

# What is a museum in 2023?

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On August 24, 2022, ICOM, the International Council of Museums, at its 26th General Conference held in Prague, after a very long process, with a very complicated ad-hoc methodology of up to 12 consecutive steps, with several partial votes, approved the new definition of museum with 92.41% (For: 487, against: 23, abstention: 17)

**<<A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.>>**

The case of ICOM and the museum professionals associated with it is to say the least curious. It seems that they need to be constantly wondering what they are, who they are, to return to the same thing over and over again. Other institutions do not. There must be some reason for it.

Let's do some memory. Up to twelve significant definitions of "museum" have followed one another in the ICOM statutes, which hold ordinary assemblies every three years: in 1946, 1951, 1956, 1961, 1968, 1974, 1983, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2007 and 2022. Due to its length and the complexity of its historical contexts, very relevant in each case, this is not the place to go through a detailed review of all of them, which can be found in the recommended readings and in a lot of web pages. However, it is worth highlighting the most significant ones.

The first, from 1946, establishes in its first statutes, article II, section 2 that

**<<The word 'museum' 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.>>**

The path is set for the following ones, especially those of 1951 and 1956, which outline the first one by changing "material" to "groups of objects and specimens" and "collections of objects" of artistic, cultural or scientific value and adding a first enumeration of "types of museums". The word "objects", at the time and in a museological context, still contains the semantic content of "precious, rare and/or valuable".

Thus, in 1956, article II.1 of the statutes says:

**<<The word of 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.>>.**

It is the model that will be followed, adding in 1961 and 1968 a separate list of "types of museums" that begins with three and ends with infinity.

But the sociopolitical situation in the world is changing and ICOM reflects it. In 1974, after the "Declaration of Santiago de Chile" of 1972, and also that of Québec, dated 12 de octubre de 1984, both giving birth to the "New Museology", the word "object" and the "collections" of objects as the core of the museum identity disappeared from the definition in the ICOM statutes. All of that among bitter criticism of "The West" for its plundering of Third World museum goods, which have been stripped of its precious, rare, curious and valuable objects, and replacing "objects" and "collections" of objects by "material evidence of man and his environment". The list of institutions that for ICOM can be called a "museum" inside the definition continues to grow.

In 1989 the curl curls. Anything can be a "museum", as long as the Executive Board, having heard the Advisory Committee, decides so. This is how it continues in 1995, when ministries are even mentioned as museums (!). Finally, in 2001, at the Barcelona assembly, the digital world, and the Internet, entered the scene by also recognizing institutions that facilitate the preservation and continuity of "digital heritage" as museums. The case was already crying out to heaven. The definition alone took up a whole page (!):

## **Article 2 - 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.**

**(a) 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.**

**(b) In addition to institutions designated as "museums" the following qualify as museums for the purposes of this definition:**

- (i) 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;**
- (ii) institutions holding collections of and displaying live specimens of plants and animals, such as botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria and vivaria;**
- (iii) science centres and planetaria;**
- (iv) non profit art exhibition galleries; conservation institutes and exhibition galleries permanently maintained by libraries and archives centres.**
- (v) nature reserves;**

- (vi) international or national or regional or local museum organizations, ministries or departments or public agencies responsible for museums as per the definition given under this article;
- (vii) non-profit institutions or organizations undertaking conservation, research, education, training, documentation and other activities relating to museums and museology;
- (viii) cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity)
- (ix) 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.

**2. Professional museum workers include all the personnel of museums or institutions qualifying as museums in accordance with the definition in Article 2, para. 1, having received specialized training, or possessing an equivalent practical experience, in any field relevant to the management and operations of a museum, and independent persons respecting the ICOM Code of Professional Ethics and working for museums as defined above, either in a professional or advisory capacity, but not promoting or dealing with any commercial products and equipment required for museums and services.**

In 2003, aware of the unsustainability of the situation, the ICOM Executive Board commissioned one of its historical members, Gary Edson, to bring order. Gary Edson, according to the customs of the time, uses a “mailing list”, “ICOM-L” to ask the community for ideas on a new definition of museum. An endless stream of posts on the subject occurred between June 2003 and January 2004.

It all starts with a post by Gary Edson, dated June 11, 2003, in which, at the request of President Jacques Perot, he officially opens the debate:

*«The definition should be adequately inclusive to avoid a separate listing of unique institutions, but exclusive enough to identify professionally oriented institutions serving the public interest. Attention also should be given to the virtual museum environment.»*

The contributions accumulate without much order or consensus until, on October 7, 2003, Edson sends a post asking for opinions on a definition "that has been suggested", anonymously (figure 1)

*<<A museum is an educational organization that serves the public by interpreting the scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of a physical environment and often objects. Museums that hold collections care for them as a public trust and preserve them for the future. >>*

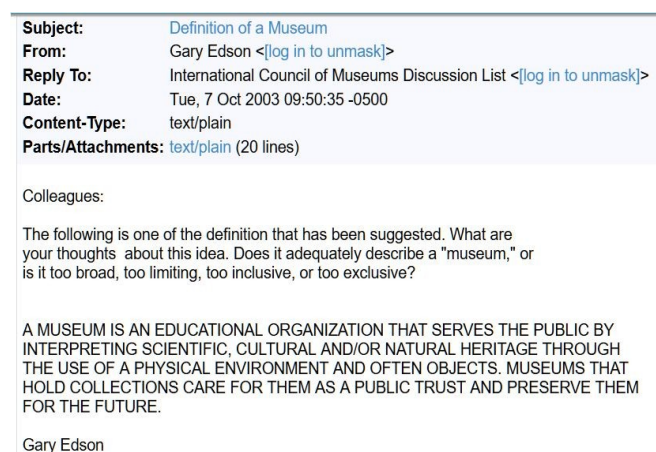


Figure 1. Gary Edson's post, October 7, 2003.

Chaos is arriving. The proposal breaks with the sacred topics of the previous definitions: Research, objects or collections, or in modern ICOM language “material heritage”, are there collateral, not essential for a museum. Only two hours later, that same day, October 7, another ICOM "historical", Milton Bloch, directed a personal post to Gary Edson, but open to the entire mailing list (figure 2):

Gary,  
*I like the gernal (sic) approach for its directness and simplicity but  
"...and often objects..."???*  
*Isn't this a bit like saying that a vegetable market it a nutritional outlet that has stalls, awnings and often vegetables.  
Museums without objects are clearly the exception and their status is still a matter to be resolved. It seems to me that  
collections of objects are at the very heart of what makes museum education unique and therefore they deserve a far  
stronger position in the definition.*  
Milton  
(Milton Bloch)

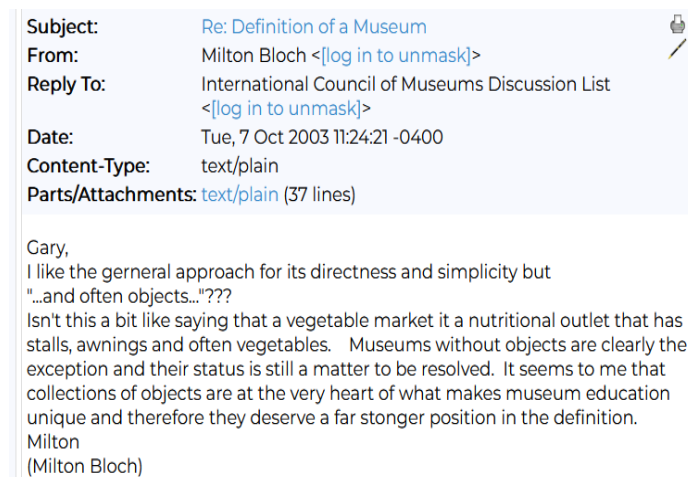


Figure 2. Milton Bloch post, October, 7, 2003.

End peace in discussion. Immediately posts go for and against each position. Some examples:

Pro Edson:

Tue, 7 Oct 2003 16:13:05 -0400. From Helen Wechsler:

*We know that collections without a physical space for interpretation and the public do not make a museum. However, we now accept that a physical space without collections can be a museum. Museums with fabricated exhibits that demonstrate and interpret concepts such as many science centers and children's museums are obvious examples. Rather than being the exception, a recent data collection effort of the American Association of Museums found that up to 20% of respondents indicated that they were not collecting institutions. If we can think of another way of wording the definition that remains inclusive of these institutions, that is fine. But we must guard against a definition that is not inclusive of these museums.*

*Perhaps we can delete the whole problematic "often objects" part and have it still work: A MUSEUM IS AN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION THAT SERVES THE PUBLIC BY INTERPRETING SCIENTIFIC, CULTURAL AND/OR NATURAL HERITAGE THROUGH THE USE OF A PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT. MUSEUMS THAT HOLD COLLECTIONS CARE FOR THEM AS A PUBLIC TRUST AND PRESERVE THEM FOR THE FUTURE.*

## Against Edson:

Tue, 7 Oct 2003 21:38:27 +0300. From Perkko Mariliina:

*Hei*

*I strongly agree with Milton Bloch's opinion. What is a museum without collections? Nothing.*

Things run fast. Gary Edson, in a post of October 8, tries to summarize the prior day debates with a beautiful series of "eight suggestions", including semantic variations on his definition together with more conservatives ones:

Wed, 8 Oct 2003 14:17:51 -0500. Gary Edson:

ICOM Colleagues,

*Following are recently proposed definitions of a "museum." Your comments are most welcome. I find this a very interesting exchange of ideas that demonstrates the diverse nature of the museum profession. Please share your ideas about these suggestions, or offer another suggestion.*

*Gary Edson*

### *Suggestion 1:*

*A museum is a cultural institution that serves society by preserving, researching and divulgating scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of collections.*

### *Suggestion 2:*

*A museum is an educational organization that serves the public by researching and interpreting scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of a physical environment and often objects. Museums that hold collections care for them as a public trust and preserve them for the future.*

### *Suggestion 3:*

*A museum is an educational organization that serves the public by interpreting scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of a physical environment and often objects. Museums that hold collections care for them as a public trust and preserve them for the future.*

### *Suggestion 4:*

*Museum: A knowledge base of the tangible and intangible evidence of the cultural and natural inheritance of humanity. Such a collection, normally in the form of objects or specimens, preserves, promotes and presents this heritage for the benefit of society and its development on a non-profit, permanent basis. A museum is also a place, real or virtual, to which the public have access to benefit from such activities.*

### *Suggestion 5:*

*A museum acquires, accumulates, permanently preserves, keeps records of, and provides expert treatment of products of nature or human creations, it ensures public utilization thereof, studies the environment from which the products of nature or human creations are acquired and provides educational services for scientific and study purposes.*

### *Suggestion 6:*

*A museum preserves and presents the objects, specimens, images, or practices of humankind to benefit society, promote education, advocate human dignity, and protect the environment.*

### *Suggestion 7:*

*A museum is an organization that serves society by exhibiting, maintaining, or protecting the tangible and intangible evidence of humankind and the environment for the purpose of cultural enhancement, education, enjoyment, preservation, or research.*

### *Suggestion 8:*

*A museums is a non-profit making institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and/or exhibits, for the purposes of study, education or enjoyment, the cultural, natural or scientific evidence of people and their environment.*

In another post, the next day, Thu, 9 Oct 2003 15:31:29 -0500, Edson introduces his “nine questions”, to be solved prior to any essay of definition:

*Is a museum always public or can it be private?*

*Does “not for profit” mean that a museum cannot make money?*

*Must a museum have a collection?*

*What is research?*

*Is interpretation the same as research?*

*Are virtual museums (which have no “buildings”) really museums?*

*Are heritage (cultural) centers museums since they often have no collections.*

*Must a museum “preserve” objects to be considered a museum?*

*If some forms of song and dance are intangible heritage, are concert halls museums?*

Endless opinions, responses, replies and counter-replies of great theoretical and programmatic importance follow one another, as never before, until today, there has been in ICOM.

Edson insists in his topics in a post on Wed, 29 Oct 2003 08:30:41 -0500 , which further excites the debate on the importance of collections and objects for a museum and the need of a shorter definition:

Colleagues:

*There has been an amount of discussion about the following definition:*

*"Museums are permanent institutions that conserve and communicate knowledge of the natural world and the cultural inheritance of humanity through collections, records, memories, images, and sites they care for, research and interpret, in public trust, for present and future generations."*

*Some have suggested an expanded version and other have recommended deletion of words. The discussion appears to be following a very traditional approach to the concept of a museum. Is this a direction ICOM should be going or is it time to take a more farsighted view of museum and museum activities?*

*Regarding the above definition are we creating a situation that will eventually result in a further listing of variables by identifying "collections, records, memories, images, and sites"? Are all those aspects of a museum (except possibly sites) not collections?*

*A recently suggested definition that take an approach that may be considered follows:*

*"A museum is an institution that serves the public interest through education, collaboration, communication, or research about social, cultural, or scientific issues expressed as objects, specimens, or activities."*

More fuel on the fire. Given the virulence of the debates, on Thu, 6 Nov 2003 12:53:46 -0500 , Gary Edson is obliged again to try to summarize the question, apologizing for the exclusive use of english in it, without correlates in spanish and french. Now, Edson arrives to list until 11 “suggestions”, that in his view summarize well the current level of the last debates:

*According to my record, the following definitions have received the most discussion. They are not necessarily listed in order of interest, but I have tried to place the most recently discussed suggestions at or near the top of the list. As always, I await your comments. Thank you for your involvement.*

Gary Edson

*These are your suggestions as of November 5, 2003.*

*Suggestion 1:*

*Museums are institutions that serve society by promoting knowledge, appreciation and conservation of the natural world and the cultural and scientific heritage of humanity through collections, memories, sites and processes they care for, research, and interpret for public benefit.*

*Suggestion 2:*

*A museum is an institution that serves the public interest through education, collaboration, communication, or research about social, cultural, or scientific issues expressed as objects, specimens, or activities.*

*Suggestion 3:*

*A museum is a cultural institution that serves society by preserving, researching and divulging scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of collections.*

*Suggestion 4:*

*A museum is an educational organization that serves the public by researching and interpreting scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of a physical environment and often objects. Museums that hold collections care for them as a public trust and preserve them for the future.*

*Suggestion 5:*

*A museum is an educational organization that serves the public by interpreting scientific, cultural and/or natural heritage through the use of a physical environment and often objects. Museums that hold collections care for them as a public trust and preserve them for the future.*

*Suggestion 6:*

*Museum: A knowledge base of the tangible and intangible evidence of the cultural and natural inheritance of humanity. Such a collection, normally in the form of objects or specimens, preserves, promotes and presents this heritage for the benefit of society and its development on a non-profit, permanent basis. A museum is also a place, real or virtual, to which the public have access to benefit from such activities.*

*Suggestion 7:*

*A museum preserves and presents the objects, specimens, images, or practices of humankind to benefit society, promote education, advocate human dignity, and protect the environment.*

*Suggestion 8:*

*A museum is an organization that serves society by exhibiting, maintaining, or protecting the tangible and intangible evidence of humankind and the environment for the purpose of cultural enhancement, education, enjoyment, preservation, or research.*

*Suggestion 9:*

*Museums help people to investigate, recognize, and understand the world, by preserving, researching, and communicating information about the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity. Museums are permanent place, real or virtual, established in the public interest, to which people have access.*

*Suggestion 10:*

*Museums are established in the public interest and help people to investigate, recognize, and understand the world, by preserving, researching, and communicating information about the tangible, intangible, and scientific heritage of humanity.*

*Suggestion 11:*

*Museums are permanent institutions that conserve and communicate knowledge of the natural world and the cultural inheritance of humanity through collections, records, memories, images, and sites. Museums interpret and research for present and future generations.*

Finally, in a post dated Fri, 21 Nov 2003 16:19:36 -0500, in french, here translated into english, extracts the core of discussions, keeping in third place the definition that sparked the controversy :

*The following three definitions were most well received:*

*Suggestion 1: Museums are institutions that serve society by disseminating the knowledge, appreciation and conservation of the natural world and heritage cultural and scientific of humanity, through the collections, memories, sites and processes that interest them, on which they research, and interpret for the public benefit.*

*Suggestion 2: A museum is an institution that serves the public interest through education, collaboration, communication, or research on social, cultural and scientific issues expressed as as objects, specimens, or activities.*

*Suggestion 3: A museum is an educational organization that serves the public by researching and interpreting natural and/or cultural heritage, through the use of a physical environment, and often of objects. Museums who hold collections take great care of them as well public, and preserve them for the future.*

Opinions and defenses for all tastes follow one another without pause. A true debate. An intellectually glorious moment for the institution, much more intense and creative than the following calls for proposals. A digital heritage that has been surprisingly ignored in subsequent references and studies, although home.ease.lsoft.com Listserv Archives still continues to house the ICOM-L list and the controversial posts.

The atmosphere becomes rare. Dozens of posts of all kinds, many of great intellectual depth, have been collected in a single day. The controversy gets out of control. Almost 200 posts with "definitions", opinions and discussion procedures have followed one another in a short time. The Executive Board decides to end the debate on the fast track. In a lengthy and self-justifying post dated January 5, 2004, Gary Edson abruptly closes the discussion, wishing everyone a "peaceful 2004." Let the General Assembly decide! The General Assembly in Seoul that year, however, leaves intact the interminable definition that emerged from Barcelona in 2001.

In the Vienna assembly of 2007, the cut comes by the simplest way: Simply, the endless list is eliminated. Article 3.1 includes only the heading from 2001:

**<<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>>.**

Milton Bloch's and his followers' emphasis on the importance of explicitly citing "objects" and "collections", and the dubious status of "objectless museums" too, seems to have faded. After giving up, Gary Edson and his definition have pulled off a small victory.

Yes, it is a small victory over the more conservative followers of Milton Bloch and his vision of the museum as a repository of objects and a research institute. But it is, at the same time, a sign of ICOM's inability to accept the new ways of conceiving a museum that the words of Edson's



definition represented. Vienna is far from representing any change in the museum philosophy of ICOM associates. However, although not in the way of Gary Edson's 2003 definition, something was moving in ICOM's Executive Board to go beyond the Vienna 2007 continuist definition.

Trying to find a controlled place for discussion, The Executive Board decides to create a specific "Committee on Museum Definition,, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP)". The MDPP starts a process open to all ICOM members, committees, partners and other interested stakeholders, inviting them to send proposals of definition but, this is important, without public discussion.

On April 1, 2019, the MDPP publishes ( <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-museum-definition-the-backbone-of-icom/> ) the submitted proposals. Until 269 different proposals, impossible to transcribe here, for an alternative museum definition were received from 69 different countries and in 25 different languages through the ICOM website!

On July 3rd, 2019, Jette Sandahl, Chair, MDPP, sends to the Executive Board of ICOM a choice of five proposals of definition ( <https://www.icom-ce.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/5-proposals-for-a-new-museum-definition-1.pdf> ) for a final selection by the EB, July 2019:

*1. Museums are dynamic and accessible, participatory and transparent spaces, working in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret and exhibit to enhance understandings of a complex, conflicted and interconnected world.*

*Addressing all aspects of the social, cultural and natural life in the past, present and future, they are communal and collaborative places in which to explore ideas, share stories, construct knowledge, challenge assumptions and seek socially just and environmentally sustainable solutions to global challenges.*

*2. 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 artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to cultural heritage of all people.*

*Museums are participatory and transparent, working 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.*

*3. In partnership with their diverse societies, museums safeguard natural, cultural and social heritages, through collecting, documentation, research, preservation, exhibition and other forms of communication. Using their material, financial, social and intellectual resources accountably and transparently, museums provide open platforms for dialogue, free learning, critical thinking and the empowerment of individuals and communities. Acknowledging past and present, local and global societal conflicts and injustices as well as the urgent crises in nature, museums support equal rights and equal opportunities for all humans and a sustainable planetary future for all species.*

*4. Respecting the past, standing in the present and facing the future, museums promote a global sustainable development.*

*They are inclusive and participatory platforms for informal education and social gathering, for collecting, preserving, researching, interpreting and exhibiting to enhance understandings of the world.*

*With transparency and accountability, museums communicate knowledge accurately, care for communities, and, while nurturing imagination, curiosity and empathy, critical thinking and aesthetic vision, they inspire people to consider the challenges facing the world and their own role and responsibilities within it.*

5. Museums are stewards of culture. Collecting, safeguarding, and making accessible artefacts and specimens, held in trust for society, they are transparent, inclusive and participatory institutions that enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.

Acknowledging past and present, local and global societal conflicts and injustices as well as the urgent crises in nature, museums provide gathering sites for study, mediation and critical thinking, and support platforms for empowerment, social cohesion, the long-term wellbeing of communities and the sustainability of local and global environments.

Finally, the Executive Board of ICOM, at its 139th session in Paris on 21-22 July 2019 reached the following decision, published in its web ( <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> ):

*The Executive Board selected the below as a new alternative museum definition for a vote to be included in the ICOM Statutes instead of the current museum definition at ICOM's next Extraordinary General Assembly (EGA), which will take place on 7 September 2019, from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. at the Kyoto International Conference Center (ICC Kyoto) in Kyoto, Japan:*

***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.***

A fresh, amazing and groundbreaking proposal, with new terms, some of which are difficult to understand without the proper context. But it was already a proposal with greater political and social content than the technical and corporate definitions of the previous reforms. Its words have so much political content that John Fraser even said that "there was a rush to gather all of the world's contemporary problems into one large bucket and claim that museums can solve these issues". The proposal was rejected by two thirds of the voters and the issue was postponed to the next ICOM general conference, to be held in Prague in 2022.

And finally we arrive at Prague 2022. New discussions, two choices:

#### *Proposal A*

*A museum is a permanent, not-for-profit institution, accessible to the public and of service to society. It researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage in a professional, ethical and sustainable manner for education, reflection and enjoyment. It operates and communicates in inclusive, diverse and participatory ways with communities and the public.*

#### *Proposal B*

*A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.*

And, with a 92,41% of the votes, after a 18 months methodology, a final result:

**A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.**

Compared to the one in Vienna, and discarded that of Kyoto 2019, the one in Prague 2022, with a war in Eastern Europe and the "values" of the Western society of the 21st century on the boil, is technically continuist in what technically remains of the Viena 2007 definition, with some very significant details regarding word order: 1. researches; 2. collects; 3. conserves; 4.interprets; 5. exhibits. For ICOM, in 2022, thousands and thousands of museums around the world, in towns and cities are, at first at with all legal and catalog of jobs implications, research institutions that, in fifth order, exhibits. Good thing if you read to the end: they also offer varied experiences for education!

In the rest, the definition is much more "political" and socially biased, if possible, than that of Kyoto. As many of its detractors have pointed out, despite the almost unanimity it aroused in the vote, it introduces into the doctrinal corpus of museums ideas that should belong to society as a whole and that should pervade all its institutions without the need for more specific mentions. Museums, for the objectors of the definition, are simply a part of that society and ICOM should go more to its specific object and stop making high-sounding statements out of place. The discussion continues at this time and seems not to point to an end. As the outgoing president Alberto Garlandini said in a statement, the definition "is not perfect"...

Two more doctrinal notes and a conclusion. One points to the "theory of knowledge", to the nature of concepts. "Museum" is a concept and, since Nominalism in the 12th century, a concept is simply a name to label a changing reality. There are no pure, "universal" "concepts". It is the history, the reality at every moment, that marks the semantic content of a "name", of a word. And since the 17th century, when the meaning closest to our culture appears, the word "museum" designates different realities, in constant evolution. "Museum" has been many things since then. This evolution can be systematized and classified by using the idea of "generations".

We have identified five "generations of museums" from the 17th to the 21st century:

1. "Collection museums" such as the British Museum, in London and practically all up to the 19th century.
2. "Procedural museums" such as the Musée des arts et métiers, in Paris.
3. "Interactive museums" like the Exploratorium, in San Francisco.

4. "Theme parks" such as EPCOT, in Florida.
5. "Virtual museums", of which there are many types: with physical and institutional support, such as "The Museum of the World", created by the British Museum and Google Arts & Culture Lab. with the WEBGL tool, or only digitally based, without material headquarters.

A sixth generation is already being born, founded on virtual reality, artificial intelligence and social networks, in which the whole world, without physical limits, is the museum and all of Humanity's heritage is its content. Museum communication and spreading, in our era of social networks and Internet tools, is also at a new level in human relations. Just search for "Virtual Museum" or "AI Museum" on Google and discard digitizations of existing museums.

Museums of painting and art in general, such as the Louvre, which appeal more to emotional communion with the precious, rare or valuable object than to rational communication, continue to be the canon of the first generation. Also, if they have world-famous objects, such as Leonardo da Vinci's Gioconda, these become their best marketing. Along with them, museums of that and other generations have coexisted and coexist, experiencing their success or failure in numbers of visitors depending on their adaptation to the ecosystem in which they are located, and wanting to exchange visitors rankings, when they are lacking, for self-given "services" to the society. Evolution, as in nature, creates fossils and rewards the adaptability or change of dominant species. Maintaining species, or fossil museums, artificially, costs the budget dearly.



Figure 3. A group of elderly people, a target audience for a panel on Alzheimer's.

The other point is of a legal nature. "Museum" is also a legal concept included in the legislation of almost all countries. A museum is still a "legal entity" and in an advanced society the legal

consideration of a museum has economic, fiscal and social implications of all kinds. In the bibliography we have included a splendid legal study that defines in its fair terms the legal context, by no means neutral, in which these institutions are registered. Many museums, and their employees, live on grants and legally conforming to an “official” definition is critical to entering the cast and keeping jobs.

And finally, a conclusion. We do not know how to define the museum of the future, but from the 17th century until now; from the first museum of the modern era, the Ashmolean Museum, in Oxford, to the last virtual museum, something has been repeated under the label “museum”, surviving generation after generation. Something that unequivocally individualizes it in front of a library or a circus. What is it?

That “something” has to do with "visiting" some space, now real or virtual, and with "observing" what the creator of the "museum" has made available to us in a certain way and with some objective, so that "we can learn for ourselves, at our pace ". The Ashmolean was already there and the "Museum of the World", of the British Museum and Google, too. In everything else they are different.

Let's focus on that. Translated into current words:

«A museum is a space, real or virtual, open to the public, and endowed with a “permanent project of non-formal education, in which the teacher and contents are unified at the service of certain objectives”».

The first is self-explanatory. The second is also easy to grasp but a little more complex to conceptualize. "Non-formal education" has always existed, but it appeared as a pedagogical concept in the early 1970s, meaning different things but distinguishing itself from "formal" and "informal". Sometimes, in the distinction between regulated formal education (the university, for example) and the non-regulated (the popular university of the towns, for example), non-formal is confused with "non-regulated". Little by little it has been taking shape and the museums have helped to do so. Museums are very useful for the concept.

Thus, in a museum project, their "non-formal" education is different from the "formal, regulated or not." (a school of any kind, in which the sender, or "teacher", and contents are rigidly separated from each other and from the receiver or student) and "informal education" (family or life, in which the sender, contents and receiver are approach until confused). In a museum with free visits, the contents must act as communicators, without the need for a guide/teacher who would transform the

non-formal educational experience into a formal non-regulated one. This is its main feature. Issuer and content are unified and the visitor is free to see or do what he wants or what catches his attention.

And that is where the last thing comes in: the “project” and the “objectives”. Although both terms seem a bit complicated, it is very simple: **someone makes a museum to get something**. The "educational project" is specified in the choices made by that museum owner of three levels of objectives:

1. Transversal objectives. What he wants at its ground level: collecting, preserving and restoring, image, infrastructure, rehabilitation of a space, transmission of values or knowledge, researching...
2. General objectives: The museum subjects, cultural areas and/or themes. The great topics he wants to deal with and communicate.
3. Particular objectives: Levels of comprehension and understanding for each of the "target audiences" to that the "museum" intends to address.

To the service of these objectives and targets, at their disposal, and depending on their availability, the museum acquires, has or produces a set of items, its contents: suitable objects, activities or experiences for each of these target audiences to achieve the objectives set by their promoters, in a non-formal, technically “non-authoritarian” mode. Elias Ashmole, the promoter of the Ashmolean, did it in 1683. The promoters of the “Museum of the World”, in 2023, too.

Any museum can be defined with the words we have used. It is its "non-formal educational project", with its gradation of objectives, means and target audiences, what individualizes each museum and makes it different from the others that have appeared throughout history, and also what distinguishes a "museum" of non-museological educational initiatives, which do not have such a project.

Some punctual ideas, open to your reflection and meditation:

There are not good and bad objects. There are good and bad educators.

There are good and bad projects. There are good and bad museums.

An empty museum is not a museum, it is a warehouse that preserves carefully.

A museum with a formal education project is a school, regulated or non regulated.

A factory, or a city, with a non-formal educational project, is an "open air" museum or ecomuseum.  
A circus has no other project than to make people have fun and earn money.  
A library is an illustrated store. Books & so communicate.  
If there is no non-formal educational project, and people, there is no museum, there is something else.



Figure 4. A “Warehouse” that preserves carefully.

Everything else, if the "museum" has collectibles or not; if it is for profit or not; whether it is privately owned or not; if you buy or are given as gifts; if you have investigative or cleaning staff on staff or not; if it is structured in permanent spaces, temporary exhibitions or both; or if it promotes diversity, sustainability or inclusiveness, all of it changes over time and at the pace of society and can be added in each case. It is not essential to define "museum" in the 21st century and ICOM, its members, and many museography companies, should overcome their old interests, anchored, explicitly or implicitly, in the "museum object" and in their jobs. Gary Edson, a member of the Executive Board of ICOM, already pointed this out in the definition that he proposed in the silenced debate of 2003 and in his “eight, or eleven, or three, suggestions” and his “nine questions”, and that is why the mess started. Reread it carefully.

We go back to the beginning. Why is the definition so important that ICOM has not stopped thinking about it? Apart from the legal, fiscal and economic aspects that we have already pointed out, it must be taken into account that in the vast world of museums there are large power structures. What museums to subsidize? Who manages a museum? Which is their job catalog?

Although it may not seem so at first sight to some, the line of ICOM and that of now famous Gary Edson's unborn definition or the one pointed out here, are staff and materially divergent. One focuses on “warehouses”, static exhibitions, research and conservation; the other on visitors, non-formal education, temporary thematic exhibitions and creative leisure. And that goes for all the generations that have appeared so far. May be we already know, by now, what a museum is.

And now let's let ICOM continue thinking about its eternal definition and if objects are yes or objects are not.

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