Preface

What is a museum? In two recent Ph.D.-defenses in museum studies and museology this question was asked from acquisitive opponents. What is a museum? The candidates answered well, pointing to the complexity of the museum, but also to how definitions are useful for different ends and how they change over time. Museums are one of these complex phenomena that are difficult to pin down, that elude easy designations, but very few would argue that one should not try. Especially not those belonging to the group of people who have museums as their chosen object of study, the museologists. So how then should museologists evaluate and take a stand in the recent debates about the museum definition within the international museum world?

We did not get a new definition of the museum at the ICOM General Assembly in Kyoto. After four hours of discussion more than two thirds of the delegates voted to postpone the decision on a new definition. We can agree on one thing, Icom's president, Suay Aksoy, is quoted to have said, that a new definition is needed. And that this is certainly not the end of the discussion.

Discussions about the new definition reached a broad audience, even Time spent time on the issue. In this instance it was not a new museum building or specific objects in museums that caught the magazine’s attention, but the work on a new museum definition. This is a true sign that what a museum is and what work they do in society is of general interest. However, the positions in the discussion did not come out in a very nuanced way:

To some, the new wording represents a worthy mission statement: updating a years-old definition and acknowledging that museums have a role to play in civic society, no matter where they are. But other experts have condemned the new definition’s “political tone,” decrying it as an “ideological” manifesto and expressing concerns that it doesn’t address the traditional functions of a museum (Haynes 2019).

In the many discussions that have taken place on blogs and social media, among other places, one can certainly find a rich material to study approaches to museums in different parts of the world, and within the various museum types. And certainly museology and museum studies have been important in formulating ways of redefining museums, yes, they might even have been instrumental in making the need for a new definition visible.

We believe that the study of museums can help reform and reformulate what museums do and what they are. But we also acknowledge that this may happen
in many different ways. In this issue of *Nordic Museology* we present articles that deal with a variety of museums. Museums with different missions, that work with different contexts and according to different fields of knowledge. Natural history museums, cultural history museums, art museums – and an oil museum. The articles deal with exhibitions, collections, educational departments and objects that travel in and out and between museums.

Curator and Ph.D.-student at Performance Design, Roskilde University, Anne Julie Arnfred, discusses “the research exhibition” as a concept and problematizes how a research exhibition might work in widely differing ways to foster and present research, or as a research practice.

In a different museum setting, the Norwegian Petroleum Museum in Stavanger, Ph.D. in Museology and Cultural History Camilla Ruud looks for how the history of the “Norwegian Oil Adventure” is presented exactly as this – an adventure. She probes how concepts developed in the field of folklore can be used to analyse an exhibition and how this matters for which narrative one may bring home from the exhibition.

From the University of Iceland, Ph.D.-student at the Department of Ethnology/ Folklore and Museum Studies, Katla Kjartansdóttir, has followed the extinct species the great auk under the title: “The changing symbolic meaning of the extinct great auk and its afterlife as a museum object at the Natural History Museum of Denmark.” The title tells it all.

In the article “Things that time forgot: Native American objects in Danish Museums. Problems and possibilities” Ph.D. candidate Laura Ahlqvist and colleagues form the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Aarhus University have researched what Native American objects can be found in Danish museums, and what their knowledge potential can be, at a time when museums are eager to dispose of objects that they do not have a stated responsibility for.

In the last article in this issue Ph.D. AlmaDís Kristinsdóttir and Professor Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson from the University of Iceland have studied organizational structures and the museum's educative role and function at the Reykjavik Art Museum. They are interested in how educational work and the educational profession get integrated in the organizational structures of museums, and thus point to the question that is the logical continuation of the question we opened this preface with: How should a museum work?

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**Literature**