

## Introduction

The focus of these papers is on museum collections: those in store, on access to them and on the information and professional expertise related to them. The stored collections of museums constitute a very large resource. Museum professionals have been aware for a long time that it is difficult to justify the considerable cost of maintaining them, since most are not extensively used. Despite these perceptions there is little or no hard information about how much collections are used, in what ways, and on how well they are looked after.

This is a current research interest in cultural heritage studies in UCL. All except the last paper have been prepared from dissertations presented in Autumn 2005 for the MA in Museum Studies. They bring a number of unexpected findings to the public domain, about public awareness that collections exist, who participates in store tours, the measurably changing role of curators, the effects on museums of putting collections catalogues online, on the effectiveness of national museum policies on the quality of storage.

Lucinda Caesar's paper discusses the success of the public tours of its main London store that were organised by the Science Museum in 2004-5. Although store tours are an obvious way of providing access to stored collections, some question their effectiveness, arguing that the collections are insufficiently interpreted. About 1500 people participated in the Science Museum tours and this paper analyses and discusses the results.

How much, how often, are collections in store accessed? To what extent are they 'used'? Laura Gardner surveyed some London museums and departments of national museums to find answers to these questions, and seek views on what were the obstacles to using collections more. She also investigated to what extent visitors to museums were aware that museums had collections other than what was on display, since some earlier work had indicated that the public were unaware of the existence of this resource.

After a decade or more of heightened museum awareness of the need to provide good quality storage for the sake of preserving their collections, is one of the great national museums, the Natural History Museum, meeting the standards it has helped to develop? Mark Carnall examines this question in relation to the zoology stores both in the museum and external to it.

The question of making museum catalogues, or collections inventories, available online is another topic that is often debated. Some argue that this is a waste of resources – the public are only interested in online exhibitions or other interpreted content. Others reply that since most collections are publicly owned, museums have a duty to publicise their holdings so as to promote research and access to them. Few consider what the effects on museums might be, and this is the area that Barbara Lejeune has researched.

Elise Coralie Edwards investigates the evolving role of the curator. In the postmodern world curators' authority and status is challenged by a growing demand for new voices and narratives to be heard in the museum. There is concern that museums now lack

curatorial expertise, because the job of the curator has shifted towards management and services such as education. A survey of job advertisements in the *Museums Journal* since 1990 addressed these questions and enables some projection of likely future changes.

The sheer metrics of museum collections is another matter of interest. How large is this resource? It was known that the DCMS had commissioned a survey of national museums collections storage in 2002. The results were obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. Some overall statistics are useful, but in general the reports are an object lesson in the difficulties of obtaining data and information that enables any meaningful comparison to be made between museums.

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