

The collections at the University of Vienna

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Abstract

A project to identify and promote the entire collections of the University of Vienna has demonstrated the need for curatorial support networks to assist those responsible for caring for them.

Background

In September 2006 the University of Vienna began a project to identify, and produce an online database of, all collections kept in different departments. Alongside this an exciting programme of events will be developed, including exhibitions, guided tours, publications and lectures. The project is based at the Vienna University Library under the direction of the Deputy of the Head of the Vienna University Library and Archive Services Dr. Andreas Brandtner. The project began in January 2007, with one employee who since July 2007 has been working full-time.

At the moment, most of the collections unknown to the majority of students, and even members of the university staff do not know about the treasures that are kept in their neighbourhood. Some of the collections, such as those in the departments of archaeology, astronomy, numismatics, palaeontology, pharmacognosy, prehistory and the herbarium, are of international significance, in addition to reflecting departmental histories.

This paper offers an overview of the University of Vienna's collections.

What do we mean with “collections”?

We include in our definition all teaching and research collections, including materials such as coins, stones, plaster casts, animal preparations and skeletons, plants, models, instruments, documents, letters, photographs and slides as well as audio and video tapes. As the project considers not only



Fig. 1 - Plaster casts, Department of Classical Archaeology

collections that are in possession of the University of Vienna, but also collections stored at the University, the project is called *University Collections at the University of Vienna*. There are collections that are completely or partially on loan to a museum, for example the Globe Collection of the Department of Geography and Regional Research which is now stored in the Globe Museum at the Austrian National Library. These collections are also included in the list.

Identifying the collections

The most important document for identifying the collections was the opening balance sheet of 2004. Information given in this document, only provided a partial picture, however, because it simply examined the material value of the collections; many collections, especially slide collections, were not included. The websites of the departments and institutes of the University of Vienna was quite helpful but most departments do not mention their collections. So in January 2007 a circular was sent to departments assumed to hold collections asking for an appointment to view them. By the end of January 2007 the first collections were visited. This process of identifying the collections is not yet finished and the final number of collections at the University of Vienna is still unknown.

Presentation

Presenting the collections is vital because a lot of collections are unknown even within the departments where they are stored. Most of the collections at the University of Vienna are stored in repositories and are not accessible for the public. Some departments present their collection in showcases, only few departments have an own collection room where lectures are held, too. Two departments have exhibition rooms where their collection is presented and which can also be visited by interested public.

In August 2007, a folder was printed in English and German giving general information about the project and the collections. This is available from the porter of the University. The next step is to present our website which will provide a list of all collections, announcements of events in the collections and information about the activities of the project. We have also been thinking about creating a virtual exhibition, and are planning lectures and guided tours through selected collections.

Providing assistance to custodians

In the course of visiting various collections and talking to curators, it turned out that most of the people who were responsible for a collection were professors who are looking after the collections in addition to their normal teaching and research work. They would find it helpful if we could offer them information concerning collection management including the production of inventories (databases,



Fig. 2 - Show room, Department of Pharmacognosy

digital asset management systems), and information on conservation, preservation and presentation.

Activities

We also decided to organize six monthly meetings for the curators with lectures on different topics, such as *University Museums and Collections worldwide* or *Digital Collections Management*. These meetings also serve as a platform for the curators to make requests, suggestions and to exchange their experiences.

Since 2005, staff and alumni of the University of Vienna have been offered the opportunity to visit some of the collections and facilities on guided tours. These activities have been organized by the department of public relations and event management and take place four times each term.

Conclusion

It is clear that a lot of university collections are virtually unknown. Therefore it is very important to present and promote the unique qualities of the collections to staff, students and the public and to provide a forum for the exchange of information, the co-ordination of activities, and the sharing of good practice between curators to create an awareness of the importance of these collections.

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