

FIRST ROUNDTABLE  
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A MUSEUM DEFINITION BY ICOM?

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*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 Kunsthaus 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** – 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.