

UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS IN MEXICO¹

OVERVIEW:

As in many countries in Europe and the Americas, university museums and collections in Mexico have a long history, but their reorganization and consolidation happened during the 20th century, when university institutions were modernized – the autonomy for the universities was then obtained – to provide students with better opportunities.

Most public universities in the country were founded upon Scientific and Literary Institutions or local Schools of Agriculture. These places gradually gathered various specimens, lab equipment, frames and objects. Since the dissemination of the positivist philosophy in education aimed at demonstrating the facts of nature within labs, during the last thirty years of the 19th century, the acquisition of items, objects and instruments was promoted for research and teaching purposes in areas such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Zoology, Medicine, and Meteorology, considerably increasing university collections.

These collections were aimed mainly at the promotion of science and teaching, and sometimes they also included dissemination activities, since in the days and hours where no classes were taught, the collections were opened for the general public.

As time went by, the number of items grew and the original equipment was substituted by one which was more suitable for scientific purposes. For that reason, many university collections were opened during the 20th century. Their aesthetic and historic values were undeniable, and their preservation and exhibition aimed at both preserving the country's cultural heritage and showing the world what was being done by the university.

Works of art such as paintings, sculptures and engravings were also used initially for teaching purposes. Many important items were originally placed in special academic buildings and classrooms, and were eventually integrated into specific collections for their public exhibition in museums and temporary exhibits. In spite of the tracking to identify the origin, trajectory and use of these university collections, it is difficult to know exactly what there is in every collection and their status.

In spite of these great differences and due to the fact that universities are guardians of a large amount of cultural heritage in the country, it is important to know the exact contents and status of each collection to promote their preservation, sustainable use, interaction and exchange of experiences among university museum professionals, which can be then disseminated within the university and among the public.

This museological interest responds to the current need of consolidating a theoretic-methodological corpus that includes the perspectives over the collections and the museography within the university. Its goal is not to interfere with the research, teaching and dissemination activities of the university, but to identify what has been done so far and set a course of action to guarantee each collection's preservation and dissemination. Although it is difficult to perform

¹ UC = University Collections; UM = University Museums.

this type of analysis, we believe there are many actions that can be taken to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage not only by the professionals in charge of every collection and museum, but also by the academic community and the general public.

FIRST ACTIONS:

The Dirección General de Divulgación de la Ciencia (General Board of Science Dissemination) of the Autonomous National University of Mexico – the country’s most important academic institution – through its *Working Table on University Museums and Collections (UMAC-México)*², has devoted itself to study these topics to build a university museology which can be adjusted to the country’s reality and needs, while contributing to the consolidation of museology in general. Its first actions include:

1. Organizing working sessions: frequent meeting with staff from university museums to exchange experiences and opinions (3 per year). The goal is to promote *UMs* and *UCs* as a specialized activity.
2. Organizing Round Tables to present and discuss specialized works (2 per year minimum). The goal is to analyze *UMs* and *UCs* within the Mexican context in order to launch it into a regional and international context.
3. Creating an institutional database (electronic version) of *UMs* and *UCs* to be accessed nationwide.
4. Creating a database with *UM* and *UC* professionals (in process). The goal is to consolidate a family of university museum workers.
5. Preparing *UM* and *UC* specialized publications in order to build a university museology and collect knowledge and experiences.

Following UMAC’s guidelines, future activities include publishing the works in order to build a conceptual platform on Mexican university museums.

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² Supported by ICOM (International Council of Museums), ICOM-Mexico (National Mexican Council, ICOM) and the UMAC (University Museums and Collections) Internation Committee.