

Can we still « acquire » ?

Tuesday 20th June 2023 –
6-9pm (CEST) – On Zoom

About the meeting

While the new definition, voted at the ICOM General Conference in Prague in August 2022, reaffirmed the fundamental missions of museums, it should be noted that the term referring to the enrichment of collections has changed : the verb "acquire" has disappeared in favour of the noun "collecting". This change looks like a paradigm shift, a new positioning of museums in their relationship to the growth of their collections.

The word "acquisition" may have suffered for some from being too close to the idea of purchase, whereas the word covers, in the use of French museums, all the means they have at their disposal to enlarge their collections, for a fee or not. At a time of global reflections on restitution, the term could be too reminiscent of the idea of "hoarding" or even "predation". The notion of "collecting", which is undoubtedly more encompassing, may have another advantage: it better conveys the idea of a reasoned choice, the desire to create a meaningful series, and the right to renounce, while allowing the question of the relationship between "collector" and "collected" to be raised.

The museum's place in the City and its social role force it to rethink its relationship to acquisition. When the "top-down" model is questioned, when civil society wishes to be more involved in the life of its institutions and when the proofreading of collections sometimes leads to a rethinking of the orientations of acquisition policies, the growth of collections must respond more than ever to a certain number of questions of ethical nature: researching sources, the relationship between museum professionals and the art market, relations with donors, fundraising, recourse to patrons, the place and role of citizens in this process, prioritising acquisitions, inventing new modes of enrichment, etc.

Enriching a collection is not an act of removal that meets a need for hoarding, it is above all a process whose ethics are measured against the variety of issues encountered in each project.

So, can we still "acquire"?

The speakers in this ethics debate will talk about their actions and their thoughts on the need for our museums to continue to carry out their fundamental missions, within a firm ethical framework, and thus define an ethics of acquisition, the keystone of the museum.

Emilie Girard, Chair, ICOM France, may 2023