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THE MUSEUM DEFINITION AND ITS DEBATE



ICOM is a membership association and a non-governmental organisation which establishes professional and ethical standards for museum activities. As forum of experts, it makes recommendations on issues related to cultural heritage, promotes capacity building and advances knowledge. ICOM is the voice of museum professionals on international stage and raises public cultural awareness through global networks and co-operation programmes.

- 44 686 professionals
- in over 138 countries
- with 118 national committees
- and 32 international committees

ICOM is the only global organisation in the museum field

II

Museum Definition



Creating a new museum definition – the backbone of ICOM

THE CURRENT MUSEUM DEFINITION

Vienna 2007

CURRENT DEFINITION

Since ICOM's creation in 1946, the ICOM definition played a central role for museums and museum professionals and became a reference in the international museum community.

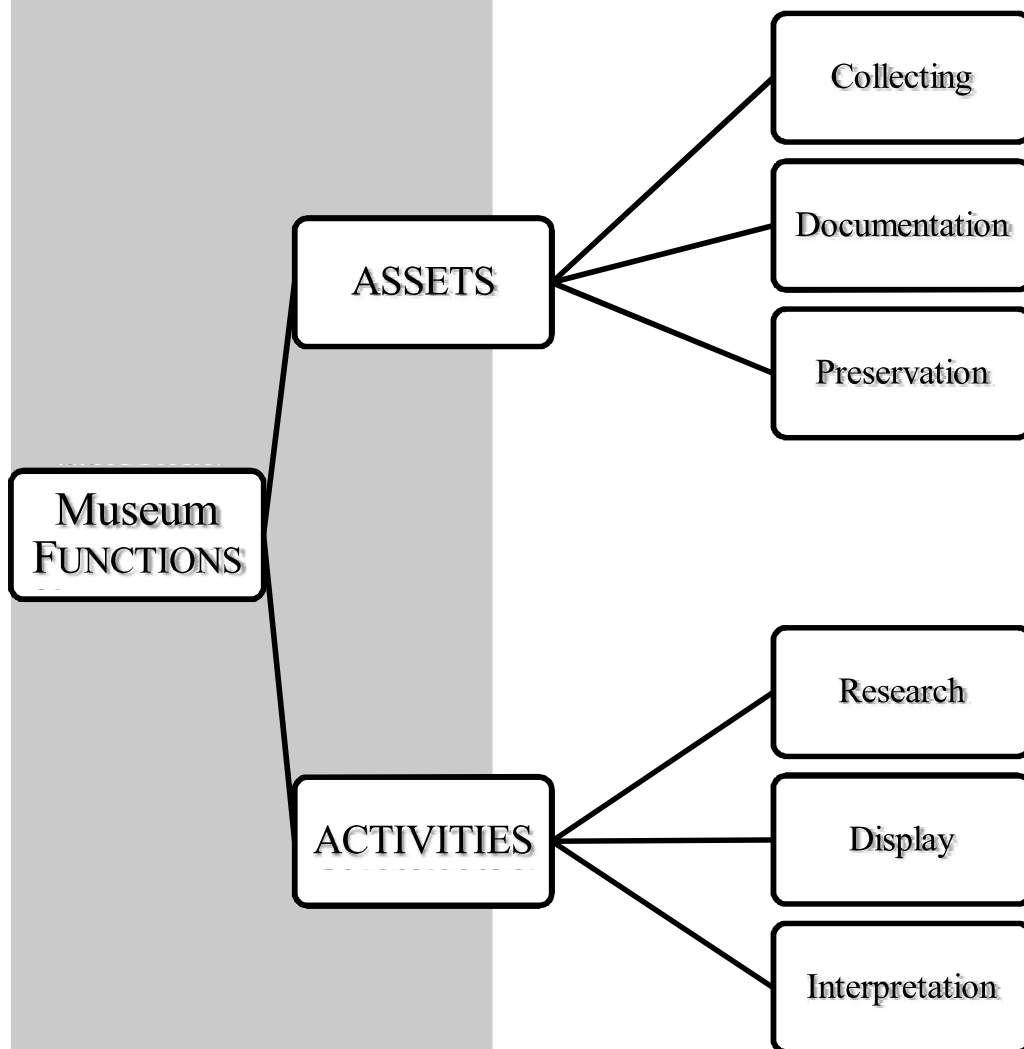
According to the ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria, on 24 August, 2007:

“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.”

In the aftermath of the 2016 ICOM General Conference in Milan, a new Standing Committee has been appointed to study the current definition. The Committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP, 2017-2019) explores the shared but also the profoundly dissimilar conditions, values and practices of museums in diverse and rapidly changing societies. Combining broad dialogue across the membership with dedicated expert fora, the committee is addressing the ambiguous and often contradictory trends in society, and the subsequent new conditions, obligations and possibilities for museums.

The Dynamics of Museum Management



THE DEVLOPMENT OF THE MUSEUM DEFINITION

ICOM 1946 DEFINITION

The word "museums" 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.

ICOM 1974 DEFINITION

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.

ICOM 1989 DEFINITION

A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of 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 people and their environment.

ICOM 1995 DEFINITION

A museum is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

ICOM 2001 DEFINITION

A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for

purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

ICOM 2007 DEFINITION

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.

(ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly (Vienna, Austria, 24 August 2007)

THE NEED OF A NEW MUSEUM DEFINITION

Over recent decades museums have radically transformed, adjusted and re-invented their principles, policies and practices, to the point where the ICOM museum definition no longer seems to reflect the challenges and manifold visions and responsibilities. We invited members and other interested parties to take part in creating a new, more current definition. New proposals were published on a continuous basis.

Following the processes of active listening, collecting and collating alternative definitions through its standing committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP), the Executive Board of ICOM, at its 139th session in Paris on 21-22 July 2019 reached the following decision.

The Executive Board selected the below as a new alternative museum definition for a vote to be included in the ICOM Statutes instead of the current museum definition at ICOM's next Extraordinary General Assembly (EGA), which will take place on 7 September 2019, from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. at the Kyoto International Conference Center (ICC Kyoto) in Kyoto, Japan:

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.

Across the world ICOM provides a common framework for museums, a forum for professional discussions, and a platform for questioning and celebrating heritage and collections in museums and cultural institutions. A shared definition of the museum serves as the backbone for ICOM as a global organisation.

However, the points of intersection between museums and communities are continuously shifting. Following the recommendation of the standing committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials and having carefully weighed the pros and cons, the ICOM Executive Board has decided, that it is time to rethink and revise the existing museum definition.

The current definition, which has only seen minor adjustments over the past few decades, does not reflect and express adequately the complexities of the 21st century and the current responsibilities and commitments of museums, nor their challenges and visions for the future.

ICOM invited its members, committees, partners and other interested stakeholders to participate in the development of potential alternatives for the museum definition in time for the 25th ICOM General Conference, which will take place in Kyoto, 1-7 September 2019.

THE DEBATE

François Mairesse, professor at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and the chair of the International Committee of Museology, resigned from Sandhal's commission believing that it contradicted two years worth of past discussions.

“A definition is a simple and precise sentence characterizing an object, and this is not a definition but a statement of fashionable values, much too complicated and partly aberrant,” Mairesse told the Art Newspaper. “It would be hard for most French museums — starting with the Louvre — to correspond to this definition, considering themselves as ‘polyphonic spaces.’ The ramifications could be serious. ICOM’s statement can be included in national or international legislation and there is no way a jurist could reproduce this text.”

ICOM new museum definition – update on the next steps

Curated by Dana Andrew on January 20, 2020

At the Extraordinary General Assembly (EGA) on 7 September 2019 in Kyoto, the decision was made to postpone the vote on the new ICOM museum definition in order to continue discussions. ICOM UK and other committees came to Kyoto having carried out consultation with their memberships. Since then, more International and National Committees have been taking action and conversations around ICOM’s new museum definition have continued around the globe. ICOM has acknowledged the enthusiasm and benefits that will come from such

discussions. Last week ICOM UK hosted two discussion meetings (in Edinburgh and London) and ran a survey for members. The summary findings will be shared with members in the coming weeks.

ICOM has now set out the next steps for the museum definition consultation process, which were agreed at the ICOM Executive Board (EB) meeting on 9 December 2019:

- To endorse the continuation of the MDPP (ICOM Standing Committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials) to address the next stage of the museum definition process;
- To suggest that this Standing Committee be called MDPP2 to distinguish it from the first stage of its work;
- To augment the membership of the MDPP2 to include more representatives from the membership;
- To set a term of three years from 2020 to 2022 to carry forward this important work into the next stage;
- To establish some parameters to guide the MDPP2 in the development of the next stage of its work.

The ICOM President and the EB asked the MDPP2 to revisit the roadmap sent to the EB in September 2019 and to develop an open, transparent and consultative process to

work with the National and International Committees over the next two years. MDPP2 will be chaired by Jette Sandahl.

ICOM President and ICOM Executive Board believe that the membership, the EB and the MDPP2 seek a common museum definition that reflects the purpose and position of museums in the 21st century. From the first stage of its work, the MDPP (2017-2019) distilled eight (8) criteria within which a new museum definition should be considered. The ICOM President and the EB believe that these valuable criteria should continue to provide a basis for developing definitions. However, to these criteria, other considerations need to be added. These include:

- Legislative aspects (with reference to ICOM Statutes)
- Ethical aspects (with reference to ICOM Code of Ethics)

The intended result is a museum definition which will address normative, legislative and ethical criteria, will be generic and whose final version will begin with the phrase “*a museum is...*”. The definition needs to be defensible against these criteria.

ICOM UK will ensure the information from the museum definition roundtable held in Edinburgh in 2018, the recent discussions meetings in London and Edinburgh and the summary results from the survey are shared with ICOM as part of the consultation process and in preparation for

discussion at the ICOM general meetings, 10 – 12 June 2020 in Paris.

There will not be an EGA or a vote for a new museum definition at the June meeting. There will be an extensive discussion which will enable participants to communicate, exchange and refine their views for a new definition and discover points of convergence for a shared one to be developed fully in the following year. ICOM is aiming for an EGA and a vote for a new museum definition in June 2021, the year of ICOM's 75th anniversary.