



# Museums and Universal Heritage

## Universal Heritage / Individual Responsibility – Individual Heritage / Universal Responsibility

The following description shall serve as an overall introduction to the ICOM General Conference theme for 2007:

> The heritage of a people implies a body of knowledge and an attitude with a holistic approach to existence that includes the environment, the sciences, technology, and the arts, as well as, the inherent system of ideas and values that define visions of the world, personal and group perceptions, and ways of life. Thus, heritage can be understood to be a process of creation and renovation that secures the continuity between matter, life, space, and time.

### Abstract

The role of museums within society is changing fundamentally and rapidly. Being increasingly exposed to numerical and economic criteria, museums are threatened by losing their main focus on collections. But collections still remain at the core of knowledge, competences and values connected to museums. The ICOM General Conference of 2007 intends to be a forum to discuss and generate ideas and solutions to bridge the gap between different expectations.

### Theme

One of the extraordinary aspects of the worldwide community of museums is the collective responsibility for preserving the heritage of humanity, and what makes that responsibility more exceptional is that it must be undertaken according to the needs and expectations of the nation and people whose heritage is being preserved.

> Worldwide, the role of museums within society seems to be changing fundamentally and rapidly. Educational work as well as economic considerations are becoming predominant features among the 5 main tasks - collection/acquisition, conservation, research, education/communication and exhibition - by which museums are being defined according to the ICOM Statutes. Acquiring and collecting objects and material no longer seems to be the primary basis of museums' work and consciousness. Communication and dialogue with visitors is becoming increasingly important, including new media (visualisation vs. verbalisation). But the act of preserving heritage with a universal view is more than economic or political expectancy. Contextualisation of objects / collections vs. uncritical adoption of social tendencies and fashions remains a key issue. As the self-assurance and self-consciousness of museums is changing and shifting, museums have to redefine their role within society.

> Collections seem to be moving out of the centre of museums' focus and activities. Displays and exhibitions are less and less reflecting the collections by ceasing to show a conglomeration of objects of varying quality and importance. Depots which should be the centre of museums for research, scientific work and progress in developing (new) methods with respect to the care, use, preservation and enhancement of tangible and notably the oral and intangible cultural heritage are being reduced to a stock room storage. Even when depots seem to be reflecting the collections more properly, they are inaccessible to the public / visitors. Thereby, museums are jeopardizing their unique possibility of being the place to see "the original". The use of new information and communication technologies are creating possibilities to increase the accessibility (e.g. the web) and can prove to be especially beneficial for the preservation of intangible heritage.

> The value of museums is derived from the collections and specific competencies related to these individual collections and their immanent main focus. By arbitrarily widening and increasing the number of topics within the exhibition programme, museums risk losing their specificity and might be reduced to event palaces.

> Quantifying the work and the "output" of museums and focussing only on numerical criteria (e.g. numbers of visitors) is misleading. Growth is not necessarily good, expansion is not always wise. When such an increase is not accompanied by enhancement of infrastructural means (space and personnel), it is bound to decrease the quality and value of museums and their work.

> The true success of museums is measured by hard-to-quantify intangibles like the quality of research and education as well as the study, care and maintenance of the collections and, last not least, the level of public trust.

> As social institutions, museums are not static and constant institutions but they always reflect and convey what is happening around them. They are part of the surrounding historic, social and national power structures, conditions, and identity. At the same time, museums influence these politics. Museum collections very often are the representative fabric of personal and national identity. In museums a new contextualisation of the objects within the collections takes place with respect to content as well as geography. Collected objects may be removed far from their original context, meaning and use. This is generally the case with objects with a ritual or sacred background. It is necessary for museums to confer the origin of the objects. Ideally, instead of being detached from its original background merely for its monetary value, an object is being explained and used to increase the knowledge about human and cultural achievements of the past ("the common heritage of humanity" or "Universal Heritage"). Museums are strongholds of such knowledge and know-how. By contextualising an object across time and space, museums can share this knowledge and its contemporary meaning with visitors. Therefore, museums should be active participants, not passive observers and recorders, in the process of preserving heritage, because they have a primary role in modelling strategies to enhance heritage awareness and social identity.

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