

# Ethical discussions and programmes in Norway

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The purpose of the Norwegian course programme 'Ethics in Action' is to create an awareness about ethics in museums. The creator of the course programme participated in the ethics seminar in Copenhagen and elaborate on aspects of ethics in relation to the programme and on a number of examples.



*The Bamyan Valley in Afghanistan. Despite international protests Taliban in 2005 demolished two colossal Buddha sculptures. The sculptures were listed as UNESCO World Heritage. Photo: AfghanistanMatters / flickr.com*

## Ethics in Action

I have been asked to present two different aspects of ethics. I will start by presenting the programme Norway has for raising ethical awareness in museums, and continue with some examples from the ethical discussions we have experienced in Norway lately.

When ICOM launched their new and retitled Code of Ethics in 2001, ICOM-Norway immediately decided to have it translated into Norwegian. The Code of Ethics deals with so many complex sides of museum work and it is important that we have a full and complete understanding. It contains many expressions that we are not fully familiar with in English and other foreign languages.

We realized that many Norwegian museums had requested the ethical information in the code and that there was an increasing interest in Ethics in society in general. Norwegian museum authorities agreed with our view

in this matter and decided to co-operate with ICOM Norway to have it translated and printed, and they paid all expences. The Code was widely distributed to museums and people working in museums. But did they actually read it? And if they read it, did they understand it?

In 2003 ICOM Norway were invited by an association of Norwegian museum employees, mainly non-academics, to present the Code on their annual meeting, but they stressed that they did not want a lecture. At that time I was the secretary of ICOM Norway. I was appointed to take on this assignment, and used all my experience from museum education to find another method.

I ended up making workshop with a set of cases for people to discuss and find out what the code said about them. The cases were purely fictional, but involved museum practises, and could theoretically have happened in a museum. 55 people worked

eagerly on the cases and the evaluation after showed that they had enjoyed it. Here is a sample:

*"The restoration worker had a nice private collection of wooden chests. He was proud to show his colleagues his two latest acquisitions. One was a duplicate that he had bought from the museum. The curator had decided that they did not need two almost identical chests. The other he had bought from an antique dealer for a special nice price as the museum was a good customer. He whispered so that only the nearest heard him, that the museum had also wanted to buy this beautiful chest".*

I have continued to improve the model and ended up with a half-day workshop: A workshop takes 3-4 hours and consists of a general introduction on Ethics, group work with cases and the Code, a discussion about each of the cases and a general discussion on



Martin Schøyen, Norwegian collector, showing some of the papyri fragments from the collection. Photo: SCANPIX

ethics. So far I have been chairing approx 15-20 workshops in Norwegian museums, including a prominent Norwegian business school for students in Management and Culture! Workshop participants have read the code in a very purposeful way and afterwards they know much more about museum ethics. To find which paragraphs to apply they had to read the code very carefully and before they had finished they had probably read it two or three times! These workshops are for all kinds of people working in museums, and it is important to underline that all of us have an ethical responsibility. The cases I use can be tailored to suit all kinds of museums, natural history, culture, arts, technology. The project has been supported by the Norwegian museum authorities, granting money to arrange several workshops in Norwegian museums thus paying for travel and accommodation for a person to chair the workshops. Museums invited participants and provided a venue for the arrangement. They have continued to grant money for more workshops and printing new editions of the Code. We were quite happy when we discovered that the Code was so much requested by museums and staff that it suddenly was out of print and had to be reprinted!

ICOM has also been interested in this way of increasing ethical awareness and invited me to present this programme in Paris for ICOM representatives in an Advisory Committee

meeting. We called the program "Ethics in Action". I have also had the pleasure of being invited to present the workshop in foreign countries, USA, Mexico, Latvia, Greece, Germany, Sweden, and last December for Asian ICOM members in Japan. I am glad to be able to share this method with others.

These workshops and the wide distribution of the Code has certainly set ethics on the Agenda in Norway. Since my name has been attached to it as the "mother" of the workshops and as chair of ICOM Norway 2003-2008, I get many requests and questions. I do not want to work as a court and deliver judgements. I try to just have a discussion with people and to put them on their way to find out themselves by reading and interpreting the code.

#### Ethical cases

As chair of ICOM Norway, I remember some museum cases that we did not find ethically acceptable. Many of these were about museums having too close co-operation with companies selling, buying and valuating antiques. Some museums had antique fairs on their premises, and invited people to bring their antiques and have them valued. We wrote letters to these museums informing them about the Code of Ethics and pointing to their responsibility. Some really felt very remorseful for what they had done, some just accepted it, and one mentioned that they were not ICOM members and

therefore had no restrictions. All the same, I think they all stopped. It's my impression that most people in museums are eager to obey the code.

We had another serious case a few years ago involving the National Museum of Arts, Architecture and Design in Oslo. The chair of their Board, appointed by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, was a well known art collector that partly collected some of the same artist that the museum focused on. ICOM Norway wrote to the museum, the chair of the Board and to the Ministry and pointed out that this was an unacceptable situation. We pointed to the paragraphs in the code that supported our view, and we gave each of them a copy of the Code. I cannot recall that any of these ever answered us. Of course the newspapers got hold of this and made big newspaper cases of it. Some people murmured that the Code was not applicable on Boards and Board members. Today I think it is a general agreement that it is.

The National gallery was a museum consisting of four independent museums that had merged. It had big difficulties finding new ways of administering the new big museum, two changes of director and a lot of difficult press attention. The press openly criticized the ministry and chair of the board and gave several juicy details. Representatives of ICOM Norway were interviewed and gave their opinion, indignant representatives of Norwegian cultural life wrote newspaper articles and were interviewed too. After 5 years (2003-2008) a new board was appointed, with or without considering ICOM Norway's intervention. Internal problems were probably the main reason. Today it looks like the situation for the museum as well as the relationship and understanding of to the Code is better.

#### The Schøyen Case

The most difficult case for ICOM Norway has been a case known as the Schøyen case. This is an extensive case involving foreign heritage, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries in Asia. The collector, who denies being a collector, is a Norwegian businessman, Martin Schøyen, and he started as a collector in 1955, 15 years old. His collection is extensive, and it is difficult to get a full overview. The collector himself is not interested in giving information and keeps a low media profile. According to reliable sources he owns 12 500 manuscripts from all over the world from a time span of 5000 years. This is one of the most extensive collections of its kind in the world. Some of the manuscripts are from the Dead Sea Scrolls, other are scrolls that have a similar importance in Buddhism. It is discussed whether all these

manuscript are legally acquired from an ethical and international convention point of view. Many of the manuscripts are from the Bamyan area, the area where the Buddha sculptures were destroyed. The manuscripts are suspected of being smuggled out through the Cyber Pass over to Pakistan and sent to antique dealers in London, approximately in 1997.

Part of this collection was presented at the website of the Norwegian National library and some were the basis for several research project at the University of Oslo. ICOM Norway intervened in both cases and the objects were removed from the website and the research co-operation came to an end. Lately another part of his collection has been in the focus of media: A collection of 654 so-called incantation bowls, in Norwegian and Danish they are called magiske krukker. They are all from the old culture of Mesopotamia in what today is Iraque, the only place this kind of bowls has been found. They have inscriptions in Arameic and dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.C. The inscriptions give important information about our civilization as well as some parts of the Bible. Again this is one of the world's biggest collections in its field, probably the biggest. Schøyen himself documents that most of his collection has been bought from antique dealers in London and in Jordan. For the first 100 bowls he says he didn't bother to keep the receipts!

Around 1996 the bowls were illegally imported to Britain to be studied by specialists at University College of London in their Department for Hebrew and Jewish studies. Some years later British archaeologists became aware of these objects. A commission was appointed to look into the origin and the legal side of this matter. 40 outstanding archaeologists concluded that the bowls were illegally exported from Iraque, after 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1990, the date of the UN sanction order. Even if they were exported before this date but after 1924 it was illegal. It was also an offense to British Laws to import the bowls to Britain. A further conclusion was that the bowls should be returned to Iraque as soon as this was safe. The report recommended the UCL to hand the bowls over to the police. What happened?

Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn who chaired the commission, addressed the House of Lords on this case in October 2009. He was upset to know that the report of the commission had been buried and silenced after a threat from the owner of the bowls to sue the University. British police were involved but decided that they did not have enough evidence to perform a criminal investigation. There was a deal between the collector and the University College in 2007 saying that "an eminent panel of experts had

concluded that Mr. Schøyen was the legal owner of the bowls." Everything halted, nothing more happened until Lord Renfrew's initiative in 2009. Today the report is public, the British police is again considering the case. Mr. Schøyen is still silent.

Norwegian newspapers are again active on the case. ICOM Norway recommends that the special police on cultural crime should look into this case. The public opinion in Norway is that the collection should be given back to Iraque when it is safe. For some years there has been rumours that Mr. Schøyen has decided that he wants to sell his collection. His plan is to establish a foundation in his own name for humanities, freedom of speech and emergency aid. Now and then politicians and librarians have raised their voices to say that Norway should buy the collection, and that this a big opportunity for Norway to establish a museum of world class to present this collections. Then I take a deep breath, sigh a little and wish I could have these people with me on an ICOM Code of Ethics workshop.

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