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*The “Academic Museum” – Göttingen’s University Collection
as a space of knowledge production and cultural heritage*

The “Academic Museum” constitutes a crucial locale for a new history of science. As a space of academic self-fashioning and self-affirmation, it can illustrate historical concepts of objectivity, cultures of evidence or the performance of knowledge. University collections delineate emerging academic disciplines and allow scientists to use material culture in order to mark out their professional identities. Accordingly, the “Academic Museum” can be investigated as accumulated cultural capital for academics and their scientific fields.

Göttingen, one of the key locations of the German enlightenment, is an important place for research into the genesis of the Academic Museum. With more than 30 collections still in existence today it is also a promising location for modern museological concepts¹. This paper will briefly sketch the history of the Göttingen collections and elaborate on the social place these collections occupied in the context of the university and the wider history of knowledge. We will also provide some thoughts on the way they are presented today and what they might look like in the future.

The University of Göttingen was founded in 1737 by British King George II. who was also the Duke of Hannover at the time. From the very beginning it was planned as an institution to reform academic learning and quickly grew into Germany’s leading Enlightenment University. The status of theology, therefore, was significantly reduced, while a substantial number of other disciplines were included in the curriculum – often for the first time in European academic history. Indeed many academic fields we know today were first conceived and taught as university subjects in Göttingen: amongst them anthropology, archaeology, art history, musicology, veterinary medicine or German philology – many, as we shall see, in close connection and even inspired by the universi-

¹ For an index of the contemporary and historical collections at Göttingen University with bibliographical information, see: <http://publicus.culture.hu-berlin.de/sammlungen/search/uni/Georg-August-Universität+Göttingen> [last retrieved: 19.11.2009].

ties collections². From the very beginning collections for the purposes of teaching and research, constituted an integral part of the universities conception. The first such collection was the library, which in a pragmatic move typical for Göttingen, was installed in a former church (Fig. 1). While other universities often kept their books separated along faculty denominations or even individual chairs, Göttingen focused on a central library collecting books on all subjects following a detailed classification system, that was quickly adopted by many European libraries. As in Paris, London or Vienna the libraries holdings included not just books, but coins, paintings and natural history exhibits as well³.

Alongside the library individual professors started their own teaching collections – frequently because they hoped that such visualised instruction would attract a larger group of paying students to their lectures.

In 1773 several of these collections were united in the “Academic Museum”, administered by the library and situated next to the library building (Fig. 2). The establishment of such a museum had long been called for. As in many other cases, its eventual realisation was the work of two dedicated individuals: the library’s director Christian Gottlob Heyne and his assistant, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. Together they managed to persuade the university’s chancellor and patron, the British King Georg III, to provide the necessary funds⁴.

The museum’s goals were twofold: While prominent advocates of enlightenment ideas stressed its utility for teaching and research, it was also hoped to attract well-off students, often of noble status, and – as documented by an intense advertising campaign in contemporary journals – to raise the universities profile internationally. Many exhibits illustrate this *double entendre*. The prominent “severed heads” of several Turkish soldiers, for example, appealed to visitors as spoils of war and a well-established visualisation of European supremacy. At the same time they figured strongly in Blumenbach’s studies of physical anthropology – propagating the fundamental equality of human kind.

Several important contributions quickly swelled the numbers of the approximately 15.000 original items. While the museum collected across all field of scientific enquiry, the most remarkable additions were ethnographical objects. In 1776 and 1778 the British King financed the acquisition of objects collected during the voyages of James Cook – the largest such collection still in existence today⁵. At the same time, Baron von Asch, a high-ranking Russian official and an early alumni of Göttingen university, donated sev-

² Cf.: Notker Hammerstein, *Die deutschen Universitäten im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, “Zeitschrift für historische Forschung” 10 (1983), p. 73–89, p.79ff.; Götz von Selle, *Die Georg-August-Universität zu Göttingen 1737–1937*, Göttingen 1937; L. Marino, *Praeceptores Germaniae. Göttingen 1770–1820* (Göttinger Universitätschriften, Serie A, Bd.10), Göttingen 1995; W. Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, Chicago 2006; M.C. Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany*, Harvard 2008; H.E. Bödeker, Ph. Büttgen und M. Espagne (eds.), *Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen in Göttingen um 1800. Wissenschaftliche Praktiken, institutionelle Geographie, europäische Netzwerke*, Göttingen 2008.

³ Cf. Ch. Kind-Doerne, *Die Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen. Ihre Bestände und Einrichtungen in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 1986.

⁴ Cf. N. Plesker, *Das Königlich Academische Museum in Göttingen* [in:] B. Savoy (ed.), *Tempel der Kunst. Die Geburt des öffentlichen Museums in Deutschland 1701–1815*, Mainz 2006, p. 261–278, and Ch. Nawa, *Sammeln für die Wissenschaft. Das Academische Museum Göttingen (1773–1840)*, unpubl. Master-Thesis, University of Göttingen 2005.

⁵ For the James Cook/ Georg Forster collection see: <http://www.nma.gov.au/cook/index.php> [last retrieved 19.11.2009].

eral hundred boxes with material from Siberia – again an collection of exceptional quality that is unique outside of Russia. These contributions constituted the catalyst for the conception of cultural anthropology or “Völkerkunde” as a separate academic science that was pioneered in Göttingen in the 1790s. In a similar development, the acquisition of the enormous estate of the art collector Friedrich Armand von Uffenbach contributed significantly on the establishment of art history as a separate subject at the University with its own chair. Other collections developed alongside new academic disciplines, such as the collections of musical instruments, antique casts or the notorious collection of human skulls, which lead Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the museums curator, to the idea of human “races” and the conception of physical anthropology⁶.

All exhibits, however, remained united in the Academic Museum until 1840. During two French occupations of the city, one during the Seven Years War and the other in the Napoleonic era, the excellent links of Göttingen’s scholars to the Paris academies had succeeded in securing the integrity of the collections. Only at the death of the museum’s long-lived curator Blumenbach, did the physical separation begin. Large parts of the collection left the museum in the library building and moved to the newly founded institutes of the academic fields they had helped to create⁷. Later collections, such as the museums of zoology, chemistry or obstetrics, were situated right along the teaching facilities – not least because they proved very useful in establishing and visualising the disciplinary boundaries of new academic fields⁸.

Today Göttingen University is home to more than 30 separate collections (Fig. 3). Many of them are now organised and institutionalised as museums, though often with limited public access and relatively small numbers of visitors. Others, such as the skull collection, which was substantially enlarged during the 1930s and 1940s, remain hidden from view in the basement of their departments. A large number, such as the antique casts and of course the library, remain in active use as research tools and teaching collections, while quietly securing the independence of smaller departments in times of rapid changes in the universities organisation⁹.

The Academic Museum’s Place in University History

Academic collections are of crucial importance to the university as an institution and place of knowledge. First of all, the generous provision of the University helped to establish its image as a key enlightenment location. In the Holy German Empire, with its numerous universities locked in intense competition, illustrious academic collections could serve as a form of distinction, a fact well-documented in contemporary public

⁶ See: D. Hoffman, K. Maack-Rheinländer (ed.): “*Ganz für das Studium angelegt*”. *Die Museen, Sammlungen und Gärten der Universität Göttingen*, Wallstein, Göttingen 2001, and Plesker, *Academische Museum*, p. 269 and 273.

⁷ Plesker, *Academische Museum*, p. 273, and K. Arndt, *Die Göttinger Universitäts-Kunstsammlung. Geschichte und Aufgaben*, “*Georgia Augusta*” 45 (1986), p. 33–35, here p. 35.

⁸ Cf. the respective articles on the genesis of individual collections in: Hoffman / Maack-Rheinländer, *Ganz für das Studium angelegt*.

⁹ For an outline of the genesis and formation of the individual Göttingen collections see: Hoffman / Maack-Rheinländer: *Ganz für das Studium angelegt*.

perception. The rapid expansion of the young universities' collections can be glimpsed from an account by Hinrich Wilhelm Schmeelke in 1798 reflecting on his education in Göttingen during the 1770s:

“During my studies [the academic museum] had not yet made a name for itself. Now it is one of the principal collections of natural and artificial bodies in Germany. All that belongs to the history of human-kind is very comprehensive [...]. You can find rarities from all three realms of nature, but one needs an expert to make a visit useful – The assistant of the Hofrat Heyne showed us all the things and Meiners assured us, that he does so as well as the museums director Blumenbach. Indeed Meiners remarked that he even tells the same jokes that Blumenbach was known to make”¹⁰.

How the Göttingen Collections presented themselves to foreign visitors by the end of the eighteenth century is illustrated by the autobiography of the Hungarian student Sámuel Fogarasi visiting Göttingen in 1796/97. He remarks about the sights of interest:

“Worth seeing in this city are the town hall, the university building, the anatomy theatre with its specimens, that is the human bodyparts kept in spirit, the house of accouchement, the botanic and the economic garden, the hippodrome, the famous library with its 140.000 volumes, the Museum, the academic collection of coins, jewellery, paintings and drawings, the chamber with models and machines, the collection of monuments and paintings in the Historical Institute and the chemical laboratory”¹¹.

A student's Guide from the year 1813 mentions further “public institutions” of the university: the “Society of sciences” and the “Gelehrten Anzeigen”, an eminent review journal from Göttingen. The Guide also provides with us with information about the accessibility and presentation of the collections. On the Museum it says:

“Whoever hears the name Blumenbach, and knows, that this museum is under his guidance, will justifiably hold no small expectations, – and he will not be mistaken! The high degree of benefit to the public provided by this marvellous collection of oddities from all realms of nature is to be admired. It can be visited on every hour with a guide for a small sign of gratitude (of two gulden; but for which up to six persons can enjoy the pleasure), it is, of course, of far more interest if you can listen to Blumenbach's own views and remarks at the same time. This intellectual pleasure is given to his regular students of Natural history. The same building also houses the picture gallery, the cabinet of coins and the chamber of models”¹².

About anatomy we are further informed:

“The present collection of specimens is well worth mentioning: But from a Langenbeck you can indeed expect the very best! The visit is open to every student, while the special collection mentioned can only be seen by prior arrangement with one of the professors”¹³.

It is evident, that the collections were open to a paying audience (especially soldiers from the local garrison) as well as to students. It appears that from the very beginning

¹⁰ K. Lohmeyer, *Land Hadeln und die Universität Göttingen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, “Jahrbuch der Männer vom Morgenstern” 29 (1938/39), p. 46–67, here p. 56.

¹¹ I. Futaky (ed.): *Selige Tage im Musensitz Göttingen. Stadt und Universität im ungarischen Berichten aus dem 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 1991, p. 15f.

¹² [Ludwig Wallis], *Der Göttinger Student oder Bemerkungen, Ratschläge und Belehrungen über Göttingen und das Studentenleben auf der Georgia Augusta*, Göttingen 1981, p. 15.

¹³ *Op.cit.*, p. 16.

the collections had taken on the character of a “public” institution in addition to their scientific purposes¹⁴.

Letters and travelogues from the time around 1800 make it quite clear, that Johann Friedrich Blumenbach and his collections had become a major attraction of the university:

“In his [Blumenbach’s] courses on natural history there are at least 80 to 90 students. During the lecture it is as silent as in a church, as everyone is trying to catch what he has to say, afraid of missing a single word [...]. No student will leave Göttingen without having read natural history with him, his course has indeed become a veritable fashion. [...] Next to the library is the museum, that I have so far only seen once very briefly, but which I will visit several times more with Blumenbach and his whole course. It displays many objects from the south-seas and from the north, artefacts, works from Othaiti, baskets, bags, and cords made from coco-strings, dresses of war and grief, weapons, a multitude of angling hooks of the wild nations, so well made, that they rightly put the Europeans to shame. A great many idols, displaying hideous contortions of the body, very repugnant and distasteful. Many amphibians, a mass of human embryos, of negroes etc.”¹⁵.

Most collections were closely associated with the professors, who were also appointed as their respective director. Without the guidance of a scholar, the objects alone remained silent. Intellectual conversation and sociability were crucial for the collections’ attraction. In the era of an enlightened culture of sociability museums doubled as salons, mediating personal contacts and initiating entertaining exchanges. Consequently, when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe stayed in Göttingen in 1801, he reported on his visit to the observatory with the words:

“Also Professor Seyffer showed me the instruments of the observatory with complaisance in a most copious way. I made the acquaintance of many eminent foreigners at this place, whom you always meet at highly frequented universities, and with every day the richness of my knowledge grew above all expectations”¹⁶.

Indeed sociability had become so prominent, that in 1779 Göttingen’s famous physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg felt it necessary to praise the scientific character of “academic cabinets” whose “whole destination is not for splendour but for the utility, for research and instruction... Göttingen is the first university in Germany, maybe in Europe, which is provided with such a genuine academic museum”¹⁷. The Professor aimed to distinguish the academic collections established for instruction through the object from the cabinets of curiosities designed – in his perception – for mere pomp and representation¹⁸. That the collections were seen as enriching teaching practice can be glimpsed from the following announcement of an extensive lecture going on for some hours, given by Professor Hermann Ludwig Heeren in 1803:

¹⁴ Plesker, *Academische Museum*, p. 274 provides some examples on the modalities of access to the museum.

¹⁵ W. Gresky (Ed.), *Eine Göttingen-Schilderung vom Mai 1799. Ein Brief des Schweizer Studenten Gottlieb von Greyerz*, “Göttinger Jahrbuch” 1982, p. 181–199, 193, 197f.

¹⁶ W. Ebel, *Briefe über Göttingen. Aus den ersten 150 Jahren der Georgia Augusta*, Göttingen 1975, p. 60.

¹⁷ G.Ch. Lichtenberg, *Etwas vom Academischen Museum in Göttingen*, in: *Göttinger Taschen Calendar*, Göttingen 1779, p. 45–57, quoted after Urban, *Völkerkundliche Sammlung*, p. 91.

¹⁸ An fine example of Lichtenbergs scathing mockery of traditional curiosity cabinets can be found in his fictitious “Verzeichnis einer Sammlung von Gerätschaften”, that included rarities such as “a bed in the form of a coffin for methodists”. G.Ch. Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*. Ed. by Wolfgang Promies. Vol. 3, München 1972, p. 451–457.

“A general ethnography of countries and populations or a critical and systematic epitome of our current knowledge of the earth and the people living on it will be given by Sr. Prof. Heeren at 6 A.M. and will be explained by a rich stock of the best and newest maps, which he will present to his listeners, and the ethnographic collection inside the royal museum will serve to illustrate the clothing, weaponry and gear of the most distant populations”¹⁹.

In addition to their representative uses, collections thus contributed to the development of the modern research university and new methods of teaching. Against the background of the traditional division of the universities into four classical faculties, the collections further enhanced a special dynamics in the process of disciplinary differentiation. The art collection for example fostered the elevation of art history to an academic subject with a respective chair being created for the very first time in German university history²⁰. Also Blumenbach – a doctor of medicine by training and since 1776 “Professore medicinae extraordinario“ – increasingly engaged with natural history, inspired by the artefacts of the Cook/Forster collections.

However, the contents of the academic museum went far beyond the disciplinary limits of medicine or natural history. With its steady expansion it grew into one of Germany’s leading ethnographic and anthropological collections, paving the way for the establishment of these subjects as academic disciplines. After Blumenbach’s death in 1840, the collections fell into oblivion until in the 1930s – now under the sign of national socialist endorsement of German “Völkerkunde” (cultural anthropology) – they returned to the institutional and scientific center of the university’s agenda. At the Theaterplatz in Göttingen the academic museum has now found its third and – for the time being – last building.

The university offered a broad range of fields and items that could be collected. Its museums did not depend on a single patron or curator, and could count on support from former students and the network of the European republic of letters. We may conclude that it was their role in marking disciplinary claims during the emergence of the modern research university around 1800, that motivated their rapid expansion and enormous diversity. As agents of scientific dissociation and delimitation they constitute an extraordinary source for inter-disciplinary research in university history as well as the history of science today.

Göttingen’s University Collections Today

The many individual collections in existence today are not only divided physically but also administratively. Most are supported by the faculties, stored in their respective buildings and remain difficult to access. In 2003 – the university had just set up a new department for marketing and public relations – a new campaign was launched, the so called “Sonntagsspaziergänge”. These Sunday Walks encompass four academic collections that are now open to public every Sunday morning (Fig 4). Since then, the collection of antique casts, the collection of paintings (both belonging to the institute of art history), the collection of the ethnographic institute and the zoological museum

¹⁹ Vgl. Urban, *Völkerkundliche Sammlung*, p. 95.

²⁰ Plesker, *Academische Museum*, p. 269 and 273.

open their doors once a week to the interested visitor²¹. However, the limited opening hours and the rather traditional selection and presentational style seriously restrict the chances to broaden interest in the collections. But the public access to these four collections is a huge step forward, in comparison to the many other collections, which remain inaccessible but to a small number of curators in order to provide occasional objects for teaching.

Accessibility, however, is not the only issue that has to be addressed regarding the collections of the university. After all, historically, most of these collections have been open to a very limited public. It is the perception and appreciation of these collections in the context of the modern university that poses a major challenge. At the time of their foundation, the collections embodied an investment in competitive scientific research. However, campaigns such as the “Sunday Walks” aim exclusively on the value these collections have today. They focus on a very limited sample of supposed “masterpieces” separated from their historical context and singled out because of their high visual appeal, their connection with famous scientists and their supposed marketing value. Admittedly, the focus on the “masterpieces” and visually appealing collections is partly a result of the lack of funding and museological expertise. Most university collections require laborious commentary and contextualisation to become accessible and understandable for a wider public. The selected opening of some enjoyable collections at the expense of other, more difficult ones, however, risks encouraging a consumerist attitude to the collections in general.

Additionally, the close administrative ties of collections and individual academic departments limit their museological impact. As we have seen, such connections have a long history. Many Göttingen collections played a crucial role in the genesis of academic fields and subjects. Indeed, many departments would not exist without their collections, and no collection would exist without an academic field supporting them. This mutual dependence is the reason why the collections, even the historical ones, still remain jealously guarded from the grasp of the university’s central administration.

Conclusion and future prospects

In today’s economic environment, the strategy of the close and exclusive relation between collection and academic department, that was once a source of legitimisation, self-assurance and independence, might well turn into a threat. The omnipresent need to economize has seen the budget of most collections decline. The ethnographic museum with its world-famous Cook/Forster collection, for example, has an annual budget of 1.500,- Euros for restoration and conservation work! At the same time, efforts to appeal to the public, by prioritizing and merchandizing a handful of “masterpieces”, completely miss the potential these collections possess.

Today, the collection’s value is connected less to the sheer amount of objects or their potential use to teaching, but to their ability to mirror the emergence of a “knowledge so-

²¹ See the “Sunday Walks” website: <http://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/38808.html> [last retrieved: 19.11.2009].

ciety”. The crucial role objects played and play in the process of generating knowledge, marking distinct professional identities and acting as embodiments of scientific normativity should become a priority. Accordingly, the focus should shift from the individual, visually appealing object to the relation that connected and connect these exhibits to the genesis of academic delineations and the circulation of knowledge. Instead of displaying objects as aesthetically charged “masterpieces”, aloof from their historical contexts, we should present them as a crucial part of university history, reconnecting them with a context in which they played a decisive role. Unfortunately, this decisive role of the collection within the formation of disciplines and the history of the university remains largely absent in today’s displays.

STRESZCZENIE

„Akademickie Muzeum”. Kolekcja uniwersytetu w Getyndze jako miejsce powstawania nauki i dziedzictwa kulturowego

Uniwersytet w Getyndze, posiadający kluczowe znaczenie w niemieckim Oświeceniu, może się poszczycić bogatą kolekcją eksponatów z zakresu historii naturalnej i antropologii, technologii oraz szeroko pojętego dziedzictwa akademickiego. Kolekcje te związane są z rozwojem nowych obszarów wiedzy, a co za tym idzie – prowadzeniem nowoczesnych badań naukowych od czasu założenia uniwersytetu w XVIII wieku. Instrumenty naukowe są świadectwem powstałych wówczas dyscyplin naukowych. Wyznaczały one także zawodową odrębność uczonych. Kolekcje uniwersytetu w Getyndze ilustrują historyczną koncepcję obiektywizmu i świadectwa. Współczesne techniki wystawiennicze, skupione na najbardziej spektakularnych dziełach, raczej zaciemniają niż podkreślają zasadniczą rolę kolekcji uniwersyteckich, którą jest ukazanie rozwoju nauki.

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Fig. I. Reading Room of the Göttingen University Library in the Pauliner Church, 1850s



Fig. II. The "Academic Museum" in front of the Pauliner Church/University Library, 1820s

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Theaterplatz 15
37073 Göttingen



ZOOLOGISCHES MUSEUM

Zoologisches Museum
Institut für Zoologie, Anthropologie
und Evolutionsbiologie
Barlmer Straße 26, 37073 Göttingen



Foto: Peter Zoller (Ulrich), Göttingen; Foto: Göttinger Institut für Ethnologie; Foto: Göttinger Institut für Zoologie, Anthropologie und Evolutionsbiologie

Fig. III. Poster advertising the “Sunday Walks – Art, Culture, Nature” 2009



Fig. IV. Map of the Göttingen University Collections in 2009 (Google Earth)