

## ICOM-Canada Report:

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From September 1-7, 2019, nearly 5000 museum professionals, scholars, and cultural advocates gathered in Kyoto, Japan, for ICOM's 25<sup>th</sup> General Conference. Because of ICOM-Canada's Travel Bursary for Emerging Museum Professionals, I was able to join my international colleagues in Kyoto to partake in fascinating conversations and gain insight into the governance of ICOM and its deep and meaningful roots world-wide. I am immensely grateful for this opportunity, and have left inspired to lead Canadian museums into thriving spaces that are sustainable, politically engaged, and supportive to their local communities.

The conference succeeded at stimulating important dialogue around many vital topics including environmentalism, reconciliation, and the future of museums. It was educational, inspiring, and infused with traditional Japanese culture. During her welcome speech at the opening ceremony, Suay Aksoy, President of ICOM, set an encouraging tone for the conference when she stated, that: "today, we live in a more uncertain world, yet in this time of profound change, museum professionals have looked for ways to lead the way." Presented with several examples of climate change and human-rights violations, museums were offered as an ideal platform to tackle these difficult subjects. While museums are not the only venue for this dialogue, they can offer a safe and powerful means for human-to-human discussion on challenging topics. Sending messages of caution, fear, and hope, they can work to educate and inspire a change in the world's trajectory. No longer a passive spectator, the modern museum can and should play an active role in engaging and shaping impactful and relevant discourse. At every moment during the conference, whether it was during the keynotes, the plenary sessions, or the discussions in the long bathroom lines, I felt the words of Aksoy resonating within me and within the other participants: we *are* in the midst of profound change, and museum professionals *are* forging a way towards a brighter future.

As an ICOM-newcomer and aspiring museum-polymath, I took the opportunity to attend a variety of sessions offered by many different international committees. As a museum-educator, I was drawn to CECA (education and cultural action) and was particularly interested in Richard Lachapelle's (Concordia University) presentation on how exhibition design can be a foundation for education. As a conservation-technician, I was pleased to attend an ICOM-CC session on different storage techniques for a range of budgets. I also joined several ICME (ethnographic museums) sessions, which were rich in case studies of collaboration with Indigenous people and revealed the interesting international similarities that museums face within their own communities which resonated with my own experiences in British Columbia.

The official title of the conference was: "Museums as Cultural Hubs: The Future of Tradition," a fitting backdrop for what would become a week of heated and ardent debates regarding a new

definition for what a museum is, or should aspire to be. The current definition, last modified in 2007, was believed to be too restrictive and problematic for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It reads below:

“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.”

As many museums have been politicizing their content, decolonizing their practices, and embodying themselves as a platform to discuss difficult topics and celebrate unique cultures, ICOM wanted to encourage all museums to continue this trend by shifting the official definition to the following:

“Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, 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.”

After a week of panels, roundtables, town hall meetings, and an open-mic session at the Extraordinary General Assembly, a vote of 70.41% passed in favour to postpone the decision to adopt this alternative definition. Many critiqued the new definition for its language, stating that it is too long, too complicated, and too difficult to translate. Some noted that it removed vital words such as “collections,” “education,” and “enjoyment”; others were concerned about funding and legal implications; in part for the countries whose museums did not have the privilege of freely expressing a political opinion. Furthermore, many were displeased by the lack of time between when the proposed definition was released and when the conference took place- contending that there was not enough time for the National and International Committees to have meaningful discussions with their members about it.

Personally, I was upset about the false dichotomy that the discussions had created. Though most speakers agreed with the values of the new definition, they felt it should have been ICOM’s vision statement, instead of ICOM’s definition for a museum. This created an uncomfortable situation where progressive museum professionals appeared to be fighting against a seemingly progressive definition. For me, museums are not neutral. Indeed, they are incredibly influential institutions with the authority to shape dialogue in a way that can be introspectively powerful and genuinely consequential in society. This opinion is grounded in my experience as a museum professional in Canada, where we have the privilege to practice this approach. As museums progress further into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is increasingly apparent that in order to stay relevant,

they must engage in contemporary conversations and act as agents for positive change. These ideas can, however, prosper without changing the definition into one with fundamental problems that would negatively affect our international colleagues.

I came to the conference as a wide-eyed graduate-student with many hopes for the future of museums. I left as an even wider-eyed graduate-student, with my hopes inspired, yet contextualized within the framework of the international museum community. I advocate that museums can and should play an active role in engaging and shaping impactful and relevant discourse; and be accessible to all members of the community, regardless of race, gender, age, ability, or socioeconomic status. I also advocate for the voice of the international museum community who at times face uniquely challenging circumstances. It is comforting to know I am not alone, but instead a part of an exciting global movement towards a brighter future for museums, for society, and for our planet.