

What if we weren't here?

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The other day I was told by a distinguished museum professional that university collections, and indeed many university museums should not become members of the Museums Association. The given reason was that these are not regularly open to the 'public', they do not comply with the ICOM definition of a 'museum', and therefore cannot be 'registered'. As defence, I brought forward several counter-arguments, starting of course by explaining that the first generally accepted 'real' museum (the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, UK) was and still is a university museum and that university museums therefore have the first right to call themselves 'museums'. I argued that ICOM had recently established UMAC, that UMAC had just successfully held its second conference in Australia and is now planning its third, to be held in Oklahoma in 2003. I also pointed out that UMAC, only one year after its formal inauguration, already had over 150 members from three dozen countries from all over the world, etc. Nevertheless and however hard I argued, the position remained: "no public, no museum!"

What makes public 'the public' and when does a specialised public – like scholars and students – begin or cease to belong to 'the public'? Can anybody explain that to me? Since universities are public institutions, and contrary to private collections,

their museums and collections are, just like their libraries, accessible by definition. Of course, we all agree that university collections should be made increasingly more accessible to larger segments of the general public. Indeed, many of the papers in this 'UMAC issue' of *Museologia* testify that university museums are making substantial efforts in that direction. It would be ideal if all university collections of 'public interest' (we should also recognise that not all of them are) would be open at regular hours, for the 'education and enjoyment' of everyone. However, if a university museum is not regularly open to 'the public', it does not necessarily follow that it is dead or that it does not have other 'publics'. It may indeed be more alive and kicking than many would suspect it to be.

One question that I offer for discussion follows from this reflection. Many countries have procedures for their museums to become 'registered', based on standards derived from ICOM's definition of a 'museum' and its 'code of ethics'. Why are all these aspects not taken into account when evaluating museums' registration applications – particularly research, explicitly considered one of the missions of all museums worldwide by ICOM? I am afraid that this question has not yet been raised and my guess is that perhaps the majority of museums

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registered today fail to perform qualified collection-based research or fail to use the object as primary source of information and collect accordingly. Yet, we all agree that such museums can be valuable members of the extended museum family. It is indeed a blessing that such a wide and rich variety of museums and collections exists, covering an enormous range of unimaginable treasures of the earth and reflecting the entire range of human inquisitiveness as well as the diverse cultures of the world, both tangible and intangible¹.

However annoying such discussions may be, let us take them as a challenge to demonstrate that *Cinderella* did wake up from her sleep and is alive and vital. Yes, in some respects university museums and collections are different from non-university museums. As Peter Stanbury explains in his introduction to this issue, the very recognition of that distinct character and the need to join forces led to the establishment of UMAC by ICOM.

Now it is up to us to demonstrate our identity and viability and that is exactly what we did. During its second conference – organised in Australia by Macquarie University under the inspiring guidance of Di Yerbury and Peter Stanbury – UMAC emerged as a strongly motivated, open-minded and energetic group, self-conscious and fully aware of its position on the interface between the university and ‘the world’. I will now summarise some of my most striking impressions and make some recommendations that came up during discussions.

Marta Lourenço drew a picture of the introduction of objects in academic learning in the early European universities. The pivotal role of objects in teaching and research was demonstrated in a number of quite different ways. The relevance of research, combined with the quality of the collections, convinced a

private, non-scientist sponsor to make a substantial donation to the University of Alaska Museum at Fairbanks. In Berlin, the ‘Theatre of Knowledge’, an exhibition in which long-forgotten research collections of the Humboldt University were displayed central stage as treasures of our common knowledge, was an overwhelming public success.

Over the years, universities have amassed many millions of objects; the vast majority related to research and academic learning. The sheer number and the volume oblige us – at the beginning of the twenty-first century – to look critically at our museums and collections. This may lead to selection and disposal or even to transfer of entire collections to new users, as was demonstrated by two projects dealing with selection and redistribution of geological collections in Australia and the Netherlands. Against this background, a new role emerges for university museums: the archival function. As keepers of our scientific heritage, we must be prepared to ask ourselves difficult and sometimes inconvenient questions: do we really need to maintain all those objects, collections and museums? Why and for what purpose do we keep them? Who will use them, who will select, who will decide and who will pay? Together with libraries and archives, we have to develop an interdisciplinary approach for the definition, enhancement and access of our scientific heritage.

The self-evaluation must take place against the background that universities are increasingly focussed on the primary functions for which they are funded, i.e. research and teaching. Sue-Anne Wallace explained the self-reflection and transformation university museums need to address in the light of recent higher education policies and trends.

Having my roots deep in ‘Old Europe’, I must confess that in my personal perception the main emphasis of

¹ The ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ will be the central theme of ICOM’s General Conference in Seoul, 2004. Academic intangible culture includes the traditions of learning, but also the ceremonial parts of university and student life and, from a sociological point of view, perhaps also the way in which a university presents itself to, and is perceived by, society. This theme was part of a research programme carried out under the umbrella of the Council of Europe; see N. SANZ & S. BERGAN 2002. *The Heritage of European Universities*. Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

university museums and collections was on traditional research and teaching collections. A strong emphasis on research and teaching is indeed one of the common features among all UMAC-members. However, the range of collections is by no means limited to 'scientific' collections, as demonstrated by collections dealing with the history of the university and student life found in most universities, as well as contemporary art collections and sculpture parks. Macquarie University's sculpture park contributes to the quality of the campus in a wonderful way.

University museums worldwide are increasingly concerned with public access to their collections, opening windows to their immediate surroundings and, in general, to contemporary society. The way in which they do so differs enormously from case to case. Most seem to do so out of self-interest, putting great creativity into finding their own 'niche' and creating strategic alliances. By presenting their experiences in working with diverse communities on the development of an exhibition and programming about Islam and Muslim life, the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, showed how a university museum proved to be the appropriate site for facilitating conversation between diverse and multi-cultural citizens. From the Nagoya University Museum we learnt of an original public programme – 'muse therapy' – aimed at using the objects, together with music and poetry, as a way of stress relief. The Museum of Human Disease at the University of New South Wales integrates pathology specimens traditionally used in academic teaching in public health educational programmes.

Several museums at Macquarie University joined efforts to produce 'Palæographia', an exhibition integrating science and art, with tremendous success among the general public. The relatively young University of Patras, Greece, is creating a science museum with the purpose of inviting the city of Patras on campus. Against the same background, the National University of Singapore is building a new museum to increase the access to its fabulous collections of South East Asian and Chinese ceramics. Nonetheless, it is not only on site that university



From left to right: Peter Stanbury, Peter Tirrell, Steven de Clercq and Peny.Theologi-Gouti (Canberra, October 2002, Photo: ML).

collections are made increasingly accessible to wider audiences. We learnt about two recent projects aiming at gathering information about university museums and collections on national levels and making it accessible worldwide on the Internet – one in Italy and the other in Germany.

Speaking of the Internet, it is quite interesting to conduct a quick scan of universities around the world and find out whether their websites advertise their museums and collections. Some proudly announce their museums and collections, often together with their libraries, like Oxford, Cambridge, Berkeley, Halle, Utrecht and Uppsala. On the other hand, I was amazed to discover that some universities with high profile museums and collections like Bologna (Palazzo Poggi) and the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota (Frank Gehry's model for his famous Bilbao Museum) do not mention their museums in their homepages. Omitting important treasures from your website is one thing, but worse are those universities that conceal their museums and collections in the furthest imaginable corner of attics and cellars. In these cases, it is up to the imagination of the staff to find ways for organising public support. When the Old Botanical Gardens of Utrecht was threatened to become a parking lot, the neighbourhood community squatted the garden and,

with the help of volunteers, turned it into what is now the museum garden of Utrecht University Museum. In Oklahoma, the local community acted likewise as a pressure group to raise support for the building of the new Sam Noble Museum of Natural History.

The fact that the director of the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History will be retiring shortly and the museum is looking for a successor, created a unique opportunity to raise and debate a difficult question: what is the ideal profile of a university museum director? Training of staff and students was also addressed in a number of ways. Macquarie University, for example, recently created a Museum Studies Course aiming at using its museums as a resource for student training and staff professional development. A similar example comes from the Helsinki University Museum, which devotes much effort to co-operation with students and the development of its museum studies module.

A closer examination of the role university museums can play as interface between university and society opens a wide range of fascinating questions and challenges. Bernice Murphy, ICOM's Vice-President, confronted UMAC with the provocative question why university museums tend to concentrate on just one of the core functions (research) of their parent institutions. Although we all have many good reasons to pay so much attention to the cultural and scientific heritage we hold in trust, Murphy is right when she suggests that 'education', the initial core function of universities, should get a stronger emphasis. University museums have easy access to a wide range of relevant disciplines within their parent institutions and can, therefore, play an innovative role. Additionally, 'education' is higher on the political

agenda than 'culture' and therefore more likely to appeal to key stakeholders.

A related subject that came up in discussions, aims at a broad, almost sociological, approach encompassing a multitude of topics. Who are we, what are we and for whom do we work? How does the museum fit into the mission of the university? How can we consolidate our position within our parent institution? What is the relevance of the museum, why is it there and for whom is it meant? What is our relation with ongoing research and teaching programmes (like history of science and museums studies) and with students? How do university museums succeed in making science interesting, thus inspiring young people to pursue science as a career? What is the 'public quality' of our museums? What is our role in the museum community at large? In which way are different approaches based on cultural or geographical differences? What does the way the university treats its museums tell us about the ambition of the museum or the university? What is the message of the museum architecture and what does its form tell us about its mission? To what extent does the museum represent the university and how effective are the museum's outreach programmes? What kind of leadership is required?

The answers to these questions may not always be evident or convenient and they will be different for each museum. But they will help us to understand what would happen if we were not here and seem to be particularly relevant, both for the management of museums themselves and their governing bodies. Indeed, one of the best ways of planning future actions is to think what would happen if the museum did not exist. Try it – ask yourself about yours.