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From Ethnographic Collections to Living Heritage Knowledge Systems: Toward a Knowledge Organization Methodology for Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

This paper treats museums not only as repositories of ethnographic collections, but as infrastructures for recording, linking and periodically revising living heritage knowledge systems. Starting from the UNESCO 2003 Convention and the 2026 reform of periodic reporting, it argues that inscription on the Representative List entails a documentary responsibility over time. Drawing on museology, material culture studies, social museology, cognitive sciences and contemporary Knowledge Organization, it proposes a six-layer methodology connecting object records, bearers, gestures, sensory learning, transmission contexts, governance and semantic interoperability through ontologies, knowledge graphs and digital humanities approaches. The living culture of Cognac illustrates how museums can document craft and social ecosystems through bodies, tools, archives, sensory judgments and community governance.

Keywords: Knowledge Organization; Intangible Cultural Heritage; museums; social museology; cognitive sciences; knowledge graphs; Cognac; UNESCO 2003 Convention

1.0 Introduction: periodic reporting as a new paradigm for ICH knowledge organization

The current UNESCO context makes this methodological question urgent. Article 2 of the 2003 Convention defines ICH as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with them, recognized by communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals (UNESCO 2003). Safeguarding includes identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission and revitalization. This definition already invites museums to connect things and practices. The 2026 actuality adds a new temporal and documentary imperative: living heritage must be followed, updated and evaluated. This approach builds upon UNESCO's Overall Results Framework, adopted in 2018, which established 26 core indicators for monitoring the implementation of the 2003 Convention and its safeguarding measures (UNESCO 2018).

In June 2026, the eleventh General Assembly of the States Parties discussed the reform of the Convention’s periodic reporting mechanisms. Following the roadmap approved by the Intergovernmental Committee in Decision 20.COM 6.c, reports on the implementation of the Convention and on the status of elements inscribed on the Representative List are to be

submitted by the single global date of 30 June 2027 and every four years thereafter, subject to the adopted amendments (UNESCO 2025, 2026). This reform changes the meaning of inscription. It is no longer sufficient to document an element at the moment of nomination. Inscription becomes a commitment to observe the element's vitality, transmission, risks, safeguarding measures and community participation over repeated cycles.

For museums, this creates a new responsibility. The museum can no longer be only a place of exhibition, conservation or symbolic legitimation. It can become an observatory of living knowledge: a place where the relations among practitioners, materials, gestures, narratives, sensory judgments, public mediation and institutional decisions are documented continuously. This role does not reduce museums to administrative reporting agencies. On the contrary, it gives museum documentation a renewed scientific and civic function. Museums can help produce robust, plural and revisable knowledge about living heritage, while respecting the authority of communities and the ethical conditions of cultural transmission.

2.0 Contemporary KO grounding: from cataloguing to semantic and relational knowledge systems

Knowledge Organization has long been concerned with the design of systems that arrange, classify, represent and make retrievable knowledge in relation to particular domains (Hjørland 2016; Tennis 2012; Zeng 2019). In museums, this concern has often been expressed through cataloguing: inventory number, title, material, dimensions, provenance, maker, date and classification. Such data remain indispensable. Yet they are insufficient for ICH because living heritage is not reducible to an item. It is relational, temporal, situated and performed. It involves human bearers, places, environments, apprenticeship, social uses, emotions, sensory judgments and transformations.

Contemporary museum documentation already offers strong semantic foundations. CIDOC CRM provides a conceptual reference model for integrating heterogeneous cultural heritage information and for representing events, actors, things, places and temporal relations (Doerr 2003; CIDOC CRM Special Interest Group 2023). LIDO was designed as a format for contributing museum object information for discovery and exchange, building on prior standards and semantic models (ICOM CIDOC LIDO Working Group 2024). Linked Art proposes a museum-oriented application profile for Linked Open Usable Data, allowing cultural heritage institutions to publish structured and reusable descriptions of artworks, objects, activities and agents (Linked Art Editorial Board 2025). These models move museum data from flat description toward relation-rich documentation.

Recent knowledge graph approaches go further by linking structured and unstructured data. ArCo, the Italian cultural heritage knowledge graph, demonstrates how national cataloguing data can be converted into a large semantic infrastructure (Carriero et al. 2019). CHAD-KG extends this logic to digitisation paradata and exhibition-related cultural heritage objects (Barzaghi et al. 2025). MuseKG proposes a museum knowledge graph that integrates objects, people, organisations, images, image-derived labels and extracted entities in a coherent schema (Li et al. 2025). These works are important for ISKO because

they show that KO is not only a theory of classification: it is also a practical architecture for making relations explicit, queryable and interoperable.

However, most museum semantic models remain more developed for objects, events and documentation than for living practice as a monitored and embodied process. They can represent an object's production, acquisition or exhibition; they can link actors and places; they can trace provenance. But they do not automatically record sensory judgement, tacit apprenticeship, variations of gestures, community governance, environmental conditions or vitality indicators. This article addresses this gap. It is not a rival to CIDOC CRM, LIDO or Linked Art. It is an ICH-oriented profile that can be mapped onto such standards while adding fields and relations required by the 2003 Convention and by living heritage practice.

This is also why digital humanities are relevant. Digital humanities approaches make it possible to connect archives, oral histories, geospatial data, images, controlled vocabularies, temporal annotations and community contributions in the same research environment. But the methodological risk is to treat "datafication" as a neutral enrichment. The model therefore insists on reflexive governance: source, consent, uncertainty, contested terms and update history must be modelled as part of the system, not relegated to marginal notes.

3.0 From museum object to living heritage knowledge system

Material culture studies deepen this point. Fleming (1974), Pearce (1992) and Prown (1982) show that objects can be studied as evidence of human making, use, intention and meaning. Their approaches are useful for ethnographic collections because they reconnect the artefact with gesture, use, technique and social life. Hermeneutic and anthropological approaches add a further layer: Geertz (1973) and Ricœur (2000) remind us that meanings are interpreted, narrated and remembered. A museum record is therefore not a transparent mirror of a culture. It is an inscription produced by a method, an institution, an encounter and a vocabulary.

The author's doctoral research on the ethnographic collection of the Cabinet d'Histoire naturelle of the Muséum national de Versailles developed this issue through the concepts of collection-archive, museum memory, contextual identity and black-box/white-box documentation (Ferey 2017). Black-box documentation corresponds to stabilized fields: name, material, date, provenance. White-box documentation makes visible the research operations, uncertainties, transformations, reclassifications, sources and interpretive choices that shaped those fields. This distinction is useful for ICH because the documentation of living heritage cannot claim to be final. It must allow future practitioners, researchers and institutions to understand how a description was produced.

Recent museology confirms this shift. Mairesse (2024) emphasizes that collections are not simply stored masses waiting for exhibition; they are knowledge environments whose data, access and care conditions shape the future of museums. In a similar way, recent ICOFOM Study Series articles on provenance, restitution and decolonizing collections underline that collections are sites of collaborative knowledge production and not only objects of expert

classification (Brulon Soares 2024; Kuever 2024; Pommerening et al. 2024; van Beurden 2024).

In Cadernos de Sociomuseologia, recent work has also stressed the social and participatory responsibilities of museums. Brulon Soares (2025) frames the museum profession at a social museology turn, while Antas (2026) discusses participation, inclusion and the critical use of artificial intelligence in museum management. These references are important because they show that the museum's contribution to KO is not merely technical. Museology brings to KO an understanding of objects as social mediators, collections as memory systems, communities as knowledge authorities and documentation as an ethical and public operation. This perspective also resonates with the 2025 ICOM General Conference, which highlighted intangible heritage, community participation and emerging technologies as major challenges for contemporary museums (ICOM 2025). Table 1 positions the authors according to their original domains and epistemological assumptions.

Table 1 Epistemological Assumptions and Contributions to the ICH-KO Model

Author(s) / domain	**Epistemological assumption**	**Contribution to the ICH-KO model**
Pomian; Bergeron; Desvallées & Mairesse / museology	The museum object is not neutral: it becomes a semophore or a musealized/documentary object through regimes of visibility, recognition and interpretation (Pomian 1987; Bergeron 2011; Desvallées and Mairesse 2011).	Explains why object records must preserve the operations that transformed living artefacts into museum evidence.
Fleming; Pearce; Prown / material culture studies	Objects can be studied as evidence of human intention, making, use and meaning (Fleming 1974; Pearce 1992; Prown 1982).	Supports a move from isolated description to object-practice-context relations.
Geertz; Ricœur / anthropology and hermeneutics	Meaning is interpreted, inscribed and remembered through narratives, contexts and traces (Geertz 1973; Ricœur 2000).	Justifies white-box documentation of interpretive decisions, uncertainty and plural readings.

Author(s) / domain	Epistemological assumption	Contribution to the ICH-KO model
van Mensch; Ferey / museology of collections	Objects pass through primary, secondary and museological contexts; collections are stratified documentary systems (van Mensch 1992; Ferey 2017).	Provides the genealogy of collection-archive, contextual identity and black-box/white-box documentation.
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; Bortolotto / heritage theory and policy	Heritage is a metacultural and political operation rather than a naturally given category (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bortolotto 2011).	Makes safeguarding documentation reflexive about nomination, recognition, expertise and community consent.
Davallon; Le Marec; Hooper-Greenhill; Brulon Soares / communication and social museology	Museums produce public knowledge through mediation, participation, education and social negotiation (Davallon 2006; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Le Marec 2007; Brulon Soares 2025).	Connects KO to public use, community participation and democratic museum governance.
Mauss; Polanyi; Hutchins; Nonaka & Takeuchi / body, tacit and distributed knowledge	Techniques, skills and organizational knowledge are embodied, tacit, distributed and transformed through social learning (Mauss 1934; Polanyi 1966; Hutchins 1995; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).	Shows why ICH metadata must include gesture, apprenticeship, rhythm, tools, environment and transmission chains.
Ermine; Berkes; Kimmerer / Indigenous and ecological knowledge	Knowledge systems are ethical, relational, ecological and situated in responsibilities toward communities and environments (Ermine 2007; Berkes 2018; Kimmerer 2013).	Supports plural knowledge regimes, cultural authority and environmental context.

Author(s) / domain	Epistemological assumption	Contribution to the ICH-KO model
Penfield & Boldrey; Catani; Gordon et al. / cognitive neuroscience	The human body is represented through relations between sensation, movement, action planning and cognition (Penfield and Boldrey 1937; Catani 2017; Gordon et al. 2023).	Provides a heuristic turning point: safeguarding must record the sensitive, learning, memorial and social body, not only verbal discourse.
Hjørland; Tennis; Zeng; CIDOC CRM; LIDO; Linked Art / KO and semantic web	KO systems organize domains through concepts, relations, standards and explicit models (Hjørland 2016; Tennis 2012; Zeng 2019; CIDOC CRM Special Interest Group 2023; ICOM CIDOC LIDO Working Group 2024; Linked Art Editorial Board 2025.	Provides the semantic and interoperable layer for ontologies, knowledge graphs and digital humanities workflows.

4.0 Methodological contribution: an ICH-oriented KO profile for museums

The methodological contribution is a six-layer profile for organizing ICH knowledge in museums. It expands the five-layer methodological matrix by adding an explicit cognitive-sensory layer and by linking the whole system to periodic vitality reporting. The model is designed as a bridge between existing museum records and a living heritage knowledge graph. It keeps object-level documentation but adds entities and relations that are usually implicit: bearers, techniques, sensory judgments, learning situations, governance rules, uncertainty, access rights and evidence of vitality.

The model is both documentary and performative. It does not only store knowledge about heritage; it helps organize the conditions through which heritage can be observed, transmitted, discussed and revised. This is why the word “performative” is important. A museum record does not merely reflect reality. By choosing terms, relations, access rights and categories, it helps produce the conditions under which a practice becomes visible, transmissible and discussable. The methodological responsibility of KO is therefore to make those choices explicit and revisable.

The distinction from existing KO models lies in four points. First, the descriptive unit is not the object but the relation between object, practice, bearer, environment and transmission. Second, embodied cognition is treated as a documentation dimension:

hands, mouth, smell, touch, proprioception, memory and attention are part of the knowledge system when they are recognized by practitioners. Third, governance is modelled as data: contributor, consent, cultural authority, contested terms, access and revision history are not annotations but core entities. Fourth, the model is longitudinal: it is aligned with the four-year reporting rhythm introduced by the 2026 reform, allowing museums to document what changes, what remains active and what becomes vulnerable.

The following diagram summarizes the proposed cycle. It begins with the UNESCO and community requirement to monitor ICH vitality; it then links living practices and bearers to museum traces; it adds cognitive recording of perception, action and learning; it translates these relations into KO structures such as ontologies, graphs and metadata; and it closes the cycle through reflexive governance and periodic revision.

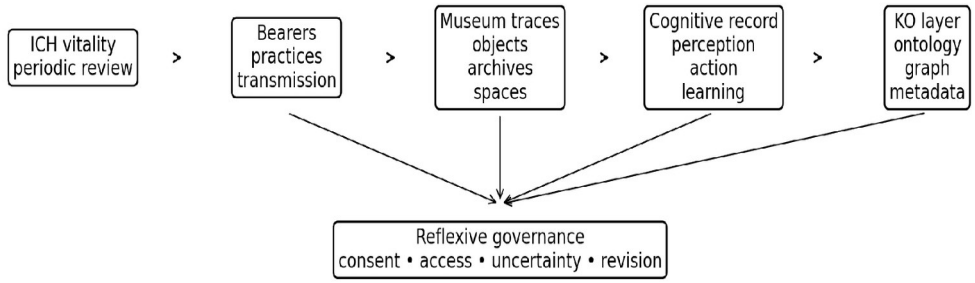

Figure 1. Proposed ICH-KO cycle: from living practice to revisable museum knowledge system.

Table 2 Six-layer methodology for ICH-oriented museum knowledge organization.

Layer	**Entities / data to record**	**KO function**	**Example from the living culture of Cognac**
1. Patrimonial identification	Element name; domains of ICH; vernacular designations; associated places; legal/status data; references to inventories and nominations.	Provides stable identifiers and retrieval points; aligns with UNESCO and national inventory categories.	“Culture of Cognac” as practices, knowledge and skills linked to vine growing, distillation, ageing, blending and social practices.

Layer	Entities / data to record	KO function	Example from the living culture of Cognac
2. Actors, bearers and institutions	Communities; practitioners; masters/apprentices; families; houses; cooperatives; NGOs; museums; roles; authority relations.	Makes authority, participation and transmission chains visible.	Winegrowers, distillers, coopers, cellar masters, glassmakers, traders, museums, ASFC, BNIC and territorial institutions.
3. Practices, gestures and know-how	Gestures; tools; sequences; rhythms; decision points; vocabulary; performance contexts; tacit rules.	Documents living practice beyond the object and supports semantic modelling of procedures.	Cutting the distillation, sensing the evolution of the bonne chauffe, reading the barrel, blending through memory and sensory comparison.
4. Cognitive and sensory recording	Perception; smell; touch; temperature; posture; attention; error correction; apprenticeship situations; embodied memory.	Extends field experience through cognitive categories without replacing practitioner interpretation.	The cooper's hand and ear, the distiller's timing, the cellar master's nose and mouth, the embodied judgement of ageing and blending.
5. Material, documentary and digital traces	Objects; archives; photographs; sound; video; 3D scans; labels; oral recordings; collection histories; links to CIDOC CRM/LIDO/Linked Art.	Connects material evidence with knowledge graphs and digital humanities resources.	Stills, barrels, tools, cellars, vineyards, maps, trade archives, oral histories, tasting notes and exhibition devices.

Layer	Entities / data to record	KO function	Example from the living culture of Cognac
6. Reflexive governance and periodic vitality	Consent; source; contributor; contested terms; uncertainty; access restrictions; update date; vitality indicators; safeguarding actions.	Turns documentation into a revisable system aligned with four-year periodic reporting.	Recording changes in apprenticeship, environmental pressures, community initiatives, public mediation and transmission after each cycle.

5.0 Cognitive sciences as a shared performative framework with museology

The motor and sensory homunculi are useful as a turning point, not as a reductive neurological explanation of heritage. Since Penfield and Boldrey (1937), the cortical representation of the body has shown the disproportionate importance of hands, face, mouth and tactile-motor coordination in human action. Catani (2017) has emphasized the historical and conceptual weight of this “little man”, while Gordon et al. (2023) have shown that the motor cortex includes a broader somato-cognitive action network. For ICH, this suggests that safeguarding cannot be restricted to discourse, photographs or inventory forms. It must also attend to the body that senses, learns, remembers and relates.

This point is particularly important for museums because many practices are taught through correction rather than explanation. A master does not always transmit a rule by verbalizing it. Transmission may occur through the hand placed differently, the sound of a tool, the smell of a material, a repeated comparison, a pause, a rhythm or an invitation to try again. Polanyi (1966) on tacit knowledge, Mauss (1934) on techniques of the body, Hutchins (1995) on distributed cognition, and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) on knowledge conversion help explain why this cannot be reduced to a written instruction. A museum documentation system should therefore include learning events, sensory cues and corrective interactions.

For museums, the implication is practical. A documentation protocol can record the sensory modalities mobilized in a practice, the moments of decision, the types of feedback, the apprentice’s errors, the environmental cues and the social setting of correction. Such information can be organized as entities and relations in a knowledge graph: practitioner performs gesture; gesture uses tool; tool transforms material; sensory cue informs decision; master corrects apprentice; performance occurs in seasonal cycle; documentation source records uncertainty. Cognitive sciences therefore do not replace museology. They help museology build a common performative working frame for the organization of living knowledge.

6.0 Application case: a museum use scenario for the living culture of Cognac

The Cognac case makes the model concrete. Cognac is not only an economic product or a collection of objects displayed in a museum. It is a living cultural system involving vine cultivation, distillation, ageing, cooperage, glass, trade, tasting, hospitality, vocabulary, family transmission and territorial identity. In a museum information system, the alambic charentais, the oak barrel or the tasting glass can be linked to actors, gestures, sensory operations and temporal cycles rather than described only as artefacts.

A prototype use scenario would begin with a museum record for a still. In a classical catalogue, the still would be identified by title, material, maker, date, dimensions and provenance. In the proposed ICH-KO profile, the same record would link to a distillation sequence, a vocabulary of heating and cutting, audio recordings of the working space, video of valve manipulation, oral explanations by a distiller, sensory terms used to describe the eau-de-vie, and seasonal constraints. It would also record governance: who contributed, what can be shared, which terms are contested, when the record was last updated, and how the evidence relates to national or international safeguarding reports.

The same logic applies to barrels and ageing. A barrel is not only a container. It is a node in a knowledge system linking forest, oak, cooperage, fire, smell, humidity, cellar architecture, time, tasting, commercial practice and memory. A cooper's gestures, a cellar master's sensory judgement and a visitor's mediated learning are different but connected layers of the same knowledge graph. In this sense, the museum becomes a place where the living culture of Cognac can be documented as a sensitive, learning, memorial and social body: a body made of human bodies, tools, places, materials, words and responsibilities.

The practical value of the model is that it can support both research and public mediation. For researchers, it allows queries such as: which sensory terms are linked to distillation decisions? Which tools are associated with apprentice correction? Which transmission spaces are active today? Which environmental pressures affect the practice? For museum professionals, it can support exhibition labels, immersive devices, sound archives, educational workshops and community review sessions. For safeguarding actors, it can produce evidence for periodic reporting without transforming living heritage into a bureaucratic checklist.

7.0 A minimal data pattern: from object record to ICH knowledge graph

To show how the model can be operationalized, the model may be expressed as a simple set of relations. A museum object record becomes one node in a broader graph. The graph does not erase the object; it restores its relations. For example, an alambic is linked to a distillation practice; the distillation practice is performed by a distiller; the distiller uses sensory cues; the sensory cues inform decisions; the decisions are taught through apprenticeship; the apprenticeship occurs in a seasonal and institutional context; the documentation is governed by contributors and access rules.

This pattern can be mapped to existing standards. Object, actor, event, place and time relations can be aligned with CIDOC CRM. Object discovery metadata can be exported

through LIDO. Public-facing linked data can use Linked Art patterns. The additional ICH profile would specify relations such as hasTransmissionMode, hasSensoryCue, hasGestureSequence, hasCommunityAuthority, hasVitalityIndicator and hasReviewCycle. Such properties should not be invented in isolation; they should be designed as an application profile, discussed with communities and mapped to existing vocabularies where possible.

The role of AI should also be defined carefully. AI can help identify recent literature, cluster oral testimonies, suggest controlled terms, align variant spellings, detect entities in archives or propose links across heterogeneous records. But AI should not decide cultural authority, replace community validation or transform sensitive knowledge into open data by default. The 2026 UNESCO and ICOM survey on AI in museums is relevant here because it explicitly links AI use to ethical frameworks such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI and the ICOM Code of Ethics (ICOM and UNESCO 2026). In the proposed model, AI is a support for discovery and synthesis, not the final source of truth.

8.0 Recent museological work and reciprocal contributions between museology and KO

Recent museological literature confirms the need for such a model. ICOFOM Study Series has developed critical work on decolonizing collections, provenance, restitution and collaborative knowledge production (Brulon Soares 2024; Kuever 2024; Pommerening et al. 2024; van Beurden 2024). These articles are not primarily technical KO papers, but they raise KO questions: who names? who classifies? who has the right to describe? how should uncertainty be recorded? how can provenance research become collaborative knowledge production rather than expert extraction? In the same way, work in Cadernos de Sociomuseologia on community, participation and inclusion pushes museums to understand documentation as a social practice (Antas 2026; Brulon Soares 2025).

The reciprocal contribution can be summarized as follows. Museology gives KO its human, social and sensory thickness. It reminds KO that categories are produced in institutions, in relations of power and in situations of mediation. KO gives museology a structure for maintaining, linking and revising living heritage knowledge. It makes relations explicit, supports interoperability and enables museums to connect archives, objects, oral histories, exhibitions and safeguarding reports. In this reciprocal relation, the museum is neither reduced to a database nor opposed to it. It becomes a situated knowledge organization environment.

9.0 Conclusion

The central contribution is the six-layer ICH-KO profile. It does not replace cataloguing, CIDOC CRM, LIDO or Linked Art. It extends them toward living heritage by adding vitality, embodiment, sensory learning, participation, reflexive governance and periodic revision. This extension is necessary because the 2003 Convention requires safeguarding to remain tied to communities, practices, knowledge and transmission (UNESCO 2003), while the 2026 reform gives this requirement a repeated reporting rhythm (UNESCO 2025, 2026).

In the case of Cognac, this means recording not only the still, the barrel or the archive, but the sensitive body that smells, touches and judges; the learning body that repeats and corrects; the memorial body that carries inherited gestures and narratives; and the social body that shares, recognizes and governs the heritage over time. This is where museology and cognitive sciences can now offer a common, performative working framework for museums: a framework able to organize living heritage as a system of knowledge, not as a frozen cultural object.

Notes

1. Convention of 2003. The article uses the definition of ICH given by Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, including associated instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces, and the definition of safeguarding as identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission and revitalization (UNESCO 2003).

2. June 2026 actuality. The eleventh session of the General Assembly of the States Parties was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 17–18 June 2026. The periodic reporting reform follows Decision 20.COM 6.c, which sets a single global submission date of 30 June 2027 and every four years thereafter for reports on the implementation of the Convention and on the status of elements inscribed on the Representative List, subject to the adopted amendments (UNESCO 2025, 2026).

AI Usage Statement: AI was used as an assistance tool to identify recent relevant literature in ICOFOM Study Series, Cadernos de Sociomuseologia and ICOM sources, especially on collaborative provenance, social museology, intangible heritage, new technologies and AI in museums. AI was also used to synthesize response elements from parts of the author's doctoral research and from the earlier ISKO text. The interpretation, selection of arguments, final structure, scholarly positioning and responsibility for the text remain those of the author.

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