THE MUSEUM DEFINITION HANDBOOK

An ICOM Define Publication
Bruno Brulon Soares & Lauran Bonilla-Merchav

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Words Inspiring Action

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to Alex and Milo
to Hugo

museums foster
PAGE 78 diversity and
PAGE 83 sustainability.
They operate and
PAGE 53 communicate
PAGE 69 ethically,
PAGE 72 professionally
and with the
PAGE 61 participation of
PAGE 65 communities,
offering varied
PAGE 74 experiences for
PAGE 86 education,
PAGE 90 enjoyment,
PAGE 92 reflection and
PAGE 94 knowledge sharing.

ICOM Museum Definition, approved on 24 August 2022

Foreword

In a poem published in 1913, Gertrude Stein wrote, '[a] rose is a rose is a rose'. This well-known quotation raises the problem of definition. How is it possible to define a rose, a flower that everyone knows? Centuries earlier, in another renowned poem, William Shakespeare suggested that even if we called it by a different name, a rose would always have the same scent. This indicates that a name is just a label that we apply in an attempt to identify a real object.

By the sixth century AD, the Roman Empire had reached its greatest expansion and was inhabited by peoples with very different languages, legal systems and cultures. It was in this context that Emperor Justinian undertook the monumental task of unifying the different legal codes into a single body of law: one that still underpins the majority of European legal systems today. In the course of this titanic work, the phrase *Nomina sunt consequentia rerum* – 'names are the consequence of things' – was coined.

These brief historical notes allow me to frame the inherent complexity of the work involved in creating a definition. If it is challenging to define a rose, how much more problematic must it be to define a complex, multifaceted cultural institution like the museum?

Between 2020 and 2022, the ICOM Define working group, under the expert leadership of Lauran Bonilla-Merchav and Bruno Brulon Soares, tackled this formidable task, building on efforts that had begun in 2015. As an organisation that has grown to include over 50,000 members from almost 150 countries, ICOM faced the challenge of articulating a definition for the museum that would represent a vast diversity of practices and viewpoints. The undertaking was as necessary as it was demanding.

But is it truly the case that names are the consequence of things? In more recent times, the linguists Ogden and Richards have offered a more nuanced way of understanding the relationship between an object and the word that designates it. In fact, this relationship is not direct; rather, it is mediated by the mental image we have of the object. This image is in turn strongly influenced by culture, values and experience.

ICOM's museum definition had to account for and include the various cultural approaches expressed by our members, but at the same time, it had to be as agile and clear as any working tool. The great challenge of the ICOM Define working group was to reconcile the necessity to formulate an inclusive definition that would honour and respect both the cultural diversity of our members, and the linguistic precision necessary for a functional definition. The resulting definition, approved in 2022, has since been translated into over 20 languages and counting. It reflects not only the great linguistic diversity of our organisation, but also the definition's broad relevance and applicability across various cultural contexts and institutional types.

The process of crafting this definition was long, complex and fascinating, and was met with enormous success at the triennial conference in Prague. This book is the result of the collective efforts of ICOM Define and the open consultations pursued with museum professionals worldwide. By exploring the range of meanings and interpretations given to each key term in the definition, the chapters that follow offer a refreshing and accessible way to communicate this new tool to museum workers, specialists, community members, educators, students and policymakers.

It is therefore with great pride that I present you with this timely and valuable publication.

Emma Nardi

ICOM President

Acknowledgements

This Handbook is based on data received from 126 National and International Committees, Regional Alliances and Affiliated Organisations of ICOM. We extend our deepest gratitude to these committees for their tireless efforts, active participation and unwavering support throughout the ICOM Define process. It is thanks to them that we were able to gather the voices of thousands of museum professional from all over the world.

We also express our sincere appreciation to the members of ICOM Define from 2020-2022 and 2023-2025. Much of what is presented in this Handbook stems from hours of deliberations over the nuances of terminology and translation.

A special thanks goes to our colleagues who provided invaluable feedback during the revision of this manuscript, including members of ICOM's Executive Board (particularly Emma Nardi for strongly encouraging us to write this book, and Inkyung Chang, Rachelle Doucet, Carina Jaatinen, Tayeebeh Golnaz Golsabahi, Luis Raposo, Steph Scholten, Kaja Sirok, Jody Steiger, Deborah Tout-Smith and Karin Weil for their insightful remarks); members of ICOM Define (particularly Ana Labrador, Nicolas Kramer and Marie Clarté O'Neill), and professionals including Ech-Cherki Dahmali, Danielle Kuitjen, Leonardo Mellado, Soraya Pérez Gautier, Carlos Serrano, Kate Seymour, and Sally Yerkovich.

Finally, on behalf of all ICOM members, we offer our heartfelt gratitude to our families, whose support and sacrifices make all of our work possible.

Introduction

Three years have passed since ICOM adopted its new museum definition, and we have observed with great appreciation how widely it has been embraced by the sector, evidencing its relevance among museum professionals today. The definition has been referenced in numerous papers and publications. It is being considered in the development of policies around the globe and is informing professional training and practice. In light of its impact, we felt it necessary to address and analyse each specific term that appears within the definition, building on reflections surrounding their meanings and significances that emerged during the participatory ICOM Define process.

This book offers the opportunity to delve more deeply into the rich and diverse data collected throughout the complex task of defining museums in the twenty-first century. Our intention is not only to review the concepts theoretically, but also to probe their operational value and investigate how these terms can be – and often already are – applied in museums. This publication, designed to be concise and accessible, seeks to enrich the interpretation of each of these terms, taking as our starting point a close examination of the cross-cultural exchanges that culminated in the creation of the current museum definition. In doing so, we aim to provide museum professionals with deeper insights and practical guidance on implementing these foundational concepts in their work.

After years of lively global debate, the current ICOM museum definition was overwhelmingly approved by 92.4 per cent of the organisation's representatives during the Prague General Conference in August 2022. This long-awaited definition, which is part of ICOM's Statutes, represents a significant consensus among its members. In an international organisation characterised by the growing diversity of its over 50,000 members, this common ground was reached through a

carefully crafted process: one involving five rounds of consultation and open debates that were systematically conducted between 2020 and 2022.[1] As Co-Chairs of the working group responsible for facilitating this profound global conversation among museum professionals, we view the definition – comprising 57 words in its English version and centred around 25 key terms – as a foundational step towards the larger exercise of acknowledging and comprehending what it means to make and sustain museums in the present day. This publication is an invitation to anyone involved with museums to transform these words into action, shaping the present and future of the sector.

For some, these terms may represent actions already well-established in their institutions; for others, they might pose challenges requiring innovative approaches to basic museum procedures. What is important to underline is that each of these terms was proposed and highly evaluated by ICOM committees, which reached out to their members and museum professionals to formulate their consultation responses. The construction of the current definition began with the submission of 2,085 terms/concepts, and their corresponding descriptions, in English, French and Spanish (ICOM's three official languages) during Consultation 2. This phase yielded extensive quantitative and qualitative data addressing the basic question: *what* terms are necessary to define museums today? Building on these initial

1 Throughout this publication, we refer to the various stages of consultation, with particular emphasis on the responses from Consultations 2 and 3. Detailed information about the ICOM Define process, including data and comprehensive descriptions of the methodology that led to the current definition, is available on the ICOM website. A summarised version, as well as an initial reflection on new terms, is available in Bonilla-Merchav, L. and Brulon Soares, B. 2022. 'Arriving at the Current Museum Definition: A Global Task and a Decentralising Exercise', *Museum International*, Vol. 74, Nos. 3-4, pp. 134-147; DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2022.2234200.

results, Consultation 3 introduced a framework of seven dimensions, enabling committees to evaluate the proposed terms for overall acceptance and preferred usage: the museum entity, the entity qualifier, the museum's actions, its objects/subjects, the experiences it offers, its audiences and targets, and its social values. These dimensions, along with the key terms that emerged as those most widely accepted by committees, played a critical role in shaping the new definition. They also informed the structure of this Handbook, which encourages readers to explore and expand on the following questions: What is a museum? What does it do? How does it operate? Why is it relevant in the present?

The contributions of committee members made it clear that they wanted a definition that could respond to all these dimensions and questions. After a meticulous drafting process, which ensured the integration of all top-rated concepts, various definition proposals were submitted to committees for further analysis and evaluation (Consultations 4 and 5), leading to the final version ultimately adopted in Prague. The structure of the definition itself was also carefully considered. The initial sentence is phrased in the singular form, a deliberate choice that is particularly significant for its application in legislation and public policy. It provides an objective yet purposeful statement that can be applied across various contexts, serving as a statutory basis for diverse types of museums. In contrast, the following two sentences shift to the plural, taking on a more aspirational tone. These sentences embody the broader values and purposes of museums, more generally articulating the collective mission of the sector.

The Museum Definition Handbook was created to foster both a conceptual and practical understanding of each term within the ICOM definition of 'museum', with the goal of inspiring meaningful action. For each entry, we consistently followed a similar approach: (1) We began by reviewing the detailed results from the multiple stages of ICOM Define research, interpreting the different

meanings and varying interpretations assigned to each term by colleagues from around the world; (2) We then considered the term's historical context within ICOM as an organisation, as well as its multiple uses and nuances in the various regions represented in the research; (3) Finally, we consulted museological scholarship to support our understanding of the terms in specific contexts and case studies, which helped refine our discussion of each term in ways that may prove useful and relevant to the global museum sector. This Handbook is not meant to provide a definition for each term, nor is it a glossary for the museum definition as such; rather, it is conceived as a general roadmap designed to guide professionals in translating flexible concepts into practice.

The Handbook is organised into four sections: I. The Museum Entity, II. The Museum's Activities, III. Museum Operation, and IV. The Museum's Values and Purposes. Each of the 25 key terms contained within the museum definition has been allocated to the section where we felt it best fit, and is presented in the same order as in the definition. It is important to note that some terms might be suitable for more than one section. For example, we included 'in the service of society' in the Museum Entity section, but it could certainly have been placed in the Values and Purposes section. Similarly, readers may notice that certain entries reference other terms within the definition. This reflects their interconnected nature, as many concepts overlap and complement each other. While each term holds valuable significance on its own, it is crucial to view the definition holistically, considering how the terms interact to create a fuller understanding of the museum's functions, role and purposes.

No concept is truly universal: many interpretations of specific terms can arise depending on geographic, cultural and linguistic contexts, as well as practical application. We have thus made a conscious effort to unpack the meanings of the terms discussed in this Handbook by providing examples drawn from different parts of the world, and informed by our own experiences, observations,

research and engagement with the process of leading the collective construction of ICOM's museum definition. Our interpretations as academics were informed by the many ICOM Define meetings in which terms were debated. Equally important were the numerous webinars in which we were invited to discuss the Define process and engaged with participants, listening to their diverse viewpoints and receiving valuable feedback. Finally, our manuscript was revised by members of ICOM Define and ICOM's Executive Board, as well as a range of specialists in the field, whose expertise and situated perspectives contributed to a broader and more nuanced approach to each of the key terms.

This publication is motivated by our understanding that the participatory and global process of crafting and adopting a new museum definition reaches far beyond the 57 words and 25 key terms that form the three interconnected sentences that are now part of ICOM's Statutes. The driving force behind these pages lies in the wealth of material collected, and the intense collaboration with thousands of professionals who enriched our comprehension of what a museum is and can be. We hope this Handbook will open new pathways for reflection, leading to actions across the different settings where museum work unfolds. We are also encouraged by the thought that it might spark further reinventing and redefining of this vital work. Above all, it is our wish that this Handbook may serve as an inspirational catalyst for international dialogue and mutual understanding among diverse professionals, scholars, students and community members, fostering unity as we come together to forge the museums of the future.

I. The Museum Entity: What it Is

Since the first definitions of the term 'museum' appeared in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, primarily in general dictionaries or encyclopaedias – and after ICOM incorporated its first global definition in the Statutes of 1946 – the museum entity was referred to as a place housing 'collections' (ICOM 1946). Over time, the terminology evolved, with the museum later referred to as an 'establishment' (1951) and an 'institution' (1961). These latter terms were adopted by the organisation to address the growing need for a definition of the museum as an administrative entity: one that could be referenced in legislation, policies and specific regulations at local, national and international levels.

In this section we comment on the adopted terms that *define* and *qualify* the museum entity: 'not-for-profit', 'permanent', 'institution', 'in the service of society', 'open to the public', 'accessible' and 'inclusive'. The noun 'institution', chosen by consensus among ICOM members to define a museum in legal and administrative terms, is qualified by other key terms that were retained since the last substantial revision of the definition in 1974, considered to be vital elements for the maintenance of museums in the present day (such as 'permanent' or 'not-for-profit'). Other adjectives have been used to emphasise and amplify some of the museum's most fundamental characteristics: to be 'open to the public' (present in the first ICOM definition of 1946, removed in 1951, and then once again included in 1961), as well as 'accessible' and 'inclusive', new terms included in 2022.

The definition also stresses the fact that the museum has a recognised social role, with the term 'in the service of society' integrated in 1974. Collectively, these and the other terms included in the definition reflect the evolving nature of museums, balancing continuity with adaptation to contemporary social and ethical expectations while reinforcing institutions' fundamental purpose and responsibilities.

Not-for-profit ICOM first defined the museum as a not-for-profit entity in 1974, the same year it affirmed the museum's role in the service of society. Since then, the term 'non-profit' (which prevailed until 2022, when it was replaced by 'not-for-profit'), could indicate a very specific legal entity, tax-exempt and regulated by strict rules, as is the case in countries such as France, Mexico, Singapore, South Africa and the United States.[2] In general, non-profit organisations are run by a board of trustees or a governing board that serves as an auditing body overseeing the museum's administration, and which consists of a specific group of individuals appointed in accordance with its statutes. These trustees do not receive 'shares' in the revenue generated by the institution, though they may receive remuneration for their time and expenses. Many museums, as non-profit organisations, have a legal personality that confers upon them certain benefits – particularly financial – and permits them to run with budgetary autonomy. However, this is certainly not the case of all museums around the world.

In the current definition, the term 'not-for-profit' reflects the importance of the concept to ICOM members and representatives (with a 60 per cent approval rate). Cognizant that the museum sector comprises a growing variety of management and funding models, the term 'not-for-profit' does not limit how museums generate income.

Museums not only gather funds through ticket sales but also through cafés, shops, hosted events and space rentals – practices that have become increasingly common. Rather,

2 Our research showed that the use of 'non-profit' and 'not-for-profit' can vary from one country to another. For instance, in Australia 'not-for-profit' is used by the Taxation Department as a specific legal entity, similar to the sense given to 'non-profit' in the United States or in Costa Rica. The adoption of 'not-for-profit' in the definition was informed by the majority of responses received in ICOM Define consultations.

the integration of the concept into the definition implies that any profit generated from diverse revenue sources is reinvested into the museum in some way,[3] which is to say that organisations generating income for independent shareholders are not complying with what is expected of a museum (Bonilla-Merchav and Brulon Soares 2022). In other words, any profit generated is used towards the museum's development and activities, to secure and strengthen the institution's financial sustainability and its potential for expansion in collections, programming or even infrastructure. The notion that museums reinvest all income has featured in all proposed definitions since 1974, highlighting ICOM's commitment to safeguarding museums' roles as public service institutions; especially with the advent of neoliberalism since the 1980s, this has marked a greater emphasis on market-oriented organisations. In most cases, opponents of a profit-driven approach for museums have highlighted its potentially detrimental impact on their public role, putting into question whether they are operating in the service of society.

With limited public funding and a growing need to generate revenue from private investors and visitor services, museums are today turning to new business models and fundraising campaigns to secure their permanence and financial perennity (see **Permanent**). For this reason, many museums, either private or public, community-based or run by corporations, face the challenge of fulfilling their social role while responding to the needs of a rapidly changing financial environment.

Although defining museums as not-for-profit institutions inherently opposes profit-driven models, it is important to

3 We recognise that, in the case of public museums, their revenue is sometimes returned to national or regional treasuries. Their not-for-profit character is, therefore, subjected to the wider management of all public institutions in a given country or region.

recognise the emergence of museums operating with business-oriented mindsets, and to consider varying approaches to generating income. Debates around whether museums should serve the interest of companies are not new, and in the twenty-first century these discussions have become more complex due to the variety of societal demands made on cultural institutions (see, for instance, Frey and Meier 2006). For decades, and often owing to decreased public financing, museums have followed a capitalist investment strategy by accepting funding from sources that may not entirely align with the museum's mission or values (see **Ethically**). This includes receiving and publicly promoting corporate donations for blockbuster exhibitions, or aligning their brands with specific corporations to increase institutional revenue.

There are other specific examples of museums adopting a profit-making model by increasing brand visibility (even if this profit doesn't necessarily translate into increased profit-shares), such as the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea, which is run by the Samsung Foundation of Culture, or the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris. We might also cite for-profit museums such as the Museum of Sex in New York City or the ArtScience Museum in Singapore, the latter integrated into a resort and self-defined as 'a different kind of museum'. The matter is complex at the grassroots level as well, as there are community-based museums or ecomuseums that follow business models which generate profit from heritage. In these cases, individuals running or participating in the museum's activities may generate an income, yet such models help keep often-endangered heritage alive and boost local economies.

The fact that ICOM considers museums as not-for-profit institutions helps ensure that their goals and mission statement are more ethically aligned with societal needs, rather than with the interests of a few shareholders. However, we acknowledge

that striking a balance between the two has proven to be one of the contemporary challenges of museums seeking financial sustainability. Nevertheless, including such a key term in the definition strengthens museums' public vocation, ensuring that they are not wholly aligned with market dynamics, nor contribute to the reproduction of inequalities created by the expansion of global capitalism.

In short, incorporating this term into the definition serves as an essential reminder that, regardless of a museum's legal status – whether public or private – their management objectives and ethical conduct are guided by a not-for-profit approach focused on serving the public good. As this entry suggests, museums have implemented mixed models to cover operating expenses and secure their financial sustainability, with funds reinvested to support their missions. By operating as a not-for-profit organisation, a museum reaffirms its commitment to its mission and, instead of capitalising heritage solely for commercial gain, strives to make it accessible to everyone.

Related terms:[4] Charity, Non-profit, Non-profit-making organisation.

Permanent The term 'permanent' has been present since the first definition of museums was published in the ICOM Statutes of 1946: a text that, in that context, stressed the need for permanent exhibition space. During the organisation's first five years, the term shifted to occupy a more primary place within the definition, characterising the museum as a 'permanent establishment' (1951). In the current definition,

4 For each of the entries on the terms included in the museum definition, we have proposed related terms that may help readers expand their comprehension. Most of these terms were proposed by respondents during our consultations. These are neither synonyms nor an exhaustive list of possibilities of semantic relations, but rather offer a means to further interpretation.

'permanent' underpins the museum's role as a continuous safeguard of heritage, ensuring its perennity and stability as an institution. It aims to protect museums and their important social role from political or governmental decisions that could alter their status, relocate collections, or lead to closures: an unfortunate reality that persists worldwide.

As some of the ICOM respondents stressed during consultation on the museum definition: 'Museums are permanent but not eternal'. It is well-known that nothing lasts forever, but the concept of permanence within the definition implies that museums are perceived to have a durable existence, and that their continuously preserved heritage will be securely transmitted into the future. This is often the motivation that leads people to donate their collectibles to museums and to trust in their transmission to future generations. In descriptive responses to consultation, the idea of a 'permanent institution' was connected to the recognition of this stable social role and continuous service to society over a long and sustained period. A museum is meant to fulfil its social role continuously and in a stable and reliable manner, perpetually working towards achieving all the fundamental tasks related to its stated mission, and thus transcending the volatile nature of our world. This, of course, is not to suggest that museums are static. Very much on the contrary: to remain both sustainable and relevant as institutions, museums adapt to constantly changing social realities and needs. As such, ICOM respondents considered museums as institutions that are resilient in the face of adversity, ensuring they continuously pursue their missions despite the challenges of an ever-changing world.

The notion of permanence is not, however, meant to undermine the flexibility inherent to eco or community-based museums. According to some of the first definitions of the ecomuseum, its experimental methods and spontaneous development by communities shaped a perception of its ephemeral

nature. According to Hugues de Varine (1978), depending on the degree of community engagement and their evolving needs, an ecomuseum might become 'useless' (*inutile*) to that community (p. 464) and end its activities. This conception reflects the inherent dynamics of museums driven by communities, which depends on the level of engagement and critical consciousness that it incites. However, the practices of early ecomuseums around the world displayed a strong tendency towards institutionalisation, with ecomuseums seeking legal and financial means to secure their long-term existence (see, for instance, Brulon 2015 and Lersch 2019). This was the case of the first initiative to adopt the 'ecomuseum' label in France: the Écomusée de la Communauté Urbaine du Creusot et Montceau Les Mines, whose statutes (issued in 1973) created an association with a long-term plan for its administration.

Additionally, it is essential to highlight that the notion of permanence encompasses the museum's fundamental responsibility of conserving museum collections in perpetuity, provided that those collections have been ethically assembled and can be ethically maintained. Museums ensure the sustainable care of collections, which may include re-collecting and the continuous reinterpretation of heritage in collaboration with diverse social groups. In this way, 'permanence' represents a museum's constant commitment to the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage. At the same time, its inclusion safeguards their role of caring for, researching, interpreting and sharing their collections with society at large, both at present and in the future. While in some cases, such as that of state museums in France, collectibles in a museum's catalogue have a special legal status, making them inalienable and imprescriptible (Bergeron 2023), in many others museum collections are not protected by law. Therefore, the permanence referred to in the definition seeks to empower museums to assert their right to continue preserving heritage in an ongoing, socially engaged

manner. This includes retaining custody over and providing care to collections that they rightfully hold, safeguarding them for future generations, and thereby fulfilling a key aspect of their social role.

Accordingly, within the context of the definition 'permanence' can be understood as reflecting the long-term nature of museum institutions. Their role and functions 'in the service of society' are perceived as ones that are to be sustained through time.

Related terms: Long-lasting, Perennial, Perpetuity, Sustainable.

Institution Since it replaced the word 'establishment' in ICOM statutes in 1961, the term 'institution' has been a key point of consensus among ICOM members, with 80 per cent of the consulted committees favouring its use. While some museum professionals and communities might prefer to use different terms such as 'space' or 'place' when referring to the museum entity (only 10 per cent of respondents), the widespread idea of the museum as an institution is present in most definitions of the term, such as the one adopted in 1998 by the British Museums Association, or the 2009 definition adopted by the Brazilian Institute of Museums.

Administratively, an 'institution' is a recognised organisation with an identifiable purpose and legal status: hence the use of the term in specific legislation, policies and other official administrative documents. In its broader sociological sense, the term 'institution' is used to describe social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated within a social group (Abercrombie *et al.* 2000, p. 179). In this perspective, an institution can be seen as a set of mores or even patterns of behaviour relating to major social interests: e.g. the church, law, family, universities and schools.

The notion of an institution as a set of established practices allows us to conceive the museum, beyond a building holding collections, as the place where musealisation occurs (on the concept of musealisation, see, for instance, Mairesse 2011). Assigning value to things through research, collecting, conservation, interpretation and exhibition makes the museum an institution comprising a set of regulated procedures. As part of museum work, such established procedures play a significant role in maintaining social structures: e.g. by establishing patterns of behaviour among the public, shaping identities or creating a safe environment for communities. Like other cultural institutions concerned with religious, scientific and/or artistic activities, museums are an important part of society; therefore, their relevance is dependent on their recognised social role and institutional status.

In descriptions submitted by ICOM committees, the term 'institution' is often associated with the museum's social role ('in the service of society') and its perennial commitment to achieving long-term goals (a 'permanent institution'). The term 'institution' has been described as encompassing 'dynamic organisations' and 'spaces for reflection and dialogue'. Some committees considered museums to be 'collection-centred' institutions defined as 'stable and reliable organisations' tasked with ensuring the preservation of collections on a continuous basis. The collection-centred approach, however, was mostly present in qualitative responses presented by European committees. Other committees interpreted the term in a slightly different way, reiterating the 'public' function of museums as 'public institutions', open and accessible – or as institutions 'accountable to stakeholders and the public'. Still other interpretations refer to museums as 'participatory' and 'inclusive' institutions that often interact with other social entities and communities. Some committees stressed the fact

that museums are not 'neutral institutions'; rather, they are institutions with real political and social roles.

As historically recognised institutions established in Europe, museums have aided in shaping societies' relationship with culture in various parts of the globe where Western values were propagated. Throughout the history of museology, multiple interpretations and shifting meanings were given to the notion of 'institution'. Although the term was commonly adopted in normative documents and definitions, it has also been critiqued by some schools of thought that are attempting to deconstruct the modern Western museum. For these critics, the term is associated with the 'classical' or 'traditional' form of the museum as a colonial and elitist institution dedicated to the conservation of material collections. This interpretation relates to a significant transformation in the museum's institutionalised form and social role, widely introduced in the 1970s and 1980s through New Museology (see, for instance, Desvallées 1992). The distinction hinges on the supposed contrast between traditional museums – associated with the metaphor of the *temple* – and non-orthodox organisations perceived as open *forums* (Cameron 1971). Since the second half of the twentieth century, innovative projects around the world were defined as 'new museums', 'ecomuseums' or community-driven initiatives that challenged the traditional form and purpose of the museum. For several decades now, debates on the status and functioning of such museums – often ones 'without walls' – question whether these initiatives fit in the ICOM museum definition. This partly has to do with early definitions of terms like 'ecomuseum', initially described as 'emanating' from the community and not possible to be defined in normative terms[5] (De Varine 1978, p. 467). Following these debates, some critics of the term perceive 'institution' as a notion that is too formal to define grassroots

5 In the original, in French, '*émanant de la communauté elle-même et dans lequel une normalisation rendrait impossible ce processus*'.

organisations without a legal status, or to be applied in the context of countries lacking specific legislation around museums.

However, if an institution, in its sociological sense, can refer to any established entity or social agreement, the notion should not be perceived as conveying a hierarchical value, nor seen as a top-down designation applied to the diverse forms that museums currently take. Like several other key words within the definition, the term 'institution' can retain multiple meanings and refer to various types of organisations and their processes. As entities shaped by human practice, institutions are constantly changing, and they may even be completely transformed through new processes of institutionalisation (the process whereby social practices become regularised).

As responses from consultations to ICOM members reflect, the overarching concept of community museums continually challenges and redefines our understanding of the conventional identity of museum institutions. As such, it is not possible to argue that they are *not* institutions, in the sense emphasised here. Many grassroots initiatives driven by communities have sought institutionalisation either by obtaining legal status (creating formal associations or issuing their own statutes and rules), by establishing governing bodies (the case of most community-based museums), or seeking support from other public or private organisations. While fighting for their own institutionalisation in order to be socially and politically recognised as 'museums', community-based initiatives are also provoking the reinvention of the 'classical' museum institution. This is precisely the case of Brazil's social museums, which are officially recognised by the state and declared as such for their specificity. However, they continue to fight for recognition as fully-established institutions, seeking the same status and resources as larger organisations. While their purpose, values and legal structure may differ, they usually act as museums in the practical sense: for instance, by researching,

collecting, conserving, interpreting and exhibiting in their own ways, and in response to local needs.

In short, museums can be referred to as 'institutions' regardless of whether they are public or private, large or small, governed by national bodies or driven by communities, and whether they operate on a long-term or ephemeral basis. This comprehensive term permits us to conceive of museums as a means for action: as entities that continuously conduct the specific kinds of procedures recognised as integral to museum work.

Related terms: Association, Establishment, Organisation.

In the service of society The intrinsic relationship between museums and society was strongly emphasised and reiterated throughout the ICOM Define consultations. One of their more evident social implications is the perception of museums as 'collective' institutions, whose mission is to engage diverse social groups and enable broad, equitable community participation as part of its core activities. However, museums assumed social roles well before ideas of engagement and participation became popular in the sector. At least since the mid-nineteenth century, museums have exerted a civic role of educating or 'civilising' certain segments of society – often to maintain the status quo. Only since the second half of the twentieth century have museums been more commonly perceived as instruments for social transformation, responding to specific social needs and acting to resolve them. This notion was globally popularised after the 1970s, echoing the debates of the Round Table of Santiago de Chile which involved ICOM delegates, Latin American authorities and intellectuals. This Round Table, organised by ICOM and UNESCO in May 1972, sought to raise general awareness of 'The importance and development of

museums in the contemporary world'[6] focusing on the context of Latin American countries. Its resulting Declaration proposed the idea of a '*museo integral*' or '*integrado*' (integral or integrated museum), defined as '…an institution in the service of society, of which it is an inalienable part, and which has within itself the ingredients that allow it to take part in the process of bringing awareness to the communities it serves […]'[7] (UNESCO 1973).

In 1974, when ICOM approved a new museum definition, the notion that the museum was an institution 'in the service of the society and its development' stirred reactions from conservative members who considered the phrase 'an inappropriate politicization of the purpose of museums' (Sandahl 2019, p. 5). But while it challenged the presumed neutrality of the definition (Brulon Soares 2020), it also raised awareness of demands from marginalised groups and social movements for museums to actively serve societies. Even then, the idea of the social function of the museum was not new. In the European context, this notion was already present in recommendations for regional and local museums and their roles for the reconstitution of societies in the postwar period of the 1940s and 1950s. The dissemination of new educational theories, and the development of open-air museums in Scandinavia connected to local groups and the environment, notably influenced ICOM's themes for its 5th General Conference, held in 1956 in Geneva. There, resolutions for local and open-air museums were adopted, considering their value for the 'benefit of local populations' (ICOM 1956, p. 9). More explicitly, in 1971 the museum

6 '*La importancia y el desarrollo de los museos en el mundo contemporáneo*', in Spanish.

7 '[…] *una institución al servicio de la sociedad, de la cual es parte inalienable y tiene en su esencia misma los elementos que le permiten participar en la formación de la conciencia de las comunidades a las cuales sirven* […]', in Spanish.

was interpreted as being at the service of society during ICOM's 9th General Conference. Held in Paris, Dijon and Grenoble, it was dedicated to the theme 'The museum in the service of man, today and tomorrow – the educational and cultural role of the museum'.[8] As considered by André Desvallées (1992, p. 17), this last event, followed by the Santiago Round Table, was the 'international starting point' for the ideas that served as basic principles for the New Museology movement, reaffirmed in the Declaration of Québec in 1984. Several examples of museum experiments around the world inspired these principles, using heritage as a resource for social development; these include the Casa del Museo in Mexico (1972-1980) and the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum in the United States (founded in 1967).

However, the turning point towards a widespread acceptance of the museum's social role came with the decentralisation of museological debates and the inclusion of voices from colonised countries, where museums assumed a pivotal role for the transformation of societies. In his keynote-manifesto of 1971, Stanislas Adotevi recognised that museums are 'theoretically and practically attached to a world (the European world), to a class (the cultivated bourgeoisie)' and 'to a certain cultural perspective' (Adotevi 1992 [1971], p. 122). This intellectual from Benin marked a moment of great inflection on the role of museums in a postcolonial world. Echoing him, former ICOM director Georges Henri Rivière (1971, p. 2) stated: 'For the museum, as an institution of public interest, to be truly "at

8 '*Le musée au service de l'homme, aujourd'hui et demain – le rôle éducatif et culturel du musée*', in French. For a general history of ICOM's conferences and influential themes see Baghli, Boylan and Herreman 1998.

the service of mankind today and tomorrow", it must adopt a constantly critical attitude to the aims of its action'.[9]

Reflecting such debates from the 1970s and associated with an early wave of museum decolonisation, the phrase 'in the service of society' remains vital in most countries today. Having received a high approval rate from respondents (75 per cent), this notion is associated with the democratisation of museums, being museums are now perceived as unrestricted and accessible social services. Likewise, respondents emphasised museums' commitments to various communities and their inclusion of diverse audiences and participants, opening their activities to people with different backgrounds, ethnicities, special needs, genders and sexual orientations (see **Inclusive**).

This broadening of engagement reinforces the idea of museums as dynamic spaces for social transformation. Defined by some as a 'public service', museums play a vital role as agents of change in advancing Agenda 2030 and beyond. As such, they are positioned to promote sustainability, support the creation of a more equitable, responsible and resilient present and future, and contribute to the wellbeing of all.

In serving societies, museums can take different formats and shapes: ones that are responsive to various social contexts and needs. There is no particular model museums follow to serve society. According to some respondents, museums continuously evolve, redefining their priorities and adapting their core activities through social inclusion, collaboration with other organisations and efforts to promote social change. This transformation is driven by the participation of communities and

9 In the original, in French: '*Pour que le musée, en tant qu'institution d'intêrêt public, soit véritablement « au service de l'homme aujourd'hui et demain », il doit prendre, face aux finalités de son action, une attitude constamment critique.*'

the work of critical and socially conscious professionals. Therefore, 'in the service of society' is a notion that applies to a wide range of experiences and examples, from the practice of Social Museology by marginalised communities in Latin America, to the transformation of museums' core procedures through the work of Indigenous curators in the South Pacific, or the creation of educational programmes aiming to enhance social inclusion in larger institutions throughout Europe.

While the inclusion of this crucial term within the ICOM definition is not new, additional terms in the current definition more explicitly underline how museums should provide that service (accessibly, inclusively, ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities). Museums now have wider missions as they seek to serve society, and a greater role in fostering 'diversity' and 'sustainability', committed to the wellbeing of communities.

Related terms: Public service, Social justice, Social responsibility, Social role, Social service.

Open to the public The 'public' nature of the modern museum is made explicit in most definitions to date. Initially, in *La Grande Encyclopédie* by Dreyfus and Berthelot (1885-1902) the museum was defined as a 'public building' ('*édifice public*'). In the context of ICOM, its first definitions emphasised the presentation of collections to the public ('collections open to the public' or '*collections ouvertes au public*', ICOM 1946). The phrase 'open to the public' was incorporated into ICOM's 1974 revised definition of the museum, along with the phrase 'in the service of the society'. This implies that the museum is open to all, belongs to everyone, serves society and, to a certain degree, operates under the auspices of the state. In this sense, the 'public' character of museums relates to their governance, referring to their representatives and stakeholders, as well as to their administration, which often follows governmental regulations and

obeys certain ethical principles to receive public subsidies (Mairesse 2005); this is in contrast to 'private', for-profit entities. While the adjective 'public' may describe a museum's public vocation – for instance, being in the service of society – the noun 'public' refers to all museum users or audiences, encompassing all segments of society and the people museums engage with, including their staff, partners and the communities with which they collaborate.

Following the French Revolution of 1789, an idea of the museum as belonging to the people took shape in Europe, corresponding to some early examples such as the Muséum Central des Arts (the Louvre). But even before that, the first public museums were being created from wealthy collectors' cabinets of curiosities. This was the case of the British Museum, established in 1753 by an act of Parliament, one that declared the private collections of Sir Hans Sloane as *public*. Another early example is the Uffizi Museum in Florence, which housed the collection of the Medici family. In that case, as early as 1582 the collections could be viewed by visitors who requested permission to study them, and in 1765 it was officially opened to the public. Later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the strengthening of nation states in Europe, national museums blossomed, conveying a concept of 'national heritage' and claiming a 'civilising' role. The notion of a museum open to all was a driving principle in the creation of the South Kensington Museum, in London, in 1857. Officially opened by Queen Victoria and conceived by Henry Cole, a British civil servant, the Victoria & Albert Museum (as it is now called) was the first in Britain to be open to the working class, following the 1851 Great Exhibition and its stated objective of suppressing 'all social distinctions' and extending the idea of national identity (Auerbach 1999).

While museums that serve a nationalist purpose still operate, in the twenty-first century we have witnessed an expansion of

the public service of museums, with renewed social responsibilities and a new sense of accountability due to the increase of civil participation in museums' processes and operations, and the engagement of communities and social movements. As a result, and as seen in consultation responses, the phrase 'open to the public', though particularly important to respondents, proved insufficient for describing the current understanding of a museum's social role and how it serves the public. According to ICOM members, and going beyond the idea of an institution that is simply open to the public, museums must be 'accessible' and 'inclusive'. The addition of these terms in the current definition shows a greater commitment of the sector to 'democratisation', 'equality' and 'social justice' – correlated terms that also appeared in our research (see **Accessible** and **Inclusive**). Responses reflected a shared vision of the museum functioning as a safe space for every community, welcoming diverse points of view and providing opportunities for knowledge sharing and intercultural dialogue. 'Representation' was also a key term, calling attention to the need to expand established frameworks of knowledge and visibility: for instance, nuanced museum research and interpretation can uncover hidden histories and communicate diverse narratives, following the public's interest in reflection and critical thinking (see **to Research**, **to Interpret** and **Reflection**).

Our consultations made clear that the concept of 'open to the public' is a flexible one. In some interpretations, the 'public' nature of museums intersects with the idea of a 'permanent' institution: one that remains accessible to the people it serves. In this sense, building a community of users through public outreach, social service and integral participation is vital for a museum's long-term existence and continued social relevance. Some responses suggested that the functioning and operation of museums – not just their exhibitions, archives and collections – should be made public. Today,

museums are increasingly taking audiences behind the scenes (for example, offering tours of storage facilities or conservation labs) or engaging them at various levels within their work, through co-curation projects or community collaboration (see **Participation** and **Communities**). Other respondents, meanwhile, emphasised the notion that museums preserve tangible and intangible heritage in 'public trust', prioritising the public use of its resources through conservation, education and knowledge-sharing activities. According to these perspectives, museums are accountable institutions, with all activities – including research, documentation, conservation and interpretation – remaining open and transparent, guided by ethical principles, and sensitive to cultural differences and the diverse communities they serve. Ultimately, a museum's public nature is not just about accessibility, but also about fostering trust, inclusivity, and shared stewardship of heritage.

Related terms: Audience, Open to society, Public, Public service, Social service.

Accessible As underlined by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience in their response to our research, museums are perceived as physically, emotionally and intellectually equitable. At the heart of accessibility is the commitment to making a museum's collections, programmes and communication available to, and in potential dialogue with, anyone who wishes to experience them – both in the present and the future. Museum collections do not belong to a select group within society; they belong to all of humanity. As part of its 'service to society', a museum has the responsibility to ensure the heritage it holds is equally accessible to everyone, regardless of socio-economic status, physical or mental abilities, age, religion, gender, race or any other differentiating factor. This, of course, requires specific efforts by museums, including improving infrastructure (such as installing ramps and elevators),

enhancing interpretive materials (e.g. signage in braille and accessible language in wall texts for different ages and educational levels), providing appropriate equipment (ranging from wheelchair loans to audio guides for the visually impaired), ensuring well-trained staff to support the museum's initiatives, working closely with diverse communities to comprehend and meet their needs, and providing free or low-cost opportunities to engage with the museum.

In the past few decades, the notions of 'access' and 'accessibility' have gradually expanded, moving away from interpretations based on the 'medical model of disability' to consider the idea of 'social disability'. In most recent interpretations, these terms serve to expose barriers related to health, education, communication, transport and labour relations, as well as those imposed by the environment and any form of social discrimination (Sassaki 2019). According to this perspective, an accessible museum makes every effort to remove the barriers that impede people from accessing their history, heritage and culture: a fundamental human right according to some respondents. As such, one of the central roles of museums is engaging and empowering the diverse communities that they serve, rather than focusing on the specialists and elite groups with necessary 'cultural capital' that historically formed their audiences (Lawley 1992, p. 38).

Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of accessibility referred to providing access for audiences with disabilities and other excluded groups, often viewed as 'target communities'. Over time, however, it has evolved to encompass the consultation and participation of these communities in decision-making processes and projects designed for them, aligning with the principle of 'nothing about us without us' (see **Inclusive**).

In the twenty-first century, and particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, accessibility has also come to mean virtual

access to information that museums can share with the public: for example, access to their collections and digital documentation of their exhibitions, research, interpretations and programming. Physical distance from the museum should not prevent interested audiences from accessing it. Furthermore, museums can create digital repositories of scientific information and intangible heritage, collaborating with users to widen their collections and disseminate knowledge through innovative approaches to technology.

Accessibility also means that museums are expected to be creative in ways that attract and empower their audiences, thus making all aspects of museum work available to and understood by everyone. It has become increasingly popular to showcase restoration projects within gallery spaces, hold conversations with curators and create visitor paths within storage spaces. These practices of exhibiting the museum's 'internal' work to the public is also part of making heritage public and available to those who wish to see, learn from and preserve it.

Educational departments play a fundamental role in making the museum accessible. By mediating and facilitating the knowledge sharing that takes place within museums, educators also ensure that this knowledge is attainable to the widest and most diverse communities possible. The educator's role is essential, from working with curators to developing wall texts and catalogue entries relevant to specialists, adults and youth alike. Their work is crucial to establishing innovative programs that can facilitate appreciation by visitors of all ages, including infants, people with disabilities or who are neurodivergent, or those who face exclusion owing either to their class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or cultural background. Today's museums, usually through their education departments, offer a variety of experiences that extend beyond traditional knowledge sharing, enhancing accessibility to the heritage they

preserve (see **Varied experiences**). These experiences can be intellectual, but also sensorial, spiritual and/or entertaining, and one of the values of accessibility is the museum's role in aiming to make these experiences available to wider and more diverse communities. By offering a richer array of experiences, museums engage visitors who come to them for different reasons, ultimately broadening access to heritage.

In operating in ways that are accessible, inclusive and show a commitment to diversity and community empowerment, museums ensure their relevance to society, and therefore their long-term sustainability. For museums committed to these values, every effort should be made to make all visitors feel welcome, respected, and valued. When the communities that go to museums feel comfortable, confident and treated with dignity, they are more likely to return, thus, enhancing a sense of belonging within the museum environment and a commitment to its mission. If, on the other hand, museums do not adapt to the evolving needs of diverse audiences, they risk being perceived as irrelevant, exclusive or out-of-touch places that are designed to serve only a select few and not all members of society.

Related terms: Available, Democratic, Dignity, Equal access, Equitable, Equity, Human rights.

Inclusive Although it was only incorporated in the museum definition in 2022, the term 'inclusive' has been at the centre of ICOM debates for several years, with growing relevance among professionals and institutions. In the process of co-constructing the definition, the term appeared in the top rankings, receiving 78 per cent approval. Amid multiple understandings of the term, it can be interpreted as a *value* that guides museum practice and as a *qualifier*: the museum as an inclusive institution. In a general sense, an inclusive museum is open and welcoming to all, prepared to engage with a diverse audience and

to serve society in numerous ways, notably by considering the specificities of different social groups, their needs and diverse perspectives. Therefore, the term is also connected to 'accessibility' and 'diversity' and is frequently associated with 'participation of communities'. In a more specific sense, to be inclusive means to be a proactive institution, combating social exclusion and prejudice in all its forms; this can be achieved, for example, through audience development, educational programming and exhibitions, or the enhancement of mutual understanding between divergent social groups. As such, recent decades have seen an increasing number of museums working closely with marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as people in prison, homeless people, victims of abuse or migrants.

Inclusivity also implies hiring professionals from diverse backgrounds and identities, which will ultimately reflect in museum governance and practice. To be an inclusive museum, in this sense, implies a structural change that involves all museum activities, policies and professionals. Rather than being limited to specific projects or outreach programmes, inclusivity guides the daily practice of museums, serving as a core aspect of museum ethics, while demonstrating a heightened awareness of the institution's social role and potential impact.

In the 1990s, when the concept began to appear in European policies and was introduced into the museum sector, 'social inclusion' was used to combat 'social exclusion', positioning museums as agents of social change. Since then, a growing body of research in museum studies has proposed to radically rethink the museum's social role, its purposes and goals, thus renegotiating museums' relationship with society (Sandell 2003). In most cases where social inclusion has been applied to museum practices around the world, we have witnessed a greater involvement of educational departments or those concerned with audience development and community outreach. However, ICOM Define responses propose

that an inclusive museum, one which is a 'non-discriminatory space' used for critical dialogue and that fosters diversity, involves the entire inventory of museum activities. From the perspective of museum governance, for example, to be inclusive involves the sharing of authority and power with communities in decision-making processes – comprising collecting, conserving, documenting, interpreting and exhibiting. Furthermore, by narrating diverse stories through its collections and exhibitions, museums may become more inclusive to people from different religious and cultural backgrounds, races, genders, sexualities and ages. In collecting practices, museums become more inclusive when they engage with diverse groups to redefine acquisition criteria or through re-collecting[10] practices informed by partnerships with these communities. With respect to audience outreach, to be inclusive mostly correlates to the diversity of a museum's audience at large, rather than referring merely to its visitor numbers. All of this can be achieved through policies that prioritise equity, diversity and inclusivity, in turn reflected in staffing, administration and in collaborations with marginalised and historically excluded groups.

Museums are welcoming and safe spaces for all. However, some ICOM respondents raised concerns regarding the idea of museums being inclusive of all people in every society. As a global organisation, ICOM recognises that the use of the term 'inclusive' or 'diverse' can be constrained by national legislation in some countries, where certain communities are criminalised based on gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity or nationality. Nevertheless, the use of the term within the museum definition reaffirms museums' commitment to human rights and social justice: principles that guide ethical and inclusive practices

10 Changing the collection by introducing new criteria and looking into areas that were not previously prioritised. When it is used, it usually implies a critical sense of reparation.

around the world, despite local differences, and helping to dispel exclusionary views and beliefs.

By emphasising the pressing need to become more inclusive, accessible and diverse, several museum projects have been developed with multiple concerned partners and grassroots organisations, frequently influencing mainstream institutions. For instance, in 2023, the Museum of Transology, in Brighton, UK, published the *Trans-Inclusive Culture: Guidance on Advancing Trans Inclusion for Museums, Galleries, Archives and Heritage Organisations*, in partnership with the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG). The guide serves professionals by setting out an ethical framework to support cultural organisations in advancing trans inclusion. This example illustrates how museums can enhance their social relevance by informing society, promoting mutual understanding and combating prejudice. Another example is the Museu Vivo do São Bento, a self-defined 'living museum' and ecomuseum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Its multiple activities and exhibitions call attention to marginalised populations marked by the history of colonialism and slavery in the suburban neighbourhood of Baixada Fluminense, denouncing the social exclusion and unequal access to cultural life experienced by most of its communities. By adopting an antiracist agenda and mission, the museum is dedicated to bringing the stories of the peripheries and their inhabitants to the forefront: stories often overlooked or occluded by most national institutions. Broadening the spectrum of dominant narratives communicated by some museums, the Museu Vivo includes new voices into the sector through methods of participation, co-creation and critical reflection on the past.

The meaning of 'inclusivity' or 'inclusiveness' (terms that appeared in our research) sometimes overlaps with the notion of 'accessibility' (see **Accessible**). In a way, inclusivity is used

as a broader term for accessibility. While the latter refers to 'equitable access' for every person to museum spaces and activities, inclusivity entails inviting those who have been historically excluded into the museum, and challenging the structural and systemic barriers that produce this social exclusion. In other words, it has to do with tackling museums' legacy of institutionalised exclusion 'through addressing issues of representation, participation and access' (Sandell, 1998, p. 410). According to many interpretations of these terms, accessibility is a crucial aspect of inclusivity, but an inclusive museum is not only accessible and open to the public. It also acts for a more inclusive society; it campaigns for diversity and champions social justice, functioning as a safe space for all, fostering wellbeing and care for communities. Museum professionals, following inclusive museum ethics (see **Ethically**), work towards repairing past injustices, facilitating dialogue and the self-representation of marginalised groups.

Related terms: Accessible, Equitable, Inviting, Social inclusion, Social justice, Welcoming.

II. The Museum's Activities: What it Does

The basic functions or activities conducted by museums are an important part of any operational definition. In the case of professional associations, this inventory of activities serves to standardise a series of regulated procedures that are perceived as structural or even indispensable within museum work; they help to set some of the foundations for professional training. In the current definition, the operational activities of the museum include: 'to research', 'to collect', 'to conserve', 'to interpret', 'to exhibit' and 'to communicate'. These were informed by quantitative data indicating the core activities conducted by museums, as well as their meanings, semantic nuances and distinctions, according to their descriptions in textual data. Such procedures continuously illustrate the core functions of museums as defined by scholarly literature: one that has helped to shape museum practice since the end of the twentieth century.

For instance, these terms closely reflect the PRC model (Preservation, Research and Communication), introduced by Peter van Mensch in the 1980s and referred to in most manuals and dictionaries of museology. According to this widespread model, the core functions of museums can be defined as Preservation (including collections management and documentation), Research (involving different areas of knowledge) and Communication (comprising exhibitions, education and public relations) (van Mensch 1985; 1992). Even in the present day, the relevance of this structure for museum professionals, was evidenced by some of the highest-rated terms in our initial rounds of consultations – 'research' being the top-rated term, followed by conservation/preservation. But some new functions were also considered vital in the definition, such as 'to collect' (replacing 'to acquire') and 'to interpret', indicating that

museums' functions go beyond the mere transmission of heritage.

In the following section, each of these activities are described *as verbs* referring to specific practices, and to the range of continuous procedures conducted by museums as part of their daily management. We understand that these may vary from one context or institution to another, and their possible variations or amplification in contemporary practices are also considered in the following entries.

to Research There was a time when museums were seen as places that provided definitive answers in any given subject area. However, contemporary museums are increasingly perceived as institutions that help their audiences explore new ideas and raise meaningful and relevant questions. Research, encompassing a wide range of procedures and methods, has become one of the most crucial operational functions of museums today. By setting the ground for all other museum activities, research fosters critical thinking and allows institutions to build and nurture trustworthy relationships with society. This is particularly important at present, in an era plagued by disinformation, misinformation and the use of internet for 'research', where algorithms or self-fulfilling searching can appear to compound and legitimise any idea. Museums remain bastions of knowledge production and communication that are based in research and fact-checking. That research is then made available to society through a variety of means and activities.

In the scientific sense, research is the intellectual exploration of knowledge within a determined field, following clear and objective methods. Traditionally, museum research has been associated with the scientific study of collections and the production of authoritative knowledge, highly dependent on specialised expertise. However, Western rationality as the sole path to knowledge is currently being challenged by the

decolonisation of thinking systems, a process through which other forms of knowledge – including Indigenous knowledge – have been shaping the interpretation of heritage. A more inclusive approach to knowledge and understanding has permitted museums to expand their production of reliable scientific facts. Today, museum research tends to involve collaboration with diverse and interdisciplinary professionals, engagement with members of source communities and involvement with their audiences, and therefore entails adopting pluralistic methodologies to share and co-create knowledge (see **Knowledge sharing**).

The term 'research' has gained particular importance in revisions of the definition adopted by ICOM since 1974, but its place has slightly varied, as has its semantic value. 1974 marked the first time ICOM considered 'research' a primary activity and driving force behind museum functioning (according to its French original version: '*le musée est une institution permanente […] qui fait des recherches concernant les témoins matériel de l'homme et de son environnement…*'; a literal English translation is: 'the museum is a permanent institution […] that does research regarding the material evidence of man and his environment…'). Later, in the 2007 definition, the term was included as one of several key museum activities (the museum 'acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits'). Moreover, following criticism from André Desvallées (2010, p. 57), the term 'research' ('*la recherche*') was replaced by the word 'study' ('*étudier*') in the French definition after 2007.

In the current definition, 'research' is regarded as a fundamental museum activity: the backbone of all other museum operations. This is not only supported by the fact that the term ranked highest during keyword consultations (76 per cent of responses in Consultation 2, and 93 per cent in Consultation 3), but also by its integral relationship with other museum functions, preceding and informing all other endeavours.

Respondents described museum research as being closely tied to the museum's collections and the disciplines related to their interpretation – for instance, in museums' efforts to conduct in-depth provenance research on future acquisitions or items already in their collections. It was characterised as an 'evidence-based' activity aimed at expanding knowledge and enhancing the understanding of tangible or intangible heritage. As such, research enables a museum's collection to contribute greater insights, while building trust within society.[11]

In a broader sense, some considered that research encompasses not only the study of collections, but also inquiries into the museum itself, its audiences, and its role. Such information is used as a means for self-improvement and to provide context for their actions, allowing museums to tell a variety of pertinent stories and to explore other forms of knowledge building. Moreover, as the pillar of all other museum activities, research was perceived in several contexts as the basis for critical thinking and reflection, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping museum practice.

An elementary characteristic of museum research is its interdisciplinary methodology (Rússio 1983, p. 121). Museums are known as places where different forms of knowledge intersect, and research is used to transcend traditional academic frameworks, offering fresh interpretations of heritage. Responses pointed out that museums are like research laboratories, where audiences and diverse communities are invited to engage in 'continuous experimentation' ('*experimentación constante*'), becoming spaces where varying ways of thinking converge through participation, and fostered by horizontal

11 Recent research in the United States (Wilkening 2021) and Germany (Grotz and Rahemipour 2024) has shown that museums rank among the most trusted institutions in their respective countries. These studies indicate that the public perceives museums as reliable sources of accurate information.

and dialogic methods. Thus, museum research holds a distinct social purpose and plays a critical role in promoting intercultural understanding and the democratisation of knowledge. This aligns with museums' commitment to accessibility and inclusivity, but also with the sustainability of endangered forms of knowledge in the world. A practical exemplar is the Museu da Língua Portuguesa in São Paulo, Brazil, a museum that has developed a research and educational programme devoted to the preservation of Indigenous languages in the country. This initiative not only creates new ways of valuing this endangered linguistic heritage, but also actively involves Indigenous researchers and educators in creating new exhibitions. Another example is the District Six Museum in South Africa, which preserves the vibrant cultural history of this section of Cape Town that was forcibly removed during Apartheid. Working closely with individuals who were displaced, the museum reconstructs memory through the collection of oral histories, photographs, personal objects and archival work, thus serving as a space for advocacy, education and reconciliation.

Diversifying research practices and methods is an essential task for museums today: one that aligns with all other functions, purposes and characteristics set forth in the definition. Research can provide a foundation for greater inclusion, and it can entail greater participation of communities, making it possible for diverse audiences to feel more 'seen' by the institution: more fully recognised as part of the society that the museum serves. If the heritage, history, knowledge, memory and vision of those who have been marginalised or made invisible is presented in the museum, then the institution's social base will broaden, increasing trust, respect and a sustained commitment to and from audiences.

Some, however, question whether research can be perceived as a universal function that all museums can accomplish

– especially when considered in its academic, 'scientific' or specialised sense. Smaller institutions often face challenges due to limited personnel or resources, making traditional research difficult to undertake. While the current definition identifies research as fundamental to the functioning of museums, smaller museums or those run solely by volunteers can be assured that their commitment to sustaining and generating knowledge and creating new interpretations of heritage is, in itself, essential to this work. In a broader and more inclusive sense, research can take many forms. It is conducted when a museum consults its scientific board for validation, or when museums recruit academics and other members of society for a specific project, or for making decisions about acquisitions or deaccessioning. Research may also refer to consulting communities, such as when younger generations seek knowledge through conversations with elders. Oral history projects, the creation of open forums for community exchange on a specific subject, or even assemblies within community-based museums – all of which facilitate the sharing and documentation of knowledge – can be seen as research activity. Furthermore, research can involve audiences in numerous processes, such as visitor studies and public outreach initiatives.

Whether grounded in 'scientific' methods or based on the sharing of knowledge with communities and audience members, research is what informs key museum functions, and thus represents a necessary activity for decision-making and good practice within institutions of all sizes and types.

Related terms: Authenticity, to Document, to Enquire, to Investigate, Knowledge sharing, to Study, to Trust.

to Collect While the term 'collection' is commonly used to describe a key component of museums, the action of collecting – or the verb 'to collect' – is less frequently adopted as one of the museum's core activities. In the current definition, the verb

conveys a more dynamic and transformative understanding of the museum's functioning and its relationships to heritage and communities. This thus signals a move away from a definition centred on the ownership of material collections, implied by the verb 'to acquire' used in the previous definition. While in most contexts 'acquiring' has a legal implication, meaning that museums necessarily own their collections, 'collecting' is a more suitable term to reflect contemporary practices, which do not always entail ownership. Collecting is determined by museums' strategic goals and collections policies, which can change through time. As such, museums are committed to collecting the tangible and the intangible, and collections are seen as 'living organisms' undergoing continuous transformation.

The first museum definitions from the early twentieth century differentiated between public institutions and private collections: the first term generally referred to an assemblage of objects exhibited to the public, the latter to individual collecting practices with a private purpose (see, for instance, Pomian 1990). ICOM's first definition of 1948 referred to museums as 'open-to-the-public collections' ('*collections ouvertes au public*') making specific mention to artistic, technical, scientific, historic and archaeological objects. The term 'collection', as a noun, was suppressed after 1961, and although the verb 'to collect' had never been used by ICOM in a definition, the notion that museums 'acquire' 'material evidence' was introduced in the 1974 definition, representing (in a narrower sense) the constitution of legally bound tangible collections. In 2007, an amendment to the definition integrated the broader concept that museums hold both tangible and intangible heritage, but the term 'acquisition' was retained, carrying a strong association with physical objects.

Far from being perceived as a separate, finite and static operation, collecting overlaps and intersects with other aspects of museum work, such as research, cataloguing,

conservation, documentation, interpretation and even exhibition. This holistic approach to collecting highlights the role of conservators, collections managers and other professionals who work with collections, now recognised as integral members of the museum team, rather than operating in isolation (Krmpotich and Stevenson 2024). As the driving force of many institutions, collecting is informed and abides by the museum's mission and values, but is also driven by its relationship with communities, and the ways in which the museum (re)presents their heritage and culture. This implies that, to maintain their social relevance and trustworthiness, museums collect by working with and considering members within civil society, including specific communities concerned with heritage preservation. In other words, to collect is a cooperative process that allows museums to engage with society in more powerful and sustained ways.

The importance of safeguarding permanent collections is certainly still a core element of most museums, according to consultation responses (see **to Conserve**). Nonetheless, based on the overall perception of what constitutes a museum today, the conservation in perpetuity of physical collections is not a universal trait, nor a central element of every museum. Some museums are responsible for keeping collections of digital data, including born-digital objects or other intangible references that allow them to carry out their key activities while serving society. Some museums don't have permanent collections, but they are constantly engaged in collecting for specific exhibitions and through research; therefore, they see themselves as 'museums'. Some hold collections in trust for social groups, such as Indigenous peoples and other communities, respecting their rights and ownership. In most of these cases, collections do not result from formal acquisitions (in a legal sense); rather, museums operate as stewards of heritage for the concerned groups. Based on the different ways museums

collect, contemporary collection management also reflects shifts in how collections are cared for. The sharing of authority and expertise with members of communities entails that the care for collections is extended to care for its users and all concerned peoples, which frequently involves addressing social and political issues through collecting practices (Emerson and Hoffman 2019).

It is also important to underline that in some responses the emphasis on research entails that collecting is a continuous activity informed by new discoveries and critical interpretations of heritage, thereby influencing education and public outreach. *To collect* is seen as a way of enhancing the interpretation of heritage, history and memory. As such, it is expected that museums with permanent collections commit to continually revising and updating their collections, seeking to exchange knowledge and propose new interpretations of the heritage they safeguard. In this sense, collecting may also be driven by the development of temporary exhibitions, wherein different narratives are built based on research that fosters new connections between items in a given set. Furthermore, the fact that museum collections are open to the public and accessible (as emphasised by some consultation responses) involves understanding that their interpretation and narration is not solely in the hands of curators. Museums are enriched when collecting and documentation practices involve users and communities. Engaging with diverse audiences allows museums to establish new collecting priorities, expand representation and enhance the interpretation of their existing collections. Through practices of co-curation and collaboration with communities, many museums are updating their longstanding collections, either through new acquisitions informed by these partnerships or innovative ways of producing knowledge (see **Knowledge sharing**).

At present, many institutions collect in various and nuanced ways, expanding the range and diversity of heritage that is being preserved for future generations. To address the challenges posed by limited storage, exhibition space and conservation resources, many have adopted citizen science initiatives and digital approaches. Collecting has also become a crucial practice for museums aiming to amplify the voices of marginalised groups whose histories are absent or underrepresented in traditional collections. The work of the Museo de la Identidad y el Orgullo in Costa Rica represents one example: there, a collection of LGBTIQ+ oral history testimonies is being collected, conserved and disseminated in the form of podcasts, making these stories available to diverse audiences. Similarly, and for many decades now, community-driven museums and larger institutions that engage with underrepresented social groups have been employing innovative methods to collect and preserve heritage. These efforts seek to fill the gaps left by the absence of historical evidence and to reveal silenced narratives. In these examples, museums use collecting as an instrument for historical and humanitarian reparation and social equity, fostering heritage justice.

Rather than simply collecting anything and everything, museums abide by collection policies, which help maintain coherence and institutional sustainability, and differ from archives or the French notion of *fonds*, which are indiscriminate about their holdings. Collecting is the act of selecting (after research has been done and following institutional missions and policies) what 'enters' the museum, what does not and what is deaccessioned. Ultimately, the term 'to collect' suggests a dynamic and continuous practice that, beyond obtaining and caring for examples of heritage, involves long-term exchange and meaningful collaboration to ensure proper preservation/conservation.

Related terms: to Acquire, to Assemble, to Build, to Care for, to Invest, to Safeguard, to Select, Trust.

to Conserve While there is ongoing discussion regarding the use of the terms 'to preserve' and 'to conserve', many responses to our consultations treated them as synonymous, alongside the term 'to safeguard'. The terms were often used interchangeably in English, with no clear preference for one over the other, while 'to conserve' was preferred in French and Spanish.[12] For other respondents, 'preservation' and 'conservation' refer to distinct but complementary practices related to the care of heritage. As such, these two (albeit distinct) terms intersect in the regular activities of museums. When a distinction is made, 'preservation' appears to designate a broader, proactive approach aimed at protecting heritage as a whole. 'Conservation', meanwhile, is used to refer more specifically to the scientific efforts undertaken by museums to prevent future damage or deterioration to heritage, and to the active stabilisation or restoration of objects that have already suffered damage or decay. Some responses indicated that conservation encompasses preservation, while others perceive it as the opposite. Both terms reflect the objective of ensuring continuity and heritage transmission. What was important to respondents (74 per cent) was that the museum definition should include a reference to the systematic activities carried out by museums to accomplish this goal, recognising conservation as one of their core functions.

While some committees defined 'conservation' as the 'active' process of caring for heritage, and 'preservation' as a 'passive' process (as in the intention to protect or keep heritage in good condition), this was not a differentiation considered in

12 In our view, this is probably why 'to conserve' received 56 per cent total approval in Consultation 3, while 'to preserve' received 53 per cent.

the choice of the term. ICOM Define ultimately opted to use the term 'to conserve' in the definition due to its primary use within the ICOM organisation on the recommendation of the International Committee for Conservation (ICOM CC), which referenced the ICOM CC's Definition of the Profession (1984) and terminology used within the conservation field as defined and ratified at the 25th ICOM General Assembly in Shanghai (Resolution 7, 2010). In the history of the ICOM museum definition, the term 'preserving' was adopted for the first time in 1951 (as a museum purpose), and later replaced by 'conserves', as a key museum function, in the revision approved in 1961.

ICOM CC defines the term 'to conserve' as an overarching concept that encompasses

> [a]ll measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. Conservation embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item. (ICOM CC 2008)[13]

Consultation responses add nuance to this understanding, using terms to further qualify this fundamental museum task such as 'care for', 'document', 'maintain', 'prevent the wasteful use of resources', 'promote', 'protect' (from physical degradation, theft or illicit trafficking), 'repair', 'save', 'secure' (from damage by humans and nature), 'steward' and 'transmit'. Furthermore, respondents explicitly stated that this umbrella term now includes intangible heritage as well.

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13 For more specific definitions, please see the ICOM CC 'Terminology to characterize the conservation of tangible cultural heritage'. Resolution adopted in 2008 by the ICOM CC membership at the 15th Triennial Conference, New Delhi.

It is essential to note that within professional conservation practice, decision-making processes are guided by ethical codes, principles and practices by which museums abide. In general, most existing professional codes, treatises and guidelines include rules around respecting the integrity and significance of the heritage asset, not adding or altering the object or knowledge being conserved, and ensuring reversible actions during any restoration. Following more recent ethical concerns (suggested within consultation responses) some museums are adopting Indigenous methods of conservation undertaken by or in close consultation with communities whose cultures, methodologies and materials are represented in given objects.

The new museum definition embodies the spirit of *Kaitiakitanga* in its commitment to care for collections. This concept, outlined in ICOM Aotearoa New Zealand's consultation responses, is defined as '[t]he practice of being a caregiver or guardian, recognising the living nature of *taonga* (ancestral treasures)'. In this sense, the fundamental concept 'to conserve' extends to sustaining access to the tangible and intangible narratives of human productivity, while safeguarding heritage and memory for future generations.

Related terms: to Care for, Custody, to Maintain, to Preserve, to Safeguard, to Steward, Stewardship.

to Interpret In the inventory of museum activities, interpretation precedes any form of museum communication, including exhibiting and mediating. Grounded in the well-accepted idea that heritage may yield multiple and varying meanings depending on its context of production, the social groups to which it belongs and the cultural setting in which it is embedded, interpretation can be understood as an ongoing and never-ending museum activity. 'To interpret' is a necessary step towards proper communication and, in the case of museums,

interpretation is grounded in research, but also in collecting and conservation practices. As a result of the knowledge produced and shared within museums, interpretation becomes an integral part of documentation, providing curators and education departments with diverse possibilities for communicating heritage and engaging with audiences. It can open museum collections to various ways of connecting with the public; it constantly promotes new opportunities for education, and it is a fundamental element for generating critical thinking and reflection.

This core activity represents a crucial aspect of museum work, especially in an era when many institutions are striving to effectively address calls for decolonisation, antiracism and the queering of collections, all while unravelling complicated, interconnected past narratives and bringing hidden stories to the surface through exhibitions and programming. At the heart of this work lies the interpretation and reinterpretation of heritage, both driving the museum's ongoing transformation. This shift towards inclusivity aims to cultivate a sense of shared ownership of heritage and encourages diversity at all levels of museum practice.

The verb 'to interpret', included for the first time in the most recent museum definition, was repeatedly cited in feedback from various committees. The notion that museums actively and continually interpret heritage highlights museums' proactive role as cultural creators, emphasising that they do not merely reproduce single truths about what is displayed. To interpret involves museums taking multiple – and sometimes contrasting – perspectives into consideration, listening to a plurality of voices, and opening numerous pathways towards understanding. This can present a challenge for those concerned with the authority museums might lose by including external or conflicting perspectives. Yet in the name of diversity and knowledge sharing, curators are not the only ones responsible for heritage interpretation. Rather,

this activity is based on active exchanges with audiences, underrepresented communities and other social groups, who may inform interpretation and inspire new and alternative ways of telling stories, sometimes even questioning the museum's official discourse (see **to Communicate**). This is the case of certain innovative exhibitions challenging museums' established narratives. In 2019, the Musée d'Orsay in France reinterpreted items in its collection to highlight the stories of Black models who had been anonymised or misrepresented in iconic paintings by modern artists. Grounded in multidisciplinary, innovative research, the exhibition *Black Models: from Géricault to Matisse* (*Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*) critically re-examined the representation of Black models, offering a counter-narrative to modernism that exposed and denounced the depiction and tokenisation of Black women as an integral component in the development of modern art (Sparks 2019).

This example illustrates what ICOM members phrased as the act of 'meaning-making' or 'transforming information based on research', while recognising museums as places for storytelling and imagination. In this sense, interpretation is the process of creating meaning, moving from 'what objects are' (in a singular sense) to what they mean (open to multiple possibilities). The term was described as a core element of museum education; but respondents also emphasised its role in highlighting audiences' 'right' to engage critically with the heritage presented. It also underscores the museum's vital role in facilitating the assimilation of new knowledge and ideas through exhibitions and public programming. In this context, interpretation incorporates new research and remains sensitive to social changes and cultural differences, fostering diverse and transformative readings of collections that empower audiences to reconsider the past, present and future.

To interpret is a critical thinking skill, and museums are increasingly viewed as spaces that enable audiences to question the intention and significance of heritage, allowing them

to create their own meaning from what is presented. By integrating the verb 'to interpret' into the definition, museums are moving away from presenting information and explanations authoritatively, or as singular truths. As hubs for innovative interpretation, museums serve as dynamic and open arenas where the public, members of communities, researchers and curators can continually challenge established and fixed readings of the past, while still acknowledging traditions.

Related terms: Critical thinking, to Engage, Explanation, to Imagine, to Reflect.

to Exhibit In 1946, one essential element in ICOM's first museum definition was the fact that they 'maintain permanent exhibition rooms'. Since then, the term 'exhibition' (or the verb 'exhibits', adopted in 1974) was retained in all subsequent definitions, usually associated with museums' public character or with museum communication. The first section of this Handbook emphasises how museums are 'in the service of society', evolving beyond their traditional role as spaces that gather and showcase heritage. Museums have sought to redefine themselves, moving away from being perceived solely as buildings that display collections or specific objects, to becoming spaces that enable significant and varied experiences with and through heritage. Nevertheless, exhibiting heritage to the public remains a cornerstone of museum work, and is one of the primary activities that distinguishes museums from other cultural institutions.

Consultation feedback revealed significant support for this term, with 60 per cent approval in Consultation 2 and 74 per cent in Consultation 3. Notably, some responses highlighted that exhibiting is the core function of museums within their communities. Exhibition creation was described as both a fundamental task and the outcome of museum work, which involves research, documentation and design. It was also considered a basic museum tool. Exhibiting was framed as an essential component of a

museum's mission to communicate and make heritage accessible, with some respondents asserting that this is to be achieved by all available means, including digital platforms and onsite presentations. One response suggested that exhibitions are museum's primary means of communication: through them, collections and knowledge are made available to society.[14]

The term 'to exhibit' was felt to be insufficient by some when interpreted as a lone task, and as such it was suggested that notions of interpretation, dialogue, critical reflection and communication be included alongside it. For this reason, 'to exhibit' is preceded by the verbs 'to research' and 'to interpret' within the current definition. Beyond simply (re)presenting heritage, through exhibitions museums strive to recreate or reconstruct memories, values, meanings and history. In this sense, they produce exhibitions that – sensitively and inclusively – share knowledge, styles, meanings, ideas, beliefs, interpretations, vestiges and evidence from the past and present. Moving beyond the perception of exhibitions as a form of unilateral communication, museums are frequently turning to co-curation projects in their bid to remain relevant and represent a greater diversity of narratives. Conversely, in recent decades, communities have created exhibitions to self-represent themselves within the museum setting.

Generally speaking, before mounting an exhibition, museums examine (through the diverse methods discussed in **to Research**), analyse (as outlined in **to Interpret**) and thoughtfully consider how to present and communicate heritage and meaning (as highlighted in the entries for **Accessible** and **Inclusive**). This refers to a key distinction made by G. Ellis Burcaw as early as 1975: 'An exhibit is a display plus interpretation; or, a display is showing, an exhibit is showing and telling' (1983, p. 115). This was echoed by one consultation response: 'Exhibiting

14 '*Es su medio de comunicación principal: a través de ella y la museografía, el museo pone sus colecciones y su conocimiento a disposición de la sociedad*', in Spanish.

is the arrangement of museum collections in a specific fiction and logic'. Others referred to it as storytelling, 'adding value' to that which is shown to the public.

Within the expanded conception of museum work that arises from New Museology and Social Museology, exhibitions came to serve as open discussions not only about what is being exhibited, but also about *who* and *what* is (re)presented and how it is shown. Direct consultation with communities has thus become a common practice (see **Inclusive**). As one respondent stated, 'We need to understand each other through museums networks and [this] must be reflected in our museum exhibitions'. Another respondent suggested that museums 'enhance understanding and encourage critical thinking by examining how context and culture change over time'. In other words, within the definition, the function of exhibiting is more than simply putting a collection or a gathering of heritage on display. Any exhibition presupposes some thought or analysis behind its conception, be it taxonometric, ecological, aesthetic, chronological, thematic, virtual, etc. The space or context in which an exhibition takes place, as well as its design, also play a crucial role in conveying given narrative(s) and experiences. Since museums are increasingly cognisant of the extractivist nature of displaying objects outside of their original contexts, they frequently reach out to audiences and communities in an effort to respectfully communicate their curatorial intent.

Exhibitions serve a wide range of purposes, such as highlighting the significance of specific objects, information and their relationships, or cultivating complex ideas or concepts with their audiences. They may serve to initiate a conversation on difficult heritage, or to foster dialogue between people with different points of view. Despite the spectrum of possibilities, museum exhibitions usually share a common goal of enabling the public to interact with heritage through various means (see **Varied experiences**). Instead of expecting passive consumption of what is on

display, museums are increasingly adopting inventive methods to engage visitors, creating varied experiences that stimulate them in multiple ways, whether aesthetic, intellectual, political, emotional, sensorial or spiritual.

Related terms: Display, Exhibition, to Explain, to Expose, to Present, to Show.

to Communicate In a broad sense, museum communication refers to the processes by which museums convey knowledge, values and experiences to their audiences, fostering enjoyment, education, engagement and interpretation. To communicate, in a museum environment, may encompass a wide range of methods and media, including exhibitions and accompanying texts, educational programmes, digital platforms, publications and interactive technologies. In the current definition, the verb 'to communicate' was removed from the primary inventory of the operational activities of museums (after its inclusion in 1974) – where 'exhibit' and 'interpret' already imply communication – and moved to the last sentence, describing the museum's *modus operandi* in its professional, ethical and participatory aspects. Although the term could also be included in section III of this Handbook which describes *how* museums operate, we consider the verb 'to communicate' as a core function of museums: one that gives purpose and meaning to all the other activities described in this section. Furthermore, we have considered linguistic differences that may influence the use of the term in museum contexts. While in English, the noun 'communication' is in more common usage, in French and Spanish, the verb 'to communicate' ('*communiquer*', '*comunicar*') holds greater meaning in museum literature, implying the 'transmission' and 'interpretation' of heritage.

In the context of the current definition, museum communication encompasses both the transmission of heritage and curated content, as well as the dialogic interactions between museums, audiences and a variety of disciplines. Denoting more than the

mere transfer of information, 'to communicate' was described by respondents as a crucial process undertaken by museums – one that allows for the telling and revision of established narratives, the (re)interpretation and (re)contextualisation of heritage, and the promotion of various forms of exchange. Through knowledge sharing and generating reflection, communication can help museums be more inclusive and accessible, utilising storytelling and cross-cultural interpretations to reach audiences in creative ways. For instance, inclusive communication presented in various formats can explore occluded histories, bringing to light undocumented narratives and fostering deeper engagement with diverse audiences. Several respondents explicitly connected communication to museums' values of diversity, equity and inclusion. The term highlights the museum's relational approach to its audiences, bridging curators' perspectives with the public through ongoing, accessible dialogue.

In this regard, recent debates informed by contemporary practices emphasise the dialogical aspect of museum communication. Museums today not only provide information to visitors, but also engage them in participatory experiences that foster reflection, critical thinking and meaning-making. Some museological studies have advanced our understanding of the audience's experience through reception research (Cury 2005). Expanding the concept of 'communication' in museology, these debates were influenced by communication scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero, whose concept of 'mediation' emphasises the role of cultural and social processes in shaping communication (1987). By shifting the focus from media – here understood as a cultural agent that can be manipulated by states or commercially-driven – and its effects, to how audiences interpret and integrate media into their daily lives and perceptions (for instance, investigating how people consume and experiment museums), the notion of 'mediation' challenges museums to consider the cultural and historical contexts in which communication takes place, beyond exhibition

spaces. By better understanding their audiences and their communication settings, museums enhance plural understandings of the world, encourage critical thinking and explore how context and culture change over time.

Other studies call attention to another significant shift in communication, whereby museums start perceiving visitors as co-authors of the meanings and interpretations they create through different forms of exchange (see, for instance, Livingstone 2003). Whether through interactive displays in science exhibitions, participation in educational programming or involvement in co-curatorship, audiences are increasingly recognised as co-creators in the processes of museum communication and meaning-making (see **Open to the public** and **Knowledge sharing**). This is evident in practical examples of co-curated exhibitions, where diverse sources of knowledge are brought into dialogue (often with collections) to generate new content. It is also evidenced in the adoption of folksonomy methods, which follow user-generated systems of documentation, classification and organisation, or in experimental workshops that contribute to the development of exhibitions. In this sense, intercultural communication shapes educational programming and further strengthens the participation of audiences and communities (see **Education**).

Museum communication fosters learning, dialogue, inclusion and co-creation, and can engage audiences as active participants. By expanding their methods and amplifying diverse voices (see **Diversity**), museums enhance intercultural understanding, deepen society's connection to heritage and ensure their relevance in a changing world.

Related terms: Dialogue, Dissemination, to Exhibit, Information, Interpretation, Knowledge sharing, Mediation, Publication, Transmission.

III. Museum Operation: How and With What it Operates

Over successive revisions throughout the twentieth century, the museum definition has roughly maintained its structure and retained some of its core elements: namely the museum entity, its basic activities and values. These three main elements have been reconsidered and meaningfully expanded in the most recent understandings of museums among ICOM members. What has also remained the same is the object and subject of museum work. Respondents continue to feel the importance of characterising the heritage they work with as 'tangible and intangible heritage' (with the concept of intangible heritage being integrated into the ICOM definition in 2007).

One significant modification in the current definition relates to words denoting the ways in which the museum operates, their common methodologies and *modus operandi*. Moving beyond the familiar activities of the museum, the latest definition evidences a clear change in its general operation: the *how* of museum work has been amply diversified (as previously demonstrated in Bonilla-Merchav and Brulon Soares 2022). To be 'accessible' and 'inclusive', and to serve societies in meaningful and multifaceted ways, museums today operate and communicate 'ethically', 'professionally' and with the 'participation of communities.' Compared to past definitions, museums in the twenty-first century operate in a more proactive manner, aiming to enact desired changes in engagement with tangible and intangible heritage, their world, their audiences and the communities concerned with their work. For this reason, this section considers 'tangible and intangible heritage' and 'communities' as central elements in museum work (representing the 'with what' and 'with whom' museums operate).

The discussion below concerns these indispensable aspects of present-day museum operations (and throughout their

contemporary history), alongside a deeper consideration of *how* museums should go about this work: 'ethically', 'professionally', and 'with the participation of communities'.

Heritage (tangible and intangible)

For most professionals in the sector, 'heritage' is an indispensable element of museum work. It is the basis for the activities of researching, collecting, conserving, interpreting and exhibiting, through which it is safeguarded, transmitted and transformed. While some museums exist without permanent collections, they operate with tangible and/or intangible heritage. Previous ICOM definitions preferred the term 'collections' (until 1974) and 'material evidence of people and their environment' (until 2007). Most respondents perceived the notion of 'tangible and intangible heritage', introduced in the 2007 definition, as the matter or essence of museum work, and thus necessary to retain in the 2022 definition. In most of its previous European usages, the term 'heritage' alone was synonymous with material culture. As such, committees felt it important to continue to highlight a broader understanding of 'heritage', including its immaterial manifestations. However, for some such a distinction is unnecessary; it is perceived as artificial and used by policy makers and professionals mainly for purposes of classification. In this sense, there are more holistic approaches to heritage, commonly found in Asia and Latin America, that consider the complexity of the heritage phenomenon as a whole and in tandem with society.

Some responses argued that heritage is a public good and that humanity has a right to heritage. In this light, it aligns with the authoritative vocabulary adopted by UNESCO in important recommendations such as the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (1972) and the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003). While ICOM's resolutions and

concepts align with UNESCO's definition of heritage, it is relevant to point out that the ICOM museum definition is often applied in contexts where official definitions of 'heritage' do not fully resonate. For instance, community-based museums frequently adopt more experimental approaches, using the 'heritage' label in ways that contradict classical, monumental and predominantly Western conceptions of the term. Traditionally, professional standards and aesthetic criteria are commonly used to designate – sometimes arbitrarily – selected sites, buildings, places and artefacts (see, for instance, Heinich 2009). In contrast, community approaches to heritage challenge the 'authorised heritage discourse' (Smith 2006) upheld by institutions such as ICOM or UNESCO, embracing a broader and more inclusive understanding of what merits preservation. The problem with the 'authorised' discourse, according to Smith (p. 29), is that 'it defines who the legitimate spokespersons for the past are', usually in detriment to other voices. It effectively marginalises diverse understandings of heritage produced by subaltern communities and 'assesses the "authenticity" of their cultural expressions against criteria seen as objective by heritage professionals' (Bortolotto 2015, p. 249). Community heritage initiatives and grassroots organisations that preserve marginalised memories and stories show how 'heritage' can also be a form of political affirmation: one that challenges the master narratives of some mainstream museums and Eurocentric approaches to heritage.

The 'authorised' notion of intangible cultural heritage has, to some extent, shifted the notion of heritage from a focus on material culture to one that acknowledges the creators, the bearers, and the communities involved in its production, preservation and transmission. Its legitimation through UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* significantly expands the scope of 'heritage' and recognises the 'participation of communities' as a key

policy principle, thus democratising the use of this professional concept. The Convention also raised the issue of 'self-determination' as a critical component in assigning value to heritage, particularly among historically excluded groups. Furthermore, the Convention introduced a new global heritage paradigm, inspired by longstanding Asian heritage frameworks, that adopts a more holistic understanding, encompassing the material and the immaterial as well as the natural and cultural. Inspired by Japanese and Korean notions of living national treasures that value humans as bearers of traditional knowledge, the Convention promotes a more holistic vision of heritage: one laced with aspects of identity and memory that are manifest in a much wider array of what can be, and is, safeguarded for the future.

For some consultation respondents, heritage preserved under the realm of 'natural history' is at once perceived as 'natural' and 'cultural', since science is a product of culture. Furthermore, most cultural artefacts and their production depend on their social contexts as well as the natural environments that provide the materials constituting them. The *Mona Lisa* can be seen as the result of a selection of natural pigments; an Indigenous diadem results from the feathers of living birds from a given ecosystem. As a label used by various cultures and societies to appropriate the material and immaterial world, 'heritage' is both natural and cultural, tangible and intangible, resulting from interpretation of the things we cherish and wish to pass on to the next generations. An example of this perspective can be seen in the establishment of the first Chinese ecomuseums during the 1980s and 1990s. At a time when China was facing rapid industrialisation, these museums prioritised environmental preservation as integral to the protection of Indigenous cultures dwelling in specific territories (Donghai 2008, pp. 35-36). This example, among others, illustrates how the distinction between 'natural' and 'cultural'

heritage is rooted in outdated paradigms, historically applied to collection-oriented disciplines.

From family photo albums and private collections of valued heirlooms to the Indigenous rituals passed from one generation to the next, the plurality of heritage is embedded in human relations (see **Diversity**). It is now very much understood that natural history and human history are intricately intertwined, making it irrelevant to continue insisting on a distinction (Chakrabarty 2019). For this reason, the most recent museum definition does not uphold the previous epistemological view that separates nature and culture, and therefore very purposefully did not include these terms so as not to sustain these fabricated categories.

In short, in the responses collected on the museum definition, 'heritage' was regarded as essential, receiving 72 per cent approval in Consultation 2 and 92 percent in Consultation 3. Furthermore, the characterisation of heritage as 'tangible and intangible' was also deemed important, receiving 46 per cent in Consultation 2 and 73 per cent in Consultation 3. Many responses stressed these terms as constituting the core of museum activities, particularly as relates to the 'preservation', 'conservation' and 'research' conducted by museums (see **Section II of this Handbook**). In the current definition, heritage can be seen as the essential starting point – or the fundamental basis – for the wide range of experiences museums offer (see **Varied experiences**). The diversity of heritage and the multiplicity of ways it can be interpreted and transmitted underscore the need for museums to involve a broader range of heritage stakeholders in their operations and communication. By bringing life to heritage and sharing its experience, museums can actively engage in the ongoing enquiry of heritage and foster continuous processes of knowledge exchange.

Related terms: Artefact/Specimen, Document, Evidence, Inheritance, Knowledge, Material and immaterial heritage, Memory.

Participation Participation is not a new term in the context of museum practice and management; however, its meaning and operational value have changed over the past few decades. Historically, the term referred to the participation of the bourgeois classes in the establishment of museums, where they exerted political and intellectual influence as well as financial support. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, and notably with the dissemination of New Museology, the term gained a broader social value, emphasising the involvement of diverse segments of society, including the general public and historically excluded communities. More recently, 'participation' has become a fundamental element of museum education, notably in institutions seeking to expand their audiences and enhance their social value.

In an ample sense, 'participation' is perceived as a core characteristic of museum work, referring to the active involvement of communities and members of civil society at every level of a museum's operations, and a vast range of procedures. This last and more structural interpretation of the term was preferred in the current definition, wherein the 'participation of communities' is embedded as a central element of *how* the museum operates and communicates. Although the participatory ideal is not the norm in every museum – and bearing in mind that ensuring participation is dependent on resources (human and financial) – it can be considered as a global strategic trend for museums that are actively committed to social change and inclusivity.

In descriptive data presented by ICOM committees, 'participation' is understood as a path to democratising museums and fostering social inclusion at a deeper level: participation in

all segments of society. The term conjures the ideas of 'inclusive communication', 'dialogue', 'networking' and 'meaningful exchange'. Respondents also applied the term to various aspects of museum work, from spatial design to co-curation, or as a means of empowering visitors and communities through social engagement. The term also allowed committees to define museums as 'living spaces' ('*des lieux vivants*'), or simply as 'meeting spaces' ('*lieux de rencontre*'), emphasising their role in integrating people through diverse approaches. 'Participation' was additionally considered as a strategic tool for building trust between museums and society, highlighting institutions' potential as safe spaces of encounter and connection within local communities. An example of this is the War Childhood Museum in Bosnia, founded in 2015 as a non-governmental institution that lacks public funding. The museum works closely with individuals whose childhoods have been or continue to be shaped by armed conflict, aiming to help participants 'overcome past traumatic experiences and prevent further trauma', while avoiding creating any further divisions between individuals of Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian identities.

In contemporary museology, the notion of participation has emerged as a driving principle, fostering the idea of museums as institutions deeply integrated into society. As recalled by the Chilean National Committee, the concept of an 'integral museum', originally proposed in the 1972 Round Table of Santiago, assumes that museums are participatory, serving communities and contribute to the formation of community consciousness (see **In the service of society**). This perceptual shift regarding museums' social role stemmed from several experimental initiatives involving communities, such as the the Musée National du Niger (recently renamed Musée National Boubou Hama) in Niamey (inaugurated in 1959), or the previously mentioned Anacostia Community Museum and the Écomusée du Creusot-Montceau. The first of these examples defines itself as an 'open-air museum' that

is at once a tourist site that promotes social development, a commercial fair for local crafts and an educational centre (Bondaz 2009, p. 365). Such initiatives challenged the traditional centrality of curators and experts in museum decision-making processes, even in larger mainstream institutions. They proposed to disrupt established practices and signalled a shift towards a more inclusive, community-oriented approach to museum work worldwide.

Inviting community participation in museum work is in no way intended to limit the work of curators. Rather, it is often a response to a need to broaden expertise and incorporate diverse voices within the museum. Such diversity benefits not only the representation, self-esteem and self-determination of external partners; it also provides curators with opportunities to learn new methods, and open avenues for varied interpretation and intercultural exchange (see **to Interpret**). Participation involves constant listening and a willingness to learn from others through dialogic and collaborative processes. In this sense, participatory methodologies have been used to dismantle authoritarian and oppressive museum practices, such as in the implementation of decolonial approaches and postcolonial interpretations of museums as 'contact zones' (see Clifford 1997; Pratt 1992).

Even though 'participation' lends itself to multiple interpretations and can be seen as an ambiguous notion referring to multiple levels of engagement (Simon 2010), some acknowledge it as part of a turning point in the sector and a new paradigm for twenty-first century museums (Cuenca-Amigo and Zabala-Inchaurraga 2018). According to these authors, the 'participatory museum' designates the visitor as a co-creator, sharing authority in the co-construction of meaning and knowledge (pp. 124-125). In this sense, participation may involve co-curation, crowdsourcing, innovative educational activities, collections management, preservation,

documentation and communication, shaping discourse and unsettling old narratives. It can also play a structural role when communities are involved from the outset in decision-making processes and collaborative projects, such as the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, established in Wellington in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1998; here, every museum function is grounded in ancestral Māori knowledge and spirituality. In this case, the work of Indigenous professionals allows the institution to challenge the existence of a single predominant knowledge system, such as Western ideologies and epistemologies (see **Knowledge sharing**).

Participation also permits specific social groups to shape the museum at different levels and capacities. For instance, collaborations between major art institutions and social movements have fostered a more critical stance towards collections; a key example is the long-term partnership between Tate Modern in London and the US-based feminist activist art collective the Guerrilla Girls, which led the museum to include more works by female artists in its permanent collection. Similarly, many museums are collaborating with marginalised communities to address inequality in museum representation and promote reparative justice. In a slightly different manner, participation may run in the opposite sense, where professionals share their expertise with grassroots institutions or community-driven museums, such as Indigenous-run groups or LGBTQI+ organisations. Similarly, smaller museums often partner with larger institutions to implement museological procedures, with curators or restorers volunteering or working on short-term projects. Through all these forms of 'participation', professionals share their knowledge respectfully and ethically, without diminishing or devaluing the experience and situated knowledge of others.

Ultimately, the inclusion of 'participation' in the definition not only enriches the functions and actions of museums, but also

serves to promote a shift in the foundation upon which they are built and sustained. Museums are not isolated entities operating in academic or cultural vacuums; rather, they are dynamic, living spaces that thrive on continuous participation and reciprocal interaction with communities.

Related terms: Co-creation, Collaboration, Engagement, Interaction, Involvement, Partake.

Communities By expanding their social responsibility and public outreach throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, museums have invited the participation of diverse social groups, including marginalised communities, undervalued populations and the most vulnerable segments of society (see **Participation**). This ongoing transformation is strongly connected to the democratisation of museum institutions, driven by calls for decolonisation and social inclusion that have persisted since the mid-twentieth century.

Since 1974, when the definition of museums as permanent institutions 'in the service of society' appeared, ICOM has recognised the need for museums to be more proactive towards the societies they serve, including the participation of historically excluded social groups (see **Inclusive** and **In the service of society**). The notion of 'communities' first appeared in the 1972 Declaration of Santiago, associated with museums' service to society, here understood as stimulating 'those communities to action', and connecting past and present in the resolution of 'contemporary problems' (UNESCO 1973, p. 199). The affirmation that museums serve communities influenced the creation of community-based museums, ecomuseums and social museums around the globe: that is, museums whose practices were conducted by communities seeking self-determination through the preservation of heritage. Starting in the 1980s, 'community museum' and 'ecomuseum' became widely adopted terms referring to a range of grassroots

initiatives based on experimental and non-orthodox practices, inspiring the creation of the International Movement for New Museology (MINOM) in 1984.

In sociology, the term 'community' is a vague and elusive notion. Generally, it refers to a collection of people in a given geographical area, but it can also refer to ethnic groups, marginalised groups in urban contexts, segregated groups or to any group marked by a social or cultural distinction. In some countries, the term is used to refer to poorer segments of society or to stigmatised populations, and carries a derogatory sense. But it also serves to emphasise social bonds and a sense of belonging, which can be grounded in shared cultural identity, religion, ethnicity, sexuality or history.

In the context of museums, some see communities as social units that help to preserve customs, traditions or values at risk of disappearing. Others, however, perceive them as dynamic, ever-changing and heterogeneous groups united by specific purposes that play a pivotal role in driving the museum's mission and goals towards innovation. As our research shows, in different languages and regions of the globe the term carries divergent meanings, which inform its varied use in museum contexts. The term 'communities' proved to be extremely important among Latin American respondents, frequently associated with the term 'society', while it was seen as a more restrictive concept by Francophone respondents. In the context of France, for instance, the term '*communauté*' is used to refer to very specific social groups defined by a shared characteristic and seen as somewhat homogeneous.[15] For this

15 It is relevant to note that the term '*communautarisme*' in French is rather pejorative. It often refers to a perception of closed communities that allegedly refuse to integrate, and sow divisiveness. The term is often used by right wing and far-right politicians to scold communities of migrants for continuing to observe certain cultural or religious traditions.

reason, French ecomuseums frequently use the expression 'community initiative' ('*l'initiative communautaire*') instead – as an adjective, not a noun – to refer to community-driven practices more generally. The term 'community museum' often refers to museums based on territory or ethnicity, as is common in countries like Brazil or China. However, this territorial or ethnic meaning usually does not apply to most French examples. In France, the idea of 'community' generally refers to local groups united either by shared traditional customs or by common concerns that influence their actions. In all these contexts, the notion of 'a museum of questions' (Évrard 1980, p. 227), used to qualify early community-based museums, still applies.

Even though the term 'community' may have various valences and imprecise usages in museology, in many contexts it has been integrated into 'a way of thinking that is running through every level of a museum service' (Crooke 2010, p. 17). A predominant term in all rounds of consultation, 'community' was described or applied in many ways. According to some responses, community participation is essential for ensuring that exhibitions, programmes and collections are inclusive, representative, accessible and meaningful. This proximity to communities fosters trust in museums, enhancing their relevance, which in turn strengthens their long-term sustainability. For others, it represents how museums serve as 'safe spaces' for dialogue and interaction among different social groups. Being in a community, especially in person, can foster understanding and empathy. Several committees also considered 'care for communities' a key aspect of the museum's functions and social role, exemplified by initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic that met social needs, such as foodbanks and vaccination centres. By serving in this manner, and in tandem with their programming and engagement, museums strengthen communal ties. In an era of increasing

alienation and physical disconnection driven by digital technology and individualism, museums play a critical role as builders and supporters of community.

Beyond addressing community concerns, engaging with communities as 'stakeholders' of heritage allows museums to co-create narratives, preserve tangible and intangible references, and nurture a sense of shared ownership through co-production of exhibitions. In this sense, community engagement is a crucial part of museum operations, fostering pluralistic communication and reinforcing the institution's relevance as both a societal point of reference and a participatory hub. By incorporating the participation of diverse social groups in its core functions and operations, museum professionals are acknowledging that expertise is built on shared authorship and agency, which requires decolonising knowledge and unsettling outmoded methodologies.

Owing to its malleability and broad appeal in both political discourse and academic scholarship, the term 'community' is used to refer to a myriad of situations associated with museums and heritage (Crooke 2010). In some cases, it is formally incorporated into policies and legislation. As Crooke notes, in the UK context community policy has guided museum practice in recent years, shaped by government priorities related to 'social inclusion' (p. 18). In France, meanwhile, during the 1990s 'community ecomuseums' were recognised as museums by the French Ministry of Culture. This acknowledgement validated experimental practices involving partnerships between social groups and professionals, influencing how such initiatives were perceived globally. In Brazil, a similar shift occurred in the 2000s when the Brazilian Institute of Museums established the category of *Pontos de memória* ('Memory spots') in recognition of community-based initiatives working at the grassroots level. While some of these labels may indicate that community experiences are part of a category that is distinctive

from traditional museums, the fact that the majority of ICOM members considered community participation as a predominant characteristic of museum work marks a meaningful change in the field. Beyond the divisions between 'new' and 'old' museology, or community museums and 'traditional' institutions, this latest definition recognises that all museums are open to social participation, and susceptible to transformation by working with communities at all levels.

Related terms: Ethnic group, Identity, Local population, Memory, Social group, Society, Stakeholders.

Ethically Museum ethics refer to the principles that govern the profession, informing and guiding practitioners across all levels and activities. These principles are based on a set of collectively determined values, operating within the moral order of a particular time. By asserting that museums operate ethically, the museum definition determines that practices align with established parameters and values agreed upon by a collective. Ethical standards are often formalised in codes: either internationally, as in the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, introduced in 1986; nationally, as in the UK Museums Association Code of Ethics for Museums from 2015; or even locally, such as codes developed by individual museums (Marstine 2023, p. 174). In all these cases, ethics align with societal transformations, and their application changes in response to cultural shifts, political developments and emerging social needs.

In its most accepted sense, notably among ICOM members, museum ethics is closely related to 'professionalism', stemming from 'the foundations of museum practices' and as determined by a defined group of professionals (Edson 1997, p. xxi). However, as the profession evolves and museum practice is shared with a diverse range of collaborators, including volunteers, community members, artists, activists and the general public, the basic set of museum ethics has adapted to address

the diverse situations to which it applies (see, for instance, Yerkovich 2016). Furthermore, museums have expanded in scope, extending beyond material collections to encompass intangible and digital heritage while engaging a plurality of territories, societies and cultures. Contemporary debates on the redefinition of museum ethics comprise, among other matters, humanity's relationship with the planet, the decolonisation of museum practices and principles; restitution and reparation in a broader sense; new guidelines for participation and co-creation; indigenisation or the incorporation of Indigenous ethics; social inclusion, social justice and human rights. Discussions around ethics also address precarious work situations that impact museum staff and collaborators; museums' political stands when facing war and conflicts; issues involving cultural appropriation and extractivism; intellectual property; the digitisation of collections and the preservation of born-digital objects, the acceptance of donations and the naming of institutional trustees. In an era of rapid and vast transformations, these issues reflect the evolving complexities of ethical museum practice and its applications.

The inclusion of the adverb 'ethically' in the current museum definition indicates that museum operations, communication and collaboration with communities are bound by ethical principles that respond to the above-mentioned issues, and align with the social values embedded in the definition. Ethical values, however, are not universal and can vary across different settings. Therefore, museums today are more attuned to the worldviews that reign in their specific locations, achieving greater understanding through close collaboration with local communities and stakeholders (see **Participation**). By understanding specific value systems, museums can make more informed and ethical decisions, ensuring their actions are both contextually appropriate and socially responsible.

Over 70 per cent of respondents in Consultation 3 stressed that museums are defined by an ethical approach to their work. As such, the term not only refers to basic standards for museum work, but also to a museum's ethical profile as a 'transparent' and 'trustworthy' institution committed to sustainability, diversity and inclusion. This notion also reflects the ongoing drive towards the repatriation of objects and human remains held in museums to their original communities or contexts. Although the term 'repatriation' was mentioned in only a few responses, the global heritage community is clearly aware that it is of utmost importance to consider, from ethical and legal stances, where and by whom heritage is preserved.

The most recent ICOM museum definition is the first to include the term 'ethically'; as such, it is more explicit about how all institutions carry out their work, forming a statement that both supports and is expanded by the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums. The need, expressed by respondents, to directly reference ethics in the definition links it to the Code, which serves as a kind of contractual agreement among ICOM members, as well as a common language and set of shared principles that guide museum practice. This foundational tool, which presently aligns with only some of ICOM's contemporary values, is currently undergoing revision to better address the social role of museums and respond to today's challenges. It also strives to incorporate diversity and remain mindful of historical injustices and geopolitical inequalities that have shaped the world order, thus influencing museum practice (Abungu 2019, p. 65).

The ICOM museum definition and Code of Ethics conjointly serve professionals worldwide. While the recent revision of the Code considers the changes in the definition, its forthcoming version will reiterate the meaning of 'ethically' as it applies to current practice and professional settings. Thus, the presence of the term in the museum definition adds weight to the

significance of the Code of Ethics, which aims to expand the tenets of the profession, emphasising museums' social responsibilities in addressing contemporary challenges while providing guidance on governance, outreach, collection management and museum education.

Related terms: Code of conduct, Code of ethics, Morals, Professional guidelines, Rules, Standards.

Professionally As an adverb that qualifies the actions of operating and communicating, 'professionally' emphasises not only the proper care of heritage, but also the behaviours or attitudes expected of museum workers. It is important to mention, however, that it does not restrict those who can work in museums to individuals with specific titles or certifications. Instead, it implies that those engaged in museum operations uphold a certain standard of professionalism. There are many indispensable staff members within the museum, such as security officers, maintenance or receptionists, who do not necessarily have professional museological training, but nonetheless play a vital role in the museum experience. These professionals are essential in the life of museums, and they behave following a set standard – underscoring that professionalism is about conduct, not credentials.

Formal training for museum personnel only emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. Prior to this, museum professionals were trained in related fields, and the basic museum operations were learned through on-the-job training, generally in an intuitive manner. Even today, in many parts of the world, particularly where university programmes in museum or heritage studies are limited or unavailable, museum practice continues to evolve empirically. Despite such challenges, individuals working in museums – even when they lack formal degrees or do not identify as museum professionals – usually seek some form of support, guidance or training to

enhance the effectiveness of their efforts. Professional organisations like ICOM have been instrumental in addressing these needs through the creation of the International Committee for the Training of Personnel (ICTOP), trainings organised by the Secretariat's Capacity Building Department, which include workshops and exchange programs, and the International Training Centre for Museum Studies (ICOM-ITC) and by providing a variety of capacity-building resources, many of which are available freely online, ensuring broader accessibility and inclusivity. Emphasising the importance of professionalism within the museum field encourages practitioners to refine their skills and expand their knowledge while ensuring they handle and engage with heritage in the best possible ways. Furthermore, professionalisation involves continuous knowledge exchange and active collaboration: professionals are constantly learning from each other, either in training programmes or through hands-on experiences within the museum setting.

By including the term 'professionally' in the definition, ICOM members expressed an expectation that museum workers pursue some form of training or capacity-building in line with museum ethics and best practices, regardless of their title, formal qualifications or role. In many cases, this can be achieved through collaborating with others and learning different expertise involved in museum work, which is both interdisciplinary and intercultural. To work professionally in a museum environment also encompasses having a respectful attitude towards the public and the diverse communities with whom a museum collaborates, as well as demonstrating care for the integrity of the heritage being preserved and concerned communities.

As museums expand their societal role and embrace diverse forms of heritage and knowledge, they also broaden the scope of their professional practice, workforce and underlying ethics

(see **Diversity**). Some contemporary museums, for example, rely on Indigenous curators to better represent their heritage, enhance interpretations and improve documentation. Conservation methods may also require a greater range of experts, spanning from trained conservators to other bearers of knowledge, including members of communities who contribute insights into the preservation of culturally sensitive materials in museum collections. At the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Māori principles are actively embraced in the implementation of professional practices. Among these is *kaitiakitanga*, referenced repeatedly in the responses from ICOM Aotearoa New Zealand, which implies responsible guardianship of *taonga* (ancestral treasures), honouring the profound connections between people, their ancestors and the natural world, as well as the past, present and future.

Like the inclusion of 'ethically', the term 'professionally' underscores the importance of both the conduct and the knowledge required for museum work. It highlights that professionalism is not confined to formal qualifications, but extends to the conduct expected of all those involved in museum operations. This qualification encourages ongoing development and ethical engagement with both heritage and society, ensuring that museum professionals remain inclusive, respectful, honest and responsible in their practices.

Related terms: Best practice, Ethically, Profession, Professional training, Professionalism.

Varied experiences To stress that the museum experience is varied, diverse and open-ended may seem self-evident for some professionals and members of the public. However, this marks the first time that such an idea has been explicitly acknowledged in a global museum definition: one specifically designed to avoid being absolute. The incorporation of this concept reflects how museums have expanded their operations

and efforts, unlocking a greater range of possibilities in what they offer to their audiences. While their core functions remain steadfast, what museums accomplish with the involvement of various participants – in the name of conservation, interpretation and interaction with heritage – is now neither fixed nor predictable. This adaptability positions museums as fresh, dynamic and innovative spaces.

As highlighted elsewhere (Bonilla-Merchav and Brulon Soares 2022), the emphasis on 'experiences' in this latest definition enables museum professionals to use their creativity and engage more flexibly with audiences, generating an unprecedented diversification of museum-based experiences. There is virtually no limit to what museums can offer society: a statement that especially rings true in moments of crisis, or when institutions work to respond to urgent social needs. For example, as previously noted, some museums served as temporary vaccination centres during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing this basic health service as well as food and supplies to vulnerable communities. By expanding their social role, museums have embraced a wide range of responsibilities, including addressing current climate or migration crises, fostering care for those in need, raising political awareness, fighting against exclusion and prejudice, promoting wellbeing, and so much more. These efforts, which move well beyond the conservation and communication of heritage, highlight the evolving and multifaceted contributions of museums to societal development.

From the perspective of their audiences, museums have proven innovative as public services, interpretation centres and educational institutions. Through their exhibitions, museums can bring joy, but they can also provoke discomfort by raising awareness of difficult heritage or working with sensitive histories. Museums can be playful and fun; but they can also elicit painful responses. They can promote cross-cultural encounters, challenge understandings of the past and propose new

perspectives and solutions for the future. They can be safe havens, offering care, or provide spaces for meditation and wellbeing. The possibilities are vast, and museum professionals have been enormously creative in shaping the impact, uses and outcomes of their practices. Due to their flexible nature and connection to human diversity, museums' established functions can be approached as means to varied ends. Furthermore, owing to the diversity of their audiences and their plural perspectives, backgrounds and life stories, museums become experimental spaces that are continually transformed by the experiences of visitors (see **Inclusive** and **Participation**).

Catering to diverse audiences and striving for inclusivity and accessibility, museum exhibitions and programming offer a wide array of experiences, incorporating multiple storytelling methods, interpretive strategies, digital technologies and interactive elements, both in-person and virtually. While some offerings may not directly relate to the heritage preserved within the museum, they still fulfil the broader goal of engaging the public and bringing them into proximity with heritage. Museum content and activities, both in-person and digitally, reveal different cultures, histories, ecosystems and viewpoints, creating spaces for a multiplicity of emotional and creative responses as well as personal and communal reflection. While for some, the museum can be a place of enjoyment, contemplation or learning, for others it can be a place to eat, shop, connect to the web, find a quiet room for study or a lively space for socialisation and listening to music. It can be a cultural hub where various community traditions can be enacted, a collection, a laboratory, an art studio, a care centre, a university and a school… The vast plurality of possibilities that the museum experience offers is precisely what makes it almost impossible to define.

Related terms: Diversity of experiences, Interactions, Perspectives, Plural encounters.

IV. The Museum's Values and Purposes: Why it Matters

The inclusion of values and purposes in an operational museum definition was widely debated during the 25th ICOM General Conference in Kyoto, Japan, in 2019. In that context, the differences between a statutory definition, intended as an operational tool for museum professionals, and a *mission statement,* encompassing aspirational concepts and values, were stressed. These discussions informed the construction of the current definition, which can be perceived as both *operational* and *aspirational*, serving as a guide for practitioners while also inspiring professionals and museum thinkers to engage in conscious and meaningful actions.

Two compelling factors were decisive in the inclusion of core values and purposes, understood here as the driving force behind museum work. First, among the initial key terms proposed by ICOM committees, 96 per cent of the responses included at least one word interpreted as a social value (San Miguel Fernández, Krajcovicova and Guiragossian 2021). Secondly, a historical review of ICOM's definitions reveals that aspirational elements have always been an integral component of the definition, with phrases such as 'in the service of society' and 'non-profit' reflecting the core values this organisation has adopted and embraced.

While museum professionals today clearly value museums' primary functions – researching, collecting, conserving, interpreting and exhibiting – they also recognise the significant transformations in their work driven by shifting societal and institutional values. Terms like 'diversity' and 'sustainability' have emerged as key ICOM values, notably reflected in two recommendations approved in recent years (Resolution No. 1, 2007: 'Protection and Promotion of Universal Heritage with Respect to Cultural and Natural Diversity'; Resolution

No. 1, 2019 'On sustainability and the implementation of Agenda 2030, Transforming our World'). Additionally, 'education', 'enjoyment', 'reflection' and 'knowledge sharing' represent desirable experiences that museums aspire to provide. While these are not the only values and purposes guiding museums, they are widely regarded as essential goals embedded in institutional missions worldwide.

The inclusion of these core values challenges the notion of museum 'neutrality', especially in an era when museums are increasingly seen as committed institutions actively engaged in caring for individual wellbeing, promoting social justice, practicing decolonisation and often assuming activist roles towards reparation, restitution and the pursuit of a better world. Although a minority of ICOM committees proposed these latter purposes as defining elements of a museum's mission in the twenty-first century, they were not explicitly incorporated into the definition due to a lack of consensus among respondents. Moreover, a more flexible approach was favoured, considering the immense range of roles and purposes that museums take in their service to society across varying contexts and diverse cultural settings. This final section of the Handbook addresses these overarching values and purposes, frequently cited throughout our research, and delves into the multiple interpretations they may embody.

Diversity As inclusive institutions in the service of society, museums foster diversity at every level of their operations, from audience engagement and participation to exhibition design, mediation strategies and the constitution of collections. In general, 'diversity' refers to people – embracing individuals from varied social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, as well as those with special needs and of different genders (beyond binary terms) and sexual orientations. Thus, diversity and equity are inherently correlated qualities of museums,

as they can only be truly diverse by providing equitable access and opportunities to all.

Carried out within a global organisation whose membership is increasingly diverse, the ICOM Define process provided a valuable platform for gathering a wide range of interpretations of 'diversity', both conceptually and in the context of museum practice. Many responses associated it with the inclusion of minority groups and marginalised communities, while others approached it more broadly, encompassing a museum's profile, research methodologies, content, publics and audience engagement strategies. Fostering 'cultural diversity' also emerges as a core element of museums' missions, with respondents recognising that heritage can be created and shared by numerous groups and by a great range of creators, in its tangible, intangible and hybrid forms.

In some instances, the term was used to describe the diversity of museums themselves, with responses emphasising that the definition should be applicable to museums of all kinds, according with UNESCO's 'Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, Their Diversity and Their Role in Society' (2015). Within the context of museum operations, the term is linked to the active participation of 'diverse' communities and audiences, positioning museums as inclusive institutions for all individuals and social groups. Additionally, 'diversity' is associated with the preservation of human rights, the representation of undervalued or oppressed groups and the safeguarding of freedom of expression within museum environments. Overall, responses show that 'diversity' is a multidimensional and nuanced concept that is currently being deeply explored, in an effort to better comprehend its implications for museum practice and its expanding role in society.

To fully implement diversity in their core operations, many museums start from within by hiring professionals from different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders and sexualities. Creating a diverse working environment and integrating varied worldviews are crucial steps towards institutional transformations, making museums more welcoming to a greater range of people. This change, which is already happening in museums around the globe, involves all staff members – not only those with public-facing roles, such as guards, mediators and educators, but also museum workers across the board, including curators, conservators, researchers, press relations staff and directors. Exhibitions developed collaboratively by diverse voices include different viewpoints, avoid unilateral narratives and, through their polyphony, become more engaging and accessible to wider and more varied audiences.

Similarly, a widely varied collection that represents multiple identities and social groups may serve as the basis for a greater range of activities, educational opportunities and partnerships with diverse communities and members of society. In this extended sense, 'diversity' is a core social value that is a determinant for a museum's success in forging meaningful connections with their audiences, and fostering a sense of shared ownership and belonging.

In addition to collecting, exhibiting and communicating richly varied heritage and perspectives, museums can embrace diversity by applying the theory of multiple intelligences, which acknowledges the vast range of human experiences and capabilities – even among individuals from similar backgrounds – while also addressing the needs of neurodiverse audiences. Recognising that humans process stimuli in unique ways, museums are becoming more cognisant of the enormous variety of experiences and impressions their offerings can evoke (see **Varied experiences**). Accordingly, they strive to engage with a wide range of audiences rather than concentrating on

select groups. To do this, museums create inclusive spaces for learning, reflection and enjoyment by employing interdisciplinary strategies alongside diverse museography, curatorship, management approaches and interactive didactic materials, continuously evolving and creatively adapting their practices. When museums adjust how they communicate and reach their audiences, public reactions and responses shift accordingly: a dynamic well-understood and often expertly applied by museum educators.

In practical terms, diversity also involves acknowledging the many barriers to access, whether social, cultural, physical or emotional (see **Accessible**). Because museums have historically served the elite in Western societies and colonised countries, their commitment to diversity in the present is dependent on redressing past exclusions and repairing bonds with subaltern segments of society. Such reparations require a direct approach to addressing issues like prejudice, segregation and social injustice. This can be achieved through engaging in dialogue with affected communities, leading to actions of re-collecting and the reinterpretation of heritage in critical exhibitions (see **to Interpret**). An example of this is the Apartheid Museum, which opened in 2001 in Johannesburg to contend with South Africa's difficult history during the twentieth century. The museum's permanent exhibition is designed as a journey through time, presenting divergent points of view that reflect the historical perspectives that exist within a diverse and ethnically mixed population. Illustrating everyday reality under Apartheid, the exhibition *Race Classification* arbitrarily classifies its visitors as either 'white' or 'non-white'. Once classified, visitors are permitted entry to the exhibition through the gate allocated to their 'race' group. The different paths demonstrate how segregation determined individuals' experiences throughout history, leading participants to question their

present (mis)conceptions and underlining that museums don't hold a single, universal version of historical facts.

Fostering diversity goes beyond merely recognising and respecting differences in people; it also involves fighting discrimination in a more active manner. For example, museums in certain parts of the world are taking a stand on social issues such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia by collaborating with communities to develop anti-racist programmes, empower marginalised groups through exhibitions and the reinterpretation of collections, and educate visitors on combatting discrimination against specific societal groups. This involves calling attention to the gaps and erasures in museum collections, the overlooked lives and untold stories in museum narratives, and the silences perpetuated in exhibitions. To remedy these erasures, some museums turn to alternative research and collection methods, such as using oral history projects as a primary tool to preserve the stories of marginalised groups. Examples include the previously mentioned Museo de la Identidad y el Orgullo in Costa Rica and the Museu Movimento LGBTI+ in Brazil, along with other community-driven initiatives. Additionally, community members actively assist museums in the co-creation of material collections, ensuring the preservation of objects often neglected by mainstream, cis-hetero-normative institutions. This is the case of the Museum of Transology in the UK, established in 2014, which houses a diverse collection of objects that represent the lives of transgender, non-binary and intersex people.

Overall, the various interpretations of this widely approved term reflect the evolving role of museums as vital, inclusive spaces that integrate, celebrate and advocate for diversity in all its forms. It is increasingly important for museums to continuously reflect on its varying impacts on society and

adapt their practices to meet the needs of the diverse groups they serve.

Related terms: Equity, Inclusivity, Multiculturalism, Plurality.

Sustainability In the current museum definition, 'sustainability', as a core value underpinning museums' operations and the fulfilment of their missions, encompasses not only the internal functioning of institutions but also their plural relationships with heritage, society, audiences and collaborators. Fostering sustainability implies addressing the operational sustainability of museums – ensuring they carry out their work in a responsible, enduring and resource-efficient manner – while simultaneously advancing broader sustainability goals. This includes integrating sustainability into museum objectives, programming and general communications. The dual application of the term as an entity qualifier and a social value aligns the museum definition closely with UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation and ICOM's 2019 resolution 'On sustainability and the adoption of Agenda 2030, Transforming our World', recognising 'that all museums have a role to play in shaping and creating a sustainable future' and endorsing the call 'for museums to respond through rethinking and recasting their values, missions, and strategies' (ICOM 2019).

Moving away from the notion of the 'development' of society, adopted in ICOM's 1974 definition and present until 2022, the concept of 'sustainability' is now grounded in four interdependent pillars: environmental, social, economic and cultural. The previously dominant notion that all societies should pursue identical paths towards 'progress' and industrial development has been critiqued by scholars in social sciences and heritage studies. Many have argued that the capitalist model of economic development, prevalent in the 1970s, prioritised industrial growth, commercial expansion and a vision of 'progress' modelled on the practices of industrialised nations in the global North (Souza 2020). This perspective stands in

stark contrast to the goals of many museums, which aim to preserve the environment and support the sustainability of local communities within diverse cultural contexts.

This interdisciplinary and holistic notion of 'sustainability', championed by UNESCO and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), forms the foundation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the United Nations' Agenda 2030, which prioritise 'peace and prosperity for people and the planet' while tackling the climate crisis. Consultation respondents frequently referenced the SDGs as a driving force behind museum practices today. They guide institutions in areas such as limiting carbon footprints, reducing waste, promoting equity and wellbeing for staff and communities, adopting new practices of care, fostering inclusion, combating inequality, building partnerships and communicating sustainability-related information. Committees expressed the range of uses and the variety of activities associated with the term during consultation, with well over 60 per cent wishing to incorporate 'sustainability' into the museum definition.

In some responses, the concept of sustainability was approached from an operational perspective. For instance, some respondents considered financial sustainability taking into account the different models available for permanent, not-for-profit institutions. Similarly, some responses referenced the essential resources needed to maintain museum operations in specific localities, extending the focus beyond financial considerations to include concerns about access to heritage assets or the human resources necessary for day-to-day functions. This is particularly relevant for community-based organisations, where social wellbeing and the preservation of cultural identity are integral to sustainability. For others, particularly in science or natural history museums, environmental sustainability and climate action take precedence (Legget and Labrador

2024, p. 2). In the latter instance, efforts often centre on raising social awareness through exhibitions and programming, while also recognising the substantial environmental impact of institutional operations. For example, virtual or cyber museums, as well as institutions managing extensive digital datasets, are increasingly concerned about the environmental costs of their servers. And in some responses, committees highlighted all of these operational aspects, ultimately linking sustainability in museums to 'Governance practices, with respect to environmental, social and cultural rights in favour of the development of a planetary citizenship'. This perspective underscores the relationship between sustainable actions within the museum and the broader goal of fostering sustainability beyond the institutional context.

Other responses, meanwhile, emphasised the sustainability of heritage, highlighting the importance of ongoing, sustainable processes for its preservation and transmission. Some specifically mentioned that sustainability applies to the management of collections, involving the conditions necessary for their proper, long-term conservation and maintenance while minimising environmental costs. In a similar perspective, others considered the continuous transformation of heritage, its living nature, and how it could be enhanced through community participation and interpretation while ensuring that it remains socially relevant. From this heritage-centred perspective, museums play a fundamental social role in connecting sustainability with heritage preservation.

In even broader understandings of the term, sustainability draws connections between heritage and people, combining its ecological, cultural and social dimensions into more holistic approaches. In attempts to liberate the concept from its dominant Western framework, Latin American museology, for example, draws on Indigenous knowledge systems to understand sustainability. These emphasise solidarity,

harmony with nature, wellbeing and respect for shared cultural practices over the pursuit of unlimited economic growth. In the context of Andean cultures, sustainability aligns closely with the Indigenous principle of *Sumak kawsay*, or *buen vivir* (Spanish for 'good living', but also translatable as 'life in harmony'). This concept prioritises collective wellbeing, balanced living and a respectful relationship with the environment. *Buen vivir* views humans as tightly interconnected with nature, advocating ways of living that honour and respect ecological boundaries while valuing community bonds over individual gains. As an alternative to Western notions of 'development', it advocates for the defence of nature as well as for reducing social and economic inequalities (Blanco and Aguiar 2020). This holistic approach provides a new framework for heritage sustainability, aiming to ensure material, social and spiritual satisfaction for all members of a population or group – without exploiting others, harming the environment or compromising future generations.

In the context of twenty-first century museums, sustainability represents a pressing call to action. For institutions with a strong sense of social responsibility, 'sustainability' goes well beyond sustainable operations, or raising awareness about the environment and the present-day climate crisis. It involves taking a firm stance and making a proactive commitment to managing the impact of human activity on the planet, while cultivating a deeper understanding of our existence as integral members of complex and interconnected ecosystems.

Related terms: *Buen vivir*, Ecology, Regenerative development, Sustainable development, Wellbeing.

Education The term 'education' was first introduced in an ICOM museum definition in 1961, alongside 'study' and 'enjoyment', to designate a central purpose of these institutions. It has since been retained in all subsequent definitions,

firmly establishing it as a core goal of museums. During consultations, committees emphasised the importance of this specific term within the museum institution and noted that its omission could result in potential legal and financial repercussions in various national contexts. Consequently, while alternative terms with similar connotations were proposed, the feedback received underscores the necessity of retaining the word 'education' as an integral part of the definition.

While 'education' is often understood as an indispensable component of museums' activities and social responsibility – a transversal goal woven throughout all museum operations – this definition emphasises the overarching educational experience museums provide, and their broader pedagogical mission. In most responses, the term was described as a museum's purpose, rather than as an entity qualifier: respondents stressed the museum as a 'place for education' or 'place where learning happens', rather than as an 'educational institution'. Additionally, some responses mentioned the importance of avoiding the use of the term as a verb, to discourage hierarchical approaches to knowledge transmission within museum contexts. It is also worth noting that some respondents underlined the distinction between museums and traditional academic institutions. Many museums around the world have adopted alternative approaches to education, focusing on the creation of diverse experiences that are not only informative but also engaging, enjoyable and even entertaining (see **Varied experiences** and **Enjoyment**).

For ICOM members, the term is frequently associated with concepts such as 'information', 'participation', 'lifelong learning', 'critical thinking' and 'cognitive processes', as well as 'transmission', 'reflection', 'enjoyment' and 'knowledge sharing'. In some responses, its connection to interpretation and communication was highlighted, while others described it as a form of 'mediation of knowledge' based

on continuous 'dialogue'. Considered by many as the core purpose of museums, education also – and in some cases, primarily – involves museum collections. For some respondents, the idea that museum collections require an educational approach to effectively be transmitted to the public is widely accepted. This perspective is motivating several institutions to expand their educational activities beyond formal exhibition spaces, incorporating museum storage and other facilities as spaces where collections and heritage work can be promoted and explored. Among other examples, the work undertaken at the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, illustrates how museum education can be transferred to a visiting storage, defined as a 'publicly accessible art storage facility'. The Depot's educational programme includes several walk-in tours, interpretation workshops and a range of outreach activities aimed at demystifying the public's perception of museum storage as an inaccessible and secluded space.

Some respondents commented on the role of museum educators (mediators, facilitators) and their specialised and highly creative labour, emphasising the need to better integrate such skills across the full spectrum of museum activities. These include collections management, documentation, conservation and exhibition development. The role of the educator, often perceived as an intercultural and interdisciplinary professional, is here envisioned as a catalyst for transforming the museum into a conversational platform where dialogues occur horizontally, engaging diverse audiences and communities.

Rather than a unilateral process of knowledge transfer, museum education today is increasingly viewed as a transformative process rooted in dialogue, active collaboration and co-construction. Inspired by the ideas of educator Paulo Freire, some interpretations of the term focus on critical thinking, dialogic collaboration and active participation. This approach

fosters a liberating process that enables individuals to critically examine, challenge and reshape societal structures, thereby contributing to a more just and equitable world.

By nurturing education, museums generate social awareness, empowering people to critically engage with the world around them (see **Reflection**). This awareness is achieved by inviting audiences to interact with heritage in co-creative processes, including by asking critical questions in exhibitions; this stimulates curiosity, reflection and lifelong learning, and in turn broadens the sharing of knowledge within and beyond museum walls. In other words, museums are no longer perceived as places that provide passive visitors with closed or definitive answers to specific questions. They are instead open, dynamic forums where members of the audience can pose new questions, examine and interpret the world they inhabit and develop tools to better understand and navigate its challenges.

From the perspective of inclusion and accessibility, museum education facilitates meaningful encounters with heritage through exhibitions, programming, communication and the active involvement of diverse participants in collection management and interpretation. It promotes knowledge sharing and co-creation through a variety of interactive approaches, including storytelling, hands-on activities, intellectual and sensorial stimulation, guided experiences, gamification and digital media. By fostering a diverse, dynamic and didactic environment, museums make their content accessible and relevant to people of all ages, abilities and cultural, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. This generates a safe and welcoming space where audiences can engage emotionally and intellectually with heritage as well as with each other, reflect on societal issues, and gain a deeper understanding of diverse cultures, environments and histories.

Ultimately, museum education serves as a powerful tool for fostering deep personal and societal growth, enriching individuals and communities. This is particularly important in an era where social media platforms often encourage fleeting, superficial exchanges: ones that can limit cognition, critical thinking and understanding. Museums, conversely, provide meaningful spaces for diversified experiences, learning and exchange, while offering the opportunity to connect more intimately with heritage, history and culture. This approach to museum education contributes not only to individual fulfilment but also to the unfolding of more informed, engaged, creative, empathetic and self-reflective societies.

Related terms: Critical thinking, Dialogue, Didactic, Dissemination, Facilitate, Learning, Mediation, Pedagogy, Teaching, Transmission.

Enjoyment Within the range of experiences museums provide, the terms 'Enjoyment/Entertainment' garnered the strongest support during the third round of consultation. An emphasis on the public's enjoyment as a key purpose of museum work was first introduced in the ICOM definition in 1951, with the term '*délectation*' in the French version; the concept has remained fundamental ever since. At that time, 'enjoyment' (or '*délectation*') was primarily associated with the aesthetic experience of art museums: the joy or '*plaisir*' of contemplating works of art. Over time, the term was applied to other types of museums, such as science museums or social history museums, promoting the notion that any museum experience should be 'joyful' and even 'fun'. In their service to society, museums are widely recognised as places for positive or formative entertainment, often referred to today as 'edutainment'. However, their societal role, ethical commitments and not-for-profit nature prevent them from prioritising entertainment above all else, or altering their missions sheerly to increase

visitor numbers and revenue. Additionally, several committees highlighted that museums facilitate learning by crafting impactful experiences designed to evoke emotional responses. These experiences engage audiences on multiple levels, going beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to inspire awe, wonder and the sense of joy that comes with personal discovery and insight.

During the discussions that led to the new definition, one question under debate was whether the term 'enjoyment' was appropriate to include, given that many museums, such as memorial and human rights museums, often evoke pain, sorrow or even traumatic reactions among their audiences. Nonetheless, it was ultimately agreed that the emotional engagement and learning fostered by these experiences, even when perceived as negative, contribute to an overall positive impact by deepening the public's connection to history and heritage, which can ultimately be conceived of as an enjoyable experience. Entertainment, on the other hand, was perceived to connote a more superficial or frivolous experience, approximating museums to amusement parks. While it has been argued that museums share similarities with theme parks – such as recreating reality through exhibitions, sparking visitors' imagination and incorporating elements of fantasy and play (Brulon Soares 2016) – the key distinction lies in their commitment to education, reflection and knowledge sharing. This commitment is complemented by their mission to conserve and transmit heritage in a trustworthy and meaningful manner.

In the current definition, enjoyment is generally connected with the idea that museums provide their audiences with pleasurable and enriching experiences. Respondents described it as 'the pleasure aroused by wonder, [the] enjoyment of beauty', and 'the feeling of satisfaction, gratification and wellbeing during museum visitation'. The term was also linked to other

concepts such as 'healing, self-discovery… recovery', as well as 'leisure, fun and wonder leading to optimism, empowerment and self-pondering'. These associations highlight the multifaceted nature of enjoyment in museums, encompassing not only moments of delight and relaxation but also deep personal growth, emotional renewal, empathy and care.

Related terms: Affect, Delectation, Emotions, Enriching, Entertainment, Pleasure.

Reflection Reflection is an integral part of museum work: museum workers consistently reflect on the heritage they preserve, the audiences they serve, how to fulfil their social role and how best to generate meaningful experiences. However, the current definition emphasises reflection as a fundamental purpose of the varied experiences museums provide to their audiences. Although earlier ICOM definitions included terms such as 'study', 'education' and 'enjoyment' to describe the purposes of museums, the acknowledgement that museums are places for reflection and knowledge sharing demonstrates a general understanding of their role as platforms for open and safe forms of exchange. By embracing a plurality of perspectives, museums can affirm their vocation as arenas for the deliberate exercise of critical thinking.

Museums inspire reflection in various ways: by provoking visitor curiosity and contemplation, by sharing knowledge in engaging and constructive ways, by conducting and accessibly communicating original research to diverse audiences and by fostering new interpretations of heritage. Furthermore, they invite the public to consider different standpoints and epistemologies, encouraging individuals to reflect on their own positionality within the world and their relationship to the past, present and future. Through research, interpretation and exhibitions, museums can expand understanding and strengthen

peoples' sense of belonging – as visitors and responsible citizens, professionals and collaborators.

In some responses, 'reflection' is closely linked to 'critical thinking' and 'dialogue'. In others, it is seen as both the basis and the immediate outcome of participation, co-creation and the coexistence of different points of view within the museum space. Reflection is also regarded as a vital process for driving social transformation and promoting the mutual understanding necessary to foster diversity and sustainability. In this last sense, beyond inspiring reflection among their audiences, we return to the exercise of self-reflection by museum professionals as a crucial attitude, evoking the critical assessment of positionality and the interrogation of authorised curatorial discourse and practice. Such introspection is indispensable for ensuring that museums remain dynamic, inclusive, relevant, and responsive to the evolving needs of the communities they serve.

Reflexivity, as a museum method, is frequently employed in projects aimed at re-reading and reinterpreting past narratives to promote reparation and tell more inclusive stories (see **to Interpret**). This process requires a critical examination of the museum itself, including its historical involvement in systems of oppression or injustice – such as institutions rooted in colonialism, those that profited from wealth generated by the slave trade, or those complicit during authoritarian regimes. Such reflexivity may be put into practice through methods of critical enquiry that involve provenance research in museum archives and collections, or the unveiling of difficult or silenced histories. It also involves engaging marginalised communities, enabling them to tell, and reflect on, their own stories and perspectives. Furthermore, reflexivity can shape the critical presentation of museum objects and information, challenging outdated methods of collecting, interpreting, communicating and exhibiting heritage. This is particularly relevant

for ethnographic institutions and former colonial museums, where traditional displays are or can be re-imagined to support a more equitable representation of history. An iconic example of this reflexive attitude is *Mining the Museum*, an installation by artist Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992. The exhibition juxtaposed slave shackles, an object used to forcibly restrain enslaved people, with nineteenth-century silver, and placed a whipping post alongside hand-crafted wooden furniture. Together, these objects positioned side by side created a powerful commentary on the institution's history, collection and historical representations.

The pursuit of reflection challenges museums and audiences to think critically and embrace practices and perspectives that deviate from hegemonic discourse. By fostering an environment of open-minded analysis, reflexivity invites institutions, communities and individuals alike to engage with heritage and contemporary issues in ways that are thoughtful, inclusive and transformative. Ultimately, reflexivity empowers museums to become more than repositories of objects, memories and histories: they become inciters of social change, tools for reconciliation and platforms for building more informed, equitable and resilient societies.

Related terms: Awareness, Contemplation, Critical thinking, Curiosity, Discovery.

Knowledge sharing Museums actively engage in the exchange of knowledge across disciplines, societies and cultures. Some responses to consultation express 'knowledge' is the object or subject of museum work, emphasising that museums are repositories of knowledge. In this sense, knowledge is stored in museum collections and archives, and is activated, constructed or transformed through research, interpretation and communication. Others perceive knowledge sharing as an operational method integral to museum work. The current museum

definition broadens these interpretations, positioning knowledge sharing as a core value and purpose, one that inspires curiosity, discovery, critical thinking and lifelong learning. Prioritising the sharing of knowledge, rather than the imparting of knowledge, levels the playing field between museums and their audiences, fostering more equitable and collaborative relationships (see **Education**). In this light, knowledge sharing takes on profound political significance, transforming museums into catalysts for inclusivity, mutual respect, holistic understanding and justice at local, national and planetary scales.

Decolonising the museum – an institution historically conceived during the European Enlightenment as offering a single path to knowledge – involves questioning the idea that there is such a thing as a 'universal' way of thinking and knowing. Embracing the notion that museums co-create knowledge *with* external partners, rather than *for* them, proposes to break down the hierarchical organisation of knowledge advanced by modern and encyclopaedic institutions that have subordinated or erased divergent knowledge systems. Sharing authority over knowledge necessitates inviting diverse partners and fostering collaboration across all levels of museum work. Furthermore, it positions museums as open, dialogic arenas where every voice matters, and all forms of knowledge are recognised as equally valid and valuable. An interesting example of this is the collaboration between the Uganda National Museum in Kampala, the Igongo Cultural Centre in Mbarara, Uganda and the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, initiated in 2015. Described by its participants as 'an experiment in and an effort for a partnership on equal footing, despite being framed by structural inequalities' (Adebo Abiti and Laely 2021), the initiative has led to co-curated exhibitions – such as those on milk culture in both countries – thus fostering joint research and cross-cultural dialogue.

The concept of knowledge sharing was introduced into the 2022 ICOM museum definition, in accordance with a high approval rating for the term 'knowledge'; this term was associated with other notions such as 'mediation', 'participation', 'decolonisation' and 'community collaboration'. Other significant ideas correlated to this key term include 'multidirectional dialogue', 'co-construction of meanings' and 'equitable values', denoting museums' commitments to creating new and more horizontal relationships within society based on shared or parallel interests, memories and concerns. Among some of the most compelling statements concerning this phrase, the International Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) argues that 'a museum can only educate as far as it contributes to the dissemination and sharing of knowledge, in an active and participatory way' (see **Education** and **Participation**). Other committees defined the museum as a space where different voices and opinions can be gathered, represented, disseminated and promoted, notably those of marginalised or underrepresented groups. Some respondents proposed a more hermeneutical approach to knowledge sharing, suggesting that museums should indiscriminately value diverse ways of knowing, question the nature of knowledge itself, and examine the existence, significance and implications of cultural biases.

Museums are made of people, and they are only possible because people work together, sharing experience and expertise. Although previous definitions did not explicitly recognise this collaborative aspect of museum practice, knowledge sharing has become a well-established practice across various levels of museum work and activities. It occurs in co-curated exhibitions and participatory programming, as well as in cataloguing processes and conservation efforts. For instance, since 2020 and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the National Galleries of Scotland

– a museum complex comprising three national art galleries – has been collaborating with Caribbean artists and activists to establish an anti-racist programme. This initiative includes the co-curation of contemporary exhibitions as an act of reparative justice. Such work could not be achieved by a single curator whose specific knowledge and experience are partial, making it impossible to approach these themes in a structural and transformative way.

Knowledge sharing also plays a crucial role in collections management, influencing acquisitions and improving procedures for documenting, cataloguing and conserving items or collections that reference complex histories with multiple stakeholders. A notable example is the Museu dos Povos Indígenas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which runs a well-established programme of Indigenous workshops devoted to the interpretation and documentation of its ethnographic collections since the early 2000s. These workshops are systematically conducted by Indigenous experts hired by the museum for short or long-term partnerships. Such collaborations help museum professionals develop new frameworks for working with collections by advancing conservation techniques and fostering more inclusive cataloguing and documentation systems.

In addition to enriching collection management, knowledge sharing also broadens the scope of museum research and engagement. By making collections accessible to researchers, museums encourage reinterpretations and the creation of new specialised knowledge. The innovative ideas and information derived from this work are not confined to academic audiences, but rather shared with the public in accessible and engaging ways. At the same time, museums are increasingly implementing mechanisms that enable the public to contribute their own knowledge. For instance, curators collaborate with communities to refine classification and documentation systems; and institutions use processes like folksonomy, where individuals add public tags to online items in

digitised collections or share information, memories and ideas via comment cards placed near displayed objects. Such collaborative efforts expand the possibilities for meaningful engagement, allowing museums to reflect diverse perspectives. These participatory practices not only help museums engage with broader audiences and build credibility, but also enhance the interpretive and knowledge-building potential of collections. By providing platforms that value and gather individual and collective knowledge, museums foster greater understanding of different cultural experiences, expressions and worldviews. In turn, this dialogue shapes museum practices, making them more inclusive and representative of the communities they serve.

Some responses described museums as 'agencies' or 'mediators' of knowledge. Through practices of knowledge sharing and empowering new knowledge contributors, museums can effectively promote social justice and ultimately put it into practice. This transformation, which some might relate to processes of decolonisation, requires a commitment to diversifying human resources. This means intentionally hiring curators and professionals from various backgrounds, including people of different ethnicities, social classes, genders and sexual orientations (see **Diversity**). Also central to this effort is valuing the authority of lived experience, which can serve as a foundation for collective bonding (hooks 2003 [1993], pp. 425-426). By connecting individuals and communities through their different viewpoints, museums can extend and deepen their relationship, relevance and service to society, making processes matter more than the outcome. This shift places collective experiences on par with, or above, individual curatorial perspectives, ensuring that museum narratives reflect a plurality of voices and knowledge systems.

The principle of knowledge sharing as a core museum value stems from the understanding that every individual's trajectory

and life story offers something unique and vital to the creation and transmission of knowledge. By embracing this diversity of contributions, museums can become more inclusive, dynamic and impactful cultural spaces that genuinely serve the public good. Through the active sharing of authority over knowledge, museums can shift from being repositories of information to active agents of social change.

Related terms: Co-construction, Co-creation, Dialogue, Intercultural exchange, Knowledge Exchange, Sharing expertise.

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Appendix: Development of the Museum Definition according to the ICOM Statutes (1946-2007)

The following list was compiled from copies of the ICOM statutes held at ICOM Headquarters, Paris, France.

1946 Article II – Section 2 The word 'museums' includes all collections open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms.

(ICOM Constitution, 1946)

1951 Article II – Definition The word museum here denotes any permanent establishment, administered in the general interest, for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value: artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections, botanical and zoological gardens and aquariums. Public libraries and public archival institutions maintaining permanent exhibition rooms shall be considered to be museums.

(ICOM Statutes, July 1951)

1961 Section II – Definition of a museum
Article 3 ICOM shall recognise as a museum any permanent institution which conserves and displays, for purposes of a study, education and enjoyment, collections of objects of cultural or scientific significance.

Article 4 Within this definition fall:

Exhibition galleries permanently maintained by public libraries and collections of archives, historical monuments and parts of

historical monuments or their dependencies, such as cathedral treasuries, historical, archaeological and natural sites, which are officially open to the public, botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria, vivaria, and other institutions which display living specimens, natural reserves.

(ICOM Statutes, November 1961; doc. 67-73)

1974 Section II – Definitions:

Article 3 A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.

Article 4 In addition to museums designated as such, ICOM recognizes that the following comply with the above definition: conservation institutes and exhibition galleries permanently maintained by libraries and archive centres. Natural, archaeological, and ethnographic monuments and sites and historical monuments and sites of a museum nature, for their acquisition, conservation and communication activities. Institutions displaying live specimens, such as botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria, vivaria, etc. Nature reserves. Science centres and planetaria.

(ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 11th General Assembly, Copenhagen, Denmark, 14 June 1974)

1989 Article 2 – Definitions 1. A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

The above definition of a museum shall be applied without any limitation arising from the nature of the governing body,

the territorial character, the functional structure or the orientation of the collections of the institution concerned.

In addition to institutions designated as 'museums' the following qualify as museums for the purposes of this definition: natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites and historical monuments and sites of a museum nature that acquire, conserve and communicate material evidence of people and their environment; institutions holding collections of and displaying live specimens of plants and animals, such as botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria and vivaria; science centres and planetaria; conservation institutes and exhibition galleries permanently maintained by libraries and archive centres; nature reserves; such other institutions as the Executive Council, after seeking the advice of the Advisory Committee, considers as having some or all the characteristics of a museum, or as supporting museums and professional museum workers through museological research, education or training.

(ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 16th General Assembly, The Hague, Netherlands, 5 September 1989)

1995 Article II – Definitions 1. A museum is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

The above definition of a museum shall be applied without any limitation arising from the nature of the governing body, the territorial character, the functional structure or the orientation of the collections of the institution concerned.

In addition to institutions designated as 'museums' the following qualify as museums for the purposes of this definition: natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites and historical monuments and sites of a museum nature that acquire,

conserve and communicate material evidence of people and their environment;

institutions holding collections of and displaying live specimens and plants and animals, such as botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria and vivaria; science centres and planetaria; conservation institutes and exhibition galleries permanently maintained by libraries and archive centres; nature reserves; international or national or regional or local museum organisations, ministries or departments or public agencies responsible for museums as per the definition given under this article; non-profit institutions or organisations undertaking research, education, training, documentation and other activities relating to museums and museology; such other institutions as the Executive Council, after seeking the advice of the Advisory Committee, considers as having some or all of the characteristics of a museum, or as supporting museums and professional museum workers through museological research, education or training.

(ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 16th General Assembly, The Hague, Netherlands, 5 September 1989, and amended by the 18th General Assembly, Stavanger, Norway, 1995)

2001 Article II – Definitions 1. A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

The above definition of a museum shall be applied without any limitation arising from the nature of the governing body, the territorial character, the functional structure or the orientation of the collections of the institution concerned.

In addition to institutions designated as 'museums' the following qualify as museums for the purposes of this definition:

natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites and historical monuments and sites of a museum nature that acquire, conserve and communicate material evidence of people and their environment; institutions holding collections of and displaying live specimens of plants and animals, such as botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria and vivaria; science centres and planetaria; non-profit art exhibition galleries; nature reserves; conservation institutes and exhibition galleries permanently maintained by libraries and archives centres; natural parks; international or national or regional or local museum organisations, ministries or departments or public agencies responsible for museums as per the definition given under this article;

non-profit institutions or organisations undertaking conservation research, education, training, documentation and other activities relating to museums and museology; cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity); such other institutions as the Executive Council, after seeking the advice of the Advisory Committee, considers as having some or all of the characteristics of a museum, or as supporting museums and professional museum personnel through museological research, education or training.

(ICOM Statutes, amended by the 20th General Assembly, Barcelona, Spain, 6 July 2001)

2007 Article 3 – Definition of Terms Section 1. Museum. 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.

(*ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly, Vienna, Austria, 24 August 2007)*

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