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# INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY – CIMUSET ICOM. PAST ACTIVITIES AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE DIRECTION (INCLUDING IN THE CONTEXT OF CZECH TECHNICAL MUSEUMS AND ACTIVITIES)

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## ABSTRACT/ABSTRAKT:

The article summarizes information about the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Science and Technology CIMUSET, which is one of the oldest independent professional units within the organizational structure of ICOM. It focuses on changes in the concept and goals of CIMUSET in the past, specific activities and projects, but also the vision of further development. The aim of the authors of the contribution is also to draw attention to the possibility of getting involved in the activities of this committee, because the issue of preserving and using the cultural heritage of science and technology is a matter of a much wider spectrum of museum and memory institutions, not only specialized museums and science centres.

**Mezinárodní výbor pro muzea a sbírky vědy a techniky – CIMUSET ICOM. Uplynulé aktivity a vyhlídky do budoucna (včetně technických muzeí v České republice a jejich činnosti)**

Článek shrnuje informace o Mezinárodním výboru pro muzea a sbírky vědy a techniky CIMUSET, který

patří k nejstarším samostatným odborným jednotkám v rámci organizační struktury ICOM. Zaměřuje se na proměny koncepce a cílů CIMUSET v minulosti, konkrétní aktivity a projekty, ale též vize dalšího rozvoje. Cílem autorek příspěvku je též upozornit na možnost zapojit se do činnosti tohoto výboru, neboť problematika zachování a využití kulturního dědictví vědy a techniky je záležitostí mnohem širšího spektra muzejních a paměťových institucí, nejen specializovaných muzeí a science center.

## KEYWORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

*technical heritage – collections of science and technology – technical museum – science centre – CIMUSET – ICOM*  
*technické dědictví – sbírky vědy a techniky – technické muzeum – science centrum – CIMUSET – ICOM*

The 26th ICOM General Conference took place in Prague in August 2022, and will go down in global museology history for its discussion of the current and often thorny issues which resonated in the conference programme – such as sustainability, decolonising collections, museums during war –

and for the approval of a new “Prague” definition of the term “museum”. For Czech museums, the appointment of a new board for one of ICOM’s specialist committees – CIMUSET, or the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Science and Technology. Mgr. Marie Gilbertová, curator at the Technical Museum in Brno, the Czech Republic (hereinafter “TMB”) was appointed as the committee’s President for the subsequent period. TMB has been involved in the activities of this committee for many years, having previously, for example, hosted one of the annual meetings of its members and contributing through the publication of proceedings. It intends to build and develop on its activities. In the following text,<sup>1</sup> the authors give a brief overview of changes at CIMUSET over the almost seventy years of its existence and formulate a number of conceptual ideas and visions which should become imprinted in the committee’s work under its new management in the near future as an enduring Czech legacy.

<sup>1</sup> This article was produced based on the institutional support of the long-term conceptual development of the Technical Museum in Brno research organisation provided by the Czech Ministry of Culture.

The somewhat immodest goal of leaving a specific Czech legacy within this international global museology think tank also reflects the inspiration of traditional Czech museology,<sup>2</sup> which still resonates with professionals, as last year's meeting in Prague demonstrated. The authors also intend to use this space in the *Museologica Brunensia* journal to appeal to its wider readers to refocus their interest on CIMUSET, as technology collections are today a crucial component of almost all memory institutions of various foci, and working with them is not just a matter for the experts working at specialised museums.

### Past changes in CIMUSET

ICOM's international committees are tasked with contributing towards defining the standards of professional museum work. In particular, their members share expertise and professional experience, build specific collaboration between individual organisations, promote examples of good practice, etc., through meetings and developing mobility (and increasingly also through the use of online communication platforms and social networks). This is no less the case for the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Science and Technology.<sup>3</sup> CIMUSET was set up in 1946, with a project to create a committee to cover technical museums and collections having been proposed before ICOM's establishment by M. André Lèveillé<sup>4</sup> alongside

Henri Laugierem<sup>5</sup> and Chauncey Jerome Hamlin.<sup>6</sup> The idea for a separate committee focused on science and technology museums thus found advocates amongst the major figures familiar with this type of institution. Their great support is also evidenced in the fact that preparations for CIMUSET's establishment were the first on a list of points at the first meeting of the ICOM executive in November 1946. A committee for technical museums and museums of astronomy was the first on a list of a total of nine committees to be set up at the first ICOM meeting. CIMUSET was founded on 20 November 1946 at a meeting of the ICOM executive at the Louvre, Paris, comprising the aforementioned M. André Lèveillé, alongside Dr. H. Shaw.<sup>7</sup> In July 1948, the Committee for Museums of History of Science and Technology was renamed the Committee for Museums of Science and Technology, with the name **International Committee for Museums of Science and Technology used from 1949**. A component of the efforts at giving the committee a precise name was to define the fields which fell under its purview, and so also from 1948, planetariums, museums of health and healthcare, museums of the history of science and technology, also so-called science popularisation museums, were added to this list.<sup>8</sup> 1959 saw the creation of the committee's familiar acronym, based on its French

name, **Comité International des Musées et des Collections de Science et Technologie**. That same year, a study and plan for creating a "science museum" concept in developing countries was produced, authored by Frank Greenaway, W. S. Thomas and Torsten Alhin (representing science museums in England and Sweden).

Conferences, meetings and gatherings of committee members take place more or less regularly, and annually from the mid-1960s. Some of the most important and notable topics discussed included, for example, a proposal put forward at the 1969 meeting in India to build a kind of research and production "laboratory/factory" for creating core collection artefacts related to science and technology fields which could enrich the collections and exhibitions in newly established museums in developing countries.<sup>9</sup> This project was soon put on ice due to an indifferent response from the Indian government. For the Czech context, 1972 is of note, with the committee's meeting taking place at the National Technical Museum in Prague, following on from elections to the committee's board in 1971, when J. Kuba, then director of the National Technical Museum had become President. Brno Technical Museum's director, M. Berka, made a presentation, *Konzervování technických památek (Conserving Technical Monuments)*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> First Director of Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, National Research Centre). See *La recherche fondamentale au service de la société – Basic research for the benefit of society*. In CNRS: *The French National Centre for Scientific Research* [online]. [accessed 2023-08-24]. Available from [www: <https://www.cnrs.fr/fr>](https://www.cnrs.fr/fr).

<sup>6</sup> Director of the Buffalo Museum of Science and first ICOM President during preparations for ICOM's establishment.

<sup>7</sup> Director of the Science Museum in London.

<sup>8</sup> *ICOM News* began focusing on the activities of all its international committees, including CIMUSET.

<sup>9</sup> Later the ICOM Science Museum Exhibits Laboratory – ISMEL.

<sup>10</sup> This fact also seems significant in the context of the pioneering activities of the Technical Museum in Brno in the field of protecting and providing access to objects of technical and industrial heritage in the Czech Republic. For more details, see also STÖHROVÁ, Pavla (ed.). *Technické muzeum v Brně 1961–2021. Šedesát let Technického muzea v Brně*. Brno: Technické muzeum v Brně, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> KIRSCH, Otakar, Lenka MRÁZOVÁ and Lucie JAGOŠOVÁ. Brno museology: The context of museological thinking in the second half of the 20th century. In TZORTZAKI, Delia and Stefanos KERAMIDAS (eds.). *Theory of Museology: Main Schools of Thought 1960–2000*. Athens: The Norwegian Institute at Athens, 2021, pp. 95–118.

<sup>3</sup> We shall be using the acronym CIMUSET, or else "committee" in subsequent paragraphs.

<sup>4</sup> Director of Palais de la Découverte in Paris, and later ICOM First Treasurer (1946–1958).

**Overview of CIMUSET’s main aims and activities**

From the outset, providing space for communication, co-operation and exchange of information between museums, specific museum staff and other professions involved in protecting cultural heritage linked to various science and technological contexts has been an important mission for the committee. The aims which the committee has taken on are in line with its focus, with the development of technology museums and collections, and naturally also with ICOM’s strategic aims. The core information on issues which resonate with CIMUSET reveal its perspective on the issues set

practice deserving of following and recognition.

In specific cases, CIMUSET recommends focusing on increasing the visibility of its activities within ICOM, such as through selecting relevant conference topics. Priority is generally given to those which also resonate society-wide and within political discussion, while topics are also naturally specific for science and technology museums and considered problematic (rather than more general issues). Co-operation between members of CIMUSET should be based on the sharing of factual/critical/neutral information. A “safe space” should also be created, however, one suitable for discussing difficult

greater number of speakers at meetings.<sup>11</sup> A quick-fire-session format was introduced, for example, designed for giving presentations within a limit of 2 to 3 minutes per speaker. It has been demonstrated that a demanding and busy programme like this enables a high quality of presentations and talks to be given, and within CIMUSET, assessment working groups are created for this purpose for specific announced topics and registered presentations.

The committee is also involved in supporting young experts and involving them in debates. Through funding from ICOM grants and other financial sources (such as from grants from institutions which

- To carry out activities related to the preservation of cultural heritage within science and technology, and dissemination of knowledge within this field.
- To provide a forum for communication, co-operation and information exchange between museums, professional workers and others concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage within science and technology, and dissemination of knowledge of this field.
- To support the aims and objectives of ICOM with reference to the preservation of the cultural heritage of science and technology, and the dissemination of knowledge of its importance to society.
- To contribute to the development and implementation of ICOM’s programme.
- To provide advice to ICOM regarding the protection of cultural heritage within science and technology, and the dissemination of knowledge in this field.
- To represent the interest of the museums of science and technology within ICOM.
- To co-operate with National Committees and Regional Organisations of ICOM and with other international committees and affiliated organisations in matters related to the Committee’s specific mandate and to ICOM’s broader interests.

Tab. 1: Aims formulated within CIMUSET’s core documents (Source: Our aims. In *CIMUSET. ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Science and Technology* [online]. Paris: ICOM, 2023 [accessed 2023-08-24]. Available from [www: <https://cimuset.mini.icom.museum/about-us/our-aims/>](https://cimuset.mini.icom.museum/about-us/our-aims/).)

out for different meetings (see also summary below, tab. 1). The “CIMUSET Award” is a concept which deserves attention, alongside different projects applying for the award, as this reveals to us what preferences museums and science centres have in their own activities and what they consider of examples of their own good – and best –

problems/issues, exchanging not just “best” experience, but also not being afraid to reveal “worst” experience, as these cases can help others just as those offering inspiration do. This approach is reflected in the formats of conferences and conference presentations, in the broad range of poster presentations and panel discussions which allow for a much

jointly organise CIMUSET annual conferences), we can, for example, cover costs for their participation in conferences and workshops abroad.

<sup>11</sup> Which is also a not insignificant detail in terms of funding the participation of museum workers at conferences, when the condition of active participation in the conference is often limiting in a decision to pay the related financial costs.

International co-operation does not just take place within CIMUSET, however, with other subjects also “put into play” (including outside ICOM), thus creating smaller topic platforms. One example is the WorkLab organisation<sup>12</sup> and a number of joint meetings held after 2011 under its auspices. The first joint meeting took place in Tampere, and subsequently alongside the ICOM ICTOP (International Committee for the Training of Personnel) and ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology) committees as part of the ICOM General Conference in Milan, and most recently in a joint block of talks at the General Conference in Prague in 2022. At this, CAMOC (the International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities) also took part in the meeting. Information on the course of the Prague meeting is given below. In 2015, contact was set up with ASTEC – the Association for Science and Technology Centres (an ICOM affiliated organisation), although co-operation has not as yet been successfully established. A meeting was held in 2018 in Ottawa, Canada with IATM – the International Association of Transport Museums.

A conference with ICOM committee CIMCIM (the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music) held in Paris in 2022 entitled *Playing and operating: functionality in museum objects and instruments* was very successful. This conference pre-empted topics of how to evaluate the impact of putting an original collection object into use, whether it should even be put into an operable condition, whether it is appropriate in terms of the long-term preservation of

objects, whether the associated risks are balanced by the satisfaction and positive impact on the object’s condition which its operation can also result in, and whether it is more appropriate to choose an alternative to putting it into operation, such as making use of a copy, or digital reproduction, etc. The main outcome of these discussions and meetings should be the creation of a kind of manual for operating objects in collections, something we consider to be one of the most pressing issues for the entire museum community, and not just in the field of museum management of musical instruments, in which the debate arose, but also within technology collections.<sup>13</sup>

As for all group activities, it remains the case for CIMUSET that it is mainly the character and performance of the leader and those closest to him which determine how active the team is and how it is perceived by others. CIMUSET Presidents and representatives are often called to take part in various events popularising science and technology, and as a side effect this also results in advantages (and new members) for CIMUSET. In 2015, for example, Jytte Thorndahl was invited to Iran, where she gave a number of talks, and alongside colleagues from the University of Isfahan and the Science and Technology Museum in Tehran, she undertook a workshop for museum colleagues. Through this co-operation, Tehran’s Science and Technology Museum is now a member of CIMUSET, and it organised a very successful commission meeting on its home soil. In 2019, the committee’s then-President, Ech Cherki Dahmali

was invited to the international meeting, *Germany meets CIMUSET*, which took place in Mannheim, and here the issue of museums of science and technology’s political role was again opened up.

Publications are tangible outcomes of CIMUSET’s work. When proceedings from committee meetings are published, this allows the permanent fixation of the status of discussions and the perspective of the expert community on issues currently being dealt with. In 2007, for example, it was the issue of interpretation and work with the public in Portugal,<sup>14</sup> seven years later in France the issue was how museums and science centres can make science and technology accessible, 2015 in Poland saw debates on the role and education of museum educators,<sup>15</sup> and Technical Museums as Guardians and Educators was the title of proceedings from the conference held in 2011 in Brno.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, in Milan in 2016 a less traditional perspective on cultural heritage as “cultural landscape” was chosen as the main topic (e.g. how labour and industry is reflected in the shaping of modern landscapes, and the phenomenon of emerging digital landscapes and cultures). In Rabat, Morocco, in 2017, the relationship between technological heritage and cultural identity was investigated, and in 2019 in Kyoto, Japan, the connection between tradition and a sustainable future was looked at. Our Canadian colleagues turned their attention to the digital world

<sup>14</sup> VALENTE, Maria Esther Alvarez (ed.). *Museum of Science and Technology. Interpretations and Activities to the Public*. Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Astronomia e Ciências Afins (MAST), 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Krakow students produced an interactive exhibition presenting options for informal education at museums and joint dialogue between students and museum professionals as an accompanying programme.

<sup>16</sup> GILBERTOVÁ, Marie (ed.). *Technical Museums as Guardians and Educators: Proceedings of the CIMUSET Conference 6.–10. 6. 2011 held at the Technical Museum in Brno, Czech Republic*. Brno: Technické muzeum v Brně, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> The International Association of Labour Museums, established in Copenhagen in 1994. See *WorkLab: The International Association of Labour Museums* [online]. [accessed 2023-08-24]. Available from [www: <http://worklab.info/>](http://www.worklab.info/).

<sup>13</sup> We looked at this in more detail in the pages of this journal: ROSENFELD-COHEN, Marie and Pavla STÖHROVÁ. Identifikace a interpretace materiálové, technologické a funkční podstaty muzejního sbírkového předmětu jako výchozí bod pro další muzejní činnosti. *Museologica Brunensia*, 2020, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 39–46.

at the annual conference in Ottawa in 2018, and the Covid-19 pandemic saw a series of webinars in which dozens of museum workers from dozens of countries around the world took part.

### CIMUSET Annual Conferences 2022 and 2023

CIMUSET members most recently had the opportunity for direct online contact and debate in various meeting formats as part of the ICOM General Conference in Prague in August 2022. The National Technical Museum hosted a so-called offsite meeting. Thus, CIMUSET made a symbolic return to the place where another important meeting had been held 50 years prior. A presentation regarding this anniversary was given by former committee President, Bernard Blache, who had taken part in the 1972 event.<sup>17</sup> This was followed by a presentation on technology museums in Czechia, their history, present and future, and this was jointly given by representatives of the National Technical Museum and the Technical Museum in Brno. In further presentations, committee members shared their experience and vision for the development of science and technology museums from various perspectives. A core and often discussed issue was the “power of museums” (which was also a central topic for the entire Prague General Conference) and the “future of education”. Museums’ educational and social role in the development of local communities is an issue which is highly discussed not just within CIMUSET, but within the institutions themselves. Museums’ work of building collections is giving way to museums as platforms for communicating new findings, and museums as nonformal educational institutions

with a large impact on the process of economic development within society and various social groups.<sup>18</sup> Established discourse and prevailing preferences are also illustrated well by which products are given recognition in the recently set up “CIMUSET Award” (tab. 2). And this is also reflected in the focus of the diverse programme for this year’s meeting, which is taking place in October in Seoul. In contrast, issues which we feel urgent in the context of Central European museum tradition are less addressed here, such as the classification and musealisation of historical technical heritage, documenting contemporary technology and science, the museum processing of industry and the protection of industrial and technological heritage, including immovable and intangible heritage in the form of technological and artisanal knowledge, etc. We believe that these issues should also be dealt with using the CIMUSET platform, and we are ready to add them to programmes and meetings in the upcoming period. Czech museological and museum experience still today has the potential to provide inspiration and contribute to improving museum quality and care for cultural heritage within an international context and through co-operation with other specialist committees and projects. It is also a pity that CIMUSET representatives were not asked to co-operate in producing entries for the new *Dictionary of Museology*, edited by François Mairesse. Here too, co-operation could be mutually enriching.

But back to the heated present. This October, CIMUSET organized an annual conference, together with colleagues from the National

Aviation Museum of Korea in Seoul. In particular, discussion of the new museum definition and how to implement it within the conditions of science and technology museums were built on last year’s activities. A central topic for the conference were the term “accessibility”, both in terms of physical accessibility, and also mental accessibility, that is to say without limits arising from belonging to a particular social or economic group, ethnicity, gender, etc. Together, we were seeking answers to the question of in what ways museum accessibility can be increased, and we were also defining who our efforts should be aimed at, who needs increased museum accessibility the most, and how this can reach maximum effectiveness. A detailed and busy programme comprising sixty presentations (selected from 160 applications!) is available online.<sup>19</sup>

From this year, CIMUSET is actively returning to publishing newsletters in which it informs its members of upcoming activities. It will certainly be of benefit for any museum workers to start taking greater interest in the activities of the committee. And so that’s why we appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation in the pages of this journal. We would like to thank all current and former members of the committee’s boards, as well as our colleagues from CIMUSET and other ICOM entities for the information provided. Specifically, Mr Ech Cherki Dahmali deserves particular thanks for his willingness to share the results of his research in ICOM’s archive in Paris in 2022 with us.

<sup>17</sup> He was President in 2004 to 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Special workshops organised by CIMUSET focused on training science centres’ and museums’ professional capacities, especially in developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region are also worthy of note.

<sup>19</sup> *50th Conference of CIMUSET Seoul 2023* [online]. Seoul: HANcompany and CIMUSET, 2023 [accessed 2023-08-24]. Available from [www: <https://cimusetseoul2023.com/>](https://cimusetseoul2023.com/).

## CIMUSET Award

The special CIMUSET Award was first handed out at the ICOM General Conference in Prague in 2022. This marked the culmination of a number of years of effort by a working group of experts – members of the committee board – to award and highlight exceptional projects which might provide inspiration across museum work spheres, from working with collections, their presentation and conservation, to research, management and education activities, etc. Any museums or collections of science and technology may apply for the award, regardless of where they are, their type or their size. Membership of CIMUSET is not a precondition either, with the only limit being that the project should have been implemented in the past two years. Nominated projects are assessed by an evaluation committee comprising at least seven members (1–2 members of CIMUSET’s board, 3–4 experts from museums of science and technology or science centres, 1 member from outside the museums sector). Three projects are always shortlisted, and these are announced alongside the winning project and presented during the CIMUSET annual conference.

Nominated projects must demonstrate that they are in compliance with the criteria, which conform to CIMUSET’s “shared philosophy” and the values it espouses:

1. The project is developed in co-operation with other institutions and/or citizens who represent diverse and interdisciplinary knowledge and competences.
2. The project is jointly created by the museum and wider community.
3. The project helps to involve marginalised and diverse communities.
4. The project has allowed citizens and local communities to engage in new ways with fields of contemporary science and technology.
5. The project also affects the institution undertaking it on an organisational level.
6. The project demonstrates sustainability in accordance with social, economic, environmental and cultural perspectives.
7. The project specifically develops sustainable development goals as adopted by the UN.

Tab. 2: CIMUSET Award (Source: About the CIMUSET Award. In *CIMUSET. ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Science and Technology* [online]. Paris: ICOM, 2023 [accessed 2023-08-24]. Available from [www: <https://cimuset.mini.icom.museum/cimuset-award/cimuset-award/>](https://cimuset.mini.icom.museum/cimuset-award/cimuset-award/).)

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