

About the new definition of a 21st century museum

Teresa Reyes Bellmunt

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Abstract

Museums are a reflection of the present society, which is why their definition evolves along with the changes it experiences. ICOM has been changing the definition of “museum” over its seventy-five years of existence, and now is the time for a new push to update it so that it fits the reality of 21st century museums. After some setbacks, there is currently a well-defined methodology that gives the opportunity to participate openly to the entire museum sector around the world, with the aim of gaining its approval at the next General Conference, to be held in Prague during the Summer of 2022.

About the new definition of a 21st century museum

Since the founding of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1946, the definition of museum has changed on several occasions, specifically in 1951, 1961, 1974, 1989, 1995, 2001 and 2007. These changes have allowed its adaptation to the prevailing criteria of each moment.

During the first ICOM founding conference in 1946, museums were defined as follows:

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 as long as they maintain permanent exhibition halls (Mairesse 2019: 154).

From this initial text, each of the new proposals will draw from the pre-existing definition, adding and modifying what is considered relevant. As an example, the current definition, prevailing since 2007 (approved at the 22nd ICOM General Conference, held in Vienna), includes several contributions that have been settled until reaching the current text:

A museum is a non-profit (1974) institution (1961), permanent (1951), at the service of society and its development (1974), open to the public (1946), which acquires (1974), preserves (1951), researches (1951), exposes (1951) and communicates the material and intangible heritage of humanity (2007) and its environment (1974) for the purposes

of education (1961), study (1961) and delight (1961) (Mairesse 2020: 37).

During the 2015-2016 biennium, a working group was set up to analyze the need to update this definition, in order to adapt it to the reality of the 21st century. At the 24th General Conference held in Milan, in 2016, it was decided to create a Standing Committee to study, revise and propose a new definition, which could be debated and approved at the next General Conference to be held in Kyoto. This Committee, called “Definition of Museum, Perspectives and Possibilities” (MDPP), was chaired by the Danish Jette Sandahl, and the results of its reflections were collected in one of the 2019 issues of the *Museum International* magazine, entitled “Museum Definition: the backbone of museums.”

The aim of the MDPP was to provide a critical assessment of the current definition, which included dialogue between ICOM members and experts from around the world. ICOM national and international committees were also invited to develop an internal discussion process, which was to converge with the work of the MDPP, from which the new proposal for discussion by all ICOM members opened.

ICOM Spain held a round table on this topic during the II Meeting of Museology, which was held in Valencia in October 2018. The resulting document was sent to the ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology) for consideration and publication on its website, along with work done on the issue by other committees.

This round table was organized using a model established by the MDPP around four questions that wanted to determine which were the most relevant contributions by museums to society, the trends and the most important challenges of the country and museums in the following decade. They also wanted to address how museums can help change and adapt new principles to meet the challenges of ever-changing societies (Reyes, in press: 152-155).

In late July 2019, the ICOM Board opted for a definition proposal that was presented for approval at the 25th General Conference in Kyoto the following September. The proposed text was as follows:

Museums are democratizing, 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.

This proposal was received with strong reservations by numerous national and international committees (including ICOM Spain), as well as by many regional alliances. They expressed their dissatisfaction with not being consulted before making this proposal official. For this reason, in mid-August, ICOM President Suay Aksoy was urged to postpone the vote on the definition and to continue the process of reflection on the proposal.

This document, which expressed the reservations of the various committees, argued that the proposals they had made had not been taken into account. It also emphasized the absence of some basic terms about the function of the museum that should not disappear, such as institution, permanent, open to the public, acquisition, education or delight, and it was commented that its terminology deviated radically from previous definitions, and threatened to undermine the consensus and usefulness they had acquired as the basis of numerous museum legislations, both national and international.

The proposal contained a certain vagueness in defining what a museum should be, and could describe almost any type of cultural facility. The importance of the collections as well as the importance of their conservation, study and

dissemination were also underestimated, which are issues that remain essential in the museological field.

The new definition should reflect the need for collections to develop formulas for interacting with the societies with which they coexist, helping to understand their history, present and future. They must emphasize the relationship with their immediate environment. The search for political correctness can be detrimental to the universality of the definition and compromise both its normative value and its legal utility.

At the Kyoto Conference, the new proposal was debated at length, but when the time came and in the absence of consensus, a motion was tabled to postpone it. This motion was passed by 70.41% of eligible members (396 votes out of 562).



ICOM Extraordinary Assembly, on the occasion of the vote on the new definition of “museum.” Kyoto, September 2019. Photo by Teresa Reyes.

In January 2020, the ICOM Board of Directors appointed a new Standing Committee, the MDPP2, which, still under Sandahl’s leadership, was expanded to include members of the boards of directors of national and international committees. This new governing institution, whose mandate was to extend until the next ICOM General Conference in the Summer 2022, was set up with a commitment to ensuring a more participatory and transparent model.

The roadmap presented to national and international committees in January 2020 provided for a series of actions, the implementation of which was cut short by the ongoing health crisis.

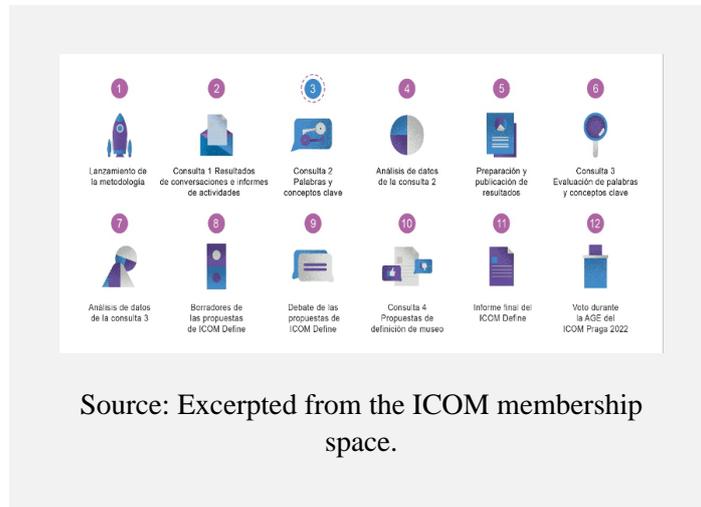
At the same time, some committees continued working on a new definition. In this regard, it is worth noting the organization in Paris, on March 10, 2020, of a day of debate entitled “Committee Day: What Definition Do Museums Need?”, organized by the ICOM committees of France and Germany, together with the ICOM Europe Regional Alliance and the ICOFOM International Committee. At this meeting, each of the forty-one participating committees made a presentation about their position on the presented process, as well as about their proposals for the future. The proceedings of that meeting can be consulted at <https://www.icom-musees.fr/ressources/de-quelle-definition-les-musees-ont-ils-besoin>.

The resulting findings were raised to the ICOM President, the Advisory Board and the MDPP2 President for their consideration. We highlight, among these conclusions, a rethinking of the modalities and work schedules, as well as the need to maintain a clear distinction between what is a definition, in the strictly linguistic sense of the term, and what is a statement of “mission” or “vision” for a museum or for ICOM. A special effort of semantic precision was also requested when choosing the terms to be used, so as not to compromise the strong legal impact that the definition has on the legislation of many countries.

In December 2020, an important step was undertaken to reach consensus on the new definition, with the adoption of a new methodological approach and the creation of a new body exclusively responsible for this specific task, “ICOM Defines. Standing Committee for the Definition of Museum”, composed of twenty-two members, under the

joint direction of Lauran Bonilla-Merchav and Bruno Brulon.

The new methodology consisted of eleven clearly defined steps, which must be deployed for a period of time not exceeding eighteen months, so that their results can be put to a vote during the next ICOM General Conference, to be held in Prague during August 2022.



A window has been set up in the ICOM members space where you can follow the whole process and consult the documentation in the process of being drawn up, both from ICOM Define and from the various regional committees and alliances.

Of the eleven steps proposed in the methodology, there are four (steps 2, 3, 6 and 10) that involve specific consultations to the museological sector to increase participation and co-responsibility. Each committee is free to decide how to make these inquiries and to which specific group will it address them. The intermediate steps are those that will allow to prepare analysis and compilation reports of the results of the queries. This procedure can be consulted in detail at the link

<https://www.icom-ce.org/metodo-guia-de-trabajo-hacia-una-nueva-definicion-del-museo/>.

The consultations to be carried out will focus on the following aspects:

—Step 2, Query 1: Assessment of the results of the talks and reports conducted from each committee after the Kyoto General Conference (December 2020-January 2021).

—Step 3, Query 2: Establishment of key words or concepts that should be part of the new definition. Up to twenty words can be presented, with a small development of each. It is a key step in elaborating the definition, as it will be from the analysis of the resulting words that the rest of the process will be articulated (January 2021-April 2021).

—Step 6, Query 3: It will allow to evaluate the list of key words and concepts resulting from Query 2. These will need to be revised by offering all comments that are deemed relevant, removing those which are considered not relevant, and adding up to three new concepts, if deemed necessary (July 2021-September 2021).

—Step 10, Query 4: A maximum of five new definition proposals, resulting from previous debate and analysis processes, will be published, and a comparative evaluation will be requested (February 2022-April 2022).

The presentation of this methodology, in December 2020, which coincides with the first consultation raised, marked the beginning of the path to be followed. The time to carry out the different consultations varies between two and three months, and the intermediate steps between two and four, depending on their complexity.

Step 11 will be the presentation of the final proposal to the ICOM Board of Directors, scheduled for mid-May 2022, for its review, approval and publication with sufficient time for everyone to know. Finally, in the framework of the 26th General Conference, at the end of August 2022, there will be an Extraordinary Assembly to debate, vote and, if so, approve the new definition.

As a conclusion

It is necessary to approve a new definition of museum that reflects not only the current situation of museological facilities, but also what their future prospects are. And this approval must be the result of a participatory process that involves and raises the complicity of as many people and institutions as possible.

It is important that the new definition is built on the legacy of previous definitions, in which the essence of the changing nature of our museums has been settled. This tradition, however, should not limit the process of debate, but should be a reference from which to reflect and create a definition suitable for future times.

The adopted methodology facilitates the homogenization of the consultations and contributions of all involved parties. Right now, Step 3 of Query 2, the key to establish the direction of the new definition proposal, has just been completed. An open format survey was carried out by ICOM Spain, from the analysis of which twenty concepts or keywords have been extracted. The information regarding this consultation can be read at <https://www.icom-ce.org/que-deberia-formar-parte-de-la-definicion-de-museo-resultado-de-la-encuesta/>. The analysis of all surveys carried out around the world will make it possible to define which are the most representative concepts, which will serve as a basis for successive steps.

A definition must not only sufficiently describe what is defined, but it must not describe anything other than that. A definition must be precise and concise. Goals, either specific or generic, as well as complementary details, cannot be part of the strict definition, but must be included in annexed documents or in explanatory developments.

The relevance of collections, as well as conservation, study and dissemination, are concepts around which there is a broad consensus within our collective. Many believe that they should remain central and not be relegated when proposing a new definition, which should aspire to a certain universality and durability and, consequently, should avoid giving too much weight to current ideological trends in a country or at a particular time.

Cultural, natural, material and intangible heritage is part of our history, the history of our neighborhoods, towns and cities. All elements and heritage spaces explain and interpret it, but not all of them are or should be considered museums. And the fact that they are not does not make them better or worse, but simply different.

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