

21st ICOM General Conference – the impact on Austrian university museums and collections

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Abstract

The staging of the ICOM UMAC conference in Vienna has provided the impetus for a much-needed network of Austrian university museums and collections.

The General Conference represented a break-through for the Austrian university museums and collections, because it brought them into the UMAC community for the first time. An initial listing of all collections was prepared for the conference and this will form the basis for a network, which is particularly needed at a time when Austrian universities are restructuring.

Due to the small size of Austria, with only 8.3 million inhabitants, universities are mostly limited to the major cities. There are in total 23 public and 8 private universities, and so far about 230 collections have been identified.

A leading role is being played by the University of Vienna, which has started a three year project to identify all its collections, publish the list on the internet and present each collection online.¹ So far seven collections are presented, each with its own site.²

In addition to conservation, one of the most important tasks for the network is raising awareness of the importance of the collections, not just as demonstration material but as objects representing the history of science at the University of Vienna. It is also vital to support communication and exchange of information among curators. At the end of November 2007 the second meeting of curators took place at the Collection of the Department of Prehistoric and Mediaeval Archaeology. The main topic was *Digital Management*, and over 30 curators attended, discussing digitization, inventories, the management of data and collection management.

The Academy of Fine Arts Vienna is playing a leading role within the Austrian Collections. In 2007 the Academy organised two colloquia about the challenges to be faced. For the first one, the chair of UMAC, Cornelia Weber, was invited as keynote speaker to present the situation and role of University Museums and Collections.

Both the picture gallery and the graphic collection of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna are facing changes. Everybody who attended the Viennese conference will remember the extreme climate conditions of the picture gallery during the month of August. After the end of the exhibition *The Dream of the South - The Dutch are Painting Italy* major renovations are planned, including a new air conditioning and security system. In connection with this, new presentation of the collections is under discussion.

For the Graphic Collection – the oldest of any academy in Europe - which is at present in temporary storage in the Albertina, new stores, a study room and studios are planned in one of the courtyards of the Academy. Exhibition space will probably be included in the picture gallery. This shows that the value and importance of the collection is recognised.

¹ See <http://www.ub.univie.ac.at/sammlungen/> (accessed August 27, 2008).

² See for example the Observatory:

http://www.ub.univie.ac.at/sammlungen/universitaetssternwarte_und_sternwartemuseum.html (accessed August 27, 2008)

Discussions are also underway concerning the position of the collections within the teaching programme and an e-learning-strategic project, *Delta 3*. These kinds of initiative are vital if the collections are to be integrated within the university's core functions.

It is evident that after the General Conference there is a broader understanding and recognition of the university collections by senior management, but there is still a long way to go to extend this to other Austrian universities. The need and desire for a common structure is clear, but this can only be achieved with strong backing from the ministry.

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