

ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums

PREAMBLE

The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* is a cornerstone for ICOM. As stated in its Statutes, ICOM establishes ethical principles based on professional values widely recognized by the international museum community. Practices based upon equity, mutual respect, openness, integrity, responsibility, transparency, and accountability are essential to ensure that museums build trust and fulfill their purpose of serving society. Acknowledging museums' roots in colonial history and recognizing their need to contribute to a sustainable future is crucial. Museums must address these critical challenges and continue to uphold their shared values to sustain society's engagement.

This code sets forth five core principles that should guide everyone who works in and with museums. These include members of governing bodies, museum leadership, museum workers, and volunteers as well as consultants and freelancers. The principles articulate standards for professional practice and performance for museums worldwide. All ICOM members should strive to abide by this Code. All international, national, and local bodies, as well as specialized organizations connected with museums, should use this Code of Ethics as the basis for museum standards as well as for related, evaluative schemes.

Each of the five core principles of the ICOM Code is of equal importance to the creation and operation of sustainable and inclusive museums. They are not a set of absolute rules but instead a point of departure for careful thought, debate, and discussion. Decisions concerning ethical dilemmas are contextual, complex, and rarely clear-cut. Accompanying guidelines provide more detail and address issues for which practices are rapidly changing. For any questions or clarification of specific principles or their application to a specific case, ICOM's Standing Committee on Ethics (ETHCOM) should be consulted.

The ICOM Code of Ethics has a history of nearly 40 years, starting with the *ICOM Code of Professional Ethics* which was adopted by the 15th General Assembly of ICOM in Buenos Aires (Argentina) on 4 November 1986. The Code was amended by the 20th General Assembly in Barcelona (Spain) on 6 July 2001, retitled *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, and revised by the 21st General Assembly in Seoul (Republic of Korea) on 8 October 2004. The present version of the Code was adopted by ICOM at its 27th General Assembly in Dubai (United Arab Emirates) xx November 2025. It follows the adoption of a new museum definition at the 26th General Assembly in Prague (Czech Republic) on 24 August 2022. Published in the three official languages of ICOM – English, French, and Spanish - ICOM welcomes translations of the Code into other languages by ICOM’s Committees.

Professional codes of ethics do not have the force of law, but they are monitored and enforced by ICOM’s Standing Committee on Ethics (ETHCOM) and ICOM’s Executive Board. In the case of a breach of the Code of Ethics, ICOM’s Internal Rules outline procedures to be taken for suspension, termination, or expulsion of individuals, national and international committees, regional alliances, and affiliated organizations.

Museum Definition

“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.”

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Principle: Museums are socially responsible institutions. They work in close collaboration with diverse communities and care for their pasts, present, and futures. Museums serve society by enhancing community participation, being accessible and inclusive to all social groups, and fostering diversity and sustainability.

1. Museums should contribute to the strengthening and sustainability of all social groups.

Museums should safeguard and value tangible and intangible heritage for the long-term sustainability of every group and the benefit of society. They should support all social groups without distinction or hierarchy, respecting the diversity of traditions and cultures. They should contribute to the genuine needs of all social groups and strengthen community bonds and a sense of belonging whether at the local, regional, or global levels.

2. Museums should support the right and the agency of every individual and every community to participate in and contribute to cultural life.

Museum work should be informed by individuals and communities, respecting their agency and knowledge regarding their heritage and honoring their rights to preserve, interpret, and exhibit their heritage on their own terms. Collections belonging to communities should be valued and preserved in dialogue with such groups, and used to promote well-being, social justice, tolerance, and diversity of expression.

3. Museums should foster knowledge-sharing and mutual exchange.

Museums should operate in collaboration with professionals, scholars, students, and community members - including marginalized groups, diaspora groups, and Indigenous peoples - while acknowledging and respecting those from whom they have learned and compensating them properly.

4. Museums should guarantee accessibility to all and promote social inclusion.

As accessible and inclusive institutions, museums should make heritage and its related information available as freely as possible, eliminating barriers to access and promoting a safe environment for all people to express themselves while complying with needs for

confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and security. Museums' activities should address social exclusion proactively, thus combating any form of prejudice.

5. Museums should respect the cultural sensitivities reflected in heritage.

Museums should foster plural interpretations of heritage, honoring the diversity represented in heritage, through collections management, research, conservation, and display. Museums should follow the advice of the communities whose heritage they safeguard concerning the preservation, conservation, and display of collections. They should recognize the sacred significance and sensitivity of tangible and intangible heritage for the concerned groups.

6. Museums should carry out all work in a sustainable manner.

Museum work should ensure long-term social, environmental, and financial sustainability. This includes contributing to the well-being of all involved, especially the most vulnerable individuals and groups. In times of crisis, whether involving human conflict or environmental, health, or financial emergency, museums should direct their activities to support society, prioritizing their professionals, collaborators, and the local and vulnerable communities.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Principle: To sustain the trust of the public, museums operate and communicate ethically and according to professional standards. This entails responsibilities on the part of the museum, as well as on the part of individuals and groups that work in and with the museum.

1. Museums should operate based on a clear and openly communicated mission statement.

To ensure that the institution, its staff, and volunteers, work as together towards a common goal and so that communities and external partners know what to expect from the museum, a mission statement should be broadly announced and easily accessible. The mission statement should clearly articulate the institution's purpose, core values, and commitment to its audiences and communities, including its virtual and in-person visitors. It should serve as a guiding principle for all activities, ensuring they align with the museum's goals and objectives.

2. Museums should recruit staff and volunteers that safeguard the institution's need for professional knowledge and reflect the diversity of the communities they work with.

Museums should recruit staff and volunteers who collectively provide the competencies needed to fulfill the institution's mission, vision, goals, and objectives. This includes professional expertise in the museum's main areas of work, as well as the skills necessary to operate and communicate effectively with community participation.

3. Museums should follow equitable and inclusive practices.

Museums should strive to follow equitable and inclusive practices in all interactions with members of society, including all people working in or with the museum. Such practices enable individuals to succeed in their work, ensuring full participation in joint activities and fostering feelings of belonging.

4. Museums should develop and publish explicit expectations for all roles.

To realize the full potential of all people working in and with museums, and to ensure a positive and effective workflow, clear role descriptions should be developed and shared with everyone involved. These descriptions should outline areas of responsibility, the degree of decision-making authority, and expected outcomes. The collaboration between the governing body, leadership, staff, and volunteers should be based on mutual respect and the recognition of their different but complementary roles.

5. Museums should ensure that individuals working for and with the museum have the competencies necessary to fulfill the responsibilities of their positions.

It is the museum's responsibility to enable all people working in and for the institution to contribute to its goals and objectives in the most efficient and professional manner. This may entail providing training for staff, volunteers, and members of governing bodies.

6. Museums should care for the safety and well-being of all individuals working for and with the museum.

The museum should actively engage in ensuring the safety and well-being of its staff and volunteers. Working conditions should promote the physical and mental well-being of everyone involved with the museum. This includes preparing concrete actions that can be implemented promptly during times of emergency such as war, conflict, or natural disaster.

THE PEOPLE WHO WORK IN AND WITH MUSEUMS SHOULD:

1. Act professionally at all times, demonstrating courtesy, respect, and objectivity. They should avoid all forms of discrimination.

People who work in and with museums form working relationships with numerous individuals both within and outside the institution. They should provide their professional services efficiently and to a high standard, avoiding any form of discrimination.

2. Follow the policies and procedures of the museum.

Everyone working in or for museums should know and understand the museum's goals and objectives, core values, policies and procedures, conditions of employment, and ethical guidelines. Relevant regulations should always be followed. If irregularities occur or practices are perceived to be damaging to the museum, the profession, or professional ethics, processes should be in place to report these confidentially.

3. Consult colleagues, other experts, and community members outside the museum when the expertise available in the museum is insufficient to ensure good decision-making.

Museum professionals should acknowledge and endorse the need for cooperation and consultation between institutions with similar goals and practices. It is a professional responsibility to consult with colleagues within or outside the museum when the available expertise is insufficient to ensure good decision-making. Differing opinions should be properly expressed and considered before final decisions are made. Decision-making power should be clear and openly communicated. Final decisions should be respected, and their implementation supported by all.

4. Maintain the confidentiality of information about the security of the museum and any of its tangible or intangible content.

To ensure the safety of the institution, staff, volunteers, collaborators, and collections, confidential and personal information obtained during work must be protected. This includes information regarding the security of the museum and its collections, financial matters, donor and data confidentiality if required, and sensitive heritage shared in confidence, as well as digital and digitized information, objects, and materials. Information about items brought to the museum for identification is confidential and should not be published or passed to any other institution or person without specific authorization from the owner. Knowledge holders should be acknowledged, and their intellectual property or copyright ensured.

5. Disclose any conflict of interest or apparent conflict of interest and refrain from engaging in any activities that might compromise professional responsibilities or the reputation of the museum.

To justify and maintain public trust, all individuals working in and with museums should understand the role a museum plays in and for society. They should recognize that no private business or professional interest can be wholly separated from their employing institution. Paid employment or accepting outside commissions that conflict, or may be perceived as conflicting, with the interests of the museum should be avoided.

Gifts, favors, loans, or other personal benefits offered to them in connection with their duties for the museum should not be accepted. The occasional giving and receiving of gifts should always be made or accepted in the name of the institution concerned.

EDUCATION, PROGRAMS, AND EXHIBITIONS

Principle: Museums promote knowledge-sharing through their activities and practices. As inclusive institutions, museums foster diversity by working together with their communities, strengthening social awareness.

1. Museums should reach out to diverse audiences, conducting all activities in accordance with their mission.

Museums should conduct, perform, or present all activities, including educational programs, publications, and temporary and long-term exhibitions, whether physical or virtual, in accordance with their mission. They should operate and communicate to diverse audiences ensuring that the information they present is well founded, accurate and gives appropriate consideration to the represented groups, their interests and beliefs.

2. Museums should preserve the integrity of the information presented.

Museums should be responsible for the accuracy, credibility, and reliability of the information provided in all their activities, programs, publications, and exhibitions. This information should be ~~duly~~ documented and verifiable and should respect the beliefs and sensibilities of the communities they represent, to guarantee the integrity of the institutions' work.

3. Museums should collaborate and develop enduring partnerships with communities.

Museums should collaborate with groups whose tangible and intangible heritage they present, building relationships of trust and respect and creating opportunities for source communities and marginalized groups to tell their stories in their own ways. Developing such active partnerships should promote an understanding of diverse perspectives. By fostering a favorable environment for community participation and through the exchange of knowledge, museums should enhance the documentation of heritage in their exhibitions, programs, and publications.

4. Museums should recognize and be sensitive to diverse beliefs.

Museums should recognize the richness of heritage and be sensitive to the diverse beliefs and values of communities, becoming safe spaces where everyone feels welcome and respected. Museums should respect cultural diversity and should avoid

imposing beliefs when presenting their activities and exhibitions, thereby creating platforms for dialogue and intercultural understanding and encouraging the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

5. Museums should respect all sensitive materials and strive to handle and display them appropriately.

Museums should consult with communities that have a legitimate interest in sensitive materials (including ancestral remains and anatomical collections, materials of sacred and cultural significance, and intangible cultural knowledge), to determine the most appropriate way to handle, store, and use them with care and respect for their meaning and cultural context. If requested by legitimately concerned communities, museums should limit access to sensitive materials, demonstrating their commitment to social justice, cultural diversity, and respecting diverse heritage. Requests by legitimately concerned individuals or groups for the removal of sensitive material from public display should be addressed promptly and with respect.

6. Museums should promote reflection and knowledge sharing.

Through all their activities, museums should promote reflection and the exchange of knowledge. Recognizing that the breadth of heritage encompasses not only objects and collections but also ideas, knowledge, and perspectives, museums should encourage critical thinking and continuous learning, offer opportunities for reflection, and serve as platforms for dialogue and debate. Fostering mutual understanding and respect for different perspectives, they should inspire creativity and innovation. Publications should follow accessible editorial policies and be based on original and rigorous research.

COLLECTIONS AND RESEARCH

Principle: Museums safeguard and display tangible and intangible heritage. They ensure the security, restoration, and conservation of the collections they hold. Museums conduct research and transmit knowledge respecting the perspectives of the concerned social groups.

1. Museums should be responsible stewards of the heritage in their safekeeping.

Museums should provide for the physical maintenance, preservation, and conservation of the tangible and intangible heritage in their care. They should follow professional standards for the storage and display of their collections and ensure that collections from community members, Indigenous peoples, and marginalized groups are treated with respect and the permission and perspective of the related communities.

Museum records should include basic information about the objects in the museums' care as well as associated knowledge gained in collaborating with related groups. Except for confidential or sensitive information, these records should be made accessible to the public.

2. Museums should create and maintain a collections policy.

To fulfill their duty of care for the tangible and intangible heritage in their collections, museums should create and maintain a collections policy that ensures the appropriate procedures for maintenance, preservation, and conservation.

The policy should specify the conditions and standards for acquisition, procedures for accessioning and deaccessioning, and guidelines for the security, protection, storage, conservation, preservation, and use of the collections. The policy should be approved and regularly reviewed by the governing body of the museum.

3. Museums should store and display sensitive material with care and respect.

Museums should establish policies concerning the storage, maintenance, and display of sensitive materials, including materials with sacred significance, ancestral remains, and anatomical collections. Collections originating from defined social groups should be preserved with the consent of such groups and in dialogue with them, respecting their beliefs and knowledge and involving them in decisions about appropriate storage and display whenever possible.

Museums should acknowledge the special nature of ancestral remains and anatomical collections, requiring free, prior, and informed consent for the use of collections in research or exhibition. Consultation with ancestral or descendant communities should determine their appropriate handling and display, and requests for return or removal from display should be treated promptly and with respect for the nature of the collections.

4. Museums should follow professional accessioning procedures.

Museums should follow professional procedures for the acquisition of tangible and intangible heritage. They should carry out due diligence and provenance research, requiring thorough documentation before deciding to acquire this heritage for their collections. Museums in former colonial powers should be particularly proactive in undertaking provenance research, generating information about their collections, and making them available to Indigenous peoples and other groups vulnerable to the effects of colonization. Museums should be in continuous dialogue with these groups to enhance the interpretation of collections.

5. Museums should provide access to collections for research, study, exhibitions, and educational programs.

Museums should provide access to collections for research, study, scientific and educational programs, and physical or virtual exhibitions. They should establish levels of access to respect the confidentiality of data.

6. Museums should carry out research to further understanding.

Museums should encourage research to advance the understanding of the tangible and intangible heritage in their care. They should collaborate with the groups whose heritage is represented in their collections to enhance the museums' understanding of the role and significance of this heritage.

7. Museums should develop procedures for responsible deaccessioning and disposal including the return and restitution of cultural objects.

Museums should develop a comprehensive deaccessioning policy that addresses the deaccessioning process and requirements for the disposition of deaccessioned objects; prompt and respectful responses to requests for repatriation and restitution; and the return of illicitly acquired material.

Museum collections are held in trust for the public and should not be treated as realizable assets. Money realized from the sale of deaccessioned objects should be

used solely for the benefit of the collection and usually for acquisitions to that same collection.

8. Museums should fight illicit trafficking of natural or cultural heritage.

Museums should participate in the fight against the illicit traffic of tangible and intangible heritage in all of its forms. Museums should keep an appropriate inventory of their collections to facilitate the dissemination of information in case of armed conflict, natural disaster, or theft. Museums should abstain from purchasing or acquiring cultural objects from an occupied territory and respect fully all laws and conventions that regulate the import, export, and transfer of cultural or natural materials.

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Principle: Governing bodies and those concerned with the strategic direction and oversight of the museum are responsible for enabling the museums to fulfill their professional duties in a sustainable manner. They do so by securing the human, physical, and financial resources necessary to sustain the museum and serve communities in perpetuity.

1. The governing bodies of museums should maintain publicly accessible mission statements and policies as well as evidence of their legal status and not-for-profit nature.

To sustain the trust of their stakeholders, including visitors, collaborators, sponsors, donors, government agencies, and the communities they serve, the institutional statements of museums should be in accordance with the law and international treaty obligations, demonstrating transparency and accountability.

2. Governing bodies should safeguard museums' professional integrity and institutional autonomy.

Museums should be safe spaces for intercultural dialogue and learning. Regardless of their funding source or governance model, museums should have the freedom and authority to oversee the content and integrity of their programs, exhibitions, and educational activities.

3. Governing bodies should secure the resources necessary for sustainable institutions.

The governing bodies of museums should ensure the availability of necessary human, physical, and financial resources to operate effectively and sustainably, enabling the museum to achieve its strategic goals and mission. They are responsible for expanding networks, including partnering with source communities and indigenous and marginalized groups, recognizing that this can provide valuable resources for professional development.

4. Governing bodies should ensure that the board members and director have the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill their roles.

Governing bodies should understand the specific qualifications and expertise required for museum leadership roles. They should identify and select candidates for Directors and Heads who are qualified to address the field-specific challenges of the museum to fulfill the mission.

5. Governing bodies should establish clear written policies for institutional integrity, sources of income, and emergency response.

Governing bodies should have an understanding of the museum's mission, main activities, core values, and ethical considerations in order to develop written policies that are essential tools for the museum's governance. These policies should provide a clear framework to guide decision-making and safeguard the museum's future. They include:

- Policies that ensure that all staff members and volunteers understand their roles, responsibilities, and ethical standards, to maintain professional integrity and consistency in museum operations.
- Policies that define clearly the sources of income the museum accepts to ensure financial sustainability.
- An emergency response plan that enables the museum to mobilize effectively in the face of crises, such as natural disasters, violent conflicts, war, theft, or other unforeseen events, thereby protecting the institution's resources and the safety of visitors.

6. The members of governing bodies should reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

The members of the governing bodies build partnerships and collaborations that reflect the diversity of museums' communities, enabling them to fulfill their missions. They should actively engage the communities and stakeholders in decision-making

processes, fostering collaboration to integrate a broad range of skills, knowledge, and expertise advancing the museum's mission.

7. Governing bodies should engage in effective and open communication within the institution and with external stakeholders, promoting transparency while respecting confidentiality and privacy where appropriate.

Effective and open communication from the governing body and appointed leaders should foster a collaborative and inclusive work environment. Ethical communication involves accurately representing the museum's activities, decisions, and financial status. The governing body should balance the need for transparency while also protecting confidential information, such as donor data, to sustain trust with stakeholders.

8. Governing bodies and the museums' leaders should ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the institution and its stakeholders.

To promote co-creation, shared authority, and transparency, the governing body and museum leadership should actively engage stakeholders and communities in decision-making processes when they are concerned. To maintain integrity and avoid conflicts of interest, they must not accept gifts, favors, hospitality, or any form of reward from dealers, auctioneers, or other individuals that could influence their decision-making regarding the purchase or disposal of museum items.

APPENDIX I. INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS

GLOSSARY