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What exactly is a museum? Icom comes to blows over new definition

As 50-year-old statement is overhauled, feuds over new description could "seriously weaken" the International Council of Museums

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“Major dissent” has been predicted if the proposed definition for museums is adopted at Icom's general assembly on 7 September. Photo: Scott Webb / Pexels

What exactly is a museum? If anyone knows, it should be the International Council of Museums (Icom), with its 40,000 members representing more than 20,000 museums. But that very question is, in fact, fuelling a bitter debate within the organisation and perhaps threatening its identity. On 12 August, 24 national branches—including those of France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Canada and Russia, along with five museums' international committees—requested the postponement of a vote on a revised definition of museums, in order to deliver a “new proposal”.

The new definition was selected by Icom's executive board in Paris on 22 July, but the petition issued by the 24 national committees predicts “major dissent” if the proposal, which constitutes a “considerable shift”, is adopted at its general assembly on 7 September in Kyoto.

For almost 50 years, Icom has adhered to a statement defining the museum as “a non-profit institution” that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” But some people, including the Danish curator Jette Sandahl, object saying “it does not

speak the language of the 21st century” and that it does not reply to current demands of “cultural democracy”.

Sandahl led the commission that put forward the new 100-word text, defining museums as “democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the future”. It adds: “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.” They are supposed to be “participatory and transparent”, work “in active partnership with and for diverse communities” and “aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing”.

“A definition is a simple and precise sentence characterising an object, and this is not a definition but a statement of fashionable values, much too complicated and partly aberrant.” François Mairesse, a professor at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

Juliette Raoul-Duval, who chairs Icom France, quickly denounced an “ideological” manifesto, “published without consulting” the national branches. “At first, I thought this was a joke,” says Didier Rykner, the founder of the *Tribune de l'art*, attacking what he describes as an Orwellian newspeak that replaces art works with artefacts and specimens. “The definition should emphasise the importance of the museums’ functions and its relationship to tangible and intangible heritage, which constitute its distinguishing characteristics from other cultural institutions,” claim the national committees which asked to delay the vote, deploring the “political tone” of Sandahl’s document.

A former director of Icom, and one of the founders of the concept of “new museology” in the 1970s, Hugues de Varine confesses that he was surprised by the “over inflated verbiage” of an “ideological preamble” which does not distinguish a museum from a cultural centre, a library or a laboratory.

The quarrel could be interpreted as a debate between the old guard and the younger generation, or between Latin tradition and the Anglo-Saxon move towards a more “inclusive” model. François Mairesse, a professor at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and the chair of the International Committee of Museology, says the matter is more serious. He resigned in June from the commission headed by Sandahl, claiming the proposals “did not reflect the discussions held over two years”.

“A definition is a simple and precise sentence characterising an object, and this is not a definition but a statement of fashionable values, much too complicated and partly aberrant,” Mairesse says. “It would be hard for most French museums—starting with the Louvre—to correspond to this definition, considering themselves as ‘polyphonic spaces’. The ramifications could be serious. Icom’s statement can be included in national or international legislation and there is no way a jurist could reproduce this text.”

Mairesse adds that “it does not take into account the extraordinary variety of museums. It would be disastrous to impose only one type of museum. If a vote breaks the consensus that has always governed Icom, it will seriously weaken the organisation.”