

Mendel Museum, the first university museum in the Czech Republic – Short excursion to the history of university museums in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

Mendel Museum has been a part of Masaryk University since 2007 and is the first comprehensive university museum in the modern history of the Czech Republic. It aims to promote the legacy of Gregor Johann Mendel, the Augustinian monk who discovered the basic principles of heredity in the Abbey of Old Brno. These principles have become the starting point for a new field of study – genetics. Mendel Museum prepares short-term exhibitions that promote the work of the university. Although Czech legislation does not acknowledge the independent category of ‘university museum’, the Mendel Museum conducts its operations under the Czech legislation for museums; this ensures the protection of collections and collection objects.

Introduction

Masaryk University is the second largest university in the Czech Republic. The university now runs a museum that manages collections, presents university research achievements, connects the university environment with the public and welcomes elementary and secondary school students. The museum bears the name of the world-famous scientist G. J. Mendel. University museums face many problems, which are not always economic. The major problem is the promotion of the museum as a necessary part of university that preserves the cultural heritage of the academic environment. Historical evolution and revivalist movements had led to foundation of many museums associated with social activities rather than university museums.

History of Czech university museums

The history of collecting in the Czech lands goes back to 11th century. As described by Kouba (1988; ŽALMAN 2005), collecting first focused on the so called Christian collecting. Later collections were obtained by the Crown and nobles. They were gathered in mansions. The beginning of museology in the Czech lands is connected with the revivalist movements at the turn of 18th and 19th century. There were no museums established within universities. We may, however, speak of ‘cabinets’. One of the donors of the so called natural sciences cabinet of Charles University was Count Kinsky. He was one of first to suggest the idea of establishing a ‘Czech museum’ in order to present the beauty of the Czech Kingdom.

Charles University is the oldest university in the Czech Republic. It was established by Charles IV in 1348. Other Czech universities were founded at the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century.

The above mentioned cabinet has the longest history of all and can be considered to be the oldest university mineralogy museum. The Charles University Museum was established in the period after the First World War. It was founded on the basis of a gift of anthropological material to Charles University and Czech people from the world-famous anthropologist Dr Aleš Hrdlička. The first Czech president, T. G. Masaryk, also supported foundation of the museum. The museum is now part of Charles University’s Faculty of Science.

Another museum at the university is Chlupáč Museum of earth history and cartography. Chlupáč Museum was founded in 2004 and is the youngest museum of the CU Faculty of Science. The

cartographic collection dates back to 1920 and is one of the most important map collections in the Czech Republic.

Another museum in the history of university museums is the Masaryk University's Mendel Museum. Masaryk University (MU) was founded in 1919 after independent Czechoslovakia was formed. The museum was started in 2007. It is the first museum in the country to have services and administration of all MU collections among its tasks. This Mendel Museum is a progressive concept and should provide guidelines to other universities on how to handle collections.

The Czech museum legislation

Museums in the Czech Republic (CR) are governed by act no. 122 of 2000. The act defines terms as collection, collection item, and methods of handling. The act defines the term CES, which stands for Centrální Evidence Sbírek (Central Register of Collections) with Ministry of Culture of the CR. The CES web page states:

"The Ministry of Culture inscribed on the Central Register of Collections (CES) all collections (owned by the State and the regional and local municipalities), whose managers – museums and galleries – were obliged ex lege to apply for registration of the collections. Collections owned by other legal entities and individuals have also been inscribed, provided that the owners decided to have them inscribed. The list of collections inscribed on the CES includes: the name of the collection, information about the owner of the collection, information about the manager of the collection, which is as a rule a museum or gallery (a gallery being a fine arts museum), separately recorded parts constituting the collections; each of these parts ("subcollections") is focused on a specific area, characteristics of each subcollection, containing: indication of the territory from which the subcollection primarily comes, the period that is primarily documented by the subcollection, and a brief history of the subcollection, the types of objects and materials that are primarily represented in the subcollection, indication whether the subcollection includes cultural relics or archival documents. Hence, the CES primarily is: 1. a complete overview of museums and galleries founded by the government or by the regional or local municipalities and a list of their collections, briefly characterised and not published anywhere else. 2. information about the specialised areas in which museums and galleries do their collecting work. 3. information about which collections enjoy, or may enjoy, subsidisation from public funds. 4. and also information about a number of other collections that are owned by other legal entities or individuals."¹

Neither this act or other amendments and by-laws define the term university museum. Thus it classifies university collections as collections of other legal entities. It is a paradox, especially because a public university manages public resources and its collections are surely part of the national cultural heritage. A public university can be called a national cultural heritage, too. Public universities educate and employ scholars who are a crucial element of society and the creation of its values; values future generations lean on. To understand collections as the possessions of so called other legal entities downgrades them to something that is part of free market, something that does not need special care. The law protects museums and their collections established by the state, regional governments and municipalities. University museums were not considered by the legislators because a couple of museums at one university did not attract legislative attention. Most museums are established by state and local governments.

Another important factor is the specific university environment. Universities primarily exercise educational and research activities. Therefore, the collections are sometimes neglected, even if they have the potential to be part of education as well as research and community outreach. University

¹ ces.mkcr.cz/en/ces.php (accessed November 24, 2010).

collections can only be included into CES if they handled as a common museum collection, which can may cause troubles in class work.

Mendel Museum

The Mendel Museum has been the part of Masaryk University since 2007. This workplace is located within the precincts of the Augustinian Abbey in Old Brno. It aims to promote the legacy of Augustinian abbot G. J. Mendel, who is known primarily for his studies conducted on plants, peas in particular. However, Mendel's also carried out other research in the field of apiology, or breeding of bees. Abbot Mendel has become an icon of modern biology and is rightly called the father of genetics. Despite his persistence, diligence, and analytical approach, his work was fully appreciated only after his death.

Therefore, one of the aims of the museum is to promote Mendel's genius. It also tries to raise awareness about the fields of study available at MU. The connection of educational efforts of the museum with theoretical aspects of several fields of study makes the Mendel Museum a significant place that connects science with practice. It allows academics to interact with the wider public.

The visitor to the museum can attend permanent and temporary exhibitions as well as visit Mendel's apiary in the abbey's garden. In addition, lectures from the *Mendel lectures* cycle, introducing outstanding personalities from the fields of biology, genetics, and molecular biology, attract those interested in science.

Masaryk University Collection

Masaryk University owns, like many other universities, collections and collection items. The items are used during classes. Only some items are of true museum nature. In compliance with the Czech legislation, a collection with three sub-collections has been created. The sub-collections are art, paleontology and mineralogy. The management is carried out by Mendel Museum. The structure of handling the collection is shown in fig. 1. An objective of Mendel Museum is to administer all potential

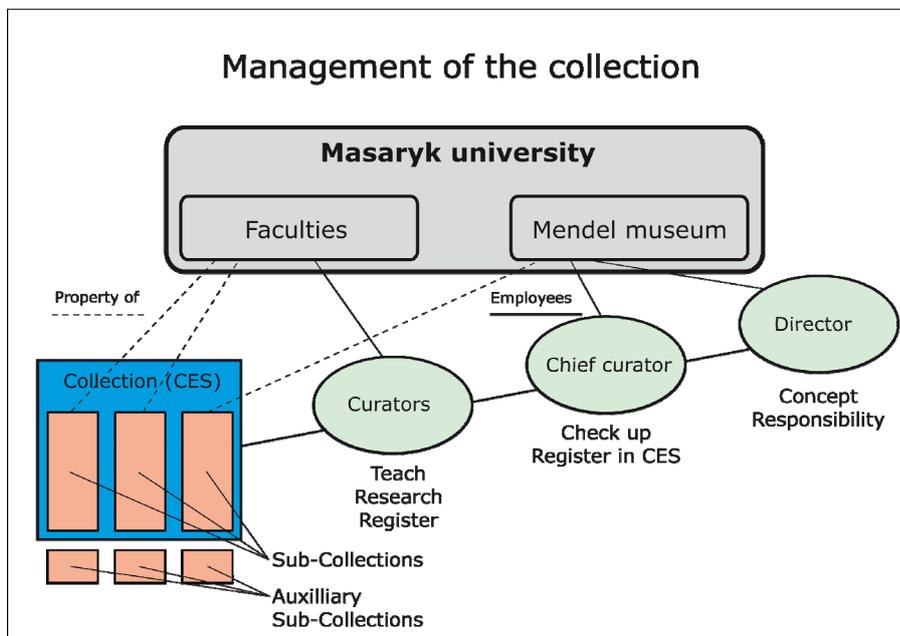


Fig. 1 - The structure of handling the collection

collections of Masaryk University. This does not mean to transfer them to one place, but to set rules for their care and use. The herbarium and anatomy collections could be among other sub-collections.

Conclusion

Museums and universities in the Czech lands have a great tradition. However, the period of political changes from the end of 19th to the second half of 20th

century has created some problems for museums. Universities and museums developed independently from each other although universities collaborated with museums and many academics worked in museums.

The Mendel Museum at Masaryk University has played a significant part in shaping the role of university museums in the Czech Republic. It is important that museums and universities work closely together in order to preserve and to use the collections of universities. The way that Masaryk University handles its collections should become the starting point and guideline for work with collections in other universities.

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