

## 224 YEARS OF DEFINING THE MUSEUM

### 1. IMPORTANCE

**Museum definition is the basic text that explains the concept of a museum. By combining the concept of a museum with a definition, we explain what the meaning of the word museum is. The word museum itself can be used in various meaning connections.**

**The definition of the museum as approved and used by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) refers to a wide range of documents, from the internationally applicable UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections (2015) to various national and regional legislation around the world.**

**This highlights the extraordinary importance of the definition.**

### 2. ESTABLISHMENT OF MUSEUMS AND DEFINING THE PURPOSES OF THEIR EXISTENCE

Efforts to define the word museum appeared already at the time of the establishment of museums, i.e. in the 18th and 19th centuries. The British Museum, founded in 1753, declared an effort to gather examples from all areas of human activity and make it accessible to all people. Institutions in the Czech Republic, which were set up at the turn of the 18th and 19th century, also tried to define the purpose of their existence in their founding documents:

**Gallery of the Society of Patriotic Friends of the Arts - 1796 (today National Gallery Prague):** *"the establishment of a gallery to prevent further destruction and balance of paintings and other works of art, as well as to provide models for future artists and art lovers. Since the beginning the museums declared as most important issues the preservation of cultural heritage and educational purposes.*

**Silesian Regional Museum - 1814:** *"... to provide young learners with the opportunity to read usefully and to establish a spring from which artists and craftsmen seeking higher spiritual education could learn lessons, but also to insipate the necessary study of nature through sensory presentation of ordered natural products, in any way these are achievable".* The seven-page-text also lists the collections to meet the intended goal. The basic tasks of museums valid to this day appear here: building collections, education, attractiveness.

**Moravian Museum - 1817:** *"... institute, which would bring history, nature, art and contemporary production, especially Moravia, closer to the public with the help of individual collections. ... to document the overall character of the country, while allowing further research and dissemination of knowledge to be retained by the museum in the form of material documents."*

**National Museum – 1818:** *"The National Museum is intended to cover all areas of national literature and national production, and in one whole to present all that nature and human diligence have brought to the country."* It is a sentence from a detailed four-page material, which calculated all sorts of reasons for the foundation of the museum. Kašpar Šternberk, the museum's "founding father," described very well the deterrent examples of some European museums that *"are dead treasures, unless properly used for the benefit of science, for the good of mankind"*. This sentence is valid!

The basic Czech compendium of knowledge **the Otto's Dictionary**, which was in published **1901**, describes museum as: *"... a place dedicated to science and art... where the system and the historical*

*development of the various sectors of science, art, industry, etc. are depicted, their creations and products, imitated preparations, tables, diagrams, etc.'* and the author of the text did not forgive himself for criticizing the appearance of museum buildings: *"The original museums were simple buildings, however, the splendor and luxury of some modern museums look like palaces, in which their own treasures of art for the splendor and brilliance of their surroundings do not come into force, and therefore Furtwängler is rightly interceding, most recently, to use the magnificent rooms in museums of simple interiors, where the monuments of the artistic aptly arranged would only act on the viewer themselves."*

### **3. DEFINITION OF MUSEUM ACCORDING TO ICOM**

ICOM was founded in 1946 at the first UNESCO plenary session. Representatives of fourteen states agreed that the role of museums in the process of caring for cultural and natural heritage is so unique that it deserves special attention, they immediately also adopted the first definition of the museum:

**1946: The word 'museum' includes all collections, open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms.**

In the following years, the definition was modified. In 1951, a text appeared in the ICOM statutes highlighting the stability, public interest, and educational role of the museum. In 1968, at the General Conference in Munich, the word "pleasure" first appeared in the definition of the museum, and museums began their journey from temples of things to institutions of lively discussion about these things.

In 1974, the new text was adopted, with minor modifications, to this day. Especially for Czech environment, it is extremely important to know the background to the discussion and approval process of this document. ICOM was in an existential crisis in the 1960's. According to its founding statutes, only the 15 most important institutions represented by its directors could be members of each Member State, which voted for the Board and the Chair who represented the National Committee at the meeting of the Advisory Committee in Paris. The workload of directors did not allow them to devote their full time to ICOM. At the end of the 1960s there was an intense debate about the need for change, in which the then director of the Moravian Museum, prof. Jan Jelínek, was very prominent. At the general conference held in Paris and Grenoble in 1971, the members succeeded in enforcing the new statutes and Jan Jelínek was elected as President of ICOM. The new statutes abandoned the condition limiting the number of member institutions to 15 and opened ICOM to all museum professionals. One very short but important resolution also occupies an important place in the adopted documents: **Museums must accept the fact that the world is constantly changing.**

Jan Jelínek and the ICOM management at the time reflected on the very concept of MUZEUM. At the following general conference held in Copenhagen in 1974, a new definition of the museum was approved:

**1974: 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.**

The adoption of this definition has been accompanied by heated debates. Odds were around the statement that the museum is non-profit. But the really heated debate was around the fact that the museum is "in the service of society." The dispute took place even on a political level, with representatives of museums from western, free, world countries, accused the representatives of the countries of the socialist bloc of inducing socialist practices into the museum. Fortunately, everything was explained to the mutual agreement and the definition of the museum was approved. Jan Jelínek and Czechoslovak museology with its most important representative Z. Z. Stránský, thus reflected for many decades into the world museum.

Minor adjustments from the wording of the ICOM definition took place in 1989, 1995 and 2001. This was due to the fact, that many museums cared not only for tangible examples of cultural heritage, but also for intangibles. In 2007, the ICOM General Conference adopted a definition complemented by examples of intangible cultural heritage.

**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."**

#### **4. CHANGING THE ICOM DEFINITION OF A MUSEUM**

The museum world takes different forms and evolves. Many museum staff agreed that the museum's definition did not adequately reflect the current form and functioning of museums. At the 2016 ICOM General Conference in Milan, it was decided that the museum definition would be discussed in order to prepare its new text. This was the focus of attention at the Advisory Committee meeting in Paris in 2018. Subsequently, members of the national and international ICOM committees were invited to discuss a possible modification of the museum definition and to send their proposals to the ICOM General Secretariat. A total of 250 proposals were sent, which were discussed by members of a working group set up to prepare a new definition of the museum headed by Danish museum professional Jette Sandahl.

The words that are constantly repeated in the 250 proposals are: DIALOGUE, DISCUSSION, PLURALITY OF VOICES, EXCHANGE OF IDEAS, SOCIALIZATION, EDUCATION, EQUALITY, PROCES, THE PAST IS HERE FOR THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE. And to make no doubt so colleagues from Yemen and Slovakia mentioned in the first sentence of the draft definition a description of what the museum is not: "a place of dusty collection of old things".

The Working Party led by Jette Sandahl presented the new proposal shortly before the ICOM Kyoto 2019 General Conference.

**2019: "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, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."**

There was a heated debate at the general conference about its meaning and meaning. European museums, in particular, expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that the definition completely de-defined the essence of the museum's existence, that of the COLLECTION. The majority then agreed that, despite the indisputable qualities of the definition (EMPHASISING MUSEUMS AS PLACES OF DEMOCRATIZATION, INCLUSION, CRITICAL DIALOGUE, QUALITY, ACCESS TO HERITAGE) the text is not 100% complete and will not be able to be satisfactorily completed on a set basis.

A new working group is currently in place and is looking for a new version of the museum definition.

THE NEW DESIGN OF THE DEFINITION OF THE MUSEUM WILL BE DISCUSSED AT THE ICOM GENERAL CONFERENCE IN PRAGUE IN 2022.

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