Defining the museum of the 21st century, Moscow, May-June 2018

Summary from two roundtables held in Moscow, Russia

This Russian language part of the ICOFOM “Defining the Museum for the 21st Century” global debate took place at two roundtables organized on 31 May and 7 June 2018. The first roundtable took place during the major festival of museums and attracted over 100 people following the debate between 8 museum professionals, among them museum directors and museologists, who were addressing the questions proposed by moderators. The second roundtable took place at the Russian State University for the Humanities and was organized by the Department of Museology to complete the discussion since suggestions for a re-definition had not been elaborated, and some key questions of the ten on the agenda had not been addressed due to lack of time during the first roundtable.

1st roundtable “What is a museum today?”

Held by ICOM Russia, Department of Museology and ICOFOM

Date: 31 May 2018

Place: Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics, as part of the INTERMUSEUM festival professional agenda

Participants: Professional museum workers and the academic community

Methodology: Focus on the roles that the museum is playing in society without discussion of the current definition. The roundtable started with a summary of proposals from different regions that had been organized by ICOFOM, followed by questions addressed by the moderators:

1. Have museums changed over the past 10 to 20 years? If so, how? What has happened?

2. Do museums really “serve” society? Or do they perform the objectives set by the government? Or are they working according to a political agenda?

3. How much is society really involved in the activities of the museum? Should society influence the museum and its policies or not?

4. Does the museum need to be independent from societal influence or the government? If so, will that independence be more beneficial to the museum and society?

5. Can the museum achieve independence (albeit partial) with the help of new business models, fundraising and commercial activities? Or could it become a "slave" to the market?

6. Is there a recent change in the ratio of the conceptual sides of the "museum triangle": preservation, study and popularization?

7. Is it possible to combine the traditional paradigm of a Museum as a Temple of Muses with a participatory approach?

8. Is it possible to consider the museum as an institution that does not possess a collection? If so, then what determines the uniqueness of the museum as an institution?
9. Does the definition of "museum" reflect an existing reality? Or is there anything the current ICOM's definition that requires changes?

10. What would you suggest including in the definition of the term "museum"? Or would you suggest reconsidering it completely?

Several weeks after the roundtable, ICOM Russia launched an online questionnaire with the deadline of **3 August 2018** requesting participants and other museum professionals to answer if the ICOM definition requires changes and, if so, what kind of changes.

**Observation:** In Russia, there is a certain dichotomy of what the key mission of a museum is, which results in confrontation and disagreement between those professionals who consider the museum a place of construction of senses and those who consider it principally as a scholarly object-oriented institution. The dichotomy during this roundtable was obvious on the level whether any museum is about objects or about concepts. During the discussions with the audience, the confrontation of “museum services” seen as **business domain vs. museum for a higher purpose** was also raised.

**Suggestions about the roles of museums in Russia in the past decade:**

- Museums are becoming more varied and it makes it especially difficult to define all of them in one definition
- All museums today are united in enabling processes of shaping the identity of an individual. However, when referring to national identities shaped through museums, the question is which identities museums are working on if there are people who come from multicultural backgrounds and may have 6 national identities simultaneously.
- Numerous new layers and types of heritage have emerged in the past decade, which makes the adjectives “tangible” and “intangible” not reflect characteristics of all the variety of heritage that museums work with.
- **Argument:** the definition should not be too focused on what the museum does, but rather on what it is for: to preserve the memory through senses and ideas, not necessarily through objects (a museum is not only a place of objects, but also a space of ideas).
- **Opposing argument:** it is dangerous to focus more on ideas and senses than on original objects because we are living in a period when once again the relativity of historical knowledge is evident and the museum, itself, as a physical institution of social memory is in threat and needs protection no less than the heritage stored in museums. New history is being invented through copies and “novodels”¹ that are treated as “museum objects”, and such negligence of museum objects as sources of credible information is becoming more evident these years. We need to avoid the emergence of this kind of **pseudo-cultural centers** under the name of “museum”.
- Museum festivals which are categorized as “contests” in Eastern European countries such as the INTERMUSEUM, among a lot of bright projects, show an alarming situation: many museums in Russia are still eager to react to the government’s agenda, due to the resurfacing of the state’s propaganda techniques that were overcome 25 years ago now working against museums as tools of propaganda all over again. For some museums, addressing the state’s aims of propaganda and meeting the high number of visitors is becoming more important than other outcomes.

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¹ “Novodel”, in Russian, means a copy of a building, antiquity etc., duplicating a lost original, made of modern materials. The term is usually used with a negative connotation because there have been concerns over the perception of an object (museum object or a heritage site) substituting the sense of the original.
There is a difference between the concept and practice of the Russian museum and those of the Western European museum. The difference is in the critical thinking, both stimulated by visitors and provoked in museums through self-reflection (critical view of how the collections were formed). Not all museums in Russia raise questions, yet many are focused on providing absolutism through answers.

Museums are a mirror of society; today our museums reflect the differentiation of society in Russia. The Museum is considered a membrane between society and eternity. Towards what this membrane oscillates depends a lot on museum workers.

Museums in Russia were withdrawn from the list of scientific institutions, which has been causing a number of problems. It would be better to maintain and highlight the importance of the fundamental nature of scientific research of museum work within the definition.

We are witnessing a few crises: that of identity, that of professionalism and that of generations gap.

There is a new modality of a museum that is responsive towards and reflective of society: on a regional level, some Russian museums have become a “place for social psychotherapy” by aiming to help people become happier and kinder. This museum mode also happens while working with different levels of complex heritage.

Roundtable on ICOM Russia YouTube channel

2nd roundtable

Date: 7 June 2018

Held by Department of Museology, RGGU

Place: Russian State University for the humanities (RGGU)

Participants: expert museum community

Methodology:

Opinion: The definition elaborated by ICOM has played a positive role in the integration of the community in identifying priorities in a number of countries, including ours. It was also introduced at the legislative level. We see no need for major changes or rejection of the current ICOM’s “museum” definition of 2007 in our region. In the last quarter of the 20th century, when revisiting ICOM’s wording, it was easier to agree upon a universal definition. Today ICOM’s revisions of the concept of "museum" reflect different geopolitical conditions: glocalization processes lead to the strengthening of regional differences. Many of the arguments and suggestions expressed at the roundtables organized by ICOFOM around the world do not constitute a current reality of Russian museums and are highly unlikely to be relevant in the coming decade in Russia. Therefore, due to the traditions of different regions, we question the possibility of a universal definition that would reflect the mission of each museum in each country. We express the necessity of a short definition that would capture the essence of the work of the museum as an institution of social memory, while at the same time not abandoning the current structure of the definition: list of

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2 Combination of the words "globalization" and "localization", used to describe something that is developed and distributed globally, but is also adjusted to accommodate the user in a local market.
functions followed by goals. The enumeration of museum’s functions corresponds to the logic of museum activities: from acquisition to display.

**Suggestion in case of a shorter definition:**

- Not-for-profit institution carrying out the activities on collections, preservation and promotion of all kinds of heritage by studying, exhibiting and interpreting it for the development of society.

**Suggestions in case of a longer definition:**

- Keep the term "non-profit" (or change for “not-for-profit” in English), implying that the profit cannot become the main purpose of the museum, which distinguishes the museum from commercial galleries, centers of interpretation (in some cultures called “paramuseums”) and all museum-alike enterprises that are aimed at increasing profits of dealers.
- Replace the word "enjoyment" with "recreation" or "cultural leisure".
- The adjectives "material and intangible" before the word "heritage" can be removed for our region. In Russia and former Cis countries heritage traditionally is not only material.
- **Functions**: add “interprets (the heritage)” into enumeration of »: «acquires, conserves, researches, interprets, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage».
- **Aims**: for education, construction of knowledge, transmission/communication of historical memory.
- Another suggestion for **aims**: realization of the informational capacity of the heritage, construction of historical memory and interpretation of heritage, formation of identity, preservation of primary sources of information and knowledge.
- “Accessible to all” instead of “public”.
- Suggested museum definition: “A museum is an institution of social memory, often co-existing as a research institute, whose areas of activity are all based on the knowledge developed in the fields of museology and scientific disciplines of museums’ orientation”.

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