

The use of the Art Collection of the University of Porto in teaching and research

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Abstract

The Art Collection of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto (FBAUP) mainly consists of works created in class by young artists during their learning and educational period. These works are collected primarily to provide a learning and teaching tool for fine arts students. In its formation and development, the collection has undergone significant changes.

Some of these changes were caused by the affiliation of the collection to the first public art museum in Portugal, the Museu Portuense de Pinturas e estampas, created in 1833. When the Academia Portuense de Belas Artes was founded in 1836, both the museum and the academy were placed under the responsibility of the same director. Additionally, the collection suffered from the effect of national education reforms to teaching and learning methods, which influenced students' art works and the development of the collection.

However, the original purpose of constituting the art collection remains the support of fine art education and training. Throughout the last decade, our strategy has focused on the co-ordination of museum activities with the teaching and research goals of the Faculty of Fine Arts in particular and of the university in general. It has also focused on its future role as a place dedicated to cultural and artistic knowledge more closely connected with society at large.

This paper concentrates on the teaching and research projects that have been developed since the official constitution of the Fine Arts Museum of the University of Porto in 1996.



Fig. 1 - Henrique Pousão (1859 – 1884), *Nude male model*, Charcoal on paper, 1881, 605 x 465 mm, FBAUP, Inv. 98.des.362, Photo: Jorge Coelho © FBAUP

Brief history

The Fine Arts Museum of the University of Porto officially acquired its designation and identity in 1996, following the integration of the Fine Arts School into the University of Porto. It has its origins in the first public art museum in Portugal, established in 1833. Its director perceived it, from the very beginning, as a living institution with a mission to educate artists and disseminate artistic taste. When the Academia Portuense de Belas Artes¹ was created in 1836, both museum and academy were placed in the same building, under the same director, and they shared a common destiny for almost a century. The museum was used especially by professors and students of the academy, but also by the general public.

The creation of a Fine Arts Academy, at the time offering training in drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture, led to the building of a collection of artistic objects, developed as a teaching collection. The best student works and works donated by teachers were also collected to be used as exemplars for students.

¹ Fine Arts Academy of Porto, later renamed Fine Arts School, and today Faculty of Fine Arts.

In 1932, an administrative reform separated the museum from the Fine Arts School. The museum, now upgraded to the category of 'national museum', was now under the state's direct responsibility. This administrative separation was followed by a physical separation (museum and school were installed in the buildings in which they remain today) and by a division of the art collection. The Fine Arts School mostly kept students' works, produced during their formative years, such as drawings, paintings and sculptures, and two excellent collections of prints (around 3,000 works) and old masters drawings (around 120), used as teaching instruments (fig. 1–3). From this collection, with this historical context and retaining its primary purpose of developing learning tools for fine arts students, the Fine Arts Museum of University of Porto project started in 1997.



Fig. 2 - José de Brito (1855 – 1946), *Nude female model*, Oil on canvas, e. 1886/ 87, 975 x 775 mm, FBAUP, Inv. 98.pint.150, Photo: João Lima © FBAUP



Fig. 3 - Carlos Marques (1948), *Nude female model* (teaching exam), Plaster, 1986, 131 x 53 x 38 cm, FBAUP, Inv. 99.esc.101, Photo: FBAUP © FBAUP

The museum's goals are:

- to provide access for the university community (teachers, students, researchers) and for the interested public, to a valuable heritage, consisting mainly of paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures, that illustrate and document the history of the fine arts teaching in Portugal;
- to provide an educational tool to be used by professors and students;
- to establish links with other museums and art collections;
- to develop links with the community at large.

The Fine Arts Museum's primary strategy was then to align these goals with the areas of study at the Faculty of Fine Arts – painting, sculpture and design. The first step was to engage each department in order to understand how the museum and its collection could be used best within undergraduate and graduate studies.

A regular program of activities was established: temporary exhibitions of works from the collection and current students' works; an annual exhibition by Erasmus students; MA final projects; workshops and

external exhibitions. In addition, both undergraduate and graduate curricular activities within today's three main areas of study – fine art, design and critical studies – often involve the collection for creative or research purposes.

This paper will explain some of the practical results of this strategy over the last decade.

A teaching tool

Undergraduate studies

The Department of Design was involved in the development of the museum website which was a student's final project in 1998. Its main features included access to selected works from the collection, information about the School's publications and a virtual exhibition room where students have the opportunity to present work specifically produced for that medium.



Fig. 4 - First year students, having classes at the museum, exhibition *The practice of drawing, in the Fine Art School Collection*, 2008, Photo: Cláudia Garradas © FBAUP

More recently, a technical upgrade involved not only the Design Department but also other schools of the University of Porto, namely, the School of Engineering and the School of Humanities. This upgrade resulted in three new important features: a tool to search the collection, a database to search for people connected to the collection, courses,

specific events, related to the School and to the museum's history, and information about ongoing projects.²

Another example of the use of the art collection in teaching programs is the exhibition *O Exercício do Desenho na Coleção da FBAUP* (*The practice of drawing in the Fine Art School Collection*). Editions of this exhibition are held once a year since 1999, in cooperation with the school's Department of Drawing. It displays around 50 selected drawings that cover the traditional drawing techniques – graphite, sanguine, charcoal and inks. Over a period of a month, together with their teachers, students have the opportunity to observe and discuss recent applications of those traditional techniques. This exhibition is now included in the first year of the undergraduate student's curriculum (fig. 4–5).

This exhibition represents also the first external initiative of the museum, as part of the strategic plan for community engagement. It was organized into four small touring exhibitions, displaying 25 drawings each, touring as part of primary and secondary educational programs.

The emergence of new fields of knowledge and the growing interest in interdisciplinarity has recently resulted in a collaborative project with the Department of Chemistry of the School of Science. Undergraduate students from both schools worked together on a contemporary art conservation project within the art collection. This project has already had some scientific output presented in international seminars in 2007 and 2009: in an international workshop on contemporary art

² museu.fba.up.pt (accessed November 22, 2010).



Fig. 5 - First year students, having classes at the museum, exhibition *The practice of drawing in the Fine Art School Collection*, 2007, Photo: Cláudia Garradas, © FBAUP

conservation methodologies in 2007 and in a one day seminar for young researchers of the University of Porto in 2009.

Graduate students

Graduate students are also involved in the museum's initiatives. Research as part of the MA program in museum and curatorial studies address issues related to the collection, within the fields of museology, curatorship and conservation. Students from other MA programs bring in additional contributions to the development of archival research, construction of digital tools or catalogue design.

Use of the collection in research projects

Research projects have been developed thanks to protocols established with public and private institutions, but also through post-graduate students and researchers. A result of one of those protocols is the publication of partial catalogues of the collection, such as the catalogue *Desenhos do Séc. XIX (19th Century drawings)*. Based on archival research into the drawing study programs in the earlier Fine Arts Academy, this shows highlights of the

different types of 19th century academic drawings: anatomy drawings; drawing from casts and live models, and composition.

The most recent publication is the result of a partnership with a commercial editor, to publish books about artists from the Porto School, students as well as teachers. The first, called *Landscape*, was published in 2007; a second and third book, dedicated to Eduardo Luiz (20th century) and Henrique Pousão (19th century), are about to be published.

The museum, along with the School's archive, is used by PhD students and independent researchers to find information about the formative period of the artists who studied in the School, about the Portuguese fine arts education system, and other related research subjects. This strategy has resulted in important contributions for the study of the art works and the artists of the collection, some of which are published in the museum newsletter, *Apontamentos (Notes)*.

Conclusion

Through the last decade, the Fine Arts Museum of the University of Porto, despite financial and spatial constraints, has reached an important position within the Fine Arts School and within the university. The definition of its areas of intervention, based on the strengths of the collection, as part of the school educational and scientific activities, has allowed the museum to consolidate its role as an instrument to support teaching and research.

At a time in which the University of Porto and European universities in general are undergoing major reforms, promoting interdisciplinarity and globalization of knowledge, university museums can significantly contribute to the construction of a university's identity. To be part of that construction, the Fine Arts Museum of University of Porto, urgently needs to:

- be integrated, along with all the other museums of the University of Porto, into the Portuguese network of museums, thus ensuring access to community funds;
- invest in building works, improve storage areas and ensure a permanent exhibition room.

This will allow the collection to acquire more contemporary artworks, produced by the students and teachers, some of whom are recognized Portuguese artists. It will also allow it to establish links with the community at large, increasing the collection visibility and relevance in the national artistic scene.

Meanwhile, the museum will continue, through its community and its most direct collaborators, the registration, preservation and study of the School's artistic heritage, as well as the promotion of cultural, educational and research programs.

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