

Redefining Museums

After a rocky start, the International Council of Museums begins anew on defining “museum.”

By Kathy Dwyer Southern and William Underwood Eiland

In this treacherous age of foreboding and pessimism—wars and rumors of wars, as the Good Book tells us—refashioning a definition for the word “museum” seems a silly undertaking. After all, we know what a museum is, don’t we?

However, the International Council of Museums’ (ICOM) current definition no longer expresses the essential nature of museums that now represent different locales, regions, and nations and embrace disciplines as varied as art and history, natural history and science, and zoos and arboreta. Beliefs about the very purpose of museums are stridently argued, especially internationally.

Museums of whatever stripe find themselves coping with the degradation of our natural world, the destruction of such hallowed monuments as Palmyra or the Buddhas of Bamiyan, gender suppression in most of the world, and, among other issues, persistent racism. Without clear guidance, ironically, we risk recolonizing (by losing freedom of speech, privacy, and conscience, for example) even as we decolonize.

Once upon a time, “museum” meant truth, conviction, and trust. We search again for that meaning even as we grapple with political falsehood, desultory commitment, and incredulity if not uncertainty. Museums no longer have the

luxury of avoiding the socioeconomic and the political; if we care about the challenges all museums are facing and if we revere the object, the living specimen, and ultimately the knowledge we find and disseminate, then we must answer who we are and what we are to become.

Given all this, ICOM undertook a multi-year quest to newly define “museum,” culminating in the presentation of the new definition in 2019. Unfortunately, the process began badly.

The Parameters and Process

Involving 44,000 colleagues in the redefinition of “museum” is perhaps an impossible and pointless task. Equally difficult is achieving consensus from this robust, literate, passionate constituency, who often value their differences—their unique missions and collections—more than their similarities.

And yet that is what ICOM set out to do: to create a process in which the world of museum professionals would create a new definition that reflects a consensus of what museums are, what they aspire to be, and what the future holds for them.

Jette Sandahl, chair of the

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Museums Definition, Prospects and Potentials Committee (MDPP), the ICOM committee responsible for overseeing this work, argues that the current definition “fails to reflect and address the profoundly dissimilar conditions under which museums work across the world, as part of diverse societies marked by conflicts and

by continuous and rapid change. It falls short in adequately articulating the current responsibilities and commitments of museums and in guiding and supporting museums in their manifold and complex visions for the future.”

The MDPP laid out a multi-year process for this work and developed the following parameters

to guide the creation of a new definition:

- The definition should be clear on the purpose and value base of museums and should retain the unique, defining, and essential unity in museums of the function of collecting, preserving, documenting, researching, exhibiting, and in



An audience member asks a question at the Plenary on Museum Definition at ICOM Kyoto 2019.

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THE EVOLVING DEFINITION OF 'MUSEUM'

ICOM Museum Definition 2007

The 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.

ICOM Proposed Museum Definition 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.



Members of the Museums Definition, Prospects and Potentials Committee speak at ICOM Kyoto 2019.

other ways communicating the collections.

- It should acknowledge the urgency of the crisis in nature.
- It should acknowledge vastly different world views, conditions, and traditions and should recognize the deep societal inequalities and asymmetries of power and wealth across the globe.
- It should recognize the expert role of museums in relation to their communities and should express the commitment to be meeting places and open to diverse platforms of exchange.
- It should express the accountability and transparency under which museums will use their resources.

MDPP's core coordinating committee included representatives from all continents who served in a series of thematic working groups, which met for two years. In addition, during that time, roundtables and conferences reached approximately 2,000 individuals who were solicited to help with MDPP's work. ICOM received several hundred suggestions, which the MDPP and the ICOM Executive Board reviewed and edited to create a reformulated definition for final presentation to the delegates at the Triennial in Kyoto in September 2019.

After heated, extensive discussion, delegates in Kyoto overwhelmingly voted to table the

proposal. There were many reasons for this; some felt strongly the definition needed to be changed, while others were equally passionate that the current definition should remain. In the end, it was clear that the new definition did not have the necessary support, and the majority of the membership needed more time for reflection and discussion.

Learning from the Process

The Triennial delegates' strong opposition surprised ICOM's leadership. Clearly, ICOM needed to take a hard look at the process and its aftermath. Following are the key points of this self-interrogation:

- A strong grassroots process was in place from the beginning, but without the concurrence and notification of ICOM's international committees structure.
- The overall project's progress and *raison d'être* needed to be shared continuously with the membership so that it was clear, understood, and trusted.
- The language of the definition's English and Spanish versions needed editing and was not clearly articulated.
- A project of this scale needed additional staff and funding resources.
- The project needed greater transparency throughout, from decision-making to committee structure.

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- The process for achieving consensus in Kyoto appeared rushed and poorly planned, which did little to assure buy-in and success.

In December 2019, the ICOM Executive Board outlined a timetable and next steps for the MDPP to help alleviate these concerns and build on the work already accomplished. Specifically, the MDPP's membership now includes representatives from ICOM's member groups, and an open, transparent, and consultative process will be developed to work with the National and International Committees over the next two years. To provide more time for discussion, ICOM

has set a three-year term, from 2020 to 2022, for the next stages of work. The three-year milestone chart will serve as a reference point for all members on the process, timetable, and progress toward a new definition.

It may be naive to think we can construct a definition that pleases all, but we believe this work will spur deeper thinking about what museums do and are.

To paraphrase Philippe de Montebello, the museum is the memory of mankind. Over the next several years, as we groan over wordsmithing and bristle at differences of opinion, we hope we can agree on a global definition

that gives us the means to save our planet, serve our fellow humans, and safeguard their legacy. Equally important, we hope we retain the poetry of our endeavors as we forge the prose.

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