

University Museums & Collections: Challenges of the Past - Responsibilities for Today

During the 2021 UMAC-UNIVERSEUM joint conference many issues were raised and discussed by our community. Among them was our capacity to position ourselves among the many challenges our contemporary society are confronted to, to define our priorities and take actions, to enhance our ability to push the limits, experiment while being aware of our constraints and knowing how others made the best out of it. During the 2022 Universeum Annual Conference in Belgium, we would like to continue this debate and focus it specifically in relation to university museums (U-museums) and collections. Can, or should, U-museums be in the forefront of social and political change? And if so, how can they have more impact on society? Secondly: Across Europe there have been times of significant development, but also times of extreme violence and abuse, inside and outside of the European borders. These pasts are often reflected in the European U-collections and other U-heritage. How can we deal effectively and appropriately today with the challenges of their past? What are the constraints and opportunities?

During the 2022 Universeum meeting, we want to explore different ways of encouraging discussion and debate around the main themes outlined above, as well as allow as many voices from the community to be heard as possible. We would like to combine short papers, with longer in-depth contributions that reflect more broadly on these themes rather than present specific projects, as well as invite dialogue and discussions from all participants. Under the main theme of "University Museums & Collections: Challenges of the Past - Responsibilities for Today", we thus invite proposals for 5- or 15-minute talks on one of the following two sub-themes or for posters addressing the overall theme:

Subtheme 1: Taking up our role in society

As centers of knowledge production in higher education, universities are at the heart of the debate and the thinking about transformations in society on themes like environment, immigration, human rights and personal data trade. And of course, political, economic, social and cultural shifts in society are in turn inevitably influencing that same knowledge production and education. Acknowledging this strong interaction with, and impact on society is part of the so called third mission of higher education. Universities are in theory bound to this third mission, but they do not always commit to it strongly.

At the same time, scientists have to deal with a growing suspicion towards science, in this era of 'Fake News' on the one hand, and of activism on the other. Science communication is therefore more than ever of great importance for the academic community. But to really reach out to all parts of society, academics are urged to step out from their Ivory Tower. Most U- museums have claimed a role in this mission, knocking down the walls between the broader public and universities, trying to facilitate dialogue. This is a very important but difficult role in these polarized times.

The following questions may trigger constructive conversation:

How do U-museums pick up on this role of assisting academics to reach out to all parts of society? How do they position themselves in these hot debates? Do they act merely as facilitators or do they take a stand?

Could and should U-museums be the forerunners in addressing societal issues? What alliances and partnerships shall we build?

Are they, as a part of the academic community, better equipped than the other types of museums to act according to United Nation 2030 agenda for sustainable development? At the same time, how can they avoid positioning themselves as the experts and only «speakers of the Truth», for instance, in matters concerning human rights, the environment or democracy? How can U-museums live up to ICOM's proposed ideal of a "democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic space for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures" of tomorrow?

Subtheme 2: Dealing with a challenging past

Many universities are confronted today with difficult and controversial issues concerning their collections, particularly in relation to objects acquired in a context of (colonial) domination or war. A strong characteristic of U-collections is this constant tension between their "original" value and their scientific or educational value today. The following questions may provide starting points for discussion:

How does this tension between original value and contemporary alternative interpretations affect the way we collect, catalogue and display these objects? What does this mean for our thinking about ownership?

Should we expect U-museums and U-collection keepers to reflect more and more effectively than others on these kind of issues, since they are part of an academic environment generally known as a place of research, reflection and knowledge production?

Abstracts for sub-theme sessions 1 and 2 need to include:

- i) introduction / problematization / context
- ii) main arguments / methods / discussion
- iii) results or conclusion.

Poster session

For UNIVERSEUM 2022 Poster Session, we encourage the presentation of posters on any activity or project (collection management, exhibition, audience engagement, collaboration, etc.) that relates to any of the above-mentioned themes. Abstracts for posters need to focus on the context, process and outcomes of the selected projects. Please send your abstract proposal (max. 200 words), with an indication of the session you are submitting to (sub-theme 1, sub-theme 2, or poster session), plus a short biographical note highlighting main research interests and/or field of professional experience (max. 50 words) to the following email address using the abstract template by Tuesday 15 February 2022:

Universeum2022@ulb.be

When submitting your abstract, please indicate whether you would prefer to give a poster, a 5-minute, or a 15-minute presentation.

The conference language is English. We welcome contributions from cultural heritage professionals and academics, but also post-graduate students.

Programme Committee

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