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Should Art Museums Be More Ideological? After Pushback, a Museum Summit Decides to Put Off Making a Decision

Museum professionals meeting in Kyoto chose to delay adopting a definition of a museum's role that stressed democratic values and protecting the environment.

Vivienne Chow, September 9, 2019



Activists outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art call for urgent action to end the climate emergency on March 24, 2019. Photo by Erik McGregor, Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images.

Museum directors and professionals from more than 100 countries have decided to postpone a decision whether to adopt a radical redefinition of the role of museums. After a week of debate in Kyoto, and pushback ahead of the International Council for Museums' annual conference in the historic Japanese city, delegates voted overwhelmingly against a contentious new definition that its critics argue is "too ideological."

The president of Paris-based ICOM, Suay Aksoy, stressed that the vote did not mean an end of the debate, rather a "new chapter" of the discussion about what a 21st-century museum should be.

In the vote at the global museum group's 2019 general conference, 70 percent voted in favor of postponing the vote, with 28 percent against the motion.

Aksoy stressed that ICOM was committed to updating its definition. "This is just another beginning in this process of redefinition," Aksoy said in a statement, adding that the committee working on a new definition will continue to meet. She said that new ideas "will probably appear in the new definition that will be an amendment of the proposed one."

Work on updating ICOM's museum definition began after its 2016 conference in Milan. The committee charged with coming up with a new wording that reflects

contemporary challenges and environmental concerns was led by the Danish former museum director Jette Sandahl. The new definition, which emphasizes championing democratic values, social justice, and human dignity, was announced in July, causing consternation among more traditional members.

It was due to be put to the vote at ICOM's Kyoto conference, where 4,500 professionals from 120 countries met last week. Traditionalists were alarmed by the new definition, which declares that museums are "democratizing, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures." The new definition also stressed championing "human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary well being."

Ahead of the Kyoto conference, 24 national branches of ICOM, including France, Italy, Spain, and Germany, objected to the new definition, with some critics arguing it was "too ideological". Others worried that downplaying education in particular might have an unintended impact on public funding for institutions in some countries.

Rather than vote for or against the definition, the Kyoto conference voted to defer the decision. It looks as if until ICOM meets again in three years time, the definition of a museum remains as it has been since 2007, with the stress on institutions acquiring, conserving, and communicating cultural heritage "for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment."

Speaking at the Kyoto conference, Sandahl, said that ICOM received a total of 269 proposals from 69 countries submitted in 25 languages. Ahead of the conference, she said that being silent on issues of the environment and in denial of the legacies of inequality and asymmetry of power and wealth will no longer be sustainable for museums, if they want to stay relevant in the 21st. Some professionals in Kyoto questioned the decision to hold the delaying vote.

After the vote, Lonnie Bunch, the secretary of the Smithsonian, warned in a tweet: "We have to make sure that museums play a role in shaping a more inclusive future," and not held captive by tradition.

The president of the American Alliance of Museums, Laura Lott, tweeted in support of further debate. She warned that "it was easy for us in the US to say the global definition should change," but its impact for museum in other countries "has not been sufficiently studied."

Seema Rao, the author of *Self Care for Museum Workers*, who works at the Akron Art Museum, was underwhelmed. She tweeted that the "whole [ICOM] definition thing feels farcical." She suggested that instead of having "arcane, esoteric

conversations that just miss the point. They should have asked visitors across the world what is a museum.”