

**PROPOSED DEFINITION OF MUSEUM  
SUBMITTED BY ICOM-CANADA**

**1. PROPOSAL:**

WHEREAS, The ICOM Kyoto 2019 General Conference September 2019 plans to consider revisions to the 2007 Museum definition; and

WHEREAS, Museum practice has evolved significantly in the last twelve years; and

WHEREAS, ICOM-Canada represents a dedicated group of Canadian museologists, professionals who are passionate about museums and international networking;

ICOM-Canada Members at their annual meeting on April 16, 2019, therefore, propose to REAFFIRM the importance of retaining the following elements of the existing definition:

- the museum as a non-profit, permanent institution;
- the tangible and intangible nature of heritage; and
- reference to the core functions of collecting, preserving, documenting, researching, educating and exhibiting;

but also HIGHLIGHT the following emergent concerns, priorities and directions:

- the interrelation of natural and cultural heritage, both in their preservation and presentation;
- the need for renewed relationships with Indigenous peoples, based on mutual respect and reciprocity;
- the need to increase diversity in the museum workforce;
- an emphasis on the museum's capacity to practise cultural diplomacy; and
- the reconsideration of museum core functions and new digital technologies for their ability to promote social good and climate justice.

At present, the ICOM Statutes, adopted in 2007, define the museum as follows:

*"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."*

**2. EXPLANATORY NOTES:**

ICOM suggests that contributions consider the following parameters: [taken from ICOM website]

- The museum definition should be clear on the purposes of museums, and on the value base from which museums meet their **sustainable, ethical, political, social and cultural** challenges and responsibilities in the 21st century.

## Proposed Definition of Museum – ICOM Canada

- It should retain – even if current terminology may vary – the **unique, defining and essential unity** in museums of the functions of collecting, preserving, documenting, researching, exhibiting and in other ways communicating the collections or other evidence of cultural heritage.
- It should acknowledge the urgency of the **crises in nature** and the imperative to develop and implement sustainable solutions.
- It should acknowledge and recognise with concern the legacies and continuous presence of **deep societal inequalities** and asymmetries of power and wealth – across the globe as well as nationally, regionally and locally.
- It should acknowledge and recognise with respect and consideration the vastly **different world views**, conditions and traditions under which museums work across the globe.
- It should express the commitment of museums to be **meaningful meeting places** and open and diverse platforms for learning and exchange.
- It should express the unity of the **expert role of museums** with the collaboration and shared commitment, responsibility and authority in relation to their communities.
- It should express the **accountability and transparency** under which museums are expected to acquire and use their material, financial, social and intellectual resources.

### ICOM-Canada Commentary:

Museums have become public spaces for reflection, exchange and debate over issues of authority, knowledge representation, identity, and social and climate justice. The new definition should highlight this expanding role.

Equality, inclusion, access and environmental protection should guide all museum actions. The museum contributes to cultural democratization and agency by engaging meaningfully with diverse communities and eliminating social barriers. By acknowledging and making room for multiple viewpoints and voices, by foregrounding marginalized voices, shifting the narrative focus and upholding pluralism, museums can play a crucial role in reconciliation and the resolution of social conflicts.

Museums have long been active in international work, yet in recent years the scope of that work has both broadened and deepened. Diplomacy is no longer the exclusive purview of states and nations. The number of diplomatic players has vastly increased, and museums form part of this growing network. Museum work from public programming, to exhibition development to repatriation, acts as prime platform for dialogue, exchange and collaboration, leading to greater mutual understanding and the building of bridges, often when political relations between places are frozen or in moments of crisis.

Indigenous groups all over the world are fighting for self-determination. Museums are well positioned to facilitate Indigenous self-representation and support authentic collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. By establishing more accountable relationships, in which Indigenous communities are prime stakeholders, museums can re-evaluate museum content, procedures and presentations to ensure that Indigenous perspectives

are foregrounded and given equal value to mainstream thinking. The emergence of Indigenous museology has obliged museums to revisit traditional Western museological practice and start to develop approaches that meet the needs and priorities of Indigenous communities and engage with the world views and cultural values of Indigenous peoples.

Alongside recognizing Indigenous relationships with museums and an emerging Indigenous museology, Canadian museums are increasingly adopting climate protection as a core value and one of their contributions to international museology.

### 3. TOWARDS A REVISED DEFINITION:

Building on the above commentary, ICOM-Canada proposes the following modifications to the current definition:

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent, **dynamic and responsive** institution in the service of a **living planet**. It is a public place that **welcomes all people, fosters cooperation, cross-cultural exchange and public understanding of human and environmental interdependence**.

The museum acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, enjoyment and **the promotion of social and climate justice.**”

TO ICOM MEMBERS: Please send us your feedback by April 25, 2019. We will submit this document (minus section 2) to ICOM on May 1, 2019. We also encourage you and your organization to submit your definition. <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-museum-definition-the-backbone-of-icom/>

Thank you!

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