

The Definition of Museum is Changed by the International Council of Museums

In August 2022, the Paris-based International Council of Museums (“ICOM”) broadened the definition of the word “museum” as it applies to all global museums. The decision came after 18 months of inter-council consultations and presentations from museum professionals internationally. The new definition provides that: “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, reflection and knowledge sharing.” This revised version of the definition of museum is important because of its inclusion of the terms “diversity,” “sustainability” and “accessibility” -- reflecting ICOM’s focus on the importance of arts institutions in promoting social progress.

Leading up to this decision was a well-publicized debate within ICOM members about whether it is a museum’s primary purpose to educate the public and preserve cultural heritage, or to exist as a center that assists social progress. Some members wanted the new definition to go further to describe how museums in the past have fallen down on promoting inclusivity and diversity in the arts, even though they are now reflecting on their own history. The President of ICOM, Alberto Garlandi, however, described the revised definition of museum as “a great step forward.”

