

University museums and collections in Mexico – An overview

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Abstract

At the UMAC conference held in 2006 in Mexico, it was realised that the factors which UMAC needs to address to achieve greater recognition should be seen on a regional rather than a global scale. It was therefore decided to encourage members to set up regional groups with the aim of achieving regional recognition, or to stimulate existing regional groups to collaborate with UMAC in achieving shared goals.

L. F. Rico Mansard (Dirección General de Divulgación de la Ciencia – UNAM) started such a regional initiative ("working forum") in Mexico in cooperation with B. T. Abraham Jalil (Autonomous University of the State of Mexico) and L. Monges Santo (Historical Collections of the Popular Art Museum).

At the first meeting on November 22nd, 2006, the group laid down the following main guide lines: 1) Create a working group entirely dedicated to museums in universities; 2) Produce an integrated database of the university collections and museums; 3) Compile a comprehensive web mailing list of those working in university museums; 4) Establish priorities for university museums to improve their services; 5) Provide members with specialized information on university museums; 6) Create spaces in which these topics can be discussed; 7) Connect the national museum group with the International Committee. Since that first meeting the regional group has met three times.

Establishing a new working forum: UMAC Mexico

As in many countries in Europe and the Americas, university museums and collections in Mexico have a long history, but their reorganization and consolidation happened during the 20th century when university institutions were modernized and granted autonomy in order to provide students with better opportunities.

Most public universities in the country were founded upon scientific and literary institutions or local agricultural schools. These places gradually collected various specimens, laboratory equipment, frames and objects. In the last decades of the 19th century, the dissemination of positivist philosophy in education resulted in the establishment of laboratories aiming to demonstrate the facts of nature. Items, objects and instruments were acquired for research and teaching purposes in areas such as physics, chemistry, biology, zoology, medicine, and meteorology, thus considerably increasing the size of university collections.

Although these collections were intended mainly for university science teaching, sometimes, on days and in hours when no classes were taught, the collections were opened for the general public.

As time went by, the number of items grew and new equipment was acquired to ensure science teaching remained up to date. During the 20th century, many university collections were opened to the public. Their aesthetic and historic value was undeniable, and their preservation and exhibition aimed at both preserving the country's cultural heritage and showing the world what was being done by the university.

Works of art such as paintings, sculptures and engravings were also used initially for teaching purposes. Many important items were originally placed in special academic buildings and classrooms, and were eventually integrated into specific collections for their public exhibition in museums and temporary exhibits. In spite of work undertaken to identify the origin, trajectory and use of these university collections, it is not yet possible to know exactly what there is in every collection or to fully

understand its status. Given that universities are guardians of much of Mexico's cultural heritage, it is important to have a full understanding of the exact contents and status of each collection in order to promote its preservation and sustainable use, and in order to stimulate interaction and exchange of experiences among university museum professionals, which can be then disseminated within the university and in public.

This museological interest parallels to the current need to consolidate a theoretical-methodological corpus that includes the perspectives on the collections and on museography within the university. Its goal is not to interfere with the research, teaching and dissemination activities of the university, but to identify what has been done so far and set a course of action to guarantee each collection's preservation and dissemination. Although it is difficult to perform this type of analysis, we believe there are many steps that can be taken to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage not only by the professionals in charge of every collection and museum, but also by the academic community and the general public.

First actions

Through its working forum on University Museums and Collections (UMAC Mexico), the Dirección General de Divulgación de la Ciencia (General Board of Science Dissemination) of the Autonomous National University of Mexico – the country's most important academic institution –, has devoted itself to study these topics to establish a university museology that can be adjusted to the country's real needs while contributing to the consolidation of museology in general. Its first actions include:

1. The organisation of working sessions: frequent meetings with the staff of university museums to exchange experiences and opinions (3 per year). The goal is to promote university museums and collections as a specialized activity.
2. The organisation of Round Tables to present and discuss specialized works (2 per year minimum). The goal is to analyze university museums and collections within the Mexican context as a basis for further discussion in a regional and international context.
3. The creation of an institutional database of university museums and collections that can be accessed nationwide.
4. The creation of a database of university museum and collection professionals to consolidate a family of university museum workers.
5. The preparation of specialised publications in order to establish a university museology and collect knowledge and experience.

Following UMAC's guidelines, future activities include the publication of this work in order to build a conceptual platform for Mexican university museums.

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