
Meeting Reports

25th ICOM General Conference

International Conference Center, Kyoto, Japan, 1–7 September 2019

The 25th triennial General Conference of the International Council of Museums marked an historic moment for museums worldwide. Taking place in Kyoto, a capital of imperial Japan where ancient Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples are juxtaposed with neon lights and skyscrapers, the conference acknowledged its own duality—its 75 years of history and its projected impact on the future of museums—with an appropriate theme: it was styled as “Museums as Cultural Hubs: The Future of Tradition.” But while it sought to capture the excitement of a milestone anniversary year and channel enthusiasm for future objectives, it became bogged down in polarized debate over the proposed new definition of “museum.”

The museum definition dominated the conference. Among the 30+ international committees holding sessions across the week, discussion and debate of the proposed definition was either notably absent from session titles, as in the case of CIDOC (Comité International pour la Documentation), whose practical focus on documentation widely skirted the issue, or it was pervasive, as in ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology), a committee particularly suited to debate the theoretical and historical aspects of museology. Plenary sessions during the conference sought to direct focus to major international issues such as the presentation of “Asian Art Collections around the World,” “Curating Sustainable Futures,” and “Museums in Time of Disaster.” But even as the Amazon Rainforest was literally and poignantly aflame during a keynote presentation by Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, an undercurrent of concern over the upcoming vote on the definition pervaded the conference.

Conversations held over bento boxes and coffee offered nuanced perspectives and civil debate on the proffered definition and its possible implications for different countries. But to the average member/observer, the politics at the top of the organization were electric. One of the four plenaries offered, “The Museum Definition: The Backbone of ICOM,” was staged with six international participants of diverse backgrounds but of a single mind in favor the definition, each urging all to accept the definition. Most reminded attendees of the exceptionally open and participatory nature of the process, and yet timing barely allowed for conversation among panelists let alone for a single refutation by the incoming president of ICOFOM. Speaking on behalf of 28 national and international committees that were already prepared to vote against the definition, ICOFOM’s two-minute rebuttal urged patience and counseled postponement of the end-of-week vote to more broadly consider the potential global ramifications of such a change.

Even this brief statement was allowed negation by a member of ICOM-US, who invoked the words of African American civil rights activist Martin Luther King, suggesting that with



regard to social change “‘Wait,’ almost always meant ‘Never.’”¹ The unbalanced and propagandistic nature of the plenary seemed to irk many members, who privately voiced concerns over the general lack of time allotted for more balanced discussion of this important matter, not only at the conference itself but also in the brief six weeks since the definition had first been publicized to members. Roundtables on the topic followed the plenary, though at inconvenient times, increasing the frustration and polarization of members as the week progressed to the final single hour allotted to a floor debate and vote at an Extraordinary General Assembly (EGA) on the final day of the conference. Perhaps with previous iterations of the museum definition, an hour would have been reasonable, but the proposed definition had more than doubled in length and linked the legal requisite characteristics of museum to “human dignity,” “social justice,” and “democratization.” So fraught with difficulties was the proposed definition that it prompted the delegation from Israel to openly marvel during the EGA that this was “perhaps the first time Israel and Iran had agreed on something.”

The EGA lived up to its name. Far surpassing the scheduled hour, floor debate was still curtailed to two minutes for only a dozen or so large national and international committees that were the first to be recognized by the chair. As member nations advocated, speakers harnessed words like “decolonization” to suggest that some countries were trying to impose foreign values, while in response others suggested that reticence to change was tantamount to bigotry. The words and emotions were powerful reminders of the passion of museum practitioners and the important role of museums, but moreover the extraordinary diversity among the 46,000 members representing 138 countries and territories. What was most striking to this observer was that while this was only the third ICOM general conference held in Asia² and had attracted a great number of participants from the region, Asian voices were noticeably absent from the debate. Frustration mounted as the EGA entered its fourth hour and as parliamentary procedure was largely abandoned, further angering delegates and confusing the issue. Eventually, a postponement of the vote for the definition was overwhelmingly approved. The Executive Board and the Museum Definition, Prospects and Potential (MDPP) Committee is now charged with extending discussion and honing the definition of a space that is now as universal as it is diverse, distinct as it is common. And while the initial process and the resulting definition are hailed as more “open” and “inclusive” than ever, they have somehow left the community historically divided.

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■ NOTES

1. Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 16 April 1963. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_from_Birmingham_Jail.
2. The 20th General Conference was held in Seoul, South Korea, and the 22nd in Shanghai, China.



Interaction, Integration, and Flow

Researching the Museum in the Global Contemporary,
Shaanxi Normal University, Xian, 15–20 September 2019

China is the new frontier of the museum world. As has been observed in this journal (Campbell 2014), and in several recent publications (Lang and Reeve 2018), the growth of museums and heritage in the People's Republic of China is unprecedented: totalling 5,600 museums with a new institution opening every day. Although the speed of this development has meant a lag in associated academic research and professional training, it would appear that this situation is changing: Chinese academics and museum professionals are drawing what they want from Anglophone museology and are putting this alongside their own cultural history and traditions. The readiness to adopt, adapt, and innovate anew, but from within a Chinese framework, seems to be eminently pragmatic, judging from my observation of this conference. As Deng Xiao Ping once said in relation to his policy of communism with capitalist characteristics: "It doesn't matter whether the cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice" (Liao 2009).

Xian was a very suitable venue for the conference. The capital of several ancient dynasties including the Tang (618–907CE), when the Silk Road connected China to Central Asia and Europe, the city boasts many historic buildings and monuments, including the well-known terracotta warriors, as well as numerous museums, such as the Shaanxi History Museum and the Xian Museum. International delegates visited most of these sites and also traveled to Yan'an in northern Shaanxi province, where we were able to visit museums and heritage sites associated with the Chinese Revolution, which marked its 70th anniversary this year, including Mao Tse Tung's famous cave house. It was really interesting to see how these sites operated as attractions for domestic tourism and Communist Party cadres from around the country. A highlight for many of us was the new museum devoted to the "educated youth," documenting the lives of thousands of students who were sent to the countryside for several years from the late 1960s (including current President Xi Jinping), which had fascinating perspectives on their experiences of the Cultural Revolution from the inside.

The conference itself was co-hosted by the School of History and Civilization, Shaanxi Normal University, Xian, in partnership with the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom. The organizers were Jin Yang and Simon Knell, whose close working relationship exemplified the spirit of the conference, in which Chinese and foreign scholars, students, and professionals came together to share their research and also to talk about setting up a new research network. The University of Leicester was the obvious partner for a conference in China. The Department of Museum Studies at Leicester has for some time had a very strong cohort of Chinese master's and doctoral students from mainland China—with many of these alumni now working in Chinese museums and universities—as well as from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Malaysia. What was most impressive at this conference was the strong cohort of young Western-trained Chinese scholars who have absorbed the best of both East and West, who can move easily between English and Mandarin, and who are facilitating exchange and dialogue between China and the rest of the world.

The keynotes at the conference by Western speakers Simon Knell, Ross Parry, Andrea Witcomb, and Conal McCarthy were notable for the pedagogical approach they took, deconstructing and reflecting on the process of undertaking research on one particular project; for example, Knell talked about working on his recent book on national galleries, going from the initial idea right through to the completion of the volume. In a situation where language, culture, and edu-

cation are so different, I felt that this tactic worked effectively to open up the theory and methods through which museum studies is practiced in the Anglophone world. The Chinese keynotes, which were mostly by museum professionals, were very different in their approach, but were fascinating nonetheless, offering a rare glimpse across this huge country of what is happening in museums of different kinds. Only a handful of standout presentations can be mentioned here: Duan Yong from Shanghai University spoke about the recent ICOM conference and the controversy over the new definition of “museum” (see Hoffman, this volume); Pan Shouyong offered a global perspective on local museums; Zhang Jiawan discussed the use of AI technology in museum collections; Linda Kong, a Leicester graduate now at Fudan University in Shanghai, talked about her research on museums and cultural diplomacy; and Li Jugang, the director of the Hanyangling Museum, described the creation of trust boards in Chinese museums, a particularly interesting new experiment in governance.

Lastly, the conference convenor and organizer Jin Yang discussed the challenges in building what she called “research museums” in a global context. Professor Yang was a quiet but essential presence throughout, deftly bringing people together, making connections, translating for the visitors, and ensuring that the event ran smoothly. She is the ultimate cultural diplomat, moving between languages and worldviews with tact and grace while articulating strong though carefully worded critiques of museum practices at home and abroad. Research in/on/about museums was the subject of the second day of the conference, which was given over to a workshop that explored the idea of a multilingual, international research network in museum studies. Yang’s co-host Simon Knell, whose passport stamps testify to the fact that he has probably visited more museums and galleries worldwide than anyone I can think of, is interested in creating new forums like this in his ongoing quest to understand the “museum in the global contemporary” (Knell 2019). It is hoped that this *bo wu guan ciao* (“museum bridge”) will allow those on either side of the river (a cultural, geographic, and linguistic gap) to move across to the other side, connect, debate, and learn from one another. As Rewi Alley, a pioneering New Zealand worker, scholar, and friend of China famously put it, *gung ho/gong he!* (“work together/take action!”) (Ross 2017).

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'Amui 'i Mu'a: Ancient Futures Conference

Tanoa International Dateline Hotel, Tonga, 7–12 October 2019

The inaugural *'Amui 'i Mu'a: Ancient Futures* conference brought together artists, academics, and traditional knowledge-holders from Tonga, Aotearoa New Zealand, Germany, and the United Kingdom to consider how the future of Tongan arts can best be guided by knowledge of their past. It was anchored by *Ancient Futures: Late 18th- and Early 19th- Century Tongan Arts and Their Legacies*, a project funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Te Apārangi under a Marsden Grant and hosted by the University of Auckland (UoA). Project members—Dr. Phyllis Herda, Dr. Melenaite Taumoeofolau, Dr. Billie Lythberg (all UoA); artists Sopolomalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, and art historian Hilary Scothorn—and affiliates in Aotearoa, Tonga, and further afield are applying previous research experience and knowledge to artifacts in Tongan collections now dispersed throughout continental Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, and Australasia.

'Amui 'i Mu'a comprised a week of events supported variously by Creative New Zealand, the New Zealand High Commission in Tonga, the Tanoa Hotel, the *Ancient Futures* project, the Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation, and Ancient Tonga Nuku'alofa. It launched on Monday 7 October 2019 with an exhibition of works made by Tohi and Dyck inspired by their access to international museum collections, and it was officially opened and hosted by the New Zealand High Commissioner Tiffany Babington. Installed in the Me'a 'Ofa Gallery at the Tanoa, it was a concrete example of the commitment this hotel is making to the Tongan arts, which is further evidenced by large-scale murals and sculptures situated throughout the site.

On Tuesday, the conference's symposium days began. The *Ancient Futures* team gave keynote addresses describing the project, its aims, and its trajectory to date (Herda); museum collections and singularities from Tonga and how to access these (Lythberg); Queen Sālote's artistry (Taumoeofolau); and historically generated artistic innovations (Tohi and Dyck). German curator Frank Vorpahl followed with an introduction to the "Welterkunder" Georg Forster on Captain Cook's second voyage and his assemblage of Tongan "curiosities." As no Tongan artifacts can be identified in collections made prior to this voyage, this is considered the information horizon for the material culture of Tonga. The afternoon's presentations were given by Aotearoa-based Tongan artists T. K. Hards, Loa Toetu'u, Vea Mafile'ó, and Emily Mafile'ó, and a panel discussion followed that also included Tēvita Lātu and Alisi Tatafu.

A report by the news outlet *Matangi Tonga* following this day's sessions focused on the "many different ways of being Tongan" referred to by the artists and brought to the fore in particular by the Mafile'ó sisters (Matangi Tonga 2019). Vea, a filmmaker, and Emily, a photographer, both focus their creative and documentary lenses on the realities of their lives and the lives lived by their families and friends in Aotearoa and in Tonga. A recent product of their combined efforts is the personal and sensitive examination of their own family, *For My Father's Kingdom*, which has received critical acclaim since its debut at the 2019 Berlinale. During the *'Amui 'i Mu'a* week, the film had its official Tonga premiere at the Tanoa, which was attended by the Honorable Sālote Lupepau'u Salamasina Pureau Vahine Ari'i 'o e Hau Tuita; Alipate Tu'ivanuavou Vaea, Lord Vaea, Chairman of the Tonga Traditions Committee; New Zealand High Commissioner Tiffany Babington, and local officials and dignitaries. The film was also screened in village and school halls throughout the week, and Tohi and Dyck likewise toured villages with their works and presentations, manifesting the commitment at the heart of the *'Amui 'i Mu'a* program: to bring Tongan arts made or now cared for overseas back to Tonga. These events were reported by local television stations and other media.

The first keynote presenter on Wednesday is today widely acknowledged as a Tongan treasure: Lady Dowager Tuna Fielakepa. A stalwart of the Langa Fonua, which was first established by Queen Sālote to uplift Tongan women and their arts practices, Lady Tuna gave a heartfelt address about change and continuity in Tongan arts. Brigitte Mang, the artistic director of the Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation, followed by addressing the history of the Georg Forster collection in Wörlitz and the various visits made by the *Ancient Futures* team. The collections manager at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), Rachel Hand, focused her keynote on the MAA's collections and community collaborations, which have included the *Ancient Futures* team. A suite of wide-ranging short talks given by Terje Koloamatangi, Stan Wolfgramm, Janet Tupou, Tēvita Lātu, Tanya Edwards, Benjamin Work, and Tanielo Petelo posed questions about Tongan creativity, the recovery of knowledge from museum collections, and the wisdom of ancestors embodied in their descendants and held in sacred/*tapu* landscapes and seascapes. Some vital energy was brought to the stage by local hip-hop dancers the Onion Squad, who recently came second in the International Hip Hop Competition in Auckland with their distinctly Tongan dance repertoire. Wednesday's program concluded with a second exhibition opening at the Tanoa, *Art in the Dark*, which included works by many of the presenters, and the opening night of the Nuku'alofa film festival.

On Thursday, dance workshops were offered by Sefa Enari, and the film festival continued; on Friday, before the evening film premiere, Terje Koloamatangi began a two-day *tātatau talanoa*, marking skin with old and newly designed *kupesi* (designs) and operating an open-door policy for conference attendees to bring their questions about this revival of practice.

On Saturday, the Honorable Frederica Lupe'uluiva Fatafehi 'o Lapaha Tuita opened a new pavilion at *Ancient Tonga*, a Tongan cultural centre in Nuku'alofa, designed and built to house replica artifacts from the Georg Forster collection. During their first visit to Dessau, the *Ancient Futures* team had been impressed by replicas of Tongan war clubs (*'akau tā*), a food pounder (*tuki*), and a headrest (*kali*). Made in the 1980s, when the original artifacts were suffering from mildew, they had been intended for display in their stead. Robust, finely detailed, and able to be handled without gloves and without the risk of deterioration, the replicas immediately suggested an application in tropical Tonga, which currently does not have a state museum. Vorpahl and Mang spoke with warmth and generosity about their experiences in the "Friendly Islands" and about the connection now instantiated by the return of the replica artifacts—a first for Germany. The Honorable Frederica Lupe cut the ribbon to the pavilion and received a tour of its exhibits, which also include fine mats, *ngatu* barkcloths, and contemporary *mosi kaka* baskets woven by Lesieli Tupou.

New connections made and instantiated by this return, conversations woven around the week-long sharing of knowledge, and the building of new and strengthening existing relationships all culminated in a suggestion voiced independently by many participants and dignitaries, namely that the *'Amui 'i Mu'a* conference should become an annual event in Tonga.

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■ REFERENCE

Matangi Tonga. 2019. "Creative Sisters Explore Different Ways of 'Being Tongan.'" 8 October. <https://matangitonga.to/2019/10/08/creative-tongan>. (accessed 15 November 2019)