

# What kinds of museums for what kinds of societies?

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## ABSTRACT

The article reflects the broader political contexts of the current debate about ICOM's museum definition. It focuses on the aim to commit museums to specific values that define their place within their respective societies. What kind of values are addressed? What is specific about them? And why did they trigger such a lively debate? To my mind the decisive question at the heart of the controversy is: Is the new text about an ambitious museum vision for the future? Or should ICOM rather pursue the cultural policy matters of formulating (minimum) standards with its definition which (should) already apply to all museums today and which policy respects?

**Keywords:** museum, definition, society, values, postcolonialism, (neo-) liberalism, agnostics.

**Quel musée pour quelle société ?**

## RESUMÉ

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L'article reflète les contextes politiques plus larges du débat actuel sur la définition du musée de l'ICOM. Il se concentre sur l'objectif du nouveau texte qui est de définir la relation entre les musées et la société

avec des valeurs spécifiques. Quels types de valeurs sont annoncées ? Quelles sont leurs spécificités ? Et pourquoi ont-elles déclenché une controverse aussi vive ? À mon avis, la question décisive au cœur de la controverse est la suivante : Le nouveau texte porte-t-il sur une vision ambitieuse des musées pour l'avenir ? Ou bien l'ICOM devrait-il plutôt s'occuper de formuler des normes (minimales) avec sa définition qui s'applique (devrait s'appliquer) déjà à tous les musées aujourd'hui ?

**Mots clés:** Musée, définition, société, valeurs, post-colonialisme, (néo) libéralisme, agnostiques.



*“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 Museum definition, 2007)*

*“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.” (Proposed definition for the general assembly, 2019, in Kyoto)*



The discursive power of ICOM's definition of a museum is similar to that of monuments: they only really become relevant when you argue about them or try to tear them down. In this regard, the definition that the Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) group proposed at the ICOM general assembly in Kyoto in the summer of 2019 was not only bold, it was a great success. It ensured that museum professionals, cultural policymakers and the media around the world addressed the question of what the essence of a

museum is. In this way, the MDPP group has achieved what one can expect from such a group: that it promotes awareness by teaching the community to think “outside the box”. A complete break with the old definition was the prerequisite for this discussion to take place now. The new text departed from the outlined paths and opened up new horizons. Never before was the question of what museums are or should be part of such a broad public debate in countries all around the world.

The proposal itself, of course, is not all that novel. ICOM, especially ICOFOM, has been debating for some time on how to update the definition.<sup>1</sup> This was, however, the first time that a completely new text to remedy the shortcomings of the old definition was put to vote at the general assembly. The 2007 definition was attested to as an “ethical vacuum” by the MDPP group in its first statement in December 2018 (ICOM, 2018, p. 7). The Code of Ethics for Museums that ICOM last updated in 2004 is considered too cautious regarding the question of values. For the future, MDPP asserts, museums expect a clearer position from ICOM, a definition that provides “a framework of value-based advocacy or activist positions relative to people, to human rights and social justice, as well as to nature as the – increasingly threatened – source of life” (ICOM, 2018, p. 7). An apolitical self-image of the museum as an institution that just stores and provides access to collections, allowing for research and educational work, is no longer sustainable in times in which no publicly funded institution can withdraw from its “social responsibility”.

## A definition as a turning point for museum policy

This sets the tone with which the new ICOM committee describes the future of museums worldwide: in general, the aim is to commit museums to specific values that define their tasks within their respective societies. The MDPP group describes museums as part of the intra-societal balance of power, as authentic political institutions that contribute to the creation of identity, portray specific historical images, impart knowledge and are responsible for their collections. If one follows this rationale – and there are good reasons for this, backed by many examples from the history of museums (Thiemeyer, 2018) – then museums must engage in public debates, be sensitive to social norms and be open to (self-)criticism.

To me, the question at the core of the controversy that the new text has triggered seems to be: Is the new text still a *definition* or is it a *vision* that points the way to the future? The latter is how the MDPP group sees the text.<sup>2</sup> On

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1. There existed an ICOM Working Group on this topic from 2014 to 2016; Mairesse, F. (Dir.). (2017). *Définir le musée du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Matériaux pour une discussion*. Paris: ICOFOM; Brulon Soares, B., Brown, K., & Nator, O. (Eds.). (2018). *Defining Museums of the 21st Century: Plural Experiences*. Paris: ICOFOM; Cf. for the latest discussion, the special issue “The Museum Definition. The Backbone of Museums” (2019) [Special Issue], *Museum International*, 71(1–2).

2. Cf. also, for example, the four questions that members were asked during the round table mee-

the other hand, the main criticism from ICOM Europe is that a definition should be concise (a kind of mnemotechnic verse) and should describe the status quo. It should say what museums have to achieve now and not what would be desirable in the future. Critics see that the political relevance that the ICOM definition has now acquired is at risk. In the end, the definition depends on as many national museum associations and national governments as possible recognizing it and referring to it politically (Rivet, 2017, Garlandini, 2018). Only then can it achieve a form of commitment that helps museums to assert their interests even against opposition. Only then can the term “museum”, which is not legally protected, take shape. It is a precondition that the term determines who can become an ICOM member and who cannot (this is a central function of the definition for ICOM and why it is also part of the statutes).

Secondly, the critics of the new proposal are at odds with the politicization of the museum, which is part of the new definition and which – according to them – misses the reality of most museums. “The terms used in the text submitted to the vote are not those used by the majority of its members.” What they find particularly grave is that the political focus has eliminated the reference to tangible and intangible cultural heritage – the unique feature that distinguishes museums from other cultural institutions.<sup>3</sup> They rightly consider the new wording to be too unspecific to reveal the characteristics of the institution of museum.

In general, the style of the failed definition proposal in Kyoto is categorically different from previous definitions: with its stronger value orientation, it speaks the language of cultural policy recommendations in the UN and UNESCO style. That is something different from a definition in the narrow sense of the word understood as “a statement expressing the essential nature of something” (Merriam-Webster, 2016). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Resolution 61/295 from 2007) and the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections from 2015, with which ICOM was heavily involved, serve as ethical reference points. “ICOM”, as written in an MDPP statement in reference to both documents and to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, “is included in a world view and values of justice, liberty and peace, of solidarity, social integration and cohesion, sustainable development” (ICOM, 2018, p. 6). This is a commitment to the values of liberal societies, although it is doubtful whether it will find the approval of all governments around the world. The contrast to this vision is formed by the rampant populisms and nationalisms with their exclusionary

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tings. They all addressed how museums and society should develop in the next 10 years. Cf. Bonilla-Merchav, L. (2019). Letting Our Voices Be Heard: MDPP Roundtables on the Future of Museums. *Museum International*, 71(1-2), pp. 160–169.

3. Invitation to postpone ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly in order to continue, with the National and International committees, the debate on a new museum definition ([http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/minisites/icom-europe/images/Invitation\\_to\\_postpone\\_ICOM\\_Museum\\_new\\_Definition.pdf](http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icom-europe/images/Invitation_to_postpone_ICOM_Museum_new_Definition.pdf)).

politics and their tendency towards “group-focused enmity” (Wilhelm Heitmeyer). This sometimes has a direct impact on museums, for example in Poland, where the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party removed the unpopular director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, Paweł Machcewicz, and mandated more patriotism for the museum.

However, the political agenda of the new definition is not only primed with liberalism, but also with postcolonialism. It is self-reflexive and – at least implicitly – characterized by a neoliberal perspective on museums. This is based on the premise that museums increasingly (have to) obey the laws of supply and demand in order to prove their social relevance – a funding and quota pressure to which German museums have had relatively little exposure so far. They are largely financed by the state or local authorities (although often at a minimum). They are only rarely dependent on matching funds, like their Anglo-American counterparts, where the public authorities only contribute as much as the museum has raised in donations and revenues. In addition, the close link between culture and education, which has represented the creed of the German educated bourgeoisie since the 19th century, (still) secures them a level of trust in the self-proclaimed German “Kulturnation” (Grasskamp, 2016; Bollenbeck, 1994).

In contrast, more and more museums around the world are dependent on raising the money they need to work. This is why ICOM has proposed to its members that museums should no longer be defined outright as “non-profit”, but as institutions that work “not for profit” – i.e. as institutions that are not primarily intended to make a profit, but which are allowed to make money. The drawback of this opening – which ICOM had wanted to highlight in its definition in 2007 – is the institution’s (partial) loss of autonomy.

### **Contested donations and discomfoting collections**

This last point was recently demonstrated by the heated debate about donations by the Sackler family to British and American educational and cultural institutions, which was closely followed by the MDPP group.<sup>4</sup> The Sacklers founded and own the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma which earned billions with the painkiller Oxycontin – a drug that not only relieves pain but also triggered an opioid crisis in the US with more than 400,000 drug-related deaths. Are cultural institutions allowed to accept money from such patrons? The Tate Modern in London and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for example, have decided that this practice is no longer acceptable. In the UK alone, the Sacklers’ foundations have donated several hundreds of millions of euros to museums, libraries or universities in recent years (Marshall, 2019). This creates dependencies that can damage the credibility of the beneficiary institu-

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4. The author’s conversation with Jette Sandahl on 5 July 2019.

tions. The word “transparent” has been added to the new proposed definition to target such cases. It has a critical impact on the direction of institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Transparency means disclosing where the funds the museums uses come from. This is in regard to financial resources as well as the collection itself. Now more than ever, public interest is focused on the latter, since word has spread that holdings from the Nazi and colonial periods ended up in Western museum storerooms under questionable to criminal circumstances. The Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art from 1998 and the recently published recommendations for dealing with colonial collections in European museums are the scientific and cultural policy answers to questions about past injustices that today’s cultural institutions have to face.<sup>6</sup> Their example is currently being used to debate questions of public morality that are genuinely political and to which the institutions must respond.

If by definition ICOM now wanted to call on its museums to guarantee “equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people”, then this is aimed, not least, at marginalized social groups – namely those once colonized peoples and states whose cultural heritage is stored in European museums, or those indigenous minorities in countries such as Canada, Australia or the US who could demand access to the artifacts of their ancestors and, in some cases, found their own museums. The idea that museums should be “participatory and transparent” and work “in active partnership with and for diverse communities” goes in the same direction. It grants “communities” a right to work independently with collections, which is likely to be addressed specifically to those sub-state groups and societies of origin, which have long been largely kept out of cultural policy negotiations (especially in negotiations between countries for which only governments are considered competent).

The terms “participation” and “partnership” stand *pars pro toto* for a changed self-image of many museums in prosperous, liberal and democratic societies, which are – or at least claim to be – first and foremost concerned with dialogue and communication with their visitors. They see themselves as public spaces in which different voices should be able to articulate themselves and speak freely with each other. Consequently, the controversial proposed definition calls museums “democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue” that protect “diverse memories for future generations”. The critics

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5. Previously, Sandahl had used “transparent” in connection with the term “accountability”, but this did not make it into the new definition.

6. Cf. the Washington Principles (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eur/rt/hlcst/122038.htm>); and for colonial collections, Sarr, F., & Savoy, B. (2018, December). *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*. Retrieved July 1, 2020 from [http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf); Deutscher Museumsbund (2019). *Guidelines for German Museums. Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts* (2nd version 2019). Retrieved July 1, 2020 from <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/guidelines-on-dealing-with-collections-from-colonial-contexts-2/>; Thiemeyer, T. (2019). Cosmopolitanizing Colonial Memories in Germany. *Critical Inquiry*, 45, 967-990. <https://doi.org/10.1086/703964>.

say that only some museums can meet such high goals – regardless of whether they consider such a self-description appropriate. They also doubt that many governments will follow such an interpretation. Ultimately, the message here is that museums give up some of their authority over collections and interpretations of the world.

### **The diverse society as the new norm**

On the whole, the MDPP group outlines a different view of society in its new definition proposal:<sup>7</sup> it defends (cultural) diversity as a value in itself and wants to protect minorities. The references to “diverse memories”, “polyphonic spaces” and “communities” paints a picture of a diverse society as the new norm: a society that does not perceive itself as homogeneous, but in which there are many conflicting interests; a society that is constantly changing and must and will always renegotiate the rules according to which its members live together, namely, in times of increased migration. Such societies can in extreme cases be “agonistic”, i.e. so deeply divided that the aim of politics is no longer compromise and consensus, but rather more or less open domination or being dominated, thus determining how people live together (Mouffe, 2013).

In my opinion, this interpretation describes quite correctly the challenges that we have today in various societies – especially those that are highly divided. But it is also “situated” (Haraway, 1988), that is, it is based on certain premises. This perspective is also anchored in a disciplinary context, borrowing its repertoire of concepts and theories mainly from anthropology. Ideologically, it is rooted in Gramsci’s theories critical of power (with the idea of hegemony; Gramsci, 1975), Foucault’s governmentality (Foucault, 1975) or the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

Anyone who looks at society with these ideas in mind no longer assumes a conflict-free, harmonious and stable interaction between society and museum, about which one can confidently remain silent. Rather, museums are understood in Foucault’s sense as disciplinary institutions that enable certain views of the world and deny others (Foucault, 1975). They are involved in power relations and follow political mandates. They do not merely depict and reproduce but decisively define what is considered right and wrong in a society. The provocation of the new text is to demand that museums give an account of their work to the public and thus make themselves vulnerable.

Seen in this light, the roles that museums assume in any society are also anything but value-free. Self-reflexive museology has long been interested, above all, in the assumptions and selection criteria which are used in determining what museums collect, preserve, research and exhibit (Butler, 2013). These four tasks have formed the canon of museums since 1974. A new addition is the

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7. This is suggested in particular by the discussion papers previously published; see ICOM Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (2018), especially p. 6.

term “interpret” (instead of “communicate”). It defines museums as institutions that offer interpretations without assuming that they are in possession of the truth. Here one has to keep the cultural policy ideas of “shared heritage”, “shared responsibility” or “cultural democracy” in mind. They are concerned with “sharing” the museums’ power of disposal and privilege of interpretation over their collection with groups that do not belong to the institution.

It is precisely this self-critical, liberal and social-constructivist subtext that causes irritation. It runs the risk of not being compatible with some museums and not being accepted in countries that do not believe in minority protection, free speech and anti-authoritarian cultural institutions. For in the end, it is still the cultural policy of nation-states and municipalities that defines what museums can and should be.

The dispute over the ICOM definition is therefore not solely (perhaps not even primarily) a conflict over whether to share or reject the proposed values. The fact that ICOM is returning to liberal values and the political function of the museum is a good sign in times when societies are becoming more diverse, when social standards are breaking down and when criticism is muted in the echo chambers of social networks or intimidated by authoritarian politics. The pivotal question is: Is it about that? Is it about an ambitious museum vision for the future? Or should ICOM rather pursue the cultural policy matters of formulating (minimum) standards with its definition which (should) already apply to all museums today and which policy respects – especially in those countries where museums are particularly in need of protection?

In my opinion, it needs both: a functional definition that briefly and clearly and very specifically outlines what a museum is, in terms that are easy to understand.<sup>8</sup> It also needs a vision that provides museums worldwide with a “framework of value-based advocacy” (ICOM, 2018, p. 6) to which they can orient themselves and to which they can refer. In this regard, the definition is a pragmatic text that describes what museums currently are. It takes into account the legal frameworks and the different political settings in which the current definition is embedded already. Thus, it should be changed carefully. The vision, by contrast, is an idealistic manifesto that takes a position and shows an attitude. It defines goals for the future and determines how to get there. Since it is inherently based on values, it might be part of a renewed Code of Ethics. Vision and definition have different purposes but share the same goal: to position museums in contemporary societies and to reflect the social impact that museums have.

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8. After all, ICOM does not describe the museum first and foremost for ICOM members, but for a public and cultural policy that quite rightly expects the largest professional association to answer the question of what is the purpose and task of the institution it represents.



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