We live in an age when people are more interested in material things than in people. But an old book entitled “The Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms” shows that this phenomenon is far from new: a Buddhist monk was once invited to a tea party. However, when he arrived at the house, the gate keeper would not let him in, because his clothes were too shabby. So the monk changed into better clothes and went back and this time was welcomed to the tea party. But when food was served, the monk poured the food on his clothes. Everyone was surprised and asked why. He answered: “What was welcomed at this party was not myself but my clothes. Therefore it was only fitting that my clothes should enjoy the food and not me.” He was pointing out that people placed more importance on his outer appearance or his attire than on himself. 1,000 years have passed but we can still share the humour of this story because today museums all around the world preserve and exhibit mostly tangible cultural assets, the equivalent of the clothes instead of the monk.

In Asia, we use Chinese characters and the Chinese characters for museum consist of one that means “wide and numerous” and another that means “objects or things”. People are now so used to the exhibitions put on by museums that they are more interested in the objects contained in the display cabinets than in the minds of the people who created the objects.

An English Ambassador during the reign of Elizabeth I was posted to Turkey, at the time of the Ottoman Empire. A contemporary Effendi historian recorded that such a strange ship had never entered the port of Istanbul: “This ship has 83 rifles and other arms and has sailed 3,700 miles to come here. It is very strange that this sort of ship has never been seen before.” In other words, the subject of interest and shock was not the English Ambassador but the ship that carried the Ambassador. If the historian had wanted to know more about the ship, it would have been better for him to take an interest in the sailors. He should have asked who the seamen were and what sort of thoughts they had, since these sailors were not slaves working on the oars, but free citizens who had come aboard of their own free will.

The ship from England was basically different from the middle-eastern armed ships but it wasn’t just the speed, the weaponry or the fact that it was propulsion–powered ships that was different: the second was operated by free men and the first by slaves.

So, as museum professionals, what we must do now is to highlight the power of the people on the ship, not the ship itself. That is what we mean when we say the discourse is shifting from tangible to intangible cultural assets.

Preparation of a Vessel to Contain Lost Life: Preservation and Successful Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage

by O Young Lee

However, this is a long journey. It was only in the 1970s that UNESCO started to list historical monuments and sites around the world and preserve them. It was only in the 1990s that UNESCO started to take an interest in intangible cultural assets and even that, initially, was only in the form of a recommendation. In 1993, at the 142nd Executive Board of UNESCO, the Living Human Treasures systems of Korea attracted attention and member countries were recommended to adopt a similar system. For this recommendation to develop into a policy-based Convention, we had to wait for the new century.

In the case of Korea, the jongmyo jerye and jongmyo jeryeak, with a 500-year-old history going back to the Chosun dynasty, was only included as a World Cultural Heritage object in 2001, and chunhyangzeon, as well as other folk art such as pansori, were only included last year.

Despite this, Korea has been able to maintain its unique culture. This is because of the intangible cultural force, spirit and soul, handed down over thousands of years, which cannot be destroyed or taken away by weapons. This is the very force that is the foundation of the unique Korean culture that we see today.
Today, the concept of cultural assets is moving from the visible to the invisible. Last year, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage was adopted at the UNESCO General Conference. The background to this is that national identities are being threatened, as the world becomes more and more globalised. The first “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” were also adopted at the 155th Executive Board of UNESCO in 1998. ICOM Regional Organisations are also moving fast to safeguard our intangible cultural assets. In October 2002, in Shanghai, ICOM-ASPAC (Asia Pacific) discussed intangible heritage and globalisation. This points to the historical trend that is taking place these days. Many definitions and concepts regarding intangible cultural heritage were raised and they discussed methods of documenting and interpreting this intangible culture as well as ways for experts, local communities and government organisations to form partnerships and federate.

The “Shanghai Charter”, which is a guideline for museums in preserving intangible cultural assets, is also very significant because it extended ways of preserving tangible cultural assets. However, despite all these events, there are still many countries in the world that do not even have the concept of intangible culture. They do not have any policies regarding intangible cultural assets, and as a result many intangible cultural assets are, at this precise moment, being abandoned and disappearing before our very eyes.

In Africa they say that when an old man dies, a museum disappears with him. With some differences, I think this applies in many other countries, where the elders are living museums. However, we consider the elders to be a cumbersome population nowadays, or a population that is only an object of social protection. We do not consider them to be cultural assets.

Between museum and artist’s studio: Valéry and Proust

As you know, the word Museum comes from the goddess Muse. In other words, it means a temple of Muse. However, not many people know that the mother of the goddess Muse was Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. This means that we need to think about what museums are preserving. They should be preserving memories and intangible thoughts because the essence of intangible cultural assets is based on our memories and thoughts. We live in an age of the instant, where all is easily forgotten, so it is time for museums to be reborn as temples of memories or temples of Mnemosyne.

An important function of the museum is preservation, exhibition and education. However, from the moment that tangible cultural property enters the museum, it loses its historical contacts and original birthplace. Whether it is tangible monuments or intangible heritage, preservation puts an end to the possibility of their further evolution. Tangible as well as intangible heritage is ultimately the product of the human spirit. Thus, the visible comes to contain the invisible. In order for museums to become cultural institutions where human culture lives and breathes, they must improve self-awareness as well as their current orientation. Naturally, museums will become interested in investigating the social realm and collecting intangible heritage and transforming it into tangible heritage through documentation, transcription, and interpretation. This also means there is a need to preserve testimonies of cultural life and display them for the general public. This requires inter-disciplinary collaboration and cooperation, as well as the development of appropriate documentation tools and policies. The task that museums face is giving physical form to intangible cultural heritage while, at the same time, reviving the spirit and soul of the creators of tangible cultural assets.

This endeavour will go beyond the conflicting views of museums held by two 20th century intellectual giants, Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust. Paul Valéry saw an art museum as a place where the dead work of art lives. For Valéry, it was the moment and production process of the work that takes place in the artist’s studio, in other words the moment of creation, that was more important. Proust, on the other hand, believed that works of art are truly completed when they come out of the artist’s studio and are neatly displayed in museums as part of human history. However, as with all works of art, cultural property will retain its vitality only when the endless cycle between womb (where it is created) and tomb (where it is buried) continues. In this respect, we cannot choose between Valéry or Proust unless we can see both the creative process and its ultimate resting place. At the same time, unless we actually place the intangible assets in an institution that we call museum, and store them in a special glass incubator that we call evaluation, categorisation or contextualisation, they will disappear altogether in the present globalised world. The museum now functions as an oxygen mask for local cultures which are slowly suffocating to death. Therefore, an element of museum must be added to the artist’s studio and a studio-like element must be added to the museum if we are to arrive at a new paradigm for museums.

When we visit museums, we see that constant temperature and humidity are maintained. But it’s quite obvious that cold or humidity is not what destroys intangible cultural assets. If cultures can be compared to wild flowers blooming in different localities and different soil, nowadays it is no longer possible for these flowers to blossom without caretaking by states or local governments.

But in fact, this frequently results in many intangible cultural assets being relegated to attractions or entertainment items, or even to events serving political aims.

With the development of semiconductor chips, we can now document and store intangible assets. And this is possible in a way that was inconceivable until now. Soon, we will see a computer memory chip becoming a museum in itself. As such, cultural assets are now often equated to digital assets. We have already witnessed such incidents in the case of Kyopan, the Japanese printing company which replicated cultural assets in digital form but not through a 3D camera, which means that it is very realistic but still not the real thing. Many tangible and intangible assets using virtual reality technologies reproduce the original almost exactly. Yet we should be aware that an unexpected and potentially detriment element might be hiding somewhere in this technology-based revolution of museums.

However, in the end, museums will continue to act as catalogues of objects which remind us, with some nostalgia, of a lost civilisation, as summed up by the great 20th century poet, 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?"

(The Rock)

The last line of this poem is relevant to all of us living in this technological age. We are losing true knowledge, true wisdom, the true meaning of life, and the significance of true living. And we are losing all this while being inundated with information. Perhaps the purpose of our activities as museum professionals is to say “here” when the question “where” is asked.

I believe that museums in the end should strive to be a permanent vessel that contains our lives, the lives that somehow got lost in the habit of living. We should now praise our courage in attempting to recover what we have lost and to rebuild our museums into vessels that also contain the intangible. This is a very valuable mission and it affects every one of us.