

# Microcosms: an introduction to an interdisciplinary museum project

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## Abstract

*This paper summarizes the questions raised by the research of Microcosms, an interdisciplinary, multi-campus research project at the University of California. This project considers the role of material collections in the modern university, within an historical perspective, and comes to several broad conclusions.*

The research that underpins the organization of the 9<sup>th</sup> annual UMAC conference, “Putting University Collections to Work in Research and Teaching”, was done within the context of Microcosms, a multi-campus research project of the University of California, co-directed by Rosemary Joyce, Mark Meadow and myself. What follows is based upon our collective work in this project. The project, beginning informally ten years ago, has the goal of analyzing the uses of material collections in the modern university, seen within an historical perspective, and projected into the future. That is to say, using the UC system’s material collections as our case study, we wish to understand the historical processes involved in the formation, use and continued functionality of university collections.

By way of clarifying what we see as some of the fundamental properties of university material collections, it is worth considering them for a moment in contrast to university library text collections, which tend to be contained in highly visible, centralized and unitary structures, a visibility which is matched by their administrative visibility, uniformity and centrality, in terms of budgets, staff classification and organization, and reporting structures, not to mention their near-universal uniformity of cataloguing systems. In contrast, as we know too well, university material collections typically lack that visibility, centrality and uniformity.

By choosing to look at university material collections, we have been forced to examine not just formal collections (i.e., museums) but also informal, ranging from departmental research and teaching collections to personal research collections that permeate every aspect, corner and function of universities. We have come to five broad, over-arching conclusions about the nature of material collections within the university (which we do not limit within the barriers of official museums).

First, the walls between collections, and types of collections (from formal to informal), and between collections and, shall we call them, assemblages of stuff, are very porous. Art museums erect the highest registrarial walls, but even these are less high than their civic counterparts. It’s a safe rule of thumb that any object entering the gravity pool of the university has the potential of ending up in formal and permanent university collections. And these material collections – or ‘realia’ – infiltrate even library special collections.

Second, the roles of these objects and collections are varied: teaching and research are the two prime ones, but many objects satisfy an historical or institutional function. Moreover, objects move from one to the other function, and in no particular cycle.

Third, the growth of material collections is instantaneous, constant, informal and substantial. Attempts to cut back on this growth are seldom successful: a particularly good example is the growth of natural history collections. UCLA, for example, got rid of their natural history collections but somehow retained the bird specimens (due, no doubt, to the protests of one senior professor) and also has a faltering but still living botanical garden. UCSB’s natural history collections were founded by the beloved first chancellor of the campus, Vernon Cheadle. After a near-death experience for his research materials housed by the university (after Cheadle’s actual death), when his 64,000 slides were shoved into a

tiny storage room, the Cheadle Museum now thrives as a proper museum. UCMerced, the newest of the campuses, and active little more than five years (the first class just graduated), has the Sierra Nevada Research Institute, and the California State Mining and Mineralogy Museum affiliated with it.

Then there are the collections that either won't go away or suddenly appear. UCDavis has a bicycle museum that no one is quite sure what to do with. And on a more global scale, campuses are flooded with scientific instruments that have been outdated by digitization, but ... what to do with them?

Fourth, the organization and the contents of collections are surprisingly personal and ephemeral – and there's interesting work to be done mapping the dynamics of functionality and organization against the change in disciplines, since most collections are closely related to particular disciplines. Here, again, natural history collections provide the most obvious example. But this is true in many other disciplines: where, for example, should geology collections reside when geology departments investigate crustal processes and not rocks and minerals?

Five, university museums constitute themselves within wild heterogeneity. We do not blanch at a text collection ranging from dance to physics – that's what university libraries are all about, as text acquisition is mapped against departments and programs. But a physical collection that contains Nobel Prize medals *and* the scarf that killed Isadora Duncan seems more than a little bizarre (UCIrvine's library). It seems a good deal odder when we realize that UC's libraries nearly all, so far as we can tell, contain as objects of collection and study, bottles and vials of fluids: petroleum (UCSB), wine (UCDavis), beer (UCLA).

In conclusion, the historical and theoretical work on university museums and their future must be undertaken and must be a priority, if we are to understand universities and the academic disciplines that are their *raison d'être*. A collection is really the result of a question, and questions (i.e., disciplines) always change. If collections are isolated from new questions, then they become moribund. Ironically, while we reach to the past to understand them, it is only as they make claims on the future that they will survive.

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