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Universities, museums, collections and heritage: A time of challenge and change

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The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant new challenges for universities, as it has for all sectors of society. It is reshaping the global higher education sector profoundly. Its impact will be felt for many years into the future. However, universities and their museums and collections have been confronted with difficult times before. In fact, the university is seen as one of the most persistent and resilient of human organisations, reshaping and adapting as society changes and new challenges emerge. Universities have survived great wars, revolutions, cultural shifts, religious upheavals, plagues, tyrants and despots. With this sort of a track record extending over millennia, you would think there should be grounds for optimism about higher education after humanity either defeats, or more likely learns to somehow live within tolerance levels of the virus and the current pandemic abates.

Around twenty years ago, Universeum (in 2000) and UMAC (in 2001) were created in what was seen as a period of crisis and profound change for university museums and collections. In 2000, the representatives of collections and museums of twelve European universities met at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, and created the Universeum network, aiming at the preservation and promotion of academic heritage in Europe. The meeting resulted in the Declaration of Halle 'Academic Heritage and Universities: Responsibility and Public Access' (16 April 2000). UMAC was formed the following year after a series of meetings on the state of the museums and collections of higher education globally after much debate and advocacy within ICOM (Nykänen 2018). Both professional associations were formed out of a need to take action because of perceived threats to collections and heritage in the higher education sector. Both associations have charted independent courses in the ensuing twenty years, Universeum on behalf of an essentially European constituency and UMAC on behalf of a global membership.

Over the years, UMAC and Universeum have often collaborated in seminars, public statements and projects. There is significant overlap between UMAC and Universeum objectives, strategies and communities. Many UMAC members are also Universeum members and vice-versa. However, a joint conference had never been organised until this year. Although planned long before COVID-19, it is appropriate that UMAC-Universeum 2021 happens with higher education in the grip of its most profound period of challenge and change in the last two decades. The time to discuss the present and help shape the immediate future is now.

Apart from the shared aspects of organisational ancestry, Universeum and UMAC have other reasons for collaboration at this time. It is the European model that has become the globalised edition of higher education in organisational form. It is challenged not only by the big questions that daunt humanity at the present time such as climate change, environmental catastrophism, inequality and social injustice, but it is also challenged by economic and existential questions related to purpose that test its own capacity for adaptability, resilience and even survival.

At times of crisis and transition such as this, how we work together as an international community, sharing problems, ideas and new perspectives is both an aspect of chance and also a crucial element for understanding the potential for change. This is therefore an underlying theme of this joint Universeum UMAC 2021 conference. In 2020, we had new opportunities to share our experiences of

COVID-19 and its impact on our practices, our capacity to respond, survive and adapt (Cioppi et al. 2020, Simpson & Lourenço 2020). This 2021 joint conference is building on these experiences to explore broad lessons of adaptability and resilience. Although there is much diversity among university museums and collections from across the world, we all share the need to remain relevant to contemporary higher education, particularly regarding the core business of research and teaching, but we must also remain relevant to numerous university communities and to society at large. This need is especially important in times of crises, which the COVID-19 pandemic has made more salient. We must find a way to clearly define and articulate the relevance and potential of university collections and museums in times of social, economic and cultural uncertainty. This is the underlying purpose of the joint UMAC Universeum 2021 conference. There are three distinct themes in the discourse of this conference.

Collections: Documenting the Past and the Present

The relevance of university collections in time of crises: when the future is unknown we try to mobilize knowledge of a known past. A first reaction to understanding COVID-19 was to mobilize a body of knowledge already established in the past and likely to provide answers. Some of those answers were provided by scientific collections preserved in various universities, research institutes or museums (i.e. samples of Spanish flu virus; 1960s artificial breathing machine). How much do university collections participate in the building of new knowledge? What collections are being created as a result of COVID-19?

Collections and Museums Closed: New Ways of Access

Access to our collections for the many: with lockdowns, closed borders, limitations on mobility, this pandemic raises the question of the accessibility of our collections and museums, whether for research, teaching or communication and engagement more broadly. How much did we learn about this forced digital experience on the one hand, and the need to “keep some distance” during physical engagement with our museums and collections? How much can we learn from these experiences? What has become new practices and what are their limits?

Engaging with Society, Taking Stances

University museums have a special position in breaking through the walls between the public and the academy to facilitate dialogue. This is a very important but difficult role in these polarized times with a growing distrust towards science and knowledge elites, in this era of ‘Fake News’ and conspiracy-driven activism. The communication of knowledge generated by universities is therefore, more than ever, of great importance for the academic community. How do university museums pick up on this role of assisting academics to reach out to all parts of society? How do they position themselves in these lively contemporary debates? Do they act merely as facilitators or conduits of information or do they take a stand as advocates?

At the time of our writing, over 300 participants have registered for the conference, from almost 50 countries around the world. A total of 36 oral papers will be presented. For the first time, video submissions were accepted. This is the second time we have used our journal as a platform for the annual conference abstracts. The first time was volume 11 issue 1 for the conference in Kyoto in 2019, the last time UMAC could hold a face to face annual conference because of the disruption of COVID-19. As you will see in this collected volume of abstracts, there is plenty that fills out the three streams outlined above. There are examples on rethinking many of the practices, services and professional activities conducted by, and delivered through, university museums and collections.

There are many examples of how the pivot to digital formats has prompted a rethink of both practice and purpose.

There are also a number of round tables and workshops that tackle some of the big challenging issues confronting humanity, including sustainability and universal access to culture and identity. There are arguments in favour of advocacy and influence through our unique position between the academic world and the civic world, rather than merely acting as conduits of information. University museums and collections and the people who work with them will need to be purposeful and proactive. The 'post-covid' world of higher education will probably look quite different from what many of us know. Now is the time to rethink our practices reassess our purpose and advocate for the value that we bring not just to our universities, but also more broadly to society and the future.

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