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# The Definition of the Museum at the Intersection of Tradition and the Digital World

**Abstract**

This study explores the evolving definition and role of museums in the digital age, focusing on the intersection of tradition and technological innovation. It illustrates the challenges of reaching a universally accepted concept by highlighting the historical development of the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) definitions. The paper emphasizes that museums have always played a central role in preserving cultural heritage and facilitating education, but their tasks and methods have changed significantly over time. The 21st century has brought new expectations, including digital accessibility, audience engagement, and lifelong learning. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation, prompting museums to expand their online presence and educational offerings. The research discusses how virtual exhibitions, digital databases, and interactive technologies can enhance the relevance and outreach of museums. It also outlines the importance of international and national strategies in supporting digitisation efforts and cultural inclusion. Today, museums must adapt to societal needs while maintaining their core functions of preservation, education, and authenticity. The paper concludes that redefining museums requires balancing traditional knowledge mediation with modern, interactive approaches. Ultimately, museums are cultural hubs whose sustainability depends on their ability to innovate and connect with diverse audiences.

**Keywords:** museum definition; digital transformation; digitisation of cultural heritage; digital museum strategies

If we were to search for the precise definition of a museum, we would find, after much research, that there is no universally accepted, well-defined concept,[1] therefore, to understand what museums can offer, it is necessary to examine their precise role and purpose, focusing on their basic tasks and functions in the light

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[1]  Soares 2020a: 16–32.

of the impacts created by a constantly evolving world.[2] According to the current (2022) definition of the *International Council of Museums (ICOM)*,

> "[a] museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."[3]

The very first definition drawn up by *ICOM* was created in 1946, with the aim of identifying the experts who could become members of the international museum organisation. This definition has been amended substantially on two occasions (1951, 1961) and a version closest to the current definition was adopted at the 1974 Copenhagen Assembly - and has assumed its current form after four minor amendments (1989, 1995, 2001, 2007).[4] In 2017, *ICOM* set up a committee (*Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials, MDPP*) to keep the concept under constant review, which put to a vote at the 2019 *Kyoto* conference the new draft definitions that were discussed in a series of conferences around the world between 2017 and 2019, co-organised by the *International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM)*.[5] The difficulty of defining the concept of a museum is illustrated by the fact that the agenda for conceptualisation contained no fewer than 269 definitions.[6] Presumably, this was one of the reasons why no decision was reached, but more importantly, the presented draft was considered too ideological, abstract and unacceptable to the members. The vision-based definition draft proposed by the committee led by *Jette Sandhal* failed to achieve consensus and was therefore not adopted.[7]

It is noticeable that between 1946 and 2007, the concept of a museum was modified eight times, and even through a committee established in 2017 and numerous professional discussions at conferences around the world, it was not possible to renew the concept in 2019. It seemed that continuous social influences and changing demands no longer allowed for the definition to evolve

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[2]   Pop–Borza 2016: 398–405.
[3]   [Museum Definition] 2022; Sári 2022.
[4]   Mairesee 2019: 152–159.
[5]   Soares 2020b.
[6]   Mairesse 2020: 33–40.
[7]   Sári 2023.

further,[8] and so the creation of a new museum definition was postponed.[9] However, in 2022, at the *ICOM General Assembly in Prague*, the current definition was adopted, which has come a long way since the unsuccessful *Kyoto Assembly*.[10]

## Museums in the cultural system

According to the current law on museums, a museum is an institution that cares for, collects, registers, preserves, restores, processes, exhibits and otherwise displays scientifically organised collections of cultural property.[11] It promotes research and the understanding of natural, societal, artistic, cultural and scientific contexts. The name "museum" may only be used by a museological institution that has a legal authorisation to operate as a museum,[12] however, in practice, there are also voluntarily established or alternative institutions.[13] The notions of museum and exhibition are often confused, even though the exhibition is essentially the museum's function as a transmitter of knowledge. "Museum exhibitions present a group of artefacts and the objects that represent them as the primary means of communication and transmission of information."[14] Museums have been of particular importance in addressing the social, cultural and moral problems of society since the beginning of the 19th century. Their functions have changed in different historical periods, but museums are in one sense constant: they represent an unquestionable value. They represent, preserve and create value.

The development of European museum collections has historically developed in a variety of patterns. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, it was common for them to be created at the initiative of rulers or the state, or through private donations. At the same time, in the second half of the 19th century, museums were also founded by scientific associations, civic societies or local communities, especially in the Central European region.[15]

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8   Salguero 2020.
9   Berényi 2020: 11–31.
10   ICOM Define 2022.
11   [1997. évi CXL. törvény] 1997.
12   Kálnoki-Gyöngyössy 2020.
13   Gréczi (eds.) 2024.
14   Vasáros 2010.
15   Bodó 2016.

"The national and cultural self-representation mediated by museums was of particular importance in the 19th century in all regions where national identity and state control were problematic in some way."[16]

In Hungary, this meant resistance against the Habsburgs on the one hand, and against the awakening of the ethnic consciousness of the different groups on the other, emphasising the role and importance of Hungarian culture.[17] Their earliest and primary task was the collection and preservation of objects of value. The requirement for museums to be open to the public and the recognition of their educational function emerged from the Age of Enlightenment. This put an end to the representative character of the "private collections" of the Middle Ages, which were intended to indicate the greatness and influence of the owner. In the 19th century, the museum was intended both to raise the cultural standards of the working class and contribute to the social inclusion of women, because participation in cafés, academies and societies was at the time the privilege of men only.[18]

The world's museums play an important educational and training role for children, school groups, adults and the elderly alike. They provide learning opportunities, encourage participation and promote non-verbal and informal learning. They provide active recreation while offering entertainment. Today's modern museums, recognising the importance of active participation, not only encourage visitors to view the collection, but increasingly organise activities to involve visitors in the exhibition.[19]

"Until museums are set in stone, they must undergo some changes. Each generation will give them new tasks."[20] as quoted by *Zsuzsa Koltai*. Indeed, the role of museums has changed considerably over time. In the literature, museums are referred to as the custodians and enhancers of collections, whose role is to protect, scientifically process and publish the collections. Its obligation is to make the collection accessible through permanent and temporary exhibitions. Its tasks include the provision of cultural and educational programmes and publications, the digitisation of cultural assets and the support of research activities.[21]

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16   Koltai 2011: 16.
17   Koltai 2011: 16–17.
18   Koltai 2011: 19.
19   Simon 2003: 11–18.
20   Koltai 2011: 41.
21   Benedek 2002: 374.

In the 20th century, they had already become a centre for exhibitions and entered the cultural market as well. Nowadays, collections must be made understandable and accessible to all. Display cases are no longer enough, we need to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital world to bring the world of museums closer to younger generations.[22] By the 21st century, new functions have been added to the role of museums. Besides collecting and conserving, transmission has become a priority.

> "In today's globalising world, museums play a role in building and animating local communities, preserving local traditions and strengthening local identity. There is a tendency for museums to redefine their role and take an active part in the organisation of local communities."[23]

Museums also have a social function, for example their role in lifelong learning is a strategic element of cultural policy. If museums want to be involved in the lifelong learning process, they have to find ways to connect to the *World Wide Web*, make their exhibitions attractive through virtual programmes, and, in essence, museums needed to rethink the function and possibilities of museum education.[24]

However, it is important to stress that the social role of the museum is not limited to supporting lifelong learning. Museums also play a key role in shaping social memory and in responding to historical traumas such as wars, repression or ethnic persecution. In addition, there is a growing focus on micro-historical approaches that allow the representation of minorities, as well as marginalised or individual life stories. Museums can also support outreach to disadvantaged groups through their various programmes. All these features are not only offered in digital spaces, but also available within the physical exhibition spaces, community events and live guided tours.[25]

The situation, operation and relationships of museums are constantly changing. It is in the interest of the administration to ensure the survival of the organisation by making museums attractive to everyone, from young children to school age groups and the elderly, through a managerial approach, using the opportunities offered by the digital world, with interactive methods and the help of museum professionals.[26] Museum funding is becoming more and more difficult, while the number of visitors is decreasing due to changes in cultural patterns of

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[22]  Bertacchini–Morando 2011: 2–14.
[23]  Koltai 2011: 25.
[24]  Fejős 2003: 24–25.
[25]  Frazon 2018.
[26]  Benedek 2002: 374.

consumption and the way people spend their leisure time. It is its interest and task to address all age groups, as it is a place and workshop for lifelong education, training and self-education.[27] The aim of this paradigm shift is to make museums more active in the life of the audience, making formal and informal learning an integral part of both community development and self-cultivation.[28]

## Cultural promotion activities of museums

The role of museums as cultural mediators has changed significantly in recent decades. One only has to think of the emergence of museum andragogy and museum gerontology, which is a clear opening towards adults and the elderly. The informal learning of adults in museums, however, requires a combination of entertainment and education. Another big change is digitalisation. In fact, the virtual museum service provides a more effective, user-friendly visit for the interested public. And the digitisation of collections that were hitherto inaccessible to the general public has opened up new opportunities for cultural outreach.

> "Museum collections, whether physical or virtual, build on the knowledge of museum professionals, partly with the involvement of partner institutions, to ensure the fulfilment of the mission of cultural promotion by presenting the values of cultural heritage recognised and accepted by society."[29]

The current question of cultural mediation in museums is whether to maintain the classical communication of knowledge or to encourage interaction and the acquisition of new knowledge. But to be successful in the cultural market, institutions need to adapt to the needs of visitors and become more open. In her study, *Zsuzsa Koltai* suggests taking into account the types of learners in the case of an exhibition or museum andragogy programme. Active learners do not respond well to frontal presentation and long scientific explanations, therefore, it is important for them that information is delivered in a variety of forms, and that it is short and to the point. Reflective learners base their acquisition of knowledge on independent exploration, and sensory mediation methods are particularly effective in their case. The theoretical type of museum-goers are attracted by theoretical models and contexts, they are the ones who are keenly

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[27]   Gombos 2011.
[28]   Arinze 1999.
[29]   Szabó 2019.

interested in longer lectures by experts, while the pragmatic type are looking for practical knowledge, and prefer guided tours.[30]

In conclusion, it can be said that museums are a fundamental institution of culture, an indispensable element of the cultural process, and their basic task is to coordinate the processes related to information (production, processing, retrieval, reproduction). Its historical evolution is an integral part of human activity, social movement and progress, going back as far as the emergence of the information society.

## Museums in the world of zeros and ones

Protecting the cultural values of our world, irrespective of nationality, race or religion, is a fundamental task for all societies across the ages.[31] The institutionalisation of collecting, processing, organising and publishing these heritages dates back to antiquity. As the various forms of writing developed, humanity began to record its knowledge, which, either consciously or unconsciously, it organised and preserved. The ancient *Museion of Alexandria* was a scientific workshop created exclusively for the practice of scientific, intellectual work and the transmission of intellectual values. The period was characterised by a scarcity of written information, which was constantly copied, analysed and translated. Although the *Museion'*s collections were intended to be exhaustive, this was not possible because the development of the period did not yet allow it to overcome neither space nor time.[32]

With the eventual demise of the *Museion*, the ideals of the universal cultural collection also vanished[33] and it took almost 1300 years for a revolutionary technology be able to overcome time in the pursuit of creating cultural value. Writing was replaced by printing, the time to spread and produce information was shortened, books could be produced quickly and cheaply. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* brought humanity closer to beating time, book production took less time, the multiplication process was accelerated, and knowledge now reached a wider range of society.[34]

Then it took nearly 500 years to go beyond time to conquer space as well. With the advent of the digital revolution, personal computers and the internet, every physical object can now be described by a series of zeros and ones. Our

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30  Koltai 2011: 67.
31  [Magyarország Alaptörvénye – Nemzeti hitvallás] 2021.
32  Philips 2010: 1–40.
33  Watts 2008: 150.
34  Géza 2005: 5–11.

information and cultural assets are stored using cloud-based technology, accessible anywhere and anytime at the touch of a button, and can be modified and edited in real time by multiple users. The rapid production and sharing of content without boundaries has led to an exponential growth of information on a daily basis, which, even today, urges us to solve the problem of authentication.[35] It is clear that collecting and organising our cultural heritage has been an institutionalised core task of humanity since antiquity, but the means by which we do this has varied from era to era. Now, in an institutionalised form, museums and libraries have the opportunity to adapt cultural transmission – as a cross-generational responsibility – to the digital age, with the help of which they can realise the vision of the *Museion*, i.e. the systematic collection and authentic transmission of the world's cultural treasures.

However, the question arises as to where museums fit into this process and how quickly are they expected to respond to technological developments. With the rise of the internet, almost all information – the world's accumulated knowledge and cultural values – has become available and digestible to anyone, leading to the emergence of the so-called knowledge society. However, there is an inverse relationship between the degree of publicity of the process and the credibility of the knowledge available,[36] which can only be managed in an institutionalised way, and this is where a competition between society, cultural institutions and economic enterprises has now clearly emerged. Museums were not the ones who took the first steps, and they are not the fastest on this path. Social collaboration services such as *Wikipedia* or large companies such as *Google* have seized this opportunity. The former endeavours to build a universal repository of knowledge,[37] while the latter – without exaggeration – is working relentlessly to digitise the intellectual[38] and physical cultural treasures[39] of the world. However, given its institutionalised form and its core tasks, it is crucial that museums, as sources of authenticity, remain in competition and be active players in the digitisation of culture.

What tools do museums have to achieve this? If we look at museum tasks in the traditional sense, such as collecting, processing, disseminating or transmitting, we now need to adapt them to the possibilities of the digital world. The process of collecting, for example, is no longer necessarily something we have to imagine through personal research and outreach. Through the *World Wide Web*, the museum can actively search and bid for cultural treasures from

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[35]  Clark 2012: 79–98.
[36]  Langenderfer–Kopp 2004: 17–30.
[37]  Woss 2005: 1–12.
[38]  [Google books] n.d.
[39]  [Google Arts&Culture] n.d.

all over the world, according to the scope of its collections. In terms of preservation, it not only creates digital inventories of its cultural treasures, but also makes them searchable online, together with their related information, in databases in order to maintain the continuity of cultural transmission. To support scientific research, its physical objects are reconstructed in digitised form, reproduced and then, in collaboration with other museums, made available in a standardised format. In order to perform its scientific communication and pedagogical tasks, it can create virtual exhibitions in which objects will be at the centre, but they will no longer be trapped in the physical rules of our world. By making information available in an easy and systematic way, we increase the commitment of potential users to the institution by attracting the interest of the virtual visitor, so that they might later become personally involved with the museum.[40]

The use of digital tools in museums was particularly emphasised during the *COVID-19* pandemic. During the period of the pandemic, museums all over the world, including Hungary, were forced to close for long months, and had to move their activities to the virtual space instead of their physical presence. This has given a significant role to digital content development, in the form of online exhibitions, virtual tours and educational programmes. The pandemic created not only an exigency, but also an opportunity for museums to rethink their audience engagement strategy and to strengthen their presence in the field of digital culture distribution. A good example of this is *Marianna Berényi*'s book entitled *Falak nélkül maradt múzeum* [*Museum Without Walls*], which discusses in detail the lessons of the *COVID* period.[41]

## Environment for digital strategies

It is evident that museums have an enormous role and responsibility in making our cultural heritage widely accessible to all in an authentic form. With the spread and continuous development of digital technologies, and with the help of the internet, it can perform these core tasks in a new format. However, for this to be effective, it needs to be managed in a coherent way along predefined strategies at both national and international level. These principles lay down the processes to ensure, among other things, the protection of cultural objects that exist physically, as in the case of digitally processed objects, the

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[40]  Poole 2013: 13–15.
[41]  Berényi 2025.

originals can be locked away for permanent preservation. The recommendations also cover the storage and dissemination of digital content, which can be organised and linked into an online database so that digitised contents can be accessed anywhere, anytime, and by anyone. The information published can be edited and possibly modified for users who have difficulties in processing the various types of information.[42]

*NEMO (Network of European Museum Organisations)* also plays a key role in coordinating international strategies and digitisation programmes. The organisation addresses the issue of digital transformation in a dedicated working group, publishes recommendations and supports museums in adapting digital tools in order to promote visitor access, inclusivity and innovation.[43]

Regarding cultural institutions, a number of international recommendations have been drafted that aim to facilitate the coordination of digitisation programmes. On 4 April 2001 in Sweden, the representatives of the Member States of the European Union defined the *Lund Principles*, in which the basic concepts were declared that would allow the various digitisation programmes to be easily and uniformly adapted. The *Lund Principles* state that the cultural treasures of Europe represent unique and important public assets that must be digitised for global accessibility, education and transmission. The underlying principle is that digitisation programmes should target cultural treasures such as museum artefacts, archaeological finds, historical documents, maps or audiovisual material. To ensure the systemic functioning of these processes, recommendations have been made to establish a common forum within the framework of which a continuous exchange of experience could take place. They are urging the creation of common databases through which digital content can be accessed by the public in a standardised format. The *Lund Action Plan*, based on the principles, defined the cooperation of the *European Commission* with the Member States, within which the EC has the declared task of monitoring the work processes and collecting data on an ongoing basis in order to review and refine the principles set out.[44] To implement the principles, a committee called the *National Representative Group (NRG)* was set up, in which experts from the Member States reviewed the effective functioning of the programme on a six-monthly cycle. Hungary joined the work of the Committee in 2003.[45]

In 2002, the *Minerva Project (Ministerial Network for Valorising Activities in Digitisation)* was launched under the leadership of Italy, initially involving seven

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[42]  Csont 2018: 56–74.
[43]  Website of [NEMO Working Group Digital Transformation] n.d.
[44]  Ross 2004: 88–98.
[45]  [5th meeting of the National Representatives Group (NRG)] 2003.

Member States.[46] In order to extend the programme to the newly acceded Member States, the *Minerva Plus* programme was established in 2004, in which Hungary is represented by the *National Széchényi Library*. The main objective of the *Minerva Project* is to coordinate the different workflows associated with the digitisation of cultural assets and to ensure that they are implemented coherently at European level. In order to continuously monitor the digitisation workflow and to exchange experiences between Member States, various working groups have been set up.[47]

In 2008, the *Europeana* (*European Digital Library*) project was launched, the main aim of which is to digitally collect and publish the cultural treasures of the European Union's Member States. It is maintained by the *European Digital Library Foundation*, an umbrella organisation that brings together the main European cultural associations, libraries, archives and museums. It currently makes available more than 58 million pieces of digital content, including books, maps, photographs and paintings.[48]

The *Digital Agenda for Europe* was launched in 2010 and it is one of the seven flagship initiatives of the *Europe 2020* strategy adopted by the *European Commission*. It aims to create a unified digital market based on the coordinated operation of different ICT tools and the widespread availability of high-speed internet, which will create sustainable social and economic benefits.[49] A key element of the *Digital Agenda* is the digitisation of European cultural assets, and the storage and distribution of digitised content. According to its definition, cultural assets include printed material, maps, sound recordings, monuments and archaeological sites. The main strategic issues addressed in its recommendations include the mission of *Europeana*, the digitisation of copyrighted objects, and the preservation of digitised content.[50]

The strategic environment for digitisation processes has not only been developed at international level, but sectoral recommendations have also been established at national level. The *National Information Communication Strategy of Hungary* has been developed along the lines of the actions set out in the *Digital Agenda for Europe*.[51] The strategy declares that the digital state is responsible for providing e-services that improve the quality of life of society as a whole. And

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46 [Minerva Project] 2011.
47 Szalóki 2005: 6–11.
48 [The Europeana platform] 2023.
49 Európai digitális menetrend / Európai Bizottság 2010.
50 [A Bizottság ajánlása…] 2011: 283/39–45.
51 [Nemzeti Infokommunikációs Stratégia 2014–2020.]

to ensure the accessibility of digital services, it will create a broad-based education and acquisition of digital competences.[52]

Various digital collection portals are important elements of the domestic digital public collection environment, which ensure the wide dissemination of digitised content of Hungarian museums and collections. The *MuseuMap*[53] website plays a prominent role in this, serving as a common search interface for Hungarian museum databases, as does the *Hungaricana,*[54] which makes digitised documents of public collections (archives, libraries, museums) available to anyone. These portals contribute to the democratisation of cultural heritage and support the social and educational use of the contents of public collections.

The *Digital Success Programme* was launched at the end of 2015, with the main mission statement being that every citizen in Hungary should be a beneficiary of digitalisation. For example, the *Digital Education Strategy of Hungary*[55] was developed within the framework of the programme, which was also designed along the European digitalisation guidelines. One of the priorities of the programme, which has already been implemented, was the reduction of VAT on internet usage from 27% to 5%, in order to promote the widespread use of the internet. After making the internet widely available, the programme was expanded in 2017 to help new areas adapt to the digital economy. Within the framework of the *Digital Success Programme 2.0*, additional programmes to support digitisation processes have been more broadly conceived. One element of the extended programme is the digitisation of public collections and the use of digitised content for educational purposes.

Recommendations for the digitisation of public collections are set out in the *Digitisation Strategy of Public Collections*, which has the primary objective of maximising the use of public collections by society and the economy, which must be implemented not as individual developments but as part of an integrated institutional framework. The strategy identifies as a key priority that our systematically collected digitised national cultural treasures should be integrated into the international cultural circulation through the provision of data to *Europeana.*[56]

With the *Digitisation Strategy of Public Collections*, a comprehensive national document has been created, which, alongside existing national and international digitisation efforts, simultaneously analyses and evaluates digital services. The strategy provides a detailed description of digitisation programmes in

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52   [Magyarország Digitális Oktatási Stratégiája] 2016.
53   Official website of [MuseuMap] n.d.
54   Official website of [Hunaricana] n.d.
55   [Magyarország Digitális Oktatási Stratégiája] 2016.
56   [A Digitális Jólét Program 2.0] 2017.

Hungary, their legislative background and, after analyses, sets out comprehensive recommendations. Its overarching objective is to provide broad accessibility to public collections, openly publish credible knowledge and also to channel it into educational processes, in order to improve the quality of digital literacy across the whole of society.[57]

The practical implementation and methodological support of museum digitisation efforts at the national level is carried out by the *Museum Education and Methodology Centre (MOKK) of the Hungarian Open Air Museum*,[58] which assists museum professionals in the application of digital content for educational and public education purposes through training courses, publications and case studies. Several of their publications illustrate well the potential of digital tools for teaching and interpretation in Hungarian museum practice.[59]

In addition, the *National Museum Methodology and Information Centre (OMMIK)* plays a prominent role in the coordination of museum IT and content development, supporting the digital transformation of public collections with professional guidelines, infrastructure development and the dissemination of best practices at national level.[60]

## Conclusion

Museums curate and exhibit scientifically organised collections of cultural heritage and support a wide range of research into cultural and scientific interconnections. In recent decades, the role of museums as cultural mediators has undergone significant changes. Digitisation has brought about a sea of change, digital content-enabled services provide a user-friendly experience and the digitisation of previously inaccessible collections opens up new opportunities for cultural outreach. The spread of the Internet has made the cultural heritage of the world accessible to all, but public access and the authenticity of the knowledge available require a careful balance, meaning that museums must remain competitive and actively involved in the transmission of culture through new media. The current question is therefore whether the cultural mediation of museums should remain within the classical communication of knowledge, or whether it should encourage interaction with visitors in a new medium and through new channels, adapting to their needs.

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[57]   [Közgyűjteményi Digitalizálási Stratégia (2017–2025)] n.d.
[58]   Official website of [MOKK] n.d.
[59]   Ruttkay–German (eds.) 2017; Pacsika (ed.) 2020.
[60]   Official website of the [OMMIK] n.d.

It is evident that the definition of museums is a challenging task for the sector. As we can see, the concept cannot be created without an understanding of the responsibilities of museums and the ever-changing technological possibilities and needs of society. Perhaps it is this changing environment that does not allow for a precise definition.

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