A History of ICOM in Ireland

Mary J.P. Scannell and Dr. James White

As the IMA assumes an increasingly important role, Mary Scannell briefly reviews its origins in ICOM-Ireland.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation) was established on 16 November 1945, in London by representatives of 44 Governments. The aim of the organisation was to make a contribution to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice.. and human rights.

Today UNESCO is a world wide organisation comprising 159 member states. From this enterprise daughter organisations have arisen. Of interest here is ICOM (International Council of Museums). It was founded in Paris on 16 November 1946 with the stated aims, to further cooperation between museums, protect and promote their interests, widen their influence and stress the importance of their role in education and in the promotion of knowledge and understanding among peoples.

ICOM continues its commitment to the foundation aspirations while adapting to meet conditions prevailing in the last years of the 20th century. In September 1992 in Quebec, venue for 16th ICOM Conference, delegates met with the theme - "Museums: Rethinking the Boundaries". They explored many of the problems faced by contemporary society as it undergoes considerable and rapid evolution. Some of the issues listed in the programme are of profound importance to mankind - creative and intellectual freedom, the environment, ecological considerations and world famine the erosion of centuries-old cultures and new technologies - all of which affect the planet.

The first ICOM conference was held in Paris in 1948, the second in London in 1950 and thereafter triennially. ICOM NEWS was first issued in 1948. It is distributed to members, six times each year. Articles and matters of common interest to museums are published. In recent years thefts from museums and galleries have been documented.

In concise terms, ICOM is a non-governamental organisation, a professional body on the international level for all those concerned with museums. Within ICOM’s definition of a museum fall exhibition galleries, historical monuments, archaeological sites, botanical gardens and other institutions which display living specimens, and natural reserves. Within the Council are International Subject Committees - specialised commissions to deal with such subjects as, the care of paintings, the lighting of museum objects and type specimens in natural history.

In Ireland, in 1956, Dr Thomas McGreevy, the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, explored the possibility of establishing a branch of ICOM in Ireland. Dr McGreevy, poet and writer, was a man of international standing in the arts and a frequent visitor to cultural establishments.
throughout Europe. As Director of the Gallery it had come to his notice that the Guggenheim Foundation in New York had initiated the Guggenheim Prize for Modern Art. Dr McGreevy contacted curators of heritage collections within reach of the National Gallery and issued invitations to a meeting to discuss the matter at the premises of The Arts Council in Dublin.

Some ten persons, including the author, attended and each had a positive approach to ICOM. Management of the National Museum of Ireland was not represented. The result of the meeting meant that Dr McGreevy was in a position to write to George Riviere of ICOM in Paris announcing the intention to form ICOM - Ireland. Dr McGreevy took the chair. Geraldine Roche (National Museum of Ireland) and James White (Municipal Gallery, Dublin) became joint Honorary Secretaries. Catriona MacLeod, Mairin Murchadh, Marie Kelly, Ellen Prendergast, Donal O Mochridha, Joseph Raftery, Ruth Dromgoole and the author formed the Committee. The Arts Council was represented by its Director, P.J. Little and its Secretary, William O’Sullivan.

1957 was the effective date of foundation of ICOM-Ireland. From this time onwards meetings were held periodically and were attended by the few members. There was no set pattern. Dr McGreevy invited members to afternoon tea in Buswells Hotel where he graciously presided. He informed the committee of events in museums in Paris and other centres in France. As time approached he announced that Ireland was now entitled to enter for a Guggenheim Prize. The Committee proposed Dr McGreevy as adjudicator.

In 1958 Patrick Collins was awarded the prize and in 1960 Patrick Scott was the winner. Both entered for the International prize in the respective years.

"I deal only in corpses"

Later Dr McGreevy announced that he was not prepared to act as adjudicator for the third time as his work was not involved with abstract art, ‘I deal only in corpses,’ he said at the time. The Committee appointed the author, a botanist, who was then studying art, to be adjudicator. Exhibitions were to be scanned and suitable artists short-listed. A decision had been reached when Peggy Guggenheim decided to withdraw all Guggenheim prizes. ICOM-Ireland continued but now with reduced vigour. Committee meetings were few. Dr McGreevy had extra duties and so less time. Miss Geraldine Roche resigned from her post, at the National Museum of Ireland. A decision had been made to transfer the Herbarium and Botanic collections to the National Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin (administration of the Department of Agriculture). The author, in charge of the Botanic Collections transferred with the collections. A core group of foundation members continued to pay subscriptions and so ICOM-Ireland continued to exist. Dr William O’Sullivan who took over the reins from Dr McGreevy and represented Ireland at the San Francisco Congress.

Time passed, it was realised that ICOM-Ireland was in need of resurgence. Leadership and guidance was provided by James White, then Curator of the Municipal Gallery.
meeting was organised for 18 May 1972 to set up, formally, the Irish National Committee of ICOM.

In October 1974, a seminar - 'Museum Planning and Administration' - sponsored by UNESCO, was held in the National Gallery. There was a large attendance. Concern was expressed that regional museums were overlooked and had little place in ICOM-Ireland. To give this sector a voice, Aidan Walsh, recently appointed Curator of the first regional museum in the Republic, Monaghan County Museum, spoke at this meeting.

In 1975-76 basic information on the total range of the material heritage of the island of Ireland was published by the Irish National Committee of ICOM - Ireland. In 1984 a Directory of Irish Museums (compiled by John O'Sullivan) was published by the IMA and ICOM - Ireland.

At a committee meeting held in February 1977 it was proposed that a draft constitution for the Association of Irish Museums (later IMA) be considered at the next meeting. Members had been unhappy for some time that ICOM-Ireland was not meeting the needs of Irish museums and that a national association was needed. At the ICOM-Ireland Executive Board meeting on 13th June the draft constitution was considered and some amendments agreed. There was a further meeting on 5 September 1977 but it was not until 1979 that the IMA came into being, holding its first major meeting in Killarney in 1980. Today ICOM-Ireland and IMA continue to thrive and to work in conjunction.

Mary J. P. Scannell is retired keeper, Herbarium, National Botanic Gardens, Dublin

Dr. James White is retired Director, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin