

Egyetemi doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei

**UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS IN HUNGARY AND
CENTRAL – EASTERN EUROPE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ORGANIZING
MUSEUM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN**

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DEBRECENI EGYETEM

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I. The goals of the thesis

The radical changes that have been taking place in society as of late and thus in the sector of higher education (globalization, the European Higher Education Area, the claim for a European Research Area, the introduction of the Bolognese system) put new tasks and expectations on universities. Consequently the importance of museums and collections inside the universities also has new aspects. As the industrial revolution swept away the medieval university, since industry required new professions, so globalization destroyed the bastion of the 200 year old “new aged” university. The second revolution of the universities is still going on. The museums and collections that are held by Institutes of higher education and were established strictly for teaching and research are trying to be relevant among those changes, but in the new university and the new disciplines they seem to lose their traditional purpose. The question of financing also puts new challenges on universities as they rapidly attempt to work out new non-traditional strategies, so the market economy, the market-oriented educational Institute has been forming. To remain in the international-education market, to be able to continue keeping the number of students, to make markets and corporations cooperate with the universities, the universities have to take every possible tool into consideration. The role of the university museum – as a mirror of the institutes’ scientific work – is becoming more emphasized and more important as they evolve and change along with their university. University museums have to focus on the formation of new identities in which, on the one hand they preserve their established identities and roots, while still being applicable and desirable meeting places for their mother Institutes as well as continuing to serve the communities.

In the past 2 or 3 decades the Institutes of higher education, which includes museum collections, have been going through deep changes on account of historical events and their expanded role in society. An appreciation of the value of the past and the preservation of old traditions have become more important as Institutes struggle to find their roots so as to clarify their role in the chaotic society full of the complications of a globalized world. These controversial and ambiguous reasons are why university museums are uncertain, reorganizing or even closing.

In my thesis I deal with a neglected topic of museology, i.e. university museums, so I describe the nature of the museums and collections held by Institutes of higher education in Hungary. I attempt to find the reasons for their existence and their role in the life of their parent Institute. I also focus on the specifications of the university museum as a special museological entity. Furthermore, my research provides the first enumeration and examination of university museums and collections

in Hungary, as well as those non-registered entities, which only its mother institute refers to as a “museum” as it is often these sorts of phenomena that initiate the preservation of heritage.

A fundamental aspect of this work is the fact that the University of Debrecen was preparing for its centennial celebrations in 2012. To be more specific the university was planning to open a university museum that would present its traditions, history and the scientific life of the institute. Such a task demands a deep understanding of the topics, hence the study of the practical realities behind a well-working university museum, as it was my intent that such work would lead to success in a museum at Debrecen. Accordingly I examined Hungarian university museums and collections and did so in preparation for the planned Museum of the University of Debrecen, as that is the social-, educational-, and cultural environment where the planned museum would operate. Special attention was also paid to the challenges that would ultimately arise from such a museum operating within Hungary and how these challenges would influence the project and what strategies would be necessary that would lead to solutions. The thesis includes the processes involved in the organization of the Museum of the University of Debrecen and also gives clues to future strategies for the operation of the museum to ensure its profitability to the mother university.

I approach university museums and the planned Museum of the University of Debrecen from two different directions. Firstly, how can such an Institute cope with the expectations of society and museological orthodoxy while, secondly, still meeting the usability and economic needs of the parent university? Parallel with the philosophy and practice of new museology, the focus must be on the social discretion of the museum and on the continuously renewing exhibition that satisfies the globalized and accelerated world of the 21st century. It is important to stress that university museums not only serve society but also the community that makes up the mother institute. To make a synthesis of this dual adequacy is the predominant intention of my analysis. To put it simply I am looking for answers to the fundamental questions of a recently formed university museum. Thus the question becomes can a Hungarian university museum, organizationally structured to merge with an Institute of higher educational and in an Eastern-Central European context, satisfy both the regional and national audience as well as the university community and what devices they must use to accomplish these tasks and in what manner it can best legitimate its existence. I approach these questions from the aspects of heritage, memory and identity as well as the unique nature of a university museum and the planning and organizing of collections prior to the formation of a museum at the University of Debrecen.

II. The methods used:

The theoretical foundation of the thesis:

Overview of the relevant literature: (2007-2012)

I give a detailed exposition of the existence and depth of the professional literature in chapter 1.4. Here I discuss the literature I used as a methodical introduction. Given the lack of detailed information about university museums in Hungarian, most of the literature used was written in English and published as conference proceedings. I also made use of newsletters, online studies, theses, and the published documents from different organizations, such as UMAC and Universeum. I also read the Hungarian literature about museology in general, brochures of exhibitions, professional scientific literature when it regarded a specific exhibition or collection, university journals with the descriptions of the collections.

Information obtained while attending conferences (2007 – 2011)

Participation in international conferences and meetings contributed a great deal to the theoretical background of this thesis as many case studies and examples are not published. I attended Universeum conferences four times (2007: Lisbon, 2009: Toulouse, 2010: Uppsala, 2011: Padua). Those conferences intended to discuss the main problems and challenges of European university museums and collections, which also helped me to find the priorities in the topics discussed.

The empirical evidence of the dissertation:

I performed my research in several stages. After the preliminary survey, I sent out questionnaires to Hungarian university museums and collections and as a part of the fieldwork I visited the vast majority of them.

Preliminary survey (2008 summer – 2009 spring)

Starting in the summer 2008 I began by investigating how many museums and collections could be found at Institutes of higher education in Hungary. The investigation was conducted by way of a document called Institutes of Higher Education in Hungary that was published on the website of the Ministry of Education and Culture. According to that website there were 70 such

Institutes in Hungary as of 2008. Then I collected information, by telephone and e-mail, from all these Institutes about their existing collections.

In my research I present those museums, collections and exhibitions of the universities that are recognized by its mother institute. However because of the lack of museum professionals or unified definitions regarding this topic I found a 40 year old permanent exhibition that was not considered as a university collection by its institute. So during the preliminary survey a lot of collections were not initially mentioned, but were found only later during the visit and in conversation with personnel at various institutes. Those exhibitions that were not mentioned were usually the ones that had only a few tableaux, photos, or showcases about the life or history of the institute. From the aspect of my research those are also important as they are evidence of a desire to preserve the heritage and present it for the purpose of forming an identity. I pay special attention to the displays concerning university history and academic life. Among the collections I deal with only the ones that are open to the public, or is possible to access, or have exhibitions or other museum material. Thus I introduce the Deer farm of the University of Kaposvár as it aspires to present the exhaustive game stock of Hungary for educational reasons. However I do not include any research site unless it has an accessible collection. Furthermore I do not write about collections relating to Churches, libraries or archives.

Questionnaire survey (2008 autumn – 2009 autumn)

As a second step, started in the autumn 2008, I sent out questionnaires either by post or e-mail to the university museums and collections found during the preliminary survey. The questionnaire asked for some basic information about the accessibility of the collections, the types of objects and information regarding usage. In some cases the questionnaire was filled out, with my assistance, during the study visit due to the museological incompetence of the collection manager. The questionnaire was compiled in accordance with the international standards established by Lourenco. In the end I obtained 48 completed questionnaires, which had been filled out according to the presence of collections, exhibitions or displays and not by museums or Institutes. Collections that have separate exhibitions but are under one organization form a museum. So, while I refer to them as one museum, the questionnaires were applicable only to each collection. I was not looking for uniformity by the questionnaires but rather intended to collect information which was used in chapter VII.

Study visits (2006 October – 2010 December)

In order to begin an analysis of the type of material on display at Hungarian university museums, as well as the exhibits' aesthetic properties and functionality, I visited the studied entities. A list of the places visited and the dates of the visit as well as a list of the people interviewed can be found in the 3rd appendix. During the study visits I learned about the concepts and collecting methods used by university museums from the point of view of the universities concerned as well as their future plans. During the study visits I made interviews with those responsible of the collections or in case of specialized collections it was the head of the department. The questions of the semi-structured interviews covered the history of the collection, the role it has played in the life of the university and if they were used in teaching and research. The main goal of the study visits was to gain first hand information about the collections, but also because most of the literature that can be found about the collections was accessible only during my visit.

Practical experience through the work of organizing the museum at the University of Debrecen (2006 – 2012)

I gained some practical experience for my thesis during the organizational work that was done in preparation for the museum at the University of Debrecen. This work entailed gathering first hand information about the processes involved in the building of a university museum as well as attempting to understand the university community's attitude towards the future museum. This meant that I also had to gauge the community's appreciation of its own heritage and material, as well as to the desired and achievable installation of exhibitions, and to the future usage of the museum. I have followed the work from the first ideas, through the collecting phase and on to the organizing phase. In my thesis however, instead of the planned museum I describe a temporary exhibition that was built as a result of the project. But throughout the dissertation I am writing about the organizing process of a museum since my initial goal was to place the university museum in a national, international, historical and social context, as well as how a university museum would work locally. It is for this reason that I wanted to gain practical experience about the material heritage of the university, about the sensitive nature of the collecting work inside a university, and also about the immaterial heritage by way of interviews I conducted with prominent persons and professors of the University of Debrecen. I elucidate upon the nature of the collecting phase in the IXth chapter. I close the thesis with the experience of the exhibition about the university's history organized for the centenary. I publish a synopsis of the exhibition in the 11th appendix.

Collecting oral-history at the University of Debrecen (2007-2011)

Though it is not an integral part of my dissertation, I was conducting interviews for the sake of using the material in the exhibition. The method of interviewing was in depth and half structured. Using this method I was able to witness how the community of the university would feel about a museum as well as to find the historically key objects to put on display. The interviews were done with people who studied at the university in the 1950s and also with prominent professors, teachers whose life and work was connected to the university for a longer period of time. The main goal of the conversations was to collect oral-history about the history of the university, but I looked at the interview also concerning the identity of the university. According to my hypothesis, a university museum would valorize the university's heritage, which in turn would raise the consciousness of belonging to the university and would have a positive effect on the university as a brand name. Seeing as how the processing of the interviews could easily make up a dissertation in and of itself, I will only refer to the present work and use the experience and information that I feel is necessary.

III. Brief introduction of the results:

1) To publish general information about the professional field of university museums and collections

Seeing as how the subject of my dissertation has been a neglected topic in Hungary, primarily my goal is to present the main definitions, typologies, history and organizations for university museums and collections. I also wrote about the recent challenges as that can give a deeper insight into the topic as well. By starting with an overview of the field I found that university museums and collections were not unnecessary old relics of the educational institutes. The field of museology has also been gathering a new strength in last three decades, and is gaining a more significant role in the marketing of universities. According to my empirical and professional knowledge I state that university museums and collections are such a special segment of museology in that they showcase a quasi- defined community and time interval while at the same time encompassing a wide scale which includes all the fields of educational and scientific life and yet still describe a specific Institute. The identity of the university influences the museum, the exhibitions and the sets of objects, as well as the philosophy and financial or community support and for this reason requires different treatment than public museums. Internationally there are conferences, meetings (UMAC, Universeum), museum networks and so forth designed to inspire cooperation and is organized mainly for the discussion of this special field. Due to the work of such organizations an increasing number of university museums have been joining this cooperative effort by recognizing the importance of their heritage.

2) Examining the nature of university heritage

I deal with the definition of university heritage in a special section, since heritage is a pillar of the university museum and also beyond the material heritage it also encompasses the traditions and intangible heritage of the institute. By the examination of university heritage my aim is to illustrate the importance of both, the tangible and the intangible, especially the timeliness of traditions, memories and anecdotes. University heritage is one segment of national heritage and specifies itself by a delineated certain community, area or relationship. Because of the above reasons, I examine university heritage differently from national or local scenes. I defined university heritage by organizing it into four segments:

- around the community of the university: the circle of those people who are or were connected to a given Institute of higher education either on account of studies or work or their everyday work somehow connects them to the university.
- Temporal and material circumscription: all of the material and immaterial properties that can be traced back to the establishment of the institute or to its history, also those that are still used around the institute as well as those that are possessed by members of the institute or can be related in some way to the university.
- Local circumscription: all of the material or intangible heritage that was made or took form on the site of the university or is acquainted with it or used by the institute
- Around the activities and task of the university: all of those material or immaterial properties that are clustered around the tasks, mission or life of the university.

3) The enumeration of Hungarian university museums and collections and their in depth introduction

I have started my research with a survey of the museums and collections that were held by universities. My main goal was to enumerate them and learn about them and their operation, as well as to place them in the context of university museums in general.

I have found approximately 50 museums, collections and exhibitions at institutes of higher education, however probably this number is incomplete. Similar to other regions of East-Middle Europe, the topic of university museums is quite neglected in Hungary as well (in the last 2-3 decades there is more attention paid to these museums). The main issues, which are common in the rest of Europe, such as lack of information, inaccessibility, lack of cooperation, lack of academic interest, confusion regarding terminology and classification problems as well as maintenance difficulties have all appeared in Hungary as well. Consequently due to the above mentioned problems the universities are not aware of their collections or do not know the unique nature of their heritage, neither the opportunities that they gain by having university museums. Institutes are continuously valorizing the past and searching for their roots in order to find legitimacy and once this legitimacy is found it can positively influence the establishment or registration of university museums.

My dissertation presents the multicolored and diverse stadium of the Hungarian university museums by a multi-faceted presentation such as the location, accessibility, history and inventory of objects. I also found it particularly important to discuss those institutes of higher education that have no museums or collections and the historical reasons for not possessing collections.

As a summary of the research I state that today, in Hungary, there is an evolving desire for the preservation of university heritage. There are attempts to maintain university museums in spite of limited financing, space and professionalism or at least attempt to present their heritage by way of temporary exhibitions. However, as of yet universities have not recognized the inherent opportunities in having museums and collections. Largely in connection with disciplines, there are certain universities or faculties that leave the strict frame of museology and use their collections for serving, entertaining or informing society by processing the central issues of the 21st century or using them in research. While this tendency is a degeneration of the classical museum, in the aspect of the historical goals and missions of university museums this is the extension of the museum from the university community to a wider public.

4) The possibilities of university museums and collection to fulfill their expectations of usage in the academic arena

In this chapter I will dwell idealistically on opportunities that can promote an innovative role and academic recognition of university museums and collections. I describe four improvements that seem possible to achieve in Hungary. At first I recommend the organization of a national network to facilitate collaboration between Hungarian university museums which would also help in regards to recognition and popularization. I justify these thoughts by introducing successive international examples about how a national network helped to recognize the significance of academic heritage, initiate versatile surveys about collections, and also create forums for professional discussion. The starting point of these international examples are similar to the present situation of Hungarian university museums and, in the relatively short period of 10-15 years, successfully integrated their museums in their society and made them better known.

By looking away from the activities of the classic museum, new functions can be introduced that would bring solutions to problems of financial maintenance. Here I am introducing Hungarian practices from university museums (the Arboretum of Erdőtelek, Deer farm of Böszénfa, History of Agricultural Tools and Machinery Trade Development Museum of Gödöllő) where there are other sources of income beyond entrance tickets. The cultural programs, that are organized thematically and physically around the museum, the search for sponsorship among the local business, or to expand the main theme of the permanent exhibition with the popular interests of the 21st century society are all new ways for university museums, as well as the business-like activity that suit the profile of the academic museum while it keeps its original functions and educational role – likewise the organic food propaganda at the agricultural museum in Gödöllő.

University museums can provide opportunities for internships as well as presentation space for researchers, which would result in the strengthening of relations between the museum and university departments.

For the sake of increasing visitor numbers I propose a rethink of the presentation of exhibitions and displays. The new task of the university museum – although it may be a utopian idea – is to interpret the often theoretical subjects taught in institutes of higher education and relay this information to the general public and make the chosen topic understandable by way of a practical, interactive and entertaining presentation. In this part of the thesis I emphasize that either the scientific collection or the exhibition about the history of the institute are always tools that the university could use to reach out to the public.

5) What is characteristic of gathering museum collections from within Institutes of higher education following my work at Debrecen

Gathering objects for a university museum is slightly different than gathering for any other museum as the objects that are collected are different as are the people from whom they are collected. To clarify this sentence, what I mean is, on account of the diverse disciplines that are to be displayed in a university museum and also the community and environment of the university, which by definition have delimited themes as well as the research and pedagogical programs, collecting for a university museum can be different from that of a non-university museum. Furthermore, collecting for a university museum is influenced by the hierarchical organization of the university itself (which require top down initiatives). Collection efforts are often made more difficult on account of a too critical attitude towards the collecting work, voluntary selecting of objects and what should and should not be put on display. Collecting work is also made difficult due to radical changes in the geopolitical environment that makes certain periods far less popular than other periods, resulting in an extreme lack of objects. For example, items damaged due to war, or items being disposed of more for ideological reasons than anything else all of which will result in a complete ignorance of objects from our recent past. At the same time as the collection work is supported by the university it is also made more difficult due to the diversity of disciplines which translates into a wide range of material to be collected. What's more, in the case of university museums there is a clear difference from a non-university museum, firstly in that the target audience is often different, secondly in that the financial situations are often radically different. Furthermore, due to the ultimate goal of a university financial priorities are seldom in the museums favor thus limiting the possibilities for new acquisitions.

The Calvinist roots of the University of Debrecen have survived through the past century in the traditions and spirituality that has been maintained since the establishment of the university. The institute is proud of its past and commemorates it at each of its jubilees. There are only a small number of objects that have survived through the storms of history and the university has made efforts to preserve those that are still extant. The thought of exhibiting this surviving material has emerged several times and as the centenary celebrations approached the establishment of a museum once again became a possibility. The nature of the collecting work at Debrecen was dictated by the fact that the preparations of the centenary celebrations allowed for only a limited period of time for the organizing work as well as to the creation of funds. The basis of the collection was a group of objects left over from an exhibition that was built for the 75th anniversary of the university. The collecting work was helped and supported by those professors at the university who recognized the importance of the work and made efforts to preserve the university's heritage. Then, the departments of the university were informed about the new museum and were asked by the Chancellor of the university to provide a person who could provide details as to the most important aspects of their past and cooperate with the museum. The collecting for the museum of Debrecen, uniquely among Hungarian university museums, also desired to collect the university's intangible heritage as well by conducting in depth interviews about the history of the university and the work of prominent professors. The uncertainty of the future of the project and the absence of a decision about the future location of the museum had a negative effect on the collecting work, as well as to the support for the museum.

The case of organizing a museum at the University of Debrecen illustrates the typical fears and threats to university museums and this resulted in the building of a temporary exhibition instead of a museum. I introduce the organizational processes involved in the preparation for the exhibition at Debrecen in the final chapter of the thesis as this was the closing act of the project for the foreseeable future. The case of the Debrecen museum is indeed a typical example as, during my research, I have found more universities with the desire to have a museum but, due to a lack of resources, had to put the efforts towards a temporary exhibition instead. The Debrecen project however became a retrogression compared to the original plans but still it is not a failure as the results of the collecting work will remain for the future. Moreover, the temporary exhibition, as with the earlier exhibition for the 75th anniversary, helped to introduce a small amount of objects to the university community that increased awareness and helps to keep the collecting work going. What's more, the challenges as well as the positive and negative experiences in my attempt at organizing a museum and the exhibition that was the result will be useful for future plans for a museum.

IV. The author's publications around the topic of the dissertation

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