

It Is, It Was, They Are, We Are: The Museum Definition as a Norm and a Collective Framework

*Il est, il était, ils sont, nous sommes : La définition du musée comme une norme
et un cadre collectif*

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It Is, It Was, They Are, We Are: The Museum Definition as a Norm and a Collective Framework

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ABSTRACT

The ICOM museum definition is widely accepted by museums and is also used as a tool for research into the history of museums. This external acceptance obscures the fact that the complete definition text is rarely filled by any one museum, rather it defines all museums. It can be argued that if all elements of a definition are only held by a minority of museums, the definition itself is possibly questionable. This paper argues that, in addition to the factual description of what a museum is (or was) or what distinguishes museums collectively, museum professionals increasingly claim space in that definition to professionalize themselves. The definition has been instrumental in defining museum professionals and in projecting what they think they are about.

Keywords: museum definition, core functions, norms, self-ascriptions, zeitgeist

RÉSUMÉ

Il est, il était, ils sont, nous sommes :

La définition du musée comme une norme et un cadre collectif

La définition du musée de l'ICOM est largement acceptée comme une description normative de ce qu'est un musée, mais aussi comme un outil de recherche sur les phénomènes de l'histoire des musées. Cette perception externe occulte le fait que le texte complet de la définition n'est pas rempli par tous les musées individuellement, mais seulement par l'ensemble des musées. Cependant, si les éléments de définition ne sont prouvés que par une minorité de musées, leur qualité définitionnelle semble douteuse. Ce document soutient qu'en plus de la description factuelle de ce qu'est (ou était) un musée ou de ce qui distingue les musées collectivement, les professionnels des musées revendiquent de plus en plus d'espace dans la définition du musée pour s'attribuer des responsabilités ou des services qualifiés : La définition du musée est instrumentalisée pour définir les professionnels des musées ou même pour présenter leurs vœux sur le sens qu'ils aimeraient voir prendre.

Mots clés : définition du musée, fonctions essentielles, normes, auto-ascriptions, esprit du temps



The universality of the ICOM museum definition

Besides the ICOM Code of Ethics, the ICOM museum definition is probably the best-known document of the International Council of Museums. It is not only used for internal purposes of ICOM. For example, the definition is used to determine the admission of members to other museum organizations or as a basis for various national and international museum registration schemes. The ICOM museum definition is also the blueprint for numerous encyclopaedia entries. If you do not know exactly what a museum is, consult a reference book and you will often encounter paraphrases of the ICOM museum definition. The best example is provided by the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. Whatever you might think of the content of this medium, the relevance of this reading is based on the fact that Wikipedia's entries in different languages are written completely independently of each other. Therefore, it is all the more remarkable that several Wikipedia versions closely follow the ICOM museum definition (I

have consulted the texts in Catalan, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish/Castilian).

The ICOM museum definition is also useful for historical analysis. The alternative strategy of tracing back the term museum does not lead to any museum history, because this term has gone through a very varied history. In Greek antiquity, Mouseion meant “sanctuary of the muses”, but it was also the proper name of a Hellenistic temple in Alexandria. In the Renaissance era, it was possible to call a palace with rich art and book collections a museum because of these intellectual inspirations. The Baroque period developed a broad variety of meanings for the word “museum”. Today’s understanding of the term appears to be a special case: Johann Daniel Major (1634–1693) was Professor of Medicine at the University of Kiel, founded in 1665 (in the Duchy of Schleswig, which was under Danish sovereignty). He called his cabinet of natural history “Museum Cimbricum” (Walz, 2016, pp. 8–9). It was not until the 19th century that the meaning of the word “museum” narrowed to today’s understanding. These fluid word meanings require starting with a set of relevant characteristics of the phenomenon in order to arrive at a plausible museum history. Here, the use of the ICOM museum definition is of interest. One dominant thesis claims that the museum is a bourgeois-democratic institution whose invention took place in connection with the French Revolution. To refute this thesis, the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy discussed institutions which are older than the Musée révolutionnaire (today: Musée du Louvre). She did not use the ICOM museum definition in its full wording, but filtered out central aspects (non-profit, permanent, publicly accessible, separate institution, collection) in order to verify their realization in the 18th century. She concluded that there were already museums of fine arts in Germany in the 18th century showing the “cornerstones of the modern museum” (Savoy, 2006, p. 22).

The usefulness of the ICOM museum definition over a period of about 300 years may be due to the fact that the previous adaptations of the definition text may well have contemporary references, but one cannot criticize the use of vocabulary typical of the time. The 2007 appeal to a more abstract vocabulary, “heritage”, may reflect the zeitgeist of the early 21st century. But the term heritage has its own 200-year history of meaning, even if this history is predominantly related to the built cultural heritage. The 1974 addition “in the service of society and its development” sprang from a vehement discussion within the association (Mairesse, 2011, p. 292).

This distance from current phenomena and problems is particularly evident in the so-called core functions of museums. Even the oldest formulation of what the essential objects of museology are, in 1845, offered a list of terms that largely corresponds to the terms used today: collecting, dissecting, classifying, setting up, storing, and demonstrating. The impression is reinforced when one considers that the author, Alexander Held, only looked at natural history museums and therefore thought of dissection instead of conservation in general (Held, 1845).

This first review proves the usefulness of the ICOM museum definition: just like the definitions of old familiar objects, from spoons to houses, the current ICOM museum definition offers comprehensive criteria for what a museum is. It can also be used for research in institutions of the past corresponding to the current understanding of a museum.

The fulfilment of the individual components of the definition

On closer inspection, however, the ICOM museum definition can only be partially fulfilled. The condition that a museum must be a “permanent institution” is unrealistic because permanence can only be determined in retrospect. However, this part of the definition is used by many museum professionals when attempting to get medium-term financial commitments. The statement that a museum must be “at the service of society and its development” is either an empty assertion that every museum in the world follows, or it is too ambitious. It is difficult to prove that every museum in the world contributes to the development of their respective societies.

The last revision of the ICOM definition (2007) kept the core functions unchanged, but no longer referred to its object as “material evidence of people and their environment”, rather as “the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment”. This poses a terminological problem because “preserving” or “conserving” refers to material goods or recording media, while “safeguarding” is usually used to refer to non-material cultural phenomena. Another problem was created by the relation of the core function of acquisition with non-material phenomena. A human being can acquire a belief or a dance but an institution is only able to acquire it in a metaphorical sense – there will be many ways to tie in with a metaphor and therefore to see in all sorts of ways the fulfilment of the assigned activity.

In addition to this error of reference, the 2007 revision brought about a change of scientific position. The exchanged term “evidence” is linked to an extensive museological specialist discourse, as well concerning “testimonies”. “Heritage”, on the other hand, is a much broader concept that has developed its own 200-year history of concepts, and close links to national and international politics in recent decades. A parallel can be found in the museological discourse as to whether museology should be expanded into “heritology”. This renunciation of a separate object of the discipline also points to an orientation towards the external perception of museums, because that is where the essential gain of this textual treatment arises. Only insiders are familiar with the terminology problem and academic discourses, but the connection to a broader concept that is considered important politically makes it easier to designate museums and to value them.

The ICOM definition of a museum only shows sharp borderlines in relation to collections that are not exhibited or interpreted, ranging from private

collections for enthusiasts to research collections that are not open to the public; e.g. in the natural sciences or medicine. Nevertheless, it appears clear and selective to outsiders, as long as the individual museum is not expected to demonstrably fulfil each part of the definition. This collective application also makes the unfulfillable elements of the definition achievable: the museum system of a state or the world has long since proven its permanence and its contributions to social development.

The overall social view of museums is satisfied with the fact that individual museums differ markedly and only the whole museum system has all the desired features. From this it can be deduced that the social relevance of each individual museum ranks significantly lower than museum professionals would like to see it, which is why they act by accumulating criteria and adopting a more comprehensive concept. In this respect, the proposed resolution for the new version of the ICOM museum definition at the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM in Kyoto on 7 September 2019 sensibly violated the basic rule for definitions, always to formulate in the singular, and started with the words “Museums are...”.

Standards and their exceptions

The broad external acceptance of the ICOM museum definition in its 1974 version and its timeless applicability is based on the fact that, at first glance, the definition is unambiguous and clearly formulated. However, it is also clearer than was desirable for its original purpose of accepting or rejecting membership applications. There is no other explanation for the fact that from the first ICOM museum definition (1946) until the most recent revision (2007) the valid definition text was followed by a list of those institutions that ICOM accepts as museums although they do not fully comply with the definition. The “we” of the ICOM members and the “it” of the museum, according to the definition, apparently diverge: in 1946 botanical and zoological gardens and libraries, provided that they operate permanent exhibition spaces, are also recognized. In the following revisions, the list is extended in each case: 1951, aquaria and archives with exhibition rooms; 1961, historical monuments and church treasures, historical, archaeological, and natural sites – all these insofar as they are “officially open to the public” – vivaria, and natural reserves. Obviously, various institutions without collections are accepted: in 1974, sites and monuments of archaeology, ethnography and nature as well as historical monuments; in 2001, planetaria, science centres, non-profit art galleries, nature reserves as well as those cultural centres that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources.

One reason for this continuous increase in the number of exceptions allowed is that the oldest ICOM museum definitions were based on the existing collection, while since 1974 typical museum activities have determined the museum definition. So, in the beginning it had to be decided how ICOM relates to other institutions that also own collections. With the increased number of

activities, more institutions inevitably come into view, but at the same time the problem arises that some institutions previously accepted as museums do not fully carry out the activities now serving as criteria. Archaeological and palaeontological sites, but also nature reserves, are characterized by the fact that they do not acquire anything, or at least do not have to acquire anything, but keep the phenomena worthy of preservation in their original location and offer them for viewing, although only exhibit them in a metaphorical sense. Take, for example, a rock slab with dinosaur footprints that has been lying in the same spot for thousands of years: there are few options for rearranging these exposed traces or adding further slabs. This example might look as similar to museums as musealized castles or historic houses do. A “non-profit art gallery” neither has a permanent collection nor looks like having one; the similarity to museums is reduced to some activities (exhibiting, preserving, and communicating works of art) – unlike the aforementioned heritage sites, these galleries are not questionable cases but clearly phenomena outside the museum definition that are included on the list of exceptions.

Furthermore, ICOM has discussed a special case once and then never again. Archaeological open-air museums differ from archaeological sites in that they do not show ruins or excavated finds at the original site, but complete reconstructions of buildings and other phenomena of which they do not have any remains, and often no site. The ICOM Declaration on the Definition of Open-air Museums of July 1957 accepts those reconstructions as collection and exhibition if original buildings do not exist anymore and if the reconstruction precisely follows academic methods.

Unfortunately, there is no statistical data on how many ICOM members fully meet the definition, and how many have been granted such exceptions. The issue is even more complex, however, because those responsible for these phenomena included in the ICOM museum definition are neither required to accept nor even acknowledge this inclusion. Whole groups of approved members have their own worldwide interest groups, e.g. zoos and libraries. According to the ICOM statutes, they would be museums, but they are not, simply because those responsible for them organize themselves in other associations and do not join ICOM.

This list of institutions declared as museums, but which do not meet the museum definition, was deleted during the last revision in 2007. What remained was the non-transparent opening clause, inserted in 1989, which can be extended at will: “the Executive Board may recognize other institutions as having some or all characteristics of a museum”.

Obviously, ICOM wants to have much broader membership than just their definition of museum would allow. This interest of the association is clearly demonstrated in 2007 with the inclusion of tangible and intangible heritage as a subject area of museums, although nobody can deny that the owners of architectural, archaeological, and natural monuments, that archives, libraries,

the curating of monuments, religious communities, associations for the preservation of traditions, local heritage associations, regional folklore offices, and nature conservation organizations contribute more to the preservation of cultural and natural heritage than a few thousand museums.

The ICOM museum definition therefore also serves the self-image of the association by occupying a field of action as an exclusive field of museums, although this does not correspond to reality and ICOM has worked constructively for many years in Blue Shield with several international associations that are also responsible for heritage. Apparently, archives, which often operate on a legal basis, do not need much energy to define their field of action: an ICA archive definition does not exist. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) follows a different strategy because it only admits library organizations as members, so that the definition work and the demarcation from related institutions remain at national level.

ICOM, on the other hand, needs formulas for what this association stands for, what criteria its members meet and, finally, ICOM needs a large number of members to prove its relevance. The important sounding terms of the definition emphasize the importance of the “we” of its members.

Definition and reality

The three German speaking national committees, ICOM Austria, ICOM Germany and ICOM Switzerland, organize a Joint Conference every three years. In 2018 this conference focused on the minimum requirements of the ICOM museum definition. In summary, it can be said that a number of museums that are connected to ICOM either as institutional members or through employee membership do not fully meet the ICOM museum definition. Case studies ranged from the consideration of whether very small museums without full-time staff are better evaluated according to special criteria, to the regional cooperation of smaller museums with a powerful central museum, and to university collections, which partly are museums, partly resemble museums, but most of which are easily distinguished from museums. After viewing these case studies, it became clear that some institutions are aware that they do not meet the criteria of the ICOM museum definition although they do not clearly contrast with the museum examples. An exhibition house that uses the term museum is easy to define, because tourist information and event listings in the mass media only offer the category “museums”. But how do you proceed with an art collector who has created a separate organization for exhibiting and interpreting art, or with the “department for history management” of the sports goods manufacturer “adidas”, which stores and indexes unique specimens and keeps them available for the development of product innovations, but no longer offers the classic instrument of a permanent exhibition to a general public (Walz, 2020a)?

Every museum professional knows how to recite the formulaic chain of action of the core functions: museums acquire, preserve, research, communicate, and exhibit. But it is easy to torpedo this plausible-sounding sequence. The fact that many museums have no budget for the acquisition of further museum objects is regularly heard. Little notice is taken of museums with completed collections that acquire nothing because they already own everything that exists, such as the royal treasury in a country whose monarchy has abdicated, or a monographic museum for an artist who has never given away or sold a painting. In many cases, completed collections are not collections at all, but complex ensembles of objects; for example, houses or castles with a historical inventory which fulfil their purpose with the existing stock and do not need to buy anything in addition.

The greatest variety is to be found in the preservation of the collection. Some museums have only a few items, which may not cause any conservation problems. Museums that collect cultural assets usually have very large collections, some of which are stored problematically and some of which are unsupervised from a conservation point of view, while the similarly extensive natural history museums are more concerned about contamination from historical conservation techniques. In the case of some state museums with collections of art and cultural artefacts where the common practice is to use the collections to furnish official residences and guesthouses, there is also cause for concern. This is because the climatic conditions in cabinet meetings, state receptions or hotel rooms contravene the requirements of collection preservation.

The core functions of exhibiting and communicating pose few problems, as there are no generally accepted meanings, even though museum experts discuss what may distinguish exhibitions from “mere putting together”. Exhibition critiques never refer to the fact that collections are shown at all, but rather to whom, why and how they are exhibited. Thus, mass media perception loses sight of the fact that the function of exhibiting was transitively related to the acquired cultural assets or natural objects. If this reduction of museums to exhibition houses dies down in the future, not only will the definitional obligation to exhibit the acquired become relevant again, but also the question of whether exclusive online presentations are sufficient to fulfil this core function.

Museum educators like to refer to Paul Watzlawick’s axiom that it is impossible not to communicate. Conversely, this means that the core function of communication (interpretation) is always fulfilled – every website, every leaflet, every object label, every guided tour, every curator’s talk, every children’s birthday party in the museum is an interpretation of collection or exhibition content. It is even easier to see the exhibition as a form of communication: that is factually correct, but it renders the separate core function of communication obsolete.

The core functions as a memorable formula are the unifying element of the museum experts – whatever disagreement there may be about these easy-to-remember ideals, they are and remain an international consensus: “we” are the

ones who have and fulfil these tasks. At the same time, the imagined chain of action of the core functions provides a didactic template to explain to any audience – from kindergarten to the cultural committee of the state parliament – what has to be done in museums, and why museum work is important and responsible. “We” can recognize ourselves as a unit and at the same time explain to outsiders what “we” are needed for. Whether each individual contributes to all the steps in the process, whether the results of the work in each museum meet the requirements, is irrelevant.

The example of collection-related research

A component of the definition will now be used to show that the ICOM museum definition has a meaning that goes beyond collective self-assurance. The research work of museum experts was particularly appreciated in the 1970s. The ICOM museum definition text indicates this as well. The revision of 1974 added the frequently cited list of museum-typical fields of action as a new definition element. Research was at the beginning; the other activities were ranked after it. Interestingly, the English text did not follow this arrangement. It was not until the most recent version in 2007 that the French text was adapted to the ideal-typical sequence of activities, from acquisition to exhibiting, of the English version. Also in the 1970s, the Prague museologist Jiří Neustupný defined the museum as a research-centred institution “which, within the framework of a specific scientific discipline or group of disciplines, purposefully collects, preserves and scientifically processes sources of knowledge from nature and society and uses them for scientific educational purposes, especially for exhibitions” (Stránský, 1979, [79]).

Similarly, the German Museum Association emphasized: “A museum must have a subject-related conception. A museum must be professionally managed, its collection of objects must be expertly looked after, and it must be able to be scientifically evaluated” (Was ist ein Museum?, 1978). As a museum-historical background, it should be remembered that only in the case of museums of natural history can the involvement of scientifically qualified persons be traced back over centuries, and that several museum-relevant scientific disciplines only came into being with the growing specialization of the sciences from the late 19th century onwards. The German Museum Association was founded in 1917 to represent the interests of art historians working in museums. Over the course of time it expanded its disciplinary spectrum, but as late as the 1980s it closed itself off to museum professionals who were not considered academic (e.g. museum educators, even though the majority of them had a university degree). In 1977, the association’s self-description was to be the “professional association of museums and the organization of scientists working in museums”.

This emphasis on research, which was appreciated by various parties, is now a thing of the past. I suppose that a majority would probably be won over today for a museum definition that puts exhibiting at the forefront. In the present context, the definitional orientation of this emphasis on research is

of more interest. The German Museum Association's draft definition suggests that neither the individual museum, nor the museum system as a whole, nor even the applicability of the definition over long periods of time was the focus of attention. A certain group of museum experts, the scientists, favoured a definition text that gave precedence to their own activity (German Museum Association) or at least emphasized it (ICOM, Neustupný).

The reality of museum work looked and looks different. At the Joint Conference of ICOM Austria, ICOM Germany and ICOM Switzerland in 2018, a German museum director took a clear position: "Scientifically grounded, activating mediation – collecting and researching others can do better!" (Kelm, 2020). His argument that his museum cooperates with a university institute that provides the necessary scientific basis is plausible but lies outside the definition limits. Nevertheless, neither critical comments nor emotional expressions followed his presentation.

The ICOM museum definition uses "research" transitively; i.e., it requires activities that relate to the acquired heritage. In addition, many other branches of research practised in museums are conceivable, such as visitor studies. A study from Lower Saxony (a federal state in north-western Germany) with data from 2009 specifically asked about any kind of research in museums. The proposed selection answers narrowed down the range of possibilities, also taking into account "interpretation-related research", "material-related research" or visitor studies. Although a discrete alternative category ("other types of research") offered the avoidance of clear statements and was also used by 8% of the respondents, almost a quarter of all museums surveyed (23,3%) stated that they did not conduct any research at all (Unger, 2010, p. 95).

This research-free quarter may not seem alarming, but it is the most positive statistical value. Unfortunately, Germany lacks precise statistical data on this aspect. However, as an indication, one may assume that about one in five institutions recorded in German museum statistics employs paid staff with scientific qualifications; since not all of the persons with these qualifications actually carry out research, the quota is perhaps one sixth. Volunteers do not make up for this shortage; only a minority (about 3%) have a university degree and undertake research work (Walz, 2020b, p. 18). Even if one includes fields such as Citizen Science, there will not be a majority of German museums that can be active in research. On the other side are university museums. These either see themselves as a research infrastructure whose staff do not carry out their own research, or they are seamlessly linked to scientific institutes, so there is no point in asking whether the collections are researched in these museums.

Some but not all of these aspects will be particular to Germany or to German-speaking countries. Looking at these examples, it seems obvious that collection-related research will no longer be given a prominent place in the definition. This does not explain why it is part of the definition at all. It seems that two approaches intertwine, which could be described as a "double we": on

the one hand, the attitude that only the totality of all museums must vouch for compliance with the definitional components, and on the other hand, the use of the term “research” as a code for the self-perception of academically qualified museum experts that museums are irrefutably their own field of activity.

Conclusion

On closer examination, the ICOM museum definition appears Janus-faced: it is a widely valued definition that not only indicates what a museum is (and is not) but can also be reliably used to mark museum historical phenomena. It appeals to overarching contexts such as heritage and outlines the museum system even for those who are only superficially interested. On the other hand, the ICOM museum definition contains a number of shortcomings in that it prescribes characteristics that some museums do not have or that only appear to be achievable collectively in all museums, while in parallel with the further development of the definition text, the list of permitted exceptions to the definition has become longer and longer. In my eyes, these shortcomings are not to the detriment of the ICOM museum definition, but rather these ambiguities reinforce the willingness of museum professionals to see their own self-description in this text.

The process to revise the ICOM museum definition initiated in 2016 seamlessly followed this practise of self-description of museum professionals: no one discussed the exceptions to the definition that contradict the character of a definition or some unfulfillable criteria. Who “we” are, what “our” self-imposed obligation to the world is, how a great, world-changing task elevates “our” individual significance, grew into the only category of statement, in which the previous debate about the primacy of research or exhibition has been lost.

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