Ethical Standards in Museums

A variety of national and international ethical guidelines set the foundations for professional standards for museums and their staff. In today’s ever-evolving and complex world, museums must promote cultural diversity and respect for different ways of interpreting nature and human history. In addition, museums have a responsibility to collaborate with the communities from which their collections originate, as well as the public they serve. This includes issues concerning the provenance of objects, acquisition principles and processes, and the historical origins of collections. Evolving ethical standards also frame and encourage the processes through which museums engage in constructive debates and source-community consultations concerning collection care, interpretation and claims for the return and restitution of collection pieces.

Background Note¹

The UNESCO 2015 Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society² encourages Member States to promote the adoption and dissemination of codes of ethics and good practice guidelines, and to use them to inform the development of standards, museum policies and national legislation.

Museum Ethics and Leadership

A code of ethics is an essential tool for guiding museums and their personnel in their work and conduct, irrespective of position, age or nature of responsibility, inside or outside the museum. However, ethics involves not only a commitment to good conduct itself, but also an accompanying recognition that good conduct is learned, not naturally acquired. Museum ethics must continue to evolve if the public’s trust in museums’ management of collections, related knowledge and resources, and representations of history and heritage is to be maintained. Museum professionals must promise to protect and care for collections according to the high ideals of responsibility, integrity and service to society.

The employment of qualified personnel with the required expertise, as stated in Paragraph 27 of the Recommendation, should be also understood to include the selection of staff that is conscious of ethical standards, as leadership in museum ethics is strengthened through acquired knowledge and capabilities. This acquired knowledge helps to unravel complex issues and inform decisions. In advancing these processes of judgment, leadership requires a demonstration of good faith in standards and ideals, even when it is difficult to find the best

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² Paragraph 26.
solution between competing forces or principles. Museum ethics should not only be taught as a regular component of museum studies and museology courses in academia, but should also be pursued in informal settings, enabling an exploration of the ethical questions that lurk in the most ordinary and informal of daily museum activities.³

**Historical Overviews of Debates on Museum Ethics since 1980**

Since the 1980s, the importance of ethical questions has steadily increased for museums and the heritage sector as a whole, part of a larger concern over issues of cultural diversity. Post-colonial critiques required museums to rethink issues concerning the representation of knowledge and history – especially the representation of diverse social constituencies and cultural minorities whose agency in interpreting their own heritage had long been ignored. ICOM’s Code of Ethics, first adopted in 1986, serves as the common standard for ethics codes globally.⁴

Important global shifts in consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s steadily influenced museum ethics, opening up differentiated concepts of communities and the social obligations of museums “in the service of society and its development” (as embraced in the “Museum” definition of ICOM since 1974). These shifts can be seen in the evolution from the 1960 Recommendation concerning the Most Effective Means of Rendering Museums Accessible to Everyone (a welcome development in the field at the time) to the 2015 Recommendation, which has greatly expanded on its predecessors’ initial vision.

The notion of culture has also evolved as continual processes of cross-cultural interaction, mobility, reformation, adaptation, fusion and renewal. *Our Creative Diversity*, published by UNESCO in 1995, asserted that “cultures overlap”; “cultures usually do not speak with one voice”; and “cultures do not form homogeneous units.”⁵ In the same period, indigenous communities, dispossessed by colonialism, were making new demands upon the museum profession, with repatriation and restitution claims becoming stronger. Museums in Australia launched their own initiatives to repatriate human/ancestral remains and secret-sacred items in the 1980s and adopted a national policy in 1993, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*,⁶ while similar changes were afoot in the United States, Canada and New Zealand.

Since 2001, ICOM has recognized non-collecting institutions (such as art galleries which show contemporary art but do not collect themselves), community-based cultural centres and “keeping places” (for example, in aboriginal, native, or indigenous communities) as equivalent to a museum in terms of the trust placed in them and the responsibilities they bear. Museums have shifted from an emphasis on exclusivity of ownership and begun to act in ever more diverse ways according to values of shared custodianship and stewardship of heritage. In so doing, many museums have found themselves to be partners with source communities. In 2004, ICOM revised the Code of Ethics and acknowledged source communities,⁷ specifying ethical requirements as to how their cultural heritage is to be cared for, interpreted and presented.

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⁴ Ethics codes and guidelines are older at the national than international levels – for example, those developed through the national museum associations of the UK (f.1889) and USA (f.1906). The earliest ethical standards code at the national level in the US (Code of Ethics for Museum Workers) was adopted by the American Association of Museums in 1925.


⁶ Previous Possessions: New Obligations, the founding Indigenous Policy adopted by Australian museums collectively in 1993, has been succeeded by the revised policy, Continuing Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities: Principles and Guidelines for Australian museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, as adopted by Museums Australia in 2005. Available online: <http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/userfiles/file/Policies/ccor_final_feb_05.pdf.

⁷ ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums. See concerning ‘source communities’ or ‘communities of origin’ Articles 4.3, 4.4, p. 8; & Article 6.7, available online at <http://icom.museum/ethics.html>
Furthermore, the gradual restoration of indigenous peoples' intellectual authority, voices and judgment concerning the knowledge that needs to be transmitted (and in some cases withheld) when organising displays and exhibitions of their heritage required fundamentally altered museum practices. This growing awareness also led to the forging of important new ethical relationships with "communities of origin" that acknowledged centres of expertise beyond the boundaries of museums. This has been strongly emphasized by Richard West, Founding Director of the National Museum of the American Indian (USA). The 2015 Recommendation, in Paragraph 18, also encourages Member States to engage in dialogue and build constructive relationships with museums and indigenous communities.

Ethical standards in museum’s work refer also to cultural rights, as they are clearly restricted if major items or parts of the living cultural heritage of peoples have been removed or appropriated (for example, under colonialism) or are subject to continuing illicit trafficking or looting from their source countries. When museums acquire cultural material (especially antiquities) without provenance, they support a situation of abuse of archaeology and cultural heritage, encouraging looting, forgery, illicit trafficking and the destruction of irretrievable knowledge and resources. Ensuring cultural access to all is essential for museums to fulfil their social role, as stated in the 2015 Recommendation.

Provenance Research: The New Front of Knowledge Generation in Museums

Provenance research is one of the most important and progressive areas of museum work today. It is not only important from an ethical perspective, but also for understanding the new issues and expanding fields of knowledge stimulated by intensified research into the complex histories of the life of objects, to whom or where they have "belonged" and where they might ultimately belong today. Possibilities for mutually beneficial relationships in heritage care and collection development are growing, as museums forge new partnerships and exchanges through provenance research, a fact acknowledged by Markus Hilgert, Director of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Germany.

The potential to build links between previous silos of expertise through digital research and access highlights how museums are becoming both mediators and "(re)mediators" as they reinterpret their own histories, calling attention to the complex circumstances that forged both the museum itself and its collections. The importance of museums as research institutions is further emphasised under Paragraph 9 of the 2015 Recommendation, which not only identifies research as one of the primary functions of museums, but encouraged collaboration with others “to provide opportunities to reflect on history […] as well as for the interpretation, representation and presentation of collections.”

8 "Repatriation … affirms the proposition that cultural authority, as a matter of the museum’s social responsibility, may sometimes sit outside that institution, and in the hands of others not members of the priesthood in the temple on the hill.” See R. West, ‘Native America in the Twenty-first Century’, in Bernice L. Murphy (ed.), Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage. London and New York: Routledge, 201, Chapter 26 p.287.
9 Art 17.
10 "We can currently observe that objects are increasingly becoming the subject of practices and discourses that are located outside of academia and research, and by now have attracted a remarkable interest, a 'new sensitivity' within the sphere of society, politics, or culture” M. Hilgert: "Definitely stolen?": Why there is no alternative to provenance research in archaeological museums’, in Bernice L. Murphy (ed.), Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage. London and New York: Routledge, 2016, Chapter 20, p. 213.
12 Paragraph 9.
Ethics and Law – Comparing, Contrasting and New Developments

Museum ethics become more challenging when decisions arise that require discrimination between two or more equally good principles, such as issues concerning deaccessioning objects from a collection. The general presumption of permanence (or “inalienability”) of public collections has traditionally required a cautious approach to any proposal for the deaccessioning or disposal of objects from museum collections. In many countries this is precluded by law. The ICOM Code of Ethics calls for "conversations" between parties when substantial claims are made to material in museum collections, or disputes exists as to a collection’s proper interpretation, retention, or use. Conversations are vital for ethical conduct, for they reinforce scrupulous practice, nurture good decision-making and uphold public trust in museums.

It is important to recognise that law generally lags behind ethics in enumerating the evolving, self-regulating standards of museums. Ethics extends beyond the quantitative limits of the law by enlarging its qualitative scope and reach within the broader spheres of social conduct, promoting wide-ranging standards of respect for diversity and mutual care of heritage. For example, the inalienable status of collections, whether by tradition or law was challenged by revisions to the ICOM Code of Ethics in 2004, which states that museums have an ethical obligation to consider, in a forthright and transparent manner, any credible claims from communities of origin (where these can be identified). Paragraph 18 of the 2015 Recommendation also encourages Museums to engage in dialogue concerning indigenous communities and the restitution of cultural property, where appropriate. Meanwhile some long-held legal positions concerning public collections in various countries have changed through new decisions in recent years. For example, the Human Tissue Act of 2004 in the United Kingdom has enabled several repatriations of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains in recent years. Similarly, in France there was the case of the return to New Zealand in January 2012 – after a legal change in 2010 – of 20 mummified heads (or Toi moko) from Maori warriors killed in battle in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Ethical Connections between Cultural and Natural Heritage in Museums

Recognizing our responsibilities to the environmental systems and natural heritage that have sustained human development is a key challenge for museums today. ICOM has produced a specialized code of ethics for natural history museums, a process which was led by Eric Dorfman, who explained that the many differences between natural history museums and other heritage institutions were the catalyst for creating a specialized document addressing issues in this sector. Meanwhile the signs of threatened biodiversity are now so apparent that intensified action is required by a broad spectrum of institutions involved in public education.

Michel Van-Praët makes a strong plea for new interdisciplinary research to re-examine the intimate connections between human and natural heritage that became separated through specializations in museums. He argues that a greater sharing of available information between museums is needed to address urgent issues of interpretation and access to scientific

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Cooperation between cultural and scientific institutions and museums is also encouraged by the UNESCO 2015 Recommendation.  

Evolving Codes of Ethics

A code of ethics within a museum provides a framework through which evolving social needs and progressive changes in museum work can be regularly considered, a framework which can be modified or updated as new issues arise that affect accepted ethical standards and good practices. The American Alliance of Museums’ Code of Ethics emphasizes that while museums are becoming more complex, the public value of museums is still based on their code of ethics. Both AAM in the United States of America and the Museums Association (MA) in the United Kingdom have progressively revised their codes of ethics and professional practice over many years, and their current standards are always readily available on their organizational websites.

Although the ICOM Code is one of the most well-known and referenced codes on museum ethics, distributed through its 114 national and 30 International Committees, along with 5 Regional Alliances, many other museum associations have created their own codes, which are sometimes adapted to strengthen particular values. For example, the Pacific Island Museums Association (PIMA) has developed a specialized Code for Pacific Island Museums and cultural centres, highlighting issues of cultural diversity that are especially important to Pacific Island societies and their indigenous communities.

Conclusion

For museums to fulfil their social role and their fundamental functions as recognised by the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation, ethical standards are essential. As suggested by the Recommendation, the adoption and dissemination of a code of ethics should be promoted by Member States for their museums. Codes of ethics need to be readily-accessible to decision-makers, in the consciousness of curators and volunteers, known and referenced by museum educators and conservators, and energetically publicised to stakeholders, politicians and community representatives. These codes should be elaborated in accordance with the specific context of each museum, taking into account their actual work and social responsibilities. The implementation of a code represents a long-term process for museum-related stakeholders and should accommodate all aspects of their work, irrespective of age, title or background.

Debates should also be encouraged to ensure that the ethical standards of museums live up to the evolving social and cultural norms that surround them. As museums work for public good, codes of ethics should ensure that the trust and confidence of the public in their work is upheld. Codes of ethics should further reflect the ideals expressed in Paragraphs 16 and 17 of the UNESCO Recommendation, which encourages the social role of museums and calls on them to be agents of social cohesion, serving as places which are open to all.

Finally, codes of ethics can act as reference points, aiding museums in their work in collaboration with source communities and encouraging greater and sustained dialogue in

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17 Paragraph 31.
21 Paragraph 26.
interpretation, collection care and public programming, all the while strengthening public engagement and respecting cultural rights. Instruments such as the 2015 Recommendation and the ICOM Code of Ethics can act as the anchors for future ethics models world-wide.