

The Definition of the Museum

From Specialist Reference to Social Recognition and Service

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> ICOM has for some time been formally reconsidering the definition of the museum, as contained in its Statutes. Quite recently the question has been raised: Why does ICOM need a new definition of the museum?

> From the point of view of professional usage, there is nothing categorically wrong with the existing definition. However, it is like a very old carpet, which has needed to be repaired and restitched over time, to keep it functioning. A major "patch" needed to be inserted in the 1970s to allow inclusion of an important element that was scarcely voiced when ICOM was founded: the museum's fundamental relationship to society. And so a new and important phrase was stitched into the old fabric of concepts: "A museum is a permanent institution (...) in the service of society and of its development...". In fact this phrase was put right up front, to give it structural prominence in the definition.

> However, what followed was still the definition that set out, section by section, the story of the museum's history, and in the narrative order in which museological developments had occurred historically. Acquisition and conservation still preceded all other functions. Exhibitions, communicating and educating came only later in the conceptual order of things – a reminder of old hierarchies and priorities.

> I believe the current definition of the museum has served ICOM well, and has for decades helped to provide a useful base-tool for many around the world. My suggestion would be that we *conserve* this definition by removing it from daily circulation and placing it into an historical collection of museological reference. It is a definition for specialists. (My suggestion is that all specialist requirements should follow and support the definition in the Statutes, but not intrude into the main definition itself).

> What is ICOM's current moment as an organisation? ICOM began as a *representative organisation* in 1946, of delegates representing National Committees and inevitably dominated by the most established museums. After a crisis of identity in 1971-1974 (following a general "crisis of old institutions" across Europe after 1968), ICOM was radically changed in 1974 to become a *membership organisation* in which all members had the opportunity to *participate* and have an electoral influence in the governance and activities of the organisation. However,

in the 1970s ICOM had a total of only about 700 members.

> Today, ICOM has some 19,000 members, and the list continues to expand. Even more important, though, is the transformed world environment in which the organisation operates today.

> While continuing to be a strong organisation of members, and promoting professional training, programmes and co-operation among museums internationally, ICOM has a much greater potential to realise. ICOM needs to think of itself not merely as a facilitator of professional activities but also as an *organisation that itself addresses and serves society and its development*: as a cultural leader; as an effective public advocate and instrument of advancing the cause of all museums and museum professionals (far beyond its own membership) within the heritage sector internationally.

> Recently developed programmes like the Blue Shield – in which ICOM acts with other heritage sector bodies internationally in awareness-raising – point to this new role of ICOM.

> Concerning the redefinition of the museum, ICOM's present challenge, I suggest, is to turn itself towards society and provide a simple but effective definition of what museums *are, do and stand for*. We need a definition that has

intellectual integrity, but one that governments, non-governmental agencies and communities everywhere can use as a reference. The definition should be clear to the mind but also nudge the human heart. It should be easily understood by lay people, and provide a moral benchmark of the non-negotiable values that museums – and the persons and professional bodies that work around and through these institutions – are bound to uphold and defend in the public interest.

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The ICOM definition of the museum is currently under review. In this issue of ICOM News, we present some of the debates on key terms of the definition and an overview of the decision-making process.

The core of the current definition is as follows: "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 Statutes, article 2, para. 1)

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