

Grasping the intangible

How should museums document intangible heritage?

Museums are being promoted by ICOM as guardians of intangible heritage. What sense does this make, if any, and what is the impact on documentation practice?

Over the past twenty years ICOM has been encouraging moves to broaden the notion of cultural heritage to include intangible as well and tangible heritage. The theme of the ICOM General Conference in 2004 in Seoul, Korea - Intangible Heritage – clearly demonstrated ICOM's strategic interest in intangible heritage, and the ICOM mission statement now reflects this extended commitment to "the conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible."

Traditionally, museums have been concerned primarily with collections of physical objects – the "material evidence of people and their environment", as the ICOM definition used to read. Current documentation standards and practice have been conceived and carefully developed over many years on the basis of this assumption. The extension of the museum's mission to include intangible heritage represents a radical change of direction, one that should – if it is taken seriously – have a profound impact on all aspects of museum activity, not least on documentation practice. How can museums come to terms with this revolution? What does "intangible heritage" mean exactly? and how do you go about conserving and documenting it? This paper aims to clarify the issues and to offer some ideas on how to get a grasp on the intangible.

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