ICOM’s Universal Heritage

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Museums around the world are not responsible for Universal Heritage as a whole – but rather for the entire Heritage included in museums – according to the definition in the ICOM Statutes. Before discussing the ideas the terms should be considered.1

1. The Terms
A critical approach to the term Universal is – particularly related to museums – of great importance. In this regard, international museum expansionism is both a challenge and a warning signal.2 *Univ ersum* was derived from the Latin words unus (the only thing) and versus (turned round), an etymology equating the universe with the cosmos: the boundlessness and infinity of time and space. European museum development has been affected by evolving concepts of universality, notably as of the Enlightenment. Voltaire’s *Essais sur l’histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l’esprit* (1756), considered as the first Universal History, led to the encyclopaedic thought informing comparative methodologies or descriptions of similarly structured phenomena. During the 20th century, sciences, technologies and mass-communication have likewise supported the global connections linking humanity as a whole. All of these notions of globalism concern and affect museums.

Universal Heritage – Museums

Universal Heritage means that Heritage is to be seen as a whole. This is true at numerous places included on the UNESCO World Heritage List – i.e., the city of Antigua/Guatemala, the Highlands of Minas Gerais/Brazil or the Jesuit Missions in Argentina and Paraguay. These are in the best sense “keystones” not only of great heritage but also as examples of excellent museums.

> The objects in museum spaces are testimonies to and a reflection of a philosophy of life, ways of thinking, everyday-life rituals, ceremonies, religions and faith, and systems of education – the intangible heritage. Indeed this immaterial evidence combined with the original objects provide its cultural dimension.3 Museums also include various fields and disciplines from natural to social sciences, from plastic to performing arts and therefore what we might term a comprehensive culture based on knowledge. At the same time, the focus must be on the responsibility of museums for the heritage.

> For museums, universality relates more to the general application of this precept: the museum entity, museological requirements for maintaining a museum, the common educational goals and encyclopaedic approach used throughout history in museums. As museums interpret the cultural and natural heritage of mankind, they are also responsible for the observance of regulations and the dissemination of human rights, particularly the right to education. Indeed they should communicate social and civic values as part of that education.

> Each museum around the world is therefore obliged to take the functions of museums (stated in the ICOM Statutes) seriously, to preserve the evidence of the past for the future, to research and to document the cultural heritage.

> Museums – everywhere in the world – have to be involved in a community, in a social and cultural environment. The museum has to reflect social and cultural developments and to react in an adequate way. It also has to be a place where proof of identity is made manifest.4

2. Tangible-Intangible/Universal Heritage – Positive and Negative Heritage

In recent years, tangible and intangible heritage have been discussed at length.5 Generally, this debate was related to the positive heritage as we consider it in museums of different types. History represented by the objects is usually exhibited in a way in which people can take pride. Nevertheless, the advent of the newer role of Memorial Museums and Memorial Sites as intangible heritage and a new breed of museums worldwide including those dedicated to the totalitarian systems of the 20th century show that heritage is not always a positive, but also a negative, that we can and do nonetheless share.6 Today, we recognize how “condemnable heritage”, not only of the 20th century (through original sites, documents, relics for example of National Socialist concentration camps, Gulag Camps in Russia) but also of earlier periods (such as sites connected to colonialism and slavery – in Africa, England, the United States and the Caribbean) should be preserved and used for educational purposes and consciousness-raising.

> Related to this theoretical basis, we should, on one hand reflect cultural identity and diversity in museums and on the other, a “universal” cultural approach. In the context of museology, this also gives rise to questions concerning inspiration and human creativity, as well as the spiritual and cultural heritage in the present and future of a cyber-world. We must ask ourselves about the association between musealisation and visualisation as well as how processes and modes of perception in diverse countries and regions reflect the coherence of cultural heritage in different cultures.

3. Ethical and legal problems/questions

The ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums 7 requires the respectful treatment of the heritage represented by the museum collections. This is particularly related to the “Colonial Age” in the 19th century and the origins of many of the world’s museum collections. If one considers the Universal Heritage, one must inevitably focus on ethical and legal problems raised by collections held in museums and claims regarding these.

> An example: the Government of Australia demands the return of problematic objects in museum collections in Germany and Great Britain. For the Australian government and the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (an organisation reclaiming the rights of Aboriginals), the mortal remains of Aboriginals – particularly related to the cult of the dead, must be returned. (These skeletons have been, since the 1840’s, in depots or exhibited in museums in Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe).8 There is no doubt, that the human or cultural rights of the Aborigines have to be respected – and that museums must “lose” or be obliged to return those “sacred remains”.

4. Universal Heritage – “Virtual Museums”

If we think about the Universal Heritage, we have also to consider the advantages and disadvantages concerning the contemporary era and especially the “Computer Age” in which we now live.

> We know that the “universal heritage” in museum collections can be made known, transmitted and made available in visual terms to almost everybody in the world who is interested in it. This is, of course, not as satisfying as seeing and learning from the original objects on a specific site and/or in a museum. However, for the many people in remote regions of the world very interested in the Heritage – in art, ethnology, anthropology, cultural history, natural sciences and technology – the “Virtual Age” offers the possibility of participating in the Universal Heritage regardless of geography.

International Museum Day

The importance of International Museum Day is precisely to stimulate creativity to bring the world’s museums closer together to serve a growing global society. . . . ICOM as universal heritage . . . For more ideas, see page 8!

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1. The ICOM Statutes, Article 2.
2. For example the problems concerning Marion True and the Getty Museum.