WHAT WE HEARD
ETHICS GUIDELINES

Canada

What We Heard – Ethics Guidelines

Introduction

CMA's Ethics Guidelines, developed in 1999, offered a unique perspective on ethics, tailored to the sector's landscape during the 1990s and 2000s. However, as societal expectations and the ethical responsibilities of institutions evolved over the years, the need for fresh, contextualized guidance for the Canadian museum sector has become glaringly apparent. The transformations in Canada and within Canadian museums have necessitated an update to ethics guidelines.

The CMA scheduled three virtual roundtables to seek the museum sector's feedback on its existing Ethics Guidelines as well as inputs for a multi-year ethics guidelines update strategy. Two English-language roundtables were held on May 12 and May 15, and a French-language roundtable was held on May 11. Additionally, written and in-person responses were sought from the sector as well. The objective of these roundtables was to understand from the sector whether and how they are using ethics guidelines in their institutions and professional life, the gaps in existing guidance on ethics in museums, as well as their expectations from a new CMA-led ethics document.

A significant outcome of these discussions was the creation of this report. This 'What We Heard' document is a collation of the varied views, ideas, and information gathered during these sessions. To maintain a balance between transparency and respect for individuals' privacy, all quotations published in this report have been anonymized. However, due acknowledgement has been given to all participants for their valuable input and participation (see Appendix). This report is not just a testament to their contributions but also a foundational document for the CMA's multi-year strategy to develop new and relevant guidance.

Methodology

The process for these roundtable discussions was designed to be comprehensive and engaging. Over the span of two hours, participants examined and discussed five key questions (see Appendix), dedicating approximately 15 minutes to each. They were asked to record their contributions on a "jamboard" that was made available in parallel to the discussions, and interactively discuss each other's perspectives in smaller break-out groups, all with the purpose of fostering an insightful discussion on the role of ethics in museums.

What We Heard

Understanding of Ethics in Museums

The discussions underscored the role of ethics as a pivotal element in professional conduct within museums. According to the participants, ethics extend beyond legal requirements, encompassing a diverse array of principles. These include, but are not limited to, fair staff treatment, respectful engagement with Indigenous communities, environmental stewardship with a focus on climate change, and the responsible use of digital technologies.

These principles do more than shape policy - they enrich museums' relationships with the communities they serve. Ethics should span from deaccessioning and representation in collections to the incorporation of varied narratives, honesty, conflict management, and public

perception. Participants also acknowledged key ethical considerations like Reconciliation and repatriation, intersectional diversity, and accessibility.

From the discussions and written responses, participants identified six vital ethical responsibilities for museums in today's world. Emphasizing the role of museums within communities, they highlighted public advocacy, problem-solving, and collaborative approaches to funding. They underscored the significance of insisting on accountability, conducting research, and maintaining collections as knowledge databanks to encapsulate the museums' duty towards knowledge preservation and dissemination.

Participants warned of a potential erosion of public trust if high ethical standards are not upheld. With the public often seeing museums as reliable information sources, it is crucial to reflect these ethics across all areas—from staff behavior and collections management to community relations.

Ethical considerations were also viewed as crucial in recognizing and mitigating the impacts of climate change on museum operations. These considerations extend to the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Participants' familiarity with the concept of museum ethics varied, from those reintroduced to the concept during the discussion to others who viewed it as a fundamental part of their work.

Usage of Existing Guidelines

The conversation highlighted various ways in which existing ethical guidelines find application in museum practices. Participants revealed a recurring need for modern, inclusive, and pragmatic ethical guidelines, adaptable to diverse operational contexts.

However, there were also voices of discontent; certain participants found existing guidelines either inadequate or excessively theoretical. They have since turned to other resources or practical examples to seek guidance on ethics. This led to dialogue about the impact of legal frameworks on ethics, revealing a complex interplay between the legal and ethical domains. The roundtable discussions showed that the application of ethical guidelines differs widely; some museums use them as policy references, others employ them for advisory purposes. However, some participants found the existing guidelines insufficient, especially in contexts involving Indigenous cultures and certain operational areas like addressing staff burnout and wage disparity.

Operational Concerns

The roundtable discussions revealed critical operational issues prevalent in the museum sector, including wage disparity, staff burnout, and job security. Participants suggested that a resolution for these issues might lie in fair compensation practices and securing adequate funding.

The current guidelines fell short of adequately addressing these diverse operational demands. Participants called for stronger labor guidelines and tangible documents to manage operational concerns, especially in collaborative efforts with communities outside of the museum sector.

Gaps in Current Guidelines

The discussions uncovered various gaps in the current ethical guidelines, including issues related to digitization, disparate pandemic impacts, fair labor utilization, environmental sustainability, relationships with Indigenous communities, and representation of underrepresented communities.

Participants suggested improvements in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), sustainability, governance, funding, collection care, defining cultural heritage, and understanding staff roles.

The discussions also revealed a need for improved inclusion of digital arts and intangible heritage, copyright management, as well as a way to navigate political landscapes in this age of political polarization, geopolitical conflict and disinformation. There was a noted call for more guidance on subjects like museum activism, socio-cultural change, community engagement, and considerations for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Non-Fungible Tokens (NFT) in arts and culture.

Desired Updates

The participants echoed a pressing need for revisions to the current guidelines, encompassing modern issues like climate change, Reconciliation, and digital transformation. They advocated for clear directives on handling digital collections and dealing with disparities in staff and volunteer treatment, alongside broader issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

They also suggested updates relating to trustee responsibilities, collections management, accessibility, sensitive object handling, copyright, professional development, and disposal. They wished for guidelines that are easily understood by both museum staff and the public and that remain adaptive to societal changes.

One key suggestion was that the guidelines should remain dynamic and adaptive, evolving in line with societal changes regularly. Given the uniqueness of each museum, participants believed that updated ethics guidelines should reflect this diversity and be applicable to various types of museums and situations.

In the era of digital transformation, the language in the guidelines should be broad yet specific, effectively applicable to both digital and intangible cultural heritage. Participants also called for an emphasis on making the guidelines widely available and promoted, particularly within smaller museums.

Participants underscored the need for a shift towards more values-based guidance, supplemented with resources to meet the new ethical standards. This could include education and programming that would help museums navigate their unique ethical landscapes. The goal would be to ensure the guidelines remain a living document—comprehensive, dynamic, and responsive to the ever-changing realities of museum operations.

Verbatim Comments

Participant 1: "Ethics is a foundation of acting properly… we should think about morality as well. Do we treat our workers fairly, or do we expect them to do more than they are paid for?"

Participant 2: "I'm looking for more intentionality and proactive guidance in the ethical guidelines. I hadn't considered climate change, but agreed it was impacting our work across the board."

Participant 3: "Repatriation is part of the whole gamut that museums need to be active in with respect to Indigenous…. Power issues – who has access, how is it cared for, what something is called, how it is reference/cross-referenced. So many fronts. It definitely needs a whole section in the code."

Participant 4: "We want to maximize access while respecting donor agreements and originating cultures. What are the implications of transferring traditional knowledge onto the cloud – particularly where servers are in other jurisdictions."

Participant 5: "The precariat. Precarious job security. The sector functions on the work of volunteers that are unpaid."

Participant 6: "The issue isn't one of paying people properly as much as treating people properly."

Participant 7: "Environmental sustainability, relationships with Indigenous communities. Under-represented communities. What to do with digital collections. We need to make sure that we've covered all the bases with respect to staff and volunteers."

Participant 8: "Ethics need to be broad enough to be understood but specific enough to apply to different and new situations."

Participant 9: "Need to be very clear about ethical treatment of staff. Professionalization of the sector. These are professionals. Not a volunteer-run sector. What do you pay people? Fair and equal pay matters."

Participant(e) 10 : « N'a pas entendu ce terme depuis longtemps. »

Participant(e) 11 : « "Les façons qu'on a besoin d'appliquer le code, un code dynamique, taille de l'institution, besoin d'un document plus complet ou plutôt contextuel, inclusive des fonctions d'éducation, de la programmation. »

Conclusion

The roundtable discussions shed significant light on the evolution of ethical considerations within the museum sector. The depth of the conversations and the varied perspectives surfaced underscored the importance of re-evaluating and updating the existing Ethics Guidelines. It is evident that the ethical responsibilities of museums have grown more multifaceted since the original guidelines were established in 1999. The need to address current and emerging societal challenges, respect Indigenous rights, promote fair labor practices, and consider environmental impacts is clear. The discussions highlighted the gaps in the current guidelines and articulated a vision for a comprehensive, dynamic, and nuanced ethics document that can effectively guide the sector in the present moment and in the future as well.

Next Steps

Building on the insights gleaned from these roundtables, the CMA will plan to revise the Ethics Guidelines. This task will involve distilling the recommendations and expectations voiced during the discussions into a multi-year strategy for updating the guidelines so that they adequately reflect the evolving landscape of ethics in the museum sector.

Key areas of focus in the strategy will include:

- Strengthening guidelines related to labor practices and is reflective of changes in labor market practices since the 1990s.
- Ensuring that updated ethics guidelines are in alignment with the principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).
- Incorporating guidelines that address the implications of climate change, digital transformations, and online operations for museum practices.
- Expanding guidelines to address novel technologies and intangible cultural heritage.
- Embedding Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) considerations into all aspects of the guidelines, ensuring they promote fair representation and inclusivity.
- Ensuring that the revised guidelines are applicable and flexible enough to cater to the diverse range of museum types and operational contexts.

The revised guidelines will also be designed to be adaptable, allowing for regular updates to ensure their continued relevance in a rapidly changing society. Alongside the revision process, efforts will be made to promote the wide availability and understanding of these ethical guidelines, particularly within smaller museums.

This process will involve ongoing engagement with the museum sector, ensuring the guidelines remain a product of collective wisdom and consensus. Through these efforts, the CMA aims to create a comprehensive and dynamic ethics document that continues to uphold public trust in museums, ensure the fair and respectful treatment of all stakeholders, and guide the Canadian museum sector towards a sustainable and inclusive future.

Appendix

Questions to Participants:

Question 1: What is your understanding of the term ethics as it relates to museums?

Question 2: Do you currently use these guidelines? If yes, in what context? If no, why not?

Question 3: Do the current guidelines support your operational concerns as a museum?

Question 4: What gaps do you see within the current guidelines that you would like addressed?

Question 5: What sections would you like to see updated?

Participants:

- Lisa Quirion, Collections Manager, Canadian Museum of Human Rights
- Jennifer Forsyth, ED, Alberta Museums Association
- Katie Fisher, Lead Curator, Canada's Sports Hall of Fame
- Camille-Mary Sharp, Faculty Fellow - Program in Museum Studies, New York University
- Jamie McKenzie-Naish, MD, Kingston Association of Museums, Art Galleries and Historic Sites
- Jennifer Gibson, Director/Curator, 1C03, University of Winnipeg
- Hillary Walker, Historical Interpreter, Toronto History Museums
- Wendy Fitch, retired, ex-ED of Museum Association of Saskatchewan
- Lorenda Calvert, Programs Manager, British Columbia Museums Association
- Lauren Wheeler, Strategic Services Director, Alberta Museums Association
- Jennifer Lee, Membership and Administration Coordinator, Ontario Museums Association
- Christopher Shackleton, Digital Projects Coordinator, Ontario Museums Association
- Shannon Davies, Exhibitions Project Coordinator, Canadian Museum of History
- Robin Etherington, Interim ED, Ontario Museums Association
- Sandra Zapata, Exhibition Project Manager, Canadian Museum of History
- Marie-Claude Mongeon, Head of General Secretariat and Strategic Projects, Museum of Contemporary Art Montreal
- Robert R. Janes, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus, Museum Management and Curatorship Journal (written submission)