

Introduction

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Definitions and missions of museums

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Museum 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.”²

Brown Goode highlights both the importance of objects and the research that underpins museum work. In this respect, the end of the 19th 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 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)³.

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 the 1971 crisis within ICOM. According to Hugues de Varine, its Director at the time, while things

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² 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.

³ All the definitions of ICOM are included in MAIRESSE F. (Ed.), *Définir le musée du XXI^e siècle. Matériaux pour une discussion*, Paris, ICOFOM, 2017.

did not come to blows during the 1971 General Assembly in Grenoble, we were not far from it⁴: 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)⁵

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 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 ICOM invested a great deal, notably by producing a monograph (*Towards a Redefinition of the Museum?*⁶). The 2007 definition is well known – it is still in use today and does not appear to have changed radically from the 1974 version.

⁴ 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”.

⁵ Website of the British Museums Association (<https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>)

⁶ MAIRESSE F., DESVALLÉES A. (Dir.), *Vers une redéfinition du musée ?*, Paris, l’Harmattan, 2007. English translation in 2010, Spanish translation in 2019.

“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* (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 (MDPP1), 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 definition⁷). The definition suggested by the MDPP1 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*

⁷ 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.

(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 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%).⁸

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 can be heard, and controversial and contentious topics discussed – a place where people can feel at home and reach across borders.”⁹

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 2015¹⁰ (*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

⁸ See the website of ICOM France: <https://www.icom-musees.fr/index.php/actualites/proposition-de-la-nouvelle-definition-du-musee>

⁹ See the museum’s website : <http://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/en/varldskulturmuseet/about-the-museum/>

¹⁰ MENSCH P & L. VAN, *New Trends in Museology II*, Celsje, Museum of Recent History, 2015, p. 15.

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 management¹¹. This strategic logic does indeed seem important to highlight for museums. However, it differs greatly from what is expected by ICOM for its own statutory 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 Rivet has shown in an important article on the place of the ICOM definition in national laws¹²) 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 MAIRESSE F., *Gestion de projets culturels. Conception, mise en œuvre, direction*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2016, p. 26-31.

¹² RIVET M., « La définition du musée : que nous disent les droits nationaux », in MAIRESSE F. (2017), *op. cit.*, p. 53-123.