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Dear readers,

this is an emergency issue which does not include, for obvious reasons, some of our usual magazine parts. We hope to offer the usual services with the upcoming issue and to see you back again, unharmed and defending culture, scientific freedom and human rights.

Titel page: The Viennese Dioskurides (Austrian National Library, Cod. Med. Gr. 1) is a late antique collective manuscript with a picture herbarium, figurative paintings and zoological illustrations. Constantinople, approx. 512. Our cover picture shows the second picture of the so-called doctor group from the codex, including Galenos. The page is named after the physician Galenos shown top center. Clockwise: Pedanios Dioskurides, Nikandros (with snake), Ruphos (Rufus) from Ephesos, Andreas (personal physician from Ptolemy IV Philopator), Apollonios (identification unclear: either Apollonios of Pergamon, Apollonios of Kiton or Appollonius Mys) and Krateuas (fol. 3 verso). Source: Pedanius Dioskurides - The Viennese Dioskurides, Codex medicus Graecus 1 of the Austrian National Library. Graz 1998 (= Glanzlichter der Buchkunst; vol. 8), fol. 3 verso.
We have chosen this representation of famous ancient physicians because its form of presentation reminds us how much we all (including our politicians) depend on the knowledge of experts. Incorrect risk assessments or hesitant actions by our politicians can result in the death of hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens.
Changes unsettle and generally cause great unease among people. The members of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) are not immune to this. An example of this is the project promoted and driven forward by ICOM President Suay Aksoy to redesign the museum definition of 2007, which has been valid up to now. After the three keywords of the Golden Circle ("what", "how", "why".), a museum council needs a concise definition of the tasks, fields of activity and orientation of museums. A definition serves as a basis not only for the admission of new members, but also for external institutions and potential sponsors/authorities. It shows what museums stand for and serve as a contact.

Since 1946, the founding of ICOM in Paris, eight museum definitions have been written, the last five (since 1974) are mostly identical with minor changes/additions. The starting point of the discussions regarding a new version was the latest version of the definition from 2007, which reads 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."  

At the Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto on September 7, 2019, the following draft resolution was presented:

"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 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."  

The most important processes and decisions of the conflict

As early as 2013, a new project was launched under the then ICOM President Hans-Martin Hinz, and a discussion has started to revise the definition of 2007. Initially, Hinz referred to “the modernisation and recast of the ICOM statutes, which virtually represent the constitution of the association”. For this a working group (WG) in 2013 after the Rio-General Conference was initiated under the leadership of Per Rekdal (Norway). The working results were adopted in a new version of the Statutes at the General Conference 2016 in Milan. Parallel to the WG statutes 2013, another working group on the reform of the museum definition was already set up under the direction of Bernice Murphy (Australia). The statements were so extensive, that a suggestion for a vote in Milan, could not be completed in time. It was decided to favour the vote of the statutes to the definition. Following the General Conference in Milan, the new Executive Board (EB) installed the group “Standing Committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP)” as a subgroup of the EB with 12 members under the leadership of Jette Sandhal. MDPP’s assignment for the next three years was as follows: 

“The Committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP, 2017-2019) explores the shared but also the profoundly dissimilar conditions, values and practices of museums in diverse and rapidly changing societies. Combining broad dialogue across the membership with dedicated expert fora, the committee is addressing the ambiguous and often contradictory trends in society, and the subsequent new conditions, obligations and possibilities for museums”.  

The report accepted by the EB, together with recommendations of the MDPP by Jette Sandhal for the initiation of a process for the development of a new museum definition, was published on December 9, 2018. In this report, Sandhal explained the MDPP’s approach, related to the collection of suggestions from members and committees as well as the voting process with the EB and the Advisory Council. According to Sandhal, there were about 2.000 members and museum professionals included in the process.  

By May 2019, the MDPP should provide alternative definitions and submit them to submitting them to the EB in June 2019. This first presentation of five alternatives, took place in a session lasting no less than 20 minutes, in which EB should decide for one or two alternatives to be voted for in Kyoto. Immediately, strong criticism was expressed, since the five alternatives no longer included important elements of the 2007 definition. There was only one point the critics could enforce right away: that a museum may not make a profit.
At the 139th meeting of the EB (from July 21 until July 22, 2019 11), the decision was made to present an alternative proposal (see above) to the members as a final draft. During the Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto (planned for September 7, 2019 from 9.30 am to 10.30 am) it was decided to introduce an alternative to be discussed. Changes/modifications were excluded, as according to French law, after the decision for one version by the EB, a subsequent modification is not allowed prior to a decision for a planned vote.

The proposal for a new definition was published on July 25, 2019 by Jette Sandhal on Facebook. 12

Resistance before the General Conference in Kyoto

Immediately after publication, and during the decision making process two groups within the ICOM members could be identified: those who wanted to keep the current definition unchanged or wanted to amend it with some changes; and those, who wanted a completely new definition for the Institution museum, which was characterized above all by contemporary current terms.

On August 12, 2019, Paris received a request to postpone the vote on a revision of the 2007 definition, by at least one year. The request was signed by 27 national and seven international committees. 13 In addition, a long letter from Peter Keller, the General Manager of ICOM, in which he described the individual stages of the finding process, couldn’t calm their minds. 14 On August 31, 2019, ICOM Europe reacted to Keller’s letter on its Facebook account and summarized the current confused situation stating the individual opinions. For the first time the danger for a potential division was indicated. 15

Kyoto

The General Conference in Kyoto (from September 1 until September 7, 2019) was announced as “Museums as Cultural Hubs: The Future of Tradition”. The conference was, however, consistently overshadowed by the increasingly hardening fronts. The discussions about the definition of a museum continued to dominate the sessions, which originally should focus on completely different topics, such as museums and sustainability. Initial complaints centered about the fact, that participants had taken extra holidays and spent a lot of money and time on this international meeting to exchange ideas. Now, one was occupied with almost nothing else but definitions. In particular, the meeting of the Advisory Council was affected by this. It was shortened in a way that no other topics could be discussed beside the election of the board. This also resulted in strong criticism.

Whilst the supporters of the new definition could use the panel in the large conference hall including video transmission during “prime time” in the morning 16, the opponents met for an exchange in the afternoon on September 3, 2019 in a limited setting, lasting one and a half hours only. This meeting was not intended originally, but was planned as a workshop, which should support the new definition. Only, when more and more critical voices were expressed, the EB decided to have an open discussion instead of a workshop, so that the critics of the proposal were also given a chance to comment.

A first highlight of common confrontations became clear, at the end of the conference during the Extraordinary General Assembly on September 7, 2019, when even the Iranian and Israeli representatives with their distinct negative attitude agreed for the first time (as emphasized by the latter in the discussion). These confrontations completely disrupted all schedules with 2 1/2 hours additional time. In the end, a vote was taken, but only on the motion for postponement. The result of 70.4% (396 votes) for a postponement of the vote on a new definition, could not lead to a reconciliation but opened the way to new confrontational and intensifying discussions.

For a better understanding of the conflict, the graphic below shows the different sections of the Swiss ICOM members on the current definition in 2007 and the proposed decision in 2019. 17

After Kyoto

The need for discussion after Kyoto was enormous. Many committees and countries started fierce discussions, some of which have not yet been completed.

On November 7, 2019, an open petition (running until January 7, 2020) to the board of ICOM Germany was started by Alina Gromowa (Berlin), which was supported by 294 people to start a debate on the new museum definition. 18

On November 14, 2019, Per Rekdal published a detailed statement on Facebook in which he examined the individual terms with a view to a definition for all members/committees and once again pointed out the connection between the ICOM statutes (how to run an organisation...
for museums), the Code of Ethics (how to run museums) and the definition (describes criteria that are shared by all those supposed to be included in what is defined), which should not be considered independently of each other. 19

From December 13 until December 31, 2019 ICOM Germany conducted a digital survey among its members. 20 The evaluation report is online since February 10, 2020. 21 In January 2020, ICOM Switzerland used the same questionnaire; the evaluation report is also online. 22

An official timetable was published in Paris in December 2019. 23a

In January, ICOM France together with ICOM Europe, ICOFOm, and ICOM Germany invited the presidents of all national and international ICOM committees for March 10, 2020 to Paris in order to continue the discussions following Kyoto (a written/digital contribution was requested from all absentees). President Suay Aksoy and MDPP were also invited to participate in the discussion. This “Committees’ Day” should serve to develop a common vision on how a museum definition and an adequate definition for ICOM could look like. Clearly leading voices in these “grassrooted actions” are ICOM France and ICOM Europe. About 70 members from different committees participated. 23b

The next result of the meeting will be a resolution, which will be published soon on the same website. Markus Walz indicated that ICOM should be aware that the published ICOM definition of 2007 was accepted by the UNESCO in 2015 as being part of their “Recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of museums and collections. Their diversity and their role in society”. If ICOM changes its 2007 definition into a completely different text, Walz notices the danger that the UNESCO museum discourse will ignore ICOM in favour of an own museum definition which is nothing but the old ICOM definition of 2007. The UNESCO recommendations offer an additional benefit by presenting definitions of “collection” and “heritage” as well. 23b

On January 20, 2020 the President of ICME, Ralf Čeplak Mencin (Slovenia), forwarded a letter from ICOM President Suay Aksoy, dated January 19, 2020 24, to the members of ICME, in which comments from all members of international committees were requested for a new definition. In her letter, Aksoy emphasized a “bottom-up” approach with simultaneous suggestions on how members could be involved best. The intention is to define a new museum definition by June 2021, the 75th birthday of ICOM.

On January 30, 2020 the panel meeting took place at the Jewish Museum in Berlin (organized by students of the HTW Berlin). This meeting was to be a continuation of the petition of November 7, 2019 (see above). 25 At the event, students asked whether it would not have been helpful to supplement the proposed resolution with a glossary so that the terms of critical museology, often used in it, could be better understood. The question arose as to where to draw the line between a definition of an institution and demands that affect the whole of humanity (such as the commitment to human rights) and therefore could not be a specific characteristic of museums alone.

ICOM Germany invited to a members’ forum in Hamburg on March 20, 2020, which was postponed due to Corona. Under the heading: “The ICOM museum definition of the 21st century” three hours had been reserved for an exchange, which will be prepared by a three-member working group. 26

Further planned meetings of the EB, and other meetings organised by the Paris office (such as the annual June meetings) were postponed to Autumn 2020. 27 On March 31, 2020 a video conference is planned, in which it will be decided about a possible postponement of the next annual June conference because of Corona. However, these conferences generally take place without the participation of common ICOM members, but the officially elected representatives of the committees take part in them. Only every three years, all members can speak publicly during general conferences – even if they are not allowed to vote themselves, but are represented by their committees.

One year before the next General Conference, the voters should agree to a new definition (according to the articles of association, national and international committee have five voting rights each). Not until 2022, at the next General Conference in Prague, the Members’ voices on the future definition of the museum can be heard – but just during breaktime.

If the decision on a new definition is made in 2021, the implementation process of the museum definition will be presented during the meeting of the EB within the Prague General Conference. One aspect for an early decision in 2021 could be, that Suay Aksoy was re-elected in Kyoto for her second term and last term as ICOM president. The next presidential election will take place in Prague, so that everything that has not been decided until then will be left to the successor. It is also factually correct that, unlike in Kyoto, no large numbers of non-voting members will be present at the 2021 vote and could raise their (possibly critical) voices.

Nine conflict levels

Like in any other crisis, different conflict phases can be distinguished within this conflictual process of finding a new museum definition for ICOM. The conflict researcher and organizational consultant Friedrich Glasl, developed in 1980 a model for conflict escalation and resolution. Accordingly, conflicts that have reached a certain point on the nine-step scale of conflict escalation can no longer be resolved without outside help. If the parties are aware of the stage they are at, they have the opportunity to analyse their conflict and to react better during the course of
the conflict. The nine escalation stages with three levels each, provide information in each case about whether at the beginning of a conflict, the involved persons can and still want to reconcile, or if irreconcilably confrontations increase with only losses on both sides until mutual annihilation.

Had there been any crisis management by ICOM?

When at a conference in Japan, with over 4500 participants from 120 countries, discussions happen in such a committed, opposed, and confrontational way, these are symptoms of an internal crisis of the Museum Council in terms of content and structure. 28 It is no longer just about the self-conception of the association. Several committees have already “threatened” that in the event of a decision in favour the proposed new definition, to terminate their membership.

If implemented, this would correspond to the Glasl’s escalation levels 8-9. The suggested new definition was seen by many as a quite suitable presentation of a “mission” or “vision”, but not useful as a definition for museums. With a possible introduction, signs of further problems could be seen. As some representatives of international committees complained, the new definition would be far too political (e.g. the commitment to human dignity, global equality, social justice) and would directly bear great potential for conflict with laws and rules in their national states. 29 Accordingly, those representatives estimated an immediate threat to the continued existence of their museum work. The same problem could also be found in Germany as in some German countries, the legislation includes to promote museums with public funds, with a mandate for the permanent preservation and maintenance of the collection as the main argument. It is not a political mandate. 30

In contrast to these four hours of fierce fighting, the podium produced more of an unhelpful silence and disagreement, how to handle these open confrontations. Calming words, as well explanations of the context of the emergence the proposed definition, or examples as set out in of the practice to deal with it, were missing. Many people were of the opinion that a group of more or less unknown or chosen ones had decided what the definition was, without realising the consequences right from the beginning. This unsettling attitude of the leaders on the panel reinforced the fronts in the plenum. At the end, the result of the vote with 70,4% to shift a decision made it clear once again that something had gone completely wrong here.

The embittered contributions on both sides seemed to have removed far from the project to formulate a new definition. Furthermore, they were clear also in contradiction to the terms in the proposed definition such as “human dignity” and “planetary wellbeing”.

After Kyoto, the commission was reorganized as “MDPP 2”; almost doubled in size with now 21 members. Two members resigned the old group: the expert in the management of cultural heritage Alberto Garlandini and the museologist François Mairesse 31; seven people from the first group continued to participate. How the members of the MDPP were selected, was not further explained. Of course, therefore the question arises, as to whether there are only supporters of the new definition. This second MDPP turn is led again by Jette Sandahl. The decision to include several contributors from MDPP in MDPP 2 again (with an identical timeschedule as in 2019), would have to be examined in view of a promising de-escalation within crisis management. Regrettably, the formation of the MDPP 2 has not yet been published on the website of the world association ICOM, which is not a confidence-building measure for all involved. 32
With the existing potential for conflicts and the personal enforcement ambitions, one should never forget, that all ICOM members, regardless of their position, want to work first and foremost together in order to preserve cultural heritage and world knowledge. The only point that should really matter in this discussion, is everyday practice in museums. In this crisis, this should be the central idea for a solution-oriented management. In the current phase of conflict, it remains to be recommended that external conciliators should be called in, to avoid a second Kyoto in Paris.

What became clear in this crisis, was not only the great need for discussion between the members (and not only between the committee representatives), but also the differences between individual institutions, which all call themselves “museums”. In this respect, it takes time to search globally for the smallest common denominator, acceptable to all ICOM members. It needs a practicable definition, that does not include all eventualities, but which illustrates, especially to external interested parties, why museums are an indispensable part of our global life-world. 34

Notes


3 https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/ (visited February 16, 2020). The full text is set out in Article 3(1) of the statutes of ICOM in the French version. Despite their international impact in a wide range of social and cultural contexts areas, this definition formulates a framework (see also Ethical Guidelines for Museums), but is not protected in Germany; the mission statement of ICOM Germany, eMail of December 13, 2019

4 I attended the conference in Kyoto (the Workshop on September 3, 1019 as well as the Extraordinary General Assembly on September 7, 2019). My own point of view, questioning of participants of the conference or members of ICOM form the basis of this text. 17


6 Hinz, eMail February 4, 2020; Davis 2007, p. 9

7 The working group underwent many consultations with the ICOM committees (members first principle) to vote the content. Hinz, op. cit.


11 Unfortunately, it is not possible to open the minutes on the ICOM website as of today (February 6, 2020). https://icom.museum/en/member/icom-executive-board-meeting/ (visited February 6, 2020)

12 https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1021667820641382&id=1044396041&sfns=sscs&extid=O%tV-1Jpa5ct0Yy3X (visited February 9, 2020)


15 https://www.facebook.com/icomeurope.museums/photos/a.61168522397130/1203123616534948/?type=3&theater (visited February 8, 2020)

16 See the digital recording of the presentation of the proposal of the new definition: https://youtu.be/ fSDP8DxdwRA (visited February 9, 2020)


20 ICOM Germany, eMail of December 13, 2019


23a https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246331 (visited March 22, 2020)

23b Program and documents: Les musées, aujourd’hui et demain ! Définitions, missions, déontologies | ICOM
Die auf Ablenkung hin programmierten digitalen Transzendenz entsteht hier aber nicht.

einer 3D-Brille und einem Computer kann man zwar

findet er dort? Er will der Wiederkehr des Immerglei

-Warum geht der Mensch ins Museum, was sucht und

Fazit

ist jedoch eine adäquate Verquickung von Genußwelten

punkt seiner Kommune attraktiv und kundenfreundlich

verstehen. Wenn das Museum als ein geistiger Mittel-

zunächst keine höhere Bildung, um die Sammlungen zu

sich schneller mit ihnen identifizieren und benötigt dazu

rungen bzw. innovativer Produkte. Wenn andererseits

lysator” oder in einen Schmelztiegel qualitativer Legie-

erhalten durch Lagerfelds “Kunstgriff” als teure Kon-

sonderen Regalen im Museum Grand Palais aufgereiht,

Die neu gestalteten Chanel-Cremeschachteln, in be-

34 Thanks to the art historian Dr. Evelyn Brockhoff and Reiner Zapf for critical comments; thanks to Marie-Louise Müller for proof reading.

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