

REPORT ON WORKING GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE “WHAT WE DO”

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Over the past few years, there has been lively discussion among some ICME members about our committee’s identity. ICME, ICOM’s international committee for Museums of Ethnography, represents a broad range of museums of culture, administered by various governing bodies and reflecting different types of cultures and communities (i.e., local, native, indigenous, migrant, foreign, diaspora, etc.). Some of these museums have undergone tremendous change in the past few decades that have challenged both those who work in and for these museums, as well as the societies they are a part of. In recent conversations, topics no less profound than a name change for our committee and an appropriate mission statement have been addressed, proposed, debated, and ultimately deadlocked.

A solution to carry these issues forward and bring the discussion to the entire ICME membership was to create a Working Group for “What We Do.” ICME President Dr. Viv Golding made this suggestion and invited me, a second-term ICME board member, to form the group.

In spring 2018, a call went out to the entire ICME membership soliciting interested candidates for the Working Group; in May our Working Group was formed. The team includes Susan Faine, independent museum consultant from Australia, Doris Prlic, of Weltmuseum Vienna, Eveline LaMeer, recent graduate in Museum Studies, University of Leiden, and Graeme Were, Chair and Professor of Anthropology at University of Bristol, UK and ICME board member.

The team worked hard and collaboratively to assemble a questionnaire intended to gather basic information about how members identified themselves and the museums where they worked or conducted research. Four groups of questions, the majority of which were presented in multiple-choice format, were asked. The headings were: 1) About Your Museum, 2) Terminology and Attitudes Toward Collecting and Exhibiting at Your Museum, 3) ICME and You, and 4) Defining ICME. To make the questionnaire as user-friendly as possible, it was distributed as both a Google document and a Microsoft Word form. Mario Buletic, ICME board member and Webmaster, contributed significantly to our efforts in formatting the questionnaire. Both Mario and Sylvia Wackernagel, ICME Secretary, distributed the questionnaire widely on Social Media and provided as many statistics about our membership as possible. Members were given approximately one month to reply to the questionnaire and sent two reminders within that time frame.

The balance of this report summarizes the results of these efforts.

Number of Respondents and Statistics

A broad distribution of our ICME questionnaire to the entire membership of 402 individuals and institutions (as of 2017) resulted in 37 responses. 29 people responded via Google and 8 responded via Word.

29 respondents represented a museum or a collection, and 8 were individual members. Of 16 ICME board members, 7 replied to the questionnaire.

In total, we received less than a 10% response rate from the ICME membership to the questionnaire.

36 percent of the respondents came from a National Museum and 25 percent represented regional or local museums. Broken down by number, 14 respondents represented national museums, 10 represented regional museums, and another 10 represented local museums.

63 percent of respondents stated that their museums do not have the term “ethnography” in their title, although 71 percent of respondents identified their museums as ethnographic.

Of seven world continents, respondents represented Europe, North America, Australia and Asia (with only one respondent). No one replied from Africa, Central or South America.

We learned recently from former ICME President and current ICOM ex officio Per Rekdal of Norway that of ICOM’s 30 international committees, ICME has the third lowest growth rate of members, with only ICR (International Committee for Regional Museums) and the Committee on Glass attracting fewer members in all of ICOM. Along with four other international committees, ICME is among the oldest, founded in 1948.

Institutions and ICOM committees represented in the Questionnaire

The following institutions were mentioned and represented by respondents to the questionnaire:

Ethnographic Museum of Istria, Croatia
Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Bloomington, Indiana, USA
Museum Studies Program, University of Leicester, UK
Horniman Museum, London, UK
Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, Norway
Ethnographic Collections of Ghent University, Belgium
Musée Cantonal d’archéologie et d’histoire, Lausanne, Switzerland
National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka Prefecture, Japan
The Museum of Urban Everyday Life, Rousse, Bulgaria

National Museum of World Cultures, The Netherlands (Tropenmuseum, Museum

Volkenkunde, Afrika Museum, Wereldmuseum)
National Ethnographic Museum, Bulgaria
The National Museum of Australia
Ethnographic Museum, University of Zurich, Switzerland
Wallachian Open Air Museum, Czechia
Folklife and Ethnological Museum of Macedonia – Thrace, Greece
Volkskundemuseum Wien/Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, Vienna
Queensland Museum, Australia
Museum of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Serbia
Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada
Estonian National Museums, Tartu
Museum Europäischer Kulturen/Museum of European Cultures, Berlin, Germany
Museum / Cultural Institute of the James Bay Cree Nation, Quebec, Canada
Library, USA

Respondents listed additional membership in the following international and national ICOM committees:

UMAC (2001) International Committee for University Museums and Collections
COSTUME (1962) International Committee for Museums and Collections of Costume
COMCOL (2011) International Committee for Collecting
ICOMOS (1965) International Council on Monuments and Sites
ICOM-CC (1967) International Committee for Conservation
ICTOP (1968) International Committee for the Training of Personnel
CAMOC (2004) International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities
CECA (1968) International Committee for Education and Cultural Action
CIDOC International Committee for Documentation
ICOFOM (1977) International Committee for Museology

National committees:

ICOM Bulgaria-non ICME Member respondent
ICOM Greece
ICOM Germany

Reflection by Working Group Members

1. About your Museum

Based on member responses and some self-reflection by the Working Group, it became clear in the first section “About Your Museum,” that certain museum types were not included in the multiple-choice options. The most notable omission was university museums, which as Doris Prlic points out, often have a slightly different, perhaps more research-based focus and should be singled out as their own category.

Other types of museums not identified in the questionnaire were eco museums, open air museums, and indigenous/tribal Museums. An individual from the Cultural Institute of the Cree Nation identified a critical problem in our option categories (i.e., national vs. regional vs. local) when she said national culture is implicitly colonial and that “it is possible for an indigenous culture to be considered their own nation/national culture.” Another respondent from the Glenbow Museum described his museum as non-governmental but with funds from the provincial government, and offered another approach to managing First Nations/indigenous collections. He said, “Our Indigenous Studies collection used to be called the Ethnology Collection. We work collaboratively with local first nations groups (and other groups when possible). Our Blackfoot gallery is now interpreted by Blackfoot interpreters only.” In the case of the Glenbow Museum, it seemed that the term “ethnology” and collaborative work with local groups did not mean the same thing. From these comments and others, it seems that in some places Indigenous peoples/First Nation peoples want their stories told by them in their own spaces while in others, they want to be respectfully integrated into ‘mainstream’ spaces. In some national museums representing the histories of that nation, the institution may be independent; in other places there may be ‘arm’s length’ involvement from government, or just plain involvement. Either way, Indigenous/First Nation museums and collections need a clearer voice within ICME.

Although ecomuseums did not seem to be represented in the responses, they are mentioned here as another category that is potentially relevant to ICME, because of their focus on local cultures and traditions, even though ecomuseums do have their own ICOM international committee dedicated solely to them. There was some dialogue between an Ecomuseum consortium and ICME during Milan triennial in 2016. More follow-up should be made with this group.

At least two open air museums were represented by the questionnaire responses. This is interesting because ICOM has another international committee devoted specifically to open air museums. One respondent from the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History carefully explained that his choice of joining ICME was due to a personal association with Per Rekdal, a former ICME President, and his own disciplinary training in anthropology.

The questionnaire was intended to be museum-focused, addressing the various types, focuses, and terminologies surrounding institutions associated with ICME. Though it was assumed that scholars and others not employed permanently by museums would base their answers on institutions they know from their private research or consulting contracts, a couple of respondents suggested that the questionnaire be more inclusive of independent professionals in ICME and list them as a category. This was a point well taken and should be pursued in any follow-up associated with this survey.

One respondent suggested that rather than asking for people to sign the questionnaire with their names that they give their ICOM membership number, as this could ensure that respondents were ICOM ICME members and maintain their anonymity if they wanted to. In general, the Working Group thought it helpful to have identifying information about the

respondents. Respondents had two chances to identify themselves—one with their email address, which was required, the other with the name of their institution, which was optional.

Assessment/Analysis

Statistics tell us that 63 percent of respondents stated that their museum does not have ethnography in its title. And whether or not they described their museum's collections as ethnographic, they chose social history as the second most chosen topic with which to identify.

Many respondents checked multiple boxes in the section that asked how they defined their collections, including the terms immigrant, indigenous, ethnic, living history, etc.

Eveline Lameer notes that this statistic may show that some member museums from ICME are not presented as ethnographic institutions toward their public.

Susan Faine noted a common language and terminology in much of the respondents' descriptions, with terms such as new voices, inclusivity, community involvement, work with source communities, collaborative approach, multi-vocality, diversity, decolonization, collections about culture, co-curation, power relations, etc.

The Netherlands Museum of World Cultures was explicit in its attention to terminology, stating in the questionnaire "we also pay attention to the words we use and the colonial heritage and its consequences that our type of museum brings."

The problem, we found, was a lack of definition or exploration of what "our type of museum" is. Graeme Were suggests that the responses reveal a lot about the attitudes of members to the term 'ethnography'. It seems that the term is recognized by most as a means to identify, unify, and represent collection types – whether they be in cultural, historical, ethnological, tribal, or art collections. ICME appears to be a go-to committee for representation of such collections and the term 'ethnography' does not seem to be problematized; rather, Were suggests, the important thing to recognize is that the institutions themselves are making changes [vis a vis] their collecting histories, missions, relation to communities, etc – and that ICME seems to provide a way to communicate this.

Several respondents emphasized the need not to politicize ICME; many mentioned decolonizing practices and co-curation/collaboration – all of which came under the auspices of 'ethnography' – particularly so as a term that incorporates contemporary collecting or a desire to do that.

Mention of politics did come into play in a number of responses. Some individuals felt that human rights had a role to play in ethnographic museums, in terms of representing racism and the cultures of LGBT, refugee, and migrant communities. Others said that even if social action is an approach of ethnographic museums, that political positions and/or social action need not be in the group's title. Susan Faine suggested that ICME should not

propose an overarching political platform when it purports to represent members whose situations and contexts vary enormously.

A respondent from the Australian National Museum argued that while not all museums have a department, collection, or exhibition space designated 'ethnographic', many museums have researchers, collections and content that embrace 'ethnographic' in their professions (historians, archaeologists, anthropologists) and in their museum areas (Indigenous Studies, etc). The definitions within ICME should embrace all researchers, curators, etc with an interest in cultures.

At least two respondents discussed a name change in their museums. The Norsk Folkemuseum is now called in English The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History. (According to curator Leif Pareli, the English term Folk museum was felt to be too narrow for the scope of this museum, which in theory works with all aspects of daily life in Norway since the Reformation in 1537). As mentioned above, at the Glenbow Museum in Canada, the Indigenous Studies collection used to be called the Ethnology Collection.

Current ICOM President Viv Golding put forth this view about terminology: "I think keeping ethnography in the title points to the difficult histories that linger in the present but perhaps the words 'world culture' could be added, and 'diversity'. [ICOM President] Suay [Aksoy] advised us to change our name in Paris this year. She said we will lose members to new committees and a couple more are in the pipeline. [Former ICME President and Current ex-officio ICOM member] Per Rekdal said that [Suay Aksoy] is keen to get a 'Diversity' group established. The process of name change was so divisive when we tackled that earlier. Perhaps reaching consensus is a long job but necessary ... The 'new' definition is by no means perfect in my view but it does point to VITAL current concerns."

Some discussion was had among Working Group members over the term "world culture," which was felt to be a homogenous term and the suggestion was made to replace it with "cultures of the world." Doris Prlic also noted that the name "world culture" or "world cultures" has been a preferred name for many museums in recent years and so an ongoing discussion of these terms is warranted. In 2013, the museum where Prlic works, currently called Weltmuseum Wien (World Culture Museum Vienna) changed its name from Volkerkundemuseum (Ethnology Museum). Such new terminologies are not without ongoing debate. In a May 2013 article from the journal *Modern Ghana*, Dr. Kwame Opaku suggested, "The notion of 'world museum' as applied by many is obviously more than problematic for these museums are all national museums and the designation is very misleading."

As an addendum to this, at the current meeting, Dr. Golding has proposed a new name for our committee, adding the terms Diversity and Indigenous Peoples to our title, making it ICMEDIP (International Committee for Museums of Ethnography, Diversity and Indigenous Peoples).

3. ICME and YOU

I am not a member, but I fill out this questionnaire for empathy with the problem "What we do" (ICOM Bulgaria)

4. Defining ICME

Most respondents answered the final question of the survey, although they offered no clear definitions for ICME. Rather they suggested the types of collecting (collaborative, inclusive) that should take place and many seemed unconcerned with the title ethnography. Some argued that the old definition, based on the profile of the collections, is a fairly good description of what unites us, although qualified that "this should not hinder us from questioning the history and the nature of those collections or to choose a more activist attitude concerning the many issues that can arise from working with such collections."

One respondent from the Open Air Museum in Czechia stated, ICME is rather open to different kinds of museums. As an open-air museum, regional in scope of presentation, we feel to be a 'minority' organization among large national museums oriented towards indigenous collections from all parts of the world. Limiting the definition may mean diminishing the dialogue and variety of views and experience.

A representative of the Queensland Museum of Australia suggested that ICME's definition needs to be broad as boundaries of collection types imposed by museum definitions and categories does not speak to all community's sense of self and relationship to material culture.

Where do we go from here?

This questionnaire was intended to open a dialogue among the entire ICME community about ICME's identity, mission and terminology. Although in reality, very few respondents proposed ideological or terminological changes for ICME, they elaborated on the various approaches that their museums take toward collection interpretation and exhibition, emphasizing how these approaches have changed over time. For many, it seems, the changing approaches and renewed emphases on working with source communities to collect, interpret and exhibit cultural objects takes the form of a definition in and of itself.

From the responses, we also gleaned a sampling of the range of museums that belong to ICME (open air, university, First Nation, encyclopedic, etc.) and got a sense of how they relate to the committee. As Susan Faine noted, though, more than defining the varied museums associated with ICME, what is important is to bring together those who work with people and cultures.

However, to gain a further appreciation for the institutional and individual diversity in ICME, a larger sample of questionnaire responses is needed. It is possible that the

questionnaire could be translated into additional languages to reach more people. It could also be made available onsite at ICME conferences.

In addition, more research could be done on other ICOM international committees and how older ones such as ours have updated their missions to better reflect their goals and constituents, and also to explore how and why newer international committees have been formed. CECA, the international committee for Education, recently became the Committee for Education and Social Action, adding agency to the topic they represent.

It is true that ICME has lost members to other international committees over the past few years, and we should understand where “our” members have gone and why. More statistics and other data are needed to explore the issue of waning membership in ICME. Susan Faine has asked if an international committee becomes a threatened species if numbers drop to a threatened level. A deeper problem may be with the engagement of the existing membership. Only about half of ICME board members responded to this questionnaire as did less than a tenth of its members. It would be helpful to know how many members subscribe to the ICME yahoo groups and follow us on FB and other social media. A priority for ICME should be how to engage better with its members.

The Working Group’s efforts have been just a beginning. We hope that this questionnaire and the points it has raised will offer a steppingstone for continued dialogue about this critical topic.

Respectfully submitted on October 11, 2018,

The ICME Working Group on “What We Do”

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