

Changing needs, changing roles: a view of the work of museums from the Americas

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A 'post'-prelude

In 2018, ICOM's Standing committee on Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials issued a call to the international museum community for proposals for a new museum definition. Since ICOM's establishment in 1946, this definition has been renewed seven times, each iteration reflecting fundamental changes within the field's evolving practices, including acknowledgement of the importance of caring for the intangible heritage of humanity. Stressing acquisitions, conservation, research, communication, exhibitions, and education as well as the concept of museums in the 'service of society', the current ICOM definition – adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria, in 2007 – largely adheres to the formulation that first appeared in 1974 (influenced by the findings of the *Round Table on the role of museums in Latin America*, jointly hosted by ICOM and UNESCO in Santiago, Chile, in 1972), and reads as follows:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

With its focus on the traditional functions of museums, this definition nevertheless only partially addresses concerns arising from the key rethinking of the purpose of museums as social institutions prompted by the New Museology movement of the late 1960s, while eclipsing in all



but oblique ways ('in the service of society') many of the questions raised by critical museology about the politics of authorship, equity, and representation.

Informed by a broader set of precepts and underscoring some of the seismic conceptual changes that have shaped contemporary museological praxis and the ethical and political responsibilities of museums of the 21st century, the Standing Committee's call for, and proposed (though not retained) definition of 2019 is in stark contrast with convention in the manner it pays significant attention to different world views, social inequalities, and urgent global issues such as the climate and refugee crises, resulting in the following proposition:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

ICOM's call for a new museum definition has been a long time in coming. If one were to consider the wide range of causes museums have championed since the rise of the new museology movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, in light of the slightly later iteration of critical museology in the 1980s, and with respect to the decolonising practices that have collectively and increasingly



Figure 1: ICOM call for a new museum definition



challenged normative museological praxis over the past half century, the work and ethos of museums has expanded significantly. Increasingly, many museums have understood their mission not only from a social, but more specifically a social justice framework, as civic platforms empowered to address difficult and sensitive social issues and histories such as poverty, discrimination, armed conflict, dictatorship, genocide, and more recently still, the climate crisis.

Drawing on case studies from the Americas, this Brown Bag lecture briefly considers the changing needs and roles of museological praxis through the lens of the social justice framework that has increasingly informed contemporary museum work across diverse museological genres. I trace three phases of this framework beginning in the late 1960s with Indigenous activism, continuing through decolonisation throughout the 1980s, and the more recent rise of human rights museology.

I. Indigenous activism and Canadian museums

In Canada in the 1960s as in many other countries around the globe, society and politics were in profound transformation. The era of the civil rights movement and social protests that brought increased world attention to issues of inequality, racism, and discrimination also marked Canada's own coming-of-age. In addition to celebrating its Centenary as an independent nation by hosting the International and Universal Exposition – Expo 67 as it came to be known – in Montreal, the country took stock of the darker side of its colonial history. The 1966 government-commissioned Hawthorn Report on the economic and social conditions of Canada's Indigenous peoples concluded that Canada's First peoples – found to be among the most marginalized in Canada – faced greater poverty, higher infant mortality rates, as well as lower life expectancy and levels of education than non-Indigenous Canadians.

The near coincidence of these two events are important in the context of the decolonizing politics that have played out in the Canadian public sphere, for in addition to showcasing innovative technologies both at home and from abroad, the hosting of Expo 67 also revealed an early instance of Indigenous cultural activism and challenges to normative colonial discourses.¹ At the iconic Indians of Canada pavilion installed on site, beyond celebrating First Nations' cultures and traditions such as the art of Norval Morrisseau and via the pavilion's iconic architectonic forms (featuring a wigwam and carved totem poles), there was more than just a hint of subtle critique of settler colonialism in the pavilion's narratives for all the world to see:





Figure 2: Indians of Canada pavilion, Expo 67; Pinterest; Wikipedia²



Wars and peace treaties deprived us of our land. The White Man fought each other for our land and we were embroiled in the White Man's wars. The wars ended in treaties and our lands passed into the White Man's Hands. Many Indians feel our fathers were betrayed.³

For indigenous communities seeking auto-determination, the cultural sphere can communicate potent messages of political actions. The Indian Pavilion at Expo '67 was an early and highly visible example of Indigenous renunciation of the master narratives of colonial nationhood that dominated Expo's other Canadian pavilions.

In a broader sense, native activists have been highly critical of the manner First Peoples have consistently been represented by settlers in mainstream museums. The rise of Indigenous-led institutions in Canada since the 1960s has enabled alternative, and far more progressive forms of representation to take hold. An excellent example is the Woodland Cultural Centre's exhibition

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1. Romney Copeman, "Unsettling Expo 67 : Developmentalism & Colonial Humanism at Montreal's World Exhibition," MA Thesis, Département d'histoire, Université de Montréal (2017).
 2. Re : Wikipedia image of Indians of Canada Pavilion : paternité – Vous devez donner les informations appropriées concernant l'auteur, fournir un lien vers la licence et indiquer si des modifications ont été faites. Vous pouvez faire cela par tout moyen raisonnable, mais en aucune façon suggérant que l'auteur vous soutient ou approuve l'utilisation que vous en faites: Laurent Bélanger; [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Expo_67_pavillon_Les_Indiens_du_Canada_\(2\).jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Expo_67_pavillon_Les_Indiens_du_Canada_(2).jpg); no modifications have been made to this image.
 3. Myra Ruthford and Jim Miller, " 'It's Our Country': First Nations' Participation in the Indian Pavilion at Expo 67," Journal of the Canadian Historical Association, Volume 17, No. 2 (2006), pp. 148-173.

Fluffs and Feathers, curated by Deborah Doxtator in 1988. This important exhibition confronted cultural stereotypes of First Peoples with an ironic dismantling of the symbols of Indianness and mythic displays that have perpetuated false, insensitive, and culturally offensive representations of Indigenous populations for decades in museological institutions.

Inaugurated in 1972, the Centre is highly significant for another reason as well: as the site of the longest-running residential school in Canada – the Mohawk Residential School (1828-1970) – what is now known as Woodland Cultural Centre has brilliantly reclaimed Indigenous identity with a mission that serves to preserve and promote First Nations' heritage and culture. Comprising a language program, museum, library, educational programming, and annual art exhibition, the Centre strongly supports the livelihood of three local communities: the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, Six Nations of the Grand River, and Wahta Mohawks. While relatively few residential school buildings still exist across Canada, Woodland constitutes an important reminder of the attempted assimilation of First Nations' culture and identity by the Canadian government.

Funded by the Government, and operated by Churches, residential schools housed Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families and sent hundreds of kilometers away from their home communities. The goal of these schools was to suppress the language, traditions, knowledge, and spirituality of Canada's Indigenous peoples and to enforce the dominant Euro-Canadian culture through forced assimilation. It is estimated that over 150,000 Aboriginal children (Inuit, First Nations, Métis) were made to attend such schools over the course of these institutions' history, in which students suffered physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, the legacy of which lives on through intergenerational trauma. Indian Residential Schools operated in Canada for well over a century (1830s to 1990s), and became the subject of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2009 which concluded in 2015 with 94 Calls to Action that fundamentally touch upon policies ranging from the provision of education and justice, to media, sports, professional development, youth programming, and the work of cultural institutions.

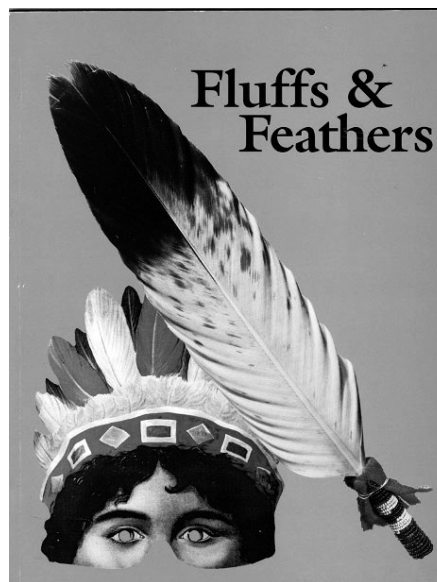


Figure 3: catalogue cover



Figure 4: <http://www.montrealgazette.com/sports/Alvin+Wanderingspirit+protests+Spirit+Sings+cultural+exhibit+outside+Glenbow+Museum+during+1988+Winter+Games+Calgary/7956293/story.html>; image of Alvin Wandering Spirit, republished in Montreal Gazette on Feb 13, 2013

II. Decolonization

Establishment museums have also historically been the grounds of Indigenous protest in Canada, as was the case at the Glenbow Museum, in Calgary, Alberta, on the eve of another international event: the XV Olympic Winter Games of 1988. Timed to coincide with these Games and to showcase local Indigenous heritage, much of which is held in foreign collections, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* exhibition became highly controversial over its patronage by Shell, an oil company exploiting non-ceded land of the Muskotew Sakahikan Enowuk / Lubicon Lake First Nation in northern Alberta in the midst of territorial disputes of Lubicon traditional lands. Massive boycotts of the exhibition, publicly supported by ICOM

not only brought international attention to the dispute, but were an important indication that relationships between Canada's First Peoples, museum professionals, and academics urgently needed to be re-assessed.

The outrage over the problematic funding of this exhibition was the catalyst to national discussions and the creation of a task force in 1988 that brought together First Nations leaders and museum professionals around the shared concern of how to remediate the interpretation, access, and repatriation policies of First Peoples' heritage in museum collections across Canada in an ethical way. The ensuing Report, released in 1992, identified a number of strategies to facilitate the involvement of First Peoples in the interpretation of their culture and history in cultural institutions that in many ways are still being negotiated today, almost 30 years later.

If Expo '67 was Canada's coming-of-age, the TRC was its wake up call. Today, museums across Canada are in the midst of transformation, and the remarkable resilience and activism of First Nations peoples have been central to changing museological narratives and display practices. Foregrounding aboriginal epistemology as well as traditional Indigenous knowledge and practices, museums in Canada are increasingly adapting narrative structures and creation myths respectful of Indigenous traditions, and paying attention to incorporating Indigenous languages and territorial maps within a purview that seeks to privilege once-silenced Indigenous voices and perspectives.



The politics of colonial policies and cultural genocide are now being incorporated into what American native scholar Amy Lonetree refers to ‘truth-telling’ in museological work, as are stories of survival, resistance, and resilience. Perhaps what is most exciting is how this revisionist approach is occurring across the museological spectrum, in national, provincial and local museums of all disciplinary orientations. Prominent examples include the new Canadian History Hall (whose 2017 inauguration coincided with Canada’s sesquicentennial) at the Canadian Museum of History, Vancouver’s Museum of Anthropology’s long-standing collaborative approach to working with Indigenous communities (note its open-storage, Multiversity galleries) and its acknowledgement in particular of the TRC Calls to Action in relation to museums and archives, the satirical critiques of colonial historiography such as artist Kent Monkman’s *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* exhibition (2019) at the McCord (history) Museum in Montreal, and the increasing prominence of Indigenous artists and scholars in mainstream museum collections and (though more slowly), in curatorial positions.

Digital platforms have also had an important impact on making Indigenous collections held in museums available to source communities. Two Canadian examples have been ground-breaking in this respect: the creation of GRASAC: the Great Lakes Research Alliance Aboriginal Arts and Cultures knowledge sharing system (<https://carleton.ca/grasac/>), in 2005, spearheaded by scholars at Carleton University, in Ottawa, and partnering with the afore-mentioned Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, the University of Toronto, the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation and Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. With its focus on Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Huron-Wendat cultures around the Great Lakes of Turtle Island (the name given by many First Nations people to refer to the North American continent), GRASAC defines itself as both a network of scholars and practitioners and an online database that virtually unites Great Lakes material heritage located in collections around the world.

Second, the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN, <https://www.rrncommunity.org>), a component of MOA’s Renewal Project (“A Partnership of Peoples”) at the University of British Columbia. Co-developed with Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lō Nation/Tribal Council, and the U’mista Cultural Society, the project is premised upon an interdisciplinary partnership that seeks to facilitate the sharing of, and access to, cultural objects from First Nations of British Columbia’s North-West Coast across a host of partner institutions, community members, and academic researchers in order to promote collaborative research on local cultural heritage.



III. The rise of human rights museology

Another significant aspect of contemporary museological practice relates to how museums are engaging with rights-related issues. If the rise of memorial museums addressing and redressing human rights violations and atrocities occurred as early as the late 1940s-1950s,⁴ the infusion of human rights and social justice discourses and pedagogies into museological programming more broadly has been a more recent development.

There are many roles that museums play in this regard, from preserving memories tied to difficult histories of human rights atrocities, to the evidentiary by uncovering hidden truths and reconstructing a just historical narrative by providing access to documentation, such as archives, for individual and collective truth-seeking measures, and providing a space for Survivors and their family members to express themselves in the public domain about their experiences. Other possibilities include facilitating networking for the empowerment of victims and activist communities, providing a platform for the voices for victims and families and their demands for reparation, and aiming to heal those affected by the violations and the legacies of colonization and imperialism.

Museums dedicated to pursuing historical and social justice mandates have evolved in geopolitical contexts around the globe. In the Americas, these range from dedicated human rights and memorial museums developed in post-dictatorship societies and transitional justice contexts to liberal democracies that perform different types of programming, and have assumed different forms of representation, in order to meet their distinct mandates. In Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights has developed a protean approach to human rights through the diversity of its galleries (recognizing human rights violations and championing human rights defenders and major advancements in the protection of fundamental rights). In Central and South America, several human rights museums have developed in the wake of authoritarian regimes, such as Chile's Museo de la memoria y los derechos humanos in Santiago (inaugurated in 2010 on the bicentenary of the country's independence), two human rights museums in the modest city

4. Some important examples include: the Memorial and Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland, founded in 1946; the Ghetto Fighters' Museum on the Kibbutz Lochamei Hageta'ot, in Israel, created by Survivors in 1949; and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, inaugurated in Japan in 1955.



of Asuncion, Paraguay, Museo de las memorias: Dictadura y derechos humanos (2002) and the Museo de la Justicia, Centro de documentacion y Archivo para la Defensa de los derechos humanos (2008), and the Museum of Memory, a national memorial and human rights museum still in planning in Bogotá, Colombia, following more than 60 years of armed conflict and conceived in the wake of the country's transitional justice processes.

These images of a temporary exhibition entitled *Voces para transformar a Colombia*, curated by the Museum of Memory, illustrate a number of experimental methods the Museum's staff incorporated into its vision of an initiative designed to elicit self-reflexivity within museum visitors and to question the very structures that enabled Colombia's prolonged armed conflict to dominate the state throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Shedding light on the complexities of this conflict, including its economic, environmental, military and sociological dimensions, as well as the roles of the myriad actors who perpetuated the conflict in one way or another (over land disputes, drug cartels, guerrilla and paramilitary warfare), were some of the goals of the exhibition, as were creating spaces for Colombians to come together to discuss their diverse experiences, memorial initiatives, and novel conceptions of rights (such as the rights of nature, conferred on the Atrato River by Colombia's Constitutional Court in 2016).

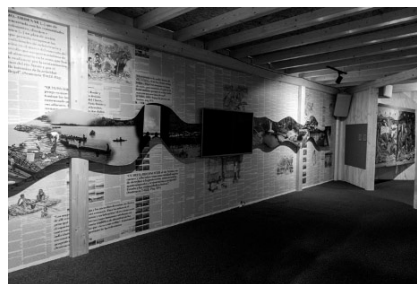
Post-script

ICOM has yet to determine how to adapt what will ultimately become its most updated museum definition to the realities of practice. Yet these realities have existed for several decades already and are vital to the relevance of museums in their respective communities as these navigate the complexities of the contemporary world. When the Standing Committee identified the need to focus not only on what binds us together as humans in our efforts to preserve natural and cultural

Figures 5 and 6: slides 44 and 52



Voces para transformar a Colombia, Museum of memory, Bogotá, Colombia
View of visitor interactions.



Voces para transformar a Colombia, Museum of memory, Bogotá, Colombia
Installation about the rights of nature
Atrato River, declared a subject of rights by the Constitutional Court in Colombia in 2016.
Collage of photos of the River, with the text of the Court's decision and a video documenting the river and its local residents.

heritage, but ‘to acknowledge and recognize with concern the legacies and continuous presence of deep societal inequalities and asymmetries of power and wealth – across the globe, as well as nationally, regionally and locally,’ it was, without a doubt, the most potent call to action this organization has issued in a very long time.

