Preface

> For the typical traveller university museums and collections will have the appeal of those travel books with titles such as *Off the Beaten Track in Tuscany* or *The Paris Nobody knows.*
>
> J. Hale, 1989

Recently, Sally MacDonald described the first time she visited the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College in London. At the time, she was considering applying to the job of museum manager. For three weeks she had been fruitlessly trying to find the Museum. Finally, she managed to arrange a meeting as a prospective candidate. It was a cold and snowy December day. She recounts:

> "[...] Despite having lived in London for ten years I had never heard of the museum. It was listed in guidebooks, and in the telephone directory, under University College London [...], but switchboard staff were unsure whether it was open to the public, and the museum extension just rang and rang. I later found out that I had called at a bad time; the museum had been closed for most of the year for security improvements, and strong diesel fumes from the main university boiler, located directly underneath the galleries, had caused staff to evacuate. [...] As soon as the door opened I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I had found something precious. The approach to the museum, the building in which it was housed, was so uninspiring [...], its contents by contrast so extraordinary and diverse, its displays so rich and yet so dry – I had to apply for the job. Getting it felt like being given a big gold key" [i].

Anyone who has visited the Petrie Museum will recognize this. When I visited the Petrie for the first time – in 2002, also on a December morning – I had several London maps and internet prints yet it took me almost one hour to find the street. I entered a university cafeteria and asked a group of students if they knew where the Petrie was – all replied they had never heard of it. When I had finally found the museum, the building could not be more indistinct (even though it had a banner). University museums often share buildings with other academic facilities. The building hosting the Petrie also housed a library, countless department offices and, of course, the university boiler described above. After entering the door, I came by a security officer who not unkindly said 'Yes?', as if I was not supposed to be there. After having explained that I had an appointment for a meeting at the Petrie Museum, the security pointed out some stairs. I went up and found a closed door with the discreet indication 'Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology'. I rang the doorbell and some seconds later Sally MacDonald was welcoming me. Behind that closed door was one of the most exceptional collections of Egyptian artefacts in Europe and certainly the most exceptional I had ever seen – untouched since the time of Professor Flinders Petrie at the turn of the 19th century.

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[i] S. MacDonald, 2000. University museums and the public: the case of the Petrie Museum. In: P. McManus (ed.), *Archaeological displays and the public: museology and interpretations*, second edition, pp. 67-86. Archetype Publications, London; quote from p. 67.

For the past three years I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit some of the most extraordinary treasures in Europe. Contrary to what some people may think, not only *national* museums and archives have treasures under their wings. Treasures are also to be found in the universities of Leipzig, Lyon, Pavia, Porto, St. Andrews, Tartu, Utrecht and many others. In Bologna, I admired Aldrovandi's herbarium from 1551, marvellous in its late medieval style, ornamented with gold and red drawings and adorned initials. In Oxford, I saw the type specimen of the tsetse fly *Glossina morsitans* pinned to a label written by Dr. Livingstone himself. I looked at some of the artefacts collected by Captain Cook during his 18th century voyages of exploration at the anthropology museum in Florence. At the Utrecht University Museum, I saw the lens through which Christiaan Huygens discovered Titan, the largest moon of Saturn, 350 years ago. The lens still bears Huygens' signature, scratched with a diamond along its edge. In Uppsala, I saw Anders Celsius' original thermometer and visited Linnaeus' botany cabinet. I could go on and on.

While working in a university museum, it did not take me long to realise that this was a peculiar type of museum. A museum where things I thought would be difficult were actually simple and things that seemed simple turned out to be quite the contrary. For example, designing a complete bilingual website from scratch with online bookings for school groups, collections, images and downloads for teachers was unexpectedly simple and straightforward, yet it never seemed possible to get extra security staff to open the exhibition on Sundays. A museum where funds to participate in a scientific conference seemed easier to get than a design for a new exhibition leaflet; where 'research position', 'research project' and 'invited scientist' were part of the daily glossary of the university administration, yet 'interactive', 'museology', 'museography' and even 'curator' were never heard. Sometimes, the university asked: Why does a museum need a photographer? What is a conservator? Why do you need a designer for an exhibition – can't you do it yourself? Why do you need a restorer to repair an instrument – can't you find a student to fix it?

Our collection was not 'normal' either – at least it was different from what I had seen before in museums of science. There were magnificent instruments, but many were indistinct, with plenty of parts missing and whole apparatuses done with bits and parts of completely different equipment and then sealed with rubber. Models, there were lots of them: models of machines, models of topological surfaces, models of architecture, models of the atom and molecules, miniatures of steam engines. Many were dull and several were ugly. Together with the collection, there were a lot of papers and books: some were scientific articles, others were class plans, scribbled notes with mathematical formulae, drawings of machines, laboratory notes and equipment manuals. I remember thinking: "How is it possible to display this stuff

to the public, to school groups, to children? This is hopeless – better leave it here where no one can see it". I was very wrong.

Is there something special about university museums and collections? Are they all equally special or only a few of them? And what is it that makes them distinct? In Ulysses, James Joyce wrote that "the horseness is the whatness of all horses". What is the whatness of university collections? These questions have been on my mind ever since I began working at the Museum of Science of the University of Lisbon.

This research has seen many twists and turns since it started more than five years ago. The first title was *Museus Universitários: Porquê e Para Quê? Estudo sobre os museus e colecções universitárias em Portugal* ('University Museums: Why and What For? A study on university museums and collections in Portugal') (December 2000). As in many countries, the first Portuguese museums were university museums or had university collections at their origin. In 1978, the *Associação Portuguesa de Museologia* organised a conference on the topic of university museums, but there was no significant follow-up at either the research or the political level. It seemed to me that the history and present reality of Portuguese university collections as a group deserved further study. My aim was to draw from two theses that had recently been done[ii] and undertake a comprehensive study of the contemporary reality of Portuguese university collections. Things meanwhile changed and this turned out not (yet) to be the in-depth study Portuguese (and Spanish) university collections lack and deserve.

In 2001, several fortunate coincidences directed the research to the international arena. The turning point was perhaps my participation in the founding meeting of the International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) in Barcelona in July 2001. In February 2002, a revised PhD plan was submitted to the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM) in Paris. In July 2002, the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon generously agreed to provide financial support for study visits to a number of university collections in Europe. In November 2002, I began a 'tour' that would eventually bring me to more than 200 European university collections in 10 European countries. Initially I had planned to conduct 20 study visits, but every time I arrived at a new university there were five or six times more collections than I had anticipated. Instead of two days, I usually stayed one week. This meant

[ii] H.C. Gouveia, 1997, *Museologia e etnologia em Portugal, instituições e personalidades* [Museology and ethnology in Portugal: Institutions and personalities']. PhD in Anthropology-Museology, Universidade Nova de Lisboa; J.C.P. Brigola, 2000, *Colecções, gabinetes e museus em Portugal no século XVIII* ['Collections, cabinets and museums in Portugal in the 18th century']. PhD in History, University of Évora.

that more information was collected than can possibly be presented in this dissertation. My sincere apologies are therefore due to anyone who might feel under-represented.

Not everything was marvellous and surely not all is well in the world of European university collections. It was difficult to behold so much neglect, contempt, reorganisation, dispersion, isolation and loss. Although not unexpected, I was quite unprepared for the degree of arbitrariness and superficiality that sometimes seems to guide irreversible decision-making regarding collections. To learn that, in the 1980s, one university *sold* its almost 200-year botanical garden to a private firm to be partly transformed into a Chinese-Babylonian theme-park is clearly not for the faint-hearted. Several outrageous facts (at least from my point of view) are not reported here or only reported with minimal discussion, because there are more appropriate arenas for condemnations and advocacy. Also, this is not a text where easy and prescribed solutions for the problems of university heritage will be found.

The purpose of this research was to contribute to our knowledge of university museums and collections – where they come from, where we are now and what their contemporary significance is. A lot is happening in this field and rapidly so. The general museum community hardly hears about what is going on with university collections and society at large even less. Yet, in Europe university collections are public. Universities are their custodians, but they really belong to the people of France, Portugal and the Netherlands.

In April 2004, at the University of Lille, Professor Pier Ugo Calzolari, Rector of the oldest university – the University of Bologna – argued eloquently about the heritage of universities being at the core of the European identity. Although today there seems to be no clear understanding about what *the* European identity means, it is true that since the mid-15th century (possibly even earlier) university collections never knew any borders except those of knowledge. They circulated and exchanged knowledge across Europe regardless of wars, religion or political turmoil, and scholars and students who used them travelled as well, from Altdorf to Louvain and from Louvain to Padua – long before Germany, Belgium or Italy as such existed. These scholars and students knew about freedom of expression, universality, criticism and pluralism – long before these were recognized and incorporated by nation states as fundamental pillars of democratic systems. The fate of our university collections should concern all Europeans.

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