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# Museums Past and Present

“Layer upon layer, past times preserve themselves in the city until life itself is threatened with suffocation; then, in sheer defense, modern man invents the museum.”

Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1938)

# University and College Museums: Some Challenges

BY IVAN GASKELL

If building campaigns, publications, Web presence, and the actions of the founders of new institutions are anything to go by, museums have never been more in the public eye worldwide than at present. The social prestige attached to art ensures that art museums receive particular attention, but developments occur in other kinds of museums, too. Funding sources vary, but private money plays an ever-increasing role, even in museums that have long relied on state subventions. Increased dependence on so-called philanthropy has considerable consequences for museums. One has been a spate of disputes and scandals at prominent institutions, including the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. However unfortunate and embarrassing for the museums concerned, this may not matter very much if most people regard them as no more than sites of popular education and entertainment. Yet if museums are to serve as sites of scholarship, engaged in research, instruction, and publishing, they cannot afford to be compromised any more than can a college or a university.

Commentators consistently overlook the scholarly role of museums of all kinds. They give far too much attention to the publically accessible parts of museums, notably their exhibits, both long-term and temporary. Contrary to popular and even dominant academic opinion, exhibition galleries are not the heart of a museum. The heart comprises the storage areas and the collections they contain, the study rooms and

laboratories in which those collections are investigated, the archival records that concern them, and the curators, conservators, and scientists who conduct and publish their research, whether in conjunction with exhibitions or not. Public galleries, while not exactly optional extras, are secondary. Even if this contrarian claim appears to be counterintuitive, or directly opposed to the expectations of most trustees and many museums' mission statements, a moment's reflection ought to confirm that anything of value that any museum achieves—including exhibiting—derives directly or indirectly from the scholarship of its staff. Although some of that scholarship may be conducted in collaboration with non-museum scholars, museum scholarship cannot be outsourced in its entirety any more than can the scholarship of physicists at an atomic particle acceleration facility such as CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva). Just as much of CERN is not usually open to the public, neither are the most important parts of many museums.

That everything of value and significance a museum does should be open to the public is a serious misconception. While much that museums do finds its way into public gallery exhibits, much does not. The Center for Conservation Genetics (ConGen) of the Sackler Institute for Comparative Genomics at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), New York, is generally not open to the public, but its scientists conduct vital research in collaboration with other research units within the museum and beyond (units of Columbia and Yale Universities, for instance). The AMNH website explains: "ConGen scientists and graduate students identify new methods and models to enhance our efforts in conserving biodiversity and successfully retaining genetically healthy populations in threatened habitats." There is scarcely a major public museum of any kind anywhere whose scholarly staff is not engaged in research and publication in parts of those museums usually inaccessible to the public. The ever-increasing emphasis on exhibiting and fundraising in museums of all kinds continually constrains museum scholars from discharging their proper responsibilities as researchers seeking to add to the sum total of human knowledge, however culturally inflected.

If museums of all kinds should function as sites of scholarship, one might expect those universities that include museums among their constituents to foster this aspect of their responsibilities. This is not invariably the case. Many universities and colleges have grown careless of their museums and other methodical collections. Others

misconceive their roles, treating them as little more than public-relations units.

Universities have had purpose-built museums since Oxford opened the Ashmolean Museum in 1683, though Oxford's collections and those at other European universities go back much further. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Enlightenment values led to the formation of collections of very varied character at European and American colleges and universities. Then things changed again. During the nineteenth century, universities divided their collections, which they had previously usually treated as comprehensive wholes, according to emergent academic disciplines. These fragmented collections—of natural history, or of art, for instance—were dispersed within their universities. Universities formed new, focused collections along the same lines. This division and disciplinary focus certainly encouraged the proliferation of new knowledge claims based largely on categorization, observation, and description. This was undoubtedly a good use of collections within universities. However, division and disciplinary focus also inhibited recognition of connections among bodies of varied material.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, specialized collections were demonstrably helpful, and often vital, to scholars in creating bodies of knowledge within an entire A to Z of disciplines, from anthropology to zoology. Yet that usefulness has not survived unequivocally into the twenty-first century. As observation increasingly gave way to experimentation, and empirical evidence to immaterial factors in the course of the twentieth century, university and college collections came to appear increasingly irrelevant to scholarly enquiry. Collections of many kinds and their associated archives were reduced in university and college administrators' estimations from valuable assets to embarrassing encumbrances fit, at best, for occasional use in undergraduate instruction. Some senior university administrators could not conceive of their institutions' museums and methodical collections as anything other than public entertainments. Even though several of Harvard's museums would retain their international significance if they were entirely independent of the university, marginalization reached the point at which a president of Harvard University could declare that he was "not in the museum business." Even so, we have to acknowledge that in recent decades museums and collections at many universities, constrained by collections defined in accordance with academic disciplines that have subsequently come to

focus on immaterial matters, have scarcely contributed to the generation of fundamental knowledge claims. This is not to ignore that many have continued to produce more modest incremental scholarship in areas such as taxonomy and technical analysis.

However, in recent years paradigms of inquiry have changed once again. Where once scholars gave all their attention to abstraction and experimentation well suited to pursuit in university laboratories and libraries, now tangible things of all kinds and their documentation are once again loci of innovative scholarly attention, whether as sources of DNA in the natural sciences, or as traces of human behavior in the social and human sciences. This creates an enormous opportunity for universities and colleges with museums and methodical collections, but currently emerging modes of inquiry do not necessarily respect the long-established disciplinary boundaries that define those collections. Many new uses of university and college collections involve lowering the barriers that separate them, as thinkers pursue connections among things that not long ago were treated as irreconcilably different in kind. Transdisciplinary inquiry now crosses once impermeable borders between, say, biochemistry and engineering, literary studies and medicine.

The current transdisciplinary development, though, is fragile, for disciplinary adherences and established prejudices run deep. The result is that in universities and colleges today, some encourage new uses of the collections, and others see them as no more than fungible assets to be realized to support other endeavors. As a result, university and college collections are in perilous predicaments. When universities permit their museums to raise and spend funds, public access is usually the priority, although there are some important exceptions aimed at fostering scholarly innovation in research. Among them are Yale's recently created Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, comprising seven laboratories, and the new storage and laboratory facilities of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. However, many senior university and college administrators behave as though their institutions' museums and collections, if not sold off, should remain no more than public relations units or, at best, adjuncts in disciplinary instruction.

Few senior university administrators seem to understand that what is at stake is the ability of their institutions to mobilize a vast array of material things for scholarly inquiry in response to new questions. Some understand that collections can give their universities a

competitive edge if they are adequately funded and—above all—coordinated. The president of Harvard, Drew Faust, has acknowledged that the university's extraordinary collections in a wide range of fields might lend it an advantage if they can be used together in emerging fields of transdisciplinary scholarship. The president of the Georg-August University, Göttingen, Ulrike Beisiegel, has taken the further step of creating an initiative that draws on all her university's numerous collections to create a research-driven, publicly accessible *Forum des Wissens* (Knowledge Forum) and an associated new senior professorship in the *Materialität des Wissens* (materiality of knowledge) across disciplines.

Both Harvard and Göttingen—and any other university that might seek to mobilize its museums and collections in conjunction with one another—face formidable challenges on a practical level. Each university museum and collection has its own peculiar history, governance, and administration. Rarely can such varied units simply be centralized by straightforward administrative action. A rare exception is The University of Glasgow, where The Hunterian, a wide-ranging collection bequeathed in 1783, has always technically remained a unity in spite of disciplinary division and dispersal along disciplinary lines in the nineteenth century. It is now being reassembled as a single entity in a visionary project that leads the way among universities in respect of their museums and collections internationally. Nonetheless, Glasgow faces considerable challenges. It shares with museums and collections at other universities the difficulty that each constituent unit has its own infrastructure and procedures—its own culture—that does not easily lend itself to homogenization with others. At the simplest level, for instance, museums and collections in the same university may well have completely incompatible electronic collections management systems. For instance, to create a unified searchable database for Harvard's nearly fifty collections that together comprise many millions of items remains a distant dream. To reconcile staffing structures in these various collection units—who has what status when fulfilling particular professional roles within each—appears to be beyond human ingenuity.

Simply to facilitate the loan of accessioned items among the various museums and collections of a single university is often a source of extreme frustration. A scholar may wish to examine an item from the university art museum in direct physical comparison with, say, another item from the university natural history museum, and per-

haps yet another from the anthropology museum; yet to assemble three things from three collections within the same university in one place—perhaps a museum laboratory with specialist equipment—can take months, if it proves possible at all. Protocols for the loan of an art museum object to the same university's anthropology museum a quarter of a mile distant can be precisely the same as if that object were to be requested by an art museum on the other side of the globe. No university museum should acquiesce in negligence when it comes to the movement of collection items, but streamlining is not impossible. This was achieved at Harvard during 2010–11, when more than 280 objects from seventeen collections were distributed among eight locations to create the *Tangible Things* exhibition that I curated with Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. The registrars (collections managers) collaborated to create new, simpler loan protocols, but they reportedly discontinued them once the exhibition had closed and returned to familiar routines. To their credit, the registrars went out on a limb, but, for the most part, their senior colleagues did not support their effort.

The difficulties surrounding internal object loan coordination among collecting units within the same institution raises altogether bigger questions. If university museums, whether of art, archaeology, science, anthropology, or some other field, are to function together to stimulate the transdisciplinary inquiry that marks so much innovation in scholarship, how should they be equipped and—above all—staffed? Are existing structures adequate? Although there are exceptions, it would seem as though university and college museums will for the most part require a thorough reassessment and overhaul if they are to function as disciplinary and transdisciplinary sites of scholarship to any adequate extent within their universities and colleges.

Although some university and college museums are small, and are run by small staffs who turn their hands to many tasks, any properly constituted museum ideally requires a team of professional specialists only a minority of whom are primarily scholars. This is not to denigrate the roles of such skilled team members as registrars or collections managers (who oversee the reception, loan, movement, and physical distribution of collection items), preparators and installers (who handle objects), designers, security specialists, editors, educators, and many others. Nonetheless, scholarly responsibility principally rests with the curators, conservators, and scientists. Usually, a director oversees all these specialists. University and college museum directors were once expected to be scholars, and some still are, but



many are increasingly preoccupied by university politics and, above all, donor propitiation and fundraising. To take responsibility for a university or college museum or a curatorial department used to be considered by all concerned as a sideline for an academic faculty member who would discharge these museum responsibilities part-time, as an amateur. Few in such positions, though, could both develop the professional skills ideally necessary to administer a museum or a curatorial department and simultaneously sustain the pursuit of scholarship necessary for an academic career. While the directors and curators of some university and college collections remain faculty members, discharging their museum responsibilities part-time—some excellently, others negligently—increasingly these positions have been defined as independent of faculty appointments, and given to people with specialist museum interests and skills who are appointed at a purely administrative level. Some university and college museums have thereby been professionalized, but have had their capacity to function as independent generators of scholarship diminished.

Universities are in a cleft stick. Appoint faculty members to directorial and curatorial positions in their museums and risk those units not being able to function adequately as professional entities, especially in relation to both donors and non-university museums. Appoint non-academic professionals to such positions, and the museum may be able to relate well to donors and non-university museums, but may also witness the diminution of its scholarly capacity and status. Do those responsible for university and college museums have to choose between museum professionalism and scholarly ability? Ideally, not; but in practice it is hard to find people capable of utmost rigor in both areas. I cannot offer a comprehensive solution to this dilemma, other than to suggest that, in the end, what really matters in university and college museums and collections is a capacity for institutionally independent scholarship on the part of their curators, conservators, and scientists. Many, though not all, who occupy scholarly positions in university and college museums in North America and Europe—curators, conservators, and scientists—do so through administrative rather than faculty appointments. Their positions are in many cases less attractive than faculty posts at the same university or college in terms of hours, study leave, remuneration, benefits, and tenure. Is this appropriate or adequate if a university wishes to revitalize its collections, mobilizing them for transdisciplinary scholarship addressing big questions? Can any university museum, whether individually or in conjunction with

other museums within a university, be effective if the members of its scholarly staff are treated as inherently inferior to the faculty of that university? Most likely not.

Universities and colleges will need to address this challenge in various ways, each of which requires education. First, future museum scholars (curators, conservators, and scientists) will have to be educated to tackle academic tasks on a par with faculty. They will no longer be able to take refuge exclusively in the purely taxonomic or technical aspects of their fields of study, and will have to be prepared to ask and research big questions that cross disciplinary boundaries. Second, future faculty will have to be educated to deal with material things individually and collectively in university and college museums and collections of all kinds, so as to be at relative ease with them—which many are not at present—and to work collaboratively both across disciplinary boundaries, and in equal collaboration with museum scholars. Third, senior administrators and trustees will have to raise more funds to pay for faculty-equivalent museum positions that are more costly than those now in place in many institutions, while also contriving adequate and appropriate means of assessing museum scholars for tenure, which few at present enjoy.

If university and college museums and collections are to work with one another within their institutions, and with colleagues elsewhere in their institutions, to mobilize tangible things for inquiries concerning big ideas, more than administrative changes of various kinds will be necessary. These will vary from institution to institution, but common to all will be a need to acknowledge the potential of tangible things and the collections that encompass them for deployment in addressing overarching conceptual questions as well as more immediate puzzles both within disciplines and across them.

Some scholars, whether faculty or museum-based, are attuned to the theoretical and practical challenges all must face when asking big questions deploying tangible things, but most are not. Museum scholars for the most part refine existing paradigms rather than propose new ones. This must change. Faculty scholars are often poorly equipped to cope with the bewilderment that tangible things of all kinds provoke. This, too, must change. Yet some museum and faculty scholars are already dealing with what is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of tangible things: that they are radically unstable, both physically and cognitively, to the extent that they throw into question fundamental distinctions that many Westerners rely on, such as that between the

animate and the inanimate. Museum scholarship, both within universities and beyond them, is at present predominantly though not exclusively small-scale in scope rather than speculatively expansive or theoretically innovative. This can be remedied, but only if universities are prepared to accept changes that may trouble some of their most vocal and entrenched constituents, including faculties. Furthermore, any such changes will cost money. Universities that invest resources in enhancing the scholarly capacity of their museums will gain a huge advantage in the international competition that motivates the world's leading institutions of learning. Embrace radical revision—it's the only way—or university and college museums will wither and die, and the institutions of which they are a part will surely suffer.