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Museum Collections are Living Things

**Interview with Kate Seymour on the occasion of her election as
Chair of ICOM-CC**

October 2020

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Julie Fassbender (JF):

Congratulations on your election as chair of ICOM-CC. What does ICOM-CC stand for?

Kate Seymour (KS): Thank you, it is a great privilege to be elected as Chair of the International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation ([ICOM-CC](#)), which represents a global and multi-cultural community of conservators, collection care professionals, educators and scientists.

I am looking forward to working with our team, the Directory Board and 21 Working Group Coordinators, during the next three years. It's a team stretching across the world, with Directory Board members from North America, Europe and Asia, and an even wider geographical spread of Coordinators. It is a truly diverse group with global representation. The current Directory Board team members are largely former Coordinators, with years of experience in leading Working Groups. That gives the team knowledge and understanding of how ICOM-CC works, what the Committee's goals, strategies and outlooks are, and how the Committee fits in the bigger picture of the ICOM family.

ICOM consists of numerous National Committees and Regional Alliances, as well as 32 [International Committees](#) and Standing Committees. Having members that know the 'ins and outs' of the Committee is very important for maintaining an overview of our activities and how they fit in with those planned by our parent body, ICOM. Our main objective, over the next three years, is to really ground ourselves in the bigger context. Also, there is a certain continuity and ability to keep things in motion and move long-term projects forward, since one of the vice chairs and I were members of the previous directory board.

JF: *According to you, what are the immediate challenges that the organisation is facing?*

KS: One of the most pressing challenges is how COVID-19 is affecting our colleagues and institutions around the globe that take care of cultural heritage collections. We have seen museums closed for months. This has an effect on those who work within and/or for museums – both permanent staff and freelancers. Also, the closed collections can become neglected during long

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periods of closure. It is the concern of the Committee to find ways to mitigate this. ICOM-CC has provided support and resources for museum communities. ICOM has published [guidelines](#) for conservation on how to close collections down during lockdown. We recently published in our latest [newsletter](#) 'On-Board' an article featuring tips and tricks for how to wake up collections after closure and how to find ways to manage and engage the public entering these collections in a COVID safe manner.



Photo from 'On Board', Newsletter of ICOM-CC
Volume 20 – Sept. 2020

JF: *Indeed, Covid-19 has had huge effects on public access to collections and conservation practices in general. Do you see any positive outcome from this?*

KS: The community spirit has been galvanised and solidified. We have seen huge numbers of digital initiatives providing our peers, colleagues and the public with new resources, webinars, catalogues and tips and tricks to support networks – all online.

This has really been an amazing period. There are a number of institutions that play a key role and of course ICOM (and ICOM-CC) is among them. ICOM has a number of [webinars](#) now accessible on their website. Another positive aspect is that the webinars are available to people who traditionally wouldn't have had access to this type of information – such as the general public. I do hope, however, we can return to in-person meetings when safe to do so, but in terms of finances and accessibility, these virtual meetings have had a positive impact on the conservation field during this unprecedented time.

In terms of best practices, the current situation has also expanded the public's impression of our field. I've recently read an article, published [Quartz at Work](#) by [Anne Quito](#) (September 25th 2020) discussing the important role of caretakers

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within the museum. The article addresses how custodians at the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art (New York) continued their work during the museum's closure, for instance: cleaning floors and displays, as well as feeding the koi fish in the fountains, ensuring the museum and its collection remained intact. Other articles, however, such as that published in [The Art Newspaper](#) by [Riah Pryor](#) (July 24th 2020), mention how collections were being affected during lockdown. Pest activity was up and had become an issue because collections were left in the dark.

“If anything, this shows us that collections are living things. They continue to ‘live and breathe’ and need care and attention, even when ‘sleeping’.” -
Kate Seymour

If anything, this shows us that collections are living things. They continue to ‘live and breathe’ and need constant care and attention, even when ‘sleeping’.



Photo from ‘On Board’, Newsletter of ICOM-CC Volume 20 – Sept. 2020: Inaugural online meeting of the new ICOM-CC Board for the 2020-2023 Triennium. Top L-R: Reiko Sakaki (Treasurer); Kate Seymour (Chair); Stephanie de Roermer (member); Middle L-R: Deborah Trupin (member); Emily Williams (Vice Chair); Nora Kennedy (Vice Chair); Bottom L-R: Claudia Chemello (Liaison); Qinglin Ma (member); Joan Reifsnnyder (Secretary)

JF: *And what about disaster relief? How can ICOM-CC help in times of desperate need?*

KS: The initial response to saving cultural heritage artifacts after disasters takes place after human life of course. During a recent presentation about disaster relief I was amazed to see how quickly response teams began to put measures into place to save cultural artifacts. This is where ICOM-CC can really play a role. The committee can

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provide a network of people who can help in case of disaster. Providing this type of support is a long-term project of the ICOM-CC. Conservators and museum professionals, through the ICOM-CC network, have to have access to local professionals in times of need – recently we have seen how this works after the explosion on August 4th 2020 in the port of Beirut. In fact ICOM has a Standing Committee dedicated to [Disaster Management](#).

JF: *How does your practice at [SRAL – The Conservation Institute](#) support your work at ICOM-CC?*

KS: ICOM-CC Chair is a volunteer position and without support of SRAL and the [Conservation & Restoration Department](#), University of Amsterdam (UvA), I wouldn't be able to do the work for ICOM-CC. ICOM Netherlands has always supported me as well. I am Head of Education at SRAL, and that means juggling a lot of projects at the same time. This has given me a good understanding of project management, planning and organising, as well as good interpersonal skills. These abilities are also essential for managing ICOM-CC and our 21 Working Groups. One of the most important tasks the Directory Board takes on is to organise ICOM-CC's Triennial

Conference and our sessions at the ICOM General Conference. ICOM-CC's next [Triennial Conference](#), to be held in Beijing, has been postponed until May 2021. ICOM's next [General Conference](#) will be in Prague in August 2022. These meetings require a lot of organisation and planning.

Also, my work at SRAL is grounded in an international context. A major project called the Indian Conservation Fellowship Programme ([ICFP](#)) is one example where SRAL is involved in international collaboration. Participating in global initiatives like this one, helps me to think 'out of the box' and consider cultural aspects different from those encountered in my daily life. To learn to work with different cultures and mentalities, as well as communicating with people that have different expectations, is very important and I think I bring that to ICOM-CC, and simultaneously these characteristics feed into my ability to work at SRAL.



Kate Seymour highlights some of the many projects she contributed to during her Board tenure. Still from short video. Source: [@ICOMCC facebook](#)

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JF: *What are you looking forward to for the coming period?*

KS: I love that my work at ICOM-CC consists of team-work. The Chair is an elected person, but the work we do is made possible through team effort, and without the input, collaboration and dedication of my fellow Directory Board members we could not take on the tasks and responsibilities of running such a large network of conservators and conservation professionals. We are supported immensely by our secretary. Our membership now stands at over 4000!

So, I'm really excited to work closely with our team over the next three years. This team mentality certainly brings a sense of community and continuity into the Committee. I am looking forward to taking up this leadership role, connecting with other ICOM International Committees and getting to know the Chairs of the other ICOM International Committees. Hopefully we can unite and interconnect the ICOM family even more.

The interview took place in October 2020 at the SRAL conservation studios in Maastricht. Text and editing Julie Fassbender.

For more information about SRAL visit www.sral.nl or follow us on Facebook @sralmaastricht and Instagram @sral_theconservationinstitute

Download *On Board*, the current newsletter of ICOM-CC on www.icom-cc.org

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