

Muzealnictwo 66 (2025)  
Rocznik, eISSN 2391-4815

# IN THE SEARCH OF CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY FOR MUSEUMS: DETECTING, REFLECTING AND PROPOSING

W POSZUKIWANIU WSPÓŁCZESNEJ TOŻSAMOŚCI MUZEÓW:  
DIAGNOZA, REFLEKSJA I KIERUNKI ROZWIĄZAŃ

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## Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje analizę procesu ewolucji tożsamości współczesnych muzeów ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem postępującego procesu redefiniowania pojęcia *muzeum*, które zostało zapoczątkowane w okresie powojennym. Język muzeum – obejmujący rejestry dyskursu i kanały komunikacji – odgrywa kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu tożsamości muzeum. Tradycyjny nacisk w pracy kuratora, niegdyś zorientowany głównie na kolekcje, przesunął się w stronę szerszego zaangażowania społecznego i cyfrowego. Choć tzw. celebryci architektury (*archistars*) bez wątpienia wpływają na wizerunek muzeum, jego istotą pozostaje jednak zdolność do komunikowania się. Artykuł analizuje różne iteracje definicji muzeum proponowane przez ICOM oraz wyzwania towarzyszące próbom określenia tego pojęcia w kontekście dynamicznie zmieniającej się rzeczywistości społeczno-kulturowej. Zdaniem autora istotą muzeum jest jego głos manifestujący się poprzez język muzeograficzny – charakterystyczny nie tylko z uwagi na niepowtarzalność kolekcji, lecz także ze względu na specyficzną przestrzeń fizyczną i intelektualną, w której dochodzi do doświadczenia swoistej epifanii muzealnej. Na poziomie teoretycznym, odwołując się do filozofii Wittgensteina, Halbwachsa, Warburga i Maussa, autor docieka, w jaki sposób muzea tworzą znaczenie poprzez wystawy. Artykuł podejmuje również zagadnienie wpływu sztucznej inteligencji (AI) oraz koncepcji metawersum na kształtowanie przyszłości instytucji muzealnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja, wystawy, muzea, język muzeograficzny, tożsamość, dziedzictwo, środowisko ekspozycyjne, kuratorstwo, interpretacja, kontekst.

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Muz., 2025(66)  
Rocznik, eISSN 2391-4815  
data przyjęcia – 09.2024  
data recenzji – 10.2024  
data akceptacji – 03.2025  
DOI: 10.69500/m.31

Wydawca:  
Narodowy Instytut Muzeów  
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Strona internetowa czasopisma:  
rocznikmuzealnictwo.nim.gov.pl

## In Search of Contemporary Identity for Museums: Introduction

Over the past seventy years, from the period following the Second World War to the present day, museums have faced social and cultural pressures to expand their role beyond conservation and education, to include new functions such as leisure, socialization, multicultural dialogue and economic development. In this landscape of quantitative and qualitative growth, the relevance of how a museum 'speaks' has become crucial. This brings us to the most intimate quality of a museum, its language.

The museum's linguistic expression, through its unique idiom and use of varied registers and channels of communication, has assumed a pivotal role in shaping its identity. The concept of interpretation has also evolved to encompass not only the extraction of information and meaning, but also the creative elaboration of information and the exploration of potentially new meanings. Consequently, we are observing a shift in museum curatorship and interpretation from a specialist focus on collections to a broader engagement with social, cultural, and digital contexts. The transformative power of the architects' creativity in shaping the identity of museums as 'superbuildings' is playing an equal role in profiling museums in the audience's mind. However, despite their significant influence on the public imagination, these cases are very limited compared to the total number of museums (with Europe alone having more than 60,000). The prevailing identity of museums in the 21st century continues to be shaped by their capacity to present a range of qualities that resonate with diverse audiences.

This is not a research paper, but rather a collection of reflections resulting from a prolonged period of inquiry into the evolution of museums since the 1970s. This investigation has been further enriched by my involvement in the Juries of the European Museum of the Year Award, the Council of Europe Museum Prize and the European Museum Academy Awards, a privilege I have enjoyed for several decades. The academic side of my work has also been instrumental in the effort to define a comprehensive framework for the contemporary museum idiom, which involves examining key possible inspirations from philosophy, sociology, and art history, in particular Ludwig Wittgenstein's insights into language, Maurice Halbwachs's social frameworks of memory, Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* and Marcel Mauss's '*obligatory expression of feelings*'. Despite being formulated in the early decades of the 20th century, their thinking/theories are still intellectually refreshing when trying to understand what the museum of the 21st century wants to be/when trying to understand the conceptualization of the museum of the 21st century.

## Detecting, Reflecting and Proposing

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has formulated nine versions of the definition of museums in the following years: 1946, 1951, 1961, 1974, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2007, and (after much debate) 2022. As this process has unfolded, we can observe a constant expansion in the number of words used, with the exception of the most recent version. Additionally, there has been a persistent endeavour to broaden the concept of what constitutes a museum, resulting in the gradual incorporation of botanical and zoological gardens, planetariums, science centres, etc., and a myriad of other cultural heritage domains. This expansion has culminated in the current definition, which introduces 'intangible heritage' alongside traditional tangible objects, evidence of human civilization, and a strong emphasis on community. It is also noteworthy that many national associations have formulated their own definitions, thereby enriching or complicating the panorama/the overall picture. For example, the UK Museums Association, in 1988, agreed on a definition that states: '*Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard, and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.*'

A quarter of a century later, the term 'inspiration' remains the strong point: inspiring people is a process in itself that goes beyond the educational mission.

The question of what a museum is and what its purpose is still seems to be open. In their book *Les incertitudes des musées*, Jean Davallon and Dominique Poulot, aptly observe that: '*In recent decades museums have been the focus of numerous conferences, publications, and articles*' A notable example of this was a seminar at the École du Louvre in the early 1980s, which posed the question, 'What are museums, what is their purpose, today?' The question has been taken up repeatedly in the decades since.'

Why has the professional museum community redefined its nature so frequently? Davallon and Poulot provide a legitimate answer to this question, but this has not been the case for other cultural institutions such as libraries, archives, theatres, and universities. This suggests a peculiarity of museums that could help them to (re)define their identity. In recent decades, museums have found themselves at the crossroads of two trends: social and cultural. On the social level, communities have made demands that extend far beyond the original functions of conservation and education, asking museums to become places of leisure, meeting, socialization, multicultural dialogue, and

reconciliation. At the cultural level, there has been a steady expansion of what is considered cultural heritage, including categories such as industrial heritage, pop music, and mass communication materials that were once not considered worthy of preservation.

Museums are also important in local regeneration. According to the '2023 Cultural Infrastructure Index', museums and galleries accounted for 55% of cultural infrastructure projects worth \$7.1 billion. However, this is not overwhelming/However, this figure does not appear to be excessive.

Another significant factor shaping the profile of museums is intangible heritage, which includes cultural traditions and digital items. Perhaps the most obvious category of intangible heritage common to all cultural institutions is that of words. Three examples include the Word Planet in Washington DC, the Cité Internationale de la Langue Française in France, and the National Archives of The Netherlands (where paper collections are treated in the same way as museum objects). These museums reflect intangible heritage such as words in an effective and very modern way. However, such content is also conveyed by other cultural 'devices', not necessarily museums.

So, if we say that the entire panorama of cultural infrastructures is evolving rapidly, what is it about museums that give them a specific identity that distinguishes them from a school, a community centre or any other organization with similar goals?

In the context of these processes, in my view the distinctive feature/specificity of museums is their voice, defined by their museographical language. Guillermo Fernández aptly calls this 'the fascinating language of the twenty-first century'. Similarly, *Developing Exhibitions* (Houtgraaf, Negri) and *Esporre Interpretare Comunicare* (Negri) describe the evolution of the museum environment and its language. One notable example is Jorge Wagensberg's *CosmoCaixa: The Total Museum* which combines science, natural history, and interactive exhibits. The identity of a museum is defined by the manner in which it presents its narratives—through its language, personality, and social conduct, that is to say its programmes, to achieve this.

Exhibition spaces have evolved into multichannel communicative environments, where the event is a combination of reading, watching, listening, and free movement. The exhibition environment is the stage on which the user's experience takes place. Long before terms such as 'immersive' and 'digital' became popular, museums already offered a fully immersive experience, driven by curiosity and metaphors. These two forces shape the museum experience, offering visitors both physical and metaphorical engagement with the world.

Traditionally, museums were defined by their collections, however, it is now the museum itself that defines the meanings of its collections through interpretation and the adoption of various communicative formats, with an increasing emphasis on phenomena rather than things. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1989–1951) wrote in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things.' This suggests that exhibitions create 'pictures/images' of reality through curated artefacts and media, representing reality in a way that visitors interpret. Wittgenstein's Proposition 4.1212, 'What can be shown, cannot be said', underscores the importance of non-verbal communication, a key aspect of exhibitions.

Wittgenstein's idea that 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world' relates to how exhibitions influence visitors' perceptions. The design and presentation of an exhibition serve as an idiom, setting boundaries for understanding the content. Finally, his last proposition, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', emphasizes the challenge of conveying complex ideas within the constraints of the medium. Museums face this challenge too, and it impels creative teams to find ways to express complex concepts through objects, images, and spaces.

The fragmentation of knowledge transmission in contemporary society is fundamentally a result of digital communication, the Internet, globalization and mass migration, which are redefining 'worlds of belonging' and collective memory. In 1925, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) described the 'social framework of memory', a concept which remains relevant for understanding how collective memory is shaped by social contexts. Despite the radical transformation of context and phenomena since then, his methodology remains a valuable point of reference.

## From sociology to art history

The *Warburg Atlases*, also known as the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, are a collection of images compiled by the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) in the 1920s. His project traced the afterlife of classical antiquity in Western culture, mapping the continuity and transformation of symbols, motifs, and themes over time. Warburg's methodology, which combined art history, anthropology, psychology, and cultural studies, has had a profound impact on museum interpretation. The *Atlases* which emphasize the power of visual memory, demonstrate how symbols persist and evolve. They promote non-linear historical narratives, encouraging a more thematic exploration of history, which can result in dynamic and engaging exhibitions that resonate with diverse audiences. Here the dialectics and temporal layering can help visitors connect more deeply with the exhibits.

This shift in methodology is indicative of a transformation in the role of the curator. Sharon McDonald's article, 'The Recursivity of the Curatorial' (2020), suggests that the role of the curator has evolved from a specialist of collections to that of an expert capable of giving multiple meanings to objects. The interpretation processes now encompass not only the extraction of information, but also the creative exploration of new meanings, marking a shift from the realm of truth to plausible interpretations, and from hyperspecialism to anthropological 'generalism'.

A similar change can be seen in the way we understand 'experience' and 'emotions'. In online interactions, 'emoticons' frequently replace words, even for profound sentiments such as love, anger, and enthusiasm. This echoes the concept of the 'obligatory expression of feelings' by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), although it was formulated in 1921 in a different context, referring to the traumatic psychological state of soldiers who survived the First World War.

These changes in interpretation and expression are also evident in museum spaces, which are increasingly assuming/undertaking educational and social functions. The design of exhibitions must reflect the evolving role of the curator and the changing ways in which audiences engage with content. But, whatever the proposed solution, the ability to trigger spatial memories, to make the museum environment awe-inspiring and to generate empathy, remains fundamental.

The role of AI, is also having a profound and rapid impact on museums. Recently, the National Museum in Norway developed a semantic search tool that attempts to understand the meaning behind search terms, thereby providing more relevant results than traditional keyword searches. The museum is indexing its collection in innovative ways by using AI models from OpenAI to generate image captions and translate them into vectors.

*'We have created a prototype of a semantic search tool for our collection. Attempting to understand the meaning behind your search terms, can provide more relevant results than traditional keyword searches in metadata.*

*We use various models from OpenAI to generate image captions, which we then translate into vectors.'*

Semantic search in an online collection

<https://beta.nasjonalnuseet.no/2023/08/add-semantic-search-to-a-online-collection/>

The expression 'to understand the meaning behind your search terms' is of particular interest in this context, as it goes to the heart of the intellectual process of analysing collections and attempting to define a conceptual framework within which to position their elements. This development suggests a shift towards a more profound, conceptual understanding of collections, which may reshape/influence the ways in which curators approach exhibitions.

The most promising development, however, is arguably the potential of the metaverse. Museums are increasingly exploring the possibility of creating virtual exhibition spaces, thereby blurring the boundaries between the physical and digital realms. In this context, the role of the metaverse architect is becoming as important as that of the curator. These developments point to a future in which AI, the metaverse, digital studies, and the in-person museum experience are interconnected, creating new opportunities for both tangible and intangible museum experiences.

While it is difficult to predict the precise future impact of these innovations, monitoring museum awards offers valuable insight into emerging trends. The European Museum Awards, documented by NEMO in *European Museum Awards: A Guide to Quality Work in Museums* (2018), provide an overview of museum innovation across Europe. These awards, along with national and local museum awards, highlight the continuous evolution of the museum sector.

Shakespeare's 'The mystery of things' from *King Lear* resonates within the museum world. Exhibits often have an air of mystery that draws visitors in, thereby turning the process of discovery into an integral aspect of the museum experience. This intuitive rationality remains central to the museum's identity. As with all cultural institutions, museums are in constant flux, shaped by technological advances and the shifting tides of local and social changes. To remain relevant, museums seek to embrace new syntheses that reflect these transformations, to understand them or even to challenge them in their ongoing evolution. This is a difficult but inevitable destiny.

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**Executive summary:** This paper explores the evolving identity of contemporary museums, starting from their continuous redefinition since the post-war era. The 'language' of the museum, encompassing the registers and channels of communication, is crucial to its identity. The traditional focus of curatorship, which was once oriented towards collections, has shifted towards broader social and digital engagement. While 'archistars' undoubtedly influence the museum's image, the core identity of the institution lies in its ability to communicate. The paper examines ICOM's evolving definitions of museums and the challenges of defining 'museum' in a changing world. The author argues that the defining feature of a museum is its 'voice', expressed through its museographical language, which is distinct, not only due to the uniqueness of its collections, but also because of the physical and intellectual space in which the museum's 'epiphany' is experienced. At the theoretical level, drawing upon the philosophies of Wittgenstein, Halbwachs, Warburg, and Mauss, the paper explores how museums create meaning through exhibitions. The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and the metaverse on the future of museums are then considered in a concise manner.

**Keywords:** communication, exhibitions, museums, museographic language, identity, heritage, exhibition environment, curatorship, interpretation, context.

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