

## Museology and the sacred

**Call for publication and participation to the 41st symposium organized by ICOFOM**

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By its etymology, the term "sacred" which derives from the Latin *sacer* and comes from the root *sak*, contains the idea of separation. The sanctuary is the space of the sacred, reserved for the deity, where the *sacerdos* or the priest performs the sacred ceremonies (Texier, 1990). The founding work of Rudolf Otto is one of the first to analyze the very experience of the sacred, including fear of divine power (Otto, 1969). This experience outside the secular world, in which we live, brings us back to another reality, which at the same time appears as the "real par excellence" (Eliade, 1965: 85).

The very notion of the sacred seems surprisingly close to some central themes in museology. The sacred, like intangible heritage, is manifested as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith" (Unesco, 2003). Many museums are dedicated to the manifestations of the sacred, either because of their collections originating, indeed, from sacred spaces (burials, temples...), or directly related to the cult (paintings and religious works, objects of the cult). The museum world itself has been regularly presented from its relationship with the sacred, either through its architectural form (the temple, like the British Museum in London, or the church, like the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam), or from its interior spaces or its activities. Duncan and Wallach, in a famous article (1978), refer to the visit of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as "a late capitalist ritual"; the visit of the Mona Lisa could be compared to a pilgrimage (Christophe & Garnier, 2014). As early as the 1920s, Gilman introduced the art museum as "in essence a temple" (Gilman, 1923), and it is still the form of the temple that Cameron evokes when he wonders in the 1970s about the future of museums. (Cameron, 1971). It is relatively easy to continue the comparison, finding, in the interior of the building or through curators gestures, in their relation to the object, the indices of a large number of measures (showcases, security, special reserves, visitors' course, etc.) testifying to a very specific relationship to objects, resolutely removed from the tribulations of the secular world (Mairesse, 2014). The museum's specificity is based on the study and selection of real things, presented as "real par excellence". Isn't it precisely close to the categories of the sacred?

In parallel, one can also observe a certain museum logic in the places of the sacred, whatever they are. Since Antiquity, the temple (the term will be used here to evoke both temples as churches, mosques or any other place of worship) keep some collections, either directly related to the practice of worship (objects used during ceremonies, paintings, sculptures, etc.), attesting to the reality of the sacred, and presented as such as relics

(fragments of a saint, objects having belonged to him, place related to the history of the presence of a deity on earth, etc.). A certain practice of visiting these places has rapidly developed through the form of pilgrimages (Mecca, Jerusalem, Rome, etc.), a practice known since Antiquity (Turcan, 2014) having given the same place, at least from the 17th century, to the cataloging of collections on display (for example at Saint Denis Abbey, France). Many of the current shrines, still frequented by pilgrims, are also listed as World Heritage sites and have developed a specific museum activity, either in the form of museums (in the Vatican) or in the form of interpretation centers (as in Uluru, in Australia).

### **Would the sacred be to religion what museality is at museum?**

If a certain number of links can be woven between the museum field and the sacred, what could be their meaning? The notion of the sacred does not appear directly in museology, and the museum seems largely constructed in opposition to this logic or, in any case, in parallel with it. However, the museum seems to produce also some sacred qualities. The object of museology has sometimes been summarized as the study of museality (Waidacher, 1996). By museality, one can understand the value of documentation of reality (or its power of signification) possessed by an object, the reason why it has been selected and preserved, this value being specified in many ways (Mensch, 2015). Does not museality, as well as the sacred, tend to testify of the real par excellence? From an integrative perspective of museology, the sacred could be considered as one of the categories of museality, and vice versa. In the same way as museality, the value of sacredness evolves according to the times and populations: fetishes are burned, a temple can be desecrated and sometimes reused (like the Pantheon in Rome or Hagia Sophia in Istanbul) for another cult or even turned into a museum (the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris), while objects of worship are desecrated or musealized (Beyer and Takke, 2012).

The purpose of this symposium is to discuss the links between museology and the sacred, especially through what unites and what differentiates the museum from the temple. Four analysis plans can be considered:

**Museum-temple-religion:** On the institutional level, what relationship does religion have with the museum (as a dated historical institution, as well as a building)? A priori, our societies clearly distinguish the two institutions, delegating their management to very different actors and under the authority of separate ministries. However, the museum (during the French Revolution, or the Russian Revolution) was largely built in opposition to the temple (the Christian church). The opposite seems also true: the iconoclasm of certain religious groups has in particular been exercised over the heritage contained in museums, and the development of the power of the religious, in turn, may result in the resacralization of ancient places of worship converted into a museum. In such a perspective, could we consider the advent of the museum as another form of the religious?

**Museality-heritage-sacred:** How, in terms of objects, can we consider the relationship between objects, heritage and the sacred? In terms of their selection, is the choice of objects (patrimonialization and musealization) influenced by their sacredness? How is the notion of sacred constructed or deconstructed in the museum? The museum can "desacralize" (Maori heads or fetishes), but also sacralize (works of art or contemporary relics). On the other

hand, does the report that visitors (in particular some form of tourism) have to museum objects and heritage sites appear sometimes as a form of desacralization?

**Scientific-political-religious:** In terms of actors, museum work has sometimes been presented as a priesthood (Michel, 1948). The figure of the curator has also been associated with that of the priest, museologists with theologians, and the zeal of the educators with that of the missionaries. Beyond what may appear as a joke but which could be the subject of a specific ethnography, what distinguishes the work of the museum professional from that of the scientist or that of the religious? The scientific or museum life can be lived, like the religious life, as a vocation (Weber, 2003). Do not they both seek the truth through a certain quest for reality?

**Museology-sacred-theology:** Is the definition of the sacred, in museology, similar to that of philosophy, anthropology or theology? What constitutes the sacred in a museum context, the premises of which refer to this specific level that constitutes the man-reality relationship on which the museology is based? The relationship between the museum and science is known and has been the subject of many studies (Neustupny, 1968, OCIM 1995). We also know the links between museology and philosophy, a subject already dealt with by ICOFOM (1999), museology being able to be presented as a philosophy of the museum field (Deloche, 2000). But what are the relations between museology and theology? How do the two domains come together, and on what levels can they meet?

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## ***Terms of submission***

This year, ICOFOM is reviving an old tradition, partially modified: articles, presented in a short form, are expected before the conference and will be collected, formatted and distributed before this one, and discussed in workshops during the conference.

- A brief proposal of about 2000 characters will be sent by **15 February 2018** to the following address: [icofomsymposium@gmail.com](mailto:icofomsymposium@gmail.com). The proposals will have to integrate one of the four axes of analysis proposed. They will be written in one of the three languages of ICOM (English, French, Spanish). Validation of proposals will be given within two weeks.
- Contributions, very synthetic (12,000 characters maximum, notes and bibliography included) will be sent by **1<sup>st</sup> June 2018** (at the latest) to the same address. They will respect the layout rules of ICOFOM.
- Collected and formatted texts will be sent to the authors and symposium participants, in an electronic version, during the month of **September 2018**.
- A selection of written contributions will be made by the publishers, after the colloquium, with the ICOFOM office, who will be invited to develop their article for publication in a longer format, for *ICOFOM Study Series*, following a peer review process.

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