

SCIENCE AND THE ART OF LOOKING

University Museums and the treatment of academic natural history collections

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Abstract

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, many European and North American academic institutions began to acquire extensive natural history collections, assembled out of all the strange objects that a rapidly expanding world provided. Not only is this testimony to the rising ambition of the Western world, but also to the increasingly important role that the study of nature came to play in Western intellectual life. Moreover, the increasing value placed by society as a whole in the academic world provided scientific organisations with the opportunity to expand these collections.

But the scientific profession has changed dramatically since those days. Many natural history collections have arisen out of the need for academic study material and have remained the property of academic institutions, even in age in which they are no longer the focus of academic investigation and have, as such, been replaced by newer and more advanced methods. This places the keepers of these collections in a dilemma: for, if academic research and education do no longer require the maintenance of extensive natural history collections, what use can they serve in an academic environment? Should they be treated as historical objects, as part of the university's or institute's history? Or should they be donated to, for instance, educational institutions that can further interest and support for the university's work?

For that reason, it is essential for keepers of academic natural history collections to analyse the shifting information structure of the objects in their care, from their primary scientific role, to their visual explanatory capacities and their cultural, historic value. Additionally, it must be taken into account how scientific research itself has changed - particularly in the 20th century. Objects of science are said to be highly compatible with contemporary educational aims because of their self-explanatory power and visual clarity. This applies mainly to collections that have been assembled in the period in which academic research relied heavily on visual techniques. New (destructive) techniques and a focus on a different, microscopic scale, certainly have reduced the expansion of such collections. Over time, their identity will inevitably shift from their primary scientific profile to an historic one.

University museums need to develop awareness of these questions and acquire an identity both as a keeper of historical material related to academic research - and therefore part of the university itself - and as a representative of the academic world to an increasingly estranged public. Issues of the presentation of these collections, educational use as a form of functional preservation, dilemmas of restoration (restore the object's visual clarity or stabilise the historic object?) as well as the research goals of the university museum itself will be addressed in this paper.

Biographical information

Marieke van der Duin (1971) was educated at the Amsterdam Reinwardt Academy of Museology. She is currently working on a re-assessment of the extensive zoological collection of the Groningen University Museum (Groningen, Netherlands). She is currently working on a thesis with the title *The collective encoding of space. The relevance of Michel Foucault's heterotopia for modern heritage theory.*

Ilja Nieuwland (1970) graduated in History from Groningen University in 1995 and has since worked in Potsdam and with the Netherlands Organisation for

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