

## Comments for new museum definition ICOM Poland

The new museums that have been established over the past dozen or so years, as well as their activities, testify to the fact that the notion of a “museum” ought to be re-defined. That is why the majority within the museum community enthusiastically welcomed the news of ICOM launching works on a new definition. Here’s a response to the four briefing questions:

1. Briefly introduce your committee: number of members, variety of members

The committee set up to develop recommendation for the new museum definition consists of 10 persons. It includes directors and deputy directors of museums in Poland, who have had experience of working at lower ranks and who represent a variety of museum profiles. Amongst the committee members are representatives of, i.a., contemporary art museum, museum of mining and minerals, museum—a royal residence, small regional museum, historical museum, museum of martyrology and ethnographic museum.

2. What feedback and what approaches have been sparked by the MDPP vision of museums, namely through this definition? For instance: Spontaneous feedbacks from members / Creation of working groups / Articles written by professionals, and/or press articles.

The spontaneous reaction to the news on creating a new definition was that of enthusiasm and interest in the subject matter, in all likelihood stemming from the fact that a need to redefine the notion of “museum” has been voiced quite often of late.

Many members of ICOM Poland expressed willingness to participate in the process of developing a recommendation for the new definition following the ICOM convention in Kyoto. Why? We feel that the information on the methodology and on the process of creating the new definition has not been promoted and shared widely enough. Many people were taken aback by the definition presented in Kyoto which was submitted for a vote—they felt that a broad and comprehensive debate had been missing, or perhaps information on such a debate had not been spread widely enough.

i) ICOM Poland committee set up a preliminary group of 10 people—deputy directors and directors of museums of various collections and various activity profiles.

ii) National Institute for Museums and Public Collections published an article in the *Muzealnictwo* journal it runs, penned by Prof. Dorota Folga-Januszewska, in which she collected opinions of selected professionals.

iii) at the conference of museum directors organized bi-annually by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, member of the ICOM Poland presidium J. Gumula announced that a preliminary group was being created to debate on a new definition and on the methodology which should be employed in the process, as well as on the methods of consulting ICOM members.

3. Can you identify, in 5 points max., the observations and questions raised by this vision and this proposed definition? Method of elaboration, vision of the museum, terms or concepts

- i) The first reaction of the majority of ICOM members for the proposed new definition was to comment that it was unclear, ambiguous, debatable, and far too long. It is the opinion of the majority that the new definition ought to be short and clear, also for someone who has no experience of working at a museum. Meanwhile, the proposed definition was hermetic, phrased in a way that is not comprehensible to all which deems it, paradoxically, excluding—even if it does refer to dialogue and democratic values.

- ii) The notion of institution vanished from the definition. The proposal is therefore more of a mission than a definition. It refers more to a process than to an institution.
- iii) The „polyphony” mentioned in the definition is also questionable. There are institutions— museums in which it is indeed vital, e.g. memorial sites, martyrology museums. However, with an objective message that remains true to historical facts in mind, polyphony should be put into question. It is not that anybody can say anything about any given subject matter.
- iv) ”Critical thinking” mentioned in the definition proposal – here most of us agree; we do believe that a narrative and dialogue in museums ought to further develop the competence of critical thinking (and, perhaps, thinking in general, reflecting, pondering)
- v) Let us consider again the place of collections in the new definition. We are aware of the fact that there are narrative museums which hold no collections. However, do we pay attention to an artefact/a museum object? Shouldn't the new definition refer to what, historically, museums were aimed to do—to preserve? To refer to heritage?
- vi) (quoting P. Jaskanis: Perhaps the definition should contain a catalogue of conditions which determine what is not a museum, should a shortage of one condition occur (e.g. no collections, no documentation of a collection, no museum practice, i.e. a clear mission and measurable social practice?)

4. Which message would you like to convey today at this international meeting? Particularly in terms of method and involvement of national and international committees in the prospective approach of ICOM?

Is it at all possible to develop one definition for museums all across the world? What about democracy, mentioned in the new definition, in museums which operate under dictatorships? Can one create a definition that is short and comprehensible to all? A definition which will encompass in short sentences the phenomenon that a museum is in its entirety?

We also pose questions regarding the place of collections in museums, and whether they define the notion of a museum. We are aware that narrative museums often hold no collections. That is precisely why we pose this question: are these in fact museums? Should museums care for a heritage, and if so, is it a requisite to be considered a museum? What about institutions which organize exquisite exhibitions, produce high-class publications, and even hold small collections, and yet they don't call themselves museums? Should they be called museums? What about theatres which sometimes organize exhibitions, hold collections and run educational activities along its repertoire? Should they be called museums, for they do—in most part—what museums do? If not, why? Where do we draw the line?

As for the work method: following the ICOM convention in Kyoto, the majority left with an impression that the work system was somehow put in order—there was a set schedule, including the engagement of national committees. We do propound the idea that the summaries of given stages of work, information on further steps and materials for consultation are all made available to national committees.

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