

# ICOMAM's Report on the Vienna Conference 2007

ICOM's Vienna conference this summer was the first at which ICOMAM organised a concurrent triennial conference. ICOMAM is the successor of IAMAM, which was founded in 1957 by a number of museums with large military or arms and armour collections. ICOMAM has been an International Committee of ICOM since 2003. The Vienna conference was in fact the 18th of ICOMAM's triennial conferences.

ICOMAM's conference theme for Vienna followed that of ICOM's very closely being entitled as: "The Universal Heritage of Arms and Military History: Challenges and Choices in a Changing World". It turned out in practice, however, that such a sweeping (and nicely alliterating) statement was quite difficult to transform into a workable lecture and discussion programme. Although during the conference a number of ethical issues were discussed, most papers dealt with practical museum and collection matters and ranged from museological issues relating to our kind of museums to recent specialist research results into the study of arms and armour.

In detail, ICOMAM's conference sessions dealt with: organising displays, including research and choices, and with display problems themselves (2 x), with descriptions of important collections (2 x), collections with an armoury or arsenal provenance (1 x), interaction between displays and the public including 'hands-on' issues (3 x), rebuilding of entire museums (1 x), creation of new museums (1 x), 'museums of museums' i.e. trying to recreate a museum with its authentic 19th-century displays (1 x), intensive restoration projects of large objects (for instance tanks) (1 x), historical firearms technology including its developments in various nations (2 x), military museums and collections of a certain country (1 x), various threats to museums in areas of political turmoil (1 x), application of science in arms museums (1 x), collaboration between museums and scientific bodies (1 x), problems of re-acquisition and disposal (also called 'de-accessioning') of museum objects (1 x). conservation treatment (2 x) and new opportunities of podcasting (1x).

Almost all papers were given by active curators in museum service i.e. from professionals to professionals and some of the discussions afterwards were very brisk. All attendants listened intently to the paper given by Admiral A. Senna de Bittencourt of Brazil, on the military museums in his country, because Rio de Janeiro will be the location of ICOMAM's annual symposium in 2008. In addition, there was an appeal by Dr Thomas Schuler, Chairman of ICOM's Disaster Relief for Museums Task Force, for assistance with making contact with the Defence Departments in members' countries to establish what rules were currently in place to protect a belligerent country's cultural heritage and thus to help establish what training and advice was required.

There were three days of conference sessions (Monday through Wednesday 20-22 August), all held at the Landesverteidigungsakademie, made possible by the co-operation of the Austrian Ministry of Defence and organised by our colleagues of the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum under the leadership of Dr Christian Ortner, the HGM's Director and now an elected officer in the Executive Board of ICOMAM. Most of the hard footwork was done by a team under Dr Ortner's second-in-command, Mag. Christoph Hatschek, who personally supervised both the preparatory organisation and the day-to-day administration of the conference. The former included several face-to-face talks on the spot in 2005 and 2006 and an intermittent, and sometimes frantic, stream of email exchanges between him and ICOMAM's CEO's, Mr Guy Wilson (Chairman), Mr Piet De Gryse (Treasurer) and the undersigned, right until the day we travelled to Vienna.

We cannot but have high praise for our colleagues of the HGM who were able to smooth out various organisational difficulties partly caused by their having to deal simultaneously with ICOM Austria (itself bound by central ICOM rules) and their own Ministry of Defence. One major problem with which ICOMAM and the HGM were confronted were our 'IAMAM orphans' i.e. former members of IAMAM who were not (yet) ICOM members but remained loyal to ICOMAM's goals and very committed to continue taking part in our conferences and symposia. We were determined that they should be able to attend (as we had been promised by ICOM when negotiating for full committee status but which proved to be against the strict rules of admittance imposed by ICOM for the Vienna conference). We are happy to say that Mag. Hatschek succeeded in mastering almost all of these problems with bravura.

In Vienna the Executive Board of ICOMAM convened two times and a plenary session, during which also a new Board was elected, was held on Wednesday 22 August. As it should for an IC of ICOM the membership of our new Board reflects the international nature of ICOMAM. Besides the three CEOs already mentioned (who are from Great Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands, respectively) the other new Board officers are from Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Austria and a second one from Britain. Two extra officers were co-opted; they are from Brazil and from Russia. ICOMAM realises that the representation of its present Executive Board is still a long way from the ideal geographical spread it desires because the emphasis is still too much on Europe. One of the very reasons for ICOMAM to join ICOM was the hope of enticing more local specialists into become members from the far-off regions and continents in which ICOM (& from Vienna onward also ICOMAM) organises its conferences.

The international spread of representation looks better in the voting membership taking part in the conference (see below), however. This, too, gives us cause to be optimistic for the future. The elections in Vienna were carried out in a fully transparent and democratic manner and according to the ICOM rules. Being ever anxious to achieve a good international representation in our Executive Board, ICOMAM regrets to say that one of its members from the U.S.A. who stood for

election just did not get enough votes to be nominated an officer in the Board. This matter is now being addressed by seeking a suitable alternative candidate for co-option.

Besides the conference sessions which were, on the average, attended by 25 to 30 members, we also took part in various excursions and visits that our HGM colleagues had organised. There was one to Graz and its marvellous Landeszeughaus (Thursday 23 August) as well as visits to the Hofjagd- und Rüstkammer of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Tuesday), to the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum itself (and its stores and workshops) (Monday), the Technisches Museum and the Museum der Stadt Wien (both on Wednesday). These excursions and visits were attended by both participants and their partners and this wider group were also present at the various events organised by ICOM Austria. ICOMAM acknowledges the debt all of ICOM owes to our colleagues of the HGM for organising an Austrian military band to play during ICOM's big opening event on Saturday 18 August. Because of the beautiful weather with which this day was blessed this event, held on the public gardens between the Kunsthistorisches and the Naturhistorisches Museum, turned out into a big open-air party with a lovely atmosphere.

The attendants of the ICOMAM conference were also invited to several receptions in Vienna amongst which the one held by the Military commander of Vienna is best remembered for the location, in addition to the food and drinks offered and for the hospitality bestowed on us.

In 2007 ICOMAM celebrates its 50-year anniversary. The Vienna conference was used to promote this anniversary and to make clear to ICOM and all its members that ICOMAM is now a fully-fledged international museum organisation that deals with important subjects even though, for some, these are "tainted" and difficult. Over the years ICOMAM/ICOMAM has been able to demonstrate to museums in other fields that the museological standards of many of its own member institutions are of the highest order. For half a century now its membership has organised significant events, such as specialist annual symposia and produced reports and other publications of the highest academic and professional standard.

In Vienna ICOMAM launched a jubilee book entitled *ICOMAM 50*, edited by its member Robert D. Smith of Great Britain, who is also ICOMAM's ExBoard advisor on publication matters. This book contains well-illustrated contributions by present members and also reprints of pertinent contributions that have appeared in previous conference proceedings and which were selected by the editor because of their enduring value. *ICOMAM 50* was duly launched at ICOMAM's closing dinner held at the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum on Thursday 23 August, to which the President of ICOM, Mrs Alissandra Cummins, was also invited. To her ICOMAM's Chairman Guy Wilson had the honour to present the first copy of the book. In her word of thanks Mrs Cummins highlighted ICOMAM's performance in general and her recognition of our Chairman's hard work and dedication.

In all, the ICOMAM Vienna conference had about 90 registered participants half of whom were voting members. The whole group included 2 Algerians, 2 Australians, 2 Brazilians, 5 Canadians, 5 Chinese, 1 Maltese, 1 South African and 3 Americans, the rest being 70 Europeans including 4 from our host country Austria and 12 from Great Britain, the largest representation from any one country.

ICOMAM wishes to thank all the organisers and participants for their efforts that made the Vienna conference such a memorable one.

J.P. Puype, ICOMAM Secretary.

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