

Making the museum visible: Reinventing a veterinary museum

ISABEL GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ, SONIA DÍAZ JIMÉNEZ & GABRIEL MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA

Abstract

The Veterinary Museum, Complutense University, Madrid, is an interesting example of institutional adaptation. From its establishment, it has had to reinvent itself in response to political, social, economic and academic circumstances. It was created at the end of the eighteenth century to house teaching and research collections that were much appreciated at that time. However, the museum history is full of losses and recoveries.

Rebirth in the twenty-first century; a new plan was developed taking into account the academic environment and seeking public recognition. The Animal Hospital belonging to the veterinary faculty was chosen for its museographic installations so its contents are very accessible to the public.

Introduction

The Veterinary Museum is now one of the numerous and varied museums and collections owned by the Complutense University of Madrid. The university has a vast heritage, but due to its size as an institution it has not been very efficient in some aspects, for example, in the documentation, care and accessibility of its heritage. The different departments have been responsible for taking care of their collections, which are used mostly for teaching; some of those collections became museums in the second half of the 20th century and others in the 21st century, which is the case of the new Veterinary Museum. At present we are witnessing the birth and growth of an institution, a very exciting process since it implies digging and hunting for objects and collections in our own place of work. We are finding real treasures and receiving new donations to enrich its contents.

The Veterinary Museum is the Complutense University's most recent museum. It is in its early stages and will emerge into the public eye very soon. However, this institution and some of its collections have a long history.

A brief history

Veterinary studies in Spain started in the 1792 with the foundation of the Royal Veterinary School of Madrid along the lines of the French model. A vast heritage was accumulated around these studies, most of which was used for teaching and research.



Fig. 1 - The old Anatomy Museum (ca. 1905)

At the beginning of the 19th century an important part of the collection was lost due to political circumstances: the Spanish War of Independence (1808–1813), French occupation and lack of interest shown by governing institutions afterwards. However, in 1827 a renewed interest in veterinarian instruction emerged and a number of academics began to gather collections for teaching.

The school grew and moved to different locations (between 1864 and 1881). At the same time its collection

was also growing. By 1881, it was located in a large building in the centre of Madrid and stayed there for almost 80 years. This period is considered to be the richest in terms of expanding collections, with items such as anatomical models, biological specimens and preparations, skeletons, books, prints, etc. being acquired. In addition, scientific cabinets and academic chairs kept significant collections. Then, an important anatomy and teratology museum came to light and had a high profile. The exact date when the museum was set up is not known, but pictures taken in 1905 have been found and documents dating from 1916 refer to the anatomy museum.

During the Spanish Civil War, which took place from 1936 to 1939, the museum was badly damaged and consequently a significant part of the collections was lost. However shortly after the end of the war the collection was recovered and the museum was opened again under the name Museum of Veterinarian Anatomy and Teratology (ca. 1942).

In 1958 the school in downtown Madrid was closed and the last move took place. This was the worst episode in the history of the collections, as a large number of objects and specimens disappeared, some were dispersed and others were sold at the flea market. The rest of the collection was kept provisionally in storage in classrooms in the law school belonging to the Complutense University.

In 1968 the new veterinary faculty buildings were opened and the collections found their way to the anatomy chair, although the contents were insufficient for creating a museum. At the same time, the surgery chair rebuilt a collection of medical and clinical equipment.



Fig. 2 - The collections were kept in storage in inappropriate spaces.

can be said that in barely five years 3,000 pieces with great historic and scientific value were rescued and gathered together: horseshoe collections, anatomical models made of wax, plaster or papier-mâché (18th and 19th centuries), surgical and professional instruments, including those donated by individuals such as the first Spanish veterinary surgeon. These impressive collections were considered good news but this was counteracted by the lack of space needed to store them.

As we were present at the creation of the museum, which is still under construction, we had the chance to define the objectives, select the collections and develop a museum project in line with its mission statement. Due to the great number of pieces coming in, we needed to evaluate their

The new museum

First step: Documentation

Things did not change much for a long time, and it was well into the 21st century before the new project could be started. In 2003, Professor Sánchez de Lollano was in charge of the history of veterinary studies chair.¹ In 2005 he began an intensive work of heritage recovery, adding his own collection and attracting donations from other veterinary surgeons, academics and students. The teaching collections of the anatomy and surgery chairs were also included along with collections coming from other related institutions. It

¹ Also in March 2003 important documents were discovered in the archives of the veterinary faculty representing a major contribution to the history of science in Spain.

significance and justify their inclusion in the museum. All the acquisitions were registered and analyzed in order to determine their state of conservation so we could act accordingly.

The heritage collected is very heterogeneous and in order to proceed with documenting the collections, it was also vital to establish priorities based on the value of the object or group of objects, their potential use and their conservation needs.²

The evaluation criteria took into account:

1. The artistic or symbolic value placed on decorative arts and objects with recognized artistic significance.
2. Scientific or technical heritage values; a sub-category will include professional value referring to the scientific instruments used in veterinary practice. This assessment takes into account age, unusual features and also if the objects contain information about a specific technique or scientific theory, or if they provide significant data about an institution.
3. Academic value applied mostly to the older collections dating from the 18th and 19th century, including anatomical models, mannequins, scientific instruments and preparations that also have historic significance.

Some objects have more than one value attached to them: artistic, academic, professional, scientific, etc.

Priorities are also based on conservation considerations: state of completeness, state of deterioration and conservation needs.

In the process of assessment we came across two special situations: many objects are duplicates or are very similar, especially instruments used by veterinary surgeons working between 1930 and 1970. We have decided that these objects will be kept in storage and be used for future donations or exchange.

On the other hand, a number of historical objects are still used as teaching materials, but some of them have great historical and artistic value. We consider that this is incompatible with their conservation and exhibition, so the production and use of replicas is being proposed.

Second step: Exhibition

The process of building the museum involved trying to find locations to keep the collections safe but accessible. Here we have to face interesting challenges, since no particular areas were designated for the museum. We had to search for the most suitable available space, and this task became a difficult mission.

Finally, the museum will be established in three locations:

1. Public exhibition: artifacts and specimen selection is based on their significance and state of conservation.
2. Visible storage: with restricted access where a representative number of objects will be kept.
3. Storage: where less significant collections will be kept, including duplicates and those in a poor state of conservation.

² An intern was assigned to the museum to help with documentation but this was clearly insufficient, however a great deal of work was done which was described in two publications: RODRÍGUEZ VARELA ET AL. 2009 and RODRÍGUEZ VARELA ET AL. 2010. Work is still ongoing today thanks to the hard work of researcher Celia Rodríguez.

We began working on the exhibition of the collections in 2007, when the veterinary and fine arts faculties started to collaborate in several research projects. These consisted of museological plans and a new museographic installation and included conservation proposals (the team includes an architect who works in exhibition design, professors of conservation and a museum and museography professor. Later on two graphic designers also agreed to take part)³.

We chose the animal hospital as the first exhibition space for the museum; the installation is now complete and open to the public. It seems a strange place for a museum but this decision was taken in response to an urgent situation: the lack of space to house the collections, which were dispersed in different buildings with a high risk of deterioration. Also, we knew about the existence of possible donations that would be lost if we did not act fast (many of the donors had heard about the museum years ago but did not believe it would come to fruition). The hospital offered enough space and opportunity for students and the general public to view the collections.

The exhibition is thematic and follows a rational coherence; also the objects are grouped by materials wherever possible. Accessible display cases allow collections to be changed on a regular basis.

Three display cases were designed and placed in the hall of the hospital, near the waiting rooms and close to the veterinary surgeon offices. We have placed a selection of the collections here to give a general view of the contents of veterinary science and practice, topics widely represented in the museum. Of course, we took into account conservation concerns, meaning that delicate items were not included, especially those sensitive to light and humidity fluctuations. A large number of people pass through this area (more than 200 people visit the hospital every day) and they seem very interested and curious about the objects displayed.

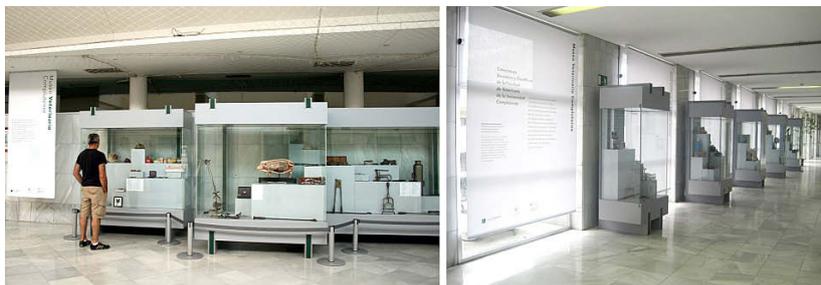


Fig. 3 - Showcases placed at the animal hospital hall and corridor.

The second display area is in the corridor of the hospital's main floor. It is also a public space but is less accessible for visitors, although many academics and students pass by every day. We have placed five smaller display cases here with a selection of objects and specimens

representing different departments or academic units: 1) osteology, embryology and teratology collections from the Department of Anatomy and Comparative Pathology, 2) the domestic parasites collections from the Department of Animal Health, 3) the teaching collection of the agricultural unit in the Department of Animal Production, 4) food packaging collection from the Department of Nutrition, Bromatology and Food Technology and 5) the collection from the zoology unit of the Department of Animal Physiology.

In this space there is abundant natural light, so we blocked it with blinds that also serve as information supports on which general information about the collections has been printed in both Spanish and English. This exhibition has been financed with money received from research projects, private companies and institutions. We have also received public funding from the faculty and the university.

³ We are also currently carrying out conservation research on some collections such as the Auzoux models. We found out that we had one of the most comprehensive collections in the world of Auzoux anatomical models. No restoration work has been done on them since they were made, although they were heavily used and some of the models need urgent restoration treatment.

At present, we are working on the next exhibition area in the basement of the animal hospital. It is a temporary space, although we are aware that in these difficult times temporary is likely to become permanent.

Visible storage

This space has been conceived as a place to keep the majority of the collections and to secure their conservation, security and accessibility. It is a visible storage area designed to be fully accessible and appealing to the public, students and researchers.

Located in the basement of the animal hospital, the space is not very large, barely 80 square meters in which we have to accommodate recycled display cases and stored furniture. We are conscious that the chosen space is not the most suitable one for storing and exhibiting heritage collections. Nevertheless, we have to take decisions and face problems that demand complex solutions. With a very low budget we were able to equip the space to make it suitable for the museum and attractive as an exhibition space. However, after finishing the renovation work mishaps prompted a reassessment of the project: the building was found to have suffered structural damage which turned out not to be as serious as we thought. We decided to continue with the project but safety regulations meant that the authorities had to place a net under the plaster ceiling. Environmental conditions have been monitored regularly and we have found that temperature levels are very stable and humidity conditions are

slightly higher than in the previous locations, making it more suitable for most of the collections.



Fig. 4 - Visible storage and exhibition space before the official opening.

The exhibition furniture has been placed using practical criteria over and above aesthetic considerations. Selecting the collections to be shown in this space (more than 700 items) was done according to different themes: instrumental, clinical laboratory equipment, anatomical models and artistic objects connected with teaching or veterinary practice. Most of the objects and specimens moved to the visible storage facility are made of resistant or stable materials and are generally in a good state of conservation. However, some

pieces are very fragile; these are anatomical models made of wax and in poor condition, requiring the collaboration and supervision of a restoration team from the Fine Arts School.

Access to this space follows two patterns:⁴

Free visits: the museum can be seen from the outside through a glass inner door that allows a general view of the whole exhibition space. Different information supports are available here, providing appropriate information about the contents.

Guided tours: the public, students and researchers can wander around the space and see the objects up close. The museum staff describes the collections adapting the explanations to suit the various groups and their interests. This type of visit allows direct contact with some of the objects and the

⁴ These are based on the proposals of John D. Hilberry "Peek-In" or "Walk-Through" (HILBERRY 2002, 36–37).

visitors' experience is more satisfactory in general terms. Information about the contents can also be found on brief information labels and information panels placed alongside significant collections.

The exhibition in this space is permanent, although the option of rotating collections is being considered, enabling visitors to see more of the wide variety of collections.

Future: The Complutense University Museum?

This is our challenge for the next decade: to open up the permanent collection, including a visible storage area housed in a better and more suitable space. This, however, gives rise to new dilemmas: how to deal with a rapidly growing collection and what to do about current problems. The solution is a new museum building. The university received a large building from the Ministry of Culture which currently houses the National Costume Museum (formerly the National Contemporary Museum). The initial idea was to move the university collections there (fifteen museums and more than fourteen collections) and to open a Complutense University Museum. Some departments disagree with this idea since their collections are really teaching collections and are in constant use. Other departments have their own well-established museum in their own buildings and are afraid that the context of the collection will be lost.

This is a difficult issue for us to resolve, as we know that a better space for the museum will be gained, with new facilities, equipment and even public access. We are sure that the essence of the collections will be resented in this general context. We are currently still at the negotiation stage, and financial problems will further delay the project.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the research project: HAR2008-0516/HIST *Nueva propuesta museológica y museográfica de las colecciones científicas universitarias (New Museology and Museographic Proposals in the University Scientific Collections)* by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Secretaría de Estado de Investigación). The authors wish to express their gratitude to Prof. Sánchez de Lollano, Prof. Carlos Fernández, Celia Rodríguez and everyone who is being involved in this exciting project.

Literature cited

- HILBERRY, J.D. 2002. Behind the scenes: Strategies for visible storage. *Museum News* 81, 4: 34–40.
- RODRÍGUEZ VARELA, C., C. ABALOS CALVO, I. GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ & P. SÁNCHEZ DE LOLLANO 2009. Evaluación preliminar de la colección histórica veterinaria de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. In: Libro de Ponencias y Comunicaciones del XV Congreso Nacional y VI Congreso Iberoamericano de Historia de la Veterinaria, ed. COLEGIO OFICIAL DE VETERINARIOS DE TOLEDO (Toledo: Colegio Oficial de Veterinarios de Toledo), 171–174.
- RODRÍGUEZ VARELA, C., C. ABALOS CALVO, I. GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ & H. LAFUENTE NICOLÁS 2010. Difusión de las colecciones docentes de la Facultad de Veterinaria de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. In: Libro de Ponencias y Comunicaciones del XVI Congreso Nacional y VII Congreso Iberoamericano de Historia de la Veterinaria, ed. DIPUTACIÓN PROVINCIAL DE CÓRDOBA (Córdoba: Diputación Provincial de Córdoba), 61–64.

Contact

Isabel García Fernández

Museology Professor

Address: Complutense University, Madrid, Fine Arts Faculty, C/ Greco, 2, 28040 Madrid, Spain

E-mail: museoig@art.ucm.es

www.ucm.es/info/museoveterinariocomplutense/

Sonia Díaz Jiménez

Graphic Design Teacher

Address: School of Art 10, Avda. Ciudad de Barcelona, 28007 Madrid, Spain

E-mail: sonia@ltdspace.com

Gabriel Martínez García

Graphic Design Teacher

Address: School of Art 10, Avda. Ciudad de Barcelona, 28007 Madrid, Spain

E-mail: gabriel@ltdspace.com

