



SPEECH BY BRUNO DAVID
ICOM
GRANDE GALERIE DE L'ÉVOLUTION AUDITORIUM
TUESDAY 10 MARCH 2020

Madam 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 Committee 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.