

### A year of crisis and initiative

The pandemic has had -and still has- a profound impact on the Dutch museum sector. Museums had to close to visitors and sometimes close altogether.

Colleagues are losing their jobs and a generation of school children are growing up without seeing our national treasures.

At the same time, museums are busy re-inventing activities and making good use of digitization and online performance. The population is even more aware of the value and necessity of culture. ICOM Netherlands has taken the opportunity to improve its services and saw a growth in membership.

### Close, open, close; museums in dire straits

As the virus spread early in 2020, museums, along with large parts of society, were forced to close to visitors. Government subsidies supported businesses first, support for cultural institutions came late. Eventually large sums were made available for the cultural sector; not only for institutions but also for independent makers, since free-lancers make up large part of the Dutch cultural landscape.

Museums were among the first to open again in the summer as '1.5 meter - museums'. Museums are well able to regulate the flow of visitors dynamically, as opposed to a more static visitor flow in other types of venues i.e. concert halls and cinemas.

Still, the second and third lockdown in November and December again closed museums to the public and at this time the future became more bleak.

In the last 10 to 15 years, as government subsidies steadily diminished, the business model of museums more and more relied of entry fees, café and shop, combined with fundraising and events. The percentage of self-generated income is more than 50% across the sector and it is precisely this business model which has become our 'Achilles heel'. A small number of museums ended their activities altogether, but many museums had to lay off staff, with free-lancers as first victims. Also, our heavy reliance on volunteers proves a predicament as many of them show reluctance to get back into the museum out of health considerations.

The Dutch Museum Association regularly sends questionnaires and newsletters to its 400+ members to enquire and inform about the state of affairs. The results are made public and are used in lobbying local and national government. These surveys and newsletters enable ICOM NL to relate to surveys by ICOM International and various International Committees.

### Opportunities arise

The museum field is filled with creativity and it is this feature which was tapped into from the very beginning. Museums successfully sought ways to attract and engage public from a distance and digitization and online performance has taken a great leap. Exhibitions, education, events but also openings are made virtual and

museums organize workshops and webinars for colleagues and visitors. Generating actual income out of these activities is however an entirely different matter and it remains to be seen how sustainable these activities will prove to be.

These initiatives however fit well into trends that have become apparent in the last few years. Already before the pandemic a discussion on the reliance on Blockbuster-exhibitions was started and has proven its relevance. Shouldn't museums rather focus on their social and societal role than on ever increasing their number of visitors and on international and intercontinental tourism? Museums were already starting to give more attention to their own collections and to address and service local communities. This is enhanced as international tourism is expected to remain modest for a considerable time and by the fact that even after the pandemic the incentive to travel abroad is diminished precisely because there is so much to enjoy locally. Museums and communities alike are getting ever better aware of the wealth of culture in depots and on display just around the corner.

Also, in the temporary absence of visitors, museums are bound to look to their own organizations and find time and opportunity to improve their services and installations; digitization of schedules, virtual tours, security improvement are actively pursued.

The Netherlands know an ancient and venerable tradition of private support for culture. Cultural foundations have been established since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and contribute in no small part to museums and their activities. Private foundations as well a government funding are broadening their support, no longer focussing largely on exhibitions and restorations, but also on innovations in the way museums work, supporting further digitization of the organizations. This enables museums to better prepare for a new way of working and presenting when society and museum can again open up.

Still, a lot of uncertainty lies before us. Museums predict a lasting decrease in the number of visitors and this will have its impact on activities and employment within the sector. Freelancers and volunteers will replace traditional contracts even more than before the pandemic.

Creativity and inventiveness are key to keep the sector sustainable. Active (international) networks provide collegial support and insight in both best and worst practices.

#### ICOM Netherlands

The importance of being part of a larger community is reflected of the increase in membership for ICOM NL; from 5.447 in 2019 to 6.124 in 2020. Not only students but certainly also Individual and Institutional members joined. The number of members that quit because they could not use the card is minimal.

In 2020 ICOM NL has continued its efforts regarding the Museum Definition. In association with the Dutch Museum Association and various other relevant parties

we inform and inquire our members through meetings and questionnaires, and are preparing online workshops in Spring 2021. The discussions around the Definition are vivid within Dutch museum communities and ICOM NL aspires to be the pivot point in establishing our members' opinion. Our members are involved in deciding what input ICOM NL will bring to both the Definition and Ethics discussions internationally. Within the board, two board members are dedicated to this subject.

As did museums, ICOM NL also turned towards its own organization, procedures and services based on the new 3-years Policy Plan which was adopted in the General Members assembly in the fall of 2020, which was held online successfully. As all board members are volunteers, our available time is limited, so for daily operations we are increasingly hiring support of external professionals for specific tasks.

Our members administration database has been completely renewed and promises to be a big improvement over the previous system. Already we are getting better aware of whom among our members are actually on the boards of International Committees.

Our communication policy was also renewed and is now being implemented as a new website is being developed, to be launched mid-2021.

As we believe we are more than a card-service desk, ICOM NL has improved its services to its members not only by increasing the budget which previously was available for travel grants, but also by widening this to a wider range of member initiatives that can be supported, like research and activities enhancing international cooperation within the ICOM network.

In 2020 we also facilitated members to take a 2-day course in *Working in an Intercultural Environment*, which proved to be very useful for the participants in improving their international networking skills

Our aim is always to entice members to actively participate in international networks and communities. The card may give members access but more importantly it gives opportunity to connect.

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[picture: first workshop Museum Definition February 2020]

