



## Position Paper on the proposal for a new Museum Definition

### *International Movement for a new Museology MINOM-ICOM*

Minom recognizes and stresses the importance of ICOM's perception towards the need for revising the museum definition, as well as the initiative of having created a standing committee dedicated to addressing the issue (Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials) and undertaking a broad democratic process of consultation, listening and selection for the proposal of a new definition. We offer, below, a few considerations which from our point of view seem important for the discussion of the subject.

The proposal for the new museum definition assumed by ICOM's Executive Committee<sup>1</sup> deserves our critical attention. A crucial point of this discussion, to which ICOM must be especially alert, is that the definition must not offer illegitimate comfort for museums who wish to justify their existence by hoarding, by the accumulation of material heritage. Following this path, the definition will fall into inconsistency, for what it says and for what it omits, and will be fated to transmit an idealized image of the museum world, which, strictly speaking, will be far from corresponding to reality.

The text presented as a definition would reach a better result if, instead of stating **what museums are**, it indicates what they **should be**. In this case we would not have a **definition**, but rather a **proposal**, which to us seems to be more challenging, contemporary and creative. In this case, ICOM would also be innovating and, instead of a definition, it would present the museological community with a proposition, a **becoming-museum**. In so being, finally, it would be possible to overcome some gaps and to include other important themes, such as museal education, repatriation of information and of cultural goods, leisure, museology or museological processes.

All museums have an owner.

The museums that institutionally integrate ICOM – a very small portion of the museal universe – represent themselves. In general they are generally maintained by Ministries and State Secretariats of national, state or city governments, by private and public foundations and by business entities. In their majority they are museums which fit into the previous definition, dating from 2007; they are also museums centered on material heritage collections offered, bought or plundered. In a general way, they are not spaces with the mission of favoring democracy and cultural citizenship, nor are they inclusive, nor polyphonic, and much less do they favor a critical dialogue about the past and the future. Very rarely do these museums recognize and address present-day conflicts and challenges. As institutions belonging to, or performing in, the field of established State powers, they serve, although there are exceptions, neoliberal ideology, anchored in the growing power of financial capital, which

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<sup>1</sup> Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

demeans the values of democracy, destroys the environment, fosters poverty and furthers intolerance, prejudice and racism. Part of material collection museums tend not to foster critical dialogues on memory, heritage, science, art and culture, and to fuel xenophobic practices and discourses opposing Human Rights and Citizenship and all of which these stand for.

The museums associated to ICOM do not represent the planet's museal universe, and, in their majority, are not "participatory and transparent". Their Executive Boards, Curatorial Councils and Scientific Councils tend to take shelter in the intricacies of authoritarian governance models. Even the "imperial" museums, which represent huge investments in terms of building industry, architecture and exhibition design, are works in glory of the established powers without commitment to democratic transparency and social responsibility.

Given this framework, the question is: what is the point in a definition that does not correspond to the daily life of the museums which integrate ICOM itself, and of those which, lacking the financial resources for paying the dues, remain at the door waiting for better days?

In truth, in our understanding, the definition proposal should be constructed and analyzed in the light of the Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (UNESCO, November 2015). The Committee surely has access to this information.

That which UNESCO enunciates as a **Recommendation** – anchored in documents such as the Round Table of Santiago de Chile, of 1972, and the Declaration of Quebec of 1984, for example, and practices recognizing the social role of museums – is the result of an alternative, critical, democratic, inclusive, polyphonic and insurgent museological practice. Nonetheless, the proposed definition seems to want to extend to all museums hard-earned values and concepts which were conquered with much struggle; it also seems to hover in the field of the ideal, uncommitted to concrete reality. It is important to consider that the inescapable **Social Museology** practices keep an extraordinary critical power and shall not serve the production of theoretical accommodations.

The signatories of this **Position Paper** do not ignore that **UNESCO's Recommendation** was inspired in museums that assume the designation of inclusive, diverse, citizen and dialogic democratic practices; they do not ignore that museum workers, in different functions, act, many times, in contexts of resistance against discourses of intolerance and theological hatred; the signatories of this **Position Paper also** do not ignore that an ever-growing number of museums associate museological practices with actions translating some form of social responsibility.

It is important to register that the proposed definition contains positivities, although harboring misunderstandings. Example: the proposal's text states that museums "are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing". Once more an idealist position reveals itself here, a definition idealized and uncommitted to the concrete museal reality. Studies by MINOM associated researchers indicate that there is museum diversity and that, in speaking of museums, it is always necessary to take historical contexts and concrete realities into consideration. There are museums that continue to reproduce and value colonial processes and others that affirm themselves as decolonial experiences.

It is a pity that the proposed definition does not once use the term Museology. This would take us into the field of Social Sciences, into an area of knowledge aiming the comprehension of museal processes and practices, in its diversity and complexity. Due to this absence, it becomes a definition that appeals to the epistemological minority of Museology, of Sociomuseology and of Social Museology as vigorous phenomena with universal dimensions.

For all that has been said above, MINOM Directorate considers:

1. The proposed definition in its present form configures an illegitimate and perhaps undesirable reassurance for museums centered on material collections.
2. The proposed definition, however well-intentioned, does not help the universe of normative museology and much less the museal processes and the museums which, through their struggles, their multifaceted insurgence, made Social Museology a growing reality.
3. Abandoning the desire to define and **assuming as a proposal the idea of a proposition may constitute an extraordinary breakthrough.**

For these reasons, we call for the voting to be **postponed** and for the **enhancement of the current proposal**, based on the complex reality of contemporary museology.

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