

Museum presentation and new trends in exhibition displays from a museological perspective using the example of selected European university museums and collections¹

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Against the background of museological theory, this paper questions new trends in current museum exhibition displays, focusing on universities as institutions of higher education and as preservers of cultural heritage. The first part of this paper provides an overview of university heritage, its scale and scope and the labels of heritagisation that can be linked to it. In the second part of the paper, select examples of university exhibitions are introduced – each of which dealing with a specific university heritage. These examples are all part of the Coimbra Group network of universities, which includes some of the oldest universities in Europe. The exhibitions are analysed in terms of their forms of presentation, the way in which they deal with objects as evidence for university history and the communication modes they use.

Keywords: museum presentation, museology, university museums, university collections on display

Introduction

From a museological point of view, permanent exhibitions are typically put on display for 10 to 15 years, at which point it comes time to review them. Fundamentally, they serve the purpose of presenting an overview of the respective museum collection by conveying to the visitors a narrative connected to the museum, the collection history or the collected objects. In this context, the museum objects are interpreted through presentation and thus play an important role in conveying a message. Moreover, museum exhibitions are – from a museological point of view – not only one of the primary tasks of a museum but also the supreme discipline of a museum as an institution, as a museum is the only institution that conveys messages via the original and authentic objects displayed in an interpretive museum presentation.²

In the autumn of 2014, I participated in the “Muzeo50 – International Museology Conference”³ that took place at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. For my

¹ The article is a result of the project: Ministry of Education, youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, AKTION Czech Republic – Austria 96p7 “Open Round Table of Museology II.”

² Waidacher, Friedrich. *Handbuch der Allgemeinen Museologie*. Vienna: Cologne, Weimar³, 1999.

³ For the website of Muzeo 50, see: <https://www.muni.cz/en/events-calendar/archive-45466549?lang=en> [28.12.2023].

contribution, I presented “Nouophors and other things. Theoretical models and (post-)museum exhibition display in the mirror of the theorem of museality”. At that time, a tendency towards visitor participation was becoming noticeable, at least for the studied museum presentations in Austria. In this regard, museums included a narrative aspect in their permanent exhibitions.

Almost ten years later, university museums are facing new questions: In which direction have museum displays developed since then? What do current museum displays look like? Do they reflect on theoretical models of museology? Accordingly, this paper focuses on forms and current museum presentation trends by addressing certain questions, namely how it is they deal with original and authentic museum objects and in which way are they reflected in exhibition displays. Moreover, it aims to answer in which way the objects are embedded into a narration of museum communication. What does the museum want to tell the visitors?

In the last decade, it has become obvious that university museums are attracting more public attention than before – especially the Humboldt Forum⁴ in Berlin, where university collections are also represented, became a topic of public debate. Moreover, the University of Göttingen opened its academic museum Forum Wissen⁵ as a platform for their university collections in 2022.

The example museum presentations selected for this contribution, which are also the focus of this investigation, are university museum presentations that were renewed in the last decade. Several study trips were undertaken in the context of the Coimbra Group network of universities⁶ to build the foundation for this study. Underlying these analyses is a theory founded in museology, one that links university museum communication to science communication, as this is also an outreach task of universities. The paper argues from the perspective that sustainably managing, preserving and communicating university heritage is of utmost importance to universities and their mission of academic research and teaching.

The example museum presentations are analysed through previous research conducted on museum presentations in which several aspects of interest for a museological analysis of museum presentations were established.⁷ Also of relevance is the content of the exhibition in the overall context of the museum in which the exhibited objects are presented. Moreover, the arrangement of the presented content and objects is also of interest. Elements of the exhibition design play an important role in communicating the message. How are the objects and contents arranged? Are they supplemented with accompanying materials like labels, graphics, figures, tablets or other multimedia systems that help visitors find the relevant information they are expecting? Finally, the guidance system and additional educational materials are relevant parts of any analysis of museum displays from a museological perspective and are therefore also considered.

Against this background, the paper first provides an overview of the theory of museology and the concept of museality in order to explain in which way museality influences museum

⁴ For the website of the Humboldt Forum, see: <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/> [28.12.2023].

⁵ For the website of Forum Wissen, see: <https://www.forum-wissen.de/> [28.12.2023].

⁶ For the website of the Coimbra Group, Working Group Heritage, see: <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/working-group/heritage/> [28.12.2023]. Twice a year, the group is meeting at a home university of the one of its members.

⁷ BIEDERMANN, Bernadette. *Präsentationsformen - museologische Zugänge*. Am Beispiel des Kulturhistorischen und Kunstgewerbemuseums am Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz, 2009; BIEDERMANN, Bernadette. Theoretische Modelle und aktuelles museales Ausstellungswesen im Spiegel des Theorems der Musealität. In: *Museologica Brunnesia*, Vol. 4, 2015, No. 2, pp. 33–41; BIEDERMANN, Bernadette. Vom Musentempel zur Eventwerkstätte. Am Beispiel „neuer“ musealer Präsentationen. In: *Curiositas. Jahrbuch für Museologie und museale Quellenkunde*, Vol. 16–17, 2018, pp. 5–44.

presentation. The selected example museum presentations are briefly introduced, and reference is given to the scope and scale of university heritage. While university heritage has been in the foreground lately, when compared to the heritage research done for universal museums, it was previously neglected; thus, it seems necessary that a reflection be made on the heritage for which universities – as institutions in the service of society – are responsible. Two university museums in Germany, one in Estonia and one in Portugal were selected as example museum presentations; of these, three were redesigned within the past decade. The first example museum presentation to be discussed is the redesign of the Uniseum – the permanent exhibition of the university museum of the University of Freiburg in Germany, which was finished in 2004⁸ and therefore the longest ago. The second university museum to be analysed is the University of Tartu Museum in Estonia⁹, followed by an analysis of the Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK) in Bonn, Germany¹⁰. Finally, the Science Museum's Cabinet of Curiosities of the University of Coimbra in Portugal¹¹ is discussed. Each of these example museum presentations represents and highlights a specific aspect of museologically presented cultural heritage. The paper's conclusion summarises current trends in handling original and authentic objects in university museum displays by focusing on the stories that are told to the public based on object collections of universities.

The Theory of Museology

The discipline of general museology discusses the meaning of (historical) objects and cultural heritage for society in three dimensions: a historical, theoretical and practical dimension of museology. Thus, museology investigates the phenomenon of collecting, preserving, researching, and displaying objects as representations of a society's cultural values. In this context, museology determines the relationship between humans and their environment, wherein specific specimens and items are selected, researched, and displayed as expressions of museality.¹²

Consequently, objects serve as significant witnesses to events and circumstances and store memories of the past. These memories can then be made visible via musealisation, an academic and museological process of research. These events and circumstances must have high importance to a society and must thereby be intersubjectively verifiable to be addressed as museality.

As objects have meaning and relevance to a society, museology acts in an interdisciplinary and intersubjective way. This inter- and transdisciplinary approach looks at objects as sources from the perspective of museology as well as from the perspective of other object-centred

⁸ For the website of the Uniseum, University of Freiburg, Germany, see: <https://www.uniseum.uni-freiburg.de/de> [28.12.2023].

⁹ For the website of the University of Tartu Museum, Estonia, see: <https://museum.ut.ee/en/university-of-our-lives> [28.12.2023].

¹⁰ For the website of the Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK) of the University of Bonn, Germany, see: <https://bonn.leibniz-lib.de/de/museum/dauerausstellungen> [28.12.2023].

¹¹ For the website of the Cabinet of Curiosities, Science Museum of the University of Coimbra, Portugal, see: <https://www.uc.pt/en/article?key=a-aecdf5827> [28.12.2023].

¹² Definition according to Zbyněk Z. Stránský and Friedrich Waidacher, see: BIEDERMANN, Bernadette. The Theory of Museology. Museology as it is – defined by two pioneers: Zbyněk Z. Stránský and Friedrich Waidacher. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, Vol. 5, 2016, No. 2, pp. 51–64. doi: 10.5817/MuB2016-2-6; Waidacher, Friedrich. Handbuch...

disciplines, such as art history, archaeology, cultural anthropology, musicology, geology, zoology and more.

From a museological point of view, objects are at the centre of interest in terms of museum presentation, as they are what visitors experience and experiencing the displays sets in motion an internal connection with the object.¹³ Thus, when designing and structuring museum exhibitions, it is important to keep in mind that information is what is ultimately being conveyed to the public; therefore, a focus on clear and correct facts and content is crucial. Moreover, the arrangement of objects in a space, the use of design mediums and forms of education and additional material are key factors. For collections that may be connected to problematic pasts or topics, international standards created by the professional museum community provide appropriate guidelines for museum exhibitions.¹⁴ They propose not to exhibit items which are unprovenanced and to respect the dignity of the communities of origin from which the objects were a part of, especially if the objects are considered sacred or are human remains.

University Museums and Collections in a European Context

The scope and scale of university heritage

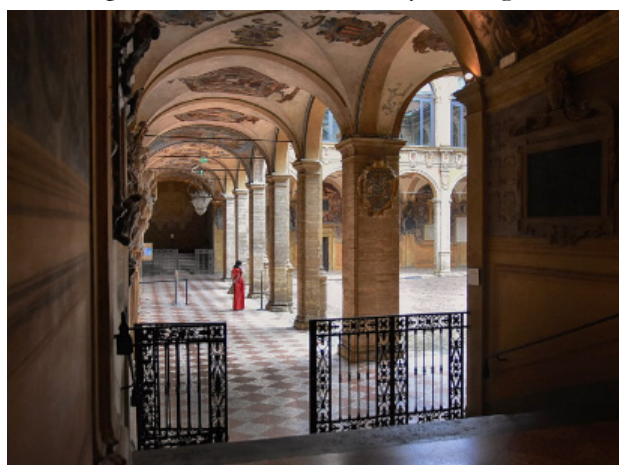


Fig. 1: *Courtyard of the University of Bologna, Italy.*
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University#/media/File:Archiginnasio_particolari_\(9\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University#/media/File:Archiginnasio_particolari_(9).jpg)
Photograph by Aneta Malinowska ART.

Since their development in the High Middle Ages, universities have become the European institution of higher education par excellence. The first universities were the University of Bologna, founded in 1088 (Fig. 1), and the University of Paris, founded in 1200. To this day, universities are the only institutions with the right to award academic degrees, deriving their power from the “universitas magistrorum et scholarium” – the community of teachers and scholars. The term “universitas” stands for the universality of academic teaching and research.¹⁵

University heritage is intrinsically linked to the history of sciences and the history of universities, meaning that scientific objects were invented as a result and are evidence of scientific and academic research. University heritage is thus a material expression of ideas, scientific research and inventions. From a museological point of view, academia and its history are inscribed into objects, which therefore stand witness to scientific inventions and are the bearers of museality. An example for this is the ruby-rod laser on display in the

¹³ According to Zbyněk Z. Stránský and Friedrich Waidacher; there is a lack of state-of-the-art research applying museological theory to museum presentations in terms of analysing special use cases; for a theoretical approach see: Veronika Kolaříková, The museum exhibition in the context of dispositive analysis. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, Vol. 10, 2022, Is. 3, pp.5–31 doi: 10.46284/mkd.2022.10.3.1.

¹⁴ ICOM (ed.), Code of Ethics for Museums, ICOM 2017.

¹⁵ KOCH, Hans-Albrecht. *Die Universität. Geschichte einer europäischen Institution*. Darmstadt, 2008; FISCH, Stefan. *Geschichte der europäischen Universität*. Von Bologna nach Bologna, Munich, 2015.



Fig. 2: *Laser by Prof. Franz Aussenegg, early 1960ies – the first laser in Austria.*
Photograph by University Museums,
University of Graz.



Fig. 3: *Hans Gross' crime scene suitcase, Hans Gross Museum of Criminology, University Museums, University of Graz.* Photograph by Marija Kanizaj.

University Museums of the University of Graz. This object is a prototype built by physicist Franz Aussenegg in the early 1960s and is today considered to be the first laser ever built in Austria. The then 25-year-old managed to build the laser based solely on his field research and knowledge without ever having seen one before.¹⁶

One example of such a scientific university collection is the criminological collection of the University Museums of the University of Graz. This collection was founded by Hans Gross (1847–1915), a coroner and professor for criminal law at the University of Graz. Due to his



Fig. 4: *History of Science Museum, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.*
https://www.hsm.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/styles/listing_landscape_image/public/mhs/images/media/museumofhistoricalscienceoxfordbyianwallman-237.jpg?itok=h0CUB35s

¹⁶ BIEDERMANN, Bernadette. University Collections as Representatives of Academic Research and Knowledge Transfer – Using the Example of the Ruby-Rod-Laser – an Object on Display in the University Museums Graz. In: *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Vol. 15, 2023, No. 1, pp. 26–15. doi: urn:nbn:at:at-ubg:3-18421.

inventing of innovative tools and methods for crime scene investigations, he is also known as the “father of criminology”. In 1895, the so-called “Kriminologische Sammlung” – his criminological collection of corpora delicti from the Graz criminal court – was founded as a teaching collection. In 1912, the Department of Criminology at the University of Graz was established, and the criminological collection was used to open the “Criminological Museum” (today the Hans Gross Museum of Criminology) (Fig. 3).

The scope of university heritage encompasses what we call the heritage of European universities. It involves both material heritage – which is the tangible cultural heritage, e.g. museums, archives, libraries, and cultural sites – as well as immaterial heritage, i.e. the intangible cultural heritage such as traditions, rites, ceremonies, and specific language and terminology connected to academic research and teaching. Due to their outstanding value for mankind, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are included in the UNESCO World Heritage’s definition of heritage.¹⁷



Fig. 5: *History of the Natural Sciences Education Centre, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland.*
Photograph by Bernadette Biedermann.

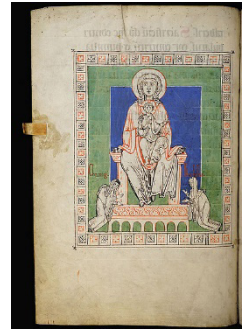


Fig. 6: *Manuscript, 12th century, Seckau Abbey, University Library, special collections, University of Graz.*
<https://ub.uni-graz.at/de/neuigkeiten/detail/article/aus-dem-leben-einer-handschrift/>



Fig. 7: *Vienna University Archive, University of Vienna.*
<https://bibliothek.univie.ac.at/archiv/en/>

¹⁷ For the UNESCO World Heritage website, see: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/> [28.12.2023]; UNESCO safeguards cultural heritage as it is defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Currently, efforts are also being made to promote and expand the UNESCO Global Geoparks initiative.

University museums and their collections are typically expressions of this material, tangible university heritage, for example, the exhibitions of university collections at the History of Science Museums of the University of Oxford (Fig. 4) and at the History of the Natural Sciences Education Centre of Jagellonian University in Krakow (Fig. 5). Moreover, university libraries preserve and store well-known scientific publications as well as manuscripts and rare book collections – as is exemplified by a manuscript kept at Seckau Abbey that dates back to the 12th century of (Fig. 6). Furthermore, university archives house the holdings of archival material (documents, correspondences, or written evidence) of key stakeholders such as deans, rectors, faculties, departments and university centres (Fig. 7). Demonstrative of this is the documentary material kept in the Vienna University Archive.

Moreover, the historic buildings that house a university's faculties, departments, centres, libraries and other administrative divisions are considered to be the built heritage of a university and are therefore part of the cultural university heritage. Such buildings are often listed as World Heritage Sites in and of themselves, irrespective of the university heritage they represent. An example of this is the built heritage of the University of Coimbra, which, as the UNESCO World Heritage Convention points out, is of “outstanding universal value” (Fig. 8). As this type of cultural heritage is often still in active use, for example, as tourist attractions, their

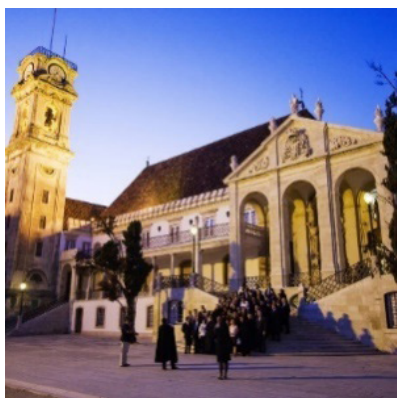


Fig. 8: Built heritage of the University of Coimbra, Portugal.
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1387/>



Fig. 9: The renovated University Library at University of Graz reopened in 2019 and features a modern art intervention by the Austrian artist Anna Artaker. She adapted the motif, which was originally Renaissance copperplate print by French scholar Jean Du Breuil from 1642 under the title “*Perspectiva Practica*”, enlarging it nearly 200 times from the size of a textbook page to cover the 500m² bottom of the University Library roof.
<https://www.uni-graz.at/de/neuigkeiten/kunst-bau/>

preservation and conservation can require significantly more resources. This fact illustrates the obvious tension between preservation and exhibition in the sense of the public's use of cultural heritage. From a museological point of view, the preservation of cultural heritage is as equally important as the exhibition of cultural heritage; consequently, these two core museum tasks are always and intrinsically in tension. Therefore, it is imperative to discuss solutions that are acceptable for reaching both, often opposing, goals. Increasing the chance of an almost unlimited preservation period means storing cultural heritage under ideal climatic conditions, conditions which are almost always at least inconvenient if not outright hostile to public

exhibition. It is the task of museum experts and researchers to mitigate this tension and find innovative solutions and museological tools that are acceptable for both opposing endeavours.



Fig. 10: Logo of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.
<https://searchvectorlogo.com/unesco-world-heritage-convention-logo-vector-svg/>



Fig. 11: Austrian logo variant for the distinctive marking of cultural property under the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Logo_of_the_Hague_Convention_in_Austria.png, image by Steindy.



Fig. 12: Article “University in Europe: how you know it is right for you”, Louise Tickle, *The Guardian* online, 8 May 2015.
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/may/08/university-in-europe-how-to-know-if-its-right-for-you>



Fig. 13: Student bedroom, European Museum of Students (MEUS), University of Bologna, Italy.
<https://sma.unibo.it/en/the-university-museum-network/european-museum-of-students-meus/gallery>

The built heritage of a university also often includes art installations and art on campus. An example of this is the University Library of the University of Graz, which was remodelled in 2019 and now features art on built heritage (Fig. 9).

In Austria, built heritage is protected as cultural heritage at both the national and international level. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention defines “outstanding universal value” using ten criteria that built heritage must fulfil to earn the World Heritage label (Fig. 10)¹⁸, whereas the Monument Protection Act codifies monument and built heritage protection in Austria and labels it accordingly (Fig. 11).¹⁹

¹⁸ For the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, see: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/> [27.12.2023].

¹⁹ For the Federal Act on the Protection of Monuments Due to Their Historic, Artistic or Other Cultural Significance (Monument Protection Act, DMSG), originally passed in 1923, see: <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Geltende-Fassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10009184> [27.12.2023].

The immaterial, intangible cultural heritage of universities encompasses methodologies and traditions related to teaching and learning, also known as the “academic knowledge” of the various disciplines. Part of the intangible cultural heritage of universities comes from university life itself, whether it be of researchers, students, or administrative staff (Fig. 12).

As immaterial or intangible cultural heritage is often linked to materialisations and thus expressed in objects that stand witness to intangible practices or rites, it is also possible to exhibit intangible university heritage. A great example of this is the reconstruction of a student’s bedroom at the European Museum of Students (MEUS) of the University of Bologna, Italy (Fig. 13), which clearly illustrates a student’s lifestyle.

Examples of rituals, traditions, and ceremonies that are related to universities include the awarding of academic degrees, such as doctorates, honorary ceremonies, and other festive activities. These are similarly linked to material expressions of cultural practises in the form of traditional clothing, jewellery (such as the necklace or rings traditionally worn by the dean or through various badges of honour) or university insignia.²⁰

As previously discussed, university heritage encompasses both the tangible and the intangible cultural heritage of universities and thus reflects the broad history of an institution as it operates in the service of academic research and teaching. From a museological perspective, university heritage stands witness not only to research and teaching traditions at the institutions, but also to the history of scientific disciplines, the history of science as a whole and the history of teaching specific scientific disciplines.

Furthermore, various cultural values are linked to university heritage – such as aesthetic, artistic, historical and monetary value as well as the value of remembrance – and must be proven by a scientific approach.²¹

Example museum presentations

The first example of forms of presentation at university museums is the Uniseum Freiburg, the university museum of the University of Freiburg, Germany. The Uniseum was founded in 2004 and exhibits the university heritage of the University of Freiburg dating back to its founding in 1457. The museum’s permanent exhibition is housed in the city centre at the “Old University” originally built by the Jesuits. Taking up approximately 1,000 square metres of exhibition space, it showcases the university’s own history as well as the history of the various academic disciplines, which are themselves subdivided into sections. The history of the university is told in chronological order, from the founding of the university in the 15th century all the way to the 20th century. Moreover, relevant objects are used to represent the separate histories of the humanities, natural sciences and medicine. Furthermore, it features

²⁰ For the insignia of the University of Graz, see: <https://gams.uni-graz.at/o:kfug.6> [28.12.2023].

²¹ For universities and their museums, see: PLAZA, Camila. Museums in Universities. Predicaments and Potentialities. In: *Museum International*, Vol. 74, 2022, No. 1-2, pp. 74–85; MURAVSKA, Svitlana and STASIUK, Ivan. University Heritage as an Instrument for the Development of the University Brand. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, Vol. 9, 2020, No. 2, pp. 2–9; SIMPSON, Andrew, FUKUNI, Akiko, and MINAMI, Hiroshi. University museums and collections as Cultural Hubs: The Future of Tradition. In: *University Museums and Collections Journal*, Vol. 11, 2019, No. 1, pp. 9–12; KOZAK, Zenobia R. The Role of University Museums and Heritage in the 21st Century. In: *The Museum Review*, Vol. 1, 2016, No. 1; de MARET, Pierre. Exposing the Ivory Tower. In: *Opuscula Musealia*, Vol.15, 2006, pp. 77–83; BULOTAITE, Nijole. University Heritage – An Institutional Tool for Branding and Marketing. In: *Higher Education on Europe*, Vol. XXVIII, 2003, No. 4, pp. 449–454.



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Uniseum

Fig. 14: *Forms of presentation, permanent exhibition of the Uniseum Freiburg, University of Freiburg, Germany.*
https://db-service.toubiz.de/var/plain_site/storage/images/orte/freiburg/uniseum/freiburg_uniseum_copyright_siehe_bild/2776511-1-ger-DE/Freiburg_Uniseum_Copyright_siehe_Bild_front_large.jpg

a section resembling a historical cabinet of curiosities as well as sections dedicated to art and architecture, student life and the history of the university's built heritage.²²

The exhibitions present objects embedded in their various contexts as meaningful items that represent the history of the university as an institution of academic research and teaching and, at the same time, as witnesses to the scientific disciplines. Therefore, the objects are given additional context information by placing them in chronological or thematic order and arranging them with other objects. The exhibition uses furniture, such as antique cupboards, for the context and exhibition properties they create intrinsically as items and for storing and displaying the objects. The objects are presented in typical glass showcases along with labels that communicate further information. Visitors also have the opportunity to book a guided tour or use the audio guide to discover even more information. The forms of presentation of the Uniseum Freiburg show quite a common and widely used form of presenting cultural heritage, one characterised by the passive reception of information where visitors are invited to look, read and hear.

A more active integration of visitors can be found at the second example for presentation forms, the University of Tartu Museum in Estonia, which was opened in 2019. The permanent exhibition on the history of the University of Tartu Museums is called “The University of Our Lives” and “looks into the University of Tartu’s influence [o]n our lives”.²³ Therefore, the presentation is less a display of various university collections and more an insight into the spirit of the university with a greater focus on intangible cultural heritage. It invites visitors to actively

²² SPECK, Dieter. *Uniseum Freiburg. Ein Bildbegleitbuch*. Freiburg, 2007; See also the website of the Uniseum Freiburg: <https://www.uniseum.uni-freiburg.de/de> [28.12.2023].

²³ See the website of the University of Tartu Museum, permanent exhibition “The University of Our Lives”: <https://muuseum.ut.ee/en/university-of-our-lives> [28.12.2023].



Fig. 15: *Forms of presentation, permanent exhibition “The University of our Lives”, University of Tartu Museum, University of Tartu, Estonia.* <https://muuseum.ut.ee/en/university-of-our-lives>, photograph by Tartu Ülikooli muuseumi püsinäitus “Minu elu ülikool”, Angelina Pjatkovskaja.

engage with the exhibition, touching on themes such as the “wisdom of professors, colourful student life, or sad loneliness and endless love”.²⁴

Activities include, for example, a test of one’s knowledge regarding the organisation of students. Visitors can watch memories of Alumni, search for information in the museum database or take a book to read.

This active engagement of visitors is achieved with an exhibition design that makes visitors feel comfortable and cosy, allowing them to feel their own emotions connect to university life. Through this, the presentation invites participation by exploring specific experiences via exhibition arrangement, like interactive dioramas, or by allowing objects to be touched. In this way, the exhibition follows a narrative of engaging with university life by presenting the story of the University of Tartu (Fig. 15).

Other parts of the museum present the university collections in a well-known and established way in showcases. This form of presentation gives visitors the opportunity to explore an emotionally engaging museum experience by offering deeper insights into the scientific collections at their own pace and according to their own interests.



Fig. 16: *Forms of presentation, “Savannah - Changeful Paradise” at the Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK), Bonn, Germany.* <https://bonn.leibniz-lib.de/de/museum/dauerausstellungen/savanne>

Another example of engaging visitors through museum presentation is the permanent exhibition of the Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK) in Bonn, Germany. The museum is part of the Leibniz Institute for the Analysis of Biodiversity Change (LIB) – a research museum of the Leibniz Association since its 2021 merger with the Centrum für Naturkunde (CeNak) in Hamburg, Germany. While the research museum houses many interesting permanent exhibitions, this paper focuses specifically on the exhibitions “Savannah” (opened in 2016) and “Rainforest” (opened in 2022) – a two-part exhibition split into both understory and canopy.

The permanent barrier-free exhibition “Savannah” is a large-scale diorama of a savannah landscape in the atrium of the museum building; it places taxidermic flora and fauna from

²⁴ See the website of the University of Tartu Museum, permanent exhibition “The University of Our Lives”: <https://muuseum.ut.ee/en/university-of-our-lives> [28.12.2023].

the African savannah in realistic contexts and situations that seem frozen in time. Visitors can gain insights into their lives by observing them through binoculars or by sitting down in the middle of the nearly 360° diorama. Visitors are only separated from the exhibition objects by a handrail, allowing them to feel as if they were part of the unfolding story.

The permanent exhibition “Rainforest” is split into two parts, an exhibition on the understory of the rainforest and one on the canopy. The exhibition, which is located on the 2nd floor and was opened in 2022, provides a completely different visitor experience. It allows visitors to study an extremely detailed diorama of the biosphere of a rainforest in Ghana behind floor-to-ceiling glass showcases. The displays are extremely detailed, showing the flora and fauna in a lifelike setting and placing visitors once again in a typical position of passively perceiving and looking at the objects. The history of the rainforest exhibition reveals that every piece on display, from every leaf to every twig, was handcrafted by the conservators and preparators of the museum²⁵ following an expedition to Ghana by the museum curators to study and collect plant material for reconstruction of the biosphere in the museum.²⁶

From a museological point of view, the use of showcases establishes a barrier between the visitor and the object; thus, a display without a glass case allows for direct and unobstructed perception of the objects and is always preferred. Needless to say, due to object conservation reasons, this is not always possible – a conflict that also touches on the aforementioned tension between preservation and exhibition. There is, of course, no doubt that the museum conservators and preparators did an excellent job in reconstructing the presented material; however, presenting reconstructed objects or replicas in a showcase highlights the importance of such objects, potentially leading to the false assumption that everything presented within a showcase simply must be original material. This is why it is especially important to be truthful in storytelling with the visitors and to inform them of why the museum intentionally wants to tell the story with replicas. Also, it should be mentioned that, in the context of current debates on decolonising European museums, the question arises whether these kinds of study expeditions for collecting items for museum educational purposes reinforce hegemonic tendencies by appropriating foreign nature.

The last case study of a current university museum exhibition to be discussed in this paper is the exhibition “Cabinet of Curiosities – An Interpretation” of the Science Museum of the University of Coimbra, Portugal, which was opened in 2022 within the already existing permanent museum presentation. It aims to present “the mysteries of the world gathered in a Cabinet of Curiosities [...] with the purpose of recreating



Fig. 17: *Forms of presentation, Cabinet of Curiosities – An Interpretation, University of Coimbra, Portugal.*

<https://noticias.uc.pt/artigos/os-misterios-do-mundo-reunidos-num-gabinete-de-curiosidades/> [28.12.2023]. Photograph by Gabinete de Curiosidades Coimbra, Museu de Ciência da UC, Foto: MIR, 2022.

²⁵ For the making-of video of the Rainforest Exhibition at Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK), Bonn, see: <https://youtu.be/WGXrc8F1xdU> [28.12.2023].

²⁶ For the website of Zoological Research Museum Alexander Koenig (ZFMK), Construction of the Rainforest Exhibition, see: <https://bonn.leibniz-lib.de/de/forschung/projekte/entstehung-der-regenwald-ausstellung> [28.12.2023].

the feeling of what one might feel when entering an 18th century Cabinet of Curiosities”.²⁷ The exhibition includes objects from natural history, such as taxidermied animals, plants and flowers as well as anatomical items, that are stored and simultaneously exhibited in historical cupboards with glass doors that double as showcases. These showcases are backlit with various colours (Fig. 17). Various animal skeletons are also hanging from the ceiling of the exhibition space. The exhibition display presents around 5,000 items that are all part of the museum collections of the University of Coimbra.²⁸

As might have been the norm for cabinets of curiosities, which had their golden age across Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, there are no labels or museum texts, as this would break the visitors’ experience of immersion. From a museological point of view, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in a museum exhibition story by prompting emotions that lead to a deeper interaction with a given topic is considered the ultimate goal of any exhibition.

Late-Renaissance cabinets of curiosities were expressions of the wealth and power of their owners as well as of a desire to compile an encyclopaedical understanding of the world. Early museum treaties provide insight into the ways in which cabinets of curiosities ordered objects by category and stored them in cupboards, often with coloured backdrops. One evidencing example for this is the 16th-century Habsburg cabinet of curiosities at Ambras Castle near Innsbruck, Austria. Against this background, two questions arise: Did the objects currently presented in the Cabinet of Curiosities at the University of Coimbra originate from this period of collecting, and were they originally stored in such a way? Moreover, it is important to question how visitors might interpret an exhibition where items of natural history are presented next to skulls and, quite possibly, African artworks.²⁹ Obviously, the individual objects are of special relevance to the long-lasting history of the institution as well as to the various scientific disciplines.³⁰ From a museological point of view, it is recommended to display objects in a way that makes it easy for visitors to recognise their function within an interpretative network. Compared to showcases, labels and texts are not the first choice to convey a message; a much more preferred means of conveying messages is through the design and layout of the museum presentation. Therefore, an immersive museum exhibition experience is an ideal opportunity for visitors to consider the content and meaning of the objects.

Museological review

From a museological perspective, the past decade’s museum presentations tend to draw visitor attention and attraction through interaction with the exhibition and through immersive museum presentations. Presenting museum objects in showcases with labels on the walls is becoming more and more old-fashioned, as the longest-standing example of a museum presentation shows. In this context, taking a museological approach to objects means considering the often multilayered history in which an object is embedded. The stories, to which objects are witness, are uncovered through the process of museum documentation. Based on the objects’ specific stories, the curatorial process of deciding which objects’ stories should

²⁷ For the website of the Cabinet of Curiosities of the University of Coimbra, see: <https://www.uc.pt/en/article?key=a-accdff5827> [28.12.2023].

²⁸ For the website of NON SERIAL, see: <https://nonserial.com/en/cabinet-of-curiosities/> [28.12.2023].

²⁹ For a review of the Cabinet of Curiosities, University of Coimbra, see: <https://amusearte.hypotheses.org/9095> [28.12.2023].

³⁰ For National Geographic Portugal, see: https://www.nationalgeographic.pt/historia/um-gabinete-curiosidades-em-coimbra_3068 [28.12.2023].

be told within an exhibition result in an interpretive presentation. If objects are separated from their stories and contexts, the visitors will probably have no frame of reference from which to understand the object. This might lead to a misunderstanding of the original object meaning – a museological perspective strives to prevent this. Regarding the presentation of the Cameroon section in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, art historian Bénédicte Savoy pointed out that by only telling object collection histories through transparency, which is the case for the Cameroon section when it was shortened to the colonial robbery of the objects by German colonial troops, objects are reduced to a mere tragic aspect of their history. According to her, this marks the “death of objects”³¹ and, moreover, leads to the “end of the museum”.³² As a further consequence, this questions the future ability of museums to preserve such contested collections³³ and also touches on the aforementioned tension between the preservation and exhibition of objects as well as the need for embedding objects in not just the context of their history and biography but in a wider networked context.

According to the international professional guidelines for museum work, it is absolutely essential that the ethical handling of a museum be considered. The Code of Ethics for Museums³⁴ and the current museum definition of the International Council of Museums³⁵ makes it very clear that this is not only key to the proper management and display of human remains but also to objects connected to a problematic or even contested past.

Conclusion

Museum presentations are the crowning discipline of an institution such as a museum that deals with historical objects of cultural value. In doing so, museums must consider principles of communication in order to effectively convey a message to visitors. It is thus necessary to strike a balance between content and design by not just telling the visitors correct and proven facts but also by actively avoiding any misinterpretations. An exhibition design must address both fact and fiction to correctly convey its message.

This is of particular importance for university museums as they are part of a university’s communication strategy – the 3rd core mission of universities in fact. As a result, university collections and museums are a way to raise social awareness of the meaning of university heritage. They strengthen scientific research and teaching and contribute to identity building by addressing future students and the interested public. Currently, however, forms of museum presentation are rarely studied with regard to university museums; therefore, a need for further research and analysis can be identified.

³¹ Interview with Bénédicte Savoy, in: Deutschlandfunk Kultur of 06 June 2022, min 55:50, see: <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/benedicte-savoy-restitution-kolonialismus-100.html> [28.12.2023].

³² Ibidem, min 56:05.

³³ Ibidem, min 58:00.

³⁴ International Council of Museums (ed.), Code of Ethics for Museums, ICOM 2017.

³⁵ For International Council of Museums’ museum definition, see: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [28.12.2023].

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