

Intangible Heritage: ICOM Seoul 2004 & ICOM Dubai 2025

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The ICOM General Conference will be held in Dubai in November 2025. This conference carries significant meaning from the perspective of Korea, as intangible heritage—selected as the central theme of the ICOM General Conference in Seoul in 2004—has once again emerged as a major topic of discussion after more than two decades. The upcoming conference adopts the overarching theme of “The Future of Museums in Rapidly Changing Communities,” with sub-themes including the safeguarding of intangible heritage, youth power, and the rise of new technologies. It will explore the role of museums as dynamic agents in safeguarding intangible heritage, with particular attention to the sustainability and revitalisation of intangible heritage within communities undergoing migration.

Whereas the 2004 Seoul Conference initiated discussions on the emergence of museums as stakeholders in the safeguarding of intangible heritage, the 2025 Dubai Conference, as outlined in the official thematic documentation, is expected to focus on the active roles museums play as institutions at the forefront of the preservation of intangible heritage. The conference also offers an opportunity to reflect on the developments of the past two decades and to share institutional experiences and practices across the museum sector. This article revisits the discussions on intangible heritage presented at the 2004 Seoul General Conference, traces key changes over the past twenty years, and considers the evolving significance and value of intangible heritage within the museum field.

2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference: A new chapter for museums

Although more than two decades have passed since the 2004 ICOM General Conference in Seoul, it remains widely recognized as a significant turning point, both for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and for museums. Above all, the conference initiated a new understanding of collections—a foundational element of museums. It also expanded the boundaries of what museums are expected to consider and encompass. From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, the museum has emerged as a permanent institution dedicated to the preservation and transmission of living heritage. The museum thus became a platform capable of holistically embracing the full scope of humanity’s heritage. This shift was grounded in the growing awareness that tangible heritage, without taking the intangible into account, lacks curatorial meaning. Even more profound was the transformation in how cultural heritage as a whole began to be perceived. Tangible and intangible heritage are now increasingly understood as two inseparable sides of the same coin. Whether through academic inquiry or public engagement, the approach to cultural heritage has become more holistic and integrated. At the same time, understanding tangible heritage as originating from the embodied practices of intangible heritage—especially in the form of visible and ritualized cultural expressions—has allowed museums to explore culture in deeper, more contextual ways. This perspective has also given rise to new tendencies in museum practice, wherein the experiences of individuals in modern and contemporary history have come to inform a renewed interpretation of museum objects.



Figure 1
2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference. Source: National Folk Museum of Korea.

2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference and the theme of intangible cultural heritage

The ICOM General Conference in Seoul was the first to be held in the Asian region. Accordingly, one of its fundamental aims was to create an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the differences between Eastern and Western cultures at a global gathering of cultural professionals. While Western civilization is said to have left behind a considerable legacy of material culture, Eastern cultures, like their ethnically diverse compositions, are characterized by a wide range of worldviews and living traditions; the intention was to provide a moment for recognizing such differences between East and West. The most significant practical reason for selecting intangible cultural heritage as the central theme of the Seoul conference was that, although it represents a core aspect of traditional culture, it had generally received limited attention in museums; moreover, as society progressed, it faced the increasing risk of rapid disappearance—thus requiring greater attention from museums. Another reason was that Korea has been a pioneer in the preservation of intangible heritage through its advanced legal and institutional frameworks for cultural property preservation. The threat of disappearance to intangible heritage stems from the fact that it may no longer serve a practical function in contemporary life, or that it has lost popular appeal due to the dominance of modern mass culture. The theme was chosen at a time when there was growing concern

that intangible heritage could vanish without a trace amid the rapid global development driven by free trade. Ultimately, this would lead to a narrowing of the spectrum of cultural diversity across the globe, and to a reduction in the resources available for future cultural creation; the underlying rationale for selecting this theme was the belief



Figure 2
2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference and the Theme of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Source: National Folk Museum of Korea.

that museums must take the lead in safeguarding such culture. This philosophical foundation aligns well with the spirit of the International Council of Museums.

The emphasis on the value of intangible heritage in the 2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference keynote address

In the keynote session of the Seoul Conference, leading intellectuals representing Asia spoke on the value of intangible cultural heritage. Among them were global cultural figures such as Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand, well-versed in traditional culture; the late Professor Lee O-Young of Korea; and a Nobel laureate from Timor-Leste. These speakers reflected on the future value of intangible heritage in the global context. Although widely known, one of Professor Lee O-Young's remarks served as a powerful reminder of the importance of intangible heritage—not only to traditional societies but also to the global community. He cited the saying, "When an old man in Africa dies, a library disappears," underscoring that intangible heritage contains the wisdom of humanity.

In his address titled 'Creating the Vessel for Lost Life', Professor Lee noted that UNESCO's 1998 establishment of the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity had sparked a sustained international movement for the safeguarding of intangible heritage. He regarded the selection of intangible heritage as the theme of the Seoul Conference as a response to this global momentum, aiming to emphasize the evolving role of museums in this effort. He concluded his speech by encouraging museums to take the lead in the preservation of intangible heritage, quoting a line from T. S. Eliot: "Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

Sid Bagli, who has long been involved in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through UNESCO and other organizations, discussed the spirit behind the ICH Convention and the process of its formation. He pointed out that, unlike the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which emphasizes universal values of humanity, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights the uniqueness of national and ethnic cultures, thereby emphasizing specificity grounded in cultural relativism. He also reported that the efforts to compile ICH inventories focused on elements at risk of

disappearance. In this context, he argued that ICOM's definition of museums should include materials related to human life and the natural environment—specifically including intangible elements. He further noted that intangible heritage can now be exhibited in museums through various means such as digital media and video documentation.

At the time, Makio Matsujono, Director of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, delivered a keynote address in which he reminded the audience that tangible heritage originates from intangible sources. He praised UNESCO's ICH Convention as something that brings new light to humanity. Citing the example of the Gusii people in Africa, he pointed to the functional and cultural challenges that arise when intangible heritage is transformed into tangible form. He described intangible culture as a living form that continuously adapts and transforms with flexibility. He argued that making intangible culture visible in museums ultimately provides visitors with opportunities to understand other cultures and that encountering different forms of intangible heritage enriches the spiritual lives of individuals.

Richard Kurin, Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in the United States, emphasized that museum curatorship has traditionally been trained with a focus on tangible heritage. For this reason, he stressed the difficulty of presenting living culture in its entirety within museums, particularly within its social and environmental contexts, and asserted that the development of new methodologies is necessary to address this challenge. He further emphasized that, unlike working with tangible objects, curatorial work involving intangible heritage requires partnerships with people embedded in society who are directly connected to the heritage. Such work necessitates a deep understanding of local history, along with psychological and diplomatic skills. He suggested that while it may be difficult to exhibit intangible heritage in its entirety, curatorial efforts can lead to more expansive and meaningful representations and exhibitions—this, he noted, is the essential direction.

A shared view across the keynote session was that tangible and intangible heritage are fundamentally inseparable. Intangible heritage, as a living cultural phenomenon, embodies the diversity, creativity, and identity of human culture, and therefore, museums must make efforts to collect and safeguard it.



Figure 3
2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference. Source: National Folk Museum of Korea.

Although the limitations and challenges of curating such exhibitions remain a central issue, it was noted that new forms of documentation—such as digital video—now make it possible to present intangible heritage in museum contexts.

Notable presentations on intangible heritage at the 2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference

In addition to the dedicated parallel seminar on intangible heritage, numerous presentations related to the subject were delivered across various international committee sessions during the Seoul Conference. Among these, the discussions on intangible heritage within ICME (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography) and CECA (Committee for Education and Cultural Action) received particular attention. One notable presentation was given by Kim In-whoe during the CECA session. He offered a new perspective on the meaning of intangible heritage, arguing that while the 20th century was marked by cultural standardization, intangible heritage in the 21st century should serve as a framework for social education based on the value of diversity. The ICME

session, organized by the National Folk Museum of Korea, addressed intangible culture from multiple perspectives, affirming its role as an international committee for such discussions. Subtopics included “Digitalization of Intangible Heritage,” “Intangible Heritage and Tourism,” “Museum Exhibitions and Intangible Heritage,” “The Role of Museums in the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage,” and “The Globalization of Intangible Heritage.” In effect, the session offered a comprehensive exploration of current issues surrounding ICH. One of the central conclusions to emerge from these presentations was the need for museums to shift their focus away from physical objects and toward intangible heritage. In particular, the ICME session holds special significance, as it was this very session that gave rise to the founding of this *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* (IJIH).

The launch of the IJIH following the 2004 ICOM Seoul General Conference

Since the ICOM General Conference in Seoul, museums’ awareness and recognition of intangible heritage have expanded dramatically. The founding of the IJIH lies at the heart of this transformation. The



Figure 4
International Journal of Intangible Heritage. Source: National Folk Museum of Korea.

initiative was led by Kim Hongnam, then Director of the National Folk Museum of Korea, who chaired the ICME session at the time of the conference. The journal was established in response to the recognition that, compared to the extensive academic work devoted to tangible heritage, scholarly achievements related to intangible heritage remained limited. It was launched as a professional academic publishing project to promote the documentation, research, and comparative analysis of intangible heritage from a global perspective, and to enable broader appreciation of its value. The Editorial Committee was formed with the participation of leading scholars and museum professionals in the field of intangible heritage from around the world, including experts from Korea. Each year, the journal selects and publishes outstanding articles on intangible heritage across diverse regions of the world. Over the past twenty years, the journal has published a total of 214 articles contributed by scholars from 61 countries. Through the dedicated efforts of the Editorial Committee and Secretariat of the National Folk Museum of Korea, the journal has achieved the highest level of international recognition—not only for its citation index but also for the exceptional quality of its design, the distinctiveness of its content, and its attentiveness to readers. The journal has published academic studies on languages, music, dance, theatre, rituals, festivals, belief systems, ceremonies, games, craftsmanship, culinary practices, and other forms of intangible heritage as defined by the ICH Convention. These works serve both as the result of scholarly research and as evidence supporting the validity of preservation, and ultimately, as a foundation for understanding and promoting cultural diversity. The journal has thus established itself as a

leading publication in the field. From the outset, its creation was an unprecedented development in the history of ICOM, launched with the organization's full support. It now stands as a truly scholarly platform that also serves as a collaborative vessel between museums and the public—one that powerfully embodies and communicates the value of intangible heritage.

Two decades of change and museums

Museums are defined by their collections, architectural spaces, and the curatorial professionals who manage and interpret them. Collections and built spaces are, by their nature, tangible heritage. However, in the 21st century, intangible heritage has rapidly expanded as a focus of museum collection and research. In particular, digital technologies have become crucial tools for incorporating intangible heritage into the museum, accelerating this development. Furthermore, as globalization advances, the recognition of the universal value of intangible heritage within museums has deepened through processes of understanding cultural diversity based on cultural relativism. Today, curatorial teams are employing diverse methodologies to exhibit intangible heritage, drawing in individuals and communities connected to these traditions. This marks a shift from static displays toward exhibitions that emphasize communication and shared experience. A representative example of this evolution is the exhibition on *Arirang*, a traditional Korean folk song, held after the Seoul ICOM Conference. Similarly, the World Intangible Cultural Heritage Performance program at the National Museum of Korea, which has been ongoing for several years, serves as another case of intangible heritage presentation within the museum context.

Such exhibitions and performances are now found in museums around the world. The transformations that have taken place over the past two decades can be seen as defining a new reality for museums—museums that embrace intangible heritage. At the same time, new forms of museums have begun to emerge: museums that function without fixed architectural spaces. These are shaped through curatorial work conducted in the very communities where intangible heritage is lived and practiced—through the sharing of knowledge and the exchange of emotion between specialists and the public. In this sense, we are witnessing the birth of the intangible museum. The traditional museum is only the beginning; now, any place touched by the hands of curators and



Figure 5
Performance accompanying the special exhibition *Arirang* at the National Folk Museum of Korea.
Source: National Folk Museum of Korea.

shaped through engagement with intangible heritage can function as a museum. We are entering an era of intangible heritage and intangible museums. Exhibitions of intangible heritage that emerge through interaction with contemporary society and diverse contexts are, in themselves, becoming intangible heritage. This represents the realization—within the museum—of the spirit of UNESCO and ICOM: a commitment to peace and prosperity through culture. And it all began with the ICOM General Conference held in Seoul.

Epilogue

At the end of the foreword to Volume 10, written in the IJH's tenth year, then Editor-in-Chief Alissandra Cummins expressed the civilizational significance of intangible heritage as follows: "We pray to the Virgin Mary to teach us how to live, how to love, how to sacrifice, and how to die." It is a prayer to her mother, but could this not also be a message to humanity embedded within intangible heritage itself? 🇵🇸