

Call for Papers Annual Meeting Universeum / 24-26 June 2026 – Coïmbra, Portugal

Legacies of Power: Shaping University Collections and Museums

Academic freedom is widely regarded as a core value of universities in Europe. Yet the autonomy of institutions and staff varies greatly between countries and among institutions. Moreover, the approach to university heritage varies considerably, reflecting the differing political, cultural and organisational experiences in the various regions of Europe. From ideological control to nationalist narratives that glorify selective histories, colonialism and systems of oppression, political systems have played a decisive role in shaping the scope of university heritage. Subtler cultural influences have also silenced alternative voices, and generated patterns of exclusion, erasure and absence.

At this conference we will critically reflect on the institutional and regional trajectories of university heritage and collections, acknowledging plurality and examining how communities, artists and curators have challenged, subverted or reclaimed museums and collections to contest political systems, or on the contrary to support them. As university heritage is not neutral, we will recognise how dealing with both the past and current political and cultural impacts is a complex challenge for university heritage professionals as they work to develop knowledge, collections, and educational and curatorial approaches. This can fundamentally challenge how we understand the purposes and definitions of our institutions, thereby also playing a vital role in contemporary local and global dialogues.

1. Power and ideology

This theme explores how university heritage has reflected and reproduced structures of power, ideologies, and political contexts through collections, curatorial practices, and educational activities.

2. The digital challenge

Digital technologies can offer tools to critically reinterpret collections, democratise access to heritage, and create new forms of participation and learning. This fosters plural and reflective narratives. At the same time, social media, artificial Intelligence and the power of global technology are challenging to the traditional role of universities as the purveyors of accepted truths.

3. Conservation and responsibility

This theme focuses on the physical and conceptual preservation of collections, examining the evolution of conservation practices across different political and cultural contexts. It also addresses the ethical considerations and institutional responsibilities for current heritage management through the lens of past coercion, inequality or controversy.

4. Social justice and reparation

This theme investigates the social role of museums in promoting justice, inclusion, and reconciliation. It will consider how institutions can engage with trauma, memories and social divisions through inclusive narratives, restitution, and initiatives that foster dialogue in polarised societies.

How to apply

We welcome contributions from cultural heritage professionals and academics, but also from Masters and PhD students. Proposals are especially encouraged from early career professionals with fresh perspectives.

Under the 4 subthemes we invite proposals for 10-minute talks or for the poster session. For the poster session, we encourage the presentation of posters on projects (collection management, exhibition, web design, social media, etc.) that relate to any of the above themes. Abstracts for posters need to focus on the context and process of the selected projects and their outcomes. Participants who present a poster will get one minute on stage to pitch their poster presentation.

Please send abstract proposals using the abstract template (max. 200 words) with an indication of the session you are submitting to, plus a short biographical note highlighting your main research interests and/or field of professional experience (max. 50 words). When submitting your proposal, please indicate if you would prefer to give a poster or a 10-minute presentation. The conference language is English. Please send your proposal by the 8th of February 2026 to universeumcoimbra2026@gmail.com.

About Universeum

The UNIVERSEUM network is concerned with academic heritage in its broadest sense, including university collections, museums, archives, libraries, botanical gardens, astronomical observatories, and university buildings of historical, artistic and scientific significance.

About the University of Coimbra

The University of Coimbra is the oldest university in Portugal and one of the oldest in Europe. Founded in 1290, it was moved several times between Lisbon and Coimbra until finally settling in Coimbra in 1537. Initially established in the Royal Palace, the university gradually expanded throughout the city, transforming its urban landscape. In 2013, its unique tangible and intangible heritage was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The university also represents a key case study in terms of legacies of power. Throughout its long history, the institution has witnessed numerous political transitions. It provides essential insights into power dynamics during the monarchy and the republic, particularly with regard to authoritarian processes such as colonialism, the Portuguese military dictatorship, and the Estado Novo (1933–1974), which shaped the scope and character of the university, its museums, collections, and architecture. Today, this legacy is the subject of debate and is reflected in contemporary policies that address past and present responsibilities. A dedicated working group on sensitive heritage has published a document proposing an action plan in this regard, promoting reflexive thinking.

Local Organising Committee:

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