

Foreword

by Mounir Bouchenaki, Director-General of ICCROM

The Foundation and Development of ICCROM: the conditions of excellence

The main justification for a special issue of the UNESCO journal *MUSEUM International*, focusing on the fiftieth anniversary of ICCROM, lies in UNESCO's decision to create this inter-governmental institution during its General Conference held in New Delhi in 1956. Further justification lies in the really exemplary way the organization has developed over half a century of existence.

So let us step back in time a few years and remind ourselves of how the international community decided to create an international institution for study and research into the conservation of cultural property, working alongside existing recognized institutions such as the Istituto Centrale del Restauro (ICR), established in Rome in 1939, and the Brussels-based Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique (IRPA).

In the archives currently being consulted by ICCROM colleagues¹ Professor Jukka Jokilehto and his wife, Professor Azar Soheil, managed to find the first correspondence and first mission reports referring to the creation of the Centre. Among these, they were pleasantly surprised to uncover the deep-seated reasons for UNESCO's decision to create ICCROM. According to these documents, the initiative came from the Swiss delegation, with a letter dated 13 March 1951 addressed to the Director-General of UNESCO, Jaime Torres Bodet, from the Director of the culture section of the Swiss National Commission for UNESCO, Pierre Bourgeois. The latter replied to a letter dated 20 December 1950, referring to the fifth session of the UNESCO General Conference, which emphasized the importance of 'research and the best methods of conservation and exchange of experience in the field of conservation' because, he concluded, 'no restoration should be carried out until the best methods for doing [it] have been studied'.

Based on this Swiss initiative, as early as July 1953, Jan Karel van de Haagen, Director of the Department of Museums and Monuments at UNESCO, contacted Franz Gysin, Director of the National Museum in Zurich, and Georges Henri Rivière,

Director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), because the UNESCO General Conference had asked ICOM, set up in 1946, to consider creating a centre for conservation. So, from the end of 1953, Georges Henri Rivière, Switzerland and UNESCO began to work together to draw up a draft text for the founding of what was to become ICCROM.

In the autumn of 1953 recommendations were made to prepare proposals for submission to the UNESCO General Assembly concerning the creation of a centre in a country that already had an infrastructure for the conservation of cultural heritage. Belgium was mentioned first, particularly by the Director of the Zurich Museum, as the best-qualified country, because of the existence of the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, directed by Paul Coremans, in Brussels. Italy was also mentioned. A passage from a letter dated 28 October 1953 from Bernard Barbey, the Swiss UNESCO delegate, on the creation of an 'International Centre for Studying Problems of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property', is quite explicit on the subject. Barbey reports on the meeting that Piero Gazzola had with the Director of the UNESCO Museums and Monuments Section, Van de Haagen: 'His Italian nationality and his obvious desire to see the centre installed in Rome naturally dissuaded me from telling him too soon that our preference was for Brussels. So I simply confirmed our intention to pick up once again, in Montevideo, the initiative that belonged to us in this affair.' The end of 1953 and the whole of 1954 were periods of intense discussion between UNESCO and ICOM, assisted by people in charge of museums or historical monuments in Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Italy and Switzerland. The draft text for the creation of the Centre was completed during this period. By late 1953 no decision had been made, and, in keeping with the UNESCO practice of reaching a unanimous decision, the Director-General undertook a broad consultation. He asked Van der Haagen to go to Belgium and Italy and to report back to the UNESCO Executive Council at its spring 1954 session.

While analysing and comparing the respective qualities of the two existing institutions in Brussels and Rome, Van de Haagen reported that the Laboratoire Central des Musées de Belgique in Brussels and the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome were both internationally reputed. But according to his report, Belgium focused on scientific research while Italy concentrated more on the practical aspects of restoration. Moreover, whereas Belgium had one major single central institution, Italy had several, each specializing in a different material, such as paper, mosaic, ceramics or stone, as well as a school of fire protection. In addition, the report noted that in order to deal with all the tasks entrusted to it, the International Centre would need close links with

other bodies such as the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

The years 1955 and 1956 were decisive in finalizing the draft text for creating ICCROM, drawing up its statutes and choosing where it should be located. Based on the reports provided and after careful study of all the factors, the Executive Council and then the UNESCO General Conference in its ninth session in New Delhi chose Rome for the creation of the centre.

This decision did not hinder the relationship with or cooperation from Belgium, which became one of the first eight ICCROM member states, and made IRPA experts available to the Centre. Moreover, ICCROM, once created and installed in Rome, was to develop a very special relationship with the IRPA in Brussels, obtaining for the IRPA representative the status of *ex officio* member with voting rights in the ICCROM Council, at the same level as the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro (ICR) in Rome. This privileged status lasted until 1992, when Liliane Masschelein-Kleiner, a member of the ICCROM Council, considered that this position was no longer justified after over thirty years of existence. She requested that the provision be annulled, reminding the Council that ‘the founders of ICCROM decided to appoint both ICR and IRPA as *ex officio* members, given their experience and expertise in conservation, and as a guarantee for the newly created institution’.

After 1959 – the first year of operation of the Centre in Rome – a large amount of correspondence exists in the archives between the ICCROM Director-General, Harold Plenderleith, and the Director of the Laboratoire Central des Musées de Belgique, Paul Coremans. This correspondence mainly concerns the doctrine and practice of the conservation and restoration of movable and immovable cultural property, which needed above all to be placed in responsible professional hands. It demonstrates that, from the outset, all those involved placed great importance on the excellence of the Centre’s missions. And excellence was the *raison d’être* for creating ICCROM, right from its origin.

This brief history shows just how much effort and discussion went into the creation of an institution such as ICCROM. It reminds us of the extent to which UNESCO was concerned to see a structure created for which the remit, defined fifty years ago, would remain up-to-date. Right from the start, the ‘founding fathers’ emphasized research linked to the conservation of ‘cultural property’ and the training

of conservation and restoration specialists to meet the challenges faced by our cultural heritage.

In the various documents published at regular intervals throughout the last four decades the discreet but effective contribution of our predecessors, recognized at the international level, has often been mentioned. ICCROM approval is now the worldwide benchmark for training in the vast field of cultural heritage. Multi-faceted action with reputable partners has made it possible to draw up methodologies that are now the gold standard for organizing international and regional courses. These courses have woven a genuine 'web' that today numbers nearly 5,000 consultants spread over every continent. Many training centres and laboratories in different parts of the world are proud of having been created with the help of ICCROM. Some possess a worldwide reputation, such as the Ecole du Patrimoine Africain in Porto Novo, Benin, or the Lucknow Laboratory in India.

The philosophical and doctrinal bases underpinning ICCROM's activities are rooted in the profusion of mid- and late twentieth-century ideas on the concepts of protection, conservation and restoration of 'cultural property', with the contribution of the ICOM and ICOMOS charters, UNESCO normative documents and the writings of Cesare Brandi and Paul Philippot. But today, in the early twenty-first century, with the broader concept of cultural heritage and its role in contemporary society, and with the new challenges of globalization (sometimes uncontrolled urban development, natural disasters and conflicts, consequences of climate change and the impact of the development of tourism), debate on the role and place of ICCROM is more topical than ever.

Over the last thirty years ideas about the protection of cultural landscapes have developed, and now incorporate the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, the restoration and conservation of underwater heritage and the conservation of contemporary architectural heritage. References to 'world heritage' have become almost universal, and the requirements for managing and valorizing it give ever greater responsibilities to the consultative bodies of the 1972 Convention – the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and ICCROM. The institutions responsible for research into conservation and redefining disciplines of training in conservation/restoration, therefore, need new approaches in order to take account of the enormous scientific progress made in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and of new fields of application.

ICCROM has a duty to provide the responses and strategies that the international community is waiting for, as it did at its creation.

| NOTE

1. A history of ICCROM is currently being written.



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2 The three ICCROM headquarters in Rome, from left to right: the first headquarter was located in Via Cavour (1958–1973), the current one in Via di San Michele 13 (since 1972), and future headquarters will be located in the ex-convent of San Francesco a Ripa.