

Helsinki University Museum and its responsibility to preserve the heritage of University history

As the oldest university in Finland, the University of Helsinki – founded in 1640 – is responsible for preserving the continuity of University traditions. Helsinki University Museum was established in order to protect and promote this tangible and intangible legacy. Helsinki University Museum is also responsible for the preservation of University property of cultural and art historical value. The Museum acquires, studies, communicates and exhibits material pertaining to the history of science, research and the University as an institution. The Museum is being developed into an information centre of University history.

Documentation of tangible heritage

The collections policy of the Helsinki University Museum states that the Museum is only to acquire items relating to the history, research, tuition or staff at the University of Helsinki. Items that do not fulfil these criteria are to be redirected to other more appropriate collections or museums. In exceptional circumstances, however, the collections of special fields, such as medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry and craft science, may also be complemented with other material. As some of these special fields lack a museum of their own in Finland, items from a broad array of fields are offered for donation, which requires careful consideration.

Documentation of changing University facilities

The facilities at the University of Helsinki have undergone some major changes over the past years: University functions have been concentrated in four campus areas, and several institutions have been relocated away from the traditional University area in the town centre to modern and more efficient facilities in campus areas outside the city. The old buildings have had to be adapted to serve new functions. As the architects have not approved bringing old furniture into new facilities, the original furniture has either been passed on to the new tenants of the historic buildings or been moved into storage.

The historic buildings of the University date from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. As the buildings are listed and protected, all alterations and changes require particular consideration. Many of the buildings have specially designed unique interiors. The mission of the Helsinki University Museum is to protect the integrity and original character of these buildings and to document all alterations that are made. When the old chemistry laboratory and museum building underwent a complete restoration and was converted into the Helsinki University Museum in 2001-2003, the Museum naturally had to abide by the same guidelines that it had issued to other University units: the original interiors and exteriors had to be preserved, all unnecessary renovation and constructional work were to be avoided and original furniture were to be used as much as possible.

In the case of the Helsinki University Museum, this meant that the original colour scheme of the building was yielded from previous layers of paint. Original gas pipes and sinks were left exposed, although no longer in use, as evidence of the previous history of the building. Original showcases were used where possible, cupboards displaying old maps were provided with glass panes and locks to enable re-use, insect boxes were turned into a display cupboard for the collections of Craft Science. Original furniture was used in the offices and the work rooms, the old table and the chairs of the meeting room were restored etc.

The Museum photographs and performs a documentation of all University buildings prior to restoration. It documents building fragments, inventory reports, restoration plans and restoration reports. The Museum makes an inventory of the building and its contents and salvages and stores all valuable furniture that cannot be reused. In 1950-52, a professional photographer documented everyday life at the different departments and institutions, for a book introducing the University. This material has been of great help when establishing earlier locations of the departments, their original interiors, original furniture etc. The Museum will continue to carry out this kind of photographic documentation: the Museum photographer is constantly documenting everyday life and festive events at the University.

The documentation of cultural traditions of the University

The Museum has a responsibility to record and document the cultural history and the traditions of the University, which include not only tangible but also intangible heritage. The centuries-old Finnish University customs related to everyday life and festive traditions have continued without interruption to the present day: the outward form of the conferment ceremonies of Master's and Doctor's degrees and the disputations has largely remained unaltered through the years, with the exception of some minor changes. The conferment ceremonies, following the awarding of the academic degrees, last for several days and include the sword-whetting ceremony for the Doctors, the garland-weaving ceremony for the Masters, the actual conferment act, lunches, gala dinners, a cruise etc.

The procedure and the dress code at the disputations and the festivities afterwards follow old documented traditions. These traditions are being passed from one generation to another, and the ceremonies are constantly being organized by a new generation and new people, who have to acquaint themselves with odd, unfamiliar traditions. In the future, general information on these University traditions will be made available on the Museum web site, whereas the Museum collections and archives will provide answers to more detailed questions that may arise on the subject.

An information centre of University history

Helsinki University Museum aims to gather and make available all possible information on University history for researchers and other interested parties. The Museum holds an extensive collection of literature on University history, which includes books pertaining to departments, faculties, student organizations and staff at the Helsinki University as well as books on other universities. The collection has been acquired mainly through donations from former or current professors. The Rectors and the Chancellors also donate gift books on University history, received on travels abroad, to the Museum. In the future, the Museum will try to acquire dissertations and scientific articles on University history to the collections.

Over the years the Museum has come to hold a large photographic archive. Initially the Museum acquired photographs for its research from other museums and archives, but it soon started to work actively to enhance the archive by documenting University life, events, buildings and people at the University. Several departments have donated photographic material to the Museum. The photographic archive is used by the Museum's own researchers, as well as other researchers and members of the press.

The architects in charge of planning the restoration of the historic buildings, use original architectural blueprints and specifications from the drawing collections of the Museum in their work. The property photographs of the photographic archive also provide valuable information. Last but not least, there is our highly professional and dedicated Museum staff, who over the years, while maintaining the collections, have acquired an extensive knowledge of the Museum material, thus being able to respond with immediate answers to innumerable questions asked via phone or e-mail.