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International Council on Archives (ICA) Barcelona Congress 2025, 27–30 October 2025

From the 27th to 30th of October 2025, the International Council on Archives Barcelona Congress took place in the wonderful city of Barcelona, Spain. Hosted at the Barcelona International Convention Centre, the event centered around the theme „Knowing Pasts. Creating Futures.“ Over 2,000 participants from 110 countries attended the congress, which featured four official languages: English, Catalan, Spanish, and French.¹ To overcome language barriers and make the content of the presentations accessible to as many participants as possible, several rooms at the venue were specifically equipped for simultaneous interpretation. The vast interactive program was available on the official website of the Congress or through an official app, which provided real-time updates and had the option to save favorite sessions to create one’s own agenda. Because of these features, I personally found the app very helpful. In fact, since there was a wealth of very interesting options to choose from – with 10 to 11 different sessions taking place simultaneously – keeping track of which sessions to attend would have been a struggle otherwise.



Fig. 1: The ICA Barcelona Congress Opening Ceremony (Photo credit: Ch. Ziletti).

¹ <https://icabarcelona2025.cat/barcelona-to-bring-together-over-2000-professionals-from-110-countries-at-the-international-archives-congress-ica-barcelona-2025/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

Monday, October 27, marked the first day of the Congress. Registration officially opened in the early afternoon, although the meetings of several ICA branches, forums, professional sections, and expert groups had already taken place in the morning. Among the workshops scheduled for the afternoon, there were a few sessions focusing on the new Records in Context (RiC) conceptual model and description standard developed by the ICA Expert Group on Archival Description (EGAD).² During one of these workshops, the participants could familiarize themselves with the new standard and get a feeling of how it works by playing a card game, which is now available online for anyone to try.³ The first day concluded with a Welcome Cocktail in a relaxed atmosphere, while the official Opening Ceremony took place the following day, with speeches by the President of the ICA, Josée Kirps, and several government representatives. The ceremony was an inspiring event, despite the atmosphere being a bit scattered because it was held in a massive auditorium.

Each day was enriched by a thought-provoking keynote speech, along with a final joint keynote panel on the last day. Mercè Crosas gave the first keynote speech on „AI-Ready Archives: Understanding the past with the tools of the future“. Crosas' presentation highlighted in a lucid manner the potential that Artificial Intelligence (AI) and new technologies can offer to the archival profession. The keynote by Alan Cobley titled „Decoloniality, Reparations, Digitisation and AI: The new paradigms and new technologies shaping Caribbean Archives in the twenty-first century“ was truly enriching. Cobley emphasized the continuing negative impact of the past colonization, despite the efforts to undo it. He also discussed existing environmental challenges in the Caribbean and how digitization can offer solutions, although it is not a panacea. Lastly, he reflected on how new forms of archiving can be used to preserve the intangible heritage of the Caribbean identity. The last keynote by Trudy Huskamp Peterson titled „Hope as an Archivist's Discipline“ was also very inspiring. Peterson reasoned that hope drives people to work for social change and take risks under unjust circumstances, and that as „seers of history“, archivists and archives have a fundamental responsibility. As she pointed out, the decisions we make now on what to preserve are fraught with significance, as they influence how people will understand things in the future. Therefore, we hope our choices are wise, especially when it comes to human rights archives, which are the most crucial and fragile.

Within the main Congress theme „Knowing Pasts. Creating Futures.“, the more than 500 accepted presentations (out of the 1,361 submitted) were organized into sessions according to five subthemes: Managing Memories/Preserving Identities; Conflict,

2 More information on the new standard is available at this link: <https://www.ica.org/ica-network/expert-groups/egad/records-in-contexts-ric/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

3 The RiC card game is available for download at this link: <https://www.ica.org/the-ica-expert-group-on-archival-description-egad-publishes-ric-card-game/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

Disaster, and Displacement; Records of Rights; Digital and Accessible; and Archival Futures. This ensured coverage of a wide variety of topics and perspectives. However, it was unfortunate that the ICA Section on University and Research Institution Archives (SUV) Conference took place concurrently with the ICA Congress, as this resulted in a lack of presentations on those topics at the Congress itself. In addition to the standard sessions, four poster sessions and three lightning talks sessions further diversified the content delivery. Several of the sessions I attended illustrated how technology can support the work of archivists. Through technologies such as digitization, computer vision for text recognition, knowledge management tools, Large Language Models, machine learning and AI, but also through technical infrastructure, it becomes possible to create new work tools that surpass the limitations of traditional archival workflows. To give just one example, in their presentation titled „When Electronic Records Management meets Generative AI: Practical Usages and Considerations“, Yoona Kang and Hyo-Jung Oh proposed and explored five practical uses for Generative AI (including title generation, metadata generation, summary generation, production report generation, and user support requests) to address the massive increase in digital records amidst stagnant staffing levels.

Although the sessions dedicated to the application of technology in archives were very interesting and relevant – providing a good picture of the future of our profession and the impact of new technologies such as AI – I personally found the sessions addressing topics such as social justice, representation, how archives strongly intertwine with and support cultural identities more enriching and thought-provoking. The way these aspects affect local, marginalized, and persecuted communities is crucial. All the presentations given during Session 1.08 „Preserving identities“ and Session 1.09 „Managing Memories and emerging technologies“ offered great examples of such topics. They covered a wide variety of perspectives, such as how the conservation efforts of the Figtree Register (relevant for the local Caribbean community) intertwine with the controversial figure of Admiral Horatio Nelson; the case of the Johnson Publishing Company archives; the transmission of corporate identity as collective heritage; the efforts to preserve the intangible heritage and memory of the Moklen communities in Southern Thailand; and considerations on methods for the preservation of instant messaging in personal archives. Furthermore, in her presentation titled „Politics of Erasure: The destruction of the Palestinian Collective Memory“, Rula Shahawan described the dramatic circumstances faced by Palestinian archives and other cultural institutions. This situation, which began in 1948, has caused the fragmentation of Palestinian collective memory and identity, despite persistent efforts to resist. Lastly, during the presentation titled „Records for Syria. Digital evidence for accountability in the virtual Prisons Museum“, Dagmar Hovestadt and Amer Matar presented the virtual Prisons Museum project. By bringing together testimonies, digitized documents, and spatial data, the project documents over 100 prisons, detention centers, and mass grave sites. This project functions both as an archive and as a public

virtual museum. Therefore, it has invaluable significance to the victims of Assad's regime and of ISIS, as well as their families, while also fulfilling the fundamental educational role of informing the wider public.⁴ By touching on very sensitive and complex topics, these presentations truly showcased the real impact that archives have and how our profession can make a significant difference in the lives of others.

One last presentation worth mentioning is the one titled „Leaving a legacy: exploring the link between digital preservation and environmental sustainability“ by Sarah Middleton and William Kilbride from the Digital Preservation Coalition. By reflecting on the sustainability aspects of our profession, they highlighted the impact of digital preservation on the environment and concluded by offering practical steps to mitigate its effects.⁵

In addition to the rich program, the Congress offered a unique opportunity to witness firsthand how a large non-governmental organization like the ICA operates. All ICA members in good standing could participate in and vote at the ICA General Assembly that took place on October 28. It was interesting to learn that the ICA has been diversifying its constituency: the number of individual members has been increasing in the last few years, alongside members coming from National Archives, associations, and institutions. However, the most significant moment of the General Assembly was when a group of participants called for an official resolution or statement from the ICA to support Palestinian archivists and archival institutions, similar to the „Ukrainian Archives and Records Professionals statement“ issued by the ICA Secretariat.⁶ Since this point had not been included in the approved meeting agenda beforehand, procedural reasons prevented the adoption of this motion during the General Assembly. However, following up on it, the ICA Executive Board issued an official „Statement in Support of Palestinian Archivists and Archival Institutions“ on January 22, 2026.⁷ Another opportunity to get involved was also offered by the European Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (EURBICA) General Assembly, which took place on Monday, October 27, in the Auditorium of the Archives of the Crown of Aragon in Barcelona. During the General Assembly, the members of the EURBICA Executive Board presented their new, detailed „EURBICA Strategic Plan 2025–2029“, which aims to relaunch the activities of the European regional branch.⁸

4 The virtual prisons museum is available at the following link: <https://prisons.museum/en> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

5 The practical steps that they offered can be summarized as follows: preserve less, increase efficiency, accept that not everything will be preserved, do less with content, change access expectations.

6 <https://www.ica.org/solidarity-with-ukrainian-archives-and-records-professionals/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

7 <https://www.ica.org/ica-adopts-statement-in-support-of-palestinian-archivists-and-archival-institutions/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

8 A copy of the „EURBICA Strategic Plan 2025-2029“ is available at this link: <https://www.ica.org/resource/eurbica-governance-documents/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

If one was busy attending as many panels as possible, the breaks were the only time left to visit the several vendors' booths located in the dedicated Exhibitors' area, where there was a good variety of displays from archival suppliers, furniture providers, and software solutions. In general, the Congress program and activities were so incredibly packed and rich that there was no time left to sightsee in the city. Luckily, for those interested, the organizers had scheduled a selection of tours to visit some of the local archives around Barcelona. Lastly, the Gala Dinner that took place on Wednesday, October 29, in the iconic setting of the Museu Marítim de Barcelona, provided another great opportunity to network with the registered attendees while also taking a short break from the intense Congress program. The dinner was also enriched by a Castells (human tower) performance, a Catalan tradition recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.⁹



Fig. 2: Castells (human tower) performance at the beginning of the Gala Dinner (Photo credit: Ch. Ziletti).

9 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/human-towers-00364> (last checked on 31.03.2026).

For those who are interested, the program of the Congress, the picture gallery, and the slides of almost all the presentations are openly available on the official website of the Congress.¹⁰ This is truly an excellent initiative, not just to reach all the people who could not attend, but also for those who participated in the Congress. In fact, all participants struggled with the fact that there were multiple interesting sessions taking place at the same time; therefore, being able to at least access the slides of those sessions one could not attend afterward is a great opportunity. Additionally, the ICA has provided its own daily summaries of the Congress on its website.¹¹

During the closing ceremony, the baton was officially passed from Spain to Malaysia, which will host the next ICA Conference in 2027 in Sarawak. Despite the exhaustion that came from trying to keep up with such an intense program, the experience was absolutely worthwhile and enriching both professionally and personally. I am very thankful that my employer provided the funding to support my attendance at the Congress, and I am sincerely grateful for all the new acquaintances I was able to make and for the inspiring conversations that I had with other participants. I would definitely recommend attending an ICA Congress or Conference to anyone at least once: it is an amazing opportunity to network with colleagues from all over the world, and the wide variety of topics covered during the event is truly inspiring and educational.

Chiara Ziletti

¹⁰ <https://icabarcelona2025.cat/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).

¹¹ <https://www.ica.org/congresses-conferences/congress-barcelona-2025/> (last checked on 30.03.2026).