be nuanced and non-exclusive

Proposal: update current definition with data from the new definition on necessary and realistic social objectives

---

---

**ICR**

Irena Žmuc, President

---

**INTERCOM**

700 members

Discussion platform : awaiting member feedback

Emilie Girard, Secretary

---

**ICOM MPR**

600 members

Board meeting : analysis of wording of new definition

Matthias Henkel, President

---

Yes to updating the current definition, which must reflect new responsibilities, new activities and new types of museums; it must meet the needs of emerging communities and national jurisdictions; it must continue to have value for public governance; it must be easy to understand for everyone, including politicians and the general public; it must explain what museums are and what they do

The new definition: :

- combines functional aspects and aspirations of museums: important
- for secondary aspects: a text could supplement the definition; the definition must be able to be understood in different ways

Inclusivity; responsive to changes to responsibility; access to all members of the public; digital aspects; value for community targeted by the museum; sustainable development; transparency; tangible and intangible heritage

Continue discussions; careful of potential legal impact of a new definition

Do not stigmatise debate on new definition between "for" and "against"

Careful of difference between vision, missions, definition; a museum is apolitical; a place of discussion, it collects, preserves...

It communicates





# Cross-cutting issues



Panel discussions

WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

# Thinking of the museum as a legal category: what are the issues around definition?

**Marie Cornu**

**Research director, CNRS, French National  
Centre for Scientific Research**

In the history of the museum, the exercise of defining the museum comes rather late in legal texts. It was probably considered that the museum institution is a kind of self-evident truth, a reality that should naturally be clear to everyone. Law and deontology were tackled in this exercise at the end of the first half of the twentieth century. ICOM's first definition came very soon after the institution was created. As for museum legislation, few legislations today have not adopted a legal definition of a museum, a definition sometimes very much inspired by the ICOM Statutes. I would like to look at this defining exercise, which I believe is of a special kind in the legal sphere. Two issues seem to me to dominate, that of the need for a legal definition and that of the function of the legal definition.

## **I. The need for legal definition**

The question of the need for a specified definition arises both in the field of law and in that of ethics, as is evident from the many discussions surrounding the definition of museum for ICOM. Of course, there are differences in approach due to the way the standard is produced. However, there are some rather similar questions in this aspiration to define the museum as a special category of public action.

***The need for a specified delimitation*** - In the two areas of law and deontology, a corpus of standards has been built up, imposing itself on museums with varying degrees of force, although inspired by the same idea of subjecting the museum institution to a common

set of rules. These rules can be very diverse, relate to several of the museum's purposes and impose a certain level of requirement in their implementation, a certain type of behaviour in the face of variable situations (public, supervisory bodies, communities, sensitive objects, partnerships, etc.).

And this normative project necessarily requires the capacity to delimit its field of application in advance. Who is this corpus of rules intended for? Which are the museums to which these obligations apply? In these two areas of developing the standard, the question of the need for an *ad hoc* definition arises. If it were a matter of purely and simply referring to a consensual reality, there would be no need for a legal definition. The law, and ethics, could easily be based on a reality that only needs to be named. When, for example, in France, the first laws recognised the right of authors of works of fine arts, they did not specify what such works were. This is understood and does not require a definition. It was later, with the appearance of industrial arts and photography that a definition was imposed, when the limits of a work of art became harder to delimit. An interposing category became indispensable.

***As for the differences in defining approaches:*** in the case of ethics, compliance with the standard relies on a voluntary adherence mechanism. We are dealing with flexible, soft law. Each museum is free to subscribe or not to the prescriptions of ICOM's Code of Ethics. The law proceeds differently since, as a general rule, it imposes a status on certain institutions, which it characterises. It forges its own categories, including that of museum, which will, if necessary, lead to exclusion. This process of forming a standard is not purely voluntary, which obviously means that the need for a definition will not have the same meaning, that it carries with it a certain conception of the institution in question and responds to a need for legal certainty. Since it imposes rules, it must delimit their perimeter. All legal systems agree on this rather basic mechanism, regardless of the legal family, whether it be Common law, Romano-Germanic law, Asian law, etc. All contemporary museum laws have a definition, and have therefore felt the need for a definition, which shows that the definition of museum is not automatically understood.

It could probably be argued that the differences observed between law and ethics, in terms of the process of standard-setting, strongly

influence the way this delimitation is thought out, the way the idea of the museum is constructed. However, in reality, we find similar questions in the reflection on the correct definition of the museum. In this case, the two approaches are intimately linked, inasmuch as several legislations have drawn, sometimes very substantially, on the ICOM definition and have transposed it into domestic law, so that it has acquired normative force. Furthermore, as ICOM France recalls in its contribution to the reflection on a new definition of the museum: “The ICOM definition of museum is included in its Statutes, and so serves as a reference in many countries that do not have a legislative corpus”.

This is a measure of the scope of the ICOM definition and the legal burden that a number of States have placed on it by incorporating it into their domestic law. The ICOM definition therefore goes far beyond its own needs for definition, since it becomes, taken up by national legislators, a genuine legal concept.

It is necessary to consider the function that a legal definition fulfils.

## **II. What function does a definition serve?**

In relation to the reality of the museum, deontology and law seem, once again, to deploy different approaches or rather different strategies. In principle, the function of the definition is not of the same nature in these two normative registers. In one case, it is inclusive, in the other more selective. There are, however, similarities in the way the two normative regimes assign a function to the definition of the museum.

### ***In deontology, definition has an inclusive aim***

In the discourse around the definition exercise, through its various iterations, one gets the feeling that the guiding idea is to seek to embrace museums in all their diversity. The successive modifications are above all dictated by the concern to keep pace with the profound changes that the institution is undergoing including digital requirements, handling intangible heritage, the development of the museum’s social function, the circulation of resources and know-how, etc. There are many plans for development.

The idea is not to exclude museums that have moved from the conservatory era to the laboratory era, in the sense that the laboratory is above all a place for experiments and experimentation. In the end, the approach involves getting as close as possible to the reality of the museum. The ICOM website says that ICOM has worked to update “this definition in accordance with the realities of the global museum community”. It is as if the function of the definition is to act as a mirror. Here it is a matter of rendering the reality of the museum in all its complexity, i.e. of trying to grasp it as faithfully as possible.

***The law, on the other hand, develops a selective vision*** and, because it is selective, in some respects it is exclusive.

Under this selective approach, the definition exercise has several functions.

### **1. An institutional and prescriptive function:**

This time it is not a question of describing and grasping the reality of the museum as clearly as possible, but, in another approach, of highlighting its irreducible characteristics, the identifying elements without which there would be no museum. It is not a question of sticking to reality, but of saying which museum deserves protection and under what conditions, which implies identifying the key words, to use the expression of ICOM France. Legal vocabulary<sup>1</sup> defines a legal definition as follows: “*Opération (et énoncé qui en résulte) par laquelle la loi principalement (...) caractérise une notion, une catégorie juridique par des critères associés*”. “Operation (and resulting statement) by which the law mainly (...) characterises a notion, a legal category by associated criteria”. The definition has a prescriptive function. However, the scope of a legal definition needs to be qualified. While it may contain indications of a regime, it is not a programmatic tool. Its primary purpose is to delimit the sharp edges of a category. Thus, the prescriptions of what the museum is and the obligations it must comply with are also to be found not in the definition, but in the body of applicable rules, which impose, for example, rules of mediation, conditions of accessibility, etc. In

<sup>(1)</sup> G. Cornu, *Vocabulaire juridique*, PUF, 2020, V<sup>o</sup> définition

addition, the aims of the museum, such as equal access to culture, enrichment of the collections, etc., are specified separately. In its aims or obligations there is a principle of public participation, and also a mention that museums must cooperate with the populations concerned by the museum's resources.

## **2. A distinctive function.**

This exercise of determining boundaries combines with the first one. It is also a question of identifying the distinctive features, the characteristics that distinguish a museum from other institutions. A museum is not a media library, an archive service or a cultural venue. The whole question is to decide what makes it unique, in relation to these other heritage sites, which may have certain questions in common, in particular, regarding their relationship with the public and society. The presence of a collection, invested with one or more symbolic values, is in most legislations one of the important distinctive elements, with, in its extension, the aims of conservation, presentation, education and communication.

## **3. An exclusive function**

Engaging in a selective approach presupposes a proper mastery of exclusionary choices. Some legislations reserve protection for museum institutions which carry on their activity for non-profit-making purposes, but this is not true everywhere. In French law, in the absence of a permanent collection (a characteristic which makes it necessary to preserve the property that makes up the collection for the long term), in the absence of aims involving conservation and presentation, the institution cannot join the circle of the museums of France, a name protected by the Heritage Code. The name museum may also be reserved for certain types of museums, certain types of collections. The solutions vary again.

In the implementation of a legal definition, it can be seen that, in many legislations, characteristics such as the permanent nature of collections, the requirement of a public or private legal entity, the notions of conservation and presentation, accessibility, education, etc. are quite frequently mentioned. Variations occur rather in the statement and hierarchy of missions, the nature of resources, whether tangible, intangible, cultural or natural, the formulation of the values which govern the recognition of the museum, the place

given to the social dimension and the meaning given to the service rendered by the museum, hence the difficulty of drawing a common definition which everyone can relate to, and which accommodates the diversity of the museum landscape.



# Some linguistic remarks on the definition of "museum"

**Jean-Louis Chiss**

**Professor, University Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle**

**T**o *define* is to meet to all the obstacles related to the world of meaning covered by all the social sciences and, specifically in the language sciences, through lexicology/lexicography (in a relationship analogous to that of museology/museography), semantics and pragmatics.

Any definition is problematic because it confronts its authors with a *metalanguage*, i.e. a language, the object itself of which may be the language (when defining the word "museum")<sup>1</sup> but also to a lexicographical *metalanguage* with its lexicon ("type", "kind", "manner", "quality", etc.), its abbreviated symbols and its typographical characters: this is the world of traditional dictionaries. Corpus linguistics has brought about major change: it would be necessary to work on the occurrences of "museum" in a large corpus and compare the results with the definitions of museum already identified.

## Gender and specific difference

The metalanguage is also likely to be defined. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of Museum is "*A building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited*". In the 2007 definition, the "museum" is an "institution", therefore a type, a kind of

(1) What I would call the "realistic" approach, as opposed to the "nominalist" approach, is to work on the "word museum which includes all open collections...". This reversal of perspective is important since it is pointed out that certain establishments considered as museums do not have this name and that others which are called "museums" are not considered as such. Whence this well-known expression: what is "museum" the name of?

institution<sup>2</sup>. This refers us to the definitions of “institutions” (hence the addition of a qualification: “permanent”). “Institution” thus seems to be a hypernym or a generic term for a museum, in the same way that “seat” is for “chair”, “armchair” etc. and that “furniture” is for “chair”, “armchair”, “table”, “cupboard”. In the proposed new definition: museums are “democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces”, we see gains and losses. “Space” retains space, that of the building, but adds vagueness and indeterminacy, and loses the “institutional” dimension. Above all, the qualifiers are problematic and in turn need to be defined: “inclusive” and “polyphonic”. If the aim of a definition is simplicity or eventual consensus, if the aim is to avoid misunderstandings, we are faced with a real problem. The lexicographical question of *specific difference* arises: the genre gives a first approach, then we add the specific difference. In the dictionary *Littré*, *man* is defined as “*animal raisonnable*”, as a “reasonable animal”. What is the difference between a museum and a cultural centre or a space for artistic encounters for example? And are the two adjectives central, necessary, defining senses? Let us note that the museum could also be defined as a “means”, an “instrument”, a “function”...

A good lexicological analysis should take into account what the field of derivation tells us and to which genres of discourse these words belong: “museum” has a lot of derivatives in the scholarly field with *museal*, *museality*, *museology*, *museography* and one finds *museification* in ordinary discourse. It should also take into account the synonymic field to “mark out” the meaning of “museum”: heritage, gallery, collection... As well as connoted equivalents: museum, temple or forum?

### **From words to discourses and contexts**

If we go from the world of the word to the world of discourse in which the word “museum” is used, connotations arise, beyond the semic nucleus; the problem with nouns is that it is harder to subject them to syntagmatic analysis than for adjectives or verbs, that is to

(2) Not all institutions are museums, even if all museums are institutions. Otherwise we would have to conclude that institutions have exhausted their activity or modernity potential and that it is the connotation of “aged” or “outdated” from “museum” that is being used! Is there a political will to eliminate “institution” from the new definition?

say to an examination of combinations. Essentially, “museum” in the position of subject, object or adjective remains

“museum”. This means that the frame of reference, the denotation of the word, will prevail especially among specialists even if the uses of “museum” in ordinary discourse are numerous and have variable connotations<sup>3</sup>. Beyond lexicological analysis, current discourse and discourse about museology needs to be analysed in order to see how the meaning of “museum” is constructed.

There are discourses and there are contexts: who is making the definition of “museum”, for what use and which audience? A principal difference exists between the current definition made by the generalist lexicographer and that intended for museologists. If we ask the average Joe, the average Jane, the difference between *river* and *tributary*, they will highlight the semantic trait “size”. The geographer may take this trait into account but, for him, the relevant trait will be the mouth point: the river flows into the sea and the tributary into another stream. The semantic field of seats, mentioned above, is obviously not the same for the ordinary speaker and the specialist antique dealer or “designer”, who will be able to find the relevant features to differentiate a couch, sofa or chaise longue.

### **The question of diachrony: a definition for present, past and future**

When the real or its perception change, when frames of thought are transformed, denominations and definitions can change: for example, the metro which in principle has the “underground” seme; when it is not underground, we add “aerial”, an adjective, and we do not invent another word. When the metro comes out of inner Paris, here we change the word, it becomes the RER (*Réseau Express Régional*, the Regional Express Network) ... Even if the definition cannot contain everything, it must remain open and cannot exclude what currently exists. At the same time, it needs to be prospective

(3) Randomly, I quote “the museum of horrors”, “a museum piece”, “his apartment is a real museum”, “New York is not a city-museum”. Its ordinary uses retain the semes of collection, rarity, precious but with often negative connotations: the city-museum poses a problem, it connotes passivity, even embalming, far from active modernity. See the formal air of the museum guards: there is a play by Thomas Bernhard (Old Masters).

in order to cover museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The new definition refers to “museums”, the previous one refers to “the museum”. Does plurality mean that we renounce the uniqueness of the definition, its “universal” character? Any definition in “comprehension” supposes that one lists the attributes of the object (this is where we have to agree) because we cannot imagine definitions in extension of the type “Museum” describes the Louvre, MOMA or Guggenheim like “red” describes the colour of fire, of blood... There was, however, a list of institutions or establishments falling within the definitional framework of the museum.

But, if we list the objects instead of the properties of the objects, we will end up, at best, with a typology of museums or recourse to “prototype semantics”, that is to say the search for the best example of the category. It is clear that the prototype of bird would be more sparrow than ostrich or penguin. In the representations of museums, what would be the prototype? Doing this would probably be risky and ultimately unproductive because you would eventually have to explain using the statement of properties why the prototype is the Louvre rather than the Hermitage or the McCord Museum on indigenous peoples in Montreal...

Obviously, the question of whether to introduce new *semes* into the definition arises: for example, the *seme* “research”. But too many new *semes* in the Kyoto definition risk killing the definition itself. To which we add a plea of principle for relative neutrality of the definition, even if we know that in this matter, as in others, the question of *values* is involved. This definition contains a generous litany of values: “human dignity, social justice, global equality, planetary wellbeing”. Certainly, all the *semes* constituting the old or new definition are open to discussion. While the explicit disappearance of the “open to the public” *seme* constitutes a problem because it made it possible to differentiate museums from private collections, the consensus on the “non-profit” *seme* could be a difficulty, “profit” denoting money and greed. In my personal opinion as an ordinary citizen, it would be better if a museum not only did not run a loss but was also profitable.

Clearly, the new version of the proposed text does not seem to me to fall into the genre of a lexicographic definition. By its length, by the use of polysemic and ambiguous terms, by the refusal of a form

of minimal neutrality, the text seems to me to belong more to the genre “Manifesto”, like the statement of a humanitarian association or NGO.

The fact remains that beyond the truth, or rather the relevance, of this or that definition, the defining activity that professionals and museum specialists are engaged in allows us to question all the major questions that structure the field. I will briefly add that the question of translation should be kept in mind, and I give a tiny illustration of it with the word “*délectation*”, “delight”, in the 2007 definition. This word means “pleasure that one enjoys, delight”. In the English version, I found “enjoyment”, which is less strange in English than “*délectation*”, “delight”, in French...

WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## First Panel Discussion

### What is the purpose of a museum definition by ICOM?

**Participants:** Daniele Jalla (*ICOM Italy*), Arja van Veldhuizen (*ICOM Netherlands*) Marie-Clarté O'Neill (*CECA*), Philippe Büttner (*ICOM Switzerland*), Markus Walz (*ICOM Germany*), Ech-Cherki Dahmali (*ICOM Morocco, ICOM-Arab*)

**Moderator:** Emilie Girard, *Vice-President, ICOM France.*

**Rapporteur:** Céline Chanas, *President of FEMS.*



**Emilie Girard** – Unfortunately **Luis Raposo**, *President of ICOM Europe*, will not be joining us as he was detained at the last minute on business that may bring insight to our discussions. He was called by the Committee on Culture of the Assembly of the Portuguese Republic to speak following the decision of the secretary of state for culture to loan collections from a national museum, against the formal opinion of the museum's director, to decorate the lobby, bar and corridors of a hotel. I will read what he prepared:

“Why does ICOM need to establish a definition of “museum”? Is it to vie with academics, militants or modern philosophers? To maintain unity within this vast and highly diverse community of professionals who work at museums from dusk till dawn? Or is it to provide a useful and practical reference, perhaps above all for the

institutional and legislative frameworks of each country?

That is what you are here to discuss. However if you believe that ICOM's museum definition should have a professional and normative scope, it will need to meet the following criteria.

It needs to be brief and written in clear terms. We do need, of course, to be aware of not leaving anything out, hence the use of more encompassing yet sometimes naïve wording that seeks *multa paucis*. However, including too much can come at the expense of excluding things. The best definitions are the simplest ones, especially if they are to be applied in a broad social sphere.

It needs to focus on the distinct characteristics of museums. Their traditional functions remain the common ground for what makes a museum. For ICOM to remain relevant and supported by professionals, we must focus on what unites us all, not on what divides us, on what is different in each region, school or political system.

The definition needs to be socially relevant. We don't want it to be exclusive to the museum sector. No, we need to communicate with various levels of organised society, from NGOs, to government agencies and political bodies. Our definition needs to be easily adopted by as wide a range of players as possible.

We may also just want to update the current definition without necessarily considering the outlook and potential future of museums and society. Therefore, in order to prepare an enlightened and representative debate, carried out according to a fully democratic process, it is important for the ideas and proposals of the national and international committees, ICOM's fundamental bodies, to be disseminated in advance, and come up with a method for organising them in a rational manner.

To that end, an initial decision needs to be made. Do we want to use the current definition as a basis, as has always been done in the past, or do we want to adopt a completely new definition with up-to-date phrasing?

Whatever is decided, proposals will need to be organised so that they can be assessed and ultimately voted on stage by stage, according to clear and rational procedures at each level. I hope



we can work together to contribute to this rational approach while preserving the unity of ICOM and its relevance to society at large.

**Emilie Girard** – Now that I have shared Luis Raposo’s message, I suggest that each of you provide a brief answer to three questions. First, who do you think the ICOM museum definition is for? Should it just be a point of reference for the members of the association, as a useful basis for defining who can and cannot become a member, or should it have a broader purpose as a legal and prescriptive standard for the entire profession, as is already the case in some countries?

**Marie-Clarté O’Neill** – The question is essential because the definition will be written very differently depending on whether it is for internal or external use. If it is used externally, a short and precise definition will impact the administrative framework and financial aspects. If it is formulated as an internal tool to develop our own actions, it could easily be developed in line with the new proposal, which is basically a statement of values, and reconcile traditional concepts taught museology of inclusion and wellbeing, with museum vocabulary. In this case it would be more like a Code of Ethics or mission statement.

**Markus Walz** – Initially, the museum definition was used to determine who could and could not become a member of ICOM. That is no longer a question with the new Article 3.2 of the 2007 Statutes, which opens up membership almost limitlessly to all kinds of institutions. The definition therefore needs another purpose. In my opinion though, it cannot be an encyclopaedic listing. In Germany and elsewhere, other museum organisations select their members based on the ICOM definition. It therefore acts as a kind of common basic text used both to allocate funding and for decisions made by private companies about their foundations. If these external and private users do not endorse the new proposed definition, the only current and general criterion will disappear.

**Arja van Veldhuizen** – As I did this morning, I would like to share with you the opinions gathered from our members. Some feel that the public should know what to expect from a museum, and many believe that a definition is especially useful for administrative authorities and funding sources, as funding is of particular

importance to many. However, quite a few also believe that the museum definition is important for ourselves, but with somewhat diverging points of view. For some, the definition is a quality standard for deciding who can become a member of ICOM. For others, particularly those in favour of the new definition, it should first and foremost be a source of inspiration. Finally, some are worried that the new proposal will exclude small institutions or highly specific collections, which they do not want.

**Philippe Büttner** – In my view, developing a definition, whether for the internal or external sphere, carries a risk of creating division. I attended the Kyoto conference and got the impression that we are losing the group in favour of the new definition. Only two people, Juliette Raoul-Duval and Mathew Trinca, Director of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra have attempted to build bridges, and mostly here today are people opposed to the new definition, including myself. How are we going to keep all ICOM members on board? It's a huge problem that worries me.

So, what should we do? At the Kunsthhaus Zürich, where I am a senior executive, our collections mainly consist of Western paintings and sculptures from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. We have started to acquire works from countries in other regions of the world, like South Africa, and I've found that it helps us better understand some of the works in our collections, such as the Dutch marine paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Seeing them through the perspective of the slave trade opens a new door. This is the type of area where we see eye to eye with proponents of the new definition, even though in my view, it is too ideological.

The problem, no doubt, is how to take into account the rapid development of the museum world. The proposed new definition goes much too far, towards a world where museums are optional. However, we need to widen our current definition of “acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating and exhibiting” by specifying “in a way that respects changes in the societies.” We need to stay true to the basis of the current ICOM definition, while moving in the direction of those who feel the need for change, but are going too far.

**Emilie Girard** – We all feel the need for unity.

**Daniele Jalla** – I agree with Markus Walz and want to underline the link between a definition and a Code of Ethics. In a museum, the Code of Ethics is the museology. However, I feel like the proposed definition is much more about museography than museology. Witness the focus on spaces, a physical reality that has no place in a definition, which is inherently abstract. In Italy, we fought for twenty years for the ICOM definition to be recognised by law. So changing it now and introducing “polyphonic spaces” would create a real mess!

**Emilie Girard** – Along the lines of what Philippe Büttner just suggested, does a definition need to evolve with time, to follow societal changes and adopt vocabulary and phrasing that is more “up to date”? The 2007 definition works. Do we really need to start all over again?

**Marie-Clarté O’Neill** – Most importantly, it would be good to do what is written! I have been working in museum education for a long time and I’ve found that people who deal with “the public”, whom we talk about so much, have a terrible position. Most of them are not on permanent contracts, are paid next to nothing and have a hard time getting on certain national committees because they can’t justify sufficient working hours in museums. If we have huge ambitions for “planetary wellbeing” and think that social issues and the public are as important as we say they are, then there’s a real problem with the administrative and financial status of those who work in these supposedly essential roles.

**Markus Walz** – Do the expressions that define museums need to keep up with the times? In my view, a good definition contains basic terms that apply for a very long time. Art historian Bénédicte Savoy notes that the picture galleries of 18<sup>th</sup> century German princely palaces basically had the same characteristics as the current museum definition, a definition that has every chance of being a good one if it has been used for at least two centuries and still being so today. The problem isn’t in the words used to define “planetary wellbeing” but in the fact that it would be hard to find content for this expression fifty years ago. When we set out to define a present-day situation, there is no way of being sure that the chosen definition will still be relevant a decade later. Ten years ago,

no-one knew what a smartphone was. Now if you ask young people to dial a telephone number on an old rotary telephone, they'll have no idea what you're talking about. For museums and telecommunications, you need a definition that applies for a very long time.

**Arja van Veldhuizen** – Most Dutch members feel that the museum definition needs to be updated, but there are highly diverging opinions on the direction that it needs to take. Young people in particular, feel that the current definition is inadequate because it is too descriptive, old-fashioned and outdated. Some feel that it could be revitalised by keeping the current wording and adding the social role of museums and the importance of participatory development. At the same time, many members, in the Netherlands as well, are afraid of change. One of them has observed that even if the current definition cannot be applied in countries in a difficult situation, there is no guarantee that a new definition will solve the problem. Another member feels that the expression “in the service of society” in the current definition automatically excludes the idea of “inclusive and polyphonic spaces”. Another feels that the expression is outdated in that it suggests one-way communication between the museum and its public. He thinks that a new definition should reflect a two-way relationship. There are therefore various opinions in the Netherlands.

**Daniele Jalla** – Does the museum definition need to evolve? The problem is that any particular museum falls under the category of “institution”, but isn't one. After defining museums as “collections open to the public” in 1946, ICOM defined them as “permanent establishments” in 1951. Then, as we all know, the definition of “the museum” was changed to the following in 2007: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” I will comment briefly on the key terms. As Professor Chiss mentioned, the museum is an institution but museums are institutes, establishments. However switching from the singular “institution” to the plural “institutes” is complex. An institution is an objectified behaviour. That is why when Louis-Jean Gachet was carrying out ethnographic research in Savoie in the 1970s, and people asked him, “Where are you from?”

to which he replied, “I’m from the museum,” they would say that they had things for him. That is what the museum institution is: something that exists even if you don’t go to it. It is an institution of modernity. Shifting from “institute” to “institution” was a helpful leap forward, but it implies recognising that the museum is not a place or a collection, but a legal entity, an *universitas rerum et bonorum*.

What can be said of the term “permanent” except that permanency is one of the specific characteristics of the museum institution? It would be worth replacing “open to the public” with “accessible to all” and adding the adjective “sustainable” to “development”. It would also be good to eliminate the current distinction between the “tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment,” which is archaic, and return to a simpler and more all-inclusive terminology of “cultural heritage”.

As far as the functions of the museum are concerned, the French refer to “*transmettre*” (transmit), which is the targeted future, whereas the English refer to “communicate”, which is in the present. We could consider using both words in the definition in a kind of Judgement of Solomon. In addition, French museums “*acquièrent*” (acquire) heritage, which implies an attitude of ownership. In the United Kingdom, the expression “hold in trust” is preferred as it underscores the responsibility of the museum, in a museum perspective where the collection is extended to the cultural heritage outside its confines, including cultural landscapes. It’s something to think about.

The main problem is perhaps the purpose of the museum. Currently we talk about its purpose being “education, study and enjoyment”. “Study” and “enjoyment” uses the person as the subject, whereas “education” can imply that the subject is the museum. Perhaps “education” should therefore be replaced with “knowledge” or “experience” to reverse the relationship. I’m not sure but as soon as we think more about mediation than education, the question needs to be raised. Finally, the definition adopted by the British Museums Association in 1998 uses the word “learning”, but it is placed before “enjoyment”. Why, within the same organisation, do we use words in a different order depending on the language?

**Philippe Büttner** – I completely disagree. The problem is not in the words, but in the attitudes behind the words. I disagree with the terms chosen by our colleagues in the proposed definition, but I can understand some of their concerns. If we focus on the words, we will never repair the divide that has been created within ICOM.

**Ech-Cherki Dahmali, ICOM Morocco** (*via Skype*) – I would like to thank the Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) for their work. We agree that the current definition is not ideal and I congratulate the ICOM executive board for having taken the decision to launch a debate on a new definition.

However, the text of the proposed definition presented by the MDPP has arisen several remarks, which have several origins. The first is ICOM's potential use of the definition as a governance tool for granting or rejecting membership. Furthermore, ICOM wants to address a wide audience of laypersons. The authors of the proposed definition have not drawn a distinction between an internal definition and a definition for society as a whole. In addition, to be explicit and readable, the text needs to be shorter and clearer than the current proposal. The definition needs to remain simple enough for everyone to know it, and if we want to supplement the definition, this needs to be done in the Code of Ethics and ICOM Statutes. Moreover, the beginning of the proposed text contains vague and highly politicised expressions that will be very difficult to translate properly into other languages, such as Arabic. These political terms will also scare off potential future members, who, when submitting their membership request, will think that the organisation is political too, which will be a problem for them. Finally, a museum must remain "permanent", so it is essential to keep this word in every new definition.

**Emilie Girard** – What key terms need to be kept in the museum definition in order for ICOM to remain unified? Do we need to start from scratch or update the existing definition? What role should collections and scientific research have in the new definition? How can national and international committees participate in this work?

**Marie-Clarté O'Neill** – There's reality and there's the words to convey it. We see it in ICOM documents. Depending on which one of the organisation's three official languages they are written

in, the terms used are very different and have different meanings. We therefore need to stick to the key functions of the museum and change certain words to convey them. For instance, we could change the word “study”, which appears in the current definition, to better highlight the function of the museum as place to work on collections and further research. As for the “public”, a significant semantic shift has taken place in recent years and there has been a lot of confusion related to museum education, where the aim, the action and the means to achieve it are confused, so much so that the term “education” is being misused, not to mention the term “mediation”, which is a means and not an end in itself, unlike education. Finally, in the age of new technologies, should we continue to say that a museum “exhibits”, or rather that they “communicate”? Should both words be used together? It is important to determine what the essential functions of a museum are, how to rank their priority and what words will be used to convey them in different languages, without seeking a perfect translation, but an adaptation.

**Philippe Büttner** – Why has the word “education” been taken out of the proposed new definition? It reminds me of the famous Pink Floyd song, “We don’t need no education”. That is what is reflected in this definition, which is fundamentally the admiration of ignorance. We’re not going to frustrate people who have not had the opportunity to learn by giving them an education. We are going to meet them at their level to avoid being rude. This completely different conception of the importance of education is really quite serious.

**Marie-Clarté O’Neill** – And it’s a misunderstanding. The aim of education is not to fill people’s heads with concepts and facts, but to cultivate society, or help it branch out, help elevate it. That is why it is crucial that this term be included, because it is the purpose of museums.

**Arja van Veldhuizen** – I agree with what the member of the ICOM Committee for Education and Cultural Action has just said. There needs to be a distinction between cramming information down people’s throats and education that helps them branch out. Having researched words used by educators in member countries, I have found that the word “education” does indeed have two meanings. There is a big difference between “teach” and “help branch out”. In

the Netherlands too, many people associate the term “education” with a dated idea. The “CECA vocabulary” survey on old and new meanings of education shows that in most countries, educators prefer that the word “education” be understood as “involvement”, meaning two-way communication to help people grow.

**Markus Walz** – Your thoughts underline the difficulty in translating the wonderful German word *Bildung* into French or English. The term reflects a philosophical idea from the 19th century that means to help cultivate. It is not a question of educating in the sense of imposing mass amounts of knowledge, but assisting in the process of self-cultivation.

**Arja van Veldhuizen** – There are two ways to resolve the problem: either choose new words or give the words a new meaning. Many museum educators are in an unstable situation and if the word “education” is removed from the museum definition, their profession could become obsolete. However we cannot, of course, come up with a new definition based on fear.

The term “enjoyment” also elicited reaction in the Netherlands, particularly from memorial institutions. It was suggested that it should be replaced with “involvement”, “enlightenment”, “enrichment”, which could perhaps be combined with another, educational concept to convey the idea of personal fulfilment. Another term that aroused reaction was “stewardship”, not just in an educational context, but out of a keen awareness that the definition will apply for today’s museums and for generations to come.

Some also raised a question that we have not yet addressed here. Will a museum have to meet all the requirements of the new definition, and fit within the full extent of the museum field? Specifically, the head of a postal stamp museum asks whether his institution really has to contribute to planetary wellbeing. Do we tell him that his establishment can be exempted from the requirement because others will do it? Telling small museums that exhibit private collections that others will do it is always a bit dangerous.

To conclude, I’ll mention two more of our members. One said that by seeking the opinions of a lot of people, we’ll always get a lot of



different answers. However we need them, which is both a drawback and an advantage. The other said, “That’s just like ICOM!”

**Emilie Girard** – But do we really want to do things “just like ICOM”? The question is worth asking. Markus Walz, would you like to comment on this abundance of terms?

**Markus Walz** – What I suggest, quite simply, is not just to take into account ICOM’s “core job”, but also look more closely at its fringes, its bordering fields. If ICOM gives a museum definition, it needs to encompass all museums, big and small, as well as specialised museums. From this point of view, half of the terms included in the new definition need to be removed because they are exclusionary and the definition will no longer cover all museums.

I highly doubt that an artist-curator, a completely new function in the world of museum professionals, will be reluctant to collaborate with diverse communities. Their job working together with other people is “polyphonic”.

On the other hand, what should be done about the term “acquiring”? After all, historical buildings have their own collection. They don’t buy anything. In addition, “researching” is one of the terms of the proposed definition, but “documenting” is not. However, many museums document, without having the resources to conduct research. In Germany, there are three thousand museums in this situation. What should we do about them?

**Emilie Girard** – How do we find terms that define a lowest common denominator for museums within ICOM? Daniele Jalla, you may have given this some thought?

**Daniele Jalla** – Let’s clear things up. The new proposal is not a “definition”. Let’s consider it more as a basis for discussing a manifesto. For example, it does not include the concept of “cultural landscape” even though at the general meeting in Milan, we voted for all ICOM documents to include it.

To discuss the definition, I would like us to agree on a method. Let’s look at the proposed definition. There are words that are unacceptable, like “development”. To convey the full idea, it should

be “sustainable development”, which is one of the goals set by the UN, not a political stance.

One option would be to include new elements into the definition. Another is to include comments. The British Museums Association published a very short definition and included examples, for instance on the difference between institute and institution. Another option would be to associate this discussion with the development of a Code of Ethics. What we need, therefore, is a kind of Garden of Eden, a framework definition with ethical elements attached. When we talk about education, it is less of a concept than it is an attitude, or even a vision. The museum is a place to debate meanings from different heritage perspectives.

I also think we should create multilingual groups. The members of ICOM don't communicate in just three languages, it's more like 120. That way we would take on cultural diversity through words that express a local perspective. Now that would be an exciting, inclusive and cooperative endeavour.

I think it is arrogant and even dictatorial to throw us a definition like this where we don't know where it came from or how it came to be. There is no trace of the 270 or so proposed definitions submitted by ICOM national and international committees. ICOM is a Tower of Babel. We should be the first to take the opportunity to experience what diversity means. *Bildung* means much more than “education, formation, inspiration”. There are a lot of notions to be looked at without changing the definition, but instead, exploring what we are putting into it.

**Marie-Clarté O'Neill** – For translations, CECA has been using a fifteen-page best practice tool for the past eight years to help those launching educational and cultural initiatives. This has given us a good idea of the challenges of trilingualism. I wrote most of the French version, and there have already been plenty of problems with the English and Spanish adaptations. We currently have a dozen versions, including Chinese and Armenian. We found that depending on the target language, it was better to use French, English or Spanish as the source language. This shows the importance of the initial concepts being clear, because terminology problems in some languages ensue.

**Guillaume Lecointre, Professor at the Museum national d'histoire naturelle** – There are, of course, small museums that don't do research, and they need to be included. While the reference to "education" is open to interpretation, I think the word "knowledge" could serve as a common basis. This morning, Marie-Clarté O'Neill said that the museum provides evidence along with an informed interpretation of heritage. This statement includes a lot of museums in all their diversity, and the interpretation in question is "informed" thanks to knowledge. The object presented to the public remains unintelligible without the knowledge used to give it meaning. For me, knowledge needs to be in the museum definition. Defining is excluding said Professor Chiss. Personally, I would like ideological deviations and manipulations, such as those of nativists from Kentucky or California, to be excluded, as they are an offense to museums like the one in which we are right now. Knowledge can act as a shield against manipulation in a museum, and democracy can only exist if it stands on a common foundation of knowledge. I felt that the term "knowledge" appeared little in the proposals from various committees. However, although a museum does not have to conduct research, it mobilises a body of knowledge, and even without having a clear-cut educational role, holds a discourse of knowledge about the objects.

**Burçak Madran, ICMAH** – I would like to reiterate the difficulties with translation. Colleagues working in different Asian languages in Kyoto made this clear. Even in Turkey, we're having problems with some of the formulations of the English or French definition. In Turkish, "critical dialogue" has a completely negative connotation. We therefore have to come up with wording that now deviates from the initial definition of museum.

**Helen Bieri Thomson, ICOM Switzerland** – The proposed new definition looks to replace "exhibit" with "communicate". In an era where everyone communicates, that would mean losing all credibility, because our work is based on evidence and knowledge. And if there is one thing that museums still do, and not necessarily everyone else, it is exhibitions. So let's at least keep the term "exhibit".

**Sergio Servellón, ICOM Belgium** – We have touched very little on the issue of knowing how to talk to colleagues who support

another definitions and building bridges between each other. It's an internal policy and methodology issue. There is a paradigm shift between the proponents of critical heritage studies and traditional museology. Without real dialogue at an academic level, debate has shifted to the practical level, for example in the choice of a museum definition. It is a lousy battlefield that relegates opposition to a strictly symbolic level.

The problem is that a vast theoretical issue has been handled by an organisation with weak governance and where decisions are traditionally made behind the scenes. Large institutions do not get involved. Colleagues in favour of a critical direction attempted a kind of symbolic *coup d'état*, but failed. If the forces remain, and we stick to the same governance, it will be very difficult to build bridges. To do this, two things are needed in my view. The first is to ensure transparency, which means strengthening the General Assembly with national and international committees getting involved, and limiting the powers of the administrative and global bodies. Secondly, academic debate needs to happen to identify common ground between these two groups.

**Emilie Girard** – How can a shared vision be developed? We'll get back to this question in the next roundtable. I'll now let Céline Chanas report on our work.

**Céline Chanas** – I'll try to summarise the opinions expressed on three main issues. First, what is the purpose of a museum definition for and by ICOM? After Luis Raposo's introduction, there was consensus among the participants of the priority of a simple and concise definition that focuses on the distinct characteristics of museums, that is unifying and socially relevant. Next, who is the definition intended for? Two mutually-exclusive solutions that control the direction of the definition were identified: a definition for internal use, and another external definition that could be useful in countries that do not have a regulatory framework. However, some countries have integrated this definition into national law and changing it would cause major problems. Marie-Clarté O'Neill underlined that this is a key issue that needs to be resolved before continuing the process. Opinions shared by Arja van Veldhuizen from members gave the same impression that the definition will address a wide range of people and that it should cover the public,

politicians, those who provide funding and all partners from the museum sphere, businesses, exhibit designers and communicators.

The second question was more complex. It basically asked if the definition should be amended or completely changed. Daniele Jalla stressed the need to start fresh from a clear understanding of the objectives and issues. Our goal is to unify, achieve a consensus and cohesion, but we must not lose sight of reason and the operational nature of a definition. As for the diachronic nature of the definition, covering the past while looking to the future, the general opinion was that other types of texts, a Code of Ethics or even manifesto could be chosen as supporting documents. The issue of terminology was also addressed with a certain distrust of cultural “newspeak”. It would be better to avoid using language that quickly becomes outdated in such a definition. However, Marie-Clarté O’Neill noted that museology now uses vocabulary that the younger generation has completely adopted.

Regarding the merits of a complete overhaul of the definition, it was said that the current definition is not that old and that full conclusions have not yet been drawn from it in practice, particularly as far as the public is concerned or the consideration of the concept of cultural landscape.

What should be kept from the current definition in order to properly describe the institution? Daniele Jalla proposed four important elements. First the museum identity – whether as an “institution” or “institute” - is permanent and non-profit. As for the object of the museum, it is cultural heritage in the broadest sense. The other elements that need to be covered are the function and ultimate purposes of museums.

Finally, several key words emerged from the discussion that would be interesting to pursue, particularly regarding research, study and documentation. Education and knowledge also emerged as pillars of the museum institution.

Finally, linguistic issues and translation require special attention.

WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## Results of the ICOFOM survey

**Marion Bertin,  
Secretary of the ICOM International  
Committee for Museology – ICOFOM**

**T**he ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) has been actively involved for some time in reflection on the process for adopting a new museum definition. After numerous debates following the presentation of the proposed definition at the Extraordinary General Conference in Kyoto in September 2019, and given the inability to seek input from our members before the vote, ICOFOM launched a survey on the subject in October 2019. I would like to thank Olivia Guiragossian, who has been a great help in creating the questionnaire submitted to members and analysing the results that I will be presenting to you, which will soon be published in more detail.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and was available from last October to December in the three official languages of ICOM. A set of open questions focused on the role of the current definition in professional practices and national legislation, on the impact of the proposed definition on professional practices and the social environment, on whether or not the proposed definition reflects the professional identity, and the involvement of our members in the process of developing a new museum definition. We also asked the survey respondents to indicate the terms that they would like to be kept in a revised version of the definition, and those they would like removed or changed.

We received 194 responses and analysed 186 questionnaires, excluding those that were not filled out or incomplete, in other words those which only replied to a single question. The number of people who responded (around 15% of ICOFOM members) and the diversity of answers, which were sometimes very long but sometimes concise, show that not everyone feels equally concerned by the debate.

The majority of responses we received came from European countries, Latin America and North America. A large number of responses came from Italy (on top), France, Belgium, Brazil and Canada. 119 were completed in English, 36 in French, and 19 in Spanish. The question on the way in which the definition proposed in Kyoto can reflect our professional identity shows that the museum community is divided. 38.7 % identified with the definition and 56.5% did not.

In the responses to the questionnaire written in Spanish, the majority agreed that all the terms should be kept, with enthusiasm for “safeguard”, “memories”, “inclusive”, “for society”, “research”, and “preserve”. It was felt that “planetary wellbeing” should be changed, together with “futures” “artefacts” and “specimens”.

For the responses to the questionnaire in French, the terms to be kept focused on the museum’s functions, including “collect”, “preserve”, “research”, “interpret”, “exhibit”, as well as “heritage”, “not for profit” and “for society”. However, it was felt that “polyphonic”, “planetary wellbeing”, “global equality”, “social justice” and “transparent” need to be removed. Numerous terms, such as “the pasts”, “the futures”, “human dignity”, “social justice” and “global equality” also generated debate and are some of the terms that respondents would like to see amended.

In the responses to the questionnaire in English, the terms to be kept related to the museum’s functions, including “communities”, “not for profit”, “heritage”, “for society”, “memories”, “the pasts”, “inclusive”, and “safeguard”. However, it was felt that “democratising”, “polyphonic”, “planetary wellbeing”, and “global equality” need to be removed. Some members who responded would also like the expressions “human dignity”, “social justice” and “global equality” to be amended.

These interesting variations between languages should be studied in greater detail. The findings should be weighed to take into account the fact that some members responded to the questionnaire in a second language.

The terms that garnered relative consensus come from the current ICOM museum definition, adopted in 2007. Numerous terms, including the expressions “human dignity, social justice, global



equality and planetary wellbeing”, placed at the end of the proposed new definition and which rather represent objectives to be achieved by the institution, are particularly controversial, mainly due to their wording. The fact that many of the responses indicated that they should be amended shows support for the ideas expressed rather than outright rejection.

Subsequently, last December, at the request of several ICOM committees, we opened the survey up to national and international committees, and alliances. We transferred the outline of our questionnaires to all the presidents or secretaries of their executive boards and suggested they carry out a similar study with their members. The initiative was not mandatory and committees were free to adapt the questionnaire to their own prerogatives and specificities, which some did. We received responses from several national and international committees, including ICME, GLASS, ICOM Morocco, ICOM Greece, ICOM Mongolia, ICOM Ireland, ICOM Italy, NATHIST, ICOM UK, CAMOC, ICOM Luxembourg, ICOM Latvia, ICOM Netherlands, and ICOM Germany. Once again the responses came mainly from Europe and North America and some from Africa and Asia.

We also received responses from individual members who used the questionnaire sent in the email attachment, and some more detailed responses sent by individual members and national and international committees. These responses sometimes came in the form of long letters describing a vision of what a museum could be and the definition that ICOM could adopt, following discussions within the executive boards of ICOM Greece, ICOM Latvia, ICOM Luxembourg, ICOM Germany and ICOM Netherlands.

Some of them feel that the proposed definition presented in Kyoto has all the trademarks of a politically-oriented ideological manifesto and is not a real clear, concise and precise definition. The terms employed, and in particular “democratising space”, “planetary wellbeing”, “conflicts and challenges of the present”, “equal access to heritage”, “human dignity” and “social justice”, are considered problematic because they are subjective. Underlying translation problems were also pointed out, particularly for writing legislation. This was especially the case for the word “polyphonic”. Insistent requests were made to simplify the terms and form of the

definition. In the letters, the committees also request that greater attention be placed on the Code of Ethics and the ethics committee, which they feel was left out of the process of developing the proposed new definition.

We are continuing to analyse the responses we received and the findings will soon be published on the ICOFOM website.

## Second Panel Discussion

### How to develop a shared vision: What unites us?

**Participants:** Alberto Garlandini, *Vice-President of ICOM International*; Burçak Madran (*ICMAH*); Chedlia Annabi (*ICOM Tunisia*); Koré Escobar Zamora (*ICOM Spain*); Alexandre Chevalier (*ICOM Belgium*); Elke Kellner (*ICOM Austria*)

**Moderator and rapporteur:** Emilie Girard, Vice-President, ICOM France.



**Alberto Garlandini, vice-President of ICOM International (via video)** – The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced me to stay in Milan but has not deterred me from speaking to you to introduce this very important roundtable. The theme that has been chosen is of course related to the debate surrounding the museum definition, but the issue is much broader. This is because a professional association and community of any kind have no future if they are unable to promote their history, their memory and shared ethical values. Its members need to be able to dialogue, share ideas and experiences, and develop new projects and objectives accepted by everyone. The world is changing at an accelerated rate, along with museums and their work. I can say from experience that the members of ICOM have a common vision, values and references. I have had the chance to work on several continents and meet colleagues from around the world in highly diverse countries with

different social, political, cultural, religious, administrative and economic contexts. I have been happy to see that while museum professionals may speak different dialects, they share the *lingua franca* of museology in all its variants and approaches, that they experience the same problems, share the same hopes and values, and share a sense of belonging to the same professional community.

This shared vision of the specific functions of museums, and the specific roles, responsibilities and skills of those who work in them is ICOM's greatest asset and what unites it and has made it a professional community. This common denominator needs to be promoted and strengthened, and the debate surrounding the definition of museum needs to help unite professionals so that they can face the challenges of our times.

The two documents that best express the collective identity, shared vision and unity of ICOM are its Statutes and the Code of Ethics for museums. The Statutes define the mission, objectives and rules governing the how ICOM is run. The Code of Ethics expresses an international vision for managing museums and heritage according to specific ethical principles and practices. ICOM members are, of course, required to adhere to the Code of Ethics and all museum professionals across the world are held to it. However, because it has become a legal standard in a growing number of countries since the adoption of the UNESCO 2015 Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society, this code is also now a shared international reference.

It is no coincidence that the two documents that form the identity of the organisation contain both a definition of museum and a definition of what museum professionals are. In theory, because these definitions are interdependent, both should have been updated at the same time. However, it has been done separately. The Statutes were revised in 2017. The adoption of a new museum definition has been postponed until 2022 and there are currently no plans to revise the Code of Ethics.

In this context, several questions will be put before the participants of the roundtable: How do we ensure that ICOM's shared vision is sustained during the difficult yet necessary process of updating the documents that form the basis of its identity? How can we ensure

that the committees participate in the revision process? How can we update these documents without calling into question our history and shared values? Should ICOM revise its Code of Ethics and if so, how should we go about doing it? Will it be beneficial to amend the museum definition without revising the Code of Ethics at the same time? What other documents should supplement the Statutes and Code of Ethics to strengthen the shared identity of ICOM members? Should we create regional documents that detail the shared vision while taking into account local diversities?

**Emilie Girard, Vice-President, ICOM France** – In short, can the museum definition be amended without amending the Code of Ethics, which in some ways exegetes it? Can we update the definition while preserving unity within ICOM? Are there any documents missing that could be added to the founding documents?

**Chedlia Annabi, ICOM Tunisia** (*via Skype*) – I looked at things through a reverse approach. How do we develop a shared vision for amending the definition while following the Code of Ethics? What has been done was done quite hastily. First of all, why was the decision made to change the definition? “Museology and epistemological” problems have been evoked but there is no record of them in any documents and the ICOM’s core members did not report any real urgent reasons for changing it. There has been no preliminary study justifying this decision, the argument put forward in the articles published by the members of the MDPP reflect only their personal opinions and cannot be considered as decisive arguments for a revision of the definition of the museum. Our goal is not to do things quickly. But it is to strengthen the leadership and aura of ICOM and for the definition to be accepted by a significant majority of the members.

The “methodology” applied in the consultation of members was not established in a democratic manner. Unfortunately, it was said after Kyoto that consultations were in fact limited to members of the national and international committee boards. Finally, the application of the criteria for the final selection of the definition was in fact limited to the evaluation and assessment of one group and not a broad consultation.

The development of a common vision must consider several parameters. Firstly, the general vision and missions of ICOM, its Statutes

and Code of Ethics must be respected. However, the Code of Ethics sets out and details the ethics and principles that form the essence of the museum and its objectives, including respect for human rights, communities and minorities. Before we start re-writing the definition, let's give the Code of Ethics a good read, because all these notions are right there! Is the goal of the new proposed definition, which was not adopted, to expand on principles that are stated perfectly in the Code of Ethics at the risk of creating confusion? Furthermore, ICOM adheres to all UNESCO conventions related to cultural and natural heritage, detailed in Article 7.2 of the Code of Ethics, and which are based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I therefore have to ask, is there not confusion in some discussions on the museum definition, between vision, objectives and missions? The notion of institution is also detailed in the Code of Ethics.

Therefore, if a new approach and new definition are really necessary, several requirements need to be met. The first is to use detailed arguments to explain the types of concrete problems that the current museum definition raise and their impact on museographical work, along with the shortcomings and deficiencies that make revision necessary. This process needs to involve men and women in the field rather than theoreticians.

The second requirement is to establish a democratic bottom-up and widely disseminated inquiry process, in constant consultation with members, with the opportunity for the MDPP to add commentary, all published on a digital platform accessible to all members, until the end of the process.

The third requirement is to avoid unilateral or limited decisions to a restricted group. The MDPP manages the discussions, refines members' interventions and answers their questions.

In conclusion, we can certainly envisage rethinking the current definition, improving it in order to integrate new paradigms imposed by museographic work. Contrary to what some seem to think, the idea is not to "create", but to carry out deep and serious discussion in a calm climate, and to weigh the pros and cons, since the definition will put ICOM on the line as the global reference on museums and it must live up to its reputation and confirm its leadership role.

Was putting so much energy into re-writing a definition for six years a real priority given the various problems which museums are facing, some of which even threaten their existence? What is our capacity to project ourselves and define today what the museum will be like in more than 70 years? Nor is it a question of issuing a new definition without preparing and foreseeing the ethical, social, moral, legal and political repercussions of this decision on the organization, on the member countries and on our institutional partners.

Above all, we have to be aware of the responsibility of such an important decision that will have a vital impact on the organization. 40,000 members are watching us and will judge the work accomplished, which is why each step must be analysed at length, reflected upon and, preferably, consensual.

**Elke Kellner, ICOM Austria** (*via Skype*) – The issue that has brought us together has already provoked reactions from ICOM Austria, as you probably know. Our former president wrote to the ICOM Executive Board to express our concerns and also did so in Kyoto. Fortunately, other national and international committees did the same and thanks to ICOM France's initiative, we were able to postpone the decision. We would like to thank Juliette Raoul-Duval for giving us the opportunity to continue the discussion here.

ICOM Austria is in favour of a new museum definition including values such as the importance of the role of museums in society, inclusion, environmental protection and social engagement. A large majority of ICOM members probably share this perspective. Other key elements, such as the fact that museums are permanent institutions, and notions such as tangible and intangible heritage, collections, education and research must also be included. For us, any new definition must affirm that museums are different from other institutions and organisations. That is one of ICOM's key functions as an international organisation for all museums and it is important that a large majority of members agree on the subject.

Since the postponement of the vote in Kyoto, President Suay Aksoi and the ICOM Executive Board have remained silent. In January, there was a message from the president on the website, about a new chance to move forward, but left a number of questions unanswered, giving eight somewhat vague ethical criteria. In

fact, we were not even told the names of the new members of the Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP). We will certainly make new recommendations but transparency is sometimes lacking.

I therefore really appreciate ICOM France's initiative to prepare upcoming discussions at the June meeting. I believe that we will be able to present a museum definition that will carry ICOM into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During the discussions that took place at the general conference, many completely reasonable proposals were made and discussed in a climate of mutual respect, which makes us hopeful for the future. Many members said that they were very concerned with the proposed new definition. Others considered that the wording really needed to be amended. Many also thought that the proposal significantly jeopardised government funding for museums and a large majority asked for time to discuss it. This hasty proposal of a new definition almost led ICOM to the brink of collapse. In my view, pushing to organise a confrontation rather than promote mutual understanding, all to put the definition to vote without leaving enough time for discussion, is irresponsible governance. The members of ICOM and its national and international committees now have another opportunity to find a solution together.

We need to create a new mission statement for ICOM in an open manner and perhaps begin a revision of the Code of Ethics. However, it will require in-depth discussion and careful wording. Once again, we certainly all support values such as democracy, inclusion, environmental protection and social engagement, and they will of course be included in a new definition. However, as an international organisation of museums, ICOM must be able to clearly define what a museum is and how it differs from other institutions. It must take on this task, otherwise it will lose its function as a defining body in the museum world.

To conclude, I would like to insist on the fact that there is no "them" and "us". In particular, we need to firmly shut down any idea of a confrontation between Europe and other countries. A museum definition must be a unifying force for institutions and their professionals. So let's write it together.



**Koré Escobar Zamora, ICOM Spain** – On behalf of ICOM Spain, I'll present a few thoughts based on Alberto Garlandini's introduction, which raises fundamental issues about our mission. He reminded us that ICOM sets professional and ethical standards for museum activities, issues recommendations in this regard, and encourages training, knowledge and public awareness.

However, where are we now in the implementation of these missions? In a constantly changing, pluralistic and ever smaller world, we must now, more than ever, take into account the basic principles, not that they are fixed, but because they are the basis of a consensus forged by recognition of these "universal" ideas that unify and define us, and are the roots of our organisation.

These ideas are in reality in the successive chapter headings of the ICOM Code of Ethics. Museums preserve, interpret and promote the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity; museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development; museums hold primary evidence for establishing and furthering knowledge; museums provide opportunities for the appreciation, understanding and management of the natural and cultural heritage; museums hold resources that provide opportunities for other public services and benefits; museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve.

Furthermore, the code presents "a minimum standard for museums", which calls less for modification than development, a revision that would not cross the red lines established when the organisation was founded. For us, debate, analysis and dialogue are necessary to continue fulfilling our mission in today's society. However the debate cannot be based on passing intellectual currents or political correctness. It must be based on the minimum universal foundation that makes the museum what it is and what distinguishes it from other institutions according to ICOM's own terms, that is, its permanence, the conservation of collections of cultural value exhibited to fulfil certain functions, which distinguish them from other institutions also dedicated to cultural heritage.

If we really feel that we are no longer able to defend these basic principles, if a majority of us think that it no longer makes sense

to talk about museums, that it is better to dilute or obscure the term by associating it with all kinds of other enterprises with a social or civic purpose, perhaps we should sincerely ask ourselves questions and amend our founding documents, our mission and our definition. In that case, we would no doubt no longer be ICOM, but something else. In the Spanish committee's view, it would be total change. We are in favour of discussion but hold to the fundamental principles that define the museum as a specific institution.

**Burçak Madran, ICMAH** – To start, I have to wonder why none of the members of the new MDPP2 committee are present today.

**Juliette Raoul-Duval** – They were all invited.

**Burçak Madran** – I know that you invited everyone and frankly, in their place I would have been really curious to see what this meeting is all about! Also, why are there no members of the national or international committees which, in Kyoto, were in favour of the new museum definition? The questions raised by Alberto Garlandini are a very good starting point, but if we cannot dialogue with members of different opinions, we'll never come to anything. I could easily discuss my stance and that of ICMAH, but I already know that we agree among ourselves, whereas in Kyoto, other groups had differing opinions, which allowed for more enriching discussion.

That being the case, how should we update our documents and what work method should be adopted? That's what we are trying to do here. For three years, no-one sent any documents to follow the working process and then suddenly a new definition was proposed. The reaction was that we could not vote under such conditions, that it was undemocratic and that we weren't informed. The committees began to launch surveys and ask their members questions...you would think that the proposal of definition was a setup to get a reaction! We began defining a method to enable members to express their opinions so that a decision could be made together. There's nothing more to be done. Once the national and international committees have finished conducting their surveys and have communicated their reports to everyone, not just ICOM's central authorities, the MDPP will become a simple secretariat that gathers this information and extrapolates the opinion of our members. It

will be a real democratic exercise. The majority will win and those with another perspective will wait their turn. We have done what needs to be done so let's wait to reap the benefits of it.

**Alexandre Chevallier, ICOM Belgium** – In Belgium, we felt that it was quite extraordinary that for two years, there were internet surveys, workshops and meetings without knowing what the responses were and on what authority they were given since everything was thrown into a hat and a result magically emerged in late July 2019. It is unacceptable that professionals had no proper method for developing a discussion process. To reinstate collective discussion, probably the first thing that needs to be done is to restore transparency so as to know who is doing what and how. I found out today that Juliette Raoul-Duval, Marie-Clarté O'Neill and Luc Eekhout are members of the MDPP2, but who else is? Why so much secrecy? What methodology are they going to recommend? First, the current definition needs to be analysed. Does it need to be changed? Perhaps the answer is no or that it just needs a few additions. Not to do so creates suspicions and lets people think that there are dirty secrets or an attempted coup. It may well not be the case, but without more transparency, it leaves a shadow of doubt. The first step is to communicate from now on. Unfortunately, things seem to be off to a poor start for MDPP2, the secretariat and the presidency.

The second question is, what needs to be updated? The Code of Ethics as well? We have a basis, the definition of museum as the place where we work. It needs to be given a purpose and a work method needs to be defined. On that note, the Code of Ethics is already more advanced than the definition itself and, in some way, the definition is catching up with the Code of Ethics when it comes to the way people work at museums. It's true that the method is changing, but, the ICOFOM survey shows that the respondents uphold and approve the fundamental pillars. However, perhaps the wording needs to evolve to reflect changes in use, but not the primary function of what makes a museum. So let's start by asking ourselves about the definition, and then the Code of Ethics. Additions and precisions are certainly needed for certain categories, such as activist museums. How far should professionals be able to go without overstepping their neutrality or objectivity, given that most are tempted to define their own subjectivity in this way?

Alberto Garlandini asks if new documents should be added, such as a mission statement, or a new vision. This mission is defined in Article 2 of the Statutes. Perhaps it could be supplemented. The vision is defined in Article 3. Should documents with a regional scope be added to create distinctive regional identities? I would tend to say “no”, in order to focus on what unites us. Nevertheless, there is already a separate code for natural history museums, whose professionals are subject to specific international conventions that do not apply to art or ethnographic museums. However for the past fifteen years or so, the latter have been confronted with requests for restitution or co-management by the communities from whom the objects which they conserve originated. Therefore, perhaps a specific professional Code of Ethics should be defined for ethnographic museums subject to these requests, who seem to be at the origin of the proposed new definition.

**Daniele Jalla** – ICOM, is an organisation with a presidential structure and is not truly democratic, and has not been for a long time. The alarming division seen in Kyoto suggested that this organisational structure had come to an end.

**Juliette Raoul-Duval** – That is why we’re here today.

**Daniele Jalla** – Exactly... to use national committees to exert a counterweight, which can be fully incorporated into ICOM’s rules. In 1974, ICOM, changed from a club into an international organisation. This shift requires another way of running the organisation, where communication is not necessarily carried out through a top-down approach. Nothing stands in the way of meetings like today and we need to take advantage of this opportunity in order to create a stable informal network capable of communicating information horizontally, acting as a counterweight in an objectively dictatorial organisation.

**Alberto Garlandini (via Skype)** – Times are tough for museums. I’m not alluding to the pandemic, but to the difficulties they are facing around the world and the changes they’re having to deal with. In this context, the aim of our discussions needs to be to decide what makes museums and museum professionals relevant in today’s world, and we can be relevant if we are able to remain united to face these challenges head on. Therefore, while debating

the museum definition and Code of Ethics, we need to leave our ideological differences aside to focus on what unites us and what is specific to museums, rather than what divides them. Mutual understanding is the only way of achieving effective outcomes. To define our common denominator, we need to be open to the opinions of others, which so far, has not been the case. It will help us with the museum definition and with ethical and management aspects.

**Arja van Veldhuizen** – The proposed new definition has been well received by Dutch museum professionals, as well as roundly criticised. I think that the majority of our national committee's seventy members who were in Kyoto were in favour of the proposed definition, but it is difficult to know for sure because many of them did not express their opinion. I admire the energy of our colleagues who support the proposed new definition. They are mainly the new generation, and whether we agree or disagree with them on the substance, we need their energy and that needs to find its way into this discussion, but I'm not sure how.

**Regine Schulz, *Chairperson of the ICOM Advisory Council*** – In my view, the problem wasn't the proposed new definition, which contained interesting ideas, but the fact that the text was brought to the executive board and presented to the Extraordinary General Assembly without the possibility of making amendments. That is what caused so much frustration and anger on both sides. Many of us were dumbstruck and choked by the process. Opposing opinions were expressed on the text. Many were for and others were against it. Fine! It needed to be discussed within the national and international committees but that was not possible. The ICOM Executive Board made the mistake of not realising that no room was left for amendments. In the end, what started as a lively discussion, which is great, finished in a highly aggressive debate, which is unfortunate.

This approach is not constructive. We now need to consider things through another perspective than what has been done over the past two decades, but we also have to take into account the potential impacts of a definition being revised in this way. Some of our Iranian colleagues were very shocked, and told me, "If this is the new museum definition adopted by ICOM, we will leave the organisation." We need to think about who we are and what the museum

definition means for our identity. Of course we need to keep up with the times and not stay stuck in the past, but we also have to keep in mind that the national committees represent countries that are extremely diverse in all respects. In this context, just how far can we push the idea of a proposed political definition? I'm happy that the decision was made to postpone the vote. We have until 2021 to reach a definition that suits the majority of members, and if it isn't enough time, we'll postpone it again. That's what's important. It is urgent that all the members and their highly diverging opinions be heard.

We should not focus our reflections only on ourselves but favour an approach that builds us into a real community that protects our colleagues in Yemen or Sudan, for instance, who are not in as comfortable a situation as we are in France or Germany, together with those who cannot travel due to a lack of funding because their museums are considered outdated and of no interest. We need to show the world that our museums are relevant, not outdated. The discussion that has begun can be useful to this collective effort and help us move forward, provided that it is loyal and we accept that other ideas besides our own can be expressed.

**Alexandre Chevalier** – I ask that the members of MDPP2 who are present to make public the methodology that will be used. Currently the national committees are asked to submit their proposals and comments before August, after which a small committee will have the same power as a national committee of 4,000 members? I don't think I'm the only one who thinks that there is a serious problem in that. The first step is to let people know who sits on the MDPP2 committee, and the method, and only then will be able to begin work.

**François Mairesse** – When Jette Sandahl, Chair of the MDPP, made her first speech in 2016, the methodology seemed clear and precise. Then everything played out in a few minutes over the last few weeks, after the proposed definition appeared almost out of thin air. Also, it's not just because a methodology is defined that it will always work. The presentations made this morning showed the fundamental difference between a definition and a discussion on values or a mission. The BBC's mission is defined as follows: "To act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain". It doesn't even

mention that it's an audio-visual enterprise! They're two things that are completely unrelated. Although some principles are old, they still stand strong and are important references that are not in absolute need of change. It's not because you want to redefine the concept of a meal that you have to redefine what a table is. We must not muddle the debate. For the past three, if not six years, we have been conflating two entirely different discussions. The result is the problems we are now experiencing.

**Emilie Girard** – I would like to thank all our speakers present or who participated in the discussion via technical means.





# Conclusions




**by Juliette Raoul-Duval**

WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## The ICOM Museum Definition

### The First “Committees’ day” Paris, 10 March 2020

rganized at the initiative of ICOM France, with the active collaboration of ICOM Germany, ICOFOM and ICOM Europe, France hosted this first “committee meeting”. The working day on March, 10<sup>th</sup> 2020 was intended to provide an update on the committee debates that have taken place since the presentation of a proposal for a “new definition of museums” in Kyoto last September.

Addressed to all elected Presidents of ICOM committees, all elected members of the boards, to the President of ICOM international and the appointed members of MDPP2, this meeting was intended to be the beginning of cooperation among all, in a spirit of exchange and unity.

The opening speech invited the members present from the outset to take part in looking for a common sense concerning the ICOM museum definition and the vision of the museums but doing it in an uncontroversial debate on the future vision of ICOM. This proposal was respected throughout the day.

41 national and international committees and regional alliances of ICOM participated in this meeting organised at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. 19 committees were present on place and 22, in particular because of the coronavirus, have submitted a written or video presentation or joined the meeting by Skype.

Seventy members representing the various committees participated in the discussions. The Executive Board of ICOM was represented by Regine Schulz, President of the Advisory Council and Alberto Garlandini, Vice-President.

The work was carried out in three stages:

- I - presentation by the committees of the state of the post-Kyoto debates in their area of action (national, regional, international),
- II - “definition of the definition”: legal and lexicographical approach by two guest researchers,

III - two round tables on cross-cutting issues.

The participants were welcomed by the President of the National Museum of Natural History. The objectives of the day were presented by Juliette Raoul-Duval, President of ICOM France. François Mairesse, Professor of Museology at Paris-Sorbonne, gave the inaugural lecture.

## **Report**

### **I – Presentation of the Committees**

39 Committees presented a paper. Additionally, two committees participated orally at the round tables in the afternoon, bringing the number of committees that spoke to 41.

31 national and international committees stated that they had continued to reflect on the definition.

7 national committees stated that they had held a meeting of their board on this subject; 30 committees had organised discussions, forums, debates with their members and/or have sent surveys or questionnaires to them after Kyoto.

### **II – Scientific Presentations**

Legal approach by Marie Cornu: “Thinking of the museum as a legal category, what are the stakes for the museum definition?”

A lexical approach by Jean Louis Schiss: “Some linguistic remarks on the museum definition”.

### **III – Round Tables**

“Why a definition of museums by ICOM?”

“What unites us?”

All the documents submitted are available on the ICOM France website. The round table discussions and conclusions will be posted

online as soon as they are decrypted. A synthesis of the main lessons learned will be prepared in the near future as a complementary document (see below, “preparation of a resolution”).

## Conclusions

Throughout the day, the participants made proposals concerning both the content and as well the working modalities for the development of a “new definition and vision of museums”. In doing so, the participants explicitly expressed their attachment to the unity of ICOM.

These proposals were synthesized and presented as the conclusion of the day. They could be completed during the full decryption of the debates. Unanimously, the participants expressed the wish that the following recommendations be formally addressed to the President and the Advisory Council (Paris, June 2020; resolution) and that the Advisory Council refer the matter to the MDPP2.

**1. Participation of elected members:** The number of participants at the meeting of March 10 and their diversity in terms of geographical distribution and committees is significant. Their mobilisation reflects the aspiration of the elected members of ICOM to be fully involved in the redefinition process. They have recalled that, as elected officials, they are the first level representatives of the members of ICOM and that the work on the definition cannot move forward without them. They recalled that the President of ICOM had, moreover, had invited all committees to present their proposals for the new definition, but they wish that these proposals are really taken into account. Several committees wish to develop their own proposal of a museum definition or have already done so in recent months. For example, ICOM Italy and ICOM South-Eastern Europe carried out this work as early as spring 2019. But the work carried out has not circulated within the ICOM bodies and does not appear to have been taken into account by the MDPP. It is essential that the work carried out in national and international committees is really taken into consideration. It is recommended that each committee producing a proposal for a new definition of the museum should

send it to the President of ICOM and to the Executive Board, thus nourishing reflection at the highest level and enriching that of the MDPP2. It is recommended that this option will be considered by the Extraordinary General Assembly in June 2019.

**2. Consultation of members and impact on the work schedule:** the modalities and timetable for working on the redefinition of the museum must be compatible with the consultation of all the members of ICOM, through their national and/or international committees and/or alliances. The first “Committees’ day” of March 10 showed the extent to which national and international committees are committed to discussing and analysing the MDPP proposal. Nine months after Kyoto, many committees are able to present results and to display a well-founded and reasoned opinion, others still need time. It is necessary to allow a long enough timeframe for the development of this work. The search for a shared vision and consensus is a priority. Definitional proposals from the committees must therefore be considered along with the new proposal that will come out of the MDPP2.

**3. Distinction between mission statement and definition:** A large number of speakers stressed the necessary distinction between what falls within a definition, in the linguistic sense of the term, and what falls within a “mission statement” or a “vision” for a museum or for ICOM. These principles are not clearly enough specified in the current reflection, and could be further specified in the next General Assembly.

**4. Legal evaluation:** Because of its role for national statutes and laws, the ICOM museum definition has a strong legal impact. A legal analysis of any new proposal for the definition is requested in the reflection process.

**5. Choice of words—terminology:** Any definition must be understandable and usable by all, in a language that is as accurate and neutral as possible. The use of lexicographical expertise is valuable to avoid any inappropriate political interpretation. In particular, members expressed the wish that the professional character of the organisation be unambiguously affirmed.

**6. Translation:** Translation is a major tool for our unity. A poorly translated text is a source of misunderstandings. Translation is not just a technical aspect, it is the key to respecting our cultural

diversity. An effort must be made to produce linguistically validated documents. The possibility of translating certain terms into languages other than those of ICOM should be evaluated.

**7. Code of Ethics:** The Code of Ethics occupies a decisive place in the common culture of ICOM members and in the influence of the organisation throughout the world. The participating members have repeatedly expressed their commitment to simultaneous work on the museum definition and the Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics must be continuously adapted to the reality of the museums, whose diversity is increasing.

The participants appreciated the message from the President of ICOM, the presence of its Director General and the President of the Advisory Council. A recommendation will be made to the Advisory Council and the Executive Board of ICOM, to formally request the MDPP2 and its President—invited but prevented from participating—reading the documents, debates and conclusions of the “Committees’ day” on 10 March 2020.

The participants expressed the wish to hold a future “Committees’ day”.

A request for SAREC support is being considered.





# Recommendations

---

**By ICOM France,  
ICOM Germany,  
ICOM Europe,  
and ICOFOM**

WHICH DEFINITION OF MUSEUMS DO WE NEED?

## **Recommendations of the “Committees’ day”, Paris, March 10th, 2020**

### **Recommendation 1, addressed to the President of ICOM International and to the Executive Board**

ICOM France—in cooperation with ICOM Europe, ICOFOM, and ICOM Germany—invited all national and international committees and the regional alliances of ICOM to an exchange of impressions and ideas after the Extraordinary Assembly in Kyoto 2019. 41 committees and alliances followed the invitation. 19 of them were personally present by elected representatives; 22 of them contributed written or medially transmitted reports due to travelling costs or sanitary reasons because of the coronavirus.

The Assembly unanimously decided to present the following resolution based on a synthesis of the varied contributions to the Committees’ day.

1. The overview of the Committees’ day clearly shows that one year of analysing and discussing is absolutely necessary to get a well-founded opinion. Therefore, you are demanded to harmonise the “museum definition brief” of December 2019 with these needs of the national and international committees by extending the time slot between the presentation of any proposal and the Extraordinary General Assembly to 12 months.
2. The participants of the Committees’ day expect a fully transparent process. Under the new roadmap, the national and international committees will be given two opportunities to get involved. This is certainly welcome; however, we demand that you influence MDPP to ensure that the subsequent processing of the materials up to definition proposals is kept absolutely

comprehensible for the members as well as for the Extraordinary General Assembly.

3. Because you proposed to the whole ICOM community to use concurring strategies for their reflection starting either at the current definition or at the Kyoto proposal, it is expected to get at least two different proposals for decision.
4. The Kyoto proposal caused high irritations and vivid, not always fruitful discussions by its specific wording and the exclusion of high esteemed terms. You are demanded to take intense care of the following four basic principles of any development of the museum definition:
  - So that ICOM will continue its worldwide leadership in the field of defining the museum any proposal must be closely related to the UNESCO Recommendation of November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015.
  - Any proposal has to avoid any discrepancy to the ICOM Code of Ethics.
  - Any proposal has to obey the text genre of definitions instead of mixing different genres: a definition must cover all museums, a mission statement and a vision should fit for the majority of the museum system.
  - Any proposal has to overarch all the different positions inside the museum system, in museology, and of museum professionals.
5. The “Committees’ day” provided a wide range of detailed insights into definition development beyond what had already been said above. The results are available to the public on the ICOM France website, also in the form of condensed summaries. We ask you not only to take note, but in particular to bring this yield to the attention of MDPP as a guide for further work on the definition.

## Recommendation 2, addressed to the Advisory Council

COM France—in cooperation with ICOM Europe, ICOFOM, and ICOM Germany—invited all national and international committees and the regional alliances of ICOM to an exchange of impressions and ideas after the Extraordinary Assembly in Kyoto 2019. 41 committees and alliances followed the invitation. 19 of them were personally present by elected representatives; 22 of them contributed written or medially transmitted reports due to travelling costs or sanitary reasons because of the coronavirus.

The assembly unanimously decided to present the following resolution based on a synthesis of the varied contributions to the Committees' Day.

1. The Museum Definition Brief of ICOM's President and the Executive Board (December, 2019) includes more participative elements but basically, it repeats a crucial shortcoming of the Kyoto process: The Extraordinary General Assembly in June 2021 shall vote about two months after the presentation of the new proposal without an acceptable opportunity for the boards of the committees to discuss different positions with their members.

Your kind support is asked for our parallel resolution to ICOM's President and the Executive Board demanding the extension of the time slot between the presentation of any proposal and the extraordinary assembly to 12 months.

2. Additionally, your kind support is asked for the following demand. Because the President of ICOM proposed to the whole ICOM community to start their reflections either at the current definition or at the Kyoto proposal, we declared to the President and the Executive board that we expect to get at least two different proposals for decision.
3. The Kyoto proposal caused high irritations and vivid, not always fruitful discussions by its specific wording and the exclusion of high esteemed terms. You are demanded to be aware that

the following basic principles of any development of the museum definition are closely considered:

- So that ICOM will continue its worldwide leadership in the field of defining the museum any proposal must be closely related to the UNESCO Recommendation of November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015.
  - Any proposal has to avoid any discrepancy to the ICOM Code of Ethics.
  - Any proposal has to obey the text genre of definitions instead of mixing different genres: a definition must cover all museums, a mission statement and a vision should fit for the majority of the museum system.
  - Any proposal has to overarch all the different positions inside the museum system, in museology, and of museum professionals.
  - Absolutely necessary elements of any museum definition are the core elements of the museum definition developed by ICOM within the last decades.
  - Within the presentations of the “Committees’ day”, “(permanent) institution”, “education” (as a function, not as a means), and “collections / evidence” are explicitly stressed as highly important elements.
4. The “Committees’ Day” provided a wide range of detailed insights into definition development beyond what had already been said above. The results are available to the public on the ICOM France website, also in the form of condensed summaries. We invite you to take note.



General Editor  
**Juliette Raoul-Duval**

Managing Editor  
**Anne-Claude Morice**

Synthesis  
**Joël Michel**  
**Maëva Regnaud**  
**Catherine Schwartz**

Translation  
**Connected Language service**  
**Emmanuelle Raoul-Duval**  
**Maëva Regnaud**

Graphic design  
**Justin Delort**

Print by  
**ICOM Imprimerie - Dijon**

---

ISBN  
**978-2-492113-00-0**

June 2020





**ICOM France**

13 rue Molière – 75001 Paris – Tel. : 01 42 61 32 02  
icomfrance@wanadoo.fr - [www.icom-musees.fr](http://www.icom-musees.fr)