

Re-defining Museums

Evidently, the identity of museums is at stake and questions around the role of institutions, the practice of conservation, issues of decolonization and how knowledge is categorized, displayed and passed on, must be considered. The old museum definition is no longer fit and currently a reformation takes place that manifests as tedious and lengthy process of wrangling with words to describe what cannot be described. Coming to consensus or at least a compromise about the wording, keeps a considerably large group of intelligent people busy.

This process is launched and managed by ICOM – the International Council of Museum.

In 2016, a new Standing Committee on Museum Definitions has been appointed. This Committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials explores the shared but also the profoundly dissimilar conditions, values and practices of museums in diverse and rapidly changing societies. Jette Sandahl, a Danish curator who leads ICOM's commission on the new definition, suggested that the current definition "does not speak the language of the 21st century" by ignoring demands of "cultural democracy." She came up with the following proposal:

"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."

The Executive Board of ICOM, at its 139th session in Paris in July 2019, selected this as a new alternative museum definition for a vote to be included in the ICOM Statutes.

ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly (in September 2019, in Kyoto) postponed the vote on the new museum definition, as the amended conceptualization was not accepted by some members (lack of consensus). <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

Since 2020, a participatory process was established to work further on the wording. Participation of members that goes beyond that of the Committee Boards are invited to express what is most important to be included in a new defining of the museum institution. A collection of the submitted proposals can be found: <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-museum-definition-the-backbone-of-icom/>

Until further notice, the old definition (since 24 August 2007) is still in place:

"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."