Report on the 26th ICOM General Conference, Prague, 20-28\textsuperscript{th} August 2022

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Introduction

I give thanks to the Board of ICOM UK for the support towards my participation in the 26th ICOM General Conference in Prague. The grant covered the largest part of my costs for attending, with further funding from CIDOC – the ICOM International Committee for Documentation. This conference is my first since the pandemic.

I have worked for over 30 years in the sector have been a member of ICOM for about 20 years, with my international committee as CIDOC. The last six years I have been on its board, with my term coming to an end this year. I have attended most CIDOC conferences, held yearly, and the ICOM general conferences including the last in Kyoto.

Overview of activities

I attended both as a general delegate and as a member of the Board of CIDOC. This meant that in addition to general ICOM sessions, I took helped to organise, and took part in:

- Two sessions organised by CIDOC itself, one of which was an ‘off-site’ session.
- A session jointly organised with CIMCIM – International Committee for Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music.
- A session jointly organised with COMCOL - International Committee for Collecting.
- CIDOC board meeting, which included discussions on who to vote for a ICOM vice-president, Treasurer, and the Executive Committee.

I was also managing the voting procedures for CIDOC’s board elections which ended during the conference. CIDOC also distributed flyers describing its work, and gave targeted people tote bags with our major themes.

I engaged with some of the technically oriented exhibitors at the trade fair, asking how much they knew about museum standards and activities. There was an unexpected lack of knowledge.
During the conference ICOM-UK delegates used a WhatsApp group to communicate and organise events and get togethers. We were invited to a reception at the British Embassy, just below Prague Castle.

Finally there was the day of trips to organisations in other parts of the Czech Republic to enjoy more of what the country has to offer, and to learn about its heritage. I was with a group that spent ‘A day with Gregor Mendel’ the pioneer of genetics theory.

ICOM sessions and meetings

The opening session included all the usual thanks and an example of Czech intangible heritage – folk music and dancing:

Also on the first day there was an interesting keynote, by Margarita Reyes Suárez, and panel discussion on the theme of Purpose: Museums and Civil Society.

Margarita explored the situation and her work in Columbia. This especially looked at her development of participatory projects for museums and heritage sites. These were created with the active and guiding input from local peoples.

She gave warnings about allowing tourism to be the driver of cultural heritage
I participated in the collections section of the very crowded Mentoring session. Here the idea was for new professionals to ‘pick the brains’ of ‘experts’ of any topic. A couple of questions stuck out: “How do I work persuade senior management?” and “How do I work with a community that does not want to engage?” Answers were not straightforward, but persistence and flexibility were some of the suggestions made. I will be helping a new natural science curator, from Bangladesh, to find support, perhaps from the UK.

I attended keynotes, by Seb Chan on ‘Delivery: Museums and new technologies’. This was an overview of the, not so long ago, past, the present, and the ever-changing future of the use of IT in museums. This was informative and inspiring. Worth catching up online!

The final day of the conference featured:

- ICOM Extraordinary General Assembly – which discussed the proposed new museum definition (see below)
- 37th Ordinary ICOM General Assembly – which approved many ICOM reports, and announced the results of the elections for Vice-presidents, Treasurer, and members of the Executive Committee. For the role of ICOM President there was only one candidate, so they were elected unopposed.

I took part and voted, as part of the CIDOC delegation, in both of these.

**Museum definition – calm after the storm**

One of the major events during the conference was opportunity to hear about the new museum definition and vote on its adoption.

In Kyoto, three years ago, the proposed new museum was so controversial that it did not even get to the vote. Many national and international committees were opposed to it and to the process by which it was created. Splits were so severe that afterwards the President, members of the Executive Committee and members of the group which had worked on the definition either resigned or withdrew.

In response ICOM has spent about two years in creating new definition with major input from its members. Consultation has been comprehensive and was steered by two members of the ICOM Secretariat. The proposed new definition was:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and
communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."

During the conference, the background to the creation of the new definition was discussed and debated. The contrast between Prague and Kyoto could not have been greater! The process and those steering it were universally praised with no negative comments. Even the voting system was simpler.

The vote was over 90% in favour of the new definition. Cheers and applause broke out at the announcement!

**CIDOC organised and joint sessions**

CIDOC was expecting about 50 registered persons to attend its sessions. However we did allow any others to attend if space allowed, so in reality we had twice that number.

Three of the four sessions took place in the general conference venue, with last 'off-site' session was held at the National Gallery Prague, Convent of St Agnes of Bohemia.

Our first session was with CIMCIM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music). CIMCIM and CIDOC continued their collaboration to further discuss documenting musical collections, particularly from an inclusive documentation perspective. The session focused on the role of social context in defining documentation frameworks. How can documentation practices be inclusive of the rich cultural diversity represented in musical collections?

The session included a presentation of an online portal of musical instruments, and cases of Latin American music collections.

Speakers were from: Germany, India, the Netherlands, and the UK. Topics discussed were: sustainable documentation of historical museum exhibitions; interdisciplinary perspectives for research and transfer; re-imaging the documentation of musical instruments by using emerging technologies; and CIMCIM’s International Directory: History and future.

In the second session with COMCOL (International Committee for Collecting) and CIDOC carried on with conversations that we started in 2021 around rethinking museum practices: decolonizing collections. How to look at power structures that surround collections and collecting.

We looked to how to dismantle or shift these structures in an aim for a more just approach to heritage? Together with our members we would like to exchange experiences, best and worst cases and build on our capacity to change for a better future.

Speakers were from: Palestine, South Africa, Morocco, Denmark, and the Netherlands. They covered: approaches to bringing Palestinian collections back; a social semiotic approach to museum representation: analysing discourses in and around curated artefacts; an artistic and participative way of collecting to enhance citizenship; citizen science as a tool to understand collections; and re-searching the post/de/colonial in the State Collection of Architecture and Urban Planning.

CIDOC’s first solo session was on *Digital transformation needs strategy*. Museums need sound information management in order to best communicate their collections and themes and develop
digital applications to reach their audiences. CIDOC looked for best practice examples where standards are used in order to develop digital documentation and digital applications ideally based on an integrated system.

Presentations came from: the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, and Greece. They featured: transformation into digital documentation, digitization and communication of the collections; anticipating obsolescence; The European Science Cloud (EOSC); political context, historical continuity, conceptual grid; and data-driven strategies.

CIDOC’s off-site meeting had speakers from: Korea, the UK, Egypt, the USA, and France. Topics covered were information management of museum data based on utilization; big data - potential in museum data; illicit traffic in Egyptian antiquities; connecting to and using the Getty vocabularies; multilingualism in ICOM’s documentation and archives databases; EODEM - a loans data transfer standard; and auditing significant collections in the UK.

I gave this last presentation to give an international audience information about Collections Trust’s work for Towards a National Collection (TaNC) which reported on the state of UK digital collections.