

Can we talk about a Europe of museums?

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On digital platform

As the French presidency of the European Union approaches, we have decided to invite museum professionals to discuss what it means for a museum to be European today.

Opening this question means asking ourselves what values we have in common - or wish to share - within a region of the world that is so varied culturally, politically and economically... This is a good time for ICOM members to reflect on this issue, as our organisation is going through a period of questioning about its identity - what is a museum, and what terms can define it in a way that is both acceptable and relevant at any point on the planet, encompassing all its fields, from art to science? This aspiration to name - or rather to rename - is legitimate, since museums have multiplied and diversified over the last twenty years; and the crises of the last twenty months are already putting everyone in a position to think about what the future will hold: we at ICOM are aware that the challenge of defining ourselves is that of our very unity.

In this context, the "model" of European museums is particularly questioned. Europe sees itself as the cradle of museums - Krzysztof Pomian says it was born in Rome at the beginning of the 15th century, others recall that museion is the name of the temple dedicated to the muses, built more than 2,000 years ago on the hill of Helicon in Athens - and our own organisation, created just 75 years ago jointly by the United States and France, is today 84% European in membership. This impressive ratio invites caution, however, as the image of 'European museums' in the museum world is not as consensual as we would like. The entire cultural sector is being shaken up by questions about its very foundations and its motives, and the museum sector is being shaken up in particular by the pressing need to clarify the provenance of its collections. Sociologists Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre warn us: "the cultural world risks being marginalised if it is content to brandish the banner of universalism without taking into account the new concerns of young people". The place of communities, the call for decolonisation ... are now essential to any forward-looking vision.

European museums as a whole have weathered the health crisis with more resistance than elsewhere. Their governments have taken protective measures, the French "whatever it takes" and the European recovery plan being two examples. Today, many museums are able to reopen and resume their activities, whereas in other parts of the world, lack of revenue and staff departures are leading to lasting closures: in North America, 13% of museums will not reopen. In addition, European professionals have been quick to adopt emerging digital innovations. On the African continent or in small island states,

digital technology is accessible to only 5% of the population, the Director-General of UNESCO often reminds us...

Faced with these divides, ICOM has set up a solidarity mechanism and ICOM France has co-engaged in a cycle of dialogue with partners in Northern and Southern Europe. As we can see, ICOM's character as a professional organisation has proved its relevance here. What binds its members is the aspiration to practice a profession, their profession, whatever their place in their organisation, the place of their organisation in the world, the museum field concerned. This link, that of competence and the will to practice, is what the Code of Ethics adopted by the 50,000 members of the 135 member countries takes up. Museums in Europe are well equipped with a high level of professionalism, due to their high level of training and qualification systems, the importance of research at their heart and the excellence of conservation and restoration practices. The December debate, within and with Inp, aims to identify this and to strengthen international comparisons. Within Europe, the issue of mobility is central; internationally, it is a question of solidarity and sharing: European museums, their training organisations and professional associations have an increasingly reactive mobilisation force during climatic events, conflicts or accidents, for example.

To think that a "Europe of museums" is possible is perhaps audacious. However, after these months of health crisis and a summer of fires and floods, culture appears to be central to repairing, rebuilding and giving meaning to collective life. "Museums are among the most credible places," said the president of ICOM in July at the meeting of ministers of culture in preparation for the G20, and his words were included in the final declaration. This message is encouraging, but above all it is a call to our sense of responsibility. Yes, museums are credible. This confidence obliges museum professionals to set an example and to be creative in terms of teaching to raise awareness and educate citizens about the challenges of sustainable development.

The debate on the "Europe of museums" is therefore a twofold issue for the members of ICOM France and for Inp:

- On the one hand, to apprehend together the European stakes,
- On the other hand, to seize this "political moment" to express our expectations in this area to European leaders.

*Une jeunesse crispée : le vivre ensemble face aux crises globales, ed. l'Harmattan, quoted by Michel Guerrin in Le Monde, 6 November "le monde culturel au défi de la jeunesse ».