

A Note on Museum Research

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Although the museum profession perceives research – along with display and preservation – as one of the basic functions of museums, there hardly exists consensus on the precise nature of museum research. The issue is controversial, not only due to the considerable diversity of museums – with different missions, subject-matter, size, governing bodies, etc. – but also because there are almost as many different perceptions of research as there are museums. Research is indeed a complex concept and nowadays it may even be considered politically incorrect to discuss the issue. Nevertheless, in these times of lively ideological debate in ICOM, we should keep in mind the importance of museum research. Researchers ask questions about the world we live in and the results of their work are not mere opinions. Confronted with the outcome of research, one does not agree or disagree but asks, “where is your evidence?”. Particularly in the case of museum research, this evidence is the collection itself. Put like this, research sounds like an intrinsic characteristic of museums – and it is.

> Objects are the physical interface between the information they contain and the public. The only way to disclose that information and to provide the necessary clues for interpretation is research. What kind of research is required and how thorough it should be, depends on the museum and its ambition and mission. Museums have to meet certain professional standards in order to be allowed to call themselves a museum. These standards include requirements on what they should know about their collections, as well as on the way they curate and display their objects. Without preliminary (and on-going) research, exhibits would become meaningless and collections mere repositories of mysterious objects. Therefore, at least elementary research activities are needed to meet the minimum requirements to attain museum status and to fulfil a public mission.

> For historical reasons, the issue of “museum research” may be easier to address in university museums. Since the late 17th century, universities have created museums as an essential tool for, and as a result of, teaching and research. Botanical gardens go back even earlier, to the 16th century. The first museum in the modern sense of the term, the Ashmolean, created in 1683 at the University of Oxford, included a school of natural history with lecture and demonstration rooms, a chemistry laboratory, a library and an exhibition room. Thousands of universities all over the world have followed this model, with disciplines covering almost all ranges of human inquiry.

> Much of our knowledge of the world is based on research performed in university museums and after three centuries of activity these hold, and are responsible for, vast scientific archives. Today, due to the development of science, the introduction of new techniques and other factors too complex to address here, the museum object is no longer the prime focus of research. This has resulted, logically, in a decline in the use of objects for research, particularly in the fields of the life sciences, geology, archaeology and anthropology. Being a worldwide phenomenon, the decline has been going on for some time now and has had a major impact on the position of university museums within their parent organisations – collections were put under pressure and some have been lost forever.

> Two important points must be recognised. Firstly, the fact that collections are not regularly used for research *today* does not necessarily imply that objects and specimens have lost their research value. The history of knowledge demonstrates that the use of collections cannot be predicted and great scientific advancements would not have been possible save for the availability of the right specimens at the right moment in time. These collections are archives belonging to the whole of humankind and should be regarded, maintained and made accessible as such. Secondly, several university museums are

introducing modern techniques and approaches to collection research, providing ample proof that it is possible to keep up with the “latest trends” and showing that collection-based research continues to be relevant to contemporary science.

> Trends come and go, but university collections will continue to be irreplaceable archives of both present and past biodiversity on Earth and, by their distinct nature, represent material evidence of the ever-inquisitive human mind and its quest for understanding and mastering natural phenomena. Collection-based research, together with teaching and research, will hence doubtlessly continue to form part of the triple mission of university museums – in the future as in the past.

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