

Global issues for university museums

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In 2017 the annual conference of UMAC, the international committee of ICOM for university museums and collections, was held in Finland at two primary locations, the University of Helsinki and the University of Jyväskylä. This was the seventeenth annual meeting of the group who came together to consider the range of global issues that impact university museums. The subtitle of the conference theme listed objects, ideas, ideologies and people as examples of factors from where global narratives could be derived.

We know that university museums and collections are filled with historical treasures, glorious works of art and science. They provide opportunities to ignite the imagination, inspire the soul, and probe the very heart of our shared human consciousness. University museums are templates or platforms as places of investigation, inquiry, and intellectual challenge in an increasingly global society. The conference organisers posited that if university museums and collections are to retain their relevance, they must be responsive to the dynamics of contemporary society.

To identify global issues our community of higher education, museum practitioners and scholars were asked a series of questions, such as; how can we increase public awareness of multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-ethnic values? How can we engage faculty and students with our collections when the educational system has been transformed by technology? How can we respectfully display human remains within a contextual exhibition? How can we protect and preserve our collections when under economic threat? The last of these questions seem to be a perennial one asked not just of university museums, but of all museums everywhere. But in higher education with declining public funds, the question “are you core business” is one that seems to be asked of university museums with more frequency. Meanwhile, the leadership groups of some tertiary institutions increasingly seem to be considering the monetisation of collection assets to fund other activities.

The annual UMAC conference was therefore set to examine the innumerable ethical and ideological issues, challenges and opportunities confronting university museum and collections, and their unique role as agents of social change. The four days of the conference attracted 123 participants from 25 nations. The papers captured in this, the 10th edition of *University Museums and Collections Journal*, represent about one quarter of the content presented in Finland in 2017. The geographic spread represented in this volume is appropriately reflective of a global community. There are contributions about university museum practice from Albania, Australia, China, Denmark, Greece, Scotland, Taiwan and the United States of America. Topics explored cover research into engagement with objects and digital surrogates, experiments in the ethical exhibition of human remains, programming at individual university museum level and the level of a geographical association of university museums. There are also theoretical offerings such as one that borrows from actor network theory to provide new insights into categorising the work of university museums, plus the application of significance assessment at a university collection level. Also explored are the use of an art collection in cross disciplinary programs and an analysis of engagement by a university museum focussed on education.

But this issue of *University Museums and Collections Journal* does not entirely represent the proceedings of the annual conference in Finland. There is also an article invited by the previous editors of the journal seeking reflections on the early history of our association. Understanding our history is an important way of making the case that university museum curatorship is an emerging specialism. In this volume, Panu Nykänen reflects on many of the controversies and debates that surrounded the establishment of UMAC as an international committee of ICOM. Panu was also the Chair of the local organising committee for the 17th annual conference. The author would be the first to point out that this is not a definitive general history of university museums. Rather it is a short story of how UMAC was formulated from the perspective of one of our members who was involved at the time. There are three starting points for this, Australia, Holland and Helsinki! Understanding where we come from as an organisation is obviously important, particularly as we draw close to a significant anniversary in 2020. As the journal transitions into an open source publication we anticipate that other active UMAC members of long standing will also offer their reflections and perspectives on the early, often controversial, development of our association.

As has been mentioned previously (LOURENÇO et al 2017) our aim is to transition this journal to an open source academic journal that is the main literature source for research on all aspects of academic museums and collections. Our goal is to be the leading journal of museums and collection research and scholarship in a higher education setting. The journal will provide global, inclusive access to analysis and research on the museums, galleries and collections within universities worldwide and stimulate discussion and debate on relevant issues and concerns. A number of processes are already underway to facilitate this transition. We have established a new and greatly expanded, Editorial Board. This gives the journal an increased range and diversity of specialised expertise. We are reviewing our journal's editorial policies so that we can expand beyond the scope of publishing conference proceedings. We are also investigating various journal indexing schemes that will give the journal a higher profile in the academic and other research communities. The process of change will take some years and involve much consultation with UMAC's membership.

The UMAC Board are focussed on expanding the influence and growing the membership of UMAC. An improved journal will assist in this endeavour. The primary language of the journal will always remain the global academic language, English. We are pleased to announce that the Board have recently undertaken a partnership with Shanghai University Museum to allow translation of whole editions of the journal into Chinese. Previously, only selected articles have been translated. We anticipate that this will engage a large number of university museum staff from China, one of the Board's identified regions for growth.

As we undergo this journey of change, seeking higher quality, we do, as always, welcome your ideas and insights on possible futures for the Journal. UMAC is your association, UMACJ is your journal, get involved now.

Literature cited

LOURENÇO, M., ROTHMEL, B. & SIMPSON A. 2017. Re-evaluating the discourse on university museums. *University Museums and Collections Journal* 9: 7-8.