

Conference proceedings: *Awareness and Action – University Museums Today*, September 25 – October 1, 2005, Uppsala, Sweden

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University museums as a strategic tool: on communicating university values

Ladies and gentlemen,

Who is Alma mater? What is she? What does she believe in and how do we come face to face with her? And what is the role of university museums in producing and passing on her knowledge, ideas and values?

As you know, we are in one of the oldest university buildings of Uppsala. I suppose that you have already heard that it was the remarkable professor Olaus Rudbeck who redesigned this house in the seventeenth century. When Rudbeck built the Anatomical Theatre (II. 1), he wanted to create facilities for teaching and research, but I am quite convinced that his main aim was to create an impressive house, conveying authority and communicating values. Rudbeck himself wrote that he wanted the building to impress foreigners. The university should stand out in all its splendour, and thus make a statement about the importance of learning and science in a northerly but powerful European state. Buildings, collections, and the people of the university play symbolic roles in the drama of contemporary society – this was true in the seventeenth century and is true today.

Alma mater is not a secluded monastery any longer. The universities are big; they are in continuous contact with society at large, constantly negotiating between the esoteric and the exoteric – between complicated theories of modern science and the openness of a diversified and democratic educational system. A better metaphor than the monastery would be that of a stall in the market-place, a stall in which high-quality goods are displayed, but not always in a way which makes it easy for the bystander to understand the value and uses of the commodities. And when facing the world, value and uses must constantly and effectively be displayed and explained.

In my view university museums play an important role, both within the universities and as an interface between the academic world and society. But it is of overriding importance that there is a dynamic collaboration between museums and their universities. Together we must justify the existence of university museums and reflect on their

purpose. In my talk I will concentrate on university museums as tools for communication – and especially tools for communicating university values. It must, however, be remembered that my perspective is the perspective of an outsider. I am a professor of literature at Uppsala University and I am fairly well acquainted with the eminent work that is done at our own museums, but I am no museum man myself. This means that I am honoured – but also somewhat intimidated – to have the opportunity of making a contribution to this conference. I want to thank the organizers and committees for giving me the opportunity.

Now to the first point I want to make. University museums must identify themselves as a part of the university and the university and the faculty must consider museums as an integrated part of the university world. This means that the museums have to think about the interests of the university, its teaching and its research. Museums are servants to Alma mater – they can be pensioned off if they do not contribute, just like derelict departments. On the other hand, the university and faculty must understand what an asset the collections and their professional keepers represent. Short-sighted fights over funding are constantly taking place and quite often the university museums seem to be part of the discussion. Money is always short in departments and hungry eyes within teaching and research are looking for new funding for vital projects. The answer to this conflict is to formulate common goals, argue for the uses of collections and museum competence within research and education, and to realise the potential of museums in public relations. There is a need for strategies, not for short-term tactics. Tactics never win wars, strategy does.

University museums are an asset. There might be situations when the kind of contributions that museums make could be met in other ways. But in most circumstances museums ought to be able to contribute significantly to the core objectives of the university – finding new knowledge and transferring skills and intellectual ability to new generations. And they ought to be eminently able to promote the underlying values of a vital and modern university. University museums should – among other things – be used for communicating university values. Let me make an attempt to list some of these.

I will begin with two crucial concepts: openness and freedom. The university must – at all times – stress the importance of open communication among scholars, but also of open communication between university and society. The concepts of academic freedom, integrity and of disinterested inquiry are basic. These values should be highlighted and dramatised through the collections and the university history. Let me give an example. On one sad occasion in the seventeenth century, the otherwise formidable professor Rudbeck is said to have – without further ado – locked the door to this building to stop a disputation on a thesis that he could not accept. The ideas in the thesis went against his own theories. However, the academic congregation fetched a ladder, climbed into Gustavianum and conducted the discussion. Is that not a nice story about the fight for basic university values?

A further group of values have to do with how things should be done at the university. Keywords are creativity, contribution, excellence and professionalism. The university riches in these areas must be made vivid, given material body and accompanying stories. The impressive botanical or zoological or paleontological collections from the past tell heroic stories about the nature of science and scientists. The row of remarkable oil portraits of Uppsala university professors – imposing and slightly daunt-

ing – are stating, in an unabashed way: „We are creative, we are excellent, we are good”. There is quite some snobbery in these statements, but now and then there are situations when it is necessary to dare to promote excellence. Today the trick is to find modern and more modest ways to say basically the same thing. And this must be done without loosing touch with the tradition.

A third group of values focus on the responsibility of the universities in society. Central concepts are public service, democratic education, cultural diversity and diversity of opinions, perspectives and interests. I like the well-known quotation from L.P. Hartley: „The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there”. There are few areas within the university that could be better equipped to show the changes in the area of academic opportunities and diversity than university museums. I would like to see these shifts, transitions and developments staged even more often at the museums.

Finally, I want to emphasize a sort of overriding university value, or perhaps rather a responsibility. I am thinking of the management, promotion and dissemination of intellectual wealth. In this task – identifying and communicating the riches of the university world – museums are of great importance.

Well, this was a lot of nice words. I am talking the talk, but can I walk the walk? I do not know. But I think that university museums are, or can develop into, strategic tools for the universities, not least because of their greater range of freedom in meeting various audiences. Most of the scientists, scholars and teachers within the university work towards a set audience – classes, other scientists, typical reading audiences. Museums seem to me to have an opportunity to use not only the voice of the academic lecturer – concentrating on facts and relations – but also a chance for emotional appeal: a museum visit should be an experience. And – and this is important to stress – this educational and emotional address is made in the name of the university. The university ethos is essential. In Sweden, universities are the institutions in society which rank the highest when it comes to trust and confidence. University museums differ from most other museums in that they are the voice – although certainly not the only voice – but still *one* of the direct voices of the university.

Education, Emotion and dedication to the university Ethos should be the three central E's in the work of the museums.

I am still on a rather abstract level, talking about ways of communicating and ways of persuading. What about the concrete situation? I find the material collections important, I find the buildings in which the university museums are housed important, and I think that professionalism should always be stressed. The media and public relations skills of the museums should be emphasized. Finally, I am convinced that the question of identity is of overriding importance. The stress should not be on university *museum*, but on *university* museum.

What is needed to achieve these goals? The answer is simple: money and will. Most important is the will. The uses of university museums must be stressed in various ways and mutually beneficial alliances must be formed. The museums must be understood as rather expensive but, at the same time, necessary and organic parts of a prosperous and self-assured university.

However, are they *too* expensive? Museums usually cost a lot, they surely do. But what the university has to do in its accounting is to put a price-tag on good-will and cultural capital. I am told by economists that both social and cultural capital is

rentable and possible to invest. And in the larger game of accountancy, the value of university museums is probably very high indeed.

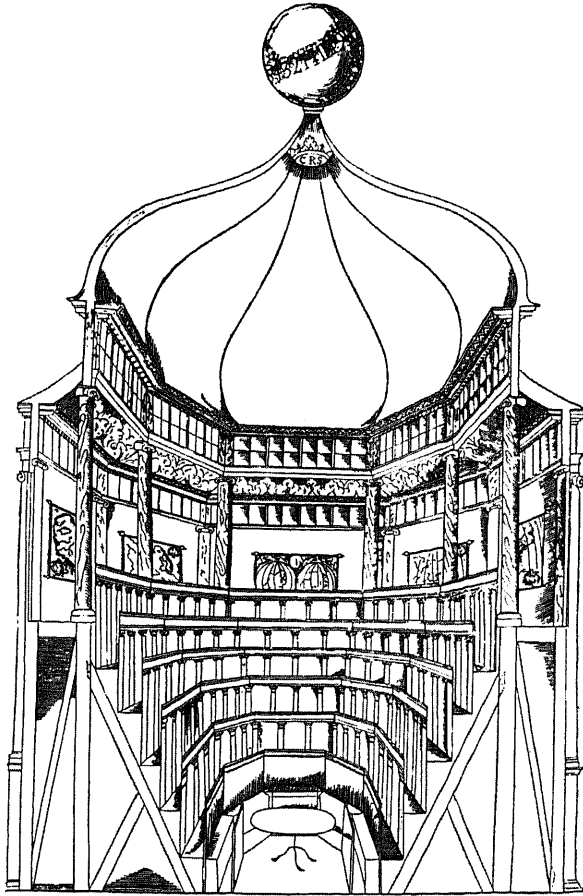
I am reaching my conclusion. To me, university museums represent, cultivate and embody a number of university values. I would like to maintain that the singular position of university museums offers a chance of communicating these values in an exceptional way. This chance must be taken, but for a successful strategy the identity of museums as an integrated part of the university is paramount.

I think that it is a duty within the university at large to consider the potential worth of university museums. And I think that you, who represent university museums from all over the world, have a marvellous opportunity to show Alma mater in her past and present fineries, on a catwalk that can be found in no other place, inside or outside the university.

STRESZCZENIE

Muzea uniwersyteckie jako ważne narzędzie strategiczne do przekazywania wartości uniwersyteckich

Uniwersytety odgrywają kluczową rolę we współczesnym społeczeństwie. Jednakże czym *jest* uniwersytet i jakie są podstawowe wartości tej średniowiecznej organizacji, która stale się przekształca, a obecnie jest ukierunkowana na rozwój w XXI wieku? Muzea uniwersyteckie od samego początku stanowiły część systemu edukacji, przy czym zmieniały się wraz z uniwersytetami. Jednakże, jaka jest obecna relacja między uniwersytetami a ich muzeami? Czy uniwersytety skutecznie wykorzystują potencjał oferowany przez zasoby muzealne oraz szczególne kompetencje swoich muzeów? A także, czy muzea skutecznie definiują i wyrażają swoją pozycję w systemie uniwersyteckim? Niniejszy artykuł omawia strategiczne możliwości muzeów uniwersyteckich zarówno w samych strukturach uniwersyteckich, jak i w odniesieniu do całego społeczeństwa. Głównym założeniem artykułu jest przekonanie, iż muzea reprezentują, kultywują i uosabiają wiele wartości uniwersyteckich, a ich szczególna pozycja daje możliwość przekazywania tych wartości w sposób wyjątkowy. Autor omawia problemy związane z tym zagadnieniem, sposoby pozyskiwania zwiedzających, a także nawiązywanie relacji z różnorodną publicznością.



Il. 1. The Anatomical Theatre, University of Uppsala (1662), in a drawing made by Olaus Rudbeck himself (courtesy Uppsala University)