

## The Museum Definition: a fact sheet

January 2021

### Introduction

The *International Council of Museums (ICOM)* is looking for a new museum definition. The current definition dates from 2007. During the ICOM General Conference in Kyoto in 2019, the decision on this matter was postponed, partly in order to conduct a more ‘bottom up’ discussion among members about what a museum is and wants to be.

The new definition appears to be a sensitive issue in the museum world. After all, by defining what a museum is, you also determine which museums are excluded and which are not. That makes it an issue of identity, connected to status and therefore also often to funding and even the museum’s legal position. Indeed, 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.

ICOM is a worldwide organization with a matrix structure. The members are grouped by country into 118 *National Committees*. Individually they can join one of the 34 thematic *International Committees* and thus meet colleagues from other countries. There are also *Standing Committees* (working groups) that deal with structural issues. The 2018 ICOM General Assembly (members meeting) set up a *Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP)* with the task of revising the museum definition. This working group was renamed *ICOM Define* in December 2020.

This fact sheet provides more background information regarding the substantive sides of the discussion, the process towards the new definition and the role of the members therein.

### The route to a new definition - up to Kyoto

The MDPP held discussions with several of the *National* and *International Committees* and initiated a communication process aimed at all 45,000 ICOM members. Everyone’s input was welcome. Gradually the conclusion was reached that many recent museum initiatives are very socially oriented, certainly outside Europe, where attention is 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. It formulated five different definitions to submit to the members, and one of these was presented by the central ICOM Board (*Executive Board*) at the *Extraordinary General Assembly* in Kyoto. This 2019 definition 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.

The outcome of the discussion in Kyoto was the best that was possible: the agenda item was deferred, in order to give each committee more opportunity to discuss the museum definition and subsequently arrive at a new definition with broader support.

### **After Kyoto – MDPP2**

In January 2020, ICOM expanded the MDPP committee with a large number of participants from various *National* and *International Committees*, who also represent various points of view. ICOM Netherlands was one of the selected committees and then chairman Luc Eekhout joined this 'MDPP2'.

The MDPP2 soon encountered problems. Firstly due to the Corona crisis, but also the dissatisfaction regarding the communication with the central ICOM leadership and mutual antagonisms increased. In June 2020, tensions came to a head and MDPP2 chairwoman Jette Sandahl resigned, along with several members of the working group (including Luc Eekhout). And within days that caused a crisis in ICOM, which led to the resignation of ICOM President Suay Aksoy and several other members of the Executive Board. The tensions surrounding the museum definition had exposed a much deeper irritation regarding the governance culture in ICOM. Since then, a great deal has occurred in the ICOM ranks and work is underway to create a more open organization with more interaction between members, also online. In this light, a new roadmap for the museum definition was presented in December 2020.

### **ICOM Define and a new timetable**

In December 2020, the MDPP2, now renamed *ICOM Define*, presented an eleven-step plan to arrive at two or three proposals that we will vote on at the next General Conference in Prague in August 2022.

The eleven steps are shown in a diagram at the bottom of this fact sheet. Some of the steps consist of consulting the members, which will occur through all the committees within ICOM. ICOM Netherlands will also consult its members and then issue concrete recommendations.

In the context of greater transparency, all information on the museum definition is now accessible for every member on his or her *ICOM Member Space*. There, under the heading *Take part in the new definition of the museum*, all materials of *ICOM Define* are available, as well as those from the *National* and *International Committees*.

### **In the Netherlands**

ICOM Netherlands will therefore also actively contribute to the definition process at various moments. We would like to take this opportunity to go into more depth in the discussions about

what a museum is, should or could be in our own country. After all, when do you get the opportunity to work so fundamentally on the basis of your profession?

We stimulate this discussion among our own (more than 6000) members, but also with non-members from the Dutch museum world. 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 (Museum Advisors in the Netherlands) is responsible for the Museum Standard. The current ICOM definition is part of the Museum Standard, against which a museum is tested when it is included in the Museum Register. Furthermore, various umbrella organizations, federations and other alliances also develop meaningful museum activities. ICOM Netherlands thus intends to use this museum landscape to initiate a discussion with the constituents – ICOM and non-ICOM members. To that end, we will join existing meetings and discussions as much as possible.

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 – the report and analysis of the members' contributions can be downloaded from the website of ICOM Netherlands*

The ICOM Netherlands board is currently working on what form the consultation with the Dutch constituents will take, so that we in the Netherlands can make our contribution to the international process towards the new museum definition.

Board members of ICOM Netherlands are available to provide clarification regarding the museum definition and are happy to join the meetings of others. Ultimately, the board will discuss the voting recommendation with the members and determine how the delegates of the board will vote in Prague.

### The roadmap of ICOM Define

In blue: steps in which ICOM Netherlands requires input from its constituents.

In light grey: steps already completed.

Step	Period	From ICOM Define	Actions of ICOM Netherlands
1	10 Dec 20	<b>Launch of Methodology:</b> Webinar and launch of gathering place on ICOM member space.	Amended info
2	Before 10 Jan 21	<b>Consultation 1: Results post Kyoto</b> Collect what each committee has already done.	Documents and requested 100-word summary sent.
3	Jan-April 21	<b>Consultation 2: Keywords and concepts</b> Ask each committee to choose 20 keywords/concepts that the members feel should definitely be included in the new definition + brief explanation.	Organise consultation among members and other stakeholders. Process results.
4	April-June 21	<b>Quantitative and qualitative analysis</b> External research agency to work with the results of consultation 2.	
5	June-July 21	<b>Preparation and publication of results consultation 2</b> Leading to a report.	
6	July-Sept 21	<b>Consultation 3: Evaluation of key words and concepts</b>	Organise consultation among members and other stakeholders. Process results.

		Consult committees on the results of the report. Ask them: what do you think of the report, submit any amendments and preferably max. 3 new key words/concepts. Also indicate what you are truly for/against or what would be acceptable with adjustment.	
7	Sept-Nov	<b>Data analysis of consultation 3</b> Leading to a report.	
8	Nov-Dec 21	<b>ICOM Define drafts proposals</b> Subgroups of ICOM Define prepare proposals. Leading to 14 proposals.	
9	Dec 21- Feb22	<b>ICOM Define discussion on proposals</b> From 14 to 8 to 10 proposals, choosing approx. 5 of them.	
10	Feb-April 22	<b>Consultation 4 – publication of proposals</b> Committees form their opinion on these approx. 5 proposals and indicate a preference for approx. 2.	Determine the form for consultation / voting and then organise it. Indicate our preference for 1 or more proposals in the form.
11	April-May 22	<b>ICOM Define final report</b> Formal recommendation from ICOM Define to Executive Board, with 2 or 3 proposals.	
	Aug 22	<b>Prague: voting</b>	Cast 5 votes.

Within the board of ICOM Netherlands, the *Museum Definition Working Group* takes the leading role.

**Contact:** [arja@arjavanveldhuizen.nl](mailto:arja@arjavanveldhuizen.nl)

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