

Annual Webinar Symposium 2026

CALL FOR PAPERS

**Museums in times of Polarization:
Dialogues, Complex Pasts,
and the Ethical Construction
of Shared Futures**

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Call for Papers

ICOFOM Annual Symposium 2026

19 November, 26 November, and 3 December 2026

Museums in Times of Polarization: Dialogue, Difficult Pasts, and the Ethical Construction of Shared Futures

Founded in the 1970s by Jan Jelínek, ICOFOM emerged as a unique platform bringing together the voices of museum professionals and scholars from around the world to foster listening, dialogue, and the exchange of ideas aimed at developing critical reflection on the museum field (Mairesse, 2019, p. 11).

Throughout its history, ICOFOM has brought together scholars working from, at times, contrasting theoretical perspectives, seeking to reconcile different ways of understanding museums and museology while examining the evolution of museology as a critical, dynamic discipline deeply intertwined with the social transformations of its time (van Mensch & Meijer-van Mensch, 2015).

These reflections have sought to explore what it means to be, to do, and to confront what we call the museum within and for contemporary societies, societies that increasingly reject singular or universal consensus (Brulon Soares, 2019, pp. 18, 38). As institutions that produce and communicate meaning, museums possess the capacity to address the same subject from multiple perspectives, enabling visitors to engage with a world that is complex, contested, and constantly evolving.

Yet within today's increasingly polarized global context—marked by intolerance, hate speech, and deepening social divisions that undermine dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution—museums have acquired an unexpected yet essential relevance. Their role is to bring together opposing viewpoints, not by dissolving differences into a false consensus, but by fostering understanding through disagreement itself. Far from constituting an obstacle, conflict can become the catalyst for deeper reflection when approached with a genuine willingness to listen, engage, and seek reconciliation without abandoning critical inquiry.

Despite the political uses that museum narratives may sometimes serve, museums continue to enjoy widespread public trust. This places upon them a profound institutional responsibility regarding the ways in which difference is represented and interpreted (Sandell, 2007, pp. 126–127).

Against the temptation to silence dialogue when confronting difficult pasts and presents in which historical wounds remain unresolved, the search for shared solutions becomes an essential exercise in restoring relationships fractured by intolerance, injustice, racism, and systemic discrimination. The narratives constructed within museums play a decisive role in shaping collective understandings of difference, justice, and equality (Janes & Sandell, 2019, p. 8).

In this respect, museums possess a unique capacity to serve as bridges between painful pasts—often difficult to acknowledge because of the "wounds" preserved within their galleries—and presents that have yet to heal. As custodians of difficult heritage, museums should not merely preserve uncomfortable memories. Rather, their greatest strength lies in creating spaces where such memories may be confronted without denial or forgetting. In doing so, museums become active companions to the societies they serve—not to assign blame, impose singular interpretations, or offer premature consolation, but to sustain the productive tension of unresolved histories while helping to build bridges toward shared futures grounded in restorative justice: an exercise in listening that recognizes victims, makes historical asymmetries visible, and opens pathways toward restoring dignity where it has been violated.

Approaching what has come to be known as difficult heritage requires reflecting upon how the past is confronted and what significance it continues to hold for people in the present (Macdonald, 2009, pp. 1–2). Museums should not simply speak about the past; they should also help us cultivate a historically grounded understanding of forgiveness in the present that may contribute to future processes of reconciliation (Williams, 2007, p. 188).

Far from serving merely as repositories of memory, museums have the potential to become spaces of ethical encounter where difficult pasts cease to be the exclusive

burden of particular groups and instead become the foundation for a shared process of repair. Through encounters with heritage objects, emotions emerge as living histories—even when we are not fully aware of them—continuing to shape contemporary lives and the worlds we inhabit (Ahmed, 2004, p. 162).

For these reasons, we invite scholars and practitioners to submit critical reflections on the meaning and future of museums in the contemporary world as spaces of encounter and dialogue, capable of embracing conflict while contributing to the construction of the bridges that our societies urgently need.

Selected contributions will contribute to a structured dialogue organised around three interconnected thematic strands. First, the symposium will examine the role of museums in an increasingly polarized world and their responsibility as spaces for public dialogue. Second, it will explore the ethical challenges posed by difficult pasts, contested memories, and processes of reconciliation. Finally, the discussion will look toward the future, imagining museological models capable of responding to the social transformations of the twenty-first century through inclusion, participation, and international cooperation.

Within this framework, contributors are invited to address—though are by no means limited to—the following themes, which will be explored across three thematic webinars to be held on 19 November, 26 November, and 3 December 2026:

Webinar 1. Museums in a Polarized World

In a context characterized by political polarization, declining public trust, and the erosion of shared spaces for dialogue, museums face the challenge of redefining their role as cultural institutions in the service of society.

Beyond their traditional function as custodians of heritage, museums are increasingly called upon to contribute to citizenship-building, the recognition of diversity, and the strengthening of democratic societies capable of embracing disagreement. This responsibility aligns with the principles of inclusion and

participation that define the contemporary museum (Brulon Soares & Bonilla-Merchav, 2025).

This thematic strand invites critical reflection on the contemporary relevance of museums as spaces for encounter, negotiation, and the co-construction of shared meanings. It encourages contributors to examine how museums can—and should—mediate within societies marked by social fragmentation without diminishing the complexity of collective wounds or imposing particular interpretations upon their audiences (Sandell, 2007, pp. 126–127).

It also raises broader questions concerning the opportunities and challenges associated with understanding the museum as an institution endowed with significant social influence. Should museums remain neutral in the face of structural injustice? Or does their very existence as spaces of memory inevitably position them within the political sphere? These questions invite renewed consideration of the ethical responsibilities that accompany the museum's public role (Janes & Sandell, 2019, p. 8).

Webinar 2. Negotiating Difficult Pasts: Memory, Representation, and Ethical Responsibility

Museums play a central role in shaping collective memory and in representing the realities that continue to generate conflict within contemporary societies.

When confronted with histories of violence, colonialism, racism, dictatorship, genocide, and other forms of structural injustice, museums bear the ethical responsibility of developing narratives that are rigorous, inclusive, and respectful—narratives capable of fostering dialogue without reducing the complexity of the past.

This thematic strand invites critical reflection on the museological challenges involved in working with difficult memories and on the potential of museums to contribute to processes of justice, recognition, and reconciliation.

Contributors are encouraged to explore ethical approaches to exhibiting histories of colonialism, dictatorship, racial violence, genocide, and systemic oppression. Such histories require museums to reconsider not only what is displayed, but also how painful experiences are presented, avoiding both sensationalism and forms of detached or complacent interpretation (Macdonald, 2009, pp. 1–2).

Proposals addressing unresolved memory conflicts are particularly welcome. They invite us to consider how museums might construct narratives that resist prematurely closing the past, instead sustaining the productive tension between what has been spoken, what remains silenced, and what continues to demand recognition (Williams, 2007, p. 188).

Likewise, contributors are encouraged to examine the relationship between emotional narratives and historical contextualization through the lenses of affect, trauma, and structural critique. Rather than opposing critical analysis, emotions constitute a fundamental dimension of how individuals and communities experience the past, and museums must therefore seek meaningful ways to balance emotional engagement with historical interpretation (Ahmed, 2004, p. 162).

Thematic contributions may also address current debates surrounding repatriation and restitution policies. These debates invite museums to question the very foundations of their collections while exploring more equitable and restorative relationships with communities that have experienced dispossession or historical injustice. Restitution should be understood not merely as the return of cultural objects, but as an opportunity to reconfigure the relationships that museums and communities will build together in the future (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 29).

Webinar 3. Imagining the Museum of Tomorrow

If museums aspire to play a meaningful role in addressing contemporary polarization and the challenges posed by difficult pasts, it is equally important to ask what kind of institutions they must become in the future. The profound social, cultural, technological, and environmental transformations of the twenty-first

century compel us to reconsider not only the museum's traditional functions, but also its models of governance, its approaches to participation, and the relationships it establishes with the communities it serves.

Rather than adapting passively to change, museums have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to become active agents in imagining and building shared futures grounded in inclusion, cooperation, and ethical responsibility. This thematic strand invites contributors to reflect on how museums can cultivate institutional resilience while remaining responsive to the changing expectations of society, embracing innovation without losing sight of their public mission.

Contributors are encouraged to explore new museological models capable of responding to global challenges such as democratic backsliding, climate change, digital transformation, migration, demographic shifts, and growing social inequalities. Equally relevant are reflections on how museums may strengthen public trust through more transparent governance, collaborative decision-making, and meaningful community participation.

This strand also welcomes critical discussions on the future of museum practice, including the role of emerging technologies, new forms of knowledge production, interdisciplinary collaboration, and international cooperation in shaping museums that are more inclusive, equitable, and socially engaged.

Ultimately, this session seeks to imagine museums not simply as institutions that preserve the past, but as spaces that actively participate in shaping more just, democratic, and sustainable futures.

Each webinar will feature keynote lectures, panel discussions, and a session dedicated to the presentation of ongoing research, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars, museum professionals, and emerging generations of museologists. Accepted contributions will be assigned to the thematic strand that best corresponds to their subject matter.

References:

- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburg University Press
- Brulon Soares, B. (2019). *Museology, building bridges*. En Brulon Soares (ed.). *A History of Museology. Key authors of museological theory*, pp. 17-40
- Brulon Soares, B. & Bonilla-Merchav, L. (2025). *The Museum Definition Handbook: Words Inspiring Action*. ICOM Define
- Janes, R. and Sandell, R. (2019). *Museum Activism*. Routledge, pp. 1-21
- Macdonald, S. (2009). *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, Routledge, pp. 1-24
- Mairesse, F. (2019). *ICOFOM and History*. En Brulon Soares (ed.). *A History of Museology. Key authors of museological theory*, pp. 11-14
- Sandell, R. (2007). *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, Routledge
- Sarr, F., & Savoy, B. (2018). *The restitution of African cultural heritage: Toward a new relational ethics*. French Ministry of Culture, pp. 27-29
- van Mensch, P. & Meijer-van Mensch, L. (2011). *New trends in museology*. Museum of Recent History Celje
- Williams, P. (2009). *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Berg

Submission Guidelines

The Organizing Committee invites proposals under two participation formats, depending on the nature and scope of the contribution.

1. Individual or Joint Papers (15-minute presentations)

Individual and jointly authored papers are invited for oral presentations of up to 15 minutes. Proposals should present original research, whether ongoing or completed. Reflective contributions based on significant professional practice or case studies are also welcome.

Each presentation will be followed by a moderated question-and-answer session and discussion with participants.

2. Quick Fire Presentations (5–7 minutes)

To encourage a diversity of perspectives and support participation by researchers at different stages of their careers, the symposium also offers a Quick Fire presentation format.

These concise presentations (5–7 minutes) provide an opportunity to share emerging ideas, preliminary research findings, methodological reflections, or conceptual contributions related to the symposium themes.

This format is particularly suited to communicating recent discoveries, innovative approaches, or research projects that are still under development but have the potential to stimulate discussion and contribute to the collective exchange of ideas.

Submission Process

Step 1. Submission of Full Papers

To be considered, submissions must comply with the following requirements:

Contributions must consist of the full paper, with a maximum length of 12,000 characters, including notes and references, in accordance with the ICOFOM submission guidelines.

Papers should engage with one of the symposium's thematic strands.

Manuscripts must follow the official ICOFOM formatting guidelines.

Papers may be submitted in any of the three official ICOM languages: English, French, or Spanish.

Although English will be the language of oral presentation during the symposium, authors are strongly encouraged to write their paper in the ICOM language (English, French, or Spanish) with which they are most comfortable, in order to ensure clarity and academic quality.

Submissions that do not meet the required standards of clarity or formatting may be declined for both publication and presentation.

Authors will be notified of the acceptance or rejection of their proposal within one week of submission.

Step 2. Participation in the Symposium

The ICOFOM Annual Symposium 2026 will be held entirely online, through three live webinars taking place on 19 November, 26 November, and 3 December 2026.

The webinars will not be publicly livestreamed.

Authors who are unable to participate synchronously may present their work through a pre-recorded video presentation.

Step 3. Publication Opportunity

Following the symposium, the ICOFOM Editorial Board, together with the editors of the publication series, will select a number of contributions for publication in the ICOFOM Study Series, subject to the journal's peer-review process.

Important Dates

Call for Papers opens: 20 July 2026

Submission deadline: 30 August 2026

Notification of acceptance: Second half of September 2026

Further Information

For additional information or enquiries, please contact:

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