

# Museum Gustavianum – The interface between the academic world and the general public

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Museum Gustavianum

In Uppsala the Museum Gustavianum, with the Art Collections and the Numismatic Cabinet, occupies a unique position as an interface between the academic world and the general public. Situated in the medieval heart of the city, the Gustavianum is the former main building of Uppsala University. The Anatomical Theatre erected on the roof of the Gustavianum gives the building its characteristic appearance. The Museum Gustavianum was inaugurated in 1997. The main exhibition describes the history of Uppsala University through a collection of objects from a wide range of disciplines dating from 1477, when the university was founded, to the present. The Museum has become a popular attraction to the public, with around 150 000 visitors every year.

Museums of today represent wide spectra of different organizations and content. But still the mission for us as museum professionals stays the same – to document, to preserve and to present. Museums in general have changed from being collection based museums for the elite to big centers for the broad public – from curiosity cabinets to science centers. In the strategic planning of the Museum



**Picture 1.** The museum as a place where the past and the present meets the future (Photo Å. Nilsson)



**Picture 2.** Students documenting a collection at a department (Photo J. Worley)

Gustavianum we decided to focus on the public side of our mission. We do believe that museums are important factors for the future in the field of mass-education, research and as public rooms for culture, knowledge and events. For university museums this public engagement is even more important because the benefits are many: widening participation in the activities of universities and new groups with different backgrounds going to universities. There is a fragile balance between the inward and the outward work in university museums, but in the long run there is a win-win situation in this area of community outreach. We must ask ourselves: who will use and who will pay for the future museums?

Today, when the perspective of using collections has changed from research and teaching to public interpretation, many museums and collections are at risk. To meet the future we must convince our university management about how useful the scientific and cultural heritage is and that it has a huge potential of knowledge for next generations. Many museums and collections are hidden treasures, unknown to the world outside, and sometimes even within, the universities. Our success depends on whether we can make our heritage useful and accessible.

One way for the museums is not only to teach but to start dialogues between those who can teach and those who wish to learn; to allow the visitors to teach the museum professionals about what their mission ought to be. Museums should work closely with the other departments at their universities as well as with other schools and organizations. The modern researcher is positive to the so called *third mission* when cooperation is made possible. Theme days on different subjects, from mathematics to Chinese punk, give academics the possibility to meet the public. University museums can play an important role in these activities, as the museum staff are professional public communicators.

Student participation is another important way of widening our mission. Ever since the museum was founded, student participation has played an important role in the ongoing work: with respect to documentation, exhibitions and education. In each semester since 1997 a number of students in the liberal arts were offered an internship at the museums' storage facility. During the internship the

students gather insights into different aspects of inventorying and preserving objects. These students' efforts have led to an acceleration of the documentation of the museums' own collections.

Even on program days and for the education side of museum activity student participation has played an important and vitalizing role. Some of the implemented educational projects have been quite unique in its nature and have attracted attention at conferences and in the media. The Museum Gustavianums' strategy has been to involve as many students as possible from as broad a spectrum of subjects as possible. We hope that in the future this work could be developed further and intensified. One example is from the autumn of 2010 and 2011 when students from the department of ALM (Archives, Libraries and Museums) helped us to arrange holiday activities for children. The activity was called *Time Travel* and was a new project where 4 stations were set up and the children could meet 4 different historical persons together with objects from the past.

In the Museum Gustavianum we start with pre-school children in our public work. University museums can support both students in their education to preschool teachers and the children's joy in finding out how exciting experiments can be. At the Museum Gustavianum we have found the student participation to be a win-win concept.

Museums have unique collections and a great many stories that need to be told. If we dare to let in researchers and students and others as well, then together we can connect the past with the present and future. Then our university museums can become laboratories for new ideas and our collections can find new meanings.