



CoMuseum 2023 Report Executive Summary

The focus of the 13th CoMuseum International was justice and representation in and through museums and cultural organisations. Speakers, predominantly from the museum sector, emphasised two key aspects of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA): The importance of inclusion in content creation, advocating for museums to adopt co-creation practices which dissolve physical and cognitive barriers; and the need to become organisations whose recruitment practices are inclusive and whose workforce is representative.

Traditional art history narratives dominate current curatorial practice, and museums need to recognise community ownership of culture and open up the curatorial process to create conditions for inclusivity and co-curation. This will require museums to give agency to their audiences by empowering them through building trust over time and relinquishing curatorial control to community partners.

To do this effectively, museums need to question the extent of inclusivity across all operations, not just public-facing activities. The need for internal re-organisation within museums was explored in several sessions and CoMuseum 2023 showcased examples of internal re-organisation to serve communities. Speakers highlighted the need for greater diversity within museums and at leadership level, to effectively implement change and create organisations that are inclusive and representative in their staff structure and their public programmes. Museums become stronger when they face the challenges and the criticism that comes with major changes in their historical role and identity. It requires courageous leadership to guide an institution through this change.

The masterclasses gave the participants the opportunity to learn directly, from the experience of the keynote speakers. They covered expertise on co-production; creating a human-centred workplace, embracing universal design; a deep dive into the rights of artists; methodologies for creative restorative justice programmes, and developing participative collaborative exhibition projects.

The Satellite programme gave the keynote speakers the opportunity to discuss these topics with key institutions in Athens. This provided a valuable networking opportunity for all.



The CoMuseum theme is globally relevant. Dialogue involving museum leaders and professionals from the global majority is needed in order to equitably re-think the social value of museums. In addition, more needs to be done to bring government stakeholders and NGOs into the debate.

The CoMuseum Conference concept

The 13th CoMuseum International Conference on Museums and Justice, took place on 6 and 7 December 2023 in the Benaki Museum, Athens and on 8 December, at the Thessaloniki Concert Hall, Thessaloniki.

The focus was justice and representation in museums and cultural organisations. The conference panellists examined the implementation of DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility) principles within cultural organisations to diversify the workforce; the impact of DEIA on museum programming and the role of museums in advancing social justice. Themes explored during the conference included decolonisation, combating racism and gender inequality, inclusive practices for people with disabilities, co-designing programmes with community participation, and the role of museums in activism and preserving cultures.

The annual CoMuseum Conference (CoMuseum) is co-organised by the British Council, the Benaki Museum and the US Embassy, Greece. It is also the flagship project of the British Council's *Museums Revisited*¹ programme. It focuses on a key theme each year and acts as a

¹ [Museums Revisited](#) is an intensive capacity building programme that explores the role of museums in society today. The programme responds to the lack of skills and opportunities for museum professionals in Europe; facilitates dialogue between UK and European museums; creates new networks and partnerships, including between museums and other cultural and civil society organisations; and influences policy change in relation to the role of museums in society, local development, tourism and creative industries.

global platform of expertise for the wellbeing of cultural organisations and the communities they serve.

Strategic oversight is provided by The CoMuseum International Advisory Committee which acts as an advisory group of experts to increase international interaction, share best practices in the field, and advise on: the annual strategic plan; the development of a global museum community; key themes and trends in the international museum sector and the CoMuseum communication strategy.

By convening international cultural thought-leaders, practitioners and policy makers, CoMuseum aims to

- facilitate the production and exchange of ideas
- strengthen networks between culture and arts professionals
- showcase and share best practice
- build capacity in museum professionals and exchange know-how and expertise

The CoMuseum conference formats consist of:

- **Keynote presentations** by leading international museum and cultural practitioners
- **Panel discussions and fireside chats** presenting a broad range of experience and expertise
- **Workshops and masterclasses** for capacity building and exchange of practical know-how
- **Networking events** and
- **Satellite Programme** of visits to introduce the international speakers and panellists to leaders of key cultural organisations in Athens

Target audiences

CoMuseum aims to engage leadership level and mid-career museum and cultural professionals with thought leaders from the global museum community and experts in related fields. The audience also includes museum studies students from Greek institutions as well as NGO's and artists. The in-person attendees are largely from Greek institutions with some representation from EU and a British Council delegation of museum professionals. Post-Covid, the plenary of the conference has been live streamed to enable additional international cultural professionals to attend.

Findings

Museums have increasingly recognised their significance in social development and the promotion of social justice. However, there remains a question about the level of awareness among stakeholders, NGOs, and governments regarding the substantial positive impact museums have on society. CoMuseum 2023 showcased examples of museums' work in education, healthcare and with underserved communities. More needs to be done to raise the profile of museums and their role in society, particularly with government entities. The responsibility for advocating for museums rests on the shoulders of museum leaders. Conferences such as CoMuseum play an essential role in offering a platform for this advocacy work.

Furthermore, as explored in CoMuseum 2023, museums need to deeply consider their organisation structures to ensure that their internal structure is shaped to deliver their social justice ambitions. Just as modern museums prioritise DEIA in their physical spaces and programming, they must also ensure that their internal structures and decision-making processes reflect these values.

The notion of re-organisation from within emerged as a prominent theme during the conference, emphasising the need for museums to transform their organisational structures. This shift requires bold and audacious leadership willing to challenge traditional models and embrace innovative approaches that align with the museum's commitment to social justice and community engagement. By reimagining their internal frameworks to be more inclusive and representative of the communities they serve, museums can better fulfil their role as agents of positive change in society.

The challenge for the conference organisers is: How do we build on this? How do we ensure that CoMuseum 2024 takes these themes and develops them further for the benefit of museums world-wide?

We saw how the agency of individuals, communities, can be unlocked by equitable and accessible museum practice. We must continue to share best practice and learning to ensure that our museums are 'Of/By/For All'², and not exclusive.

The essential nature of CoMuseum 2023 was summarised eloquently by one of CoMuseum's Keynote Speakers:

*"No term could fit this meeting better than CoMuseum:
Cooperation, Communion of ideas, Consistency in research and pursuit of ambitious goals,
Commitment to human service, Coherence of the program, and Co-construction of new paths.
I felt at the centre of a 'Community of inheritance', as the Faro convention states.
I am still forming thoughts about what happened during those days."*

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April 2024



² [Of/By/For All](#) – a support network founded by Nina Simon and designed to support member organisations in building more equitable relationships with their local communities.