

## The museum definition: a fact sheet

July 2020

### Introduction

The *International Council of Museums* (ICOM) describes what a museum is in the 'museum definition'. The current definition dates from 2007. In many countries, the ICOM definition is seen as an international standard and used as a benchmark for internal policymaking and the granting of subsidies. At the General Assembly of 2018, the decision was made to revise the definition.

ICOM is a worldwide organization and has a matrix structure. The members are grouped by country in a *National Committee*. Individually they can join thematic *International Committees*, for example to meet colleagues from other countries. There are also *Standing Committees* that deal with structural issues. The *SC for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials* (MDPP) was tasked with revising the museum definition.

### ICOM decision-making and the museum definition

The MDPP held discussions with a number of the 118 *National Committees* and 34 *International Committees*. An international communication process was set in motion, aimed at all 45,000 ICOM members. Gradually the conclusion was reached that many recent museum initiatives are very socially oriented, certainly outside Europe where attention was given to decolonization, endangered nature and heritage, the emancipation of indigenous people, and victims of political oppression. The MDPP sought to include these social trends in the new definition. They formulated five different definitions to submit to the members, one of which was presented by ICOM to the members during the *Extraordinary General Assembly* in Kyoto. This 'definition 2019' was distributed among the *committees* six weeks before the General Assembly.

The 2019 definition differs greatly from that of 2007:

**2007:** *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.*

**2019:** *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.*

### I was there in Kyoto

The discussion of the new museum definition at the 2019 General Assembly in Kyoto was tumultuous. The new socially oriented approach was experienced by various members as politicization. Sensitive issues within ICOM were touched upon: traditional European and 'white'

dominance, conservative counter-pressure from collection-oriented museums, the self-censorship of countries with authoritarian governments, progressive movements in liberal countries, fear of losing subsidies, procedural manoeuvres, communications failure, dominance of the English language... and particularly the short time available to consult everyone's constituents. All elements that provoked intense emotions. It was a memorable *Extraordinary General Assembly* for everyone present.

ICOM France and several other European countries sought to postpone the 2019 definition 'until full consensus was reached'. ICOM Netherlands and others saw this as an attempt to dismiss the theme and opposed it. The outcome of the discussion in Kyoto was the best that was possible: the agenda item was deferred. The problem of communication with the constituents was thus addressed. Every *committee* now has the opportunity to discuss the museum definition within its own ranks.

### **New timetable**

In Kyoto, we assumed that the definition would be voted on again in June 2020, but this was altered in January 2020. ICOM has decided to broaden the discussion and expand the MDPP committee with a large number of participants from various *international* and *national committees*, who also represent the various viewpoints. ICOM Netherlands was one of the selected committees and chairman Luc Eekhout joined this 'MDPP2'.

In the adjusted timetable, all ICs and NCs were asked to submit their opinions before August 2020; the decision-making was ultimately planned for June 2021.

Partly due to the Coronavirus crisis, this timetable was once again jeopardized, but the internal process within the higher ICOM forums also hindered progress in the MDPP2. Recently, the uncertainty increased due to the resignation in mid-June of the chairman and some of the members of MDPP2 (including our chairman Luc Eekhout). Therefore, both the procedure and the associated timetable need to be revised again. But also in that situation, input from the Netherlands will be requested, and ultimately also an opinion in the vote on the definition.

### **.... now in the Netherlands**

The Dutch contingent in Kyoto comprised around seventy people. The turmoil surrounding the museum definition received much attention in the media. After all, by describing what a museum should or could be, you also determine who is excluded. That makes the discussion an issue of identity, connected to status and therefore also often to funding.

*NC ICOM The Netherlands* has 5,300 members and focuses on encouraging those members to look beyond their borders, to use ICOM as a platform to connect with museums and colleagues abroad and to get inspired by international perspectives. And thus also to think about the new definition. Therefore, ICOM Netherlands aims to collect the opinions of its members. To that end, we will join existing meetings and discussions as much as possible.

Compared to many other countries, the Netherlands has a rich museum landscape. The Dutch Museum Association functions as a representative for museums and, together with the LCM (the Museum Advisors in the Netherlands) is responsible for the Museum Standard. The current ICOM definition is part of the Museum Standard. The Museum Register makes evaluations. Various umbrella organizations, federations and other alliances also develop meaningful museum activities. ICOM Netherlands intends to use this museum landscape to initiate a discussion with the constituents – ICOM and non-ICOM members – on the following occasions, among others:

Already held:

1. *Erfgoedarena 'Game Changers': 29. January 2020, 20:00 at the Reinwardt Academy*
2. *Work session and networking gathering for ICOM Netherlands members: 6. February 2020 at Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht*

Cancelled:

3. *Museumkennisdag (Museum Knowledge Day) of the Dutch Museum Association, under the title 'Is the museum a clubhouse with a collection?' at Museum het Valkhof in Nijmegen. This was postponed from 23 March to 28 September, but has now been cancelled*

Upcoming:

4. *General Assembly of ICOM Netherlands: 26 October 2020*

5. *Member consultation (digital) before ICOM Netherlands submits its opinion to MDPP2 (the timetable has changed, more information will follow)*

This will be further supplemented with other moments and forms of discussion. We are also keen to join the discussions of others.

Within the board of ICOM Netherlands, the *Museum Definition Working Group* will take the lead: Frederique van Steekelenburg (director Mariniersmuseum), Herman Tibosch (director Museum Jan Cunen), Arja van Veldhuizen (manager Stadsmuseum Woerden).

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#### **.... And later in Paris**

On a date yet to be determined, at the annual ICOM General Assembly in the UNESCO building in Paris (or perhaps Prague), five votes, including from *ICOM Netherlands*, will be cast on the issue of the Museum Definition in an *Extraordinary General Assembly*.

ICOM Netherlands therefore calls on its members to actively contribute ideas and participate in discussions in their own country, but also in the *International Committees*. And to make personal contacts via <http://www.icomfamily.com>. And anyone in the Dutch museums who is not yet an ICOM member, is of course invited to join ICOM.

The board members of ICOM Netherlands are available to provide clarification of the Museum Definition. Ultimately, the board will discuss the voting advice with its members and decide what the delegates of the board will vote on the benches of the ICOM meeting.

*The board of ICOM Netherlands / [www.icomnederland.nl](http://www.icomnederland.nl)*