

Re-Visiting the Contact Zone: Museums, Theory, Practice

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Doors to Knowledge: University collections and museums as intersections between past, present and future

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ABSTRACT

Universities have assembled collections for teaching and research purposes in the sciences, arts and humanities for at least 400 years. Until the mid-twentieth century, these collections were an integral part of academic life and were used daily by countless students and researchers. For the past decades, university collections are at a crossroads. Across Europe, universities are searching for alternative ways of organising collections and museums. Many are selecting and merging disparate artefacts and specimens, selling or renting historical buildings, creating foundations and associations to run museums, moving collections between buildings. Often, these new ways of arranging and rearranging do not take into consideration the original purpose, internal coherence and meaning of many university collections. Often too, a significant portion of university heritage is irreversibly lost. This paper aims at offering a brief overview of the present situation of university collections in Europe, discussing in particular their history, significance and relevance for contemporary society.