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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/2426>

DOI: 10.4000/iss.2426

ISSN: 2306-4161

Publisher

ICOM - International Council of Museums

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2020

Number of pages: 95-106

ISBN: 978-2-491997-27-4

ISSN: 2309-1290

Electronic reference

Alix Ferrer-Yulfo, "Intangible Cultural Heritage museums: Further considerations for a new museum definition", *ICOFOM Study Series* [Online], 48-2 | 2020, Online since 26 January 2021, connection on 06 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/2426> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.2426>

Intangible Cultural Heritage museums: Further considerations for a new museum definition

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ABSTRACT

As a new museum definition is being developed, it is time to reconsider the impact of UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* on the museum field. Museums focusing on specific intangible cultural elements, or Intangible Cultural Heritage museums, have been emerging to illustrate a range of approaches to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage from a museological perspective. This paper suggests the need to explore these experiences to gain a better understanding of how museums and their practices are being transformed, expanded and adapted in response to this element

of heritage. The Museo del Baile Flamenco is briefly presented as an example of an ICH museum that challenges us to think more broadly about the actors and methods involved in defining a museum, calling for a more open-minded approach for envisioning museums in the 21st century.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, safeguarding, ICH museums, museum practices, Museo del Baile Flamenco

RESUMEN

Museos de Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial: Consideraciones adicionales para una nueva definición de museo

Mientras una nueva definición de museo se encuentra en desarrollo, es hora de reconsiderar el impacto de la *Convención para la Salvaguardia del Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial de la UNESCO* en el campo museológico. Museos enfocados en elementos culturales inmateriales específicos, o museos de Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial, han ido surgiendo. Estos ilustran una variedad de estrategias para salvaguardar el patrimonio cultural inmaterial desde una perspectiva museológica. En esta ponencia se sugiere la necesidad de explorar estas experiencias para comprender mejor cómo los museos y sus prácticas se están transformando, expandiendo y adaptando en respuesta a elementos patrimoniales. El Museo del Baile Flamenco se presenta brevemente como un ejemplo de un museo de PCI que nos reta a pensar de manera más amplia sobre los actores y métodos involucrados en la definición de un museo, llamando a un enfoque más abierto para visualizar los museos en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: patrimonio cultural inmaterial, salvaguardia, Museos de PCI, prácticas museológicas, Museo del Baile Flamenco

Introduction

It has been 20 years since ICOFOM published its first issue considering the topic of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). With increasing attention given to ICH as the neglected side of cultural heritage in the international heritage discourse, *Museology and Intangible Heritage*¹ (Vieregg & Davis, Eds., 2000)

1. This was the title of ICOFOM Study Series #32, which was published in 2000, edited by Hildegard Vieregg and Ann Davis.

focused on exploring the interrelationships between museology and intangible heritage. Articles discussed several themes including the potential impact of ICH on the museological field; the roles and relationships of the museum concerning ICH; the possibilities and challenges of “musealizing” ICH; and the many interpretations of ICH in the museological context. This was followed by a second supplementary publication in 2004, after the adoption of UNESCO’s *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (ICHC) in 2003, which further considered how museums should approach this “new heritage paradigm” (Blake, 2017).

While several international meetings and documents have called for stronger engagement between museums and ICH,² it was not until recently that their relationship received international attention with the *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project* (IMP) (2017–2020).³ This was a multinational initiative seeking to understand the relationships between museums, ICH and ICH bearers, and their potential opportunities for enhancing museum practices in the European context. IMP added to research on museological responses to UNESCO’s ICHC by bringing further insights into the impact ICH has had on museum practice; key at a time when a new museum definition is being considered. It suggested that encounters between museums and ICH create a “third space”, where hybrid practices can emerge (Nikolić Đerić, 2020, p. 16).⁴

Nevertheless, many of the experiences examined in the project focused on how museological organizations were approaching and integrating ICH into their work, much like previous research (e.g. Stefano, 2010; Carvalho, 2011; Alivizatou, 2012). What about the experiences of museums intentionally created around an ICH element? What can they tell us about the musealization of ICH and ICH management within a museum setting? Can they be considered in this “third space”, where hybrid practices develop? Are they faced with similar challenges and opportunities to those of more conventional museums? What can they contribute to current debates regarding a new museum definition?

Earlier discussions regarding ICH and museums must be revisited. This is crucial for a continuous reflection on how ICH fits within museology. The influence of the ICHC is not limited to national heritage policies; it has also been felt in

2. For example, the *Charter for the Protection of Intangible Heritage* [Shanghai Charter] (ICOM-AS-PAC, 2002) called for museums to become facilitators in safeguarding ICH, while the 2004 *Seoul Declaration of ICOM on the Intangible Heritage* [Seoul Declaration] endorsed the ICHC, strengthening ICOM’s commitment to ICH safeguarding. However, it was the 2004 *Oestgest Declaration on the Roles of Museums in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Bouquet, 2004) that focused specifically on how museums could support the implementation of the ICHC and the challenges ICH could present to museum practice.

3. IMP was co-funded by the Creative Europe program of the European Union. The project was led in partnership by organizations in Belgium, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and France.

4. In defining the encounters of museums and ICH, the project adopted Homi K. Bhaba’s concept of a “third space” as one where alternative positions emerge and new authoritative structures can be set up.

the museum world globally. This paper suggests the need to consider museums focusing on particular ICH elements, or what can be termed ICH museums, when seeking to develop a museum definition and further understanding the opportunities and challenges museums can encounter when engaging with ICH. It briefly introduces the Museo del Baile Flamenco as an example of an ICH museum.⁵ Exploring these more-specialized museums will not only provide additional perspectives in broadening museum practices but also help in understanding operational and structural challenges for conceptualizing museums in the 21st century.

ICH Museums

ICH museums are museological organizations that have been purposefully created for the presentation, promotion and safeguarding of a particular ICH element as defined by the ICHC (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2020). Specifically, ICH museums focus on one or more of the domains through which ICH can be manifested:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- (e) traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2.2)

These subject-specific museums might differ from other museological models (e.g. community museums, ecomuseums) in that a particular ICH element is their main theme, the focus of museum work and what is to be expressed through the objects, activities and experiences (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2020). Additionally, while ICH museums can be managed and staffed by museum professionals, ICH practitioners are actively involved in the museum's work and, in some cases, its management although to varying degrees. Nevertheless, ICH practitioners retain control over the management and safeguarding of the ICH expression itself.

Blake (2015; 2018a; 2018b) found some examples of this type of museum while examining *Periodic Reports* submitted in compliance with the ICHC from 2011–2013. She describes the creation of ICH-related or ICH museums as a strategy for safeguarding ICH followed in some countries. For example, in Turkey, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Applied Museum in Ankara not only holds collections covering all domains of ICH but also allows their practice within the museum, while the Living Museum in the Beypazari Municipality seeks to revitalize and safeguard ICH elements through the active participation of ICH

5. For more information on the Museo del Baile Flamenco as an ICH museum see Ferrer-Yulfo, 2017 and 2018.

bearers in the museum exhibits. These museums present an all-encompassing view of the ICH of their local communities and promote its safeguarding by using participatory approaches in museum work. More specifically focused on an ICH element, the Lace-Making Museum in Croatia was developed as a specialist museum related to the tradition of lace and lacemaking in the town of Lepoglava and its surrounding areas, while in Peru, plans for the development of an on-site museum focused on the Huaconada Dance is underway. These two last ICH elements were inscribed in the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2009 and 2010, respectively.

As part of the IMP, a series of case studies were examined to discuss and learn about different approaches and practices focused on ICH in museums. These included museological organizations and their specific projects for the safeguarding of ICH, which involved expanding museum functions, integrating ICH into museum practice and working in collaboration with ICH practitioners in safeguarding processes. Two of these organizations can be considered ICH museums: the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette Antonio Pasqualino in Sicily and the National Fisheries Museum in Belgium (NAVIGO). Both museums cater to an ICH element inscribed in the *Representative List*: the Sicilian Puppet Theatre (2008) and the tradition of shrimp fishing on horseback (2013) respectively. These cases are briefly described in the Project's recent publication: *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector* (Nikolić Đerić et al., 2020).

NAVIGO reopened in 2008 with new buildings and exhibitions that brought together different aspects of shrimp fishing on horseback (Nikolić Đerić et al., 2020, pp. 42–43). However, it was not until the inscription of this ICH element in 2013 that the museum became more than just a facilitator, transforming itself into a community centre after establishing a safeguarding committee and working collaboratively with shrimp fishers and the Workshop Intangible Heritage Flanders. This serves as an example of the impact the ICH paradigm can have in the development of museums and their practices. In contrast, the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette has worked towards the preservation and promotion of the Sicilian Puppet Theatre since 1975. It combines traditional museum activities with creative and learning activities related to Sicilian puppetry (e.g. performances, workshops, festivals) in collaboration and partnership with puppeteers and other practitioners (Perricone, 2019). It was conceived for and with ICH bearers and supported the proclamation of the Sicilian Opera dei Pupi as a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* in 2001, which was later passed into the *Representative List* in 2008.

The Museo Internazionale delle Marionette is evidence that museums focusing on intangible cultural expressions existed even before ICH became standard nomenclature in the international heritage and museum framework. Other examples include the Museo de la Canción Yucateca in Mexico created in 1978, and the Museu do Fado in Lisbon created in 1998. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, similarly to NAVIGO, the ICHC and its *Operational Directives*

would influence the development of these museums in those cases where their subject was inscribed in the *Representative List* (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2020).

Currently, there are many more subject-specific museums that can be considered ICH museums. Some developed as the Operational Directives were being drafted, and others were conceived as a direct response to the call for museums to get involved (UNESCO, 2018). These include: the Museu Vivo do Fandango, Brazil, started in 2002 and included in UNESCO's *Register of Good Safeguarding Practices* in 2011; the Museo del Baile Flamenco, Seville (2006); the Museo del Danzante Xiqueño, Mexico (2015); and the Jamaica International Reggae Museum (under development). Not surprisingly, some of these focus on an ICH element inscribed on the *Representative List*.⁶

Based on observations from the submitted reports, Blake (2015, p. 33; 2018a, pp. 25–26), suggests that the establishment of these types of museums is an important safeguarding action since these can serve many purposes: from centres for interpretation, documentation and training to spaces for performances, craftwork and exhibitions. Previously, Alivizatou (2012, p. 191) had proposed that within UNESCO's ICH paradigm, the museum should be envisioned as “a cultural centre”: a space for sharing ideas, bringing people together and promoting intercultural dialogue rather than the one-dimensional dissemination of knowledge. If museums are to safeguard ICH they would require a transformation, not only of their institutional framework but also of their functions and their relationships with those they seek to serve (Alivizatou, 2012). This idea was further supported by IMP which saw the museum as a meeting place between ICH practitioners and museum professionals, “where ICH can be performed and transmitted, and where new links and relations can be created and reinvented” (Cominelli, 2020, p. 66).

Although there are a number of ICH museums, the information presented about some of these cases is limited and largely descriptive (e.g. *Periodic Reports*, IMP). While Pimentel, Pereira and Corrêa (2011) provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities of creating a museological project focused on an ICH element, their discussion is limited to a description of the development of the Museu Vivo do Fandango. Given the lack of research, the Museo del Baile Flamenco and the Museu do Fado were investigated from 2017–2018 to understand how ICH museums are organized, how they function and what lessons can be learned from them (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2020). In the following section, the Museo del Baile Flamenco is introduced to provide an idea of the importance of considering these types of museums.⁷

6. Flamenco was inscribed on the *Representative List* in 2010 and Reggae in 2018.

7. This theme is further explored through a more in-depth discussion of the Museo del Baile Flamenco and the Museu do Fado as ICH museums currently in preparation.

An example of an ICH Museum: the Museo del Baile Flamenco

The Museo del Baile Flamenco (MBF) is a private ICH museum focused on flamenco. It was created for the presentation, promotion and safeguarding of this performing arts expression, particularly its dance aspect. It was conceived as the personal project of Cristina Hoyos, a renowned flamenco dancer from Seville, who also serves as the museum's main financial supporter and artistic director. Hoyos' aim with the project was to dignify flamenco and safeguard it for future generations (Museo del Baile Flamenco, 2007). With the objectives of cultivating, preserving and disseminating flamenco the MBF's mission is:

“to enable people to understand and feel one of the main intangible cultural expressions of Andalusia through multimedia exhibitions about flamenco dance; exhibitions of objects related to flamenco; conferences, talks and presentations about the origins, structures, development and current manifestation of flamenco; and flamenco cultural events” (Museo del Baile Flamenco, 2013, p. 3).⁸

”

The museum is managed by members of Hoyos' family and staffed by a combination of cultural management professionals and flamenco ICH practitioners. Its main mode of exhibition and display is through audio-visual material with fewer material objects (e.g. dresses, shoes, memorabilia). This approach is based on the museum team's understanding of flamenco as an act of communication, a process that is transmitted and better appreciated in action, including recorded performances (Grötsch, 2006). Based on this conception, museum activities include organizing flamenco performances, providing flamenco lessons, and coordinating workshops and events that promote flamenco as the livelihood of many.

It has been argued that the museum developed a strategic museographic design for simultaneously making flamenco a museum experience (i.e. “musealizing”⁹ flamenco) and safeguarding it as an ICH expression within the performing arts (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2017). This museographic design comprises several components: a school, a performance space and a multipurpose space that works as a learning lab and temporary art gallery in addition to its permanent exhibition, which is a space with digital displays called the Interactive Museum. It

8. Author's translation.

9. As explained by Desvallées and Mairesse (2010), the term “musealization” is seldom used in English-language scholarly work and is interpreted differently depending on language and context. In the case of ICH museums, musealization involves a complex process of adapting the museum and its functions by considering the nature and characteristics of intangible cultural elements in its development.

was developed in consultation between architects, museum professionals and flamenco practitioners, including Hoyos. This design not only achieves the museum's purpose of musealizing and safeguarding flamenco but also allows ICH practitioners (i.e. flamenco dancers, singers, musicians) to actively work in the museum as teachers, performers and workshop leads.

Figure 1

The MBF's components and the different safeguarding actions these enable corresponding to the MBF's objectives (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2020).

As described in Figure 1, different museum functions and safeguarding actions can be achieved through the MBF's museographic design. The Interactive Museum focuses on raising awareness of flamenco history and practices through digital and interactive displays. The performing arts stage is a space where ICH practitioners can communicate, disseminate and revitalize flamenco practices through performance to visitors interested in appreciating this ICH expression. The Flamenco School allows the intergenerational transmission of flamenco knowledge and practices, while the multifunctional space – where temporary exhibitions and workshops take place – enables the exploration of flamenco through other creative practices and practice-based research. This illustrates how museum functions can be expanded to include ICH safeguarding actions in museums specifically focused on ICH elements. It also demonstrates the opportunities brought by the convergence of different fields such as digital media technologies, creative industries, museology and cultural tourism. In this case, it is an experience where an ICH element like flamenco can be appreciated in the museum, while also being safeguarded.

As suggested by Cominelli (2020, p. 66) the combination of different social, economic and cultural domains can produce innovative and creative results for connecting ICH and museums. This is clearly illustrated by the MBF. As an ICH museum, the MBF gives us one perspective on how hybrid museum practices can be developed by approaching ICH. It also helps us visualize how the previously-mentioned “third space” (Nikolić Đerić et al., 2020) can take form. In this sense, the MBF serves as an example that broadens the conceptions and perceptions of museums; their structures, functions, spaces and actors.

However, there is one factor that can be considered to disqualify the MBF as a museum based on the current definition. Museums are “non-profit” and, considering its private character, the MBF is not. As Hoyos’ project, the MBF was created under her name as the sole proprietor. Even though the museum’s earnings go towards paying collaborating ICH practitioners, utility, maintenance and programming expenses and repaying loans taken for its creation, its institutional nature as a private enterprise disqualifies it from being considered a museum under ICOM’s conditions. Indeed, some critics of Hoyos see the MBF as a private project seeking to compete with other more commercial flamenco performance venues, notwithstanding its mission of safeguarding flamenco dance as ICH and its role in supporting the livelihoods of flamenco practitioners: an example of the complexities of safeguarding ICH on the ground. In this sense, the potential difficulties ICH practitioners might face in their attempts to establish large scale and more concrete safeguarding projects, like a museum, and the kind of support they should receive from the museum field require reflection.

Overall, this brief overview of an ICH museum shows how the museum can be interpreted and adapted by ICH practitioners to fit their purposes. In this case, it is an ICH practitioner, along with other practitioners and cultural management professionals who decide how best to musealize an ICH element like flamenco and how to adapt museum functions to work for its promotion and safeguarding. In their view, including a school and a performing art space is seen as crucial for achieving their objectives and the use of digital media technologies to present and exhibit flamenco is considered a suitable approach for communicating this ICH element as a museological subject. How these approaches to the musealization and safeguarding of ICH differ among other ICH museums will bring further insights into the transformative effects of the ICH paradigm on the museum field.

Conclusion

ICH museums will continue to emerge as the impact of the ICHC expands throughout the world. Therefore, it is important to continue exploring the effects of the ICH paradigm on the development of the museum field and consequently on a re-evaluated definition of museums. As an example of an ICH museum, the experience of the MBF contributes to the current debates regarding the new museum definition by illustrating the intersections between

the museum field and the management and practices of ICH. Museum functions might be reframed and/or expanded, while museum structures might take several forms combining elements from other cultural sectors. Additionally, careful consideration must be given when museological projects are carried out by ICH practitioners since an official museum definition might pose a challenge when seeking financial support.

By briefly presenting the MBF's approach to musealizing and safeguarding an ICH element, this paper makes the case for further exploring ICH museums as phenomena that can support a deeper understanding of the complexities of ICH, as well as the diversity of museum practices and approaches that have developed since ICH came to the fore. As argued, ICH museums are evidence of alternative museological responses to the ICH paradigm. They allow an exploration of the strategies used to accommodate ICH expressions in a museological setting while considering the inherent characteristics of this element of heritage. Additionally, they can illustrate the nuanced relationship between ICH and the museum and the complex task of (re)defining museum practices in the 21st century. They challenge us to think more broadly about who defines a museum and how. They call for a more open-minded approach to understanding museums as hybrid spaces where different heritage elements, actors and fields converge.

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