

Adding value to university collections

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The International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) was established in July 2001. Its first formal meeting was held in Barcelona, Spain at the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) Triennial gathering of the museum profession, but with hindsight it is easy to push the origins of UMAC considerably further back.

All members of UMAC will have different personal recollections of UMAC's origins. A notable landmark for me was the publication in 1986 of two papers in the *Museums Journal*. These were 'Triple crisis in university museums' and 'The crisis in university museums in Scotland' by WARHURST (1986) and WILLETT (1986) respectively. At that time I worked in a university museum where the core collections were at least a century or two old (The Macleay Museum) in Australia's first university (University of Sydney). As in other countries, universities were undergoing profound changes in management and governments were allocating resources less and less generously, even reluctantly. In addition, new and quite specialised research fields were replacing general and taxonomic studies. In consequence, universities began to re-examine their priorities. Where staff responsible for university collections failed to speak clearly and align their practices to

powerful lobbies within the university, their resources were cut and their plight became acute. Whether the collections held were of national or international importance hardly registered with the new style administrators: if expenditure by a section could not demonstrate a return within the financial year, then funds were not forthcoming.

For some university museums it was as though the roof had been removed and the staff blamed when the collections deteriorated. Looking back, one can see that the fact that the roof had been removed was partly of their own making: the custodians had been neither active nor vocal in promoting their significance. Many smaller university museums had not formed strategic alliances, they had no partnerships or feeble ones at best and paid little consideration to the university's aims of teaching, use-oriented research or community outreach. They were simply custodians of past ages without a defined role in a changing environment.

One important reason for the bewilderment of some university museums at this time is that they had no understanding of their position within the university or in the museum profession as a whole. WARHURST (1986) succinctly defined it as a crisis of

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Peter Stanbury, Chair of UMAC (Canberra, October 2002, Photo: ML).

identity. Unfortunately a few university museums still are in jeopardy today for the same reason. One of UMAC's roles is to assist the staff of collections who find themselves without clear direction.

For these various reasons, university museum curators in several countries resolved to protect their collections by forming groups and informing decision makers, both within and without universities, of their contemporary meaning and potential use. The role of university museums needed to evolve and the strength of numbers was needed. In Australia, a university curators group, called the Council of

Australian University Museums and Collections (CAUMAC) was formed in 1992. CAUMAC, with the help of a Vice-Chancellor, Professor Di Yerbury, was influential in persuading government to fund two national reviews of university museums¹.

These reviews had several important effects. Firstly, they highlighted the responsibility of university management for care of important collections within their institutions. Secondly, the reviews also provided university curators with stimulus to write policy linking with the university's own and to practice routine preventive conservation. Lastly, and perhaps

¹ UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS REVIEW COMMITTEE 1996. *Cinderella Collections: University Museums and Collections in Australia*. Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, Canberra. *Transforming Cinderella Collections: The management and conservation of Australian university museums, collections & herbaria*. Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, Canberra.

most importantly, the *Cinderella* publications enabled university curators to get to know one another (to network), to exchange information, to visit one another's collections, and to form partnerships.

The successful formation of CAUMAC led me, encouraged by remarks made by Manus Brinkman, Secretary General of ICOM, in his opening address to the 1998 ICOM meeting in Melbourne, Australia, to propose the formation of an International Committee for university museums. Sufficient signatures were in the following months obtained to forward a request to ICOM. The request was debated within the Advisory Council of ICOM. There was some opposition because most other International Committees were composed of professionals working in a single field, whereas university museums clearly cover a diverse range of areas. Eventually a compromise was reached and UMAC was given permission to start on a trial basis.

Since that time we have been active. First as a loose group and then as a properly constituted International Committee, we have spoken at international meetings in Glasgow, Paris, Barcelona, Sydney and Canberra. Our next meetings are already scheduled for Oklahoma, Seoul, Uppsala and tentatively Singapore in 2006.

Members of UMAC have written many articles about university museums and collections in successive special issues of UNESCO's journal *Museum* (numbers 206 and 207) and in an OECD special publication (KELLY 2001). UMAC's first and second annual

conference proceedings are published in the University of Lisbon's *Museologia*, which you hold in your hands. Peter Tirrell, whose institution at the University of Oklahoma will host the 2003 UMAC conference, has published an important article about the concerns of university museums in *Curator* (TIRRELL 2000). ICOM's 2003 Study Series, recently published, includes articles written by UMAC members about the opportunities offered by university museums for all sectors of the museum profession and for their communities².

Steven de Clercq, UMAC's Vice-Chair, in summarising the atmosphere and feeling of UMAC's 2002 conference, asks (this issue, p. 149) an important question – what if we weren't here? It is as valid for museums *not* in universities as for those *in* universities. How do you answer this question? Will you answer dispassionately?

UMAC's role is to highlight similarities and differences between university museums and other museums, and to encourage interaction and partnerships between all museum professionals wherever located. By asking probing questions, UMAC enables solutions to be found to protect our common heritage. UMAC's writings, conferences and discussions augment the formal training of those responsible for university collections.

UMAC distils the experience of its members for the benefit of all. UMAC exists to illuminate and smooth the way ahead for university museums. Our purpose is to enrich the journey.

References

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² UMAC's website www.icom.org/umac lists our aims and objectives, gives details of our working groups and activities, and lists university museums in a variety of countries.

