

What is in a Museum Definition?

Reflections on ICOM's New Museum Definition

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In 2019, ICOM unveiled a new definition for consideration following a consultation with its members. The new definition states that:

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 new definition sparked intense debates among members of the museum community, both at the ICOM Kyoto 2019 where a collective decision was taken to defer the new definition for future deliberation, and elsewhere as the debates took on a new lease of life on online discussions on various print and social media as well as through consultations by museum associations in different countries.

So what makes defining the museum so challenging? A universal museum definition needs to satisfy the different needs of diverse genres of museums operating under a variety of historical, economic, social, political, and cultural contexts. In practice, we are confronted with some incompatible ideals, values, and principles that make achieving some consensus about what a museum means extremely tricky.

The dilemma of defining the museum underscores a clash

of values. Do we focus on lofty ideals and sacred cows, such as the preservation, management, and interpretation of museum collections, and be silent about the underlying value dissonance and wider politics in society about who the museum really represent? Or do we want to acknowledge some of these wider societal injustices we still face, and make explicit our sustained commitment to challenge the status quo to make the museum and our world a more inclusive and accessible place to live in?

Museums, especially national museums, are widely considered to be instruments for legitimising state narratives and projecting social values. The new definition carries a value judgement that democratic political systems are better than authoritarian ones, a position that some states obviously disagree. Understandably, the mention of 'democratising', 'inclusive' and 'social justice' will put off some actors, especially those in authoritarian regimes or societies where marginal or minority voices are being suppressed. But to be silent on these attributes means we make no effort in demanding that these actors to live up ideals of inclusivity and respect for different groups, including marginalised communities.

The museum can be a space of liberation or a space of repression, depending on whose ideals and what values are being represented and promoted in the museum. In today's world dominated by divisive politics, the museum can emerge as an inclusive forum to promote respect and dignity for all people where everyone, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, can have a place that they call their own. How museums speak to contemporary issues and be relevant to our society at large should form the crux of our discussion on ICOM's new museum definition.