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# THE GLOBAL REACH OF CAMPUS MUSEUMS

Editors: John Wetenhall, Andrew Simpson, Gina Hammond

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Cover image:
Students of GW professor Cristin McKnight Sethi research artworks in The Textile Museum Collection for a project contributing to the exhibition Handmade: Creating Textiles in South Asia. Photo by Denny Henry.

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# THE GLOBAL REACH OF CAMPUS MUSEUMS

**John Wetenhall**

The George Washington University Museum & The Textile Museum
UMAC Annual Conference, Sydney, Australia

It was not until our struggles and adaptations through the Covid lockdown that we – the professional staff at my small museum and, I suspect, a great many other college and university museum professionals – came to discover that our working model of the campus museum had been too simple. We all understand the dual nature of town and gown that bifurcates our audiences and missions. We serve our academic communities – students, faculty, administration and alumni. We also offer a front door to campus for the lay communities in which we reside, be it as a central public museum for a small college town or as a civic attraction in a busy urban setting.

We know that this duality provides both prominence and weakness. It poses a mandate for service across academic departments and affords visibility among civic leaders, but at the same time positions the museum as ancillary to academic departments and its staff supplemental to the faculty hierarchy – notwithstanding comparable degrees, publications, and academic service. The pandemic accentuated this dichotomy by introducing a third constituency – the digital audience.

Pre-pandemic, museums could regard their digital outreach as an extension of existing services. Online collections informed scholars (particularly students and faculty) about objects available for research. Content on exhibitions and educational programs marketed the museum to the local community. But now, post-pandemic, this simple model no longer suffices because the explosion of popular interest in internet-based programming has created an opportunity to cultivate audiences from beyond driving distance.

This new audience leverages a particular advantage held by many of our academic collections compared to those of more general municipal museums, namely, their specialized focus. University museums are often defined by their distinct, idiosyncratic collections: medical devices, plant or insect specimens, scientific instruments, artifacts that articulate histories of specific times or places, archaeological objects retrieved from certain sites, works of art of particular aesthetic movements or media, and the like. While specialization tends to limit the pool of potential researchers and visitors on-site, that very specificity attracts people elsewhere, and in the process, invites inquiry into the broader relationship between museums and the audiences they serve.

My institution opened ten years ago to provide a new home for The Textile Museum of Washington, DC, as well as a privately assembled collection that documents the local history of our national capital. The vast collection of global textiles – many dating back hundreds or even thousands of years – supports George Washington University's commitment to international studies and diplomacy while DC history speaks to our location at the center of federal government. GW also hosts major graduate programs in museum studies and museum education, thus creating a mandate for its museum to function as a laboratory for museological innovation and as a hands-on "teaching hospital" for future museum professionals.

Visitation at the old Textile Museum had long been diminishing as its visitor demographic aged over time. Relocation replenished this audience with faculty, students, and visitors to campus. But we never suspected what we learned during the Covid lockdown: we had a very large, enthusiastic, and international audience spread across the internet.

Like so many other museums, we adapted our in-person educational programs to online formats: virtual lectures and panel discussions, zoom-based classes and workshops, etc. What would have been a scholarly symposium in our public space became a "global roundtable" online – enhanced by speakers from five continents and audience members from fifty countries. What surprised us most were the repeat viewers who tuned in seemingly every week for programs on textiles, streamed live to their monitors across North America and beyond. Our largest user base no longer represented DC, Virginia and Maryland but now came from California, Michigan and Florida. Paid memberships followed this pattern, as driving distance no longer seemed to matter. Our textile-specific niche museum that had struggled to engage an

ever-diminishing cadre of local enthusiasts now enjoyed access to individuals who had been isolated in communities whose local, general museums had not the collections, curatorial expertise or programming bandwidth to cater to their interests. They found us.

We leveraged this strategic differentiation through partnerships. For example, we had for some time been hosting monthly gatherings for museum studies students to engage with local thought-leaders on challenging issues. Once in-person changed to virtual, we realized that our speaker series might interest emerging museum professionals elsewhere, so we partnered with the Association of Academic Museums & Galleries to stream "Museums Today" live each month to AAMG members. What once served 20 or 30 attendees now reaches 100, 200 or 300 – spread across the United States, Canada, and occasionally Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas.

Similarly, a series of interviews with contemporary textile artists proved attractive to the Textile Society of America that gladly advertised our programs to its national membership as though they were TSA's own. An association of collectors and art patrons, the Renwick Alliance, also joined the consortium, as did other craft-focused arts organizations, thus building audiences for our mission-based programming far beyond the capacity of our museum to attract. Attendance exceeded on-site programming, again, up to a factor of ten.

The efficiency of partnerships is so powerful that we seldom offer online programs without collaborators. Like many UMAC museums, we do not have the staff, time or money to advertise, or otherwise reach the people that congregate in professional associations or specialized groups. So we share. Starting with a program template – list of topics, potential speakers, format, frequency, etc. -- we welcome partners in the planning process and they, in turn, promote each program to their members through established channels. No money changes hands. Simple, sustainable, and mission-expanding for all.

Specialization also led us to utilize zoom to connect at the professional level. Early in the pandemic, our senior curator convened a periodic meeting of textile curators from across North America. Participation grew into what is now the "Textile Curators Forum" that regularly meets as an exchange of best practices, a clearinghouse for exhibitions, and an incubator for scholarship. Such a curatorial interest group requires little more than a clearly defined focus, organization and a commitment to meet regularly.

Unexpectedly, however, virtual dissemination of our collections and exhibitions led to fewer celebratory results. We had been photographing our collection of some 25,000 global textiles for the past 5 years, published through the online portal of our collection database. While this resource provides a valuable index for students and scholars, it was never designed to feature the interpretive content and conceptual interactivity needed to engage a larger, general audience. Similarly, online tours of our temporary exhibitions – essentially home movies recorded on I-phones and narrated by curators – have contributed little to audience development, serving mostly as fond reminders for visitors or documents for posterity. What we learned was that collections and exhibitions were nowhere near as transferable to online formats as educational programming.

Consultants from San Diego's Balboa Park Online Consortium helped us understand that success would require new hardware and software, a digital asset management system (DAM), additional employees to manage virtual operations, dialogue with people from originating cultures, and a small army of curatorial expertise to generate interpretive narratives seasoned with internet links to explain and interpret the objects we wished to share online. Unlike gallery exhibits through which assemblies of objects tell stories in concert with each other, online objects better perform solo, but with the capability to relate to contextual content online through links to other sites. Virtual "curating" thus requires original work. Indeed, the entire enterprise constitutes a fresh commitment with its own resources – much like building a new wing or stand-alone satellite museum. This calls for a comprehensive plan, major gift fund-raising, hardware and software, more staff and student assistants, time, and a stream of annual income to keep the new enterprise active.

The revelation here is that a commitment to build a virtual museum adds a fundamentally new business model to the university museum – a model so different that it brings into sharp focus the duality of our existing models that we tend to take for granted. In other words, we may be running three distinct museums: a public museum, an academic research center(s), and a virtual enterprise. Each has different audiences, purposes, and metrics of success – all contributing to our missions in different ways.

We understand the basic model of most public museums that focuses primarily on attracting visitors to permanent collection galleries, special exhibitions, and educational programs. Front door visitation serves as a proxy for audience interest, with supplemental support from the museum store, café, and maybe even an occasional rental.

Most university museums also function as academic centers to facilitate the study of collection objects. My institution operates four: the Albert H. Small Center for National Capital Area Studies for Washington, DC history; the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center that functions much like a print room for textile fragments; the 20,000-volume Jenkins textile library and archives, through which we publish an internationally juried Textile Museum Journal; and the Avenir Center, an off-site collection storage and conservation center that welcomes independent researchers and sponsors workshops for textile scholars and conservators. Each of these centers reaches out to students, faculty and independent researchers, but aside from the occasional "open house," they rarely seek crowds. In these centers, advertising and head-count matter little next to measures of learning and the generation of scholarship – be it through course projects, lectures or publications – in alignment with the way that faculty members strive to contribute to their academic disciplines.

Think of these two models – the public museum and academic research center – as two ends of a spectrum. One end values volume and short-term visits, the other prizes learning and long-term scholarship. Breadth vs. depth. Now, post pandemic, somewhere between these poles we can situate our third model: the digital museum. Digital programs for general audiences – in our case, "Rug & Textile Saturday Mornings," or "DC Mondays," or lectures for museum members – approach the visitation/volume end of our spectrum. Toward the middle, online interviews with contemporary textile artists appeal to general textile enthusiasts as well as specialists. Further along the continuum, a "Global Roundtable" on specialized textile subjects assumes a level of expertise, while a quarterly "Curators Forum" is for professionals by invitation only. The online object photographs that our collection management system allows us to publicize tend to serve the scholarly community as an index of objects available for study – they skew toward the academic center. As we learn to develop more interpretive means of presenting objects online, we might find ways to democratize online collections toward general audiences in greater numbers and across a global demographic – creating a "digital museum" that seeks general visitation much like the physical museum does today.

One of the values of thinking about our university museum as three distinct enterprises (or even only two) is that it helps our staff members focus on results that matter. The head of our Cotsen Center for textile fragments need not worry about visitation volume. A single scholar who studies an object in depth is as mission-fulfilling as a crowd in the galleries. A student research paper – or better yet a class that requires object-based assignments – advances our purpose as meaningfully as an exhibition's opening night. The online model allows us to expand virtual programming today, while understanding that popular use of online collections may be a few more years and considerable resources away. By separating distinct museum functions according to how exactly they promote our mission, these conceptual models relieve us of the debilitating burden imposed by unrealistic expectations.

The model of an academic research center functioning in tandem with public galleries can also help to elevate the museum's status on campus. After all, at least in America, universities often establish academic centers as a means of promoting cross-disciplinary scholarship and generating research and programming that contribute to academic prestige. A museum's academic center thus trades in the same currency as faculty schools and departments: research papers, symposia and conferences, visiting scholars, publications, and the like. Such activities place our curators and educators on an even plane with faculty, in contradiction to the ancillary status that so many academic museums (especially their credentialed curators and educators) must currently endure. As we communicate these activities to our administrations, we accrue academic relevance, thus elevating our status and strengthening our sustainability.

University museum leaders can advance their own cause by aligning measures of success with academic aspirations and re-prioritizing the order of statistics they report. Lead with numbers of students who engage with collection objects, courses hosted, assignments facilitated, faculty members served, research conducted, and scholarly publications, including exhibition catalogues. Accentuate numbers with photographs and captions that demonstrate teaching and learning in action, supplemented with student and faculty testimonials that demonstrate the value of object-based learning. In this context, collaborative projects with peer institutions, professional workshops, and presenting papers at national and international conferences may rightfully claim credit for their contribution to the university's academic prestige. General attendance can come last, as according to our academic mission and purpose, it probably should.

We understand the complexities of operating university museums: serving at once an academic community and public at large; reporting to both an administration and, in many instances, an advisory board; being perceived as "ancillary" while promoting hands-on learning and generating scholarship at levels expected

of senior faculty; and operating as entrepreneurs by extending services well in excess of the budget in hand. Our embedded academic institutions are among the most flexible and experimental entities across the entire museum field. We demonstrate innovation and advance museological progress. Viewing university museums through a three-part operational model helps to reveal the complexity of our academic museum audiences and how their needs determine how we fulfil our missions.

For too long, major museums and media that report on them have measured accomplishment by gross attendance, equating the delivery of mission with the physical presence of a visitor. Inspired viewing, contemplation, and the pursuit of learning blends with idle wandering, shopping at the museum store, or imbibing drinks at a special event – as though meaningful engagement with collections were conveyed by means of osmosis.

Public visits to galleries differ from research in a scholarly center differs from tuning-in to a lecture online. These are different means of engagement with differing depths of inquiry and understanding. The complexities of our university museums expose as insufficient gross attendance compared to a portfolio of experiences that all museums, at their best, truly provide. Measuring the effectiveness of any museum's mission requires analyzing the interrelationship of activities, from arms-length viewing – much of it fleeting -- to prolonged study, potentially enhanced through public presentation or publication. In a word, scholarship. Our museum field can, and eventually must, elevate the prominence and importance of the scholarly end of our spectrum of mission – especially as the pursuit of growth and expansion, museum by public museum, meets the limits of available and sustainable resources. As it does, our museum field at large may look increasingly to us, the community of university museums represented by ICOM-UMAC, to light for them a better way.

**Keywords**

engagement, audiences, partnerships, scholarship

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# ETHICAL CASE STUDY: ACADEMIC MUSEUM COLLECTIONS UNDER SIEGE AT MIDWEST COLLEGE ART MUSEUM

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## Abstract

*This case study illustrates the ethical complexities of considering academic museum collections as capitalized assets. As such, the administration and board of trustees at the fictitious Midwest College are considering the sale of Midwest College Art Museum's five most valuable artworks to fund critical campus infrastructure projects. In a bid to increase the college's competitive edge in recruitment and retention, the administration recognizes that liquidating artwork could potentially fund the renovation of two dormitories. Meanwhile, the museum staff fear the tremendous risk inherent in the proposed plan, including the potential loss of its American Alliance of Museums (AAM) accreditation status and the violation of AAM and ICOM professional codes of ethics.*

## Part I: Case Narrative

Like many small, private, liberal arts colleges across the United States, the fictitious Midwest College (MC) is facing numerous existential threats. Located in the Rust Belt of rural Illinois, MC has weathered one financial crisis after another. Since 2008, the college has endured declining enrollments, rising deferred maintenance costs, low morale from two staff buy-out initiatives, and declining annual fund gifts. While MC's reputation for producing top-notch graduates is still solid, President Roston recognizes that the campus lacks the amenities necessary to attract new students and compete with its peers in the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM).

One of the more unusual assets on the campus is its exemplary teaching museum that dates to 1955. Faculty from nearly every discipline bring their students to Midwest College Art Museum (MCAM) for programs, tours, lectures, and object-based teaching and learning exercises. Math students study Maya number systems, while language students curate small exhibits and translate labels. Students gain valuable hands-on experience in work-study positions that align closely with different career functions within the museum field.

One morning in July, the director of MCAM—Dr Benson—receives a request to meet with President Roston. Dr Benson assumes the meeting is about the annual rotation of paintings in President Roston's office suite; however, she is shocked to learn that the president and the board of trustees are seriously considering the sale of MCAM's five most valuable paintings. The potential sale includes work by significant abstract expressionist painters. The founding director of MCAM solicited a gift of abstract paintings from alumni in the mid-1950s and these are now considered some of the most historically significant works owned by the museum. Preliminary auction estimates gathered by the president's office indicate that the sale could fetch as much as $15 million. For a small college with a modest endowment of just $125 million, this small collection of paintings represents a vast amount of cash that could easily solve the campus' housing crisis.

After the brief meeting with President Roston, Dr Benson shares the news with her small staff of four. They are stunned that MC would even consider such a shortsighted path. What about the International Council of Museums (ICOM) code of ethics? Or perhaps the museum's prestigious accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums (AAM)? After all, the museum received accolades and glowing compliments following its first-time accreditation award just one year earlier, knowing that only 5% of museums throughout the United States achieve accreditation. Furthermore, the staff argue that the sale of artworks would directly violate the code of ethics set forth by AAM and other professional organizations, such as ICOM and the Association of Academic Museums & Galleries (AAMG). The reputation of the college and the museum would be tarnished in perpetuity.

Finally, what about the proper procedures for deaccessioning artworks? The MCAM's collections committee was never consulted, nor have the artworks in question been sent through the formal deaccession process. Dr Benson and the staff agree that these procedural violations would go against the museum's own code of ethics and its collections management policy—both documents that the MC board of trustees endorsed and approved decades ago.

Back in her office, President Roston weighs the enormous gravity of the decision that she and the board of trustees must now make. While they recognize that the museum is a tremendous asset to the academic life of the campus and the community, the administration also understands that five paintings could potentially save the college from falling further off the enrollment cliff—thus saving the college from extinction. It seems a fair "trade" as fiscal and administrative stewards of the college.

As she considers the options before her, President Roston receives an email from Dr Benson. The first paragraph reads as follows:

> ...to deaccession these works is unconscionable and unethical. Please know that the backlash from the museum community will be swift and severe—the press around this issue is never kind, and I can assure you that media outlets like The New York Times *will* condemn the college if the administration proceeds with this sale.

President Roston prints the email and tucks it into her padfolio. She has just 20 minutes to make her way across campus before the summer meeting with the board of trustees begins.

## Part II: Case Study Analysis

### Ethical Dilemma

Beckner (2004) notes that an ethical dilemma often presents as a choice between "right versus right" (p. 90). As such, President Roston finds herself confronting a very difficult decision following her meeting with Dr Benson: does the college's administration knowingly violate museum ethical guidelines and principles to ensure the college has a better financial future? Or does the college pursue another path to raising the required funds for dormitories, thereby safeguarding the college's teaching collection—and its reputation—for future generations of students and scholars? Both the protection of academic resources as well as the advancement of the college's admission and retention strategy are worthy endeavors; however, either choice will invariably yield a new set of ethical consequences for consideration.

### Kitchener's Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM)

Given the complexity of the situation, it might be wise for President Roston to employ a framework such as Kitchener's (1985) tiered Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM) to guide the decision-making process. Although originally developed for counselors and psychologists, the EDM outlines a set of ethical reasoning tools to assess a wide range of ethical situations (COTTONE & CLAUS 2000; KITCHENER 1985).

As Figure 1 suggests, the model begins with the most specific tool (i.e., rules) at the base of the pyramid and concludes with the most general tool at the top of the pyramid (i.e., theory). In other words, Kitchener suggests that ethical rules or codes of ethics should be consulted first when dissecting an ethical dilemma, followed by ethical principles, and lastly, ethical theories.


FIGURE 1: A Visualization of Kitchener's Ethical Decision-Making Model

#### *I. Codes of Ethics*

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the Association of Academic Museums & Galleries (AAMG),

and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) provide codes of ethics and best practices for general museums and academic museums respectively (AAM 2023; AAMG 2017; ICOM 2017). These codes are intimately tied to accreditation and best practices that are recognized fieldwide in documents such as the toolkit for the protection of university collections—a resource for academic museum professionals that clearly states:

> As embedded institutions, college and university museums lie at the crossroads of intersecting fiduciary obligations: those of the museum and those of their parent organization. In such circumstances, institutions of higher learning facing financial hardship may claim that the fiduciary demands of its educational mission trump those of its museum. The Task Force believes that such dichotomies are false and entirely ignore the legal, ethical, and moral commitments made by a college or university when they chose to accept collection objects into their museum for the benefit of their campus and the wider community (AAMG 2021).

For President Roston and the board to have previously acknowledged the existence of these codes of ethics vis-à-vis board-approved policies— yet violate the very essence of their deaccession policies—is akin to the dilemma raised by Reybold and Halx (2018): "… [while] discussion of professional ethics in the academy is routine, [it] risks becoming nothing more than a script for 'doing the right thing'" (p. 286). This is particularly true given the board's overt discussion regarding the sale of artwork in a manner that is inconsistent with ethical codes of conduct within the museum field.

The various codes of ethics (e.g., ICOM's Code of Ethics) that exist within the museum sector are designed with the protection of collections in mind, particularly since these institutions hold their collections in the public trust for future generations (ANDERSON 2012; GENOWAYS & IRELAND 2003). Should President Roston and the board reverse their commitment to these fieldwide practices, they will most certainly draw the ire of many. In addition to fieldwide sanctions from the AAM as well as the loss of MCAM's accreditation status, the decision is certain to stir a response from a wide range of constituents and the media.

Unfortunately, real world situations much like MCAM's fictitious scenario have arisen in the past at the Rose Museum of Art at Brandeis University (KENNEDY & VOGEL 2009), and more recently at the Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University (ADAME 2023). In both cases, university administrators elected to pursue plans to liquidate university art collections in favor of bolstering deteriorating university finances and new construction projects respectively. While Brandeis eventually backed down from their proposal to liquidate artwork as capitalized assets, Valparaiso recently finalized the sale of paintings—including historic works by artists such as O'Keefe and Hassam—to fund the proposed renovation of student dormitories at the time of this writing (BOUCHER 2025).

### *II. Ethical Principles*

In addition to the code of ethics outlined previously, President Roston may want to consult the second tier of Kitchener's EDM for additional guidance. Drawn from the field of biomedical ethics, these principles are more general than codes of ethics but more specific than ethical theories discussed in section three. The principles include: "respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful" (KITCHENER 1985).

As Dr Benson noted in the case, the ethical principle of harm (i.e., nonmaleficence) would clearly apply to this situation should President Roston proceed with the sale of artwork. Faculty and students would lose access to some of the most historically significant works of art at MCAM, while alumni and donors would likely lose faith in the organization. Why, after all, would a supporter feel comfortable leaving assets to a college that clearly does not abide by an ethical policy of nonmaleficence when it comes to collections stewardship (GARY 2010; WHITTINGHAM 1995)?

### *III. Ethical Theories*

Finally, the third and most general tier of Kitchener's EDM lies within the realm of ethical theories and perspectives. In this case, President Roston might consider weighing her options through the lenses of utilitarianism or perhaps Kantian principles (JOHNSON 2016; JOHNSON, 2021). Viewed through the utilitarian lens, the sale of paintings might be justified in providing far greater benefit to the thousands of students who will ultimately profit from new dormitories. However, a Kantian approach would emphasize duty above all else; in this case, a duty to abide by the ethical code of conduct agreed to by the board when it first approved the museum's "statement of permanence" as a prerequisite to the accreditation process.

## Conclusion

American higher education has never faced so many existential challenges (GIGLIOTTI 2019; RUBEN 2022). As colleges and universities continue to confront difficult choices amidst declining enrollments and the destabilization of higher education policy at the federal level (CANTWELL 2025), many academic museums and their collections will continue to come under threat—particularly if they are deemed irrelevant or ancillary to the university's core mission (AAMG 2021; SHAPIRO et al. 2012). And while codes of ethics and accreditation can build a strong case for the protection of museums, it will ultimately come down to each institution to determine how a museum and its collections should be treated.

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## Keywords

Auction, Case Study, Deaccession, Ethical Decidion Making

# HISTOLOGICAL DIAGNOSIS OF EARLY 20TH CENTURY MEDICAL MUSEUM SPECIMENS

**Richard Fraser**

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## Abstract

*As part of a Maude Abbott Medical Museum conservation project, sixteen specimens preserved in Kaiserling solution and accessioned between 1903 and 1951 were selected because of uncertainty in the diagnosis based on the gross appearance. Biopsies were taken from areas felt likely to confirm the diagnosis given on the specimen card. The samples were processed and stained with hematoxylin and eosin in modern automated machines. Tissue staining was considered to be excellent in four cases, good in seven and poor in five. There was poor correlation between staining quality and year of accessioning. The current diagnosis was considered to agree certainly or to be consistent with the original diagnosis in eleven and three cases, respectively; it was deemed uncertain in one and incorrect in one. Histological diagnosis of tissue samples from human tissue originating in the early 20th century is feasible. The diagnosis stated on museum specimen cards is usually correct.*

*The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.*

## Introduction

Medical museums throughout the world contain specimens of human organs and organ parts collected to illustrate various aspects of disease ALBERTI & HALLAM (2013). Most such specimens were acquired between the late 1700s – when physicians such as William and John Hunter began to establish their famous teaching collections – and the mid 20th century, when the decline of the museum in medical teaching and the recognition of the importance of patient consent for keeping tissue samples led to a significant decrease in organ retention.

Initially, most museum specimens were preserved in alcohol. In the late 1800s, this was replaced in most institutions by formalin or formalin-based solutions such as those developed by Jore and Kaiserling (EDWARDS & EDWARDS 1959). The histologic appearance of tissues preserved in all these solutions has had limited investigation. However, studies of tissue taken from 2000–3000-year-old Egyptian mummies (WALKER et al. 1987) and from 200-year-old diseased lymph nodes (POSTON 1999) have shown that preservation can be sufficient for interpretation of pathological abnormalities in at least some cases.

The clinicopathologic diagnoses given on museum specimen cards are usually in agreement with modern interpretations based solely on the gross organ appearance. For example, heart attack (acute myocardial infarction), intracranial bleeding following trauma (acute subdural hematoma) and some widely disseminated infectious diseases (e.g., miliary tuberculosis) in the appropriate clinical setting have such characteristic appearances that microscopic assessment is usually not necessary for definitive diagnosis SAHN & NEFF (1974). However, diagnosis of disease in some specimens, such as those illustrating a particular type of cancer or metabolic disease such as diabetes, can be questioned. Such potential diagnostic inaccuracy is clearly relevant in specimens used for student teaching. Nowadays, it is also an important consideration in genetic/molecular investigations of these historical specimens, (DÜX et al. 2020; TAUBENBERGER et al. 2005) to ensure that appropriate material is selected for research.

Given this background, I decided to assess the feasibility and accuracy of histological diagnosis in a sample of fluid preserved specimens obtained during the first half of the 20th century at McGill University's Maude Abbott Medical Museum (MAMM).

## Methods

The MAMM has approximately 1250 jarred organ specimens. Although the fixative is not known precisely for all of these, on the basis of MAMM archival material, I believe that most are preserved in Kaiserling III (EDWARDS & EDWARDS 1959). All have typewritten cards attached to their tops showing some clinical

information and a pathologic diagnosis. As part of a project to replace discolored or insufficient fluid in approximately 100 of these specimens, sixteen were selected for histologic study. A specimen was chosen if the diagnosis indicated on its associated descriptive card was not considered to be definite on gross inspection (e.g., amyloidosis, Gaucher disease or lymphoma). Selection was also done to assure relatively even representation of specimens accessioned over the period 1900 to 1950. Use of these criteria resulted in a study sample of sixteen specimens.

After drainage of all residual fluid in the jar, biopsies approximately 2 x 5 mm in size were taken from areas felt likely to show the abnormality indicated on the specimen card. If no specific site for such biopsy was evident, two random sections were taken. The samples were post-fixed in 10% formalin for approximately 24 – 48 hours, then processed and stained with hematoxylin and eosin in standard automated machines in a modern hospital-based laboratory.

Quality of staining was assessed subjectively in three categories – excellent, good, and poor – by comparison with slides of current surgical pathology specimens stained at the same time. Current pathologic diagnoses were given by the author. A difference in terminology that was not considered to alter the basic concept of disease – such as the relatively non-specific term carcinoma solidum (1927) vs the well-defined label embryonal carcinoma (2023) – was not counted as a discordant diagnosis.

## Results

The sixteen specimens were accessioned between 1903 and 1951. Original diagnoses included a variety of neoplastic, infectious, and metabolic abnormalities (table 1). Tissue staining with hematoxylin and eosin was excellent in four cases, good in seven and poor in five (fig. 1). There was no correlation between staining quality and year of accessioning (fig. 2).

Diagnoses given on the biopsy slides were considered to agree certainly or to be consistent with the original descriptive card diagnoses in 11 and 3 cases, respectively. Diagnosis was deemed uncertain in one case and frankly incorrect in another. The first of these two “discordant” diagnoses (uncertain) was in a heart specimen originally diagnosed as an intramyocardial syphlilitic gumma. The latter is an inflammatory lesion characterized in part by the presence of granulomas and multinucleated giant cells. Histologic examination showed mostly necrosis with scattered, poorly defined inflammatory cells. The appearance was unlike that of a myocardial infarct and felt more likely to be an infectious process abscess or necrotic

| Museum number | Date | Histology quality | Original diagnosis | 2015 diagnosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| E.1049 | 1903 | Poor | Spleen amyloid | Amyloid |
| E.3386 | 1907 | Excellent | Bile duct melanosarcoma | Melanoma |
| E.3848 | 1908 | Poor | Heart sarcoma | Undifferentiated malignancy |
| E.5482 | 1912 | Poor | Lung syphilitic gumma | Necrotic tissue, neoplasm vs infection |
| E.5020 | 1912 | Excellent | Amebic colitis | Consistent with amebic colitis |
| E.7744 | 1922 | Good | Spleen Gaucher's disease | Gaucher's disease |
| E.8706 | 1925 | Poor | Syphilitic aortitis | Aortitis consistent with syphilis |
| E.9200 | 1927 | Good | Carcinoma solidum (metastasis from testicle) | Consistent with embryonal carcinoma |
| E.9207 | 1927 | Poor | Heart syphilitic gumma | Consistent with syphilis |
| E.10505 | 1932 | Excellent | Lymphoma cutis | Small B cell lymphoma |
| E.10961 | 1934 | Good | Skull hemangioma | Hemangioma |
| E.11379 | 1936 | Excellent | Septic splenitis | Splenitis |
| E.11461 | 1936 | Good | Appendix tuberculosis | Acute appendicitis |
| E.12089 | 1939 | Good | Muscle actinomycosis | Actinomycosis |
| E.13437 | 1951 | Good | Liver sclerosing hemangioma | Hemangioma |
| E.14133 | 1951 | Good | Tuberculous colitis | Granulomatous colitis consistent with TB |

Table 1: Specimens selected for histologic study

cancer. However, no granulomatous inflammatory component was seen and a diagnosis of a syphilitic gumma cannot be considered definite.

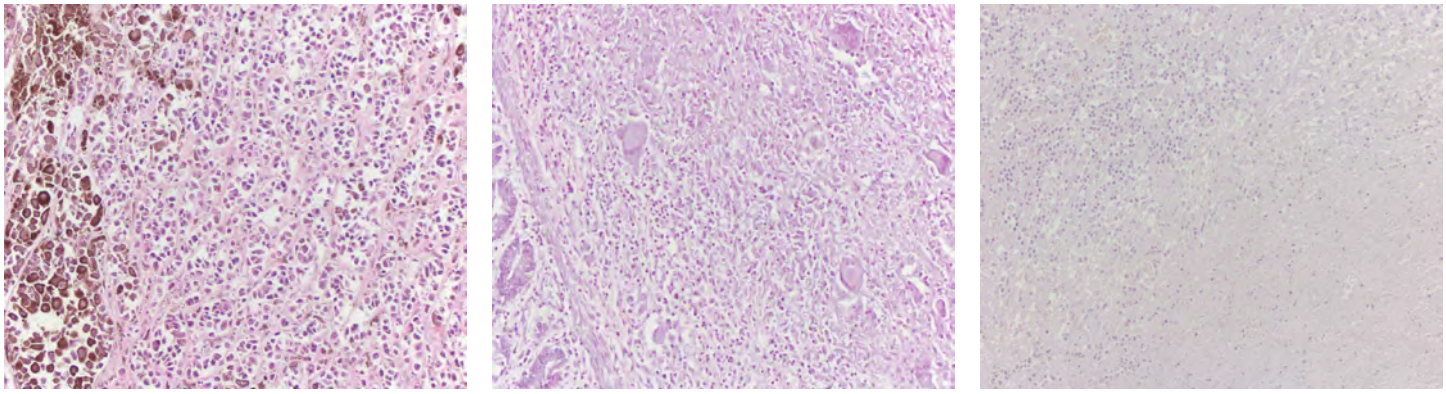

Fig. 1: Examples of staining quality (original diagnoses).
a) Excellent: Bile duct melanoma; b) Good: Tuberculosis of colon; c) Poor: Cardiac syphilitic gumma.
All pictures provided were taken by Dr Richard Fraser.

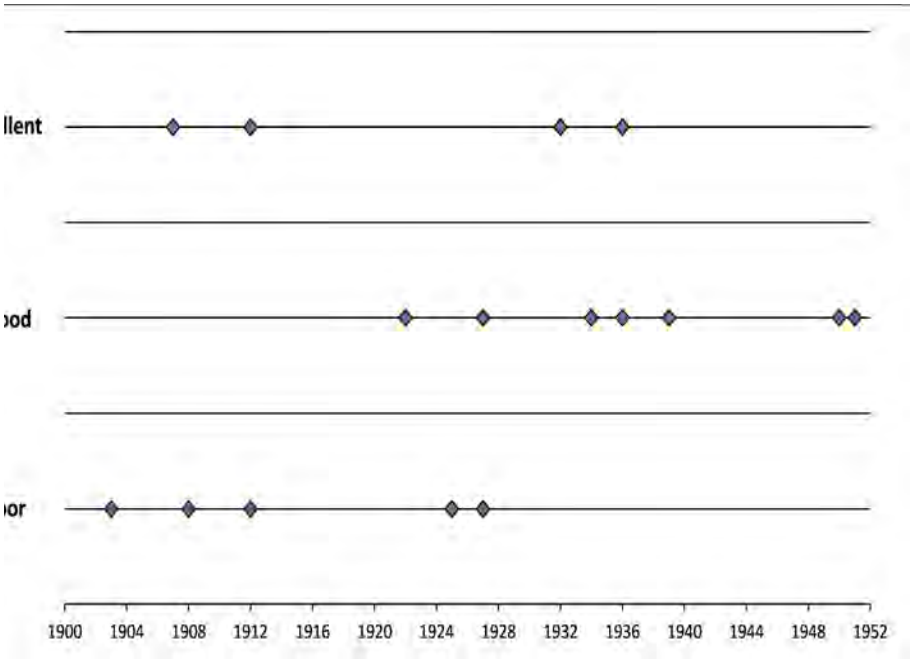


Fig. 2: Specimen staining quality related to year of accession

The second discordant case (incorrect) was initially diagnosed as tuberculous appendicitis. However, the biopsy showed no caseous-like necrosis or granulomatous inflammation characteristic of this disease. Instead, there were numerous neutrophils, consistent with a much more common non-tuberculous bacterial infection (acute appendicitis).

## Discussion

In our experience, the pathologic diagnoses given on original museum specimen cards are usually in agreement with modern interpretations based solely on an organ's gross appearance (e.g., remote myocardial infarction or intestinal intussusception). However, some diagnoses are not certain following such examination and require histologic confirmation. This is most often relevant in cancer, metabolic disease, and infectious diseases in which a specific organism is indicated to be responsible. Possible reasons for potential diagnostic disagreement include the development of more precise diagnostic criteria in modern times, the identification of an entity not recognized at the time a specimen was first accessioned, errors of interpretation inherent in any diagnostic process, and sampling of a lesion that has variable

histology. It is possible that the last named was relevant in our case of supposed myocardial syphilitic gumma.

Although the number of discordant diagnoses in medical museum collections is uncertain, the results of our limited study suggest that they are infrequent (in our sample only 2 out of 16 specimens (12%)). In fact, only one of our cases (acute appendicitis) had what we felt to be a clearly incorrect diagnosis. The reason for the discrepancy in this case is difficult to understand, since pathologists at the time the specimen was first examined would almost certainly have been able to make the distinction between the acute inflammatory reaction of bacterial appendicitis and the granulomatous one of tuberculosis. It is possible that the diagnosis was made without histologic confirmation. The lung from the same patient is indicated in an accompanying logbook entry to have shown cavitary tuberculosis; appendiceal TB might have been assumed to have been present by simple association. In support of this interpretation is the fact that examination of the specimen shows no definite sampling cuts.

The quality of the histologic appearance of the biopsy specimens varied, but was mostly good to excellent, facilitating confident diagnosis. The author of one case report of samples taken from a probable salivary gland tumor that had been fixed in alcohol for almost 120 years reported them to have "a fair degree of preservation [...] not at all unsatisfactory for microscopic study" (PAUL 1925, 9-12). My interpretation is similar for what I believe to be preservation in Kaiserling III solution. Interestingly, the staining quality in our material showed no clear association with date of specimen procurance, suggesting that duration of fixation does not significantly alter the histologic appearance. It is possible that prefixation decomposition might have been responsible for the variable histology. However, data to support this hypothesis is not available.

## Conclusions

Histological examination and pathologic diagnosis of tissue samples from organs originating in the early 20th century and likely preserved in a formalin-based solution such as Kaiserling III is feasible. In this limited study, the diagnosis indicated on museum specimen labels was almost always considered to be correct.

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# DEVELOPING DIGITAL ONLINE NARRATIVES FOR THE MUSEUM COLLECTIONS OF THE IONIAN UNIVERSITY

**Stavros Vlizos & Maria Tsouka**

Museum Collections of the Ionian University

## Abstract

*The subject of the article is centered around the study of designing shared digital narratives for different academic collections online. The limited literature on the creation of digital narratives using online resources and the production of communication and interpretive tools by Greek university museums with thematic collections, as well as the absence of holistic approaches to the promotion of individual university collections gave rise to the design of a methodology that attempts to lay some foundations. The methodology presented in this article proposes an integrated approach to designing the narratives and then converting them into digital narratives using online resources. The necessity of the research lies in the possibilities of presenting the content of university collections in narratives on the web, their contribution to museum communication and the holistic curatorial approach to individual academic collections. The Museum Collections of the Ionian University will be a field of utilization of the proposed methodology by forming a pilot model of implementation.*

## Introduction

It is well known that narrative is a tool that many museums use to interpret and communicate to the public the issues they address. Museums have been moving in this direction for years, most notably with the introduction of the museum concept of the 'postmodern museum'.

Following the introduction of the term 'new museology' by the collective book New Museology edited by Peter Vergo in 1989, which described a critical approach that challenged the traditional role of the museum and focused on the visitor and the museum's social responsibility, Eilean Hooper Greenhill in the book "Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture" discussed a new museological philosophy in 2000: the post-museum. According to her; "The great collection phase of museums is over. The post-museum will hold and care for objects but will concentrate more on their use rather than on further accumulation. In addition, the post-museum will be equally interested in intangible heritage" (HOOPER GREENHILL 2000, 152). All the above represents a shift in the role of the museum towards use, i.e. meanings, the visitor, and intangible heritage.

In the context of postmodern concepts, the museum also renegotiated the way it approaches its narratives. The narratives for the postmodern museum are multifaceted experiences that invite discussion and interaction (WYMAN et al. 2011, 462). GABRIEL (2000) claims that stories and experience are linked to postmodern values to such an extent that stories are transformed into experience and conversely, experience into stories. NIELSEN (2017) adds that narrative was developed as a tool of postmodern museum communication. Thus, narratives are part of museum processes such as shaping museum experiences, museum communication, interaction and participation.

The context of museum perceptions in society and the academic community is changing and transforming. In her text entitled "Historical Knowledge and Museums," Eirini Nakou divides museums into traditional, modern, and postmodern, identifying their characteristics and distinctive differences using the terms "traditional museum—object oriented," "modern museum—object and people oriented," and "postmodern museum—people oriented." (NAKOU 2000, 228). Particularly in the postmodern museum, the frequent need for change and flexibility becomes particularly evident. The transformative museum is a museum model introduced in 2014, by Nielsen in her article "Transformations in the Postmodern Museum" (NIELSEN 2014). According to the writer; "A museum in constant transformation will be a museum shaped by knowledge and traditions of the past, by debates, discussions and trends of the present and by ideas, thoughts and opportunities of the future." (NIELSEN 2014, 27). The author describes a museum open to the influence of society. Among the developments in the concepts of the modern, postmodern and transformative museum, the author mentions the evolution in the approach to exhibitions. The stories

behind the objects, which the postmodern museum focuses on, are a characteristic recognition of the value of narratives. The transformative museum goes one step further by acknowledging storytelling and adding to it participation, influence of the visitor and co-creation with the audience (NIELSEN 2014).

University museums are organizations that have some very specific primary purposes. As TANABASHI mentions; "University museums are uniquely organized to play a pivotal role as academic hubs or cultural commons that meet, and cross, the interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary knowledge between the past and the present for the future" (TANABASHI 2021, 148). Universities often have theme-based collections related to a division or Department of the institution, where collections of anatomy, science, minerology, herbology, typography, education, zoology and so on are often found. Often, all these academic collections are treated separately, both in terms of administration and curation. This is because they originate from the collecting activities of professors or departments with these interests, which ultimately shape the collection. The most common reason for their existence is to be used as teaching material in courses in those Departments.

In recent years, university museums within this broader postmodern and transformative context have been gradually redefining their objectives and priorities to communicate with the public. University museums in recent years have been orienting themselves and discussing their role in the context of transformation. A noteworthy example is the conference co-organized in September 2024 by the two university museum networks UMAC and UNIVERSEUM, entitled "Shaping Transformation. University Collections in a Changing World ". The conference raises the issue of the role of academic heritage institutions "as places of exchange and debate", enhancing the visibility of academic discourse and supporting the knowledge transfer and inclusiveness of wider and more participatory audiences (EUROPEAN ACADEMIC HERITAGE NETWORK, n.d.).

The Museum Collections of the Ionian University, established on January 29, 2019, with the publication of their Internal Rules of Operation in the Government Gazette (Government Gazette 144/29.01.2019/v.) consist of three sections: the Typography Collection, the Collection of the History of School and Education (in memory of Stephanos G. Priftis) and the Collection of Digital Culture and Arts. The present study attempts to highlight the "narrative" factor as an important and useful tool for extroversion, interpretation and communication.

## Part I: State of the art

NIELSEN (2017, 440) argues that storytelling is a way of defining interpretation, relevance and meaning making in the museum, while relating to; "many aspects of practical museum communication" (NIELSEN 2017, 448). BEDFORD (2001) adds the issue of personal interpretation, in other words, through storytelling the visitor constructs meaning for themselves through emotional engagement and the evocation of memories created by storytelling.

The combination of museum objects has learning properties, as it is to some extent related to object-based learning. In this context the role of the university museums is already particularly useful and productive. CHATTERJEE & HANNAN (2015) in their book *Engaging the senses: Object-based learning in higher education*, examine how learning with objects can enhance higher education and strengthen interdisciplinary teaching and students' sensory engagement. The book analyzes the pedagogical value of object-based learning, presents applications and learning environments and suggests creative practices (CHATTERJEE & HANNAN 2015). THOGERSEN et al. (2018) argue about the dual character of objects that "On one hand they are definitive, observable, readily described and immutable; on the other they lack fixity, are readily re-contextualized, multiply reinterpreted and ascribed highly variable values in their engagement with our ever-changing knowledge systems. This tension between object and context makes them both effective mediators of meaning and educational tools" (THOGERSEN et al. 2018, 113-114). The authors in their article present a project implemented in a university museum, where object-based learning was used to connect different cognitive subjects and; "to elicit new uses for university museum collection objects in the delivery of tertiary, secondary and primary education programs" (THOGERSEN et al. 2018, 113). TANABASHI (2021) in her article presents a methodology for university museums with science collections, in which she uses object-based learning to attempt interdisciplinary learning and teaching for students at a Japanese university. The important role of university collections in teaching is unquestionable, but it is important that collections are highlighted beyond the boundaries of the academic sphere.

Something that in many cases would prove productive is the identification of common elements and conceptual connections between the collections, their interpretation and correlation, as suggested by DAL FALCO & VASSOS (2017) with various thematic implications. In other words, as MICOLI et al. (2020) suggest "Crucial components of the physical objects preserved in the museums include all the immaterial elements connected to them" (MICOLI et al. 2020, 2). The identification of the common elements between museum objects, the connection between different collections and the interdisciplinary use of them is already found in all the above-mentioned research (CHATTERJEE & HANNAN 2015; THOGERSEN et al. 2018; TANABASHI 2021). GIBSON et al. (2024) focus on the theoretical and practical analysis of thematic connections between different museum collections. Their research confirms the importance of recognizing common concepts and elements between objects. According to the authors, "This work has also reconceptualized collections as field sites for knowledge discovery and generation via an understanding of their expansive relationships, rather than as simple repositories of knowledge" (GIBSON et al. 2024, 129). MICOLI et al. (2020) focus on the development of digital tools to highlight the importance of the conceptual connection and; "a collection of cultural heritage pieces linked each other through intangible cultural heritage (ICH) elements" (MICOLI et al. 2020, 16). The authors argue that "using 3D digital reproductions of the objects can give rise to exhibits of various kinds by relating multiple museum pieces through shared immaterial elements that can be pointed out and narrated in a virtual environment" (MICOLI et al. 2020, 2). This process creates a new narrative that connects different objects, different academic collections and the concept of the presented product could also be more relative to the general audiences' interests.

In the paper of COMPAGNUCCI & SPIGARELLI (2020) a systematic literature review has been conducted on the term "Third Mission" of the university. The writers refer that this term is labelled as "a contribution to society" (COMPAGNUCCI & SPIGARELLI 2020). This concept has to do with the university's mission to disseminate the knowledge and research it produces to society. In this context PANCIROLI & MACAUDA (2016) argue that "every structure within the university should communicate and spread knowledge through a close relationship with local institutions and people" (PANCIROLI & MACAUDA 2016). One of the structures of the university are also university museums and collections. According to SIMPSON, university museums; "For many of the public, it may be their only interaction with the academy. They are a link between academic knowledge and lay knowledge; between academic cultural production and mainstream society" (SIMPSON 2023, 27). It's easy to understand that museums, thanks to their extroverted nature as institutions, could help the university, as structures of it, more efficiently in the concept of the 'Third Mission'.

The reasons why a holistic approach would benefit each individual collection, and the parent institution are the broader image of the institution or the narrative around which each university forms its image to the outside world. In other words, university museums can create a brand name identity. Still, they can help strengthen the brand of the parent institution. (MURAVSKA & STASIUK 2020, 8; BOYLAN 1999, 53). In addition, "museum branding is crucial for strengthening the identity and adopting appropriate strategies to highlight the unique characteristics of their objects and stories." (DAL FALCO & VASSOS 2017). In this way, the holistic approach will also strengthen the individual collections, since it is within this framework that their objects and their stories will be highlighted. The collections will be presented in a more dynamic context, and their 'voice' will reach further.

## Part I: Methodology

Storytelling is one way that university museums can use to communicate and engage diverse audiences outside of academia. However, narratives need to be communicated in a dynamic way to attract different communities outside the university and spark the interest of the general audience. All the individual collections that a university may hold relate to themes and concepts, which can form a new framework between them. The fact that they constitute the academic heritage of the institution is commonplace. In many cases the connections that collections may have with each other may be less obvious and more creative. For example, the academic heritage of an institution could also be linked to the local history of the area in which the university is based. This idea comes from the book *Co-curating the City*: Universities and urban heritage past and future (MELHUISH et al. 2022). The book through many examples (Gothenburg, UCL East, Lund) explores how academic heritage can be reimagined through participatory, cross-sectoral engagement with local urban identities. In particular, the case of the University of Gothenburg illustrates how the university's physical infrastructure interacts with collective memory, through the re-evaluation of

Haga, framing the campus as an evolving archive of the city's cultural heritage (MELHUISH et al. 2022).

The proposed methodology to harness the potential of narrative development includes four sections and attempts to cover almost the entire process of designing and creating narratives, their digital presentation, their online projection in an organized environment, the possibility of public participation and the accessibility of various audience groups to the online resources in which they will be presented.

## Conceptual framework

The first part of the methodology is the design of the conceptual framework, the selection and organization of the material within it and the creation of the narratives.

University museums can use storytelling to create a unified brand identity that aligns with or reinforces that of the parent institution. To address the difficulties of the separate curatorial approach to academic collections, it is suggested that a common conceptual framework be defined. In this context, a university museum must consider two key issues in developing the conceptual framework on which the narratives will be based:

- What is the narrative that the parent institution wishes to build or is already building?
- Where is it located in its collections?

First, the concepts that run through the museum collections will be catalogued where common or related concepts will be identified. These will then be cross-referenced with their thematic implications (DAL FALCO & VASSOS 2017). Once the two lists of (a) common links and (b) thematic extensions have been formed, objects from each collection that correspond to them will be evaluated. To facilitate this process collection objects will be mapped similarly to the curriculum mapping methodology by THOGERSEN et al. (2018). The way of this informal "evaluation" is simple: the more obvious the connection between objects and extensions, the better. The selected objects will then be interpreted according to this connection. Once this process is completed, their common denominator will be recorded in a comprehensible way. This interdisciplinary approach will eventually create a narrative, which will be the new conceptual framework through which the stories will be integrated.

The criteria for the selection of the content to be used in the narratives are the following:

- Thorough documentation to identify connections that facilitate the process of analysis, where necessary, to identify evidence of connection to the context.
- Common links, which cannot be taken for granted for all objects in the collections. Common links can be identified either between objects, or between objects and a conceptual framework.
- The interpretation and interpretations of the object in which its relation to the conceptual framework is reflected. In the context of object polysemy, it is advisable to choose the interpretation of the object that can link it to the other objects to form a story.
- Digitization. To produce such narratives, digitization is a basic requirement. Otherwise, such an effort will be a factor in delaying the project and will be a financial burden on the process.
- Documents from other institutions that have open access repositories with digitized material.

Next comes the creation of a plot skeleton. This methodology requires the application of three narrative theories according to the needs of each story:

To create narratives that visitors will connect and relate to, Vladimir Propp's theory of creating recognizable patterns for plot construction (the hero's journey, the villain, the donor) is suggested (PROPP 1968).

If the objects and theme presented in the narrative concern an invention or have contributed to the solution of a problem or deficiency, the 5-stage equilibratory model of TODOROV & WEINSTEIN (1969) is suggested.

If the subject of the narrative is a specific personality (artist, politician, scientist, etc.) then Joseph Campbell's model is suggested, where the structure of the archetypal hero's journey found in world myths (CAMPBELL 1949).

The script is then written, using William Labov's language structure (LABOV 1972), which includes the following points:

- Summary: marks the beginning of a story
- Orientation: provides context
- Complicated action: the main event - usually something remarkable or unexpected
- Analysis: the outcome
- Evaluation: comment on why the story is interesting or noteworthy, may occur near the end and throughout the story,
- Coda: marks the end of the story.

## Selection and organization of online resources and digital media

The second part of the methodology proposes ways of organizing the material in digital media, the structuring of a suitable online resource and the organization of the media in it.

### *Organizing the material on digital media*

An important parameter is to have a combination of digital media as this is the element that characterizes digital narratives (HUG 2010, JENKINS & LONSDALE 2007, SIGNES 2010). In this context, it is proposed to use all or two families of media, i.e. visual, verbal and audio media. Each has properties that the others lack (RYAN 2006, 19 - 20) and by combining them more sensory elements are brought out. In addition, media are proposed that combine more families of media or provide opportunities for user interaction. Specifically, the digital tools proposed to be used:

- 3D Representations of digitized objects.
- Digitized archival and photographic material from open access repositories related to the theme.
- Sounds that produce or relate to the objects of the narrative. (e.g. the sound produced by a printing press in operation or the sound of a ship's horn).
- Short texts.
- Titles, Headings.
- Video of oral testimonies from a narrator.
- Audio from a narrator (e.g. an actor) or a real narrator (a person describing their own experience).
- Interactive map.
- Interactive timeline.
- Interactive video.
- 3D Interactive Virtual Reality exhibits.

In combining families of media in narratives, one family of media usually predominates over the other (URBANEJA 2019b, 38), which is why predicting the predominance of one family of media from those to be chosen is necessary. In most cases it is likely that either visual or verbal media will predominate.

### *Media and audience groups*

Certain media can be designed for certain types of audiences, provided as a complement to each narrative, with the aim of attracting certain audience groups in a more targeted way. A comic book or an interactive video will attract the interest of the young audience. An attractive option for preschool and primary school age groups is silent books, this is a textless book where the picture guides the story and can be read in different ways by each person.

Scientific audience, it is more interested in; "receives positively the models of spatial and temporal representation that take full advantage of the affordances of digital media" (URBANEJA 2020, 105), i.e. chronologies, interactive maps, diagrams. For all of these, a download option may additionally be provided, so that the user can save the representations for their own use.

All this can be presented next to the main narrative in a thumbnail that the person can choose to open.

### *Structuring an online resource*

The online availability of the narratives to the public is proposed through the creation of a digital platform

not embedded in the museum's main website. Its independence will allow it to have its own structure, allow unlimited possibilities while being connected to the main website (URBANEJA 2020, 116). For the typology of the resource, the online hypermedia model (URBANEJA 2019a, 3.36) is proposed. This is chosen for the multimedia that runs through it as a kind of resource but also because "Hypertextual navigation in online resources reminds the audience of the spatial movements performed when visiting an exhibition and reading a publication" (URBANEJA 2019a, 3.36). In this way, the online exhibition can address a diverse audience and include digital narratives along with additional features such as games, participatory module, bibliography and resources, etc.

*Organizing the spatiality of the online resource*

The hypermedia model is expected to create a wide "spatial field" (URBANEJA, 2019b, 36), within which narratives and the other possibilities it can provide will be developed that the visitor can explore comfortably. In contrast to the page dynamics imposed by the hypermedia model, the use of the Scrollytelling technique is proposed for digital narratives. The term Scrollytelling is a variation of the word 'storytelling' with the addition of the word scrolling "meaning the vertical movement of displayed content" (TJÄRNHAGE et al. 2023). According to MÖRTH et al. (2022, 5165); "scrollytelling is a recent visual storytelling technique extensively used on the web, where content appears or changes as users scroll up or down a page. By employing the familiar gesture of scrolling as its primary interaction mechanism, it provides users with a sense of control, exploration and discoverability while still offering a simple and intuitive interface.

This technique is characterized by scrolling and linearity. The user will see the digital media of the narratives unfold on their screen through scrolling. In essence, the set of narratives will form a continuous flow, on which each narrative will be separated from the previous and the next by its title and the change of color palette. Digital media will be integrated into the full size of the screen to expand the spatial field. In addition, linearity and text in the narrative add the feature of spatial expansion. These two options are expected to enhance the reading of the texts and the observation of visual elements. The media will be sized to full screen size. This affects spatial expansion, so text, images, interactive media take on the role of material objects and will be revealed as the page expands by scrolling down. In addition, the linearity will also help to quickly scan each narrative, allowing the user to check it before spending more time.

*Organizing the temporality of the online resource*

Some digital media impose a strict time frame, such as videos or audio clips. In these, the duration of the narrative is more strictly defined and the only things that can be provided for the user to have control over are playback, pause and the freedom to move forward or backward. According to URBANEJA'S survey results (URBANEJA 2020, 112), museum professionals claim that videos on online resources last a few minutes due to the attention span of users. Visual media have to do with the time that the user spends observing them or simply glancing at them, but also with that which they depict. At the design stage it is recommended that this time frame should be specified from a few seconds to one minute. The length of the entire digital narrative will be increased to one linear page, while the length of the text is recommended not to exceed 200 words. The digital media with which the user can interact are expected to increase the user's time.

No evidence was found in the literature suggesting a specific duration. The conclusions of URBANEJA's research (URBANEJA 2020, 158) "highlight the importance of user time in determining the temporality of a narrative". In general, what is empirically suggested is that each digital narrative should not exceed 8 - 10 minutes in its detailed presentation. At the same time, it is advisable that the user can scan it in 3 - 4 minutes to decide whether to take the time to view in detail. The total time of 8 - 10 minutes assumes that the user has interacted with all the media, read the texts included, listened to all the extracts or watched the videos included in the narrative without skipping ahead or interrupting them at any point.

## Participation

As NIELSEN (2014) states; "Visitors should have the opportunity to shape their own stories, find the information they find interesting and shape activities and exhibitions by sharing and adding their own knowledge and experiences. They want to be involved, and they want their influences to be visible and useful." This concept has found application in several online exhibitions, where public participation is requested either in writing the accompanying material or in shaping the content or even developing

the concept of the exhibition. For example, the Tenement Museum offers the chance to visitors of its online page, to share their stories of migration and cultural identity on a platform. The result is a digital exhibition, named "YOUR STORY, OUR STORY" which consists of photographs and the visitors' personal stories.[1] Another example is *The Future Themes Forum* at *MOD,* which is a project that according to the participatory practices "demonstrates an effective method of engaging audiences in the strategic co-design of exhibition themes." (CARFORA et al. 2024, 12). The Ashmolean Museum presents the program "Our Museum Our Voices" in an online exhibition, which is implemented annually by assigning a group of visitors the task of writing captions for selected museum objects from its collections.[2]

In the present research a methodology is proposed which invites the public to shape the content of an online exhibition entirely. The audience to whom the invitation to share content will be primarily promoted is the academic community and the local community of the area where the university is based, this can then be extended to remote audiences. The outcome of this process can reinforce the objectives of the originating exhibition and contribute to the cultivation of the university's brand name.

The choice of topic for the requested content is crucial and must be related to the theme of the exhibition and the interests of the communities to which it will be primarily addressed. The way in which the public will share their own material is important to be easy and quick to use. Following the example of Tenement Museum, by creating a participation form the users will fill in the content they want to share.

It is important that the type of content that the public can upload should be determined by the museum requesting the content, so that there is both uniformity and ease of management of its use. It is important for the museum to consider that the public have a chance of sharing the content requested, it must be something simple, easy and almost spontaneous to create (e.g. a photo and description).

It is best to make new content available online almost automatically without the need for the museum to curate it. For example, if it is an image or image gallery with a short text description, it can go into a database as a request, then the museum can assess whether the basic conditions (content relevance, image quality) are met, and then it can be posted along with the rest of the content that has been shared. The way the user content is displayed will depend on the type of content requested and the aesthetics of the web resource.

### Accessibility

The digital platform, as it has been understood so far, may include a variety of digital media and this is likely to affect, to some extent, how fast the internet and modern device or operating system, the user must load all the media.

Ensuring access to the content of the report is important for users who have older computer devices, operating systems or slow internet connections. A simplified version of the report could be an additional micro-page. In it, all content can be offered in a simplified form. Texts and images can be of lower resolution, while videos and interactive media can be offered via hyperlinks opening in new tabs. The simplified version may be a much less attractive version, but it will give access to the content in a static website with lower resolution media, for all interested users.

Furthermore, to create an inclusive online exhibition, the accessibility of online resources by people with disabilities is of crucial importance. All websites need this approach anyway for this large audience group. To provide the content of the exhibition, it is proposed that the accessibility of the report's online resource meets the requirements set by the internationally recognised World Wide Web Consortium standards at Compliance Level "AAA": all Priority 1, 2 and 3 checkpoints are met (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 2021). By ensuring all three of these priorities, not only the accessibility but also the experience of these users is guaranteed. This is a key priority for an online exhibition.

## Part III. Applying the methodology

This section presents the design of the application of the above methodology in the Museum Collections of the Ionian University.

1. https://yourstory.tenement.org/
2. https://www.ashmolean.org/omov

## Conceptual framework

The first question to be answered based on the methodology is the identification of the narrative of the Ionian University. According to its official website (IONIAN UNIVERSITY, n.d.), it links its academic work with that of the Ionian Academy (1824 - 1864) which was the first Greek university established in Corfu until 1864 (ANGELOMATI – TSOUGKARAKI 2019). Today the Ionian University tries to maintain its role as the academic successor of the Ionian Academy (IONIAN UNIVERSITY, N.D.), recalling that the regional areas need higher education structures to upgrade their educational level, while at the same time contributing to the field of research and academic knowledge. The building that housed the Ionian Academy now houses the Rectorate of the Ionian University, its central services, lectures, conferences, workshops, courses and the graduation ceremonies. Thus, it is a place of memory for the University, which, through the activity of the academic community in this place, seals the University's claim to be the successor of the Ionian Academy. Similarly, the University Museum of Helsinki is responsible for the preservation of the historical continuity of the university (SIMPSON 2023:31). A parallel can also be drawn to the Chau Chak Wing Museum at the University of Sydney, which consolidated various disciplinary collections into a new, purpose-built structure adjacent to the university's central library and historic quadrangle. This spatial arrangement symbolizes a triadic unity of object, text, and tradition (SIMPSON 2023, 32).

The second question of the methodology is the identification of the narrative in the Museum's collections. Its collections relate to certain themes related to education and local history, which are related to the wider historical, educational and social context in which the Ionian Academy operated.

Based on all the above, the objects that have sufficient documentation and digitization were identified in the three collections and then the elements that are affected by the specific conceptual framework were sought. Their connections were then analyzed and those that could be interpreted were grouped together, identifying more common elements between them. Through this process the following four narratives were formed:

- "The Ionians in schoolbooks and Dionysios Solomos"
- "First university in Greece"
- "The relationship of the Press with the Typography and Education in Corfu"
- "Typography in Corfu in the 20th century and the graphic arts industry of the Aspiotis Brothers"

This article will briefly present one of the above narratives, entitled, "The relation of the Press to Typography and Education in Corfu". The material gathered for this narrative is museum objects, 3D virtual reality representations of the three collections of the Ionian University and documents from open online repositories. The topic concerns the way people in Corfu were informed from the period of Venetian-occupied Corfu until the beginning of the 20th century. It presents the relationship of typography and education with the policy in place, its influence on the level of illiteracy of the inhabitants and the eventual transformation of the situation. The narrative theory chosen for this narrative is the equilibratory model of TODOROV & WEINSTEIN (1969). The plot follows the points of the narrative model and unfolds as follows:

- Venetian Rule: prevalence of illiteracy among the lower social classes. Oral information of citizens by the town crier. There were no printing presses in Corfu.
- French Republicans: establishment of the first printing press and foundations for public education.
- The public sought the publication and printing of books.
- 1848: establishment of free printing - establishment of private printing houses.
- A flourishing of publishing, ensuring free education for all and subsequent literacy.
- Inclusion of the Ionian Islands in the Greek state. Free and public education for all. Import of magazines and newspapers from the rest of Greece.

The script was written based on William Labov's structure and divided into clips based on the points of the structure mentioned above (Summary, Orientation etc.).

## Selecting and organizing the online resource and digital media

The digital media chosen are the audio script, an audio extract from a printing press, visual (photographic, archival) and audiovisual material as well as short texts in the form of captions.

The four narratives will be organized in an online exhibition of a hypermedia model. This will not be embedded in the official website of the Ionian University Museum Collections[3] but will be accessible through the menu of the official website. Its environment will be structured and mixed according to the characteristics of the hyperlinks, digital media, pop-up windows and the linearity (only for narratives) defined by the Scrollytelling technique. This will be done in the following way: the user will enter the interface of the online resource on a home page, where there will be various shortcuts to navigate to the area of the online resource attracting their interest and a menu with all the features provided. The possibilities will be Stories, Your stories, Accessible version, Language.


Fig. 1: Home page

The layout of the narratives in the 'Stories' section will be linear according to the Scrollytelling technique. The user, through scrolling, will interact with the digital media and find the narratives in a preselected order. Otherwise, the narrative to be viewed can be selected from the menu. As an example, the narrative from the 'Stories' section presented here will be organized on the interface of the online resource in the following way:

The first narrative displayed at the top of the page, where the title of the narrative will be displayed, and below it the visual media of the selected documents and objects in groups. The background will be white.


Fig. 2: The title of the story on the top and the first audio clip and group of media.

The audio narration of the script will be in five extracts next to the visual media groups. The audio bars for each audio extract of the script will make it clear to the user that this is where the audio extract is located with the instruction 'Listen to the story'.

3. https://museum.ionio.gr/

Below the audio bars will be the visual media groups. The user will select the audio bar and at the same time will see the digitized documents and museum objects in images and will be able to select each of them to see them in more detail in a pop-up window without interrupting the narration.

Along with the audio narration of the script, subtitles will automatically appear at the bottom of the screen, which the user will be able to deactivate if he/she does not want them. There will be a button marked 'CC' for deactivation.

The grouping of the audio script and the visual media that will be referred to in each clip helps to correctly match what is heard in the narration with what the user is seeing at that moment. They also divide the narration into parts making the listening experience more relaxing.

### Participation

'Your Stories' section is a participatory section, in which the user will enter on two pages. The first page will be the 'Participation Form', here the user will read a short text inviting them to share their own material and participate in a collective effort through sharing their own content. Based on the theme of the exhibition, the themes that will be requested are the book as a choice of entertainment, education and material object and the role of the book in their lives. The aim is for the audience to express and present their relationship with the book and, through sharing, to identify similarities and differences in their perception of reading.

The second page will be titled 'Exhibition', where the material that users share through the form will be posted. The participatory exhibition will be displayed in a gallery format consisting of thumbnails of the images sent by users. Selecting one of the thumbnails will display in full screen size the photo(s) of that post and next to it the short text. For each post there will be options to share it on social media and download the entire post in which the Museum's logos will be visible.

### Accessibility

In the 'Accessible Version' section, the content of the narratives will be offered in a static page as described above in the Methodology. Whilst the accessibility tools will be on the home page and available everywhere on all pages as it would not be practical to have them in a separate section for obvious reasons.

## Part IV. Conclusions

This article has attempted to gather and suggest good practices that university museums could adopt on their websites using digital storytelling. The methodology is based on the principle of combining objects from different collections based on a conceptual framework set through the acquisition of common elements from the collections. A limited number of connections emerged during the implementation. This is not only due to the principle of combining objects from individual collections, but also to the size of the collections and the early stage of the specific collections where the methodology was applied.

Another component affecting the identification of links has to do with the capabilities of the project's research team, combined with the timetable. Documentation and research are two important prerequisites for identifying evidence in the history of objects that have not been highlighted. Thus, the assistance of competent researchers, who will have the necessary time at their disposal to implement historical research on the objects that can be used in the narratives is crucial.

For a university museum with a similar volume of collections, the number of connections may be limited. However, it seems that it may be possible to start an online platform that will gradually bring together the material. In academic institutions the approaches that can be supported by museum collections are numerous. The present methodology could encourage other structures or departments of the institution to be inspired by the collections and organize various interdisciplinary storytelling projects.

Finally, the collections included in the application, although they are individual, thematic collections, are managed by a directorate under the central structure of the Ionian University. Thus, issues of collection management are simpler than they would be in a case where the collections would belong to different Departments or Sections of the parent institution.

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## Keywords

Academic collections, digital storytelling, online resources, participatory approach, Corfu culture

# ETHICS, AGENCY, AND SENSITIVITY: DEVELOPING DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES IN COLLECTION CONTEXTS

**Dagmar Schweitzer de Palacios, Susanne Rodemeier, Rainer Brömer, Lars Feuer, Ernst Halbmayer, Edith Franke, Tanja Pommerening**

## Abstract

*In July 2023, a research group comprising three academic collections at the University of Marburg (Museum of Religions/Religionskundliche Sammlung, Ethnographic Collection, Medico-historical and Anatomical Collection) launched an interdisciplinary research project to discuss approaches to sensitive objects, focusing on the categories of human remains and sensitive religious objects while also reflecting the nature of sensitivity. Possible solutions for storage, digitization, study, but also potential exhibition or restitution/repatriation of sensitive objects are evaluated in the light of their agency and ethical debates.*

*This paper aims at a systematic presentation of current debates regarding the three central concepts of 'ethics', 'agency', and 'sensitivity' in their mutual relations. One of the outcomes will be the delineation of some of the gaps in the range of academically sound and ethically adequate options for the practical treatment of sensitive objects in university collections, but also in museums more generally. Furthermore, initial thoughts for the development of practices to be applied to specific objects are formulated.*

## Introduction

What is it that makes items held in collections sensitive? Assuming dead matter to be inert and passive, free from any effective links with other entities, the construct of sensitivity seems inapplicable to objects on shelves or in drawers. However, over the past few decades social and cultural anthropologists and ultimately museologists have created an awareness of the intricate relations between members of the various realms of the living and the inanimate, the biological and the mineral (and, more recently, the digital world), affecting one another in displays of agency, raising ethical concerns previously reserved for creatures endowed with reason or at least sentience. It therefore becomes imperative to analyze the triad of 'ethics', 'agency', and 'sensitive objects' to create a more secure grounding for the growing discourses surrounding the treatment of sensitive objects, however defined, in scientific collections maintained in academic institutions.

In this context, when talking about sensitive objects, human remains are also included in the debate. This points to a wider problem arising from the practice of addressing sensitive 'things' as 'objects': When it comes to human bodies or their parts kept in collections, referring to them as 'objects' can be seen as problematic. Thus, FUCHS et al. (2021, 8) discuss how the same piece of human remains can be called 'material', a 'person', a 'corpse', a 'human', a 'victim', a 'specimen', a 'thing', or an 'individual'. The authors of the cited recommendation insist that institutions should monitor the use of language applied to the remains in their collections to avoid objectification and dehumanization of the persons whose body parts they are curating. The same problem may equally arise in the case of other sensitive objects, especially when, from an emic perspective, they would rather be considered as bearers of power or actual subjects, where such parlance would raise accusations of inadmissible objectification. These issues are at the core of this paper analyzing the triad of ethics, agency, and sensitivity in view of the future development of collections, particularly those curated by academic institutions.

This article sketches the conceptual foundations of an ongoing research project (Agency and Ethics: Sensitive Objects in Academic Collections, acronym AESOH),[1] whose aims include the identification of sensitive objects in three of the collections of the University of Marburg (UMR): the Museum of Religions/ *Religionskundliche Sammlung*, the Ethnographic Collection, and the Medico-historical and Anatomical

1. BMBF-AESOH, Projektnummer 01UQ2301 Agency und Ethik – Sensible Objekte in Hochschulsammlungen, Philipps University Marburg; Spokesperson: Prof Dr Tanja Pommerening, Institute of the History of Pharmacy and Medicine; PIs: Prof Dr Edith Franke, Institute of Studies of Religion and Prof Dr Ernst Halbmayer, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology; Members: Dr Susanne Rodemeier, Vanessa Sampaguita Obermair, Institute of Studies of Religion; Dr Dagmar Schweitzer de Palacios, Lars Feuer, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Dr Rainer Brömer, Ricarda Gericke, Katrin Weber, Institute of the History of Pharmacy and Medicine, Dr Sven Mecke, conservator/curator of the University Collections, Dr Ortrun Brand, Research Data Management.

Collection. Further thematic focuses of the project include the study of these objects in relation to the challenges of documentation, digitization, scholarly study, and (possibly limited) public accessibility. Networking with selected museums and with the wider public are further elements of the project, leading to the formulation of a frame of reference for staff working in academic collections and museums in the context of discourses in the international scientific community.[2]

The innovative aspect of the AESOH project is not limited to identifying and analyzing 'sensitive objects' and discussing their classification, including culturally and religiously sensitive objects as well as human remains; in addition, questions regarding the perspectivity of agency and consequences for an ethically adequate (respectful) approach to these objects will be debated, as it is important to consider both the different possible perspectives of people (as scholars, museum visitors or believers) and the power and affordance of the objects themselves (as deities, ancestors or animated beings).

For the present analysis, it may be useful to draw certain distinctions between various types of museums and collections, differentiated by the order of priorities assigned to collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting objects physically (or nowadays virtually), respectively (WALZ 2016). Notably, academic collections and museums are historically evolved spaces catering to discipline-based research and teaching; where ethically and pedagogically appropriate, they continue to provide objects for research and education (and sometimes for exhibitions, especially in an educational context). Their focus on research and teaching engenders a number of questions and needs that go beyond those discussed in relevant guidelines. Thus, in the provision of objects they differentiate between target audiences, e.g., with regard to access for students enrolled in a university curriculum or (external) researchers, and concerning the issue of suitability for exhibitions: The Museum of Religions/*Religionskundliche Sammlung* at the University of Marburg, for example, was founded with the intention of presenting its holdings to a diverse audience, both academic and non-academic. Today, as part of their studies, students are involved in the research on object provenance as well as in the discussion on developing or renewing exhibitions (FRANKE & RODEMEIER 2025, 27-45). The other two collections included in the research project (ethnographic and medical-anatomical) were designed primarily for university teaching and not as museums.

Ethnographic collections were established, sometimes prior to the creation of related institutes, to support object-based research and teaching (KRAUS 2001). Many anatomical collections, on the other hand, mostly were organized as a consumable resource for research and teaching where long-term preservation and documentation were not in the focus, with predictable consequences for the quality of documentation, posing particular challenges to provenance research. In any case, various disciplines have strong interests in researching objects that are evaluated differently from the perspective of agency and ethics.

This paper takes a systematic approach analyzing current debates about the three core concepts of 'ethics', 'agency', and 'sensitivity', highlighting problematic areas and questions. Some debates were the basis of more general recommendations for the ethically adequate treatment of sensitive objects in collections of natural or cultural scientific character. As the terms 'ethics', 'agency', and 'sensitivity' are not unambiguous and different concepts are in circulation, it is important to clarify in advance which perspectives and criteria are to be considered.

For some years now, the German Museums Association (DMB), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and the Max Planck Society (MPG), to name just a few, have been dealing with the topic of sensitive objects and sensitive collections. However, little attention has been paid to the aspects of agency and ethics of objects; furthermore, the definition of what constitutes a sensitive object has rarely been spelled out (BERNER et al. 2011; ANDRATSCHKE et al. 2023). The final section of this paper is therefore dedicated to the issue of sensitivity, including first proposals for practical approaches to some specific objects.

## The entanglement of the concepts of 'ethics', 'agency', and 'sensitivity'

The categorization of objects as sensitive can be said to result from the (attributed or experienced) agency of certain objects, i.e., the concept of their autonomous power to act. Such an approach is demanded by ethical considerations.

The following aspects are of relevance. When starting with evaluating an object, the historical circumstances of its inclusion in the collection must be clarified. Particularly critical situations are those where appropriation happened against the will or without the consent of the original owners or in the context of

2. On the history of the Marburg collections involved in the project, see BRÖMER et al. 2024.

an asymmetrical power relation. Keywords include 'context of injustice', 'looted art' (e.g., in the NS period, but also in the GDR), or 'punitive expeditions' motivated by colonial concerns (see BRANDSTETTER & HIERHOLZER 2018; SCHORCH 2020; SCHUHMACHER 2024). Furthermore, it is necessary to assess the ethical questions confronting staff in charge of academic collections and museum displays as part of their responsibilities for the objects, ensuring respectful involvement of stakeholders who have (had) connections with these objects. Ethical parameters for the approach to sensitive objects need to be shaped with regard to the agency of these objects: Things that scientifically are not considered to be animated are still affecting the world around them. At this point, questions of differences in perspectivity and attribution of agency need to be considered.

Ethical discussions therefore need to include the ethics of science from a wide range of positions – including postcolonial and decolonial approaches and awareness of general power relations in the research process as well as different ethical systems rooted in culturally and religiously emic perspectives and individual choices and convictions.[3] In this paper, the range of ethical problems is demonstrated, pointing towards practical ways in the evaluation of an object.

Taking seriously the agency of objects in the future development of academic collections requires an understanding of what is meant by this term and how it can be understood and used productively in the context of this project. From this foundation, it will be possible to define which 'objects' are to be classified as sensitive and what conclusions need to be drawn for every single one of them in academic collections. The sensitivity of an object can be formulated as an outcome of this process of evaluation.

## Ethical arguments in approaching objects in museums and university collections

Ethical concerns regarding museum activities have been formulated and debated by numerous museum managements and professional associations. The most influential document to date is the "Code of Ethics for Museums" first adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1986, revised in 2004 and currently under review (International Council of Museums 2017; 2023, see part 'sensitivity' of this article). A wide range of issues is discussed under the rubric of ethics, including questions of adequate handling of the objects being curated in the respective collections, awareness of potentially problematic provenance ('contexts of injustice'), as well as matters of social responsibilities towards the audience and the community in general (allocation of resources). While the aspect of agency is not mentioned, 'sensitive materials' are casually defined as "[h]uman remains and materials of sacred significance" (International Council of Museums 2017, 25).

In recent years, calls have been formulated for a 'new museology', where a more central role should be given to audience experience and visitor participation in the museum compared to the display of actual objects (MARSTINE 2011). Communities of origin should have an influential voice in the development of museum holdings and exhibition design, particularly where collected objects have been moved outside of their cultural contexts (SOARES 2023). Such a focus on participation of stakeholders and on the role of museums for the community at large is increasingly gaining importance regarding public museums. University collections, however, can be said to occupy a special place, given that their initial purpose for academic training and research is fairly well defined, even when specific uses are changing over time, often rapidly (TE HEESEN 2010; BRANDSTETTER & HIERHOLZER 2018). In the academic environment, collections are mainly meant to serve the needs of current or potential students and academic staff, while the outreach to the public tends to be subordinate to scholarly requirements, not least in terms of resource allocation to the museological aspects of public exhibitions in institutions of higher education; purpose and values may greatly shift in the transition between these contexts (MEADOW 2011). While didactically professional presentations are to be expected from public museums, the aims of university departments showcasing the foundations of their work are relatively less central compared to the importance of their collections for the generation and transfer of knowledge. As an example, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the UK has defended the preservation of human remains, which is a particularly contentious issue in many contexts, regarding the potential benefits of research on these collections (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2005, 14). In a similar vein, the Leiden Declaration on human anatomy collections of 2012 emphasizes the value of anatomical specimens as cultural heritage and stresses the need for their adequate preservation (The Leiden Declaration 2015). When weighing the ethical values

3. The contrast between emic and etic perspectives was introduced by PIKE (1954). In the longer term, the team of authors is planning to develop specific ethical approaches to the treatment of individual objects.

involved in the curation of objects in academic collections, the positive importance of such objects for the future development of the disciplines involved must be seen in the context of their historical origins, increasingly involving descendants of source communities.

In a Western perspective, the notion of ethics was historically conceived as a discourse evaluating exclusively the actions of living human beings, who as "self-determined actors" "are fundamentally capable of following normative (ethical) principles in pursuing their goals" (LENK 2021, 110). In the 1780s, this limitation was transcended in contexts such as Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism (BENTHAM 1789). Bentham's criterion of the "capability to suffer" was further elaborated by animal ethicists Tom Regan and Peter Singer (REGAN & SINGER 1976). In their view, a symmetrical relationship where all involved possess power of judgment is not a necessary condition for being morally considerable. The term moral considerability was proposed by Ken Goodpaster (1978) as a convenient shorthand when it comes to the application of moral maxims to entities such as biological species or ecosystems, which traditionally would not be considered as moral agents; he cites G. J. Warnock's term "patients" as a possible antonym (GOODPASTER 1978, 308) – an echo of Bentham's "capability to suffer". Background of this debate in the 1970s was the burgeoning field of environmental ethics (JAWORSKA & TANNENBAUM 2023; GINN 2024).

In recent years, the discussion of moral considerability has been further expanded to include non-living artifacts as "moral patients", whose existence and integrity can be considered as matter of ethical concerns. For the current debate on digitization of collection items, a more recent branch of this debate may become relevant, when the question is brought up whether or not digital objects, too, should be included in the realm of what is ethically considerable (HOŁY-ŁUCZAJ 2019). For practical purposes in dealing with objects in the collection and in the digital realm (see QUADE 2024), further work is needed to draw up a framework to guide ethical decision-making processes and negotiations in intercultural context (FLETCHER et al. 2023). This is particularly necessary in relation to objects that are regarded as inanimate from a Western perspective (e.g., ancestor figures), but which are regarded as animate by the communities of origin in the past or even today.

In his survey mentioned above, Lenk attempts a bottom-up approach in order to "distil the essence of a basic ethical understanding" from international and national codes focusing on (but not limited to) human remains. Lenk's point of departure is the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums in the versions of 1986 and 2017 (International Council of Museums 2017). While the other codes included in Lenk's analysis are focusing on human remains, general observations can be made regarding the use of the term 'ethics' in the human remains collection context: Since the early phase, when the Vermillion Accord of the World Archaeological Congress was adopted in 1989, "respect" (for the "mortal remains", for the known or inferred wishes of the dead, their guardians, and their communities) has become a central term in the ethical debate (FFORDE 2014).

While this historical reference may provide some indications, it is less clear what the foundations of such an ethical discourse are in Lenk's reflection. Most of the examples he provides are following a utilitarian approach ("advancement of knowledge", "the common good"; LENK 2021, 111), yet his argumentation remains vague when he leaves the firmer ground of explicit or inferred consent required by law (LENK 2021, 112). Furthermore, the distinction between ethical and juridical arguments seems blurred, and emic perspectives of source communities are only introduced in passing, with a brief reference to the rights of "Indigenous groups" to have their ancestors repatriated (LENK 2021, 117). On this point, it is worth noting that a network of experts working with human remains in Germany proposed facilitating the process of repatriation through the creation of a specific fund focusing on human remains (Stellungnahme des Expert*innen-Netzwerks 2024). While the guideline of the German Museums Association (German Museums Association 2021) is specifically aimed at human remains, questions need to be asked about the demarcation of moral considerability beyond the organically human (e.g., issues of digital objects based on human remains) and the relationship between ethics and legal arguments. An important lacuna regards the continued process after physical restitution: In how far the further destiny of the repatriated objects concerns the returning institution – how to do things 'right', and on what ethical basis. The mere act of translocating ancestors and objects to the modern state that encompasses their respective place of origin may not satisfy the descendants of their source communities, as a recent example from South Africa emphasizes (TILEY-NEL 2025).

Rather than following general ethical maxims from within a Western academic tradition, individual applied ethical approaches need to be developed, and their respective contexts made transparent to enable

concrete decisions when dealing with collection items that are considered sensitive. In this perspective, normative and descriptive ethical approaches need to be interlaced: On the one hand, new decisions have to be made from the current viewpoint of the curating institutions, while at the same time taking into consideration the categories and value systems of stakeholder communities involved in the negotiation of possible restitution. Thus, the British Museum (2025, Art. 5.1) emphasizes a "presumption that the Collection [including human remains] should remain intact". This demand covers e.g., "[h]uman remains [that] are a record of the varied ways that different societies have conceived of death and disposed of the remains of the dead" (Art. 5.2.1), posing strict limitations to considering requests for return (Art. 5.13-14), including cultural or religious continuity between the deceased and the claimant community (Art. 5.15), thus limiting the options for communities changing over time in their religious or cultural commitments. Historically, the interplay between different communities, their places of residence, communal beliefs and cultural values can be extremely complex, defying simplistic notions of continuity.

A study carried out in the Wangoni community exemplifies the variety and variability of beliefs and practices in a population descending from displaced populations of South Africa living in Tanzania. This community preserves ancient customs while interacting with their new cultural environment and confronting colonial missionary activities and looting. The attenuation of traditional beliefs and loss of ritual objects have resulted in an ambiguous situation where the status of looted objects, especially those kept in collections of the former colonial power Germany, is contested within Tanzania itself (MAKUKULA 2022). How could these realities be mapped on to the binary criterion of persistence or lack of continuity demanded in the British Museum policy formalized in 2024?

When talking about communities and the filiation of historic origins and living descendants, matters become complicated, given the increasingly diasporic nature of human societies. The limits of 'community' as an anthropological concept were already discussed at the turn of the 21st century (e.g., AMIT & RAPPORT 2002), and practical experiences with repatriation to 'countries of origin' have underscored difficulties of identifying or even reaching the relevant group of people speaking with authority about the objects to be restituted to 'them'. Very often, documentations available in the collections are vague and possibly unreliable. Thus, a survey of human remains from colonial contexts in German collections demonstrates the precarious state of knowledge about their specific provenance (PÉREZ RAMÍREZ 2023), but even when provenances are clear, international regulations may prevent direct access to source communities whose living representatives can be weary for their ancestors to pass through centralized national institutions in their state (RODEMEIER 2024).

At the same time, the internal perspectives of academic actors and their institutions should not be overlooked. Of particular relevance could be the issue of utility from different disciplinary points of view. To give but one example, the opinion of the working party on human preparations in collections stresses the role of scientific norms in assessing the ethics of keeping specimens in anatomical collections. The authors emphasize how the primary goal of specimen design would have to be the "dissemination of knowledge", while "artistically abstracted preparations should neither be produced nor preserved" (Arbeitskreis 2003: A1961). Since then, the disciplinary aspect has receded, with ethical evaluation focusing (or narrowing) its scope to the preferences of the descendants of source communities. Given the pace of cultural change that has happened both locally and globally since the time of appropriation, it remains to be discussed to what extent their view regarding the potential preferences of their ancestors can be seen as emic: Why, asks Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, should citizens of a previously colonized country consider themselves to be in contrast with other civilizations (TÁÍWÒ 2022)?

The question remains; how far the reconstruction of a historical emic perspective is actually feasible? Researchers from outside the region of origin and different groups of descendants of source communities may come to quite different conclusions: The latter are best placed to take historical constellations seriously, even when they point out that their religious beliefs are not those of their ancestors. For example, societies that converted to Christianity decades ago also consider reclaiming objects that had religious connotations at the time of their creation, even if the beliefs of their makers are no longer shared by their descendants today (MEYER 2024, 121; RODEMEIER 2024, 7-8). Nevertheless, it needs to be asked in how far the viewpoint of the latter can be defined as emic with regard to their ancestors?

The plurality of ethical positions to be considered grows with the range of objects of different provenance. Such an analysis must take into account current and historical horizons in the development of different ethical traditions between the time of origin of the artifacts and remains, the processes of transfer into the museums and collections where they are currently kept, and the ongoing debate about further care and use

or restitution (return to previous owners or their heirs) or repatriation (return to the place of origin, which often is equally hard to determine). For each individual object to assess, first the relevance and applicability of the criteria just described need to be ascertained – they will differ depending on the completeness of available data on provenance, the demands of potential claimants from the descendants of the respective source communities, and practicalities such as the ways of informal and formal negotiations about the further treatment of ancestral objects and remains. Ideally, archival research should yield sufficient initial data to be able to identify possible origins. On this basis, questions about the desirability and acceptability of specific further research methods (non-invasive, micro-invasive, invasive?) can be clarified, and direct communication between the various stakeholders on equal terms should lay the ground for individual decisions, respecting ethical norms subscribed to by the communities involved. This section has shown some of the obstacles found in practice, leaving more work to be done to create useable recommendations for at least a selection of items in a range of collections, focusing here on issues in the university context.

In the next two sections, the role of 'agency' in the normative assessment of objects curated in collections and museums will be examined, trying to develop a useful working definition for what constitutes 'sensitivity' of certain objects rather than others.

## 'Agency' in scientific collections / university collections

Etymologically, agency is derived from the Latin *agere*, which means to act, to operate, or to set in motion. The term implies action and an actor/agent and, above all, autonomous power to act. When this meaning is applied to things, it raises a number of questions about the acting subject: Who is the bearer of agency? What is the principle behind it? What is the role of the agent? And what is the nature of the relationship between the agent and the other parties involved?

In social and cultural sciences, the term is used in various ways in relation to 'things' or 'objects'. A look at the anthropological literature reveals the use of the term in two main ways: It can refer to the thing's significance as part of social or economic networks. Under this premise, they become bearers of agency and, in the quality of social agents, possess their own social life (APPADURAI 1986). On the other hand, agency can refer to the thing itself, which possesses active power in certain contexts (SANTOS-GRANERO 2009). Theories of animated things are found throughout the history of anthropology and study of religions (see below). In contrast, actor-network theory assumes an agency distributed between human and non-human actants without postulating that things are to be animated or personalized. A particular line of thought, which deals with the agency of things with regard to the reception of things, comes from the anthropology of art (GELL 1998).

What unites all approaches is the idea that things can have an impact on their surroundings, independently of being considered animate or personalized from a scientific point of view.

As museums or collection artifacts, things have been removed from their original contexts, decontextualized and re-contextualized according to Western academic standards, resulting in a constant multiplication of their interpretability and value. They are part of academic networks; at the same time, they maintain the relation to their past and the original intrinsic meaning with specific cultural or religious attributions. The 'agency' of museums or collection artifacts must therefore be seen in the interplay of those perspectives and their liminality is their ability to transact between these zones.

The collection artifact as an action-triggering element or 'agent' can be seen in the tradition of Appadurai's approach, who in his ground-breaking anthology not only considered things as social agents but also postulated a relationship between value and things. It is argued that value is only created through exchange and that the link between value and things is political and subject to change through social relations (APPADURAI 1986, 57). In the academic context of university collections, this argument becomes more important if one considers not only the original, locally changing, values of things as well as the changing scientific value of musealized objects, but also public research policy interests and directions, which are constantly aligned with science policy debates. These dynamics ultimately lead to changes in the consideration and categorization of things over time. Accordingly, the current project emphasizes issues such as ethics, sensitivity, and agency – aspects that have not previously been the central focus of scientific investigation.

Another crucial aspect is introduced by Kopytoff: In his essay "The Cultural Biography of Things" in the same anthology, the author proposes tracing the biography of things to uncover their connections throughout their lifespan, including their origin, production, use, and end, within different networks

(KOPYTOFF 1986). Thus, the process of analysis involves examining how things move between those networks (KOPYTOFF 1986, 67; see SPLETTSTÖßER 2015, 201). Regarding 'agency', the things assume the role of non-human actors who engage in a relationship with human actors in terms of the actor-network theory (ANT) by Latour.

As Splettstößer (2015, 202; see SAYES 2014, 141-142) points out, in Latour's symmetrical anthropology, agency is a defining characteristic of both people and things. But rather than proposing a singular theory of agency, the objective is to pluralize the understanding of agency. The attribution of agency is to be considered in a relational and context-dependent manner; 'agency' is thus understood as distributed and shared (SPLETTSTÖßER 2015, 202). This thought of shared agency also prominently features in the emerging 'anthropology of technology' (BRUUN et. al 2022; COUPAYE 2021). Situated between 'science and technology studies' (STS) and anthropology, based on Latour's ANT, it focuses on technology not as a "supporting role in people's lives [, but as] co-extensive with humans: lending humans agency, empowerment, and new identities, as [for example] attested to by the everyday use of hearing aids [...]" (BRUNN & WAHLBERG 2022, 22). A "thing" (technology) not only has its own agency, but also extends it (on) to others. The 'anthropology of technology' approach is informed by works from material agency (KNAPPETT & MALAFOURIS 2008; BILLE & SØRENSEN 2007), 'material culture studies' (BILLE 2022), and archaeological debates about agency (PREUCEL 2006; LINDSTRØM 2015; SØRENSEN 2016; RIBEIRO 2016).

It is therefore necessary not only to consider things, people, and spirits as participants and bearers of agency, but also to recognize their role as components of different networks in which their agency has different effects. The roles and significance of humans and non-human actors are not fixed and are not centrally controlled, but arise in specific temporal and spatial constellations, not unlike what Splettstößer called "assemblages", using the concept of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and DeLanda (2016) (SPLETTSTÖßER 2015, 203).

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether these things are able to initiate interactions independently or whether a human agent is necessary to provide the initial impulse. In the literature, there are different opinions on this matter. While in ANT the things are actants, other theories consider agency in the most general sense as a "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (AHERN 2001, 110; HOSKINS 2006, 74; GELL 1998, 16) or as a phenomenological moment when we encounter the thingness – its materiality beyond the use or representation of objects as in 'thing theory' (BROWN 2001). The question whether the things bear autonomy does not seem to affect the networks but presents a challenge to philosophical inquiry (see HOPPE & LEMKE 2021); it shifts the focus to the thing itself and thus to the second approach to 'agency'.

Ideas about living or animated things can be found in European written narratives as well as in descriptions by early travelers and ethnologists who observed that in 'foreign' cultures, certain things comprise active properties. As a result, the concept of 'animate' things was incorporated into the emerging anthropological and religious evolutionary theories of the 19th century, notwithstanding differences in the conception of the term 'agency' (DESCOLA 2021, 25, ref. 6). A possible reason lies in the fact that these theories, in the development of their evolutionary stage models and classical notions of animism, focused on people's (religious) behavior towards animate entities rather than things (TYLOR 1871).

After its initial central importance in evolutionary and diffusionist theories in social and cultural anthropology, with the rise of (structural) functionalism and structuralism the study of material culture and 'things' ceased to be at the core of theoretical debates, and new theoretical approaches to things have emerged in recent decades: While Miller (2005; 2010; 2012) theorized materiality, stuff, and things from the perspective of consumption, Ingold and Hallam (INGOLD 2013, HALLAM & INGOLD 2016) developed a phenomenological approach to making and creativity, and Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (HENARE et al. 2007), influenced among other by the perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro (1997), theorized artifacts ethnographically from an ontological perspective.

Studies focusing on the perspective of indigenous people towards things show a range of concepts that challenge the distinction between the human (subject) and the non-human (animal, plant, object, etc.) (DUILE et al. 2023) and indicate that a subject object binary is often absent from indigenous epistemologies. The investigation of the intrinsic character of things reveals the most diverse types of conceptions of who or what is concealed in a thing and can be brought to life or made to act depending on the situation. Concepts that generally assume an agency being initiated, activated or ascribed by humans relate the power to act to divine or spiritual entities or to individual persons. In both cases, the things either take

on the role of placeholders (representations) or materializations, or they become the entities themselves when activated. In other instances, specific material items are perceived as part of a person or a divine or supernatural entity or as part of the equipment of the latter. Furthermore, things may serve as a medium for communication with the divine or supernatural forces (see articles in SANTOS GRANERO 2009), thus taking on an active role as well. There are also specific performative intersemiotic, often ritual relations that so far have received little attention in terms of the agency of things. These include, for example, the relations between a thing, music, dance, but also speech or writing, that generate forms of temporal agency that is not located in the thing or human agents alone. Agency may encompass not only the things themselves but also their images, photographs, and digitized forms of existence, since these are thought to make present an absent phenomenon (DESCOLA 2021, 23).

All of these approaches link the concept of 'agency' to corresponding underlying cosmologies or cultures of knowledge that assign people and things a specific place in the world and organize their relationship (DESCOLA 2011). Investigations of patterns and iconographic signs play a pivotal role in this context. Attention is also paid to the biography of 'things' from the emic point of view, i.e., the process of production, their daily and ritual/professional use, their conservation, and their "end".

The mentioned approaches show that the classification according to academic standards based on measurable properties such as material, size, weight, color, shape, technology, etc., cannot account for the agentive characteristics and meanings of things without the application of background analyses.

The existence of emic conceptions of 'things' is not immediately apparent; nevertheless, it can evoke certain effects and sentiments in the viewer, depending on their state of knowledge, and may turn things into sensitive objects. The research lines of the anthropology of art seek to ascertain points of reference that imbue an object with identity for people to recognize (GELL 1998; DESCOLA 2021; SEVERI 2021). The concepts of figuration, prototypes, and indices have been developed to facilitate the analysis of their meaning (DESCOLA 2021, 23).

These approaches extend beyond the cultural and religious aspects and interpretations of iconographic forms and signs in semiological analyses. Instead, they focus on the effect that these have on the individual. Agency is defined "as attributable to those persons (and things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences [...] events caused by acts of mind or will or intention [...] An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe" (GELL 1998, 16; see LAYTON 2003, 451.). The artist is the primary agent who introduces his own agency into the object through the act of creation. Consequently, objects are not self-sufficient agents (ibid.). However, as part of the social networks they cause reactions, which may be either positive or negative, encompassing a range of emotions, such as happiness, anger, fear, and pleasure (GELL 1998, 95; cf. HOSKINS 2006, 76). The quality of impact is considered to be more important than aesthetics and may vary between individuals.

From this perspective, the concept of agency assumes a further dimension of things which is mostly invisible. These hidden sides are particularly pertinent to questions of sensitiveness and ethical conduct in the handling of collection and museum objects. This dimension of agency is likely to become an important criterion for categorizing the sensitivity of things. Existing research shows very differing ways in which agency is found in things, demonstrating the importance of further explorations of this topic in the course of our project and beyond.

Finally, there is a growing literature that relates the question of agency not just to things but to collections and museums as such, which themselves become the focus of a variety of actions, interactions, networks (e.g., BRYNE et al. 2011), and assemblages (e.g., ROTENBERG 2014) involving a wide range of actors, including indigenous agency (e.g., HARRISON et al. 2013) and events (e.g., HERLE 2012). In the next section, the category of sensitivity is being critically examined on the basis of its origins, to include the findings laid out so far in this text.

## 'Sensitive' objects – 'Sensitivity' as a relational category

Debates about the ethically appropriate handling of objects in collections and museums are inevitably entangled with the question of inherent agency and the experience or attribution of agency. If such agency is recognized, it is now widely accepted that these objects have a special status in terms of their subjectivity, and therefore the question of appropriate treatment should be raised. The issue of the ethically challenging status of objects also brings into focus the categorization of 'sensitive' objects. This refers to objects that are considered carriers of agency and transcendent powers, as well as human remains, objects

representing ancestors, and objects that come from colonial contexts or have been illegitimately, often violently, removed from their context of origin (e.g., Nazi-looted art) (BERNER et al. 2011; LANGE 2011; FRÜNDT 2015; FÖRSTER & FRÜNDT 2017; GRIMME 2018; BRANDSTETTER & HIERHOLZER 2018; RAABE 2018; MAIRESSE 2019; QUADE 2024, 12). In addition, however, other objects that are often generally connoted as religious are also classified as sensitive.

In the debates and literature on ethics in collections and museums, the reference to the sensitivity of objects is a clear indication that we are dealing with objects that need to be treated with particular care in a comprehensive way: in regard to their collection, preservation, research, and presentation – including digital presentation – as well as in regard to different forms of access to these objects for different groups of people. Various guidelines and scientific analyses on the treatment of sensitive objects emphasize this need (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft 2003; 2020; International Council of Museums 2010; Deutscher Museumsbund 2013, 121; International Council of Museums 2017; Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung 2018; German Lost Art Foundation 2019; Deutscher Museumsbund 2021, 19-21; International Council of Museums 2022; IMERI & RIZZOLLI 2022; WINKELMANN 2022; WEBER & THEIß 2024). However, a more precise definition of this seemingly plausible but often very general category is still lacking. With explicit reference to the agency and ethics of sensitive objects, a more nuanced consideration of the relationality and perspectivity of these concepts should be achieved as a basis for the scientific and curatorial handling of sensitive objects.

In order to clarify the use of the term 'sensitive' as a scientific category, this section first examines the semantics of the term. 'Sensitive' refers primarily to sensory perception and suggests a close connection with feelings. These cannot only be touched and triggered, but also hurt. Accordingly, a 'sensitive issue' is understood as an indication to proceed with particular sensitivity, empathy, and tact. Other uses of the term refer to "being concealed" or "kept secret" and thus to a regulated approach that should be based on the feelings and perceptions associated with that object or issue (Wiktionary). The meaning of 'sensitive' therefore already implies an interaction in which the perceptions and sensitivities of different actors need to be considered. Further handling should be carefully considered and pondered.

It remains a challenge for secular places, such as university collections and museums, to deal with emic perspectives, religious feelings and, in a broader sense, the consequences of decontextualization and the subjecthood of objects. Evidently, the categorization of 'sensitive' is not about a juxtaposition of the rational and the emotional. Rather, it addresses the question of how to deal ethically appropriately with sensitive objects that are considered to be animate or endowed with agency, and how to deal with people's feelings and their relationship to the sensitive holdings of a collection or museum (see also BRANDSTETTER & HIERHOLZER 2018, 13).

In everyday museum life, the complexity and difficulty of accounting for emic perspectives or religious regulations regarding individual objects can be seen, for example, in the attempt to fulfill the wishes of some communities of origin and to store human remains, which are seen as subjects and possibly members of the social community, separately from other objects. But even within a single community of origin or interest that uses or has used objects, expectations vary. Some explicitly demand that there should be no strict spatial separation between human remains and objects from the same community of origin, and that the deceased should instead be kept in an environment that is familiar to them (QUADE 2024, 29). It must therefore be assumed that different views on the handling of objects exist not only between the museum and emic perspectives, but also within communities of origin or interest.

However, before addressing the question of an appropriate approach that considers the feelings and interests of different stakeholders, it is first necessary to identify sensitive objects within scientific collections. When the Ethnographic Collection, the Museum of Religions/*Religionskundliche Sammlung* and the Medico-historical and Anatomical Collections of Philipps University Marburg came together a few years ago to deal with sensitive objects in their collections, the discussion on this issue seemed to lead in different directions as to what should be considered as sensitive collection objects. These included, but were not limited to objects that originated from the aforementioned contexts of injustice. Since the identification of those contexts often needs further detailed provenance research, the number of objects from such categories is probably significantly higher than previously known. A central aim of the AESOH project is to make the processes of identifying and categorizing objects as sensitive more transparent and precise.

The discourse and research on the sensitivity, agency, and ethics of objects in collections and museums has been ongoing and will continue.[4] Furthermore, the provenance and agency of objects and how they end up in university collections or museums is increasingly being researched (e.g., MEYER 2024, CORBEY & WEENER 2015, MAIRESS 2019).

Meanwhile, the ontological turn in cultural anthropology (HOLBRAAT & PEDERSEN 2017) has led to a broad acceptance of multiple realities, both visible and invisible. However, the relationship between agency and the sensitivity of objects in university collections and museums has rarely been the subject of research.

In Germany, the Society of University Collections (Gesellschaft für Universitätssammlungen) has taken up the issue and explicitly placed the question of sensitive objects in university collections at the center of the debate (WEBER 2018). A helpful overview of the discussion on sensitive objects and provenance research for the German-speaking world can be found in the online document by Weber and Theiß (2024). Under the title "Nicht nur Raubkunst" (English: "Not only looted art"), an edited volume by Brandstätter and Hierholzer (2018), the authors use specific examples to identify areas in which the sensitivity of objects comes into play: In addition to Nazi-looted art, looted and illegally traded antiquities, colonial collections, and human remains, these include looted images and voices (such as photographs and audio recordings of African soldiers), sensitive natural objects, and sensitive content (such as testimonies to the Holocaust). In his contribution to the same volume, Vogel summarizes that the sensitivity of an object is not static, but rather an "effect that is formed from the relationships and connections it assumes" (VOGEL 2018, 42).

A study by Birgit Meyer (2024) on objects from Ghana illustrates the multi-perspectivity with regard to the 'agency' and 'sensitivity' of objects. In a conversation with Meyer, Christopher Voncujovi, an Ewe priest in Accra, surmised that the *dzokawo*, which were classified as "magic cords" by missionaries at the beginning of the 20th century and brought to the Übersee-Museum Bremen, "still contain the spirits enshrined in them" despite the temporal and spatial distance from their place of origin (MEYER 2024, 121). The priest assumed that the cords retained their spiritual power because they had not been subjected to any ritual that would have taken away this power before being handed over to a missionary, as the priest realized when Meyer visited him in Ghana. He offered to go to Bremen to see if the cords were indeed, as he suspected, "hungry" and "wanted" to return to Ghana to stay there for the rest of their lives, which he would be happy to facilitate (ibid.). The Ewe priest therefore assumes that the agency of this object will continue to exist even after it has been transferred to a museum collection. In practice, objects in university collections have so far been labeled as sensitive mainly when a problematic situation regarding their acquisition or taxonomy had become apparent, such as historical classifications of objects using Christocentric and derogatory terms such as "fetish" or "idol".

The AESOH project aims to address the issues of 'agency', 'ethics', and 'sensitivity' of objects as intertwined categories and to broaden the view of unequal power relations beyond a focus on colonial contexts (e.g., objects that came into university collections as a result of medical care for the poor or due to the Christocentric perspectives of missionaries).

## From Theory to Practical Approaches

The analysis shows that the concepts of 'sensitivity', 'agency', and 'ethics' have been used and defined in different ways and that some clearer conceptual definitions are needed to provide a basis for ethically appropriate ways of dealing with sensitive objects in collections and museums. One important result of this review, which is supported by our experience in the university collections, is that four overarching frames linked to the discourses on ethics, agency, and sensitivity can be detected and appear suitable for a practical implementation of the theoretical considerations: 1) relationality, 2) temporality, 3) perspectivity, and 4) contextuality. With these frames, we are on the one hand able to approach the objects practically and on the other hand achieve a clearer conceptual usage of the intertwined terms of 'agency', 'ethics', and 'sensitivity'.

**Relationality:** The focus on relationality places the relationship between 'person' and 'object' at the center of consideration. In this context, the relationship to the person is not only characterized by the

4. As mentioned above, the current Code of Ethics for Museums (International Council of Museums 2017; see MURPHY 2016) has been under revision since 2023 upon the initiative of the International Council of Museums (International Council of Museums 2023).

individual, but also by institutions and religious or socio-cultural communities of interest. Of crucial importance here are the attitudes and perspectives of those who have been and are related to an object or an object of the same 'kind' and co-constitute its agency in the context of an object's (life) history: These may be people of faith, researchers, curators, viewers, etc. They all contribute specific relationalities to the (sensitive) object, creating a network of relationships. While, for example, the Quran is regarded by Muslim believers as the direct word of God, and a special way of handling is derived from this belief, the same object may be regarded by the academic director of a university collection as one religious-historical source among many; an Adu Zatua figure from Nias may express the agency of transcendent power for one person but be an aesthetically pleasing carving for another. Relationality can also be seen in the fact that a human fetus is an object of scientific knowledge for one researcher, while for another, it is an unlived life or a dead person to be buried.

**Temporality:** Whether an object is experienced and seen as sensitive, powerful, sacred, or associated with special qualities can change over time. An example from research can illustrate this variability: For example, the Adu Zatua figures from Nias in Indonesia just mentioned were perceived as being endowed with agency and religiously effective before the conversion of a believer more than 100 years ago, and were subsequently considered as sensitive by museums and collections because they were seen as a medium for contacting or even locating ancestors, whereas Christian descendants of the region now understand them as historically valuable heritage, but no longer believe in the figures' healing or transcendent agency and power (RODEMEIER 2024). However, social changes are conceivable that initiate a revival of religious tradition, which may lead to a renewed spiritual turn towards this type of object.

The specification of an object as sensitive – which is here meant in the sense of agency – can vary, because: a) it is understood as a transcendent power or is supposed to represent this power, b) it is a historical object that is directly related to one's own history and ancestors, or c) because it came into the possession of a collection in a context of injustice and is therefore a contemporary witness (WANGEFELT STRÖM 2019, 199).

**Perspectivity:** The focus on perspectivity is understood here as a consequence of attention to relationality and temporality regarding an object. As described above, the perception and categorization of any particular object as sensitive changes over time, not least as a result of changing relationships. However, these changes are not only caused by time, but are essentially characterized by the possible perspectives from which an object is viewed. According to the current legal situation in Germany, all objects in a university's collection belong to the federal state in which the university is located. In an academic institution, such as a university collection, the objects are available for teaching and research. There is an increasing demand and growing pressure for transparency of the holdings in collections and archives, not only for scholars but for a wider public; this is often met by making object databases accessible on the Internet. In the case of (internet) publications, however, it is important to bear in mind that emic perspectives on objects must be considered, just as in the case of face-to-face and online exhibitions. In religious contexts, for example, objects that are believed to have agency, to be animate, or to represent a transcendent force often require specific ways of handling from an emic cultural and religious perspective or are subject to taboos: For example, a Quran should not be placed on the floor, or a *tjurunga*[5], as demanded by some Australian Aborigines, should be kept under lock and key and only be seen by male museum staff, if at all (KRÜGER & RADERMACHER 2023; RAABE 2018, 135f.).[6]

**Contextuality:** The keyword contextuality refers to the relevance of the socio-cultural and historical, but also the economic field, both for the categorization as 'sensitive' and for the question of ethical treatment: When, by whom, and for what reasons is an object classified in such a way that the term sensitive becomes relevant? How is an object acquired and what happens to it when it is included in research or teaching? Are invasive interventions into the object as such admissible for research purposes? In what context is an object presented and exhibited? What is to be communicated with an object, and in what terminology? How and where is an object stored (object environment, climate)? In what way are members of a religious community or people from an object's context of origin involved in decisions about its fate or how can they be involved, and what significance do cultural factors have? In exhibition contexts, the sensitivity

5. *Tjurunga* or *tjuringa* formerly known as bull-roarer.
6. This desire is currently giving rise to a new academic discourse. In particular, the question arises as to whether museums should be allowed to keep "secrets" (BOTTESI 2021, 53-67).

of visitors must also be considered, which is linked to group- or personality-specific socialization and viewing habits.

The variety of contexts in which an object is relevant, or is made relevant by collection interests, makes it necessary to consider the complexity of contexts and perspectives regarding an object. At the same time, it becomes clear that neither the categorization as sensitive nor the resulting treatment is permanently constant. However, we assume that attention to the above-mentioned complexity can and must lead to a reflective approach to sensitive objects. These reflections and conversations among the contributors to the AESOH project are aimed at developing a comprehensive framework to sharpen and operationalize the term 'sensitive' in relation to the concepts of 'agency' and 'ethics' within collection contexts.

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## Keywords

University collections, handling of sensitive items, agency of objects, historical and contemporary dynamics of emic and etic perspectives

# MAXIMISING UNIVERSITY MUSEUM ENVIRONMENTS FOR WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

*Educational pathways to museum employment are complex, marked by a precarious labour market and graduate employability concerns, especially for international students facing placement barriers in accessing work experience. This paper introduces an innovative large-scale Non-Placement Work Integrated Learning initiative at the University of Melbourne. Sixty-four Master's students collaboratively delivered public exhibitions and programs at the Grainger Museum, providing authentic, hands-on arts work experience in a psychologically safe environment. This paper outlines the approach, actions and learnings from the project to demonstrate how the scalable model fostered professional readiness, demonstrating an effective approach for preparing diverse future museum workers and offering significant stakeholder benefits.*

## Introduction

University museums are uniquely positioned to provide experiential learning to students, leveraging their pedagogical assets and fostering student engagement in experiential class-based teaching and learning contexts, as well as the provision of internships and other work placements for limited numbers of participants (SIMPSON 2022). Educational pathways to museum employment are complex, with arts management and curatorship roles demanding diverse skills in a precarious labour market (GOODWIN 2025). Placement-based work-integrated learning (WIL) offers opportunities to a few students per semester but given the international popularity of arts management and curatorial degrees, and barriers faced by international students in accessing WIL (MACKAWAY et al. 2024), greatly expanded opportunities for experiential learning are needed. One opportunity that this paper presents is to consider university museums as sites for *non-placement* WIL (NP-WIL). NP-WIL includes activities such as projects, consultancies, simulations and fieldwork that offer the ability to scale up student numbers and engage with the museum staff and space in new ways (SIMPSON 2024). In this context, this paper presents the Industry Core and Project case study at the University of Melbourne, an innovative large-scale NP-WIL initiative. It enabled 64 Master of Art Curatorship and Arts and Cultural Management students to collaboratively deliver public exhibitions and programs within one of the University's key campus-based museums (the Grainger Museum), situated on the main Parkville campus in Melbourne close to the main teaching facilities for the course.

The following sections of the paper outline the specific approach, actions, and learnings derived from this project. It demonstrates how this scalable NP-WIL model successfully fostered professional readiness, while providing authentic, practical experience in a psychologically safe environment, which particularly benefited international students facing traditional placement barriers. The discussion confirms the potential of university museums as crucial sites for preparing diverse future museum workers.

## Background : Work integrated learning and diverse arts management and curatorship cohorts

As Simpson observes, "museum work is undertaken by a highly diverse global community of practice", requiring "both specialised knowledge and skill sets and an understanding of underlying theoretical principles" (SIMPSON 2024, 41). Educational pathways to employment in the museum sector are less institutionally or occupationally defined than many other disciplines. Many students who study art curatorship and arts management aspire to museum careers, yet there are not always clear occupational entry points or career pathways for those aspiring to become arts professionals (INGLIS & CRAY 2012). However, arts management and curatorship are academic and professional disciplines that share concepts and skills with business and management only to apply them in a distinctly creative context (EVRARD & COLBERT 2000). Educational programs developing arts management skills traditionally "focused

on identifying the skills and knowledge base required of professional not-for-profit arts administrators" (DEWEY 2005, 12), however the 'average' arts management job can include everything from marketing and audience development, operations, fundraising, risk management, governance, arts education along with relationship building with diverse stakeholders (DE VEREAUX 2019; SIMJANOVSKA & KARJALAINEN 2022). This breadth of work undertaken under the umbrella of arts management, museum studies or curatorship can mean provision of vocational skills can be challenging.

Coupled with the broad range of skills required to succeed, the arts sector's neoliberal labour market is characterised by boundarylessness, precarity and minimal opportunity for stable employment or hierarchical career progression (BRIDGSTOCK 2011; COMUNIAN & ENGLAND 2020; ELTHAM & O'CONNOR 2024; SHAUGHNESSY et al. 2022). In their study of museum, gallery and heritage studies students, COFFIELD, et.al (2022) found that students entered postgraduate programs with a sense of "lack" concerning their employability and job readiness and ranked their abilities as being behind their peers. To prepare graduates for this uncertain future, work integrated learning (WIL) plays an important role in providing a realistic job preview through the collaboration between students, educators and external partners to integrate and assess authentic professional experiences as part of the university curriculum (FERNS et al. 2024). WIL is distinct from other forms of work-based learning, by its links to curriculum, integration of theory and practice and inclusion of three parties in the process – students, the educational institution and an external stakeholder (ZEGWAARD et al. 2023). WIL can help move students away from what ARONSSON and JOSEFSSON (2024) describe as "pretend" museum practices, to a truly authentic workplace experience. To address labour market challenges, higher education approaches to graduate employability in the arts have shifted toward the development of entrepreneurial skills necessary to build a career in the absence of stable employment opportunities, and the resilience needed to cope in the precarious market (McROBBIE 2016). Participation in WIL activities can provide an important study to work transition enhancer for these students. Internships or placements are commonly recognised WIL activities and often found within the University Museum context (KNOTHE 2024), but there are several other practices, known as non-placement WIL, including projects, consultancies, simulations and fieldwork that also provide vital skill enhancement for students. ROOK and DEAN (2023, 243) define non-placement work-integrated learning as "authentic educational experiences that integrate theory with expanding practices and notions of work, but without extended time inside a physical workplace." Since Covid-19 there has been increased in interest in NP- WIL, as it offers significant benefits for student career readiness, employability and stakeholder engagement (ROOK & DEAN 2023).

There are approximately 500 Master of Art Curatorship and Master of Arts and Cultural Management students enrolled at the University of Melbourne, with around 100 aiming to complete their 'capstone' subjects at any given time. Capstone subjects are final-year courses of study designed to consolidate learning gained throughout a degree and, simultaneously prepare students for post-study life by integrating professional skills into the curriculum (GOODWIN et al. 2019). Between 75-80% of the Art Curatorship and Arts and Cultural Management cohort are international students, the majority who come from non-English speaking backgrounds in Southeast Asia. There are significant benefits for international students in undertaking WIL within their host country, and access to WIL opportunity has been identified as a key decision factor for students when deciding where to undertake higher education (VU et al. 2022). However, accessing and maximising placement-based WIL opportunities as an international student can be difficult, with international students often at a disadvantage (MACKAWAY et al. 2024)Goldman, and Zegwaard 2024. At the University of Melbourne, students are responsible for securing a placement, and while opportunities are centrally advertised, the onus is on the student to apply for and obtain an internship. Despite scholastic aptitude and often highly developed, relevant skills, employers can be reluctant to place international students due to a perceived lack of "cultural fit" in the workplace or doubts regarding local communication capability (PHAM 2023). Coupled with this, international students sometimes lack understanding of relevant norms and processes when searching for placement opportunities or lack workplace experience that placement hosts like to see within a candidate, that put them at a disadvantage in comparison to their local peers (PHAM et al. 2018).

## Campus museums as flexible and innovative learning environments

Campus museums and art galleries are well- positioned to provide a wide range of services to their academic communities. University museum collections, many of which have formed in parallel with or as a direct outcome of academic research, have traditionally been highly valued as discipline-specific primary

research repositories, spanning both scientific and cultural contexts (BOYLAN 1999; HAMMOND et al. 2012; VITELLI 2013; PLAZA 2022; SIMPSON 2022). In recent decades, many campus museums have significantly expanded their activities, providing materials and environments for Teaching & Learning (T&L) across diverse disciplines. In T&L contexts, collection objects are activated as pedagogical assets, while museum spaces serve as innovative learning environments, integrating physical collections, exhibitions, and architectural spaces into core curriculum delivery. The pedagogies of museum-based tertiary education align comfortably with theories of experiential learning, where "learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment" (KOLB & KOLB 2005, 194). This expanding activation of campus museums worldwide has led to a proliferation of literature exploring the effectiveness of various pedagogical strategies to integrate objects, collections, and museum environments into learning (CHATTERJEE 2010; SIMPSON & HAMMOND 2012; CHATTERJEE et al. 2016; BOYS 2013; PLAZA 2022; SHAPIRO et al. 2012).

University museums also have a long history of providing internships or placements for university students in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) contexts, including credit-bearing opportunities; students typically engage in placement-based WIL, undertaking activities as "trainees" or "interns", working alongside professional museum and art gallery staff (BECKMANN 2016; SIMPSON 2024). The proliferation of museum studies and related degrees in recent decades has created intense demand on the traditional placement model. In the USA alone, over 160 courses were offered in 2016, with new courses starting worldwide (BECKMANN 2016, 41). This growth has contributed to calls for strategic changes in how internships are understood, designed, and implemented (BECKMANN 2016, 50). There is a clear need to create new innovations in delivering internships at the greatly increased scale required by courses with high enrolments. In the literature we have found a small number of studies documenting campus museums and galleries successfully delivering WIL experiences at scale, catering to large, diverse groups for extended periods with genuine co-production opportunities (MATOS 2021; CHUI-FUN 2021). However, these examples often have limitations in student autonomy or co-production opportunities. Non-Placement WIL (NP-WIL) utilizing university museums is an emerging research area, with potential for innovative approaches to scaling WIL experiences within the convenient environments of campus-based museums and galleries.

## Industry Core and Project Case Study

The capstone subject Industry Core and Project (MULT90064) delivers on a variety of the University of Melbourne's key strategic priorities. Arts and culture are central to the University's goals in the intention "To privilege genuine interaction and inquiry-based learning in our teaching practices and learning environments" (University of Melbourne 2023). The Advancing Students and Education Strategy also focuses on future-ready graduates, aiming to "unite curriculum, careers and professions", with an expansion of "experiential learning opportunities available inside and alongside the curriculum" (University of Melbourne 2023). As a capstone, most students are undertaking the subject as the conclusion of their degree, and the subject is a bridge between the academic and the professional world. The intended learning outcomes focus on understanding of professional practice and developing skills that then could be showcased for future employers. These include students demonstrating the ability to:

- appraise the current conditions, cultures and practices of the cultural and creative industries;
- assemble professional concepts, frameworks and techniques and apply them in practical ways;
- investigate and appraise professional decision making and management in the creative and cultural industries; and,
- analyse their place within industry networks.

The University of Melbourne's Museums and Collections (M&C) Department manages many of the university's cultural collections and art and museum venues. This department operates under a mandated Academic Engagement framework, which forms the foundation for delivering innovative experiential learning and aligns directly with the University's strategic priorities. As a key professional unit within Chancellery at the University, M&C enables collaborative academic engagement with the academy into its multiple museums through an embedded academic team, dedicated to fostering and facilitating academic engagement and pedagogical innovation. The collaboration for Industry Core and Project between the M&C Department and Faculty of Arts academic staff in 2024 offered a unique opportunity to co-facilitate a novel approach to delivery, integrating the collections, facilities, and staff expertise of the Grainger Museum and wider department, with a deeper and more concentrated learning experience for students compared to

anything the Department had attempted previously. The Grainger Museum, an autobiographical museum founded by Australian experimental musician Percy Grainger, is particularly well suited to this new approach, having a diverse and accessible collection (ranging across traditional and experimental music and musical instruments, text-based personal archives, musical scores, photography, fine art, decorative arts, costume, furniture) a small footprint of just under 300 square metres, and being located within 200 metres of the main teaching spaces for the Faculty of Arts. Importantly, M&C established a new strategic approach for the Grainger Museum in 2022, which places tertiary student-focussed activity at the core of its programming, both in devoting around 80% of weekday hours during semester teaching periods solely to educational access (closed to the public), as well as physically devoting up to 30% of the exhibition spaces to student-created content (such as exhibitions drawn from the Collection or creative responses to the Collection). Supporting this approach, the Museum focuses a substantial proportion of its staff resources on developing innovative and targeted responses to pedagogical requirements across diverse disciplines and delivery contexts (Grainger Museum: Academic Engagement, 2022).

In 2024, Industry Core and Project consisted of 64 students working collaboratively over a 12-week semester to deliver four simultaneous public facing exhibitions and public program activity in the Grainger Museum. For students, this equated to attendance and participation in six two-hour workshops held fortnightly and 138-hours of practical work. At the start of semester, enrolled students signed up to one of four exhibition teams, each of which was assigned a pre-selected group of objects from the Grainger Museum Collection (see below). Within each team there were four professional roles (2 x Project Managers, 2-3 x Curators, 5 x Media and Communications staff and 4-6 x Public Programmers.) Project Managers ensured the teams functioned effectively and that the project goals and outputs were reached; Curators selected objects and shaped the curatorial theme, installation each of the displays, and produced exhibition texts; Media and Communications members produced a marketing plan, including a poster and social media promotion; and Public Programmers designed the launch program, including selecting and inviting performers and speakers, as well as completing risk assessments for all activity. Within each exhibition students self-selected their professional roles in line with their degree (e.g. only student enrolled in the Master of Curatorship were eligible to be curators) and their professional interests. Guest speakers and mentors attended fortnightly workshops and shared industry-specific expertise in areas of marketing, risk management and development of public programs. Participation in the project was a "hurdle" requirement, therefore not graded, however students also submitted a 2,000-word reflective journal documenting their learning, how they applied skills and knowledge from their degree and how the experience impacted their future career plans.

The Industry Core and Project subject utilized a combination of virtual and physical experiences to accommodate the large cohort of 64 students while ensuring meaningful engagement with the Grainger Museum Collection. The initial selection of Collection objects for each of the four teams was made by author Gaunt in collaboration with Grainger Museum Collections staff colleagues, and was based on key criteria, including:

1. Diversity of object media, offering varied teaching opportunities in handling, display conceptualization, and installation.
2. Potential for student exploration of individual artworks and broader themes, enhancing independent research skills.
3. Opportunities for a range of curatorial narratives to emerge, targeting skills of discernment and effective communication.

Each of the four Collection groups was shaped around a media type, a loose exhibition 'theme' and was allocated a specific gallery in the museum, to provide a clear structure for the student curators. For example, the 'Night at the Opera' Collection group included around 40 items drawn from the costume collection, focussing on male and female evening wear created in the first half of the twentieth century; student had to make a sub-selection from this larger group, which would be displayed on two mannequins and flat display table, with the final exhibition integrated into a gallery of the Grainger Museum which already contained a 'historical house' theme. Another group, 'Archives, decorative arts and curiosities', included the same number of objects, ranging from letters, photographs, jewellery, decorative arts, etc, from which students could make a wide range of thematic links, and students were allocated two desk cases and all surrounding wall space in another gallery. A third group consisted of around 40 2D works ('flat art'), and student curators made a sub-selection of up to eight works, requiring students to learn skills in installing mounted works into temporary frames, and hanging these on the inhouse click-rail and

nylon wire system. Within provided parameters, teams could create their own exhibition narratives, make decisions about how many objects to integrate into the exhibition, how they would be displayed according to object type and conservation requirements, and how labels and didactics would be placed. Technology played a crucial role in delivering the subject, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by the large cohort size. Due to collections safety concerns and space limitations, it was not feasible for all 64 students to physically visit the offsite Grainger Museum Store. Instead, the Padlet platform provided virtual access to pre-selected museum objects for the entire group.

Once teams had chosen their final objects virtually, and had created an exhibition design, both of which were workshopped with students then signed off by Museum staff, the Curators from each team participated in three hands-on seminars with the Grainger Collection objects over two weeks. The sessions were structured in two- to three-hour blocks, with at least one staff member working alongside and supporting each team, as they explored and problem-solved the specific challenges associated with different objects and media types. In the first session at the offsite Grainger Collection Store, teams focussed on challenges and solutions in handling diverse media types and trialling installation techniques in preparation for exhibition (for example, fragile textile handling onto mannequins, to de-crating and moving complex 3D musical instruments, and cleaning and preparing temporary museum frames); in the second session on site at the Grainger Museum, teams applied these skills to problem-solve site-specific challenges and begin installation. In the final week, each team was allocated a half day in the Museum to fully install all exhibition elements closely supervised and supported by staff. Throughout the project, students continued to use Padlet to develop their exhibition content, including object labels and room didactics, and share for critique with peers and staff. The final exhibitions featured altogether 35 diverse artworks and objects from the Grainger Museum's collection, shown across three of the museum's six galleries.

The semester of work culminated in a final day of public outcomes led by the students. On the afternoon of 14th October 2024, the exhibition opened to the public with a full four-hour program, with 130 visitors and students attending. Public programming organised by the students included four guest speakers and performers. The exhibition remained open for public visits into the beginning of the academic year in 2025.

Fig. 1 (left) 'A Night at the Opera', One element of the students' exhibition in the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne, with room brochures and labels. Image courtesy the authors

Fig. 2: (right) The public opening for the student exhibition, with guest speakers, at the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne. Image courtesy the authors

## Benefits and learnings: Authentic work integrated learning for diverse future museum workers

Industry Core and Project provided a large-scale opportunity to connect the academic and professional realms for a diverse arts management and curatorship cohort. In line with the intended learning outcomes, the subject allowed students to develop practical skills that could be presented to future employers. While students work on practical scenarios and case studies throughout their degree, they do

not get significant opportunity to engage in the *practice of curatorship or arts management*, to become as Ashton describes "cultural workers in the making" (ASHTON 2013). In this case, Industry core and Project gave students and opportunity to act and apply theories learned around curatorship, object handling, risk management, audience development and the like. Arts management students assumed professional roles within exhibition teams, including Project Managers, Media and Communications staff, and Public Programmers. Art Curatorship students gained direct 'hands-on' experience with Grainger Collection objects at the Grainger Museum and its offsite store. In addition, the ability to practice skills in a NP-WIL environment amplified the transmission of knowledge and expertise from industry professionals who gave guest lectures and provided coaching advice.

Fig. 3 Students working with objects and exhibition design elements at the Grainger Museum Store with Collections staff. Image courtesy the authors

Importantly, the facilitation of non-placement work-integrated learning through this case provided professional experience to international students who are less likely to gain internships or placements due to various barriers (PHAM 2023; PHAM et al. 2018). For those with less confidence in the workplace, Industry Core and Project provided a psychologically safe environment (EDMONDSON 1999), allowing them to test their skills in a space where they had a sense of trust with their colleagues, could speak openly about their challenges or learning needs and ask for support if necessary. This level of alignment and commitment to student wellbeing is not necessarily found with industry partners outside the university context. For example, students with accessibility needs, such as neurodiverse students, often felt more comfortable speaking to staff they had a pre-existing relationship with than they might with an external employer. As GALLANTI et al. observe in this context, "Academic museums are a particularly appropriate context for hosting trainees from university courses, as they offer a natural inclination for dialogue with students, and students are likely to find university museums less intimidating than extra-academic ones" (GALLANTI et al. 2021, 144). A key enabler for this project was the partnership between Museums and Collections staff and academics from two programs to achieve professional and pedagogical goals. Lead by authors (Dr Heather Gaunt (Museums and Collections) and Dr Kim Goodwin (Arts and Cultural Management), and Dr Matthew Martin (Art Curatorship), the subject brought together subject-matter expertise in curriculum design, museum management, curatorship and careers and employability, as well as specific knowledge of the Collection and the museum venue.

Placement based WIL generally offers opportunities for between one and three students per organisation, per semester. By conducting non-placement work-integrated learning within the museum context this project provided opportunity for 64 students. Effective engagement and learning was provided as the students were concurrently split into split into four exhibition teams allowed for well-structured peer to peer learning, in conjunction with inputs from experts across the museum and teaching team with a single aim and, simultaneously, into professional role groups (e.g. programming, marketing, curatorial). Having students divided into smaller, overlapping, groups, supported use of concurrent teaching environments to deliver to the larger cohort (for example, some role groups were being taught in collaborative learning spaces in the Arts Faculty, while others were simultaneously utilising museum environments. This

pedagogical approach allows for the subject to be scaled up and down (within the boundaries of exhibition space) depending on student numbers.

Traditional placement-based work integrated learning requires a reconceptualization of the traditional approaches to assessment design, administration, and validation (FERNS & ZEGWAARD 2014). Challenges emerge when considering the role of industry hosts in undertaking assessment tasks. NP-WIL within the university – museum context, however, overcomes some of these challenges. By having students engage in professional practice within the university setting, there is opportunity for academic and museum staff to work together to assess student's professional practice and competence in the workplace setting (McNAMARA 2013). This differs from internships where academics lack visibility over student performance in the workplace and host employers are not trained in assessing in line with curriculum. As issues around secure assessment in the age of artificial intelligence transform academic assessment, this pedagogical approach offers a practical solution. The University of Melbourne has deemed placements and observed work projects a form of "secure assessment" where assessors high confidence that rules were followed and can verify that the student completed the task.

Industry Core and Project also demonstrated the potential for seamlessly integrating virtual and physical experiences in Non-Placement Work-Integrated Learning (NP-WIL) contexts. As noted above, technology played a crucial role in all aspects of developing and delivering this innovation. By leveraging technology, the project successfully balanced collection preservation needs with the educational requirements of a large student cohort, showcasing how digital tools can enhance and scale up museum-based learning experiences. The integration of the Padlet platform into the subject also supported effective group work outside of the formal seminars, as students were able to virtually 'handle' collections, shape their exhibition narratives collaboratively online, and post updates or queries about specific collection objects to the teaching team. The project contributed to knowledge in the area of online university museum-based learning (SIMPSON 2022; GAUNT et al. 2024).

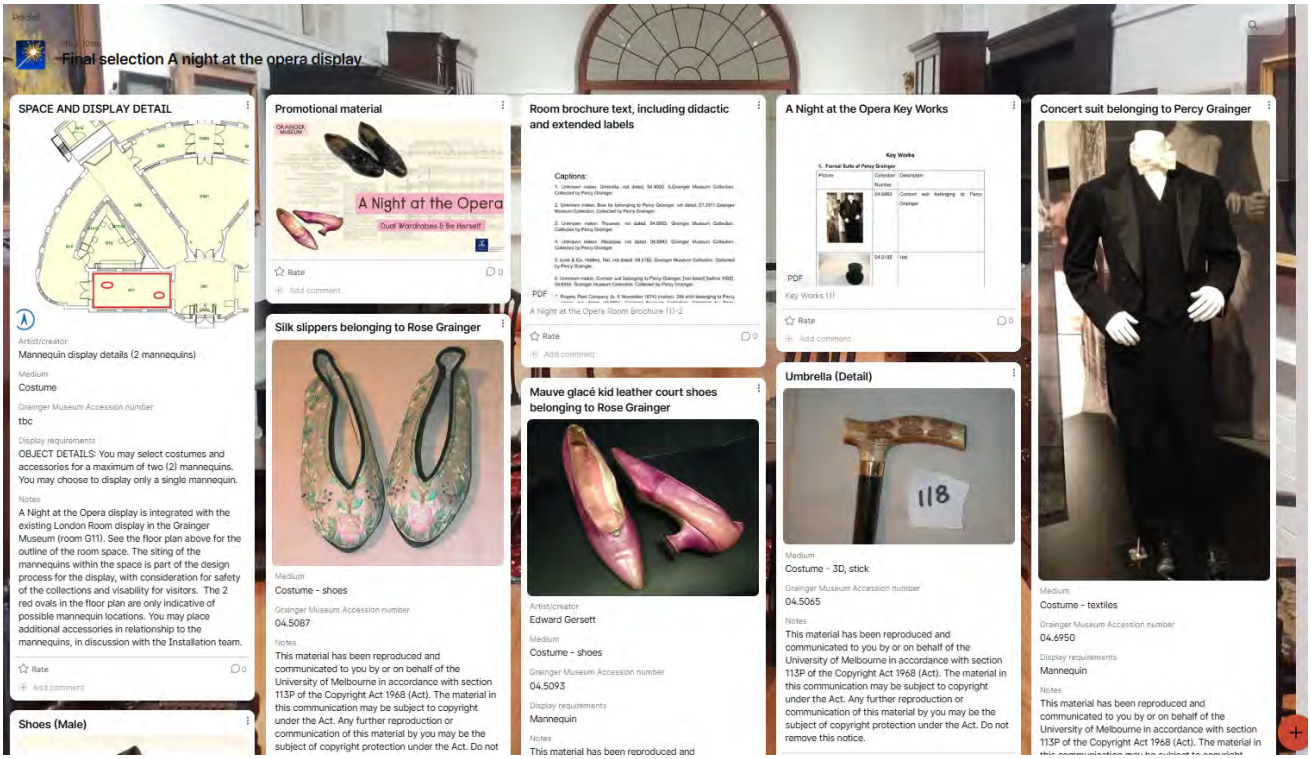


Fig. 4: An example of the use of the collaborative online platform Padlet to deliver virtual objects, as well as instructions for exhibition layout and design, in the planning stages.

One of the challenges when administering placement-based work-integrated learning programs is the engagement of hosts and educational partners. While the benefits to organisations are manifest, the role of relationship management can place added burden on academics who are not WIL specialists but often rotate through WIL subjects are part of their teaching responsibilities (FLEMING et al. 2023; APRILE et al. 2023). A key benefit of running non-placement WIL within the on-campus museum context is the

collective visibility of returns to all stakeholders. Benefits for the university-based industry partner (in this case, the museum) include delivering on one of the key roles of the organisations, their university mandate, by becoming an internal driver for pedagogical innovation through museum-based experiential learning (PLAZA 2022). Further to this, staff involved in the project as guest lecturers and subject matter experts in the areas of project management, managing risk, audience engagement along with collections and curatorial experts, anecdotally reported increased connection to the academic work of the university. For academic staff, being able to view student outputs progressively over the course of semester, along with the final showcase, gave new insight into the pedagogical process and provided a sense of secure assessment which is increasingly important given the challenges of AI.

Public outputs for the museum, showcasing the students' exhibition and programming outcomes, also support the mission of university museums in community outreach (engagement, social inclusion and civic participation) (PLAZA 2022). Creating a sense of belonging so that the university is a welcoming place for everyone in the community and showcase further opportunities for future study – this is an important role of all cultural organisations on university campuses. MARSTINE has described the "messy" challenges inherent in the "daunting proposition" of offering students opportunities to curate exhibitions in university museums and galleries, including "all too short deadlines that do not allow for sufficient introspection, exhibition plans that are sometimes not fully conceived at the outset, objectives that might contradict the institution's other scripts, and

non-professionals assuming the voice of the institution" (MARSTINE 2007, 305). As reported, however, the commitment to undertake such a process in a university museum demonstrates the "centrality of the institution to the academic mission of the university" (MARSTINE 2007, 305). Our experience of our program was indeed one of complexity and some 'messiness', but the outcomes for both students, staff and public, reported anecdotally, demonstrated its effectiveness.

## Future Opportunities

The Industry Core and Project unit in 2024 was a positive step in the development of non-placement work integrated learning situated within the museum context. The success of this pilot has led directly to the creation of a dedicated subject in the University of Melbourne's Master of Art Curatorship from 2026, Art Curatorship Core and Project (ACUR90011) led by Dr Matthew Martin, which replicates the program outlined in this paper, with a focus on curatorial students. We see even further opportunities, however, to build on the foundations of the exhibition model. While obtaining disciplinary and technical skills aligned to their sector will always be essential for future museum workers, there are additional skills that support potential success in the creative economy. BRIDGSTOCK (2009, 7) suggests given the fluidity of the creative labour market "is impossible to identify the exact destinations of graduates ahead of time and thus know what their various skill needs are going to be." The dynamic creative labour market coupled with the rapid pace of workforce change facilitated by AI and other technologies, means forecasting employer skill requirements is an ongoing challenge. One element of success is linked to personal identity, including an individual's sense of resilience and confidence in their potential work and career pathways (GOODWIN 2019). This leads to a focus on the meta-competencies that are useful to all graduates building careers in the arts sector. These meta-competencies include career management, entrepreneurship and enterprise skills, networking capability and transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity, as noted by SIMPSON (2024), is vital for those undertaking arts work given the complex stakeholder environment of arts and culture and the multifaceted nature of the work (VAN BAALEN et al. 2021). Involving students more broadly in museum operations, project management, team leadership and operations would help provide further transdisciplinary skills to benefit their future employability.

## Conclusion

The University of Melbourne's Non-Placement Work-Integrated Learning (NP-WIL) initiative with the Grainger Museum directly addresses the complex, precarious arts labour market and the difficulty, particularly for international students, in accessing traditional internships. The project offered a psychologically safe environment, less intimidating and more obtainable than external institutions, that allowed students to test and develop skills obtained over the life of the degree. Success of this project demonstrates the need for strategic partnership between academic faculty and Museums and Collections staff, in facilitating curriculum alignment and assessment practices.

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All images courtesy the authors

# OBJECT-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING WITHIN THE ZOOLOGY COLLECTIONS WORKSHOPS, GHENT UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

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## Abstract

*Object-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) is gaining contemporary popularity, yet its roots trace back to the inception of many university museums and collections. The utilization of tangible artifacts in real-time demonstrations to elucidate lessons or principles offers students a more enriched and profound educational experience compared to traditional ex cathedra lectures.*

*OBTL not only enhances the understanding of theoretical concepts but also underscores the complexities involved in meticulous observations and research endeavors. Activities such as experiments, dissections, and microscopy, which are integral components of research, become more challenging and enlightening through OBTL methodologies, contributing significantly to the generation of knowledge and tangible results. In this article we discuss the importance of OBTL in higher education and give a few examples of workshops given in the Zoology Collections of the Ghent University Museum.*

## Introduction

Using objects as teaching tools has continuously been one of the primary purposes for university collections (SIMPSON 2022). We are convinced that today, this remains relevant and important in the contemporary education of students.

Object-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) is gaining contemporary popularity (THORGERSEN et al, 2018), yet its roots trace back to the inception of many university museums and collections. The Ghent University Zoology Collections were initiated at the establishment of the university in order to be used for demonstrative purposes as objects in anatomy, morphology and zoology courses.[1] At the time, these courses were provided to students studying to obtain the degree of Doctor in Medicine and Doctor in Sciences. The utilization of tangible artifacts in real-time demonstrations to elucidate lessons or principles offers students a more enriched and profound educational experience in comparison with traditional lectures.

For Belgium, this dates to a Dutch regulation from 1816 that the three allotted cities of 'the Southern Netherlands' (Ghent, Louvine and Liège) had to provide their newly established universities with buildings and collections to illustrate lessons (University of Ghent, 1992; original: written report in the first meeting minutes of the Ghent University archives, 1817-1818).[2]

Object based teaching and learning also demonstrates how challenging observations and research can be when performing such experiments involving dissections, microscopy, preparation, analysis, lab testing and modeling; these are vital in research, and in producing knowledge and results. The diagrams, pictures and drawings that teachers use to illustrate theoretical lessons for students are the result of repeated scrutiny, devoted research and extensive study. Showing the objects next to these diagrams offers the students an insight into these studies which proceeded with theory and allows them some insight and appreciation of the effort that is involved in such research. It can also be a stimulant and encouragement to engage them in future research of their own. Higher education is meant to be experienced rather than strictly taught in a traditional theoretical manner. Theory classes particularly benefit from incorporating objects, with even greater efficacy when used they are used in an interactive manner. In this way OBTL forms an important addition to standard practical exercises.

As good as our 'perfect' pictures and schematic drawings are, they don't always generate lasting impressions. Students require practice and training in a subject to derive gratification from the learning process. OBTL fosters a more profound and enduring comprehension of the underlying theories where practicals are not available (SIMPSON & HAMMOND 2012).

1. Minutes of the first board of professors meeting at the Ghent University. 1817 (1818). Archives of the Ghent University.
2. Ghent University, 1992. 175 jaar Universiteit Gent. Book published for the 175th anniversary of the University, 336p.

In this paper we demonstrate briefly what knowledge we want to transfer to students through workshops using different objects and tools. In addition to managing a diverse array of objects, our repository includes a plethora of tools. These serve as valuable instruments through which we can effectively communicate scientific knowledge to both students and the public, thereby bridging the gap between academia and civil society.

The Ghent University Museum was one of six partners in the European Erasmus + project with a main objective of fostering and supporting innovative object-based teaching methods and practices in higher education by collecting, evaluating, enhancing and sharing methods, tools and recipes for teaching with academic heritage objects with a focus in digital and hybrid didactic contexts. The result of this cooperation is the new platform[3] . Since the establishment of the website, a new joint UMAC-Universeum working group on Teaching with Objects (OBTL working group) has been established.

## OBTL

Object based teaching and learning renders added value for students as well as teaching staff, hence the significance of its incorporation both on campus and online. As an educator, the personal experience is that OBTL cultivates a more attentive and engaged audience, contributing to a more dynamic and stimulating teaching moment.

## Interdisciplinary OBTL

The excitement intensifies when objects are approached by various areas of study or disciplines (THORGERSEN et al. 2018). This exploration introduces a wide range of intriguing possibilities in both teaching and research. It has the potential to broaden our perspectives and unveil exciting new findings, revealing that many objects possess characteristics that extend far beyond our own discipline or field of study.

One can liken the significance of multidisciplinary Object-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) to the world experienced by the flying fish when compared to other 'normal' fish: it opens up new dimensions and perspectives, allowing for a more expansive and enriched educational experience: a Flying fish sees and experiences the world from two different horizons (above and below the water line), while other fish only get to see one horizon. It is a matter of the angle of observation and the different experiences that come with it. The greater the number of perspectives from which one can observe and comprehend, the more enriching the experience and knowledge gained. To give an example, a skull (the object) can serve educational purposes in anatomy, the exploration of evolutionary principles, and connected workshops, as well as in the realms of arts, ethics, and history, In this example the object is not only usable in different disciplines but can also be used in interdisciplinary approaches and workshops, making the learning experience much broader.

The cross-disciplinary challenge sparks creativity: when studying tapestries for example, one can wonder what animals are depicted there, how accurate these drawings are, what the interest of the time was, and what influenced the makers' or the clients' choice. Another thought worth considering is the question where painters/artists got the inspiration for the objects (e.g. skulls, animals, plants) they painted or on what observations they based their drawings?

Fig. 1 UGMD_552281Homo sapiens, skull mounted according to the Beauchêne method (© GUM – Gents Universiteit museum)
Fig. 2 UGMD_54303 Equus ferus caballus, juvenile, skull mounted according to the Beauchêne method (© GUM – Gents Universiteit museum)
Fig. 3 UGMD_54307 Tapirus indicus, skull mounted according to the Beauchêne method (© GUM – Gents Universiteit museum)

3. https://teachingwithobjects.org/

The art of manufacturing stands and models is a craft that can go unnoticed in certain collections, but this art merits our attention as much as the object itself. The Ghent University Museum (GUM) collections hold a lot of dismantled and reassembled skulls using the 'method of Beauchene' (SPINNER et al. 2011). It enables students to see and study all different skull bones, without losing the overall view of how things are related in the meantime. The craftmanship behind the assemblance of these objects using beautiful brass mounts is unfortunately not often acknowledged.

Edmé François Chauvot de Beauchêne (1780, Île-de-France – 1830, Paris) was a French physician, surgeon and anatomist. He was the inventor of the disarticulated or exploded human skull used for medical teaching (MURRAY 2022), known as the Beauchêne skull. The GUM collection houses several skulls like this: 'exploded' skulls of an alligator, codfish, sea turtle, eagle, tapir, young horse and man. Felix Plateau (1841-1911; professor at Ghent University and curator of the Zoology Collections; Ghent University, 1992) added to this and personally made a series of 'exploded' and remounted arthropods (bird spider, crab, lobster, Carabid beetle). All of these were and are still used for the education of Biology – and Veterinary students at the university.

In art collections there are a lot of still life paintings which depict local fauna and flora. Identifying these allows us to study what plants and animals people encountered, cultivated, ate and otherwise used as a resource. RIJKS (2024) emphasizes the importance of this by referring to Guicciardini who wrote a chronicle about the history, geography, economy, and customs of the Low Countries;[4] this his work also contains elements of natural history.

Such paintings are said to contain symbolic iconography (COLLIGNON, 2016, 2019; MacBEAN, 2013). In the 16th and 17th century, depicting crayfish, oysters and cross sections of fish were meant to express seductive and erotic messages. Quite well known are the Dutch painters Joachim Beuckelaer (16th century) and Isaac Van Dyunen (17th century) who both made a whole series of still life paintings with fish and fish mongers. RIJKS (2024), COLLIGNON (2016, 2019) and HENFLING (2019) discuss that the recurring vibrant red salmon steaks may be related to a reference to female sexuality.

This use of religious, erotic, and satiric symbols was a common practice. The use of hidden messages in art or design is still alive (MacBEAN 2013).

## Examples from the field

The importance of OBTL lessons or workshops is illustrated by examples from the GUM field. A range of OBTL lessons/workshops is provided to the biology students that are related to. and to show some of the courses given by the Zoology professors.

*Evolution@work*: A workshop in which we try to answer three questions:

1 – do species evolve and change into new species?

2 – can species from entirely different groups evolve to look the same?

3 – can we 'see' evolution in action?

After explaining some of the principles concerned with these questions, students need to locate and recognize four skull bones (os nasale, os frontale, os praemaxillare and os maxillare) and their differences / evolutionary changes between or within species. Seeing the changes in the bones and skulls of domesticated and wild species, the students get an idea of how one can breed domesticated animals such as dogs or other species by studying the differences in skull bones between different species to get an idea of how one can have evolved to the other.

Fig. 4 UGMD_54329 Bos taurus, skull, view on the turbinalia (nasal conchae), (© GUM – Gents Universiteit museum)

4. Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi ("Description of All the Low Countries") by Lodovico Guicciardini first published in 1567 in Antwerp. Lodovico Guicciardini (1521–1589), was an Italian merchant and writer living in Antwerp, the book was originally published in Italian and later translated into other European languages.

*Characters, evolution and taxonomy of Vertebrates*:

The systematics (grouping – taxonomic division) of the Vertebrates based on character changes, all demonstrated with objects (skeletons, skeleton parts, skull, organs, animals in spirits) from our Zoology Collection. A similar lesson is offered on Invertebrates.

*Parasites, lifecycles and hosts*:

Lesson on parasites in nature, their struggles, lifecycle, opportunities and success. All demonstrated with objects from our wet collection and models.

*Pond life*:

Students take samples in the Botanical Garden's ponds. In the lab, they triage, and identify groups that were found, and eventually analyze and determine all the species caught with binocular and light microscopy.

*Bachelor's thesis*:

Students get to handle, determine and recognize all the skeletal bones of a newly acquired and cleaned skeleton of any cadaver (we use 'roadkill', animals which died in a zoo) of species that are not already represented in the collection. The students compare size and shape of the bones of the cadaver with specimens in the collection for further study and reconstruction. Afterwards the skeleton can be mounted and used for educational purposes.

## Some tools

For these practices there are different tools for different purposes. We provide you with a few examples of the GUM Zoology Collection, keeping in mind that these tools and practices can be adapted and applied to most other disciplines and collections. We like to use affordable tools such as the top – or ocular microscope camera, magnifying camera used with a portable and flexible lighting system where directional lighting can be controlled.

We were used to providing such workshops and lessons before Covid19, but ever since Covid19, OBTL and these tools gained a new purpose and public. All of this to be used in live demonstrations, and / or recordings via Teams, Zoom, and any other similar program used in other institutes. Even now, post Covid, hybrid OBTL lessons are provided for students on campus and online. This is for students who would otherwise miss classes when they are 'doubly booked' of sick at home\.

## Concluding Remarks

We contend that as a basis of understanding through pedagogy, there is no sense of 'recognition' without objects. Recognition here both means insight, understanding of knowledge by students and appreciation of collections by the community.

We state that without objects, learning is essentially all just theoretical where a transfer of knowledge between teacher and student is mostly superficial. Finally, teaching and learning with objects is much more professionally satisfying for the teacher and student than without objects. It is also more fun.

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**Keywords**: Object-based, teaching, learning, on campus, online

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# BIRD CONSERVATION: INSPIRATION FROM MUSEUMS

**Ciwuk Musiana Yudhawasthi and Yeni Azharani**

## Abstract

*The Frank Williams Museum of Bird Sculptures at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia, is a museum that was originally a private museum collection of Frank Williams, an American researcher and bird lover, founded in 2008. This museum collection was donated to Udayana University in 2015. It is now in accordance with the Chancellor's mandate to support academic and non-academic activities, such as training, research, and community service, for all Udayana University academics. Unlike museums about animals, this museum does not collect bird specimens, but bird replicas made of wood. As a reference centre for endemic birds in Bali, the Bird Sculpture Museum often holds seminars and bird-watching festivals. This can be done because the museum has a bird-watching facility on the roof of the museum and is in a strategic location in a bird migration area. Using a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach to museum managers and student groups, researchers conducted in-depth interviews to explore their experiences in social action related to the conservation of endemic bird groups that are starting to go extinct on the island of Bali. The results showed that the museum succeeded in inspiring visitors to care more about the environment and provided positive experiences in studying ornithology, ecology, and taxonomy.*

## Introduction

The Frank Williams Museum of Bird Sculptures at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia, is a museum that was originally the private collection of Frank Williams, an American researcher and bird lover, founded in 2008. The collection consists of bird replicas made of wood. There are some interesting reasons as to why the collections are made from wood. Kemenuh village is the name of the place where the museum was founded. It's commonly known as the village of the sculptor. Frank Williams asked the villagers to make sculptures of every bird found in Bali. They make sculptures that are very detailed, like the original animals, copying the colours, size, and form, and even including a copy of the bird's egg. Frank Williams not only asked them to make the sculpture, but he also inspired the sculptors to make a lot of bird sculptures and sell them as Bali's souvenirs. In the museum, there is an honour board to remember the names of the sculptors who made the highly detailed sculptures. The Bird Sculpture Museum has 500 replicas of the 262 bird species found on the island of Bali. Apart from that, the Bird Sculpture Museum also has a collection of 230 replicas of bird eggs belonging to 56 species. This museum opened to the public in 2016, signed officially by Prof. Dr. dr. I Ketut Suastika, Rector of Udayana University.

The museum comprises two floors designed to support education and observation activities. The first floor provides visitors with opportunities to learn about avian biology through curated exhibitions and interactive educational media, including the "Wheel of Birds" game, painting activities, and a mini theatre presenting audiovisual materials on birds. The exhibits cover a range of topics such as bird eggs, anatomy, plumage, and ecological habitats.

The second floor contains a reference library and offers views of the surrounding rice-field landscape. In addition, the rooftop functions as a bird-observation area, allowing visitors to observe avian species in their natural environment. To support observational activities and public education programs, the museum provides binoculars and designated observation points.

Since the museum has been open to the public, several public programs about the rare endemic birds of Bali have been attempted, as the museum's mission is seen as conservation. In 2017, the museum collaborated with the Biology Students Organization of the University of Udayana Bali (Himabio). They organized the Bali Birdwatching Race 2017[1]. The goals of this activity are not only to introduce the Biology

1. BBR 2017 Gandeng Frank William Museum Patung Burung Udayana: Jangan Tunggu Langka Untuk Jaga Satwa https://www.unud.ac.id/en/berita1886-BBR-2017-Holds-Frank-William-at-Udayana-Bird-Statue-Museum:-Do-not-Wait-become-Rare-To-Keep-Animals.html?lang=in


Figs 1-4. Collection of bird sculptures, source: the Frank Williams Museum of Bird Sculptures, Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia, 2025.

This was one of the earliest such programs. The activities were held at Payung Mountain Cultural Park, Kutuh, South Kuta Selatan, Badung. They involved students, lecturers, and local people in Desa Kutuh and Payung Mountain Cultural Park, and a group of observers of Bali Kokokan Birds. Public lectures were held to open the program; after that, they conducted a program of observations in Serangan Island, Bali. The Bali Birdwatching Race closed with two competitions, namely one on bird observations and an online photography competition.

In October 2018, to welcome the natural phenomena of the migration of raptor birds, the Frank Williams Museum of Bird Sculpture at the University of Udayana broadened its collaboration with more partners. These included Minpro Rothschildi FKH University of Udayana, the Bird Study Club Curik Bali Biology Department FMIPA University of Udayana, KPB Kokokan, and the SAB Wildlife Photographer Community. They held an 'Observing the Migration of Raptor Bird Festival'. In this program, there were also two activities: an 'on-site migration watch' was held on a transmission unit of TVRI Denpasar at Gunung Sega Mountain Karangasem; and a one-day seminar entitled '*Sang Garuda di Pulau Dewata*' was held on October 27, 2018, in the University of Udayana. The 'on-site migration watch' in Sega Mountain, Karangasem, Bali was followed by 60 participants from the university and the public. The participants observed three raptor birds, namely, the Chinese Sparrowhawk, the Oriental Honey Buzzard, and the Japanese Sparrowhawk that fly from Agung Mountain to Sega Mountain. They noted that 2.064 birds flew to Sega Mountain Karangasem over a period of 6 hours (between 8.00 and 14.00).

For the next year[2]The museum collaborated with the Post Graduate Program of the University of Udayana, Minpro Satwa Liar Rothschildi FKH University of Udayana, the Bird Study Club Curik Bali Himabio FMIPA Unud, KPB Kokokan, and the SAB Wildlife Photographer Community to hold World

2. The museum won a national award in 2019, see https://www.unud.ac.id/in/headline3135-Universitas-Udaya-na-Raih-Anugerah-Purwakalagrha-Indonesia-Museum-Award-2019.html

Shorebirds Migratory Day 2019 in April 2019. They held seminars, book discussions, and a workshop on GPS-Mapping Training for Integrated Coastal Conservation Projects in West Bali National Park. In October 2019, the museum collaborated with the Ornithologist Union and the Asian Raptor Research and Conservation Network. They held the 11th Asian Raptor Research and Conservation Network International Symposia[3].

All the activities stopped with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, especially observations in the field. At that time, the museum was only able to conduct an online webinar. The webinar entitled 'Birds Connect Our World' was to celebrate World Migratory Bird Day[4] 2020. In September 2021, the museum collaborated with the Biology Students Organization (Himabio), University of Udayana to hold an international webinar entitled Marine Biodiversity Conservation[5]. The goals of this international webinar were to give current information about biodiversity and marine life, and information about threats to biodiversity and threat prevention measures. This webinar was followed by more than 200 online participants.

In 2023 the Bird Sculpture Museum facilitated and was involved with the *Asian Waterbird Census* (AWC)[6]. AWC is an annual activity based on a voluntary network coordinated by Wetlands International Indonesia in conservation efforts for water birds and wetlands as their habitat. This activity is run together with the international census which covers Africa, Europe, and America, under the International Waterbird Census (IWC). In Indonesia, this activity was jointly organized by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Wetlands International Indonesia, the EKSAI Foundation[7], Bird Indonesia (Burung Indonesia)[8], Birdnesia, and Bird Sea Indonesia. The aim of the AWC is to collect annual information on waterbird populations in wetlands as a basis for evaluation of important sites, monitoring of populations, and monitoring the annual status and condition of censused wetlands. This census activity not only involved Udayana University FMIPA Biology students but also invited Mapala "Wanaprastha Dharma" Udayana University (Mapala "WD" UNUD) to conduct bird observations in the ITDC Nusa Dua Lagoon. Using binoculars, the volunteers observed and recorded the birds found. These included: Pecuk padi belang, Pecuk Padi Hitam, Blekok Sawah, Cangak Merah, Cangak Abu, Kuntul Karang, Kuntul Kecil, Kuntul Besar, Trinil Pantai, Kuntul Kerbau, Kowak Malam Merah, Kowak Malam Abu, and Pecuk Padi Besar.

Based on the activities undertaken by the Frank Williams Museum of Bird Sculpture, we pose the following questions.

1. How does the museum encourage visitors, especially students, to become agents of change in environmental care?
2. How do students view the role of museums in increasing awareness of the environment?

## Methods

This research was a qualitative study that explored phenomena with individuals or groups as research subjects with data collected from the original environment, without the researcher's intervention, and analysed using the researcher's interpretation (CRESWELL & CRESWELL, 2018). This research used qualitative data, based on the characteristics of this study, in the form of perceptions, understandings, and personal experiences of the managers of the museum and the museum visitors. Research data were obtained through an in-depth interview process with research informants. Criteria for informants from the museum visitors are (1) they join the museum program regularly, (2) they make a promotional program and persuade other people to join, and (3) they are interested in collaborating with the other stakeholders to enhance the conservation program. The informants of this research are the head of the museum and two students from the Biology Student Organization.

Research data were processed and analysed using matrix analysis (MILES & HUBERMAN, 1994). Data analysis was carried out by compiling data collected by grouping data by category, breaking it down into units, synthesizing data, compiling data based on patterns, sorting data to be studied, and making conclusions.

3. https://raptor-indonesia.org/2019/05/02/the-11th-arrcn-international-symposium-bali-indonesia/
4. https://www.migratorybirdday.org/
5. Museum Patung Burung Frank Williams Universitas Udayana Bali. 2021. HIMABIO Udayana with Frank Williams Museum Patung Burung organizing International Webinar on Marine Biodiversity Conservation. Accessed 26 July 2023. https://biologi.unud.ac.id/posts/himabio-udayana-with-frank-williams-museum-patung-burung-organizing-international-webinar-on-marine-biodiversity-conservation
6. https://south-asia.wetlands.org/our-approach/healthy-wetland-nature/asian-waterbird-census/
7. https://yayasaneksai.org/
8. https://burung.org/en/about-us/

## Theories

DEWEY (1938) believed that the learner's individual interest was a crucial element of learning, as without genuine interest, there is no identification with the material and no active effort to resolve the issue. DEWEY (1938) theorized that all genuine education came from experience, or practical, hands-on learning, but recognized that not all experiences would be educative. However, HEIN (2000) is aware of the limitations of Dewey's thinking, commenting that "Dewey's criteria of 'lively, vivid and interesting', along with good accessibility and ample amenities, may be sufficient for entertainment. They are necessary, but not sufficient for education" (HEIN 2000, 3).

HEIN (2005) argues that museum activities need to be connected and engaging and integrate activities that lead to growth and categorizes four educational possibilities for museums, namely: traditional lecture and text (the systematic museum), discovery learning (the discovery museum), stimulus-response (the orderly museum), and constructivism (the constructivist museum). The systematic museum employs didactic, expository education. It has sequential exhibitions with a beginning and an end, which are easy to comprehend, tell a 'true' story, and offer no alternative explanations. Text, in the form of labels or panels, explain what is to be learned and is arranged hierarchically, from simple to complex. In this model, the subject is analysed and then presented, focusing on the individual units that can most easily be learned. The orderly museum is similar but makes no claim for the objective truth, although it includes reinforcing components that reward appropriate responses. In this case, the pedagogical model focuses on the teaching method, and only the teacher/curator needs to have a clear idea of what should be learned.

In the discovery museum, the visitor is free to explore and learns by seeing and doing, instead of being told. Although displays ask questions that prompt the visitor to discover the answer for themselves, visitors engage in activity that leads towards accepted results and always reveals conclusions and concepts that are independent of the learner. HEIN (2000, 33) questions this and argues that, if everyone will get the correct results every time, is the activity experimental? "We cannot claim that someone has discovered something when there was no chance for error". The pedagogy for discovery learning allows visitors to manipulate, explore and experiment, but reach the desired goal.

HEIN (2000) unabashedly favours the constructivist museum, an accessible place where structure and presentation depend on the educational needs of the visitor, not the properties of the objects on display. The museum presents various perspectives and serves a wide range of learning styles, enabling visitors to experiment and connect with objects and ideas through an extensive variety of activities and experiences that relate to their life experiences and encourage social interaction. In this model, the pedagogy focuses on experiences that stimulate and challenge, presenting the museum as an "encyclopaedia or catalogue, not a textbook" (HEIN 2000, 38) and allowing visitors to pick and choose what to pursue.

Apart from the perspective of the strategic exhibition in the museum, social psychologists' perspectives can be used to observe how the attitude of visitors can enhance the experience. Social psychologists have identified empathy as a motivating factor of altruistic or prosocial behaviour (BATSON, 2011; HOFFMAN, 1984). Further research suggested that inducing a sense of connectedness and commonality led to feelings of empathy for others and subsequent prosocial action (BORSHUK 2004). Drawing on this research, museologists have recognized museums' potential to be sites that elicit empathy for the purpose of inspiring social change. Research on museology has determined that museums can and do inspire empathy (GOKCIGDEM 2016). Several museums have employed certain strategies, such as creating emotional discomfort, intending to provoke empathy, and inspiring action (HAYES 2016, SIMEONE 2016). Few have evaluated the long-term success of these efforts to motivate visitors to change their actions or behaviour (TOMCZUK 2018).

In the Bird Sculpture Museum case, theories of transformative learning have also influenced museum practice. The theory of transformative learning posits that a transformational experience rewrites the framework through which an individual sees the world, thus altering their actions and behaviours (MEZIROW 2000). Museologists have advocated for designing exhibits for transformative learning to achieve impacts on visitors' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (GARNER et al. 2016). While the impact of transformative learning has been evaluated in some museum contexts, researchers have not examined whether it plays a role in shaping the typical visitor's post-visit behaviours. Clearly, museum professionals are being intentional about their attempts to inspire visitors to social action. By designing for empathy, hope, and transformative learning, they have drawn on tested theories in other fields to create in-exhibition and hands-on experiences that may lead visitors to action.

## Discussion

This paper aims to explore whether the museum successfully drives students to be agents of change in terms of caring for the environment and how the students' perspective towards the role of the museum in enhancing students' caring for the birds and the environment.

### RQ 1: How does the museum encourage visitors, especially students, to become agents of change in environmental care?

According to the museum constructivism theory, the museum offers different perspectives and assists various learning styles, which enables visitors to experiment and connect with objects and ideas through a wide variety of activities and experiences that relate to their life experiences and encourage social interaction. In the context of the bird museum, the museum facilitates visitors to learn more about the birds by offering bird observation. The observation involves not only the visitors but also anyone who is concerned with nature, particularly those groups interested in birds. In the observation, the students, along with other participants, watch birds' behaviours, count the number of birds, as well as pay attention to the breeding of Bali's rare endemic birds. Furthermore, they also learn that the existence of birds affects the environment. They are aware that the migration depends on the condition of the environment. Once the environment is degraded or in some way different, those birds will not want to pass by the area, as they cannot find food. Through participation in the events, people discover that several areas are damaged and are no longer visited by the birds; they can then educate themselves and the local people on how to care for the environment, as well as monitor the development of the birds' reproduction. In this case, the students are encouraged to social interaction. The relationship built between the participants and the local people demonstrates the result of the programs provided by the museum.

### RQ 2: How do students view the role of museums in increasing awareness of the environment?

From the social psychologist's perspective (HOFFMAN 1981, BATSON 2011), inducing a sense of connectedness and commonality leads to feelings of empathy for others. In terms of the birds' museum, the programs could enhance prosocial action that the museum stimulated with a series of program collaborations that involved the stakeholders of bird conservation, not only the lecturer, but also the local people, the government, and other communities. They make observations, make decisions, and solve problems together. So, the empathy will grow, especially centred on the question of how to conserve the birds. The informants in this research said that it is not easy to persuade people to join this program voluntarily. Moreover, when the volunteers have joined the program, it is also challenging to make everyone focus on what they observe. However, after they see how splendid the birds and the nature of Bali are with all the biodiversity, they change their mind. They focus more and realize that all ecosystems are an outcome of an interplay of factors, so they have a big responsibility to preserve them.

The museum presents various perspectives and serves a wide range of learning styles, enabling visitors to experiment and connect with objects and ideas through a wide variety of activities and experiences that relate to their life experiences and encourage social interaction. In this model, the pedagogy focuses on experiences that stimulate and challenge, presenting the museum as an encyclopaedia or catalogue. The theory of transformative learning posits that a transformational experience rewrites the framework through which an individual sees the world, thus altering their actions and behaviours (MEZIROW 2000). To be involved with the world, the Frank Williams Bird Sculpture Museum actively campaigns to build the responsibilities of young generations for supporting bird life. This is done not just by giving some knowledge about the birds themselves, but also the skills to observe, breed, conserve, and preserve.

During the interviews for this research, some informants stated that initially, they joined the program simply because they liked the idea of photographing the birds, climbing the mountain, and enjoying the scenery. However, when they participate in the program repeatedly, they develop a sense of care for the birds and the environment. Hence, it can be concluded that the museum stimulates the young generation to build good prosocial characteristics that are derived from habits and hobbies. Through the programs, the museum indirectly teaches good values to students, such as caring for the environment and collaboration. Besides, the museum stimulates the students to be social entrepreneurs and inspires people to act compassionately.

## Conclusion

Frank Williams Bird Sculpture Museum of Udayana University has a strategic role in building the character of visitors through consistent, interesting, and innovative public programs. Involving visitors actively is a strategy to improve the interpretation of collections for visitors with a sublimation approach. Empathy for the environment can be formed by providing a variety of activities that are loaded with approaches to problem- and project-based education. Everyone is given a challenge that encourages leadership, communication skills, working with integrity, and working with a team with full responsibility. So, all university museums can formulate their programs in detail where the goal is not only to increase knowledge, but skills and a positive attitude towards their environment.

The Bird Sculpture Museum has succeeded in managing programs that can inspire young people in social interaction and social action, and even make them aware of the importance of paying attention to the natural environment, especially endemic birds in the Bali region. It is proven that social function can be done by the university museum. Therefore, all the university museums should have a mission to implement their social function.

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Museum Communication; Social Action; Social Function Museum; Phenomenology

# UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS: GLOBAL BY NATURE

**Andrew Simpson**[1] **and Gina Hammond**[2]

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We have taken the title of the opening article by John Wetenhall as the collective title for this issue of the University Museums and Collections Journal. There are two very different collections at George Washington University, one based on the history of the nation's capital, a collection of "Washingtoniana" and the other, an extensive collection of textiles, both came to GWU in 2011. In a way they represent the local and the global. Yet the article clearly advocates for the global characteristics and global potential for any museum or collection in a higher education setting.

The individual stories that follow show us that university museums are, by their very nature, global institutions—even when they primarily only serve a local campus. Craig Hadley poses a hypothetical about the sale of art from a college collection and investigates some of the ethical implications that emerge from such a scenario. Here the financial value of collection items, a global value itself, crashes onto the jagged shoreline of economic rationalism in a way that questions the nature of the educational institution itself. This is an issue that already has attracted much analysis and commentary (e.g. WETENHALL 2022).

Richard Fraser from McGill University's Maude Abbott Medical Museum shows us what can be deduced from analysis of some of the early 20th century medical collections of human organs. The close historic association of higher education and medical training means that these types of collections can be found throughout the world.

Stavros Vlizos and Maria Tsouka from the Ionian University take an institution-wide look at university collections and provide some propositions on how to structure the development of digital narratives across the campus collections to develop new forms of engagement extending well beyond the campus. This is a global challenge and an opportunity for every higher education institution with collections. The obvious question that attracts occasional recurrent attention (e.g. BOYLAN 1999, SIMPSON 2022) follows - is there a higher education institution that doesn't have collections?

Dagmar Schweitzer de Palacios and colleagues report from the University of Marburg's investigations into higher education-based collections of human remains and sensitive religious/ethnographic material. Their project is an analysis of the idea of sensitivity and its iterative interconnections with ethics and agency. Some theoretical analysis is undertaken that may mark a pathway forward that could allow appropriate institutional and museological responses. This, of course, is essential for understanding provenance questions and the current global issue of restitution and return (SCHOLTEN et al. 2025).

Heather Gaunt and Kim Goodwin outline their experiences working with the Grainger Museum at the University of Melbourne on an innovative workplace experience program involving a campus museum. This is relevant to any higher education institution anywhere in the world that teaches museum studies, curatorship or any similar program and wants to maximise the potential learning experiences through their own organisation's museums.

Dominick Verschelde and Marjan Doom from the Ghent University Museum cover the history of the zoological collections and their application to object-based teaching and learning, another global topic in the pedagogy of higher education. Their piece covers how the work of Edmé François Chauvot de Beauchêne with medical teaching collections that was expanded into new zoological realms at Ghent. It underscores the global interest in teaching with objects and UMAC's recent initiatives in this area (e.g. GUERRY et al. 2025).

Ciwuk Musiana Yudhawasthi and Yeni Azharani tell the story of Frank Williams Museum of Bird Sculptures at Udayana University and how the collection there has inspired an interest in environmental issues and prompted different communities to link up and observe the global phenomena of bird migration. Not only do all the writings in this issue of the journal touch on the global themes of university museums, but they have also emerged globally from the Americas, Europe and the Asia Pacific region.

Depending on the original reason for collection development, the scope of university collections is often international. Many university museums hold artifacts, artworks, or scientific specimens gathered from around the world. These collections can often reflect centuries of academic research, field studies,

archaeological expeditions, and international collaborations. This allows the museum a global narrative: exhibitions can cover world art, world cultures, biodiversity across continents, or planetary scientific processes and topics.

University museums support faculty and student research with an international reach through global research and teaching networks. They participate in global fieldwork (e.g., anthropology, geology, biology), loan objects to other museums worldwide, and join cross-institutional research projects such as work on international archaeological sites, worldwide biodiversity surveys and global conservation initiatives.

The global nature of the university museum aligns with the fact that universities must embrace global issues and have a global perspective. Their social contract should extend beyond national borders. There are many other global dimensions to the work of higher education. Students from all over the world use university museum collections in teaching laboratories, seminars, and for different modalities of experiential learning. An increasing number of university museums share digital collections internationally, allowing scholars across the globe to study objects remotely. Many universities will have a component (sometimes a significant component) of international students and staff. The university museum is a place for cross-cultural exchange and understanding (HAMMOND & SIMPSON 2014). Joint degree programs or courses with overseas universities often incorporate museum resources.

University museums are increasingly involved in, global ethical conversations about repatriation of cultural heritage, the provenance and colonial history of collections, collaborative curation with descendant or source communities. These activities on the interface between civic and academic communities make them active participants in global cultural diplomacy. Many university museums not only serve local audiences but also; host touring exhibitions from abroad, create online exhibits accessed worldwide and partner with foreign universities, NGOs, and governments. As centres of knowledge, they act as bridges between global research and the public. University museums often tackle issues of worldwide relevance—climate change (SIMPSON 2024), migration, biodiversity loss, technological change—by using collections as both evidence and teaching tools. Their global approach reflects the university's mission to address universal challenges. Any university collection can have global connections with scholarship. A collection of "Washingtoniana" is relevant to similar collections and archives from national capitols.

University museums occupy a distinctive position in the museum landscape, shaped by their educational mission and academic setting (PLAZA 2022, SIMPSON 2022). With a primary purpose of a combination of the generation and dissemination of knowledge, museum practice is integrated with scholarly inquiry. They can be places of innovation, experimentation, and risk because of this academic environment. They can experiment with new interpretive frameworks, collaborative curation with students and the community, experiment with interdisciplinarity as a way of linking different segments of the academy (MILKOVA & KOVACH 2024), and they can be laboratories for museum pedagogy and professional training (KWAN & SIMPSON 2021, 2024).

Apart from the edited volumes of the journal noted above, many of the individual articles in different issues of the University Museums and Collections Journal frequently address international and comparative issues and topics. This reflects the truly global nature of the professional community that the International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) continues to foster.

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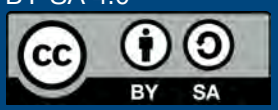


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