

German Report to ICOM Define / Résumé du rapport allemand à l'ICOM Définir

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Voir le résumé français ci-dessous. – See the French abstract below.

Abstract:

Some German discussions have indicated that one should not conflate a museum definition with a mission statement. The current museum definition is widely accepted, but a new definition is being proposed. The core functions of museums are undisputed, but documentation and digital activities are missing. Finding highest acceptance as an overarching concept is the preservation (transmission) of cultural and natural heritage (evidence). In second place is interpretation (education), followed by the role of museums as information and documentation institutions or research infrastructure. A problem facing any revision is the survival of the 2007 version as the UNESCO museum definition.

Résumé :

Certaines discussions allemandes ont indiqué qu'il ne fallait pas confondre une définition de musée avec une déclaration de mission. La définition actuelle du musée est largement acceptée, mais une nouvelle définition est proposée. Les fonctions essentielles des musées sont incontestées, mais la documentation et les activités numériques font défaut. La préservation (transmission) du patrimoine culturel et naturel (preuves) est le concept fondamental le plus largement accepté. Vient ensuite l'interprétation (l'éducation), puis le rôle des musées en tant qu'institutions d'information et de documentation ou d'infrastructure de recherche. Un problème auquel est confrontée toute révision est la survie de la version 2007 en tant que définition des musées de l'UNESCO.

Full Text of the German Report:

Member Survey 2019

ICOM Germany conducted an online survey in December 2019 to find out how members felt about the wording of the current museum definition and of the Kyoto proposal, in order to gain a more accurate idea of members' attitudes in this controversial situation. This was also done to underpin the contribution to ICOFOM's survey of all ICOM committees on the same topic. A total of 309 fully completed questionnaires were submitted electronically, seven were from people without current membership. The total of 302 valid questionnaires represents a 4.6 per cent participation rate out of 6,501 members (2019). ICOM members from the whole of Germany participated; regional clusters are plausible due to large cities with staffed museums.

In principle, all members had the same opportunity to participate, so that the result is unaffected by the conditions of the survey. To what extent a representative statement about all members of ICOM Germany is possible remains open, as the opinion of the majority is unknown. Since only four members complained in writing about the short processing period (13 to 31 December 2019), it can be assumed that a significant proportion of members are either averse to complex surveys or have no interest in discussing the museum definition.

The position of the participants in relation to the current ICOM museum definition is coherent and shows broad agreement: The appreciation of individual text excerpts is 66.3% in the least favourable case and 98% in the best case. In overview, 80.8% consider this text to be a well-suited museum definition or one that only needs improvement in certain areas. Only 1.3% rate it as unsuitable. In contrast, the assessment of the individual text excerpts of the Kyoto proposal as important definition components varies between a minimum of 26.5% and a maximum of 72.8%; 11 of the 27 text excerpts are assessed as important definition components by less than half of the participants. In overview, 47.4% of the participants consider the Kyoto proposal to be a well-suited museum definition or one that only needs improvement in certain areas; in contrast, 13.9% rate it as unsuitable.

It is of particular interest that 36.1% of the participants rate the current museum definition and the Kyoto proposal as equally suitable or as only in need of selective improvement. Since the Kyoto proposal contains considerably more definitional features, it cannot be interpreted that one third of the respondents would not have seen any serious differences in suitability; consequently, for this third, the Kyoto resolution proposal appears to be an extension rather than a contrast to the current museum definition.

The current ICOM museum definition performs better in comparison of statements that are closely related in content. This difference is particularly clear in the core functions of the museum ("acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment"): The vocabulary of the current museum definition with the lowest approval rating ("acquires" with 68.5%) achieves a higher approval rating than the wording of the Kyoto proposal with the highest approval

rating (“hold artefacts and specimens” with 64.9%). On the same aspect, communication (interpretation), the highest agreement value of the current definition (98.3%) and the lowest agreement value of the Kyoto proposal (47.3%) are opposed to each other.

Kyoto’s point of contention as to whether the Kyoto proposal is less a definition than a mission statement was addressed in the member survey by also examining all formulations for their value as components of a mission statement. 23 formulations of the Kyoto proposal achieve higher approval ratings as part of a mission statement than as definitional components. As statements of a mission statement, only two statements are positively appreciated by less than half of the members surveyed.

The ICOFOM survey used as a basis for this member survey asked for relevant concepts and key terms. In order not to overwhelm ICOM Germany members who were unprepared for this challenging task, the questionnaire provided 22 pre-formulated options to choose from. The response varied between a maximum of 93.4% and a minimum of 24.8% agreement that this was an important formulation in the museum definition, with the designation of museums as Third Places gaining the least acceptance. Only four of the 22 proposals did not receive majority support, while 14 of the 22 proposals were considered important by at least two-thirds of the participants. From the point of view of the participating members of ICOM Germany, numerous, differently oriented umbrella terms or concepts can be assigned to museums.

Even the three formulations with the highest agreement values belong to different fields of activity: Preservation of material cultural and natural heritage (93.4%), research infrastructure (87.4%), information and documentation facilities (86.8%). A value tendency is indicated by the fact that every second of the six formulations with the highest agreement values addresses the preservation and transmission of evidence or cultural heritage for future generations. Official umbrella terms gained broad approval, but no top scores: the classification as cultural institutions, which is common in German legislation, achieved 82.8% (6th place), the related category “cultural infrastructure” 79.1% (9th place), and the term “memory institution” used by the European Union and the meta-database Europeana for archives, libraries and museums received 77.8% approval (12th place).

In addition, there was the possibility to enter freely formulated concepts and key terms; 34.4% of the participating members made use of this, partly with extensive texts. Here, too, there is a high variance. If these answers are summarised under umbrella terms, communication/interpretation/education reaches the highest value with 26 mentions, followed by preservation, experience, and participation with 12 mentions each.

Public Panel Discussion

Respectable attention of the public to the revision of the ICOM museum definition can be seen in the fact that a museum funded by the Federal Republic of Germany, the Jewish Museum Berlin, in cooperation with a University of Applied Sciences, HTW Berlin, held a public debate entitled “Quo vadis, Museum?” on 30 January 2020. Board member Markus

Walz took part as a representative of ICOM Germany. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Director of the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony and at the time a member of the Executive Board of ICOM International, was invited as the opponent.

The discussion dealt, among other topics, with procedural questions and with different views of what the purpose of a museum definition is. A quote from the President of the Standing Committee MDPP, Jette Sandahl, provided an impetus for the discussion: museums are very diverse and therefore, they do not have to fulfil all the definition characteristics individually; consequently, the Kyoto proposal should rather be understood as a vision. The two panellists took opposing positions on this.

The discussion also dealt with the question, whether a museum should be a place for political discussions. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch recalled that in the global context, topics like decolonisation and repatriation were articulated as focal by museum professionals. Markus Walz referred to individual mandates and decisions of different museums.

The Jewish Museum Berlin coped with considerable demands for this event; over 400 people were present. This lively event provided the impetus for commentaries on the international work process on the ICOM museum definition to appear in the feature pages of two national daily newspapers a few days later.

Committees' Day

Together with ICOM Europe and ICOFOM, ICOM Germany was a cooperation partner in ICOM's first "Committees' Day" to exchange ideas on the revision of the ICOM Museum Definition. ICOM France initiated and realised this bilingual event on 10 March 2020. ICOM France will certainly report on this in more detail. The comprehensive documentation of this event was also carried out by ICOM France. It exists in English and French as a print publication and is also available as an e-book for free download on the ICOM France website.

The Position of the Public Museum Consulting Authorities

ICOM Germany was invited to present the state of discussion on the museum definition at the annual meeting of the "Conference of Public Museum Consulting Authorities in the Federal States of Germany" (KMBL) on 20 January 2020. The KMBL has a central role in the German museum system because these state or state-financed institutions, on the one hand, advise the more than 6,000 German museums on all issues of museum practice, and, on the other hand, assess applications for state funding and provide advice for the funded projects.

A major point of discussion was that the ICOM museum definition is also a component of several funding guidelines and of the quality assessment of museums in quality seal procedures, so that processing on the museum definition by ICOM leads to discrepancies in other fields of action. It was feared that the great acceptance of cultural policy and cultural

administration of the federal states for the ICOM museum definition would be damaged by an abrupt replacement of the entire text.

KMBL provided ICOM Germany with the following joint statement on 16 March 2020: “The KMBL pleads for a retention of the existing ICOM museum definition in the version of the year 2007, which has proven itself from the point of view of museum consulting. The 2007 version of the definition describes the basic characteristics of a museum. It also offers sufficient interpretative leeway to take up new social impulses and to adapt to social requirements. In its short form, it is precise and generally comprehensible for the public, sponsors, patrons and museum stakeholders. From this, the standards for practical museum work can be derived. The KMBL is open to an adaptation and further development of the definition, as long as it can be clearly distinguished from a mission statement.”

ICOM Germany Members’ Forum

It was planned to offer a discussion exchange for the members of ICOM Germany on the museum definition in connection with a German-Danish conference of ICOM Germany on 10 March 2020 in Hamburg. Due to the COVID pandemic, this international conference had to be cancelled; the members’ forum was redesigned into an online video meeting and held on 18 June 2020.

This event was attended by 80 members of ICOM Germany. After the welcome, the event was divided into three groups with different topics to facilitate joint discussion. In two of the three groups, independently of each other, the problem of working on a definition when there is no prior agreement on whether a definition should determine essential characteristics or articulate objectives was mentioned, and furthermore, what exactly should be achieved with the definition (self-assurance of museum professionals, a cultural policy determination, the outline of a project worthy of support). Behind the discussion about definitional components, disputes about the sovereignty of interpretation were perceived. In the course of the discussion, all three groups came to the point that the distinction between definition and vision / mission statement is important. One group also discussed the need to clarify the relationship between the definitional elements under consideration and the ICOM Code of Ethics.

The first group focused on the evaluation of formulations in the current museum definition against formulations in the Kyoto proposal. Several aspects presented by the Kyoto proposal are missing from the current museum definition (e. g. diversity, inclusion, democratisation, sustainability, potential for change and innovation, inclusion of communities). In general, digital activities are missing from definition texts. On the other hand, it was noted that the Kyoto proposal sets high demands which small museums may not be able to meet. There was general criticism of terms such as “artefacts and specimens” and “non-profit”.

The second group discussed the difference between characteristics, especially core functions of museum work, versus values and visions, which can differ greatly in different regions of the world. The familiar core functions of museums were identified as a useful definitional

approach, but with the comment that these descriptions of actions cannot be detached from the people acting, nor from the people or groups addressed, nor from the purpose. The discussion focused on collecting and exhibiting; at the same time, education / interpretation was named as a possible umbrella term.

The third group began with an open-ended collection of terms that should find a place in a museum definition; several participants saw values as the central content. Possible textual beginnings for the museum definition were discussed: "The museum is a third place ...", "The museum is a meeting place ...", "The museum is an educational platform ...", "The museum is a place where cultural heritage is preserved and researched". The further discussion referred to the core functions, which were still considered important "pillars". Nevertheless, the focus should be on enabling participation, providing impulses, promoting criticality and judgement, sharing knowledge. Transformation, networking, and participation were seen as important concepts.

The participants expressed their interest and willingness to continue the joint discussion. Due to the unclear situation in the international development process of the ICOM museum definition at the time, no further planning could be done yet.

Proceedings of the Tri-National Conference of German Speaking Countries

In June 2020, ICOM Germany published the conference proceedings "Museum: sufficient. The 'lower limit' of the museum definition", in parallel as a print publication and as an e-book in open access. This book reflects the tri-national conference on the same topic, which took place in Friedrichshafen (southern Germany) on 21-23 June 2018. It is part of the series "Bodensee-Symposium", which ICOM Austria, ICOM Germany and ICOM Switzerland jointly organise every three years.

A summary conference report has already been made available to ICOM International and the Standing Committee MDPP in 2018. The discussions in Friedrichshafen showed that the current definition of a museum already contains features that are obviously not fulfilled by all those institutions that are generally considered to be museums.

Case studies ranged from the consideration of whether very small museums without full-time staff are better evaluated according to special criteria, to the regional cooperation of smaller museums with a more powerful central museum, and to university collections, which partly are museums, partly resemble museums, but most of which are easily distinguished from museums. After viewing these case studies, it became clear that some institutions are aware that they do not meet the criteria of the ICOM museum definition although they do not clearly contrast with the museum examples. An exhibition house that uses the term museum is easy to define, because tourist information and event listings in the mass media only offer the category "museums". But how do you proceed with an art collector who has created a separate organisation for exhibiting and interpreting art, or with the "department for history management" of the sports goods manufacturer "adidas", which stores and indexes unique specimens and keeps them available for the development of

product innovations, but no longer offers the classic instrument of a permanent exhibition to a general public?

The Revision of the Document “Standards for Museums”

In 2006, the German Museums Association, in cooperation with ICOM Germany, published the document “Standards for Museums”. In its introduction it states:

“The Standards for Museums formulate criteria for quality museum work and thus support a structured approach. The standards are intended to help museums to assess their own performance and to develop it continuously. [...] Every museum in the sense of the ICOM definition must in future be measured by the achievement of these standards.”

This direct reference to the ICOM museum definition is reinforced by the fact that the individual chapter headings closely follow the text of the museum definition, particularly the core functions. The “Standards for Museums” have significant implications because they are the central basis of German certification procedures for quality in museum work. In addition, some funding bodies expect museums to either demonstrate in their applications that they meet these standards or have received museum certification based on these standards.

In 2019, the German Museums Association and ICOM Germany, together with the aforementioned KMBL have begun revising the “Standards for Museums”, as it has recently become clear that museum work has experienced a number of new emphases that these Standards have not previously reflected. Two examples of missing points are in participatory forms of interpretation and in all forms of digital work. The unclear state of development of the ICOM museum definition appears to be a stumbling block here because the outcome of the resolution in 2022 is unpredictable, but the formulation of the 2006 standards, which has become outdated, is not to be carried forward in 2024. In the meantime, the working group began the text work on the assumption that the core functions would survive.

It seemed appropriate to increase the number of core functions in deviation from the current ICOM museum definition. The 2006 “Standards for Museums” count four core functions (collecting, preserving, researching/documenting, exhibiting/communicating), whereas the current ICOM museum definition counts five. It is unanimously agreed that documentation is not a research strategy, but an independent, indispensable field of action for all museum work. Therefore, documentation should be named as an independent core function, so that the revised “Standards for Museums” will present six core functions.

In the event that the development of the ICOM museum definition takes an incompatible course, the working group discussed the possibility of using the UNESCO museum definition as an alternative foundational text, so that work can continue consistently. In its recommendation of 20 November 2015, UNESCO published the 2007 version of the ICOM museum definition as its definition of a museum. However, for ICOM Germany this would create the unsuitable situation of following the latest version of the ICOM definition within ICOM, but the UNESCO museum definition at the level of national cooperation.