

ICOFOM Consultation with National and International Committees on the new Museum Definition

For over forty years, the ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) has been charged with fostering theoretical debates and circulation of knowledge in museum theory and practice. We have been actively engaged in addressing ICOM's goal to establish basic concepts and definitions for the museum field. Most recently, we have been involved in the project of defining the museum in the 21st century that was initiated by ICOM in 2016 after the adoption of the 2015 Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, Their Diversity and Their Role in Society (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246331>), and developed since 2017 by the Standing Committee on the Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP).

Understanding that the ICOM museum definition is the most structural and operational tool for the organization to express its central values and mission to the museum world, we, the International Committee for Museology Chair and Board members, would like to consult the ICOM community using a dialogical methodology to collect our various viewpoints on the current proposed definition.

ICOFOM therefore invites all National and International Committees to survey their members and express their views to us on the new proposed museum definition. Our goal as a committee is to collect a wide range of opinions representing the cultural diversity of ICOM members, including those who have not yet had the opportunity to participate fully in this debate. Gathering this greater range of diverse viewpoints, we will then present and publicize a general report, in keeping with our mission within the ICOM network.

We ask for each National and International Committee to present to us a short statement with some considerations on the proposed definition and, if possible, their own proposal for amendments on the text. In this statement, we ask you to consider the following questions: 1) What are the key elements that should be present in the museum definition (concepts, terms and values)? 2) What elements from the current definition, present in the ICOM statutes since 2007, should be kept in the new museum definition? 3) What elements in the new proposed definition should be kept and which terms and concepts could be problematic and why?

BACKGROUND:

Addressing the great challenge proposed by ICOM of defining the museum in simple terms for the pluralistic and multicultural museum world, ICOFOM implemented a global series of discussions. Over the past two years, we have presented the results of

11 symposia organized in 11 different countries, involving actors ranging from museum professionals and scholars to community members engaged in the development of museums in various and non-hegemonic forms. These symposia have resulted in at least three new publications on the topic of a museum definition, containing some of the problematics but also the specific claims from those multiple communities concerned with the museum definition worldwide. The collection of these publications and resolutions from the ICOFOM symposia are available for public consultation on our website (<https://icofom.icom.museum>).

After the discussions on the definition promoted by the MDPP, of which ICOFOM played an important role, the ICOM Executive Board, at its 139th session in Paris 21-22 July 2019, chose one proposal from among the texts recommended by the MDPP for debate and deliberation by the ICOM representatives of National and International Committees in the Extraordinary Assembly scheduled for 7 September 2019 in Kyoto. After considerable thoughtful debate, the Assembly as a body voted to postpone the vote on the proposed definition in order to have sufficient time to more fully consider the implications of the proposed text and to hear the opinions of our members in a transparent and participatory process. ICOFOM applauds this decision to give the proposed definition the time necessary to study its implications for us all.

Here is the text of the new definition proposed for consideration by the ICOM Executive Board:

“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.” (<https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>)

Reflecting on the results of our two years of symposia, and the studies and discussions presented during our time in Kyoto, we recommend the following considerations as we together debate this new definition for the museum in the 21st century:

- 1) The museum definition should – as it has always – represent the core values of the ICOM organization, expressing what it stands for and how its members, represented in the National and International Committees, perceive the museum in the 21st century throughout the diversity of their practical work and their critical thinking on these institutions;

2) A definition should find a balance between defining the practical essence of what constitutes a museum and expressing the aspirational ideal of the ICOM organization regarding what a museum can be for societies in its future manifestations;

3) At the same time, a definition is a prescription with normative connotations, having the potential to shape institutions and cultural spaces by influencing their mission and priorities. In a global organization like ICOM, its words must be carefully measured for their real impact in multiple settings. For instance, in a number of countries of different political regimes, the museum definition is translated into national laws and helps to delineate public policies for the cultural field, resulting in a real guideline for museums and their professionals;

4) Poorer countries (ICOM categories 3 and 4), particularly those with less investment in the museum field and those with non-democratic or authoritarian regimes, are the ones most sensitive to the values expressed in a museum definition. The opinions of members from these countries must be sought out and their voices heard so that this important tool can be used for their benefit, not used against them or putting at risk their past achievements in difficult circumstances. Other nations, however well-intentioned, can not presume to speak for them in this discussion;

5) Any change in the definition will affect the lives of many people in different levels and with different consequences from one context to the other. From museum professionals and community leaders who depend on public policies and international recommendations in their claims for investment for their museums, to museology researchers and scholars who teach about the foundations of these institutions, we will be affected by the specific terms and core values expressed in the museum definition;

6) For many decades the ICOM museum definition, last amended and approved in 2007, has been the result of considerable achievements of ICOM members and their various committees. We may point out the inclusion of an “education” mission beginning in 1961; the phrase “in the service of society and its development” following the Round Table of Santiago, Chile, in 1974; or the acknowledgement of “intangible heritage” in 2007. In a way, the definition represents a certain tradition related to ICOM history, and changing it so drastically (for instance, eliminating all three of those phrases) may imply giving away some real achievements from the past;

7) To be effective in our multiple contexts, any museum definition must be clear enough to be unambiguously translatable into diverse member languages;

8) The museum definition is not a statement that will simply define what museums are; it also defines who we are as a culturally diverse, multinational, heterogenous group of people who think, work and live museums in the different parts of the world. So far, what most of the committees and their members agree on is the fact that the proposed new ICOM definition for the museum should reflect the image of this diversity that represents our international community today. Therefore, it is not easy to

find a definition that suits everyone. But what do we have in common? What are the minimum features of the museums for which we work? What are the values that represent our lives in museums today and at the same time express our hope for the future of these complex institutions?

TIMELINE:

In order to present a report representing an analysis of the viewpoints of all National and International Committees before the next ICOM General Assembly in Paris in June 2020, **we ask that all statements (highlighting points of both approval and problems regarding the proposed new definition), be sent to ICOFOM before 31 January 2020. Statements and proposed amendments to the definition for this open consultation should be sent to the following e-mail: icofomsymposium@gmail.com.**

Attached to this correspondence is a **survey** we have developed to aid us in polling our own membership regarding the new definition. Please feel free to use or adapt it for your own Committee if it is useful to you.

We thank you for your cooperation, and we are looking forward to working together for the new museum definition!

Respectfully,
Bruno Brulon Soares
ICOFOM Chair and Board members (2019-2022)
