

Annual Conference of the ICOM Costume Committee

Museo del Traje, Madrid, Spain

In collaboration with ICOM ICME and ICOM Spain.

Joint session with ICOM ICME

CALL FOR PAPERS

Undressing the Institution: Costume, Fashion and Textile Collections, Colonial Histories, New Museologies

Costume, fashion and textile collections sit at a productive contradiction. They hold some of the most intimate and universal records of human experience: records of how people dressed, moved, mourned, celebrated, and identified themselves across time and place. And yet the institutions that house them were shaped by histories of empire, colonialism and ethnographic classification that determined what was collected, how it was described and whose material culture was deemed worthy of preservation.

The systems of cataloguing and indexing that still structure many collections carry the imprint of those origins, encoding hierarchies between "fashion" and "craft," "Western dress" and "ethnic costume," "art" and "artefact." They continue to shape what we display, how we interpret, whose stories we tell.

This meeting invites participants to sit with that tension, to unpick the language of catalogues, question provenance, rethink taxonomies, and, crucially, to share new approaches: community-led collecting, collaborative interpretation, exhibition strategies that refuse to reproduce old power relations.

The global movement of textiles and dress through trade, empire, and cross-cultural exchange offers particularly rich ground for reflection. Consider the cochineal dye harvested in the Americas that transformed European textile production; the Spanish morion helmet whose silhouette echoes in the Peruvian montera; the vast circulation of materials and aesthetics across the Habsburg world. These histories of exchange – coercive and creative alike – remind us that the collections we steward are not static national or institutional possessions but nodes in long, entangled networks that stretched across continents. Making those networks visible is part of what this meeting asks us to consider.

How can costume, fashion and textile museums become spaces where divided histories are acknowledged and more equitable futures imagined? How do we address questions of cultural appropriation – of aesthetics, knowledge, and material culture – embedded in our institutional foundations? And what does it mean to practise a new museology in the storeroom, not just in the seminar room?

We welcome proposals that are practical and conceptual, grounded in case studies and driven by argument. We are looking for contributions from across the full range of roles and institutions: curators, conservators, researchers, educators, community practitioners and independent scholars alike.

Sub-themes

Proposals may address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

1. Imperial Threads

The colonial and ethnographic origins of textile and costume collections: how they were assembled, what logics of classification shaped them, and what that inheritance means for institutions today. The global movement of textiles through trade, empire, import and export, and how those routes of circulation are (or are not) made visible in the collections we hold.

2. Cataloguing and Power

How systems of indexing, cataloguing and taxonomising textile collections encode particular worldviews, and experiments in rethinking terminology, metadata, categorisation and description.

3. Collecting Otherwise

Acquisition practices that move beyond inherited hierarchies of taste, value and significance: what enters the collection, on whose terms, who decides.

4. Restitution, Return, Repair

Provenance research, repatriation debates, and ethical frameworks for textile objects acquired under colonial or unequal conditions.

5. Whose Knowledge?

Integrating non-Western, Indigenous, artisanal and community-held knowledge systems - tangible and non tangible - into the research, interpretation, stewardship and care of artefact.

6. Exhibition as Counter-Narrative

Display strategies that make visible the power relations embedded in how costume and textiles have historically been shown.

7. The Local and the Global

Community engagement, neighbourhood initiatives and place-based projects that reposition the museum within its immediate social context.

8. Dress, Identity, Belonging

How costume collections engage with migration, diaspora, gender, class, cultural appropriation and the politics of self-presentation in divided societies.

9. Digital Infrastructures

Technology as both opportunity and problem: digitisation, open access, virtual exhibition and the question of whether digital tools replicate or disrupt the inherited frameworks of costume and textile collections.

Submission Guidelines

Proposals should include:

- A title and abstract of no more than 300 words.
- A short biographical note (up to 150 words) for each presenter.
- ICOM Membership if you're member (ICOM national committee and number for ICOM Members)
- An indication of the sub-theme(s) addressed
- Language of presentation (Official ICOM languages are accepted: English, Spanish or French)

Deadline for submissions: 12/06/2026

Please send proposals to: icomcostume.general@gmail.com

Notification of acceptance: 08/07/2026