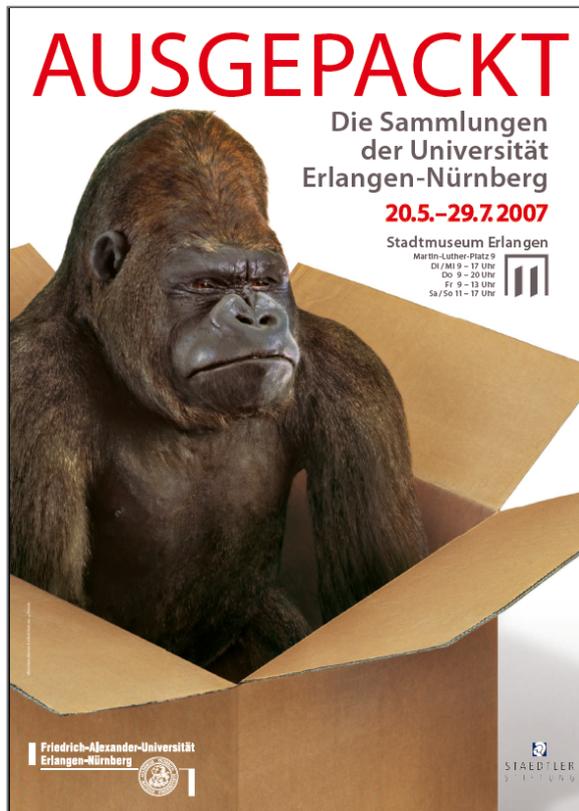


Unpacked. The Collections of the University Erlangen-Nürnberg

An Exhibition and more



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First of all, I want to thank the organisation team for giving me the chance to report from the Erlangen collection situation - and I want to thank the speakers, too, for all the inspiration and encouragement I've drawn from their papers up to now.

The situation at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg is in many respects similar to the situation in Vienna and Edinburgh. It is a university with collections, but without a university museum. The re-discovery of the University's collections started about 3 years ago with the forming of a working group of the collections' curators. I want to stress this point: In Erlangen it is a movement started by the collections themselves, not imposed by the university's authorities.

Our latest - and up to now by far largest - common project was the exhibition "Unpacked. The collections of the University Erlangen-Nürnberg" (Ausgepackt. Die Sammlungen der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg), hosted in the museum of the City of Erlangen from 20. May to 29. July 2007.

In my talk, I will cover three points: in the first and main part, I will explain the concept of the exhibition; then I will give a short overview about the collections themselves; and finally, I will cast a glance at our visions for the future.

A. Concept of the Exhibition

The concept was worked out by Udo Andraschke and Marion M. Ruisinger (University Erlangen-Nürnberg) together with Thomas Engelhardt (Stadtmuseum Erlangen) in close collaboration with the representatives of the 17 university collections. The financial support was granted by the University in August 2006. So we had a time space of 9 months to realise the exhibition. As the University itself has neither exhibition rooms nor qualified staff at its disposal, the collaboration with the Municipal Museum turned out to be extremely helpful.

We decided to tell our story in three chapters: "Collecting", "The Collections" and "Collected things". The first chapter presented the historical phenomena of collecting from a general and a local perspective. First, we gave some basic information about the historic relationship of "Collecting and Science" by enlarged reproductions of copper plates showing Early Modern Collections. Then we focussed on the early history of "Collecting and Erlangen University".

This history is closely linked to the persons of private collectors and the founder of the University, Margrave Friedrich of Brandenburg-Bayreuth. In the early 19th century, the university's collection were systematically ordered and publicly shown in the "Academic Museum".

The second chapter of the exhibition, "The Collections", was dedicated to the systematic presentation of the 17 University Collections. First, the visitor entered a room which formed the very heart of the exhibition: the "Depot", a virtual magazine of the University's collections. This room was covered with shelves which hold all kinds of objects, it formed a modern "Kunst- und Wunderkammer". Here the visitor got an idea of the abundance of the University's collections, of the variety of questions still to be answered and of the general and still lasting importance of the material basis of science. It was the very same idea that has been realised by the exhibition "Storage" at the University of Porto, as we have heard from Lucia Matos in her talk.

The "Depot" with its tightly packed shelves was followed by the reduced aesthetics of the "Parcours" in the next room, the former assembly room of the city's council. Here, each of the 17 collections was represented by a standard module, including a text, a photo and a show-case with objects. The 17 modules were placed along the walls in chronological order. The centre of the room was used for interactive stations. A favourite with our visitors was the "Commodore 64" with the computer game "Miss Pack-Man".

The third and last chapter was dedicated to the leading actors of the collections: the things themselves. In a suite of six small rooms we presented nine selected things from nine different collections. These nine objects shown off by red fabric were surrounded by secondary objects, pictures and texts, which revealed the historical context or the "thing story" of the central object. Thus, the things started talking, and they told unexpected stories:

An oil painting from the University's library led to a bladder stone; a passenger pigeon was linked to a children's theater in Frankfurt and to Rio Reiser, a German Rock Star; and the historic school-bench referred not only to the children who occupied it in old times, but also to the old people who occupy it today in the biographic therapy program launched by the Collection of School History in Nuremberg residences for elderly people - an approach quite similar to the "1940's room" at the University College London, which has been presented to us by Helen Chatterjee.

The exhibition ended with a single object - a human heart - in an arched showcase under the title "zu spät / too late". This was our memorial place for the forgotten, lost and destroyed collections. And it was the final appeal to our visitors - and to the responsible persons at the university - to care for the collections, which form an important part of our cultural heritage and of our specific academic identity. To create this sense of responsibility with the Erlangen public as well as with the University staff was the main intention of our exhibition.

To achieve this aim, we complemented the exhibition with additional projects: Advertisements, e.g. on the railway information leaflets on the train from Munich via Berlin to Hamburg, the publication "Die Sammlungen der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg", a lecture programm, an internet presentation, an educational program developed by the museum's professional staff and a press campaign with weakly essays in the local newspaper.

This exhibition project hopefully will serve as a starting point for future activities for and with the collections. I would like to end my talk with a short survey over the University's collections and some remarks about our wishes and visions for the future.

B. The Collections

When Erlangen University was founded in 1743, three collections came into existence as well: The Anatomical Collection, the Library and the Archive.

Margrave Friedrich left his Natural History Cabinet, which thus far was housed in the palace in Bayreuth, to the University of Erlangen. This was the foundation for the Collections of Botany, Geosciences and Zoology, which separated in the early 19th century.

In the course of the 19th century the first special collections came into existence: The Martius-Collection of Pharmacognosy, the Collection of Pathological Anatomy, the Collection of Antique Plaster casts, and the Observatory in Bamberg with its astronomical instruments.

In the 20th Century private collectors gave the impulse for the collections of Ethnography, Prehistory and Musical Instruments. The newly established Dermatological Clinic was enriched by a Moulages collection. The three youngest collections were assembled by members of the Schools of Pedagogic, Medicine and Computer Science.

Today, the 17 collections differ widely in respect to their size, storage and presentation. Some are very well presented and accessible for the public at fix opening ours, others are packed away and hardly known by the scientific staff itself. They differ also in respect to their inclusion into the research and teaching programme of their mother institutions: some form an important, integral part for the students' education; others are looked at more or less as useless rubbish, which occupies precious space in the institute's building.

The collections are, notwithstanding these differences, united by common needs and visions. Therefore, three years ago the representatives of the Erlangen-Nuremberg collections formed a working group, which up to now has successfully realised its first common projects, with the exhibition "Unpacked" as the latest and most important one. Due to our work, last year the Government of the University has appointed me "responsible person" for the University's collections (Sammlungsbeauftragte), which facilitates the communication process a lot.

This leads to my last point, some remarks on the "Visions for the Future" of the Erlangen-Nuremberg collections.

C. Visions for the Future

In my opinion, the collections have their main potentials in the fields of teaching, research and communication of science and PR-activities for the university. We have to explore these potentials and we have to find new ways and to develop innovative models in doing so. I believe that the collections may profit to a high degree from the various reform processes and the new competitive spirit of German Universities.

If we want to improve the collections' situation in the long run, we have to build up adequate structures within and without our universities. In Erlangen, the next steps could be a still closer and more regular collaboration of the collections, the formulation of a common statute of the collections and the engagement for the foundation of a Central Custody.

On a nation-wide scale, I think it would be very helpful to form a nationwide, albeit informal task force of the university collections and custodies for the direct exchange and discussion of ideas, arguments and solutions.

And - in the very long run - I dream of a University Museum, as a place to explore the history and to shape the future of the University Erlangen-Nürnberg.

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