

UMAC-México

ROUND TABLE

University Museums and Collections of Science, Art and History

On June 20th 2007 the third Assembly of UMAC Mexico was held at “La Casita” building of the DGDC/UNAM (General Direction for Science Communication, National University, Mexico), starting at 5:00 P.M.

As an introduction and a reference for the newcomers, Luisa Rico the chair of UMAC Mexico, reminded about how this group took shape, when last October the 6th it was stated the commitment to organize Mexican National Committee for University Museums and collections, which is a branch of UMAC, itself a part of ICOM. The main working lines were traced to three different tasks:

1. The making of a data base which includes the most information about University museums and collections in our country. The two other assemblies were already dedicated to this item.
2. The making of a data base on Mexican museums’ professionals working or researching on, about, or for University museums and collections.
3. Providing the atmosphere to undertake the analysis of the various museological and museographic aspects related to University museums and collections.

In fact, last meeting the attendants agreed to approach this last important subject, as this assembly would be the closest in date to the celebration of International Museums Day. So, it was decided to invite three well known professionals who work for different kind of University Museums: Science, Art and History. They would tell the audience what they consider the relation between each one’s discipline and the fact of developing it within the University milieu.

Later on, L. Rico announced the three following lectures would be soon published by UMAC-Mexico, and went on reading the agenda for that afternoon:

1. A twenty minutes lecture by each professional.
2. After each one, five minutes for individual questions by the audience.
3. General session.
4. Conclusions.
5. Short announcements.

Reminding UMAC members that next assembly will be held on August the 8th, the usual schedule, and there’s still time to deliver abstracts for the Vienna General ICOM Conference, since UMAC deadlines won’t be met until August 25th, Bertha Abraham, also a board person of UMAC-Mexico, introduced the lecturers:

First of all, C. Sánchez, a biologist who works for the DGDC-UNAM, and is in charge of several exhibitions at Universum science museum, spoke about her specialty. Based on some examples both from Mexico and abroad, she exposed the peculiar role of science museums, which have to create their own collections, consisting of varied equipments, to illustrate processes and concepts for their visitors to understand them. As for the interactive exhibitions they often recur to computers.

Regarding the history of this kind of museums they’ve defined many so called “generations” from the old curiosities cabinet model, with no didactic intentions, to a stage of “codesign” that seeks social interaction among the public.

She also referred to the levels of the interaction with the visitors, which can be attained mechanically, mentally or even emotionally, appealing to people’s inner feelings.

Of course these theoretical categories may appear together in actual exhibitions and museums.

The second lecturer was P.V. Langle, with a lot of experience in the field of visual arts. She has been adviser to many university art museums, although she has never been properly a member of their staff. She tracked the history of this kind of museums in Mexico back to the early 1960's when the MUCA was founded. That space was formerly intended to be visited by students and teachers when going through the Campus. So it was not supposed to keep permanent exhibitions or to possess collections, but the circumstances changed those plans and eventually it received donations of artworks and handicrafts, because the prestige of the institution included its reliability as a guardian of the pieces. After many years of successful exhibitions and the growth of modern art collections the University role in the area gained so much importance that a Center for Museum Research was created to manage the museological and museographic activities of the institution. Some thirty years after the MUCA's opening as an Arts and Sciences Museum, new needs gave birth to Universum, taking the science field away from MUCA. A new museum of contemporary art is now under construction in Campus, which will meet new challenges through the following years.

Finally, J. Carrandi, an archaeologist who has for a long time collaborated with the museums system of the State of Mexico, disserted on history museums, starting from the wrong but common belief concerning both history and museums, which considers them related to old and useless stuff. Nevertheless history cannot be avoided even in art or science museums because it gives the exhibitions the most logical structure. Besides, apparently distant fields mingle for instance in science history museums. Last but not least, the ideological ground provided by history museums confers their public a sense of identity, which, in the case of the State of Mexico includes peculiar features. To illustrate this item M. Carrandi gave several examples directly from his professional experience around the UAEM's history museums.

The attendants were eager to participate in the debate and there was hardly time to answer all their questions and listen to their comments, aroused by the interesting subjects treated during the meeting.

For next assembly, L. Rico proposed a kind of exercise which consisted on making a twist on the three lectures, so that the topic of two of them would be analyzed through the other one's point of view, suggesting the audience that one of the next possibilities might be discussed on the occasion:

1. How could the idea of different "generations" be applied to both art and history museums?
2. Does the university character means the same to history and science museums as it does to the art ones?
3. Does the quite evident role of ideology in history museums work equally in those of science and art?

Just to close the session, the board members thanked the lecturers for their kindness to UMAC-Mexico by giving them a ¿diploma? stating their collaboration with the committee's activities.

José Luis Sánchez Mora
ICOM-México