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W07.4.1A ETHICS MATTERS FOR MUSEUMS

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Abstract:	This learning object introduces learners to what is ethics and why it matters for museums. Topics addressed include an overview about professional codes and the ICOM Code of Ethics as a reference tool.
Keywords:	Museum ethics, ethics, professionalism, museum values, code of ethics, ICOM Code of Ethics, International Council of Museums, Museums Association (UK), American Alliance of Museums, standards



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Aim and objectives

The aim is to introduce what is ethics and why it matters for museums. Topics addressed include an overview about professional codes and the ICOM Code of Ethics as a reference tool.

Learning outcomes

After studying this resource, you will be able to: identify when was published the first Code of Ethics for museum workers; identify the most important outcome of using professional codes of ethics as reference tools; and recognize what makes ICOM Code of Ethics distinctive from other codes of ethics in the museum sector.

Keywords

Museum ethics, ethics, professionalism, museum values, code of ethics, ICOM Code of Ethics, International Council of Museums, Museums Association (UK), American Alliance of Museums, standards



Contents

1. Introduction	6
2. Museum ethics: what, why and for whom?.....	9
2.1. What is museum ethics and why it matters?.....	9
2.2. To whom it matters?.....	11
2.3. Law and ethics	12
3. Museum professional codes.....	13
3.1. Museum professional codes: a brief overview.....	13
3.2. ICOM Code of Ethics: a reference tool.....	18
3. Synopsis.....	20
4. List of references	21
5. Glossary	23
6. Further reading	25

List of figures

All photos by Ana Carvalho

Photo 1 (p. 6): Museum of Kyoto, exhibition detail, Japan, 2019

Photo 2 (p. 9): Acropolis Museum, exhibition detail, Greece, 2016

Photo 3 (p. 13): José Malhoa Museum, exhibition detail, Portugal, 2016

Photo 4 (p. 18): Screenshot of ICOM Code of Ethics, 2019





1. Introduction

Generally speaking, **integrity/ethical** is the ability to apply ethical principles, whether in your role as a citizen, whether in your professional life.

In the framework of project Mu.SA integrity/ethical was included, from the start, in a list of 20 **transferable competences** that were considered relevant to support museum professionals in their efforts to make museums thrive in the **digital environment**, along with a combination of specific **digital competences**.¹ Among that list were also other transferable competences such as: leadership and change facilitator, team working, communication, time management and creative thinking skills, which by now you are familiar from the MOOC learning journey.

¹ The initial list of transferable competences was drawn up from previous European projects (Silvaggi, 2017, p. 19).

In fact, integrity/ethical is a topic frequently approached in main reference frameworks related to the “21st century skills” related to any person to succeed in learning and working life. For example, that is the case of [P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning](#) (based in a partnership founded in 2002, USA) or the [Key Competences for Lifelong Learning — A European Reference Framework](#) (2006), to name a few. While the approaches to integrity/ethical in these frameworks may vary when considering it as a **competence per se**, they also share common points or directions.

In the P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning (P21, 2019), for example, the integrity/ethical viewpoint is included in “Life and Career skills”, namely the ability to **work positively and ethically** (p. 8), and is also very much linked to “leadership and responsibility” regarding the need to **demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior in using influence and power** (p. 8); furthermore, it is also foreseen in the context of “Information, Media and Technology skills”, by applying a **fundamental understanding of the ethical/legal issues surrounding the access and use of information, media and technologies** (p. 5-6).

On the other hand, in *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning — A European Reference Framework* (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2006), the integrity/ethical dimension is attached to two main competences. One of which is the “Digital competence”, namely the need to be **aware of the legal and ethical principles involved in the interactive use of Information Society Technology (IST)** (p. 16).

A second mention is related to the competence “Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship” that embraces in its definition the **awareness of ethical values** and the promotion of good governance, and, furthermore, the **awareness about the ethical position** of “enterprises” [in this case we could adapt to “museums”], and how they can be a force for good, for example through fair trade or through social enterprise (p. 17).



While ethical issues are very much embedded in our personal and civic life, challenging us in a number of ways, in this module we will rather place integrity/ethical in the museum context, focusing on the professional challenges that ethics poses.

We will argue that ethics is embedded in most daily museum activities and, thus, is a shared concern among every museum professional and job profile, including those that work for museums. Gaining awareness about the meaning and relevance of ethics in the museum sector is a first step to critically inform and build your practice, knowing the limits and consequences of what we do.





2. Museum ethics: what, why and for whom?

We will start by discussing what are ethics and museum ethics, and explore the meaning and relevance of ethics in the museum sector as a shared concern for all museum professionals. We will also look at the differences between law and ethics.

2.1. What is museum ethics and why it matters?

Let us begin by exploring two definitions, as a starting point: “ethics” and “museum ethics”, with two extracts from *Key Concepts of Museology* (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010):

[...] **ethics** are a philosophical discipline in philosophy that deals with identifying values which will guide both private and public human conduct. Far from being a simple synonym of morality, as is currently believed, ethics is the opposite in so far as the choice of values is not imposed by a



specific set of rules, but rather freely chosen by the individual taking action. [...] (p. 32)

Desvallées & Mairesse (2010) also describe museum ethics as “**the discussion process aimed at identifying the basic values and principles on which the work of the museum relies**” (p. 33).

Likewise in other professions, acting ethically implies asking questions and reflecting about the values, meanings, principles and limits within the field. And, of course, it is about a set of guidelines and standards that museum professionals choose to follow in order to organize and regulate best practice.

Within the museum profession, codes of ethics and guidelines have been used since the beginning of the 20th century and continue to spark adjustments, debate and reflection, accompanying the growing professionalization of the sector and new challenges posed by society.

Museum ethics also reflects the evolving role of museums in society. Let us think about the backbone of museums: hold **collections** in trust for the benefit of society and its development. This commitment to society entails high ideals of responsibility, integrity, honesty, accountability, transparency, excellence, equity, including also the respect for stakeholders (**audiences, communities**, groups, donors, funders, etc.) with diverse interests and interactions with the museum.

Also related to this topic is the evolving definition of what is a museum. For example, the **museum** definition by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), updated in 2007, delineates the purposes, responsibilities and functions of museums in society, meaning the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of museums — and is supplemented and supported by the ICOM Code of Ethics (last revised in 2004), which describes the standards under which these responsibilities should be carried out - the ‘how’ of museums.

In fact, the ICOM museum definition is currently being discussed to better reflect changes in contemporary society. The discussion

around the museum definition should be a continuous one, as argued by Jette Sandahl, Chair of the ICOM Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials. Jette Sandahl when questioned about the "[The Challenge of Changing the Museum Definition](#)" (2017), states: "This is a continuous activity of looking at what is the relationship between museums and societies in which we live and work, which are the context of our activities" (Sandahl, 2017, 8:27 min).

In the same direction, museum ethics is also about a continuing debate about the responsibilities of museums in society.

The scope of ethics in museums is broad. That is to say that is embedded in most museum activities and areas. Those may include leadership, financing and management practices, exhibitions, marketing, technology, conservation, collections management, repatriation, visitor learning, cooperation and partnerships, to name a few. As underlined by the specialist in museum ethics, Tristram Besterman: "**there is no part of the museum that is free from ethical implications**" (Besterman, 2006, p. 432).

2.2. To whom it matters?

Ethics concerns every professional that works in and for museums. It is not exclusively the responsibility of museum's management but rather a shared commitment among all staff. That includes boards of governance, senior and junior employees, and all personnel in technically skilled areas with responsibility inside the museum, volunteers, and consultants (Murphy 2016).

In sum, every **museum professional** should be aware of museum ethics. Nevertheless, the commitment to the museum values (e.g. accountability, transparency, openness and social responsibility) is also linked with leadership and governance.

2.3. Law and ethics

In this introduction to museum ethics, let us consider also the difference between law and ethics.

The law defines methods or the means to fulfil museum activities and a basic framework. Note that many countries have their own museum laws. For example, that is the case of Portugal that has a Museum Act (*Lei-Quadro dos Museus Portugueses*) since 2004 or the case of France – *Loi n.º 2002-5 du 4 janvier 2002 Relative aux Musées de France*, among others. Generally, those countries that have museum laws may not create code of ethics at national level, and the contrary may also occur.

On the other hand, codes of ethics provide a systematic framework of ethical principles to guide professionals, cultivate good principles of conduct to guide decision-making for the common good, and promote shared values in the profession. It is also about self-regulation.

Codes of ethics co-exist in parallel with national laws, but they are not legally binding, although they may influence laws and prompt changes. Moreover, ethics depends on the law to penalize behaviours or a wrong conduct. As for a wrong or unethical conduct, in the realm of professionalism, one of the consequences would be, in principle, ceasing a membership in a professional body. In that sense, professional bodies may act as agents of pressure and influence.

In other words, while the law is mandatory, codes of ethics mainly express guidance.



3. Museum professional codes

Museum ethics, as we have learned, is essential for guiding museum professionals in their practice. Now we will present a brief overview on professional codes: when they started to be built, and what continues to drive changes. We will focus mainly on the professional codes of three museum organizations as references: the American Alliance of Museums (USA), the Museums Association (UK) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Finally, we will address the ICOM Code of Ethics in more detail and highlight overall contributions of ICOM in shaping museum ethics.

3.1. Museum professional codes: a brief overview

The first steps to build professional codes around museum ethics emerge in the beginning of 20th century and have been evolving since then, accompanying the sector growing professionalization.

The “Code of Ethics for Museum Workers” was published in 1925 by the American Association of Museums — AAM (now called American Alliance of Museums), founded in 1906. It is considered to be the first professional code in a published form in the museum sector (Besterman 2006) and with an international outlook.² The present AAM [Code of Ethics for Museums](#) (adopted in 1993 and amended in 2000) emphasizes its commitment to society, as stated:

Ethical codes evolve in response to changing conditions, values and ideas. [...] Although the operating environment of museums grows more complex each year, the root value for museums, the tie that connects all of us together despite our diversity, is the **commitment to serving people, both present and future generations**. (AAM, 2000)

Over the years other professional bodies in other countries followed in developing their own codes. That is the case of the Museums Association (UK), founded in 1889, which established its first Codes of Practice and Conduct in 1977. It was revised over the years (1987, 1991, 2002, 2007) and the last version of the Museums Association [Code of Ethics for Museums](#) dates from 2015, following a process of consultation within the sector, and general consensus.

The Museums Association Code is organized around three key ethical principles: **public engagement and public benefit**; **stewardship of collections**; and **individual and institutional integrity**. At the basis of these principles, the importance of reinforcing public trust in museums is central, as underlined in the introductory statement of the Code:

Museums are public-facing, collections-based institutions that preserve and transmit knowledge, culture and history for past, present and future generations. This places

² Worth mentioning is the fact that the German Museum Association had already adopted a code of ethics in 1918 regarding art dealing and the public (Meijer-van Mensch, 2013).

museums in an important **position of trust** in relation to their audiences, local communities, donors, source communities, partner organisations, sponsors and funders. Museums must make sound ethical judgements in all areas of work in order to **maintain this trust**. (Museums Association, 2015, p. 2)

At the supranational level, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) contribution is also relevant in shaping museum ethics, as a worldwide organization (founded in 1946). Concerns towards ethical issues can be traced to the 1970's, but only in 1986 a "Code of Professional Ethics" would be adopted by ICOM (Schärer, 2016). Another important step followed within the organization. It was the creation in 1986 of an Ethics Committee, advising ICOM in all matters regarding the museum professional ethics (e.g. illicit traffic of cultural goods, clandestine archaeological excavations, destruction of cultural goods, claims for return of objects, unethical behaviour of museum professionals, deaccessioning, etc.).

Since 1986, ICOM revised the Code and the current version dates from 2004. Since then, the [*ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*](#) has been translated to at least 38 languages and is widely recognized as a reference tool.

One of the reasons that make *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* distinctive from other codes of ethics in the museum sector is its international reach. Currently with 44,686 members from 138 countries and territories, with 118 national committees and 32 international committees)³, ICOM represents a global museum community. The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* is considered to be "the most influential standards document produced by any organization for the international museums community" (Edson, 2016, p. 134).

³ From: <http://bit.ly/2JdLBh4> (accessed 23 October 2019).

The continuing demand to explore debate on museum ethics in the framework of ICOM can also be testified by the creation, in 2019, of a new international committee on Ethical Dilemmas (ICEthics), thus, joining the 31 international committees that are specialized in focus (e.g. training, documentation, conservation, management, etc.). The process started in 2017 as a proposal, underlining the need to for “a permanent open-for-all forum for reflections about museums’ relation to the society they are part of”, and to function in a complementary way with the existing ICOM Ethics Committee (ETHCOM).⁴

An ethical museum practice has also been shaped at other levels, including by individual museums, either on overall aspects of the museum activity or around more specific ones.

For example, leading museums such as the British Museum (UK) have their own public set of [Standards of Conduct Policy](#) (2016) related to overall activities, taking into account and with respect to national laws, but also with the Museums Association *Code of Ethics for Museums* and ICOM *Code of Ethics for Museums*.

Moreover, the British Museum has developed more specialized codes around specific topics, namely for research – [The British Museum Code of Good Research Practice](#) (2017), outlining a set of principles for research practice in the museum.⁵

In sum, the most important outcome of using professional codes of ethics as reference tools in museum practice is to offer guidance, cultivate good principles of conduct and standards for decision-making, and promote shared values in the profession.

While not exhaustive, in this brief overview we have seen a few examples of museum organizations that have been proactive in producing codes of ethics.

⁴ From: <http://bit.ly/365MPoC> (accessed 23 October 2019).

⁵ A previous code for research was publicly available in 2007, see: <http://bit.ly/2PbraW6>

Note that there are many other codes that have been developed in the sector or in museum-related domains and professions that can be of interest. You might want to look at the following list for further reading about this issue and explore more in detail: <http://bit.ly/2JeX3ZW> (list prepared by ICOM).





3.2. ICOM Code of Ethics: a reference tool

Next, we return to the ICOM inputs in shaping museum ethics, namely to the ICOM Code of Ethics to consider it in more detail.

If you are an ICOM member it is expected that you strictly follow the ICOM Code of Ethics. Nevertheless, the influence of such document surpasses membership, since it has been a reference tool for the museum community worldwide, inspiring individual museums or museum organizations to set their own specialized codes, addressing specific needs.

The [*ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*](#) (2004) aims to cover all museum types and sets minimum standards of professional practice, focusing on common challenges and values. It is organized around eight key principles, as follows:

- 1. Museums preserve, interpret and promote the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity** (issues

related to the institutional, physical and financial resources needed to maintain a museum, including the personnel).

2. Museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development

(issues related to collections: acquisition, **provenance**, sensitive collections, **deaccessioning**, proper care).

3. Museums hold primary evidence for establishing and furthering knowledge (issues related to research ethics, collecting and sharing knowledge).

4. Museums provide opportunities for the appreciation, understanding and management of the natural and cultural heritage (issues related to the education role of museums, exhibition and interpretation, sensitive materials, standards of accuracy and respect).

5. Museums hold resources that provide opportunities for other public services and benefits (issues of expertise, objects authentication and valuation).

6. Museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as with those that they serve (issues of cultural property – return, restitution; respect for communities).

7. Museums operate in a legal manner (compliance with the legislation – locally, regionally, nationally and internationally).

8. Museums operate in a professional manner (issues related to professional conduct, responsibility, independence and conflicts of interest).

The eight principles presented above in a summarized outlook do not excuse the need for a more comprehensive reading of the Code, which we recommend.

Other contributions by ICOM should not be overlooked. That is the case of the [*ICOM Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums*](#) that was approved in 2013. ICOM's International Committee for Natural History Museums (NATHIST) established this more specific Code in collaboration with ICOM's Ethics Committee (ETHCOM). It is seen as a supplement and complementary to the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (2004), focusing on natural history museums. By "natural history museums" means those institutions that collect, display and research materials collected or extracted from 'the natural world'. This Code recognizes the need to address ethical issues that are specific for these types of museums (e.g. care and display of human remains, repatriation of natural history specimens, among others).

Other complementary approaches to standards and guidelines have been also explored by ICOM's committees on specific topics (e.g. loans, deaccessioning, museum documentation, etc.). A comprehensive list of the documents available about standards can be found at the following link: <http://bit.ly/35mtlf2>.

3. Synopsis

We started by discussing what are ethics and museum ethics, and explored the meaning and relevance of ethics in the museum sector as a shared concern for all museum professionals. We also looked at the differences between law and ethics.

We also presented an overview on professional codes, looking at some examples, namely from the American Alliance of Museums (USA), the Museums Association (UK) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Finally, we addressed the ICOM Code of Ethics as a reference tool and highlighted overall contributions of ICOM in shaping museum ethics.

In the next step of this module, we will look more closely to examples of current ethical issues in the museum sector, including ethical challenges that arise from the digital environment.

4. List of references

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Edson, G. (2016). “Unchanging Ethics in a Changing World.” In *Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage*, edited by Bernice L Murphy, pp. 131–40. Abingdon, Oxon: ICOM and Routledge.

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The British Museum. (2017). "The British Museum Code of Good Research Practice", April 2017, from: <http://bit.ly/2pJZZXq>

5. Glossary

Audience: individuals and groups who make use of the museum's resources or facilities. (Adapted from Museums Association, 2015, glossary)

Collection: relates to a body of cultural and heritage material. Collections may be physical, intangible or digital. (Adapted from Museums Association, 2015, glossary)

Community: can be described as a group of individuals who share a particular characteristic, set of beliefs or attitudes. (Adapted from Museums Association, 2015, glossary)

Competence: is the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. (Adapted from CEDEFOP, 2014)

Deaccessioning: relates to the process of removing an object or specimen from a museum collection. (Adapted from ICOM, 2004)

Digital competences: involves the confident and critical use of Information Society Technology (IST) for work, leisure and communication. It is underpinned by basic skills in ICT (Information and Communication Technologies): the use of computers to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in

collaborative networks via the Internet. (Adapted from the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of on key competences for lifelong learning, 2006)

Digital environment: a context, or a "place", that is enabled by technology and digital devices, often transmitted over the internet, or other digital means, e.g. mobile phone network. Records and evidence of an individual's interaction with a digital environment constitute their digital footprint. The term digital environment is used here as a backdrop for digital actions without naming a specific technology or tool. (Adapted from the DigComp – Digital Competence Framework for Citizens – glossary of new terms)

Integrity/ethical: is the ability to apply ethical principles.

Museum ethics: can be described as the discussion process aimed at identifying the basic values and principles on which the work of the museum relies. (From Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010, p. 33)

Museum professionals: include all staff of the museums and institutions qualifying as museums [...] and persons who, in a professional capacity, have as their main activity to provide services, knowledge and expertise for museums and the museum community (ICOM Statutes, 2017, article 3, section 3, p. 3).

Museum: is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (ICOM, 2007).

Provenance: is the full history and ownership of an item from the time of its discovery or creation to the present day, through which authenticity and ownership are determined. (Adapted from ICOM, 2004, glossary)

Transferable competences: mean those competences that are transversal to several professions (jobs or careers). Transferable skills include soft skills and hard skills. Soft skills are related to

interpersonal capabilities. For instance, leadership can be considered a soft skill, as can communication and creative thinking, among others. Hard skills are defined more technically. For example, proficiency with MS Office Suite applications, or the ability to manage time using Outlook could be understood as hard skills. (Adapted from the online Cambridge dictionary)

6. Further reading

Other codes of ethics: <http://bit.ly/2JeX3ZW>

List of codes of ethics adopted by national museums associations or by associations or organisations dealing with museum-related domains or disciplines of interest to museums. This list was organized and made available by ICOM.

Other suggestions:

Museum ethics has been subject to analysis in several publications over time. *Museum Ethics*, the book authored by Gary Edson in 1997 (with many subsequent editions) has been a reference in museum ethics theory and practice:

Edson, G. (1997). *Museum Ethics*. London: Routledge.

Since then, many other books and articles have been written discussing this theme. Take a look at some books published in recent years, in case you want to explore further reading:

Marstine, J., (Ed.). (2011). *Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*. Milton Park: Routledge.

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