

University collections: some recent developments in Albania

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Abstract

The definition and concept of university museum activities, covers the collections, research, publications and exhibitions undertaken. Many nations have already examined basic issues and focused on the contemporary challenges facing university collections. In the Albanian higher education sector, university museums and collections have not as yet received attention or are not conceived as potential tools for academic studies. The benefits and utility of cultural collection material in higher education has not as yet penetrated the Albanian academic mindset, they do not feature in pedagogic traditions. While this paper discusses this situation, this analysis addresses aspects related to the contents of university museum collections and the new possibilities that future endeavor will offer for academic institutions in Albania.

Introduction

Over recent decades the role of university museums has changed. They have become more open and receptive to the cultural needs of the public by focusing on educational programs and playing important role in object-based learning¹. In many European countries, comprehensive museum collections have developed since the 19th and early 20th centuries². The same evolution can be seen in some Balkan countries³, but it is difficult to identify any similar university museum developments in Albania. This is possibly due to continued instability and socio-cultural changes. It is important to note that for the Natural Sciences Museum, scholarly literature, reports on the didactic use of collections and records of visitor numbers are missing. This hinders recognition its educational activity as well as an understanding of the ways the museum has previously used its collections. Such documents would have been relevant and enabled comparative studies with other university museums in the Balkans. This history serves as an indication of the many challenges the university museum has still to overcome? However, in recent years, several new initiatives are underway such as establishing educational exhibitions installed by university students and using them as learning tools.

Background: The Natural Museum, from the establishment to actual challenges

The Museum of Natural Sciences has been recognized by the state since 1996 as a university museum. Its main mission is to serve as a focus for educational activities and to support the university research purposes of several disciplines of the Natural Sciences Faculty, with which it is affiliated⁴. The museum preserves a comprehensive natural history collection covering the diversity of Albanian flora and fauna, as well as some important representations of mineralogy and petrography. The establishment of museums started after World War II. In 1948 the first specimens collected came from other collections that already existed prior to the war. They came from a Jesuit and Franciscan Monk College in Shkodra and the Harry Fultz American School, both closed after the war⁵. In the first years of its establishment the museum operated as a subordinate branch of the Institute of Science, until 1957, after which the State University of Tirana was established, the first academic institution for studying, teaching and academic research in Albania.

It is important to point out that at the time of its establishment and in the years that followed, many museum practices did not form a smooth continuum. Nevertheless it was important on a national level for collecting different aspects of Albania's natural heritage, even though collecting for academic purposes was still a novelty at the time. But the establishment of the Natural Sciences Faculty brought new perspectives for this museum such as more advanced collecting enabling the commencement of discipline-based research. Academic staff was appointed to develop the specimen collections and instigate teaching and research with the Zoology Department. Scientists, professors and students were all involved in this task. The entire collection has been expanded through several campaigns of accumulation, selection and sometimes donation after a rigorous and systematic process to seek appropriate specimens for the Zoology collection.

Today this museum has a considerable number of specimens studied by a range of professors and other specialists, and is used for enhancing further studies in the natural sciences. It is also available to all through exhibition work. This museum has a mission to recognize and make available to students, pupils and visitors the flourishing natural patrimony of Albania. It has been recognized as university museum, a term that was used for the first time in 1996⁶. Its contribution is using its collection for university purposes in a way that impacts academic life. After several years of dedication collecting and studying the natural history of Albania, the museum has 3000 taxidermy specimens of animals from Albanian territory and some from other countries.

1 Chatterjee, H. J. (2011). Object-based learning in higher education: The pedagogical power of museums, pg.179

2 Guthe, A. K. (1966). The Role of a University Museum. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 9: 103–105.

3 Doxanaki, A (2017) The development of Balkan Medical Museums and their contribution to the history of medicine: examining the role of medical collections of the national and Kapodistrian University of Athens, *Archives of Balkan Medical Union*, (pdf) March, vol.52, no.1, pg.73.

4 Cf. https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muzeu_i_Shkencave_Natyrore, (accessed June19, 2017).

5 Artan Lame, <https://www.shqiperia.com/shqip/opinionart/alD/490/Ish-shkencat-dhe-ish-natyra>, (accessed August 5, 2018).

6 Cf. https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muzeu_i_Shkencave_Natyrore, (accessed June 19.2017).

The museum has five rooms where different specimens are displayed. There are two entire rooms of birds, including a hoopoe, curlews, a great- crested grebe and pelicans. The mammal section is on the ground floor. In room four there is a herpetology collection with preserved snakes and lizards, as well as turtles and tortoises. Room five has a collection of insects (including moths and butterflies). The last room displays shells and corals, most of them from the tropics⁷. Some of the collections displayed in this museum are divided according to their specimens' types, as follows: aquatic invertebrates, 693 individuals of 488 species, represented by a diversity of sponges, sea stars, mollusks, gastropods, etc., some species, such as large sponges and giant shells are from the Indian Ocean and other tropical regions. The insects section is composed by 12 different families with a total of 217 individuals including butterflies and beetles; they are labeled in Latin and Albanian languages and include locality data. Fishes are composed of 167 specimens of 157 species, found in seas and lakes; this section also includes a group of amphibians consisting of 15 species of salamanders and frogs. Reptiles consist of 37 native species, including sea snakes, the 'thin arrow', the 'blind serpent', and venomous snakes, there is also an aquatic turtle with a shell of 1m diameter.

Birds are represented by 380 individuals of 224 species including 'air kings' (canary birds, mountain eagle), they are displayed in two large halls. Mammals are represented by 52 individuals of 44 species representing the most common individuals of this class. In this classification beside the wolf, jackal, fox or wild cat, there are also African and South American monkeys and forest deer⁸.



Fig. 1
Butterfly collection: University
Museum of Natural Sciences. June
2017
 Photo: Dorina Xheraj-Subashi



Fig. 2
Bird collection: University Museum
of Natural Sciences
 Photo: Dorina Xheraj-Subashi

⁷ Gillian Gloyer, Albania, Bradt, 4 edition, pg.75

⁸ Muzeu i Shkencave të Natyrës «Sabiha Kasimati», <http://www.fshn.edu.al/qendra-kombeetare-e-florees-dhe-faunees-shqip-tare/muzeu-i-shkencave-tee-natyrees>, (accessed August 22,2018).

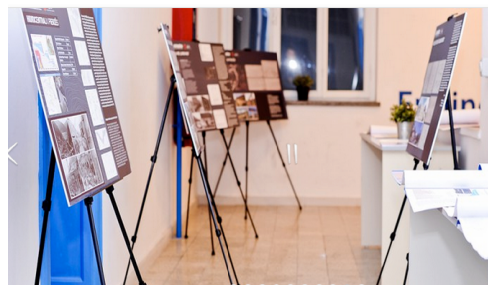
Discussion

Despite the already established collection, there is an absence of documentation relating to museum function. In fact the museum itself doesn't have a webpage which would obviously help with visibility and promotion of activities. Facts are known only through personal communication with the museum keeper⁹. This is the only source of information about visitors, education programs and other information about collection usage. This information is incomplete and not enough to provide accurate insights into museum functionality.

Now we come to the key issue regarding the importance of creating university collections and their impact on future academic life. During the period from 2005 to 2017, Albania saw an increase in the number of new public and private universities (12 public universities and 11 private ones), this has significantly changed the role of academic life in Albania. Many of the first attempts to develop curricula by these private universities has been based exclusively on literature, none of these universities had established or donated collections or donated ones, instead they are making their own heritage based on the creation of small objects (material culture) that are used for explanatory purposes during lessons. These new practices can be a starting point for their first university collections.

Some private universities have involved students in their educational projects using special themes that aim to revitalize cultural heritage and develop knowledge about ancient crafts, this might therefore result in a small collection for the university. This was undertaken by the following universities: Polis University, created a clay exhibition called "Modelling and Artistic Technique" on 29 June 2016¹⁰. The idea had the purpose recreating ancient techniques and understanding a specific process of production for important objects of every life, and examine their role, as decorative object today. Polis University is an institution focused on design and architecture. This project deepens research knowledge of the heritage of ancient societies and also serves a learning agenda through collaboration. Another project at Metropolitan University involved students undertaking historical research into an archive of the architectural industry of Albania. The educational outcome from their spirit of curiosity resulted in the rediscovery an architectural engineer, through the creation of an interesting exhibition entitled "Pieces that created history".

Fig. 3
"Pieces that created History"
 exhibition, by Metropolitan
 University
<http://www.aqtn.gov.al/index.php?pg=aktiviteti7>
 accessed June 8, 2017



The European University of Tirana (UET) involved their students in another project called "Art, Sketches and the American's Presidents in the Hosteni journal" an exhibition for a young demographic that focused on the communist ideology in Albania and ignited debate and dialogue about a particular time period on diplomatic relationship between Albania and USA. This exhibition was about the historical reality of how was America perceived through Hosteni sketches, during the communist and socialist regime.

Fig. 4
"Art, Sketches and the American Presidents in the Hosteni journal".
<http://alb-spirit.com/2017/06/06/si-dermohej-shba-karikaturat-e-hostenit>
 accessed June 8, 2017



⁹ Personal information inside museum June, 2017

¹⁰ Modeling and Artistic Technique. <http://www.universitetipolis.edu.al/?q=sq/node/1705>, (accessed June 8, 2017)

Both of these private universities have organized and created contemporary exhibitions in recent years that aim to connect students with special themes based on interpretation of political and industrial heritage with didactic exhibits carrying an educational purpose. It is interesting that each of these projects was carried out by students in collaboration with their professors. This can be seen as a new era that brings fresh ideas and commences the creation of a new heritage archive, that in the future might turn out to be an important tool for further reflections. What I want to emphasise and recall is the fate of all material collected and displayed in these exhibits. I don't know with certainty where they are archived and preserved and in this phase [I believe that this is the most important part and role of these universities] if they have created the proper environment that ensures documentation and storage to develop and enrich archival collections. Attention is required on how to benefit from the past exhibits in order to collect materials in university collections to support future work. Without this, these new developments will not have a lasting impact and will not form a foundation for future work.

Aleksandër Moisiu University, located in Durrës and established in 2006, is one of the youngest academic institutions. The number of students has been growing and for it to have a viable future, it should create a sense of its own history and legacy. The Tourism Department of the university offers students specific studies that, in my opinion, need to embrace object-based learning, such as the "Management of Archaeological Tourism" and "Management of Cultural Tourism" among others. Other faculties and departments can also benefit from having a material culture archive to support their learning and teaching.

Fig. 5

Exhibition of initiative "Trashegimia Ime-Trashegimia per te Gjithe"

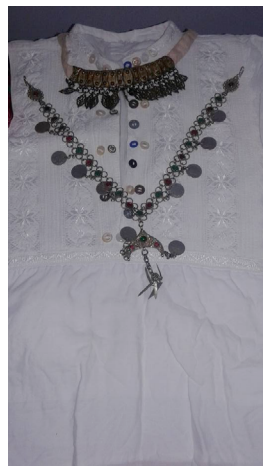
[My Heritage-Heritage 4All]

a. <https://www.facebook.com/111437802780247/photos/a.113223065935054/220772991846727/?type=3&theater>

b. <https://www.facebook.com/111437802780247/photos/a.113223065935054/220773078513385/?type=3&theater>



a



b

We believe we have the opportunity to create a University Museum, an urgent matter, that has already been proposed and highlighted previously, and which we hope will be taken in consideration soon. In the 21 Century, despite the political transition currently underway, we must not overlook other institutional possibilities and values that can play a constructive role in society. This is truly an important issue that the public and the private universities in Albania have to face.

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Si dërmohej SHBA me karikaturat e Hostenit: <http://alb-spirit.com/2017/06/06/si-dermohej-shba-karikaturat-e-hostenit/> (accessed June 8, 2017)

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