

ABSTRACT

The ICOM General Conference, held in Prague, in August 2022, had the theme “The Power of Museums”. Indeed, museum specialists from all over the world proved their determination to give a boost to their activities, adopting a new definition for the museum. The new definition, adopted – with a large majority of the votes – after six years of debates, is a turning point in the history of museums, worldwide.

Key-words: ICOM; the power of museums; new museum definition

ICOM Czech Republic has suggested *The power of Museums* as the topic of the 2022 General Conference. As early as May when International Museum Day is celebrated with the same topic, museum specialists were the first to ask themselves what is the driving force behind the organizations they are working for. The answers were extremely diverse, ranging from very enthusiastic, striving to prove the omnipotence of museums, to the most pessimistic which regarded museums as lacking any kind of power. However, in its International Museum Day celebration message released on 18 May, the ICOM committee concluded without any doubt that: “Museums have the power to transform the world around us”. This is a statement, not a question.

In fact, last year’s conversations within the museum space focused on this very topic: do museums really have the power to transform the world? And, if the answer is yes, in what way? It’s not by chance that this debate coincided with the debate around the adoption of a new definition of a *museum*. Following the disastrous discussions in Kyoto, 2019, the entire debate around this sensitive topic was resumed by the new ICOM administration lead by Alberto Garlandini, this time, tactfully and prudently, in part due to the distancing requirements imposed by the pandemic restricting face to face meetings, resulting in a channeling of energy in written and committed texts. In this context, the complicated negotiation of the new definition was entrusted to the South American museum specialists Luran Bonilla – Merchav (art historian) from Costa Rica and Bruno Brulon Soares (anthropologist) from Brazil, who both tackled the issue with enough diplomacy to mitigate the excessive approaches of the Nordic countries and to ease the frustrations of Southern European and African regions. **This time, the definition which emerged as the result of a transparent process in which no one tried to force the adoption of seemingly**



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exaggerated concepts truly represents a paradigm shift. Precisely because it was thoroughly negotiated, the new definition was adopted by an overwhelming majority at the organization's Annual Meeting held on August 24, 2022. Below is a personal translation of this definition: *A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. Museums operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities. They offer varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.* One can easily notice several important changes compared to the old definition (A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent, open to the public institution in the service of society and its development which purchases, conserves, studies, exhibits and carries over mankind's and the world's tangible and intangible heritage for research, education and enjoyment purposes). For example, the concept of accessible refers both to a museum being accessible for anyone and to the removal of any obstacles preventing people with disabilities from visiting a museum as any other person would. Inclusion is already universally defined, legislation included, as the policy of providing active participation for all people to all economic, social, cultural and politic aspects of society. Thus, museums must equally and without discrimination cater for all members of society. In fact, this calls for museums to make great efforts to address an audience that spans extremely diverse segments, as not everyone has the same level of education, knowledge, learning skills, social and cultural experiences. Referencing sustainability is also a novel aspect, in the global context in which an increasingly number of people are aware of the 17 sustainable development objectives (or "global objectives") adopted by 193 UN member states in September 2015.

Although they are part of our Agenda 2030 and we're rapidly approaching this year, it's clear we're very far from reaching any of the 17 objectives, starting with the last one "partnerships for achieving objectives" through the first one "no poverty". In fact, museums around the world have directly and committedly adopted these 17 objectives! To the best of my knowledge, museums are the only institutions to have adopted the objectives set by the UN, thus being at the forefront of contemporary society.

Mentioning ethics and professionalism is yet another novel aspect. As in recent years there has been an increasing number of museographers involved in accepting artefacts from illicit trafficking of cultural goods in collections, such a provision raises the level of expectation from museum staff. In other words, museums themselves agreed to no longer accept as staff members persons with dubious moral standards or lacking proper professional training. Still, probably one of the most striking features of the new definition is the participation of various communities. Therefore, on the one hand, museums state they are not set up for the guilty pleasure or the shallow interest of a single person (be it a collector) or an individual researcher, but for the benefit of society as a whole, which must be attracted to the activities of the museum. And, on the other hand, it's clearly stated that, in today's world, the communities in which museums exist are no longer homogenous and uniform, but, on the contrary, extremely diverse in all respects (ethnic, cultural, social, religious etc.). Well, museums are going to cooperate with all groups from the communities in which they operating. There is a perception - probably more for the Romanian audience than for other countries - that museums are mostly open for tourists. Of course, museums such as the Louvre, the British Museum, Prado or Uffizi are mostly visited by tourists, most often foreign tourists. But most museums in the world, as they should, mainly rely on local visitors.

Another novelty is the express mention that the museum offers *diverse experiences* to its audience. In other words, if museums - as we knew them until six, seven decades ago - would only provide guided tours and, more recently (40-50 years ago) minor educational programs, this time, according to the definition, museums are open to hosting any kind of imaginable cultural event. Only the limits of personal creativity could possibly stand in the way of organizing such events, as long as they contribute to the education and entertainment of the audience, thus ensuring the museum conveys all of its knowledge to the audience.

Present-day museums will face some unforeseen or barely imagined challenges. Participants to the ICOM General Conference held in Prague specifically discussed the power of museums - which is obviously the people working in these intuitions - needed to face various challenges, with one such challenge which museums have overcome surprisingly well being the pandemic that struck the world in 2020.

The authors of the articles in the *Romanian journal of museums* talk about the reinvention of museums - an ongoing process-, but also about their ability to recover. I would also like to point out an article discussing the place of museums in a draft law which has been under way for several years without, until now, a concrete ending in sight: Cultural heritage code. We hope lawmakers find the means to speed up the regulatory process, ensuring that museums occupy in society the very place they themselves strive for. It's a daring project and it's up to us to see it through. ICOM is right: museums have the power to change the world.

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