

Revision of the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums  
**Consultation Three — Review of Outline**  
Introduction

The Standing Committee on Ethics (ETHCOM) is revising the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, one of ICOM's fundamental documents. The Code is based upon the values that we, as museum professionals, share and that underpin the professionalism of our work. It is important that the revised Code support the work that we do.

The following is an outline of the proposed revision. It is organized around five topics that were developed from feedback that we received during ETHCOM's 2021 and 2022 consultations with ICOM members. Each topic is followed by statements that elaborate upon the topic. The revised Code itself will also begin with a preamble that introduces the document, followed by the museum definition. It will include an appendix that lists the international conventions that are relevant to museums.

Your National and International Committee, Regional Alliance, or Affiliated Organization responses to the outline will help ETHCOM ensure that the Code will be useful to museums well into the future. The respondent's confidentiality will be maintained but the content of the responses will be reflected in a report that will be posted to member space on the ICOM website in early 2024.

**Please send your responses to [ethics@icom.museum](mailto:ethics@icom.museum) by 31 October 2023.**

### **Core Topics/OUTLINE**

1. A museum's primary responsibility is to its communities<sup>1</sup> — past, present, and future. These include the communities whose objects it cares for, the communities in which it is located, and the communities that benefit from its activities. To serve society, a museum:
  - a. Contributes to the development and strengthening of communities.
  - b. Supports the right of everyone to participate in and contribute to cultural life.
  - c. Collaborates with the global museum community, encouraging mutual exchange and sharing, developing enduring partnerships and promoting cooperation.
  - d. Safeguards and values tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage for the benefit of society.
  - e. Guarantees accessibility to all, promotes practices of social inclusion, and respects diversity.
  - f. Contributes to the health and well-being of the environment and society.

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<sup>1</sup> See definition in *Dictionary of Museology*, edited by François Mairesse, Routledge: New York, 2023. pp. 79-82 and in *Dictionnaire de Muséologie*, sous la direction de François Mairesse, Routledge: New York, 2023, pp. 122-127.

2. To sustain the trust of the public, museums operate according to professional standards. These entail responsibilities on the part of the museum as well as on the part of the individuals and groups that work in and with the museum.
  - a. Museums should:
    - i. Recruit staff and volunteers that reflect the diversity of the museum's communities.
    - ii. Follow equitable and inclusive practices.
    - iii. Ensure that individuals working for or with the museum have the competencies necessary to fulfill the responsibilities of their positions.
    - iv. Provide for training and support for staff, volunteers, and governing bodies so that they can responsibly carry out their duties.
    - v. Develop and publish explicit expectations for all roles.
  - b. The people who work in and with museums should:
    - i. Act professionally at all times, demonstrating courtesy, respect, and objectivity.
    - ii. Avoid discrimination.
    - iii. Respect collegial decision making.
    - iv. Maintain the confidentiality of information.
    - v. Disclose any conflict of interest or apparent conflict of interest and refrain from engaging in any activities that might compromise professional responsibilities or the reputation of the museum.
3. To fulfill their educational role (including programs, exhibitions, and publications), museums:
  - a. Conduct all activities in accordance with their missions.
  - b. Preserve the integrity of all information presented.
  - c. Collaborate and develop sustained partnerships with communities.
  - d. Consult with represented groups.
  - e. Recognize and are sensitive to diverse beliefs.
  - f. Respect sensitive materials (including ancestral remains, materials of sacred significance, intangible cultural knowledge, etc.) and strive to use them appropriately in virtual or in-person exhibitions, programs, publications, etc.
  - g. Promote reflection and knowledge sharing.
4. To responsibly steward and safeguard the collections (tangible and intangible heritage<sup>2</sup>, archives and digital collections), museums:
  - a. Create and maintain a collections policy.
  - b. Observe the duty of care/stewardship.
  - c. Follow professional accessioning procedures, including requiring valid title, carrying out due diligence and provenance research, and require thorough documentation.
  - d. Provide for accessibility of collections for research, study, exhibition, and programs.

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<sup>2</sup> See definition in *Dictionary of Museology*, pp. 245-248; *Dictionnaire de Muséologie*, pp. 497-501.

- e. Maintain, preserve, and conserve<sup>3</sup> the museum's collections.
- f. Appropriately store and maintain sensitive materials (including ancestral remains, materials of sacred significance, intangible cultural knowledge, etc.).
- g. Carry out research to further understanding.
- h. Create exhibitions, both physical and virtual, long-term and temporary.
- i. Develop procedures for responsible deaccessioning and disposal, including the return and restitution of cultural objects.
- j. Do not knowingly support illicit trafficking of natural or cultural heritage.

5. To protect the museum's resources and ensure that the museum operates in a sustainable manner, serving its communities in perpetuity, a museum's governing body and leadership:

- a. Maintain documentation of the museum's legal status, not-for-profit nature, and permanence.
- b. Ensure the fulfillment of the mission statement and objectives.
- c. Maintain professional standards of integrity and quality.
- d. Promote museum independence/autonomy<sup>4</sup>.
- e. Secure adequate human, physical, and financial resources (duty of care).
- f. Appoint the Director or Head with appropriate professional knowledge and skills.
- g. Demonstrate mutual respect and ensures clear division of roles among leadership, staff, volunteers.
- h. Establish written policies for personnel (staff and volunteers), collections, fund-raising, emergency response, and other museum-wide matters.
- i. Monitor the composition of the governing body so that reflects the museum's communities and includes individuals with the range of competencies that allow it to support the museum's mission.
- j. Commit to transparency in communications — internally (with the director, staff, and volunteers) and externally (with key stakeholders — e.g., core audiences and community members as well as supporters) — and take all contributions into consideration.
- k. Are accountable to the museum's stakeholders and protect against any conflict of interest or the appearance of such conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> See definition in *Dictionary of Museology*, edited by François Mairesse, Routledge: New York, 2023. pp. 86-97; *Dictionnaire de Muséologie*, pp. 142-146.

<sup>4</sup> see ICOM [Statement on Independence of Museums](#)