

“ICOM’s General Conferences”

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Museums and Cultural Landscapes

International Conference by ICOM Italy

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Dear honorable hosts and guests,

Dear Alberto Garlandini, dear Daniele Jalla, members of ICOM Italy,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome all of you here to Siena for a first important conference on the theme of the 2016 ICOM General Conference: “Museums and Cultural Landscapes.”

From the very beginning, I have been fond of this enticing theme for our next major gathering. As a geographer who worked on development and conflicts pertaining to land use, as a historian and museum professional who worked on spatial changes in history, I am looking forward to seeing how our global museum community is going to discuss this theme.

Themes for General Conferences and International Museum Day should always attract all corners of the world. But given that the world is so very diverse, oftentimes people complain that our themes do not cover all of our regions or missions. Does “Cultural Landscapes” have the same meaning for museums and colleagues in Italy, where the urban and rural space has been developed over the centuries, as it does for museums and colleagues in Africa, for example, where the rural, natural space is almost untouched?

We often also use the term “Museum Landscape” - but is this something we have in common everywhere?

The year 2016 will not only mark ICOM's second General Conference in Italy, following the one held in Milan and Genoa in 1953, but is also the year in which ICOM will celebrate its 70th birthday.

General Conferences have always reflected the societal development of the time, as well as ICOM's character as a member-driven association, and have acted as a forum in which the role of museums for society is discussed. And it must not be forgotten that decisions about programmes and actions concerning the protection of Cultural Heritage within and outside of museums are made during General Conferences.

Furthermore, ICOM General Conferences have always been ideal places for international networking. Countless co-operative efforts, projects and friendships have been born during these meetings.

Just as membership has grown over the decades from a few hundred in the beginning to 33,000 today, the General Conferences started small: in November 1946, during ICOM's first Assembly, representatives from 14 countries met at the Louvre Museum in order to create a global organisation following the terrible period of nationalism, war, the Holocaust and all of the accompanying destruction.

With the social changes of the 1960s, the student movements and changes in everyday culture in the western world, so present in our memories, ICOM members also undertook in-depth discussions on new challenges for museums and for the world association.

The 1971 General Conference in France, for example, was a turbulent event: the membership limitation of 15 per National Committee, which more or less represented the state, was challenged. The opposing view was that ICOM should reject all artificial limitations. In the end, membership was opened to all museum professionals. The role of National Committees became more autonomous, independent from governments, political parties and the ICOM headquarters. Redefinitions of museums and museum professionals followed as well, with the review of ICOM's statutes in 1974.

As a result, membership started to grow rapidly, activities of National and International Committees developed as never before, and the Secretariat in Paris gained a new structure.

ICOM was increasingly recognised as an advisor and partner of UNESCO, signing 11 co-operation contracts with the body between 1976 and 1977 alone, for example. It also grew more visible in the public eye, following the implementation of International Museum Day activities in 1977.

With this greater public visibility, ICOM discussed its role in the service of society at the General Conferences in the 1980s and 90s, as well as the protection of cultural heritage at risk; it also developed an ICOM Code of Ethics as a basic global ethical tool and discussed the role museums can play in order to promote culture.

Today, ICOM's General Conference, attended by thousands of members, reflects the process of emancipation and participation over the decades and plays an important role in a more globalised and rapidly changing world. General Conferences today offer a great deal of capacity building through programmes and activities, most of all, those offered by our 31 International Committees, as well as ICOM's 115 National Committees, Regional Alliances and Affiliated Organizations. They are voices for new missions museum should deal with, such as inclusiveness and sustainability, acting as places of memory and reconciliation; they also speak for museums as institutions which offer new views on cultures and the past by presenting international or global perspectives in order to allow visitors to better understand the world.

70 years on, ICOM needs to look ahead to the future and discuss issues such as its missions in the 21st century; its internal organisation and structure; its role as the largest international cultural membership organisation in the service of society, as a moral protector of cultural heritage and as an organisation that supports the international exchange of museum experts, enabling them to create exhibitions of high quality. Museum visitors are the ones who should benefit from offers with ever-higher aspirations, all over the world.

I think it is also time to discuss the definition of museums once again. We need to check whether the current definition covers the scope of all new developments, and whether we continually have the global museum community in mind.

ICOM Italy has been one of ICOM's most solid pillars over the decades, and I am convinced that the 2016 General Conference will go down as a milestone in ICOM history.

I wish you and the Organising Committee great success. I am sure that the many thousands of participants in Milan 2016 will remember the General Conference as a forum for productive intellectual discussions about our profession, and a place for the start of new friendships.

Today is a perfect beginning. Let us get started.