Your Majesty, Minister, honorable guests and dear colleagues...

I’d first like to express my appreciation to the members of the Directory Board for the invitation to present the Triennial Lecture. This would be a great honor at any time of course, but it’s especially so on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of this important ICOM committee. When the first meeting of ICOM-CC took place in Brussels during the week of September 6, 1967, 120 people from twenty-five countries participated. Fifty years later, we welcome over 1,000 delegates from fifty-eight countries. I think these figures alone say a great deal about the scope and vitality of this organization.

Someone recently asked me what I thought made ICOM-CC different from other organizations for conservation professionals. Of course, every organization has its own particular strengths and purpose but there is something about ICOM-CC that I have always especially valued: This is a profoundly democratic organization. I believe this has a lot to do with the twenty-one working groups that both form ICOM-CC’s structure and serve as its driving force. The working groups have always have been vehicles for members to have a direct role in the life of this organization— to stay connected, to collaborate, to exchange information, and to take collective action towards common goals— which of course is the very essence of democracy. Members can choose to participate as much— or even as
little— as they please. For the past fifty years, this democratic structure and the spirit of collaboration that animates it have supported the members of ICOM-CC in making significant contributions to the conservation profession. I think this is an excellent reason for all of us to celebrate this week.

Over the course of the past triennium, Joan Reifsnyder and Janet Bridgland took on the considerable task of compiling a history of ICOM-CC, gathering information & photographs from materials that had been stored in the ICOM archive in Paris and the ICCROM archive in Rome. They were substantially aided by many people within ICOM-CC who generously made available to them their personal records, files, photographs and memories. This was an enormous effort but thanks to their work we now have a formal record of the formation and evolution of ICOM-CC. Since that record has now been made available to all of us in our conference packs, I plan to give only a brief account this morning of why and how ICOM-CC came into being. In doing this, I plan to acknowledge some of the visionary people who helped launch this organization and who contributed to the development of our field in so many important ways. Some of their names will certainly be familiar ones, others less so. But all made noteworthy contributions to conservation throughout most of their careers and I think it’s appropriate, on the fiftieth anniversary of ICOM-CC, to pay tribute to their efforts because today we all stand on the foundation that they put into place.

Anniversaries are occasions for both emotion and reflection: We look back, we take stock, we feel sentimental and we celebrate our journey. Anniversaries also urge us to look forward: To the path that we’ve yet to take and perhaps to work still left undone. Fifty years ago, in 1967, the leaders of our profession were dealing with many issues that were
very specific to the time and circumstances in which they found themselves. Our field was still going through the long process of transforming from a largely practical occupation based upon a tradition of restoration to a scientifically-based profession with a defined body of knowledge, informed by theory and an ethical code. Our founders had very clear ideas of what needed to be done to complete that transformation, and much of what they accomplished through organizations like ICOM-CC was done in pursuit of the goal of making conservation into a true profession.

Five decades later, in 2017, I think we can say that we have made enormous strides, even as our profession is still evolving and its horizons expanding in ways that will demand fresh thinking and bold leadership on the part of our field’s emerging leaders. Perhaps the best way to chart a path for the future of our profession is to become reacquainted with our roots. While history doesn’t always provide us with a ready-made template for dealing with present day challenges, it can at the very least provide some ideas and inspiration. And there really is a great deal of inspiration to be found in ICOM-CC’s beginnings.

‘Someday the history of these important committees should be told...’

This sentence appears at the beginning of a brief report that appeared in the Newsletter of the American Group of IIC in October, 1967. The report describes the creation of ICOM-CC which had occurred only the month before at a meeting in Brussels when the members of two long-standing ICOM committees— the Committee for Scientific Museum Laboratories and the Sub-Committee for the Care of Paintings (sometimes also called the Commission for the Care of Paintings) — decided to proceed with a merger that had been under
consideration for some time. As this statement suggests, these two committees separately were making important contributions to the emerging profession of conservation— and in fact had been doing so for almost two decades.

The sub-Committee for the Care of Paintings was the older and smaller of the two ICOM committees; it had been founded in 1948 and, as it name indicates, dealt with a fairly wide range of matters relating to the technical study, restoration and exhibition of paintings. The names of members of this committee are today, unfortunately, not as familiar to as many conservators and scientists as they should be. In fact this committee included a very eclectic and impressive group of people. Most— although not all— were art historians, curators, and even museum directors. In 1967, the membership included such figures as: Germain Bazin, curator in chief of paintings at the Louvre; Sir Philip Hendy, director of the National Gallery in London (who had also served for six years as a president of ICOM); Pasquale Rotondi, an eminent art historian and arts administrator (and who at the time of ICOM-CC’s founding was the director of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome); Stanislaw Lorentz, Director of the National Museum in Warsaw; and Theodore Rousseau who was head of the paintings department at the Metropolitan Museum. And then there was the Dutch art historian Arthur van Schendel who also had a role in the establishment of both IIC and of ICCROM and, in 1963, was instrumental in the creation of the Central Laboratory in Amsterdam. At the time of ICOM-CC’s founding in 1967, in addition to being a member of the sub-committee for the Care of Paintings, van Schendel was also serving as President of ICOM as well as director of the Rijksmuseum.
The Committee for Scientific Museum Laboratories— was the larger of the two ICOM committees that formed the basis of today’s Conservation Committee. It had been formed in 1950 as more museums were creating in-house labs and employing scientists to carry out research and technical analyses. A look at the roster of names associated with this committee shows that it was made up of people who form the virtual pantheon of our profession. It would take the rest of the morning to list them all and describe their contributions to the field—although I doubt if any of them really need an introduction. They included Norman Bromelle, Francoise Flieder, Rutherford John Gettens, Paolo Mora, Robert Organ, R. Sneyers, Nathan Stolow, Paul Phillipot, Harold Plenderleith, Gary Thomson, Giorgio Torraca— to name really just a few.

These are the people who helped build the foundations of the field that we know today; they contributed to the development of the theoretical, practical, and scientific underpinnings of our profession. Like their colleagues on the Care of Paintings Sub-Committee, these scientists and conservators were active on many fronts: several had roles in IIC and in the formation of ICCROM. They taught and mentored younger colleagues and wrote many of the seminal publications of our field. And they took care to create a profession that was interdisciplinary and to which scientists, curators and conservators could all contribute.

Since 1955, these two committees had been meeting jointly every two years. The decision to finally merge the two committees was made in 1965, with the purpose of—in the words of the leaders of the committees— “improving the collaboration between museum keepers, restorers, and laboratory specialists.” (ICOM News, Vol 18, n.5-6, October-December 1965,
Two years later in September 1967, the two committees met for the last time, at the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique (IRPA) in Brussels. It was then, on the 6th of September, 1967 that the merger was formalized and ICOM-CC was born.

The first directory board of the newly formed ICOM Committee for Conservation was made up of members drawn from both of the former committees, and so consisted of a good mix of conservators, scientists, art historians and curators. Even the President of ICOM at the time— the remarkably energetic Arthur van Schendel— served on its first Directory Board.

The members of the two committees who came together to form ICOM-CC were clearly people of high intellect and impressive achievements, but it was their leadership and vision for the future of conservation that made this organization a reality. ICOM-CC’s founders cared deeply about cultural heritage and its preservation. Through their work and involvement in ICOM-CC and related organizations like IIC and ICCROM, they took responsibility for assuring that the right mechanisms would be in place both for the protection of heritage and for the professionalization of the field of conservation.

The first ICOM-CC Directory Board put together an ambitious list of recommended actions that they believed would contribute to those goals. These included steps to facilitate communication and coordination with other international bodies (like IIC), the formation of working groups, and the publication of a multilingual technical terminology. The report of the initial meeting of the first Directory Board also lists no fewer than seven recommendations that dealt specifically with the training of conservation personnel— a fact
that underscores how critically important members of the Board considered training and its potential for raising professional standards.

In fact, concern about the professionalization of conservation remained a priority throughout the first decades of ICOM-CC. For despite the increase in the number of conservation labs in larger museums, and the formation of professional groups like ICOM-CC and IIC, by the last quarter of the 20th century there was still no universal agreement on what made a conservator. Neither were there yet clearly defined standards of practice nor a statement of the values, purpose and capacities of the people represented in the profession. Not surprisingly, there was also no consensus on the type of education and experience that needed to be acquired by people working in the field.

_____________________

“In most countries, the profession of the conservator-restorer is still undefined: whosoever conserves and restores is called a conservator or a restorer, regardless of extent and depth of training.”

I think one of the best summaries of the state of the field during the second half of the 20th century can be found in the introduction to a document that wasn’t drafted until eleven years after ICOM-CC was formed, but which very succinctly describes the critical situation that conservation had been facing for many decades.

‘The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession’ was the first serious attempt—in its own words—“to set forth the basic purposes, principles, and requirements of the conservation profession”. This effort began in November 1978, when Agnes Ballestrem
submitted a working paper she had drafted to ICCROM’s Standards and Training Committee. Ballestrem was a specialist in the conservation of polychrome sculpture and was keenly interested in the development of the professional profile and status of people working in the field. Ballestrem’s working paper would set in motion a long process of reflection and deliberation on the purpose and functions of a conservation professional.

Since a document that aspired to define conservation required wide consultation with the field, ICCROM entrusted ICOM-CC to guide Ballestrem’s working paper through successive reviews, discussions and revisions by other colleagues. The entire process spanned six years, with the final version presented to the ICOM-CC membership at the triennial meeting held in Copenhagen in September 1984. So in fact this week we are also celebrating the anniversary of this iconic document, appropriately in the city where it was presented in its final form thirty-three years ago.

‘The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession’ would become what I believe is one of our field’s most significant foundational documents. It is a remarkably succinct yet far-ranging document, describing the values and functions of a conservator, how we operate in the world, how we relate to allied professions, and the type of education and formative experiences required for competent practice.

I don’t think I need to describe its content further since you can certainly read the Definition yourself on the ICOM-CC website. I urge you to have a look at it—especially if you’ve never read it, or haven’t read it in some time. Many of us who have been in this profession for a number of decades still have a deep appreciation for the power of this document and the role it has played in the professionalization of conservation and in our concept of our field.
Someone who is looking at it now, perhaps for the first time, might be tempted to think that it is somewhat outdated. This document is, after all, thirty-three years old. It’s certainly true that the current version of the *Definition* no longer provides a complete picture of the conservation world that we now live in—a world that has changed and expanded in a number of ways over the past decades. Nonetheless, I think we should view the *Definition* as more than simply a ‘period piece’, or a relic representing a single moment of our history. It’s a great deal more than that. Its real significance lies not just in what it says, but rather in what it does: It functions as a compelling statement of our values and identity as a profession. As such, I believe we should consider the *Definition* as a dynamic document, something that can be updated and refreshed, made more current and reflective of the world as we now know it. As it set out to do thirty-three years ago, it should describe our response as professionals to the challenges and opportunities of our age.

**Where are we now?**

There is no question that conservation has moved towards greater professionalization over the last five decades. During that time, we’ve become a scientifically-based profession, and in many countries conservators follow clearly articulated standards for practice, based on an ethical code. We have thriving professional organizations that represent conservators and conservation scientists on the international and national levels and we have established academic pathways for entry into the field. It might seem that most of the concerns the founders of ICOM-CC had about professionalization have been largely met. However, while these are all significant steps that have truly advanced our field, I would suggest that in fact we still have some unfinished business on our path towards professionalization.
One of the important hallmarks of any true profession is a system of oversight by a professional body or a legal entity that can attest to competent and ethical practice on the part of the people who work in that field. This of course protects the interests of both members of the profession as well as members of the public whom they serve. And yet, unlike other professions, what we don’t yet have— except in only a few countries— are robust systems of accreditation that can attest to the competency of the people who practice conservation. A small handful of countries— most notably the United Kingdom and Canada— have taken the lead in establishing accreditation systems. Australia has a fairly rigorous vetting system through its national professional organization— the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material.

But members of the profession elsewhere are still debating the merits of accreditation. In the US, accreditation (or certification as it’s called in the States) is still a hotly debated topic, even a divisive one. In many European countries, the concern seems to focus more on attaining legally protected status for conservators which, like accreditation, would limit the profession to those who are actually qualified to practice it. However, the process to establish legal protection has not been easy or straightforward, despite serious efforts to move this forward. And in countries where conservation does not have a long history as a field, colleagues frequently report that there is a lack of understanding among some museum colleagues of what a conservator actually does, who is entitled to use that title, and the type of training required for competent practice.
And so, despite the very real advances we have made in so many areas, we have not yet attained the full measure of professionalization that accreditation and legal representation would offer. Because of this, those words from the opening lines of the *Definition* are still true thirty three years later in too many countries represented in ICOM-CC: *whosoever conserves and restores is called a conservator or a restorer, regardless of extent and depth of training.*

I think we should be very concerned about this. Because as our field expands in size, scope and influence, the lack of a process to clearly identify competent and ethical practitioners in every country represented within ICOM-CC will certainly undermine our credibility and status. We’ve come too far to allow that to happen. So I believe this final and somewhat elusive step in the professionalization of conservation is something that we should take up with renewed purpose and vigor.

For practical purposes, the actual mechanisms for either accreditation or for legal protection of the profession will likely need to be developed on the national or regional levels. However, I think there is something to be said for having a powerful collective statement—like the *Definition of the Profession*—that reflects international consensus on what makes a conservation professional. I believe there is a case for looking at the *Definition* with fresh eyes and with a view to how we might update this document so that it can speak for us in the 21st century. Quite frankly, as the profession faces new and urgent challenges, I would say we need a document like this now as much as we ever did. So I invite you to think
about what ‘A Definition of the Profession’ for the 21st century would need to say about how we work now, and where we might be going as a profession?

The Preprints of the last Triennial meeting, held in Melbourne, contains an article that suggests a good starting point. Entitled “What is Conservation? An examination of the continued relevance of ICOM-CC’s The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession”, Robyn Sloggett makes a compelling case for the continued viability of this document, while noting that it does not fully represent, as Robyn puts it, ‘an inclusive and expansive professional model’ that ‘acknowledges the need for conservators to work within a pluralistic and diverse environment’. This is an important statement and sums up a key area of difference between the world of conservation fifty years ago and the one we inhabit today.

I think an updated Definition would certainly need to reflect the fact that conservation has become a much less introverted field than it was in the late decades of the last century. Today we all understand that conservation has an important social dimension and that, as professionals, we need to connect with a wide range of communities, including those who have been traditionally marginalized. We do operate in a very pluralistic world, one in which a number of different groups of stakeholders are encouraged to have a voice in how their cultural patrimony is collected, interpreted and preserved. We know that there may be a number of values attached to the objects we conserve, and that some of these values may shift with time or with different groups of people. The greater the number of values
associated with heritage, the more nuanced our thinking will need to be. This openness and flexibility are critical to how we work and define ourselves now.

What else might define conservation in the 21st century? Well, we already see conservators and scientists grappling with new materials and media, and bold new forms of artistic and cultural expression, many of which were unknown fifty years ago. New categories of cultural objects keep emerging: modern materials, new forms of contemporary art and design, electronic and time-based media. Many of these new cultural categories will require new conceptual approaches, innovative research and working methods. They are likely also to require people with different knowledge and skill sets—unlike the more traditional backgrounds of the arts and physical sciences, we are likely to see people entering the conservation field with computer science backgrounds, for example. The boundaries of our field have always been quite elastic, expanding in new and sometimes unforeseen directions with a steady stream of compelling new problems to be solved. The future promises more of the same.

One of these will be that issue that many of us consider the major challenge of our times: Climate change will continue to influence how we deal with collections, as well as heritage buildings and sites. In most of our countries we have been seeing a disruption to weather patterns, an increase in severe weather events. In the United States, we have just experienced one of the most severe hurricanes on record. And over recent weeks we have seen devastating floods in various areas of South Asia. Sadly, we will be seeing more events like this, throughout the world.
There is no doubt that climate change will bring new and greater risks of environmentally-induced deterioration. It’s already doing so. Addressing these risks will require new thinking and research, which will also need to factor in environmental and financial sustainability. We must rethink how we use our resources, and that links to how we specify and maintain environments for our collections—whether on display, in storage or in transit. The field has already been moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to the museum environment that in the not-too-distant past relied on a narrow set of environmental parameters and fairly tight control. This never quite made sense anyway, given how difficult these types of environments are to achieve for many museums. I think there is now growing acceptance of a more pragmatic approach to preventive conservation more generally, and in particular in how to determine an appropriate environment for a particular collection— one that takes into account such factors as local climate, type of building, the historical conditions of the collection, the capabilities of existing systems, availability of resources, and so on.

I must say that it’s been especially exciting to see the pioneering work that’s been carried out here in Denmark over recent decades by members of the conservation, architectural and building science communities. Striving towards low-energy or passive environmental management, our colleagues here are exploring design and construction principles that can contribute to safe environments for collections without heavy use of energy resources. While some of these designs may need to be adapted for other contexts, they serve as valuable references and prototypes for the cultural buildings of the future. Frankly, I think
this will be one of the most exciting areas of research and exploration for conservation professionals as well as architects and engineers in the coming decades. We need to overturn old ideas and expectations about the museum environment and develop new thinking and practical strategies for assuring the long-term care our collections in museums and historic sites.

Before I close, I would like to call attention to one other way in which ICOM-CC has changed over the past fifty years and, in my mind, it is one of the most exciting developments we have seen. We are now, in 2017, a much more truly ‘international organization’ than we ever were. ICOM-CC sprang from two committees whose members were largely European and North American. They were also largely male, at least at the beginning. Over time, the Conservation Committee has expanded to six continents, and our membership is more diverse than it’s ever been.

When ICOM-CC published A Definition of the Profession in 1984, it was a giant step forward. But that document describes an inward-looking profession. When it was written, in the last decades of the 20th century, conservation was an activity that happened within the walls of a museum, and was carried out by experts. We’re no longer that profession. Now, in the 21st century, conservation does not inhabit one place. It really has no physical boundaries at all. No single expert speaks for it. Conservation has taken on many voices, and some of those voices belong to the public. We are now an outward-looking profession, more engaged with the world and with the concerns of our time.
The next fifty years will require the type of foresight and leadership that characterized the founding members of this organization. Just as the earlier generation of ICOM-CC’s leaders were shaped by the conditions of their time, ICOM-CC’s next generation of leaders will engage with new challenges that will certainly influence how they think about and carry out their work. If the past is anything to go by, defining the profession for the 21st century will require fresh vision and imagination. And if I were to pass on one piece of advice to our next generation of leaders, it would be this: be audacious. Test the boundaries of our field, and move them in the direction you believe they need to go. After all, that’s the type of thinking that brought us this far. And it’s the type of thinking that will bring us into new realms of possibilities. The next fifty years belong to you.