

BELONGING TO A VIBRANT GLOBAL COMMUNITY



Greetings! Since UMAC was created in 2001, university museums and collections have considerably changed. This practically goes without saying because museums in general have changed, universities have changed and the world has also changed. However, in university museums and collections changes were probably more significant than in any of the previous decades.

For a variety of academic, social, economic and political reasons, the late 1980s and 1990s were very difficult for university museums and collections. Many had low visibility within their parent institutions. They were generally not recognised by the museum and culture sectors. They struggled with limited human and financial resources. Perhaps more critically, they struggled with finding relevance in contemporary teaching, research and public access. In Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, the number of relevant professional networks was still scarce. During those years – which became known in the literature as ‘the crisis period’ – many university museums and collections were closed, relocated, stored and even lost.

To a great extent, the creation of UMAC was one of several initiatives aimed at responding to the ‘crisis’. It could have been done decades ago, but the recognition by the International Council of Museums in 2001 was paramount to the global community of university museums and collections. Since then, this community has a permanent discussion forum in UMAC. Across the world, professionals have mobilised to increase reflection, advocacy and scholarship. Research has considerably augmented, and so have the publications. Many networks have been created at local, national and regional levels. There is much more awareness among universities towards the importance of heritage. Together, we are now much better prepared to face difficulties.

Is the ‘crisis’ gone? No, the crisis is always lurking. Although universities are natural ‘generators’ of collections and heritage, there is an inherent contradiction between the volatile and avant-garde nature of the institution university and the need for stability and constancy shared by museums, collections and heritage. This contradiction is permanent, like a perpetual scenario in our background. We deal with it. Somehow paradoxically, it can be managed with great benefits to the academic community and the public.

For the UMAC community, after almost two decades of activity, I identify two main challenges.

The first challenge is at the core of UMAC’s existence: our distinct nature. What is the significance of the cultural heritage preserved by universities? What does it mean to be a university museum or collection today? What makes us similar to, and different from, other museums? And how can we participate with our universities in shaping better societies?

The distinct nature was central to UMAC’s creation but the reflection got somehow lost as time passed. We need to put the university back into our museums.

The second challenge for UMAC is inclusiveness. How can we make UMAC (and ICOM) better known in the higher education sector? How can our conferences be more accessible, read less expensive? How can we develop remote and online tools to reach small and isolated university museums and collections? How can we inspire and assist researchers, professors, students, university presidents and rectors all over the world?

If you have ideas about these questions, do not hesitate to write me.

UMAC is for all university museums and collections in the world, but particularly for those which are small, isolated, and have never heard of us.

I am looking forward to working with all of you and make this happen.