

# UMAC: INFORMATION, IDEAS AND INTERNATIONAL COLLEGIALITY

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## Abstract

The International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) identifies and enhances the strengths of university museums and collections. To do this, UMAC must find ground common to all the museums and collections in the sector. There is a dizzying array of fields of interest, sizes, staff, resources, ages and reputations. Seeing this variety, one gets the same sort of feelings as looking at the bright night sky in the countryside—feelings of wonder, confusion, fascination, variety, timelessness, futurity, life and belonging.

Universities are simultaneously places of the old and new, of the ephemeral and the permanent, of the material and immaterial. Despite such diversity, university museums and collections are places where past heritage can, for the benefit of society, interact with current thoughts and ideas. All university museums can establish meaningful links across disciplines and between communities. In this paper, I present some metaphors concerning the role of university museums and collections and explain why UMAC makes a difference to the future of both museums and individuals.

## Belonging—Make Sure People Know You Belong

The feeling of belonging is important to individuals. The curators of university museums are part of the wider museum profession, but also belong to the university scene. By being part of both, they enrich both. There are common goals, opportunities and threats. Ideas and information should flow freely through museum staff. It is important that the wider museum sector and university management (including their respective political masters) understand the strategic position of university museums. Make sure your museum has that feeling of belonging to both the institution and the wider museum sector. To fail to do so is to set course for failure (Stanbury 2001). Make sure you belong to UMAC.

## University Curators—Chefs of the Institution

The job of a curator of a university museum is to take objects of significance and combine them with others to enrich the campus experience. This enrichment might be a themed exhibition, an explanation of current research or an aesthetic experience. Chefs choose fine raw materials and blend them into appetizing experiences in much the same way. Thus, curators are the active, creative and innovative agents that enliven, attract and make new meaning for communities, both internal and external. A curator and a chef both require knowledge, confidence and contacts. It is UMAC's aim to bolster confidence by providing access to a wide range of relevant information tailored for the environment of the campus, and a list of colleagues in many countries. So there you have it—sample recipes, people ready to

help: join UMAC, gather your local ingredients and make your museum a uniquely memorable experience.

## University Museums—Knowledge Exchangers

University museums follow recent research and new areas of study and relate them to the collections. University museums are the nodes through which information passes on to a wider public. Consider, for example, attracting students turned off by micro subjects such as molecular biology and reconnecting them with whole animals and plants, or mounting a changing exhibition in the local hospital.

University museums are the only museums that have liberal access to the inventive, fresh ideas of students and the experience and deep understanding of not just a few researchers, but hundreds or thousands of them—more than any other type of museum could hope to employ. Exhibitions originating from the university's research work or from the suggestions of students broaden your constituency and increase advocacy for your museum.

Collections are no longer the *raison d'être* of museums, use and enjoyment of them is (Hatton 2002). The daily work of a director of a large museum is one of negotiating—taking ideas forward and delivering change—it is rarely dealing with objects. The university curator will ensure the survival of his or her museum only by practicing similar skills. Safeguard the objects by all means, but concentrate on people. Innovative curators question circumstances, ignore old debates and develop new audiences. University museums exist to link disparate fields of knowledge, people and ideas. UMAC is the agent to infuse intellectual excitement

into exhibitions where knowledge is exchanged and extended.

### **University Museums—A Counter to Increasing Specialization**

University museums are bastions of liberal education. Students can visit the museum to explore broad themes, widen contacts, follow developing research, develop skills not formally taught, make illuminating connections between intellectual fields and relax in a non-threatening learning environment. Curators make important contributions by explaining the development and evolution of the arts and sciences, thus providing historical meaning for which there is no time in formal coursework. University museums are the fasteners that connect disparate pieces of knowledge into lucid maps.

One of the greatest opportunities for students is the lure of seeing real objects instead of the digital images of distance or web-based courses. University museums are an oasis of the real in the desert of the digital world.

Some university museums now offer short supplementary courses to replace basic information now omitted through the streamlining of tertiary education. And isn't teaching from the collections how universities started in the first place? *Plus ça change!*

### **University Museums—Enzymes of Interdisciplinary Action**

No one doubts the worth of the university library as an information resource. Yet, many people fail to realize that objects in a university museum contain information that can be used across disciplines. Thus, a dried insect can be an art object, a source for pesticide research in a new housing development, a stimulus for aeronautical studies, a chemical source for the extraction of a furniture polish, a pivot or stimulus for a short story, a key specimen in evolutionary studies or an exhibit in a welcome display for new overseas students. The insect is no longer of interest only to the biologist. Diverse and multicultural audiences view and use the same object in a range of ways. It is a function of UMAC to point this out, and it is vital, if university museums are to survive, that university museums are promoted as resources for more than one community and more than one field of knowledge. University museums have the potential to act as catalysts in the formation of new knowledge from old.

Listening to visitors and their points of view is an inspiration for new interdisciplinary exhibitions, as reported at this and other conferences. UMAC is the loom that curators use to weave the strands of knowledge produced by researchers, thinkers and creative people into material that will be appreciated by, and will attract, diverse communities.

### **University Museums—Signposts at the Crossroads of Community and Campus**

University museums are open doors onto the campus. Many in the community fear coming onto the campus without a sufficient reason or an invitation. University museums connect visitors and university staff by introducing prospective students, answering or forwarding questions, facilitating donations, providing community feedback, initiating contacts between museum staff in other sectors and academics, finding speakers and undertaking cooperative research. These functions of university museums deserve highlighting because they help raise profile and facilitate links. University museums are the very essence of what universities are all about—providing the institution with relevancy in its various communities. UMAC is the *agent provocateur* pointing to and facilitating this process.

### **University Curators as Propagators of Ideas**

The curator can be seen as a gardener (Worton *in litt.* 07.2003) who plants seeds of knowledge that grow in the mind of students as the months and years pass, until the graduate cannot remember a time when this gradually accumulated appreciation of heritage was not present. University curators have an unrivalled opportunity to make their campus flower with relevance for the wider community as life fills with unrepairable and mysterious black boxes, chemicals replace mechanical and surgical procedures and post-modern installations seemingly render brush skills obsolete. The curator's role is to explain and make relevant the paths of development, evolution, social consequences and results of research. University curators have an opportunity to seed the soil of students' imagination at a most receptive and fertile stage. This enrichment of experience is particularly important for students whose experience may be limited, but their creativity is developing actively. UMAC helps to identify these and other benefits that enrich the communities served by the university.

### **UMAC—An Agent Linking Curators and Ideas**

UMAC is important because one of its tenets is equity of knowledge: equity among its members, but also equity for all concerned with university collections at whatever level, wherever located. UMAC strives to reach university curators, university management, politicians, whether in government or not, and the wider museum sector. UMAC has status as an official committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

UMAC is important because it attempts to redress a lack of knowledge. It develops definitions, procedures and policies. With its international contacts, it can help those who seek assistance. Furthermore, UMAC respectfully proffers information where it feels that there is a lack of understanding about the nature of university museums and collections. UMAC practices advocacy.

UMAC is important because it stimulates discussions, fosters international partnerships, develops links and advances knowledge. It regards quality of individual experience as essential in all its dealings. UMAC believes in diversity of approach. UMAC attempts to reach its goals by a series of successive small steps. UMAC is young, growing, active and practical. It has a proud publication record. It is determined to improve its web site to make information about university museums more readily available. Demonstrable action, as for any museum (Glaister 2003), is important for UMAC, too.

I urge you to participate in UMAC's working parties and discussions. Just a few small, new steps by you will make all the difference. Please consider joining a working group. Your action for UMAC locally will bring you significant insights and global renown for your museum. Let us have much to report to many members at our next conference in Seoul, Korea, where the theme will be *Museums and Intangible Heritage*. With your help, we can assist our managerial and political masters to an understanding of the value of university museums to their various publics. Together we can assist our colleagues to face the future with confidence.

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