



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF MUSEUMS (ICOM)

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ICOM CODE OF ETHICS FOR MUSEUMS

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2026 (Paris, France)**

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INTRODUCTION

ICOM recognises that this Code was written during demanding times. Museums are facing major geopolitical, social, economic and climatic challenges, while some long-accepted societal practices and attitudes are being questioned. Museums, as vital civic institutions, are profoundly affected by these changes and should lead the way in addressing them. Yet

- We have only begun to understand the impact of rapidly evolving digital technologies on our understanding of history, culture, science, creativity and art;
- We are confronting the global challenge of the climate crisis, striving to achieve carbon neutrality, while communicating to the public our evolving understanding of the interdependence of humans and ecosystems; and
- We must address the role that museums have played during the colonising process, but have yet to comprehend its implications for all museums and their collections, related policies, practices and programmes, as well as for museum discourse.

These examples illustrate the challenges museums face, provide the backdrop for this revision of ICOM's Code, and demand both firm resolve and flexibility in the face of change. ICOM recognises that the global museum community is diverse, with a variety of governance models, capacities, capabilities and resources.

To address issues related to museums worldwide, the Code was developed as a set of core principles to guide action in museums. ICOM acknowledges that museums' resources may vary, and some may lack the capacity to comply with all the principles; nonetheless, the Code articulates standards that museum professionals believe in, share, and should uphold. The Code is complemented by sets of guidelines that provide more specific guidance on topics integral to the museum profession.

This *Code of Ethics* is the result of a unique participatory process. From 2019 to 2026, it was developed through five consultations with ICOM's National Committees, International Committees, Regional Alliances and Affiliated Organisations, as well as related Standing Committees, Working Groups and external experts. During this process, members shared their professional

perspectives, articulating the values and standards that are fundamental to their work.

This Code communicates those standards as clearly as possible and serves as a beacon for museums.

The ICOM Ethics Committee (ETHCOM), 2026

Ethical issues that require the attention and/or consideration of the ICOM Ethics Committee (ETHCOM) may be addressed to its Chair by email: ethics@icom.museum

PREAMBLE

The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* is a cornerstone for the International Council of Museums. Together with ICOM's Statutes and Internal Rules, the *Code of Ethics* forms one of the three pillars upon which ICOM stands. As stated in its Statutes, ICOM establishes ethical principles based on values widely recognised by the global museum community. Practices grounded in integrity, responsibility, equity, mutual respect, openness, transparency and accountability are essential to ensure that museums protect and promote heritage, sustain and increase trust, and serve the public. These values entail obligations to society and the museum profession, as well as a duty to provide opportunities for knowledge-sharing, dialogue and reflection. They involve responsibilities to safeguard and research collections in museums' care and to govern conscientiously and sustainably.

To Whom Does This Code Apply?

According to ICOM's statutes, all ICOM members agree to abide by this Code as a condition of their membership. The Code sets forth core principles to guide museums and museum professionals in their internal and external activities. In addition to its members, the activities of ICOM's National and International Committees, Regional Alliances and Affiliated Organisations are bound by the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. Furthermore, although not binding for non-members, the Code serves as a point of reference for people who work in or with museums worldwide.

ICOM encourages its members, both museums and museum professionals, to ensure that the principles of the *Code of Ethics* are upheld by everyone who works in or with their institutions.

Law and Ethics

Local, national and international laws and conventions establish the baseline for action by museums and museum professionals. Operating within such legal frameworks is obligatory for all museums and museum professionals. A list of these frameworks, including international conventions, resolutions and declarations, accompanies this Code. The *Code of Ethics* goes beyond compliance

with the law to establish a higher standard for action. Together with the law, the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* serves to sustain the integrity of museums.

Core Principles and Guidelines

All five core principles that underpin the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* are equally important to museums. They provide a point of departure for resolving ethical dilemmas through careful decision-making that involves thoughtful discussion and deliberation. The Code and its Principles are not a replacement for institutional policies and procedures.

This Code is accompanied by guidelines that serve as tools for its interpretation and implementation. These documents offer substantive guidance on evolving areas of museum practice and can be amended to meet developing standards.

The Code is monitored by ICOM's Standing Committee on Ethics (ETHCOM) and enforced by the ICOM Executive Board. ICOM's Statutes and Internal Rules outline the consequences of violating the Code of Ethics for individual and institutional members, National and International Committees, Regional Alliances and Affiliated Organisations. For questions or clarifications around specific principles or their application to a particular case, ICOM's Standing Committee on Ethics (ETHCOM) can be consulted.

Museum Definition

‘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, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge-sharing.

SOCIETY: Museums Serve Society.

Principle: *Museums serve society by protecting and interpreting tangible, intangible and digital heritage. Accessible and inclusive, museums collaborate with diverse individuals and communities to care for their past, present and future. By embracing different perspectives on heritage, museums operate as spaces for open dialogue, upholding human rights, practising social justice and promoting peace.*

S.1. Museums should conserve and share tangible, intangible and digital heritage for the benefit of society.

By documenting, researching, conserving, interpreting and sharing heritage, museums play a vital role in maintaining social cohesion. They have a duty to respect all traditions and cultures equally, to encourage the sharing of knowledge across generations and to ensure that the collections they care for remain available for future generations.

S.2. Museums should support the right and the agency of members of society to participate in and contribute to cultural life.

Museum work should be informed by members of society. It should respect their agency and diverse knowledge, and honour their right to participate in museum activities. It should value their physical, mental and emotional well-being and the desire for social justice. When opposing opinions or conflicts arise due to cultural differences, museums should be safe spaces for dialogue and promote mutual understanding.

S.3. Museums should foster dialogue and knowledge-sharing through enduring cooperation and collaboration.

Museums should work with community members, including students, scholars and other experts, as well as with other museums and heritage organisations, to enrich museum practices in researching, collecting, conserving, documenting and interpreting heritage.

Museums should involve community members, including Indigenous Peoples, in decisions about their heritage and creative expressions, collaborating with them and respecting their right to identify, preserve and interpret their tangible, intangible and digital heritage. Respecting those they learn from, museums should seek their free, prior and informed consent, acknowledge their contributions and provide them with equitable compensation.

S.4. Museums should guarantee access for all.

Museums should make tangible, intangible and digital heritage, along with all related non-confidential information, accessible to everyone. They should also strive to eliminate barriers to participation, including but not limited to physical, virtual, linguistic, socio-cultural and economic obstacles.

S.5. Museums should foster inclusive participation and combat discrimination.

As inclusive institutions, museums should actively address social exclusion by promoting equitable participation for all and combating prejudice, including discrimination based on, but not limited to, disability, gender, race, sexual orientation and belief systems. They should tackle systemic racism and respect human rights, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

S.6. Museums should represent diverse cultures while respecting the sensitivities reflected in heritage.

Museums should promote plural interpretations of heritage, respecting differences in research practices, collections management, conservation, interpretation and display. They should show respect for the sciences, traditional knowledge and the belief systems of Indigenous Peoples and other communities. Museums should acknowledge that some tangible, intangible and digital heritage have a sacred nature and follow appropriate protocols in handling these sensitive materials.

S.7. Museums should actively and continuously practise and promote sustainability.

Museums should strive for long-term social, environmental, cultural and financial sustainability. This means prioritising the well-being of everyone involved, conserving collections, minimising environmental impact to fight climate change, and maintaining financial stability. Museums should operate in ways that respect human rights and address inequalities, ensuring that their practices benefit people, protect the planet and promote prosperity in a socially responsible manner.

PROFESSIONALISM: Museums operate and communicate with professional expertise, knowledge and standards.

Principle: *To sustain society's trust, museums should operate and communicate ethically and according to professional standards. This entails responsibilities for the museum's leadership, those accountable for the day-to-day management of the museum and the implementation of its strategic plan, and for everyone working in or with museums.*

P.1. Museum leaders should recruit staff and volunteers that uphold and enhance the institution's professionalism.

Museum leaders should engage staff and volunteers who collectively possess the skills needed to fulfil the institution's mission, vision, goals and objectives. They should offer ongoing education and professional development to ensure that staff and volunteers have the necessary skills to operate the museum and communicate effectively, both internally and externally.

P.2. Everyone who works in or with museums should always act with courtesy, respect and integrity.

Museum leaders should ensure that fair and inclusive practices are maintained in all interactions with staff, visitors and community members by fostering a culture of dignity and respect, with strong policies and reporting mechanisms that prevent any form of harassment and discrimination.

Everyone working in or with museums should adhere to established standards of behaviour and show consideration for the dignity of all their colleagues, respecting differences of opinion and recognising everyone's right to a safe work environment. Collaboration among the governing body, leadership, staff and volunteers should be based on mutual respect and acknowledgement of their different, yet complementary and interdependent, roles.

P.3. Museum leaders should attend to the safety and well-being of staff and volunteers.

Museum leaders should attend to the safety of their staff and volunteers, create conditions that support physical, mental and emotional well-being, and provide equitable pay. Concrete plans that can be quickly implemented should be developed to protect staff and volunteers during emergencies such as armed conflicts, environmental disasters and health crises.

P.4. Museum leaders should ensure the protection of the museum's collections.

Museum leaders should implement policies and procedures to maintain and safeguard the museum's collections. This entails regular monitoring, preventive care and intervention as necessary to ensure the long-term stability, integrity, and accessibility of heritage for future generations. Emergency procedures should ensure that collections can be promptly assessed, stabilised, and restored as needed.

P.5. Everyone who works in or with museums should follow institutional policies and procedures.

Everyone working in or with museums should support the museum's goals and objectives, and understand its core values, policies and procedures, conditions of employment and ethical guidelines. Differing opinions should be properly expressed and considered before final decisions are made. Members of museum professions should object appropriately if irregularities occur or a museum's practices are seen as damaging to the museum or the broader museum community.

P.6. Everyone who works in or with museums should protect confidential information obtained as part of their work.

Confidential and personal data should be protected to ensure the safety and security of the institution. This includes but is not limited to information about the security of the museum and its collections, personal data about staff, volunteers, and contractors, financial information and confidential data and information about donors.

P.7. Museum leaders should oversee the use of digital technologies in the museum, evaluating the benefits of these technologies and ensuring they cause no harm.

Museums should ensure that their use of digital media and digital technologies aligns with established standards, as well as with institutional goals and missions.

Everyone working in or with museums who uses these technologies should help minimise risk by taking into account their ethical implications and potential environmental impact, as well as their capacity for spreading inaccurate or false information. They should proceed cautiously, mindful of the impact of these technologies on intellectual property rights, Indigenous rights and data sovereignty.

P.8. Members of museum professions should collaborate and consult with their colleagues, other experts and community members outside the museum to ensure best practices.

Members of museum professions should recognise and support the importance of cooperation and consultation among institutions with shared goals and practices. They should build working relationships at local, regional and international levels, and collaborate with individuals and community members outside the museum for the benefit of the institution. When the expertise available in a given museum is insufficient to ensure good decision-making, members of museum professions have a duty to consult with colleagues and others with relevant expertise outside of their own institution.

P.9. Everyone who works in or with museums should guard against any conflict of interest with the museum.

Every museum should create and make public a policy on accepting gifts, favours, loans, invitations, or other benefits to help staff and volunteers avoid conflicts of interest. Everyone working in or with museums should disclose any real or perceived conflicts of interest, including private collecting related to the museum's collecting interests, and avoid engaging in activities that could compromise professional duties or the museum's reputation. Members of museum professions should never endorse a specific dealer, auctioneer or appraiser to the public. They should not directly or indirectly participate in buying or selling heritage for profit.

P.10. Everyone who works in or with museums should work actively to prevent illicit trafficking in cultural property.

Everyone who works in or with museums should not participate, directly or indirectly, in the plunder, damage or destruction of tangible, intangible or digital heritage.

Museums and members of museum professions should combat illicit trafficking by researching the origin and history of their collections and maintaining thorough documentation and inventories. Museums should collaborate with other museums, heritage institutions, law enforcement agencies and regional, national and international organisations that fight illicit trafficking and ensure compliance with applicable laws.

EDUCATION: Museums offer diverse experiences for knowledge-sharing and reflection.

Principle: *Museums' educational activities and practices should ensure ongoing knowledge-sharing and dialogue.*

E.1. Museums should reach out to diverse audiences, aligning all activities with their mission.

Museums should clearly define how they will achieve their educational goals, fostering diversity and life-long learning through educational activities, exhibitions and publications, whether onsite, offsite or online. These activities should serve as forums that foster inclusivity and promote multilingual, intercultural dialogue.

E.2. Museums should maintain and conserve the integrity of all information they present.

Museums should ensure the accuracy, credibility and reliability of the information they share through their activities, including cultural events, educational activities, exhibitions and publications. All information should be well-founded, accurate and grounded in the relevant academic and scientific disciplines, traditional knowledge or belief systems.

E.3. Museums should establish enduring partnerships with communities to enhance their educational activities.

Museums should collaborate with individuals and communities whose tangible, intangible and digital heritage they hold in their collections and present in their activities, publications and exhibitions. Museums should seek out and respect

Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge, practices, languages, laws, rights and customs regarding the display of items in their collections. They should engage respectfully with local and other communities on the representation and display of items associated with them. Indigenous tangible and intangible heritage and traditional knowledge should only be used in museum activities with free, prior and informed consent.

E.4. Museums should be accessible to all and consider their visitors' needs and interests to ensure everyone can benefit equally from the museum's educational activities.

Museums should develop the content and physical formats of their educational activities, including exhibitions and publications, both onsite, offsite and online, to ensure inclusive and accessible participation for everyone. To enhance social relevance, inclusivity and meaningful engagement, audience feedback should be integrated into programme development.

Museums should ensure public access to all educational activities, exhibitions and publications in their communications, recognising the dignity and humanity of the individuals and communities involved. Publications should adhere to accessible editorial guidelines, standards and policies.

E.5. Museums should attend to all sensitive tangible and intangible heritage with care, striving to use them in educational activities, exhibitions and publications in accordance with professional standards.

Museums should develop guidelines concerning the display and use of sensitive tangible and intangible heritage in their collections in all museum activities. Established conservation standards should inform these guidelines, and, when feasible, the methods for displaying and using these materials should be determined in dialogue with the communities whose collections the museums hold.

Requests from these communities to limit access to sensitive materials or remove sacred or culturally significant materials from public display, whether onsite or online, should be addressed promptly, respectfully and transparently. Clear policies and procedures for handling such requests should comply with applicable laws, while balancing accessibility, educational use, and the long-term care of collections.

E.6. Museums should foster knowledge-sharing and reflection.

In all their educational activities, museums should foster the exchange of knowledge and encourage reflection. Recognising that museum collections include not only tangible, intangible and digital heritage but also ideas and traditional

knowledge, museums should employ various pedagogical methods to promote active learning, critical thinking and lively interactions between the public and the works or objects on display.

E.7. Museums should use technology responsibly in their educational activities, exhibitions and publications.

When using digital media and digital technologies as pedagogical tools, museums should manage them intentionally and in accordance with their mission. They should make every effort to present to the public an accurate historical, scientific and artistic record. Museums should maintain an awareness of how digital media and digital technologies affect users and ensure that measures are in place to protect their audiences' physical, mental and emotional well-being.

E.8. Museums should be committed to maintaining their capacity to protect heritage for future generations, promoting sustainability.

Museums should play a fundamental role in educating society about the importance of sustainability, while promoting the conservation of tangible, intangible and digital heritage as well as the planet.

Museums should encourage those who work in or with museums to continuously update their educational techniques and incorporate innovative, responsible and sustainable practices that support meaningful engagement with audiences and the protection of collections.

E.9. Museums should adopt reparative practices to encourage critical reflection and support communities' right to reclaim their cultural heritage.

Museums should acknowledge and help repair past injustices and support all cultural rights, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples and other communities whose collections they hold. They should enable these communities to reconnect with their history, fostering knowledge-sharing and dialogue among their audiences. Discussions and dialogue about the restitution or return of heritage

should afford opportunities to learn about different cultures, practices and knowledge.

COLLECTIONS: Museums research, collect and conserve.

Principle: *Museums collect, safeguard and display tangible, intangible and digital heritage. They ensure the security, documentation and conservation of the collections they hold. Museums conduct research and transmit knowledge in trust for society, respecting diverse perspectives and the rights of communities whose collections they hold.*

C.1. Museums should create and maintain a collections policy.

Museums should develop, publish and adhere to a collections policy that specifies procedures for the acquisition, documentation, protection, conservation and use of the tangible, intangible and digital heritage in their care. The museum's governing body should approve and regularly review the collections policy.

C.2. Museums should be responsible for the collections in their care.

Museums should ensure the conservation and management of the tangible, intangible and digital heritage in their care through appropriate security measures, documentation and risk assessment. They should provide adequate security to safeguard collections against theft or damage in exhibitions, storage areas and while in transit.

Museums should describe and follow established standards in their collections policies and include specific procedures for sensitive materials, in accordance with cultural traditions and applicable laws. Objects of sacred or religious significance and other culturally sensitive materials should be stored securely and cared for respectfully. Biological specimens should also receive special handling and storage.

When making replicas, reproductions or digital copies, museums must respect the integrity of the original. All copies should be clearly and permanently marked as facsimiles to ensure transparency and prevent misrepresentation.

C.3. Museums should uphold the inherent dignity of human remains and promote respect for their significance.

Museums should care for human remains as well as artefacts and creative expressions that include human remains with respect. Decisions about these items and collections should be made in collaboration with descendants or communities from which they originate, if known. In all cases where human remains hold continuing cultural or spiritual importance, museums should consider restricted use or repatriation as appropriate.

C.4. Museums should adhere to professional acquisition and accessioning practices.

Museums should follow established standards and procedures for acquiring objects, whether through purchase, gift, loan, bequest or exchange. Museums should assess the conservation needs of objects prior to acquisition, ensuring they have the resources, expertise, and facilities to maintain the objects' long-term conservation. Museums should ensure that all objects are obtained in compliance with applicable laws regulating the ownership, import, export and transfer of cultural or natural materials. Museums should refrain from acquiring objects from occupied territories.

Museums should exercise due diligence in establishing an object's origin and complete history. All objects, including fossil material and specimens obtained from fieldwork, should only be acquired when there is no reasonable cause to believe their collection was unauthorised, or collected using non-scientific methods, destructive or exploitative practices.

In an emergency, museums can serve as temporary repositories for objects if their preservation is at risk. This temporary protection should be agreed upon with the States, institutions or individuals requesting shelter.

C.5. Museums should establish documentation procedures and develop databases to ensure the long-term viability, conservation and security of their collections.

Museum collections should be documented following established standards and procedures. Documentation should include detailed information about the objects in the museum's care, created in collaboration with interdisciplinary professionals and, when applicable, with the communities from which the objects originated.

Museum documentation and databases should be stored in a secure environment and supported by recovery infrastructure and techniques to mitigate the risk of data loss. Except for confidential or sensitive information, complete records should be made accessible to the public, both onsite and online.

C.6. Museums should develop procedures for responsible deaccessioning and disposal.

Museums should develop a responsible deaccessioning policy, defining the standards and requirements for disposing of deaccessioned objects. The disposition of an object from a museum collection should only be undertaken after considering its significance, its character and legal standing, and the possibility of transferring the object to another museum, as well as any loss of public trust that might result from such action.

Museum collections are held in trust for the public and should not be treated as realisable financial assets. Compensation received from the sale of deaccessioned objects should be used solely to benefit the museum's collection.

C.7. Museums should use technology responsibly to support the study and research of collections.

Museums should employ digital tools and technologies to facilitate the research, documentation and analysis of their collections. Digital methods should be used to enhance understanding of the context and conservation needs of objects, while ensuring the integrity and accuracy of records. Museums must consider the potential impact of technology on both collections and users, implementing safeguards to prevent physical or digital harm as well as the misrepresentation of information.

C.8. Museums should collaborate on research to enhance the understanding and interpretation of heritage.

Museums should carry out research to foster a deeper understanding of the tangible, intangible and digital heritage in their care. They should collaborate with experts and communities regarding objects in museum collections. Fieldwork should adhere to best practices and show respect and consideration for community views, environmental resources, and cultural and human rights.

The traditional knowledge and belief systems of Indigenous Peoples and other communities should only be recorded with free, prior and informed consent. This material should be held respectfully, following established standards, collaborative processes, intellectual property laws and principles of confidentiality.

C.9. Museums should provide access to heritage for research and study.

Museums should ensure equitable access to the collections in their care, and to associated documentation. To ensure the continuity and permanence of their collections, museums should publish their research results and make them publicly available, guaranteeing that this information is widely disseminated to the public and accessible for future generations.

Access may vary depending on the condition and sensitivity of the material involved. Personal and other information contained in collection records should be disclosed or withheld in accordance with applicable law.

C.10. Museums should actively respond to requests for restitution and return and, when appropriate, pursue voluntary return.

Museums should promptly and transparently respond to requests for restitution or return. The restitution or return of items from a museum's collection should align with applicable laws. Restitution or return should be considered to States, individuals, Indigenous groups, other communities, museums and heritage institutions. Museums should be prepared to constructively engage with the requesting party, base all exchanges on scientific and historical facts and documentation as well as traditional or spiritual knowledge, and be open to dialogue about restitution and return.

Museums should conduct provenance research on all the collections they hold. When this research reveals new data about an item's ownership history or shows that an item was illegally acquired or is otherwise problematic, museums should voluntarily engage in discussions about the future of the item.

If a decision is made to return or proceed with the restitution of an item, museums should develop a collaborative process to ensure the safe return of the item to its rightful source.

GOVERNANCE: Museums are not-for-profit, permanent institutions.

Principle: *Governing bodies, those concerned with the strategic direction and oversight of museums, are responsible for the long-term sustainability of their institution. They should secure the professional, physical and financial resources necessary to maintain the museum and serve society.*

G.1. Museums' governing bodies should ensure that their institutions comply with all applicable laws and make their legal status, not-for-profit certification and core documents publicly available.

Museums should adopt a mission statement and strategic plan to guide all their activities. They should be transparent about their legal status and governance structure and comply with all applicable laws.

G.2. The governing body should establish policies that serve as tools for the museum's governance.

The governing body should adopt and publish institutional policies, including those for collections, income generation and fundraising, institutional integrity, board and staff diversity and emergency response. These policies should be conceived in collaboration with museum staff and regularly updated to maintain professional standards, provide a clear framework for decision-making, and safeguard the museum's future.

G.3. The governing body should secure the resources necessary for the museum's longevity.

The governing body and museum leadership should secure the professional, physical and financial resources needed to enable the museum to achieve its

mission and strategic goals. Museums should seek to support environmental and social sustainability.

G.4. The governing body should safeguard the museum's integrity and autonomy, resisting any influence that could compromise their mission or values.

The governing body should ensure the museum serves as a safe space for dialogue and learning. Regardless of funding sources or governance models, museums should maintain control of the content and integrity of their activities, exhibitions and publications. Income-generating activities should not compromise the integrity of the institution. Museums should resist financial or political influence.

G.5. The governing body should ensure that museum leadership has the knowledge and skills needed to fulfil their responsibilities.

The governing body should understand the qualifications and expertise necessary for museum leadership roles. It should identify and select candidates for governance and management positions who are qualified to address the museum's challenges in fulfilling its mission and provide them with appropriate training when needed.

G.6. The governing body should reflect the diversity of the communities it serves and strive for inclusive representation and leadership.

The composition of the governing body should reflect the communities the museum serves. Where appropriate, the governing body should promote co-creation, encourage practices based on shared authority and transparency, and should secure the necessary support for communities to be involved in ongoing, sustainable collaborative processes. This commitment should be formalised in institutional policies. Museums should practise inclusive leadership to advance their mission, foster innovation and enhance institutional impact.

G.7. The governing body should ensure the care and respect of those who work in or with the museum.

The governing body should promote respectful and fair working relationships among museum staff and collaborators, embracing employment practices that align with principles of equality and human rights. They should ensure dignified and equitable working conditions, prevent precarious employment, and foster a healthy, fair and respectful workplace.

Glossary

Community

A group of individuals connected by shared characteristics or experiences such as locality, cultural identity, vocation, avocation, life stage, social role, or collective memories. These groups are stakeholders in the museum and, alongside those working in or with museums, help care for and sustain it. Communities are always changing as members interact with one another.

Conflict of interest

The presence of a personal or private interest that gives rise to a clash of principles in a work environment, thus limiting, or seeming to limit, the objectivity of decision-making.

Conservation

Conservation includes all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. This includes preventive conservation, remedial conservation, and restoration, all carried out with respect for the material, significance and integrity of the object.

Documentation

A systematic process of acquiring, organising, storing, retrieving, issuing, recording and archiving information. It includes printed, electronic, audio-visual and digital materials that convey images and information.

Due diligence

The requirement that every effort is made to establish the facts of a case before deciding on a course of action, especially in identifying the source and history of an item offered for acquisition or use before acquiring it.

Everyone who works in or with museums

Everyone who works in or with museums include paid staff, volunteers and consultants, who contribute with specific expertise in fields relevant to the management and operation of museums. Museums employ people from a wide range of professions, including educators, curators, researchers, fundraisers, managers and manual labourers.

Governing body

The persons or organisations designated in the museum's enabling legislation as responsible for the strategic direction and oversight of museum governance.

Indigenous Peoples

Groups descended from populations that inhabited a geographic region prior to colonisation or the establishment of current national borders. They are characterised by maintaining ancestral ties to their lands, possessing their own social, cultural, and political systems, and preserving a distinct identity based on self-identification and recognition by the other members of the community.¹

Intellectual property

Area of law concerned with intellectual creations. Intellectual property law distinguishes between literary (including scholarly and academic works) and artistic property, which is governed by laws on copyright and related rights (for music performers, as well as record, video and database producers, publishers and news agencies); and industrial property (patents, trademarks, industrial designs and registered designations).

Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights are the collective rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.²

¹ Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169, International Labour Organisation (1989). UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). UNESCO's action for Indigenous Peoples (2024).

² See Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Museum leaders

Museum leaders are responsible for the day-to-day management of the museum and the implementation of its strategic plan.

Museum professionals

Museum professionals include all staff of the museums and institutions qualifying as museums and persons who have as their main activity to provide services, knowledge and expertise for museums and the museum community.

Preservation

Preservation emphasises maintaining and protecting heritage in its current state, focusing on slowing deterioration and extending the lifespan of objects. It recognizes that natural aging cannot be stopped, and highlights minimal intervention, preventive care, and responsible management to retain integrity, authenticity, and accessibility.

Provenance

The complete history and ownership of an item, from the time of its creation or discovery to the present day, that establishes its history, authenticity and rightful ownership.

Racism

Racism can be expressed through individual attitudes and actions, as well as through broader structural forms. Systemic or institutional racism operates through laws, policies, and practices embedded in social systems such as criminal justice, employment, education, and cultural representation, often in subtle or less visible ways.

Restitution/Return

The term refers to the act of returning or repatriating cultural belongings or natural specimens, objects, works of art or other material to claimants, often referred to as 'source countries' or 'source communities'. The terms repatriation, rematriation, restitution and return are used to refer to returning to its rightful owners what has been lost or appropriated in unethical or unlawful ways.

Restoration

Refers to interventions directly applied to stable items to facilitate appreciation, understanding and use. Restoration is only undertaken when an object has lost part of its significance or function due to past alterations or deterioration, and actions must respect the original material and cultural significance.

Sensitive materials

Sensitive materials include objects, data, and visual or audiovisual materials that require special consideration in their care, access, display or interpretation due to physical fragility or cultural, spiritual, ethical, legal or social considerations. These may include materials containing personal or confidential information, as well as those subject to cultural traditions or legal restrictions.

Traditional knowledge

Traditional knowledge refers to the intergenerational, collectively held knowledge and practices of Indigenous and local communities, shaped by many generations of close connection to their local culture, land and environment. It is reflected in, among other things, cultural values, language and agricultural practices.³

³ See Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD). (2007). *Article 8(j) Introduction: Traditional Knowledge and the Convention on Biological Diversity*.

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For Back Cover:

The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* has a history of nearly 40 years, starting with the *ICOM Code of Professional Ethics*, which was adopted by the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of ICOM in Buenos Aires (Argentina) on 4 November 1986. The Code was updated by the 20th Ordinary General Assembly in Barcelona (Spain) on 6 July 2001.

It was subsequently fully revised, reorganised and retitled *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, and adopted by the 21st Ordinary General Assembly in Seoul (Republic of Korea) on 8 October 2004.

The revised *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* was adopted by the 41st Ordinary General Assembly in Paris (France) on 25 June 2026. It incorporates the changes resulting from the adoption of a new museum definition at the 37th Ordinary General Assembly in Prague (Czech Republic) on 24 August 2022. Published in the three official languages of ICOM – English, French, and Spanish – the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* may also be translated into other languages by ICOM National Committees, and ICOM welcomes such translations.