The Role of University Museums and Heritage in the 21st Century

ZENOBIA R. KOZAK, PHD
Museum Consultant

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Abstract University museums and collections present both challenges and opportunities for their parent institutions. The identification and recognition of objects and collections of material ‘heritage’ proves difficult to universities, due to their collections’ formation and ongoing utilization. Although each university possesses a history of varied length and significance, the rich heritage collections universities keep remain undefined and largely unknown. This article addresses new and changing roles for university museums and collections, focusing on the definition and role of heritage in the university. What purpose does an institutional collection of academic heritage serve beyond preserving or representing the history of a university? By utilizing these once undefined and underappreciated collections, universities can use the heritage objects and material culture representative of their academic history and traditions as institutional promotion to potential students, staff, and funding bodies.

About the Author Dr. Kozak is a museum consultant based in Washington DC with over 10 years of experience working in museums and archives in both the UK and USA. Most recently she served as a Vice President and Division Director at an historical consulting firm in Washington DC, providing collections management expertise to a range of museums, as well as government and corporate clients. Before that, Dr. Kozak worked at the BBC in London, acting as interim Heritage Manager, developing new collection policies and procedures. She also held positions within the BBC Archive and BBC News Library. Dr. Kozak completed her PhD in museum studies at the University of St Andrews and holds a BA in Art History from the University of Washington.

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Introduction University museums can be traced to the 17th century, with the foundation of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford - regarded as the oldest public museum in Britain and the earliest recognizable form of the modern museum institution.1 (Boylan 1999: 46) Since the Ashmolean opened in 1683, university museums have carried out over 300 years of collecting, research, teaching, display, and outreach. Between the 17th and 21st centuries, developments in teaching, scientific practice, and knowledge of the natural and cultural world have resulted in the accumulation, utilization, and even disposal of innumerable artifacts and specimens within university museums. Survey studies provide a limited history of university museums, with more focused, individual studies provided by institutional historians.2 While these studies provide valuable insight into the history of university collecting and collections, there is little reference to the unique heritage university museums and collections have formed to date.

The objects and collections that make up university museums hold a wealth of information with the potential to tell a number of stories. They serve as didactic specimens, illustrating
specific subjects and disciplines, yet still contribute to contemporary research, particularly in life sciences, archaeology, and history. In addition, they help form the greater heritage of the university to which they belong. The university is one of the earliest and most unique collecting institutions, yet university museum display narrative gives little indication of the university collections’ present or past relationship to their parent institution. While university museums address the history and progression of a given subject or discipline, the important and active role the university played in this development tends to be grossly understated, if it is present at all. These objects represent the university’s research that lead to innumerable breakthroughs and discoveries of the modern world. As Lourenço explains,

...university museums have the tools – they have the real objects, the real researchers, and real laboratories. They have access to knowledge as it is produced now and are therefore probably in a better position that any other institution to reflect the complex issues of collecting, studying and interpreting contemporary scientific, artistic and cultural material and immaterial heritage...(Lourenço 2004: 13)

Potentially, university museums have the standard of collections, available facilities, and on-site expertise to provide a progressive museum service, matching the forward-looking university atmosphere of which they are a part. However, university museums generally lack the funds to maintain their collections, the space required for storage, research, and display, as well as appropriate staffing requirements. Once viewed as the ‘model’ of the modern museum, centuries of expansion, reconciliation, and restructuring have left university museums lacking their original innovation, with their most problematic period being perhaps in the last 30 years.

The ‘crisis’ of the 20th century university museum
Government cutbacks in public spending and structural changes in higher education during the 1980s and 1990s resulted in staffing shortages and attempts to rationalize university collections through disposal and sale. These adjustments coincided with changes in object-based teaching. As teaching changed dramatically, both in content and in methodologies, research interests shifted, leaving previously utilized collections in a precarious, unemployed position. Additionally, universities redirected funding from collections care to faculty and student recruitment, and expanded new research and associated facilities. The museum community raised questions about the contemporary role of university collections. In 1986, Alan Warhurst, Director of the Manchester Museum, described the struggle of the university museum as a “crisis in identity and purpose, a crisis of recognition; compounded by a crisis of resources.”(Warhurst 1986: 137) Since the ‘crisis’ of the 1980s, university museums are forced to “convince their own parent institutions of the value and relevance of their collections – both internally and for society at large.” (Lourenço 2004: 6) Further, Nick Merriman suggests that university museums “lack a clear purpose and role within the university.” (Merriman 2002: 75) Without a clear internal function within the university, what purpose can a university museum serve in terms of the museum sector?

The changing role of the 21st century university museum
University museums have the potential to distinguish themselves from other museum types, as the collections formed by universities represent some of the oldest, most rare, and most
important objects. These collections provide material evidence of the progression of teaching and knowledge, which hold intrinsic value to the university in terms of institutional heritage, as well as didactic and cultural significance to the greater public. By acknowledging and choosing to display institutional heritage, universities can differentiate themselves from other museums and Boylan contends, “provide public relations value to the university’s external image.” (Boylan 1999: 53) In addition to providing the ‘triple-mission’ (research, teaching, and public interpretation), institutional heritage recognition can provide university museums with an enterprising new role in direct relation to their parent institution. This progressive approach to university collecting and display also addresses the archaic perception of university museums. Like the university itself, an institution which may combine a tradition of teaching extending back to the Middle Ages coupled with participation in modern research, the university museum too, can remain relevant in the 21st century, yet recognize its early foundations.

Institutional heritage recognition and the university museum

The recognition of institutional heritage is not a new concept. From the university’s medieval foundation, its external image was expressed through its material heritage. The architecture, collections, and libraries not only served an academic purpose, but also distinguished certain universities for their prestigious holdings and notable built environment. Universities have long played host to touring scholars and visitors, serving as an early form of institutional promotion or recruitment exercise. As part of these visits, universities made available their libraries, cabinets of curiosities, picture galleries, and college spaces in the interest of institutional promotion. At the University of St Andrews (the oldest university in Scotland), Rawson contends that as a part of the standardized university tour, certain artifacts were regularly shown to visitors and

... the presentation of [these] objects convey[ed] not only what precious items the University own[ed], but also, through them, information on the value it place[d] on its own history, its pride in its association with particular individuals, its intellectual outlook, and so on. (Rawson 2004: 3)

This recognition of institutional identity illustrates the university’s acknowledgement of the identity’s intrinsic value. Even before the foundation of a university museum at St Andrews, the university had objects and collections it recognized as significant in the formation of its identity, both past and present.6

During the 18th and 19th centuries, university collections rapidly expanded, partly to affirm this idea of institutional identity, but primarily to facilitate object-based instruction. Institutions were striving to provide their professors and students with the most comprehensive and valuable research specimens, with certain objects gaining international attention like the extinct 17th century stuffed Dodo once displayed as a part of the Tradescant Collection in Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum.7 Similarly, noted professors and academics made contributions to university collections in the form of research collections, papers, equipment and personal artifacts. Cambridge’s Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences still retains Dr. John Woodward’s 18th century founding collection of natural history specimens and archaeological artifacts, considered the oldest surviving intact collection of its type.8 In Krakow’s Jagellonian University Museum, Collegium Maius holds several portraits of the Polish astronomer Copernicus (who
studied at the university from 1491 to 1495) with a unique set of 15th century instruments including a celestial globe and several astrolabes. Beyond the didactic value these objects and collections bring to their respective academic departments, they help form the material identity of the university and museum to which they belong. In addition, they serve as tangible evidence of the evolution in knowledge and teaching that took place in the university during the period and that continues to this day.

Universities and university museums: reflexive responsibilities
The university is a dynamic and continually evolving institution, and its objects and collections chart and reflect that progression to date. Is it not the responsibility of the university museum to acknowledge the presence and value of the university in its displays? Reflexively, is it not just as vital that the university understands and appreciates the institutional promotion role of their museum in teaching, research, and display? Much has been written on the responsibilities of the university to its museum, but what does the university museum offer in return? In the increasingly market-driven world of higher education, university museums are expected to offer a greater and more direct service in relation to their parent institution. (Boylan 2002) By recapturing the spirit of institutional identity and promotion previously mentioned, university museums have the opportunity not only to display objects and collections unique to their institutions, but also to use them to illustrate their university story.

As previously stated, university museums have the potential to provide innovative services that immediately benefit the university in terms of institutional awareness and promotion, but also provide the wider audience with the distinctively academic and experimental programs only a university museum can provide. By adopting what Lourenço terms the ‘multi-level and integrated approach’ (Lourenço in press: 12) university museums can act as heritage innovators, incorporating “science, art and nature, museums and collections, artefacts and specimens...historical and in use...books and documents, buildings and gardens – in short, space and time, form and function, tangible and intangible.” (Lourenço in press: 12) Lourenço further explains that this integration “may take the form of a physical integration - collections under the same roof - or institutional integration (a new unit officially created to run the different parts) or both.” (Lourenço 2004: 8) Whether or not a centralized space or unit approach is taken or not taken is an administrative matter to be solved on a case-by-case basis. The fact that collections are assembled under the same roof does not guarantee that the approach itself is integrated.

Physical integration
In terms of physical integration, the 2003 merging of the former University Museum of Helsinki - specializing in the history of the university - with the Museum of Medical History, the Museum of the History of Veterinary Medicine, the Museum of the History of Dentistry, and the Collections of Craft Science resulted in the new Helsinki University Museum housed in the historic Arppeanum building. The collections include university founding material, an impressive series of dental chair and equipment reconstructions, and a ‘magic cup’ used in the 19th century to demonstrate water pressure. A majority of the objects are displayed in the original cabinets of the Arppeanum, with modern fittings and lighting fixtures sympathetically treated. Though the University of Helsinki Museum has merged disparate collections into an historic building, the result is cohesive and thoroughly modern in context. By acknowledging the university collections’ ability to tell a more complete university story, the displays in the
Arppeanum not only address the progression of the individual subjects but how they help form the greater university identity.

Institutional integration
At the University of Dundee in Scotland, institutional integration has taken the form of the University of Dundee Museums Service, part of the larger Archive, Records Management and Museum Services, which resides within the university’s Directorate of Planning and Information. The Dundee Museums Service provides a common structure integrating the university collections, including collections of natural history, medicine, and chemistry, as well as furniture and art from the Duncan of Jordanstone Art College collection. At present, the University of Dundee does not have a permanent museum building for collections display; however, the curator - and only member of museum staff - maintains a series of temporary exhibitions in venues housed in various university buildings across the university’s urban campus. Despite the staff limitations, the University of Dundee collections are regularly displayed and infused in the everyday fabric of the university.

The University of St Andrews: a case study in integration
An example of both physical and institutional integration can be found at the University of St Andrews. Following its long tradition of institutional awareness, the Museum Collections Unit of St Andrews University developed a new strategy for the use and display of its collections, with a particular focus on the university’s heritage. Just as the early visitors to St Andrews were routinely shown what the university regarded as its ‘treasures,’ the Museum of the University of St Andrews (MUSA) provides contemporary visitors with an object-based history of the ancient institution. Housed in an historic building overlooking the North Sea, the museum displays incorporate objects from the diverse range of university collections held at St Andrews.

The MUSA development at St Andrews represents the forward-thinking and fluid approach to the use and display of its historical and heritage collections necessary for university museums to remain relevant to the public in the 21st century, and also relevant to the aims of their parent institutions. Utilizing an historical building within the university, yet employing a contemporary attitude towards displaying institutional identity, may prove to be the most innovative project of a British university to date. While continental university museums, like the Arppaenum at Helsinki and the Gustavianum at Uppsala, have adopted the physical integrative approach, British and North American university museums have yet to explore this as a collections display possibility.

The future of university museums
Adopting a more inclusive approach, focused on an individual institutional identity can provide university museums with an exciting new role for the 21st century: institutional heritage recognition. University museums should actively reflect the presence of the university as parent institution, but more importantly, as ‘collector.’ The presence and relationship of the university to its museum is not made sufficiently clear in displays and narrative, and as Lourenço contends there is “extraordinary potential resulting from the inherent position of university museums – museums in the university, of the university and for the university.” (Lourenço in press: 10)
A means of providing a heritage-minded narrative within a university museum can be achieved through what Alberti refers to as ‘object biography,’ similar to the integrated approach taken in Helsinki, Uppsala, and St Andrews. (Alberti 2005: 560) As a scientific and museum historian, Alberti approaches the history of museums through the objects and their collections and suggests “material culture has a metaphorical ‘life’ or ‘career.’” By tracing the “careers of museum things from acquisition to arrangement to viewing, through the different contexts and the many changes of value incurred by these shifts” object biography provides

an appealing narrative hook...as things collected in the field can be firmly connected to institutions and practices...via the identity and meaning they accredited during their trajectory. By studying what curators then did with objects in their collections, this approach contributes to constructivist histories...by embedding the study...in material culture. Exploring the status and personnel involved in this museum work provides insights into the role of museums in scientific and civic culture...finally...a museum object can be a prism through which to view various publics’ experience. (Alberti 2005:560-1)

Just as Helsinki’s Arppaenum and the Gustavianum in Uppsala utilize objects from across their university’s collection to tell a cohesive story, university museum displays employing an ‘object biography’ approach can reveal object-university relationships as well as layers of more focused institutional value and significance. These layers help form a more complete narrative, one which reflects the objects’ relationship to the university and the museum, as well as the objects’ shifting role from initial acquisition to current display. For example, Helsinki’s Arppaenum (the oldest purpose-built museum in Finland) originally housed the University’s chemistry laboratory and associated collections, including the impressive Mineral Cabinet. After the 2003 collections merge and building renovation, the Arppaenum now serves as an integrated museum of disciplinary and institutional history of the University of Helsinki. A blend of historic fixtures, fittings, and collections with a contemporary display narrative acknowledges the progressive history of the collections and their relationship to both the university and the Arppaenum.

**Concluding remarks**

Objects gather and disseminate meaning, and objects within a university museum or collection have the potential to tell a variety of stories from a range of perspectives. Lourenço argues that the unique wealth of the university museum

*is in scientific equipment that has been used and reused countless of times for different purposes... the cannibalized instruments...the apparatus...embedded in hundreds of rocks gathered for a research project or PhD thesis...in art collections resulting from students’ experiments and development...*(Lourenço 2004: 14)

The distinct nature of the university museum is both an attribute and an impediment. While university museum collections hold the tangible evidence of knowledge progression (stemming from their parent institutions), institutions and funding bodies remain unaware of a university museum’s contemporary role within the university and, indeed, society. In order to remain relevant in the 21st century, institutional heritage recognition and a shift towards
more cohesive display narrative acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between the university and its museum must take place. With nearly 400 years of collecting, research, and display history, university museums have the wealth of experience and the collections capable of providing the inspiration and service of a dynamic and engaged 21st century museum.

Notes

1 The Ashmolean is regarded as the first, completely new, purpose-designed, large museum.


3 Besides the Ashmolean Museum, university museums at Leiden, Paris and Bologna have been cited as early and influential examples.

4 For example, the University of Newcastle’s sale of 19th century African and Oceanian ethnographic collections and the transfer of its 150-year-old natural history museum, the Hancock Museum, to the local city council. Additionally, within the last 20 years the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has purged its natural history collections following the closure of its geology department in 1983. The collections were orphaned and later donated (along with UvA’s zoological collections) to the Amsterdam Zoo and Naturalis, the local natural history museums of Maastricht and Nijmegen; the rest were disposed of. Furthermore, the Botanical Garden was de-accessioned in 1988 and the Pinetum Blijdenstein (arboretum of conifers) was later sold. See SWG de Clercq, ‘The “Dutch approach”, or how to achieve a second life for abandoned geological collections’, Museologia, 3: 2003, 27-36.

5 Merriman served as Curator of University College London Museums and Collections and is now Director of the Manchester Museum.

6 A university museum, principally containing natural history specimens opened in 1838, jointly managed by the St Andrews Literary and Philosophical Society. This museum also housed the specimens and curiosities previously housed in the university library. See WC McIntosh, Brief sketch of the Natural History Museum of the University of St Andrews, St Andrews, 1913 and M. Simpson, St Andrews University Library in the 18th century, unpublished PhD, St Andrews, 1990.

7 The Tradescant dodo was damaged by fire and its remains are now preserved at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

8 Sharon Heal addresses the redevelopment of the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences in the January 2006 Museums Journal ‘Rock with the times’. She cites a ‘...sensitive blend of erudition and inviting display has brought Cambridge’s Sedgwick Museum...into the 21st century without sacrificing its principles.’ However, she later adds that the redisplay of the HMS Beagle voyage of several thousand rocks ‘is currently displayed in desk cases, with little to indicate that some of the original
labels are in Darwin’s hand, and no interpretation to explain that long before the publication of the *Origin of the Species*, Darwin was a geologist who made some important and lasting discoveries.’ See *Museums Journal*, January 2006, 34-35.

9 Lourenço highlights two trends across Europe: *integrative tendency* and *increasing autonomy tendency* and I briefly discuss integrative tendency in this paper. *Increasing autonomy tendency* occurs in parallel with integrative tendency where collections are removed from their traditional academic departments, recognized individually (in the Statutes of the University), staffed individually (have a qualified person responsible) and have dedicated funds and facilities See M. Lourenço, ‘Where past, present and future knowledge meet: An overview of university museums and collections in Europe’, Atti Convegno d’Autunno dell’Associazione Nazionale Musei Scientifici, ‘Il Patrimoni della Scienza, Le collezione di interesse storico’ Torino, 10-12 November 2004.

10 The Arppaenum (named for the Professor and Rector Adolf Edvard Arppe) was designed by C.A. Edelfelt and completed in 1869, one of only six four-storey buildings in Helsinki. See K. Heinämies (ed), *Helsinki University Museum: research, art, history*, Helsinki, 2003.

11 The Museum Collections Unit of St Andrews University has responsibility for collections of art, ethnography, chemistry, physics, astronomy, medicine, ceremonial regalia and the Bell Pettigrew natural history museum and teaching collection.

12 The Gustavianum (Uppsala University, Sweden - Scandinavia’s oldest university) dates back to the 1620s when it served as the primary teaching building until the 19th century. Since 1997, the building now houses the University Museum, with five permanent exhibitions. Objects related to student life, the work of Celsius and Linnaeus and the impressive Art Cabinet of Augsburg, trace the history of the university from 1477 to present day. Of particular interest, Olof Rudbeck’s anatomical theatre erected in 1663 gives the building its distinct rooftop.

13 The University’s early geological specimens were obtained from Sweden. Subsequent purchases and acquisitions were made by the acting professor of chemistry, who specialized in mineral chemistry. Termined the Mineral Cabinet, the collections expanded rapidly in the 18th century to include specimens from Central Europe, the Ural region and a stony meteorite which had fallen in Savitaipale, Finland.

References


McIntosh, WC. (1913) *Brief sketch of the Natural History Museum of the University of St Andrews*, St Andrews.

