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MUSEUM DIVERSITY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE KYOTO DEFINITION

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The process of elaborating for the eighth time in ICOM history a new museum definition was launched in 2016 at the General Conference in Milan.¹ A standing committee was then formed in order to follow the process, appointed by the President of ICOM Suay Aksoy. This committee, entitled *Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials* (MDPP), was composed of seven and then nine members and chaired by the Danish Jette Sandahl. The objective of the committee was to carry out a global study on the trends linked to the development of the museum phenomenon and to propose definitions to the ICOM Executive board reflecting these evolutions, so that the board could choose one that would be voted in 2019 at Kyoto. The International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) not having been associated at first with this work, decided to organize a consultation process around the world by means of conferences, the first being launched in Paris in June 2017. It is in this context that the ICOM Executive Board decided on my integration, as President of ICOFOM, into the MDPP, which was also joined by Alberto Garlandini, Vice-President of ICOM. ICOFOM thus organized ten conferences (Paris, Beijing, Rio, Buenos Aires, Quebec, etc.) and published three reports on the museum definition.²

I will not mention here the reasons which led me to resign from this group, when it became clear for me that none of the five definitions that would be proposed corresponded to the criteria I considered to be essentials for a museum definition. As soon as it was adopted by the board and published through Internet, the first reactions emerged, ranging from astonishment to indignation. Very quickly, three committees – ICOM Europe, ICOM France and ICOFOM – decided to draft an open letter to the President of ICOM asking to postpone the vote

and continue the discussions in order to develop a more consensual proposal. The letter, signed by 27 national committees and 7 international committees, was sent in August to Suay Aksoy.

The Kyoto Conference thus started in an atmosphere of great tension, most of the informal discussions revolving around ‘the’ question. At this time, it seemed very difficult to know what could emerge from the September 7 vote, the number of voters per committee being identical for most committees: Barbados and Luxembourg have as much weight as France and Germany (which account for almost 25% of ICOM members). Proponents of the new definition – who were highly applauded – presented this proposal as the only possible solution to confront the challenges of the 21st century, accusing their detractors of undemocratism or conservatism. The moment for the Extraordinary General Assembly arrived on September 7 and took place in extraordinary chaos, with many reversals of the situation: scheduled for one hour, it would last four hours and lead to the adoption of the proposal to postpone the decision, to 70.4% of the votes.

ICOM definitions continuity

The ICOM museum definition, established in 1946 in order to be included in its Statutes, has been transformed many times (1951, 1961, 1974, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2007). Certain moments were undoubtedly more decisive than others. One of these major moments is linked to the 1971 crisis within ICOM. These were, in many ways, the same issues to those being discussed today, which were pushing several members to ask for a new definition. Hugues de Varine who was then the director of the organization, remembers this event:³

“When it was necessary to prepare for the 9th General Conference, which was to be held in Paris and Grenoble, the Executive Board decided to adopt the theme “The museum at the service of men today and tomorrow” and to invite as main lecturers political figures: two French ministers, German and Soviet ministers, a former minister from Dahomey (Benin today), Stanislas Adotevi, and the designer of the new national museum in Mexico, Mario Vazquez. After an inaugural speech in Paris by the French Minister of Culture, Jacques Duhamel, who took liberties with the orthodoxy of his own ministry, followed in Dijon by that of the Minister for the Environment, Robert Poujade, who announced a new concept called eco-museum for museums linked to nature and the environment, the sessions in Grenoble heard, among others, Mario Vazquez who asked museums to be made first for the people and free themselves from the constraints imposed by European tradition, then Stanislas Adotevi who demanded the de-Europeanization of cultures and museums in Africa. This succession of non-conformist points of view encouraged a group of young participants from many countries, especially from Europe and North and South America, to ask, sometimes vehemently, for a modernization of the museum, its missions and its practices, and also a modernization of ICOM, its structures and the status of its members. The majority who remained attached to tradition reacted vigorously and there were fierce debates between the Ancients and the Moderns, which were finally arbitrated by the outgoing president, Arthur van Schendel, and the new president, Jan Jelinek”.

The 1970s young generation of curators urged changes, considering that the museum had to adapt to society. It is undoubtedly a moment of relatively similar tension that ICOM members experienced in Kyoto, even if that institution has changed a lot since that moment. On the other hand, Varine remembers that the definition itself, which was developed three years later following this desire for transformation, was adopted with a broad consensus (like all ICOM definitions). The 1974 definition is known, it has not changed much since then. It is in fact essentially the notions of tangible and intangible heritage of humanity that were added in 2007, during the last modification. On the other hand, an element, which is perhaps more fundamental than what was imagined at the time, has been removed: the famous list of institutions recognized by ICOM as museums, which included nine detailed categories. It was notably this list which made it possible, for national committees, to identify the establishments that could become members and those which did not enter the general framework or for which a discussion had to prevail.

The current definition illustrates the continuity that has operated between all the definitions previously considered by generations of ICOM professionals: if we take the terms used in the previous definitions (in italics and dated in brackets), we can see this principle of continuity with previous generations at work.

“A museum is a non-profit (1974), permanent (1951) institution (1961) in the service of society and its development (1974), open to the public (1946), which acquires (1974),

conserves (1951), researches (1951), communicates (1974) and exhibits (1951) the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment (1974) for the purposes of study (1961), education (1961) and enjoyment (1961).”

The definition of 2007 therefore results from a long sedimentation between these different moments of evolution and integrated all the discussions of professionals on the principle of the museum, in a harmonious manner and respecting generations of professionals who have succeeded each other. The definition presented in Kyoto, on the other hand, is radically different from the previous ones. If we try the same exercise as for the 2007 definition, we get:

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 (1974), safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage (2007) for all people.

Museums are not for profit (1974). They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research (1951), interpret, exhibit (1951), and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

The search for terms previously used by ICOM reveals a desire for radical change, to say the least, since only five terms (out of nearly one hundred) come from previous definitions. Emilie Girard, for ICOM France, had done quite similar work to examine how the definition proposal debated in Kyoto reflected the 269 definition proposals that had been presented in 2019 by members or by national or international committees, during the call for proposals made by ICOM during this year.

Museums are democratizing (5.2%), inclusive (9.3%) and polyphonic (0.4%) spaces (23.8%) for critical dialogue (7.4%) about the pasts (plural, 0.4% – singular, 13.4%) and the futures (plural, 0.4% – singular, 20%). Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts (0.4%) and challenges (3%) of the present (13.4%), they hold artefacts (4.8%) and specimens (1.1%) in trust for society (31.6%), safeguard (6%) diverse memories (14.1%) for future generations and guarantee equal rights (1.9%) and equal access (11.5%) to heritage (46%) for all people (17.1%).

Museums are not for profit (23%). They are participatory (8.2%) and transparent (5.2%), and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities (13.8%) to collect (12.3%), preserve (26%), research (37.2%), interpret (7.4%), exhibit (34.9%), and enhance understandings (8.2%) of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity (1.9%) and social justice (0.7%), global equality (4.5%) and planetary wellbeing (0.4%).⁴

Certain generic terms (society, preservation, study, exhibition) have been widely used by contributors; on the other hand, a large number of others (especially the terms which gave rise to the most discussion, such as ‘polyphonic’, ‘social justice’, etc.), seem to barely reflect the ICOM members’ proposals.

Definition and mission statement

The reasons given for refusing (or postponing) the Kyoto proposal are known, they were still widely mentioned during the meeting of March 10 organized in 2020 by ICOM France, which brought together representatives of more than forty national and international committees around these questions.⁵ The proposal is less a definition than a kind of value statement, the terms are often vague and confused and do not correspond, from a lexicographic point of view, to what one expects from a definition. It is too long, impossible to remember, and its structure is of a rare complexity. The adoption of this definition could have important consequences from a legal point of view, particularly regarding its use in national law or in international jurisdiction (the UNESCO 2015 *Recommendation on museums and collections*). If taken literally, it would also lead to the exclusion of most of the current members, as almost all museums (including the Louvre) do not meet the criteria of the definition.

I would like to focus more specifically on two elements regarding the origin of this new definition: its form and its sources of inspiration.

If the Kyoto definition does not resemble, lexicographically, a definition, if it does not really reflect the proposals made by ICOM members, nor the previous definitions, what then would be its origins? The difficulty of interpreting this proposition as a definition has been mentioned several times, stressing its character of a 'mission statement' or a 'value statement'. A mission statement, or the definition of the missions of an organization, is part of the reflection on its overall strategy, of which it constitutes an important step (the value statement is associated with that exercise). It aims to formulate, in a short paragraph, the nature of a business, as well as the values and objectives that its leaders and the organization want to set and share with their stakeholders. It is presented as a roadmap, a noticeably short statement of the main objectives and goals to be achieved.⁶ This strategic approach, however, differs widely from a definition. It is thus not necessary to describe what the organization actually does, but rather to evoke the purpose behind what it does. For example, the mission statement of BBC radio and television is:

"To act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain".⁷

This sentence would be an awfully bad definition of what the BBC is, since it does not even mention television or radio which are its main activities. The principle is the same for museums. As an example, the mission statement of the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg is as follows:

"The aim of the Museum of World Culture is to function as a platform for dialogues and reflections, where many different voices can be heard and controversial and contentious topics discussed – a place where people can feel at home and reach across borders".⁸

Here too, the museum is not talking about collections, research, or exhibitions, but about dialogue, polyphony, and controversy. These principles are welcomed by Peter and Leontine van Mensch who presented them in a book published in 2015⁹ by stressing that if the museum of Gothenburg continues like any museums to work with its collections and to exhibit them, its mission stands out from this logic to assert its social commitment. We are obviously tempted to note the close resemblance between this mission statement and the definition of Kyoto, especially as we know that Jette Sandahl directed this museum (she was no longer director when this statement was developed, around 2012–13).

A mission statement is linked to the organization that conceived it, it is unique as it is established in coherence with its values and its stakeholders. In this it differs radically from a definition, which seeks on the contrary the common denominator of the organizations which it attempts to describe. If we compare the Kyoto definition with the Gothenburg Mission statement, we must recognize their similarity... as a mission statement. As a definition, on the other hand, that proposed in Kyoto could include many museums like that of Gothenburg, but would the same be said of most of the tens of thousands of other museums around the world?

Museum diversity

It appears interesting at this stage to review the committees who positioned in favor or against the proposal during the Extraordinary General Assembly. The supporters who took the floor in order to postpone the vote were (by speaking order) France, Austria, Canada, ICOM Europe, the Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA), the Committee for Regional Museums (ICR), ICOFOM, Belgium, ICOM LAC (Latin American countries), Argentina, Germany, Brazil, Italy, Iran and Israel. The committees in favor of a vote were Australia, the Netherlands, the International Committee for Management (INTERCOM), the United States and Denmark. The list of these countries, combined with the quality of the members of the MDPP, deserve to be analyzed.

It will be noted at the outset that the Asian as well as African countries were noticeably quiet during the process, carried by two different but Western visions of the museum. Jette Sandahl, chair of the MDPP committee, created the Women's Museum in Denmark, before working at the Te Papa Museum in New Zealand and then directing the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden. The members chosen were all connected to Anglo-Saxon culture, most of them being deeply involved in their specific domain of interest. Richard West founded the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC, David Fleming, former director of the Liverpool Museum, was particularly invested in the defence of human rights, Margaret Anderson, Australian feminist historian, directed the Migration Museum, etc. We must here emphasize the very high quality of the members associated with this museum reflection, and their commitment to such values which appear as very important topics in the current museum world:

gender, postcolonial or decolonization, community dialogue, democracy, sustainable development, etc. However, we may question the representativeness of these actors as regards the museum world.

It could be interesting to examine the reasons for advocating for these specific values. The commitment to the values behind this new definition may be based on the social roots of the museum, which are widely favored around the world, as ICOFOM was able to observe through its debates.¹⁰ This trend has grown strongly over the past ten years in the Anglo-Saxon world, but also in Latin countries. It is not new, as it was found in the background of the debates of the ICOM General Conference of 1971. However, this vision of the museum is reinforced by a more critical gaze on the institution, emerging in the late 1980s with the (British) New museology¹¹ in which the museum is analyzed from its political role, in the light of Foucault and French Theory. This type of reading, close to cultural studies, was in turn influenced by gender and postcolonial studies, from a resolutely multicultural perspective. The classical museum is thus called into question for its approach considered too universalist, Western and imperialist, male, and white, neglecting minorities. This principle may be found in the report presented by the MDPP in 2019, mentioning the need for such changes:

"Museums as institutions were shaped at the intersection of a spirited quest for knowledge and new scientific paradigms with the extreme violence employed by European powers in the colonisation of the Americas, in the enslavement of populations in Africa, in religious persecutions and expulsions within Europe".¹²

From a museological point of view, such a reading of museum activity is undoubtedly stimulating, offering new perspectives for questioning the notion of museum around the world. However, it shows its limits if it presents itself as the only possible reading key, leaving in the shade other angles of analysis (the economic perspective of the museum system is here surprisingly neglected).

According to this new doxa, the museum will be multicultural and active or better activist, tackling the problems of society (from human rights to global warming), or it will not be. If there is no doubt that such establishments must be able to play a major role and are sometimes among the most exciting to attend, should we therefore limit museum diversity from this single component? Should all museums, including the Louvre or the National Museum in Warsaw, tackle the question of human rights or global warming as a priority? As for the principle of collections, should it be put into perspective so that it no longer practically appears as one of the constituent parts of the museum system? Paradoxically, the desire for inclusion advocated by the new definition, in this perspective, seems very largely to exclude any other form of vision.

In conclusion, if the ICOM definition is first and foremost fairly classic, it is because it first fits into a text that has legal status. Statutes are not strategic plans. The statutory definition aims to bring together its members, sharing sometimes very different visions and values on the museum, in order to define who can be affiliated with ICOM and not what are the objectives of the organization or those of each museum. It is also linked to a certain number of legal texts: we find the ICOM definition in many national laws¹³ and especially within UNESCO which adopted it in its 2015 recommendation, a fundamental text for a large number of Member States without museum legislation. It is therefore no longer wholly owned by ICOM, so to speak, but also by its various stakeholders.

According to the principles of a definition, the museum definition should specify the characteristics which unite its current and future members. ICOM certainly needs values and perhaps a mission statement, a strategic reflection on the place of museums in the world, but this is a different work which must be carried out in parallel with that of definition, without harmful interference between the two projects. There would be a great risk, if not, of a separation or a possible breakdown of ICOM structures, rather than its strengthening.

Abstract: The author analyses the logic underlying the ICOM museum definition process and the sense of continuity among the different definitions, since its creation in 1946. The new definition proposed in Kyoto in 2019 (during the ICOM General Conference, 1–7 September) created a risk of breaking within this continuity and the

museum community. The definition process is here put in parallel with the notion of mission statement, associated with strategic management, and the value system linked to a resolutely activist vision of the museum, integrating such topics as gender, postcolonialism, sustainable development or human rights.

Keywords: Imuseum definition, museology, new museology, postcolonial studies, ICOM, ICOFOM.

Endnotes

¹ I had the opportunity to write several times about the ICOM museum definition. Preliminary (and shorter) French versions of this article were written in: "La bataille de Kyoto", *La lettre de l'OCIM*, 187, January–February 2020, pp. 57–60; "Définitions et missions du musée", *Proceedings of the ICOM committees day of March 10, 2020*, Paris, ICOM France (to be published).

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- ³ Personal conversation with the author, January 2020, and unpublished article written in 2020.
- ⁴ See ICOM France website: <https://www.icom-musees.fr/index.php/actualites/proposition-de-la-nouvelle-definition-du-musee>.
- ⁵ The numerous documents on this meeting are available at <https://www.icom-musees.fr/actualites/les-musees-aujourd'hui-et-demain-definitions-missions-deontologies>.
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- ¹² MDPP reports of December 2018 can be found at https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/MDPP-report-and-recommendations-adopted-by-the-ICOM-EB-December-2018_EN-2.pdf
- ¹³ M. Rivet, *La définition du musée: que nous disent les droits nationaux*, in: F. Mairesse, *Définir le musée...*, pp. 53-123.

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Table of contents 2020: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/12766>