

Roundtable: Why bother to preserve, study, and communicate scientific and university heritage, and how should we do it?

Session proposal to The 7th Norwegian Conference on the History of Science

Scientific or university heritage does not receive much public attention. Within the scientific community, the preservation of “heritage” is often at odds with day-to-day activities and future-oriented institutional and professional identities. To the extent that the value of scientific heritage actually is acknowledged, it may be assessed in widely differing ways. It may, for example, be seen as a source to the history of science, as the heritage of the nation or humankind, or as a way of branding institutions or disciplines or to celebrate science.

Scientific and university heritage are ambiguous concepts. ‘Science’ can be defined broadly or narrowly and University heritage may be seen both as a more restricted concept than scientific heritage or as more encompassing, as it includes not only objects related to research but also to education and all other aspects of the University and its entanglements in society.

The ambiguity that surrounds scientific and university heritage is manifest in the incoherent, random or non-existing institutional framework for funding, identifying, assessing, preserving and studying it. Uncertainty about ownership and responsibilities, random storage and informally managed collections is commonplace.

How do we, as museums-workers and historians, deal with these challenges, and why should we deal with them? These two questions are interconnected. In order to develop strategies for surveying, assessing, selecting and preserving objects, we need to have some idea about what scientific heritage is and why it is of any value. Furthermore, given the lack of societal interest, institutional strength and substantial funding, we need to develop alliances and collaboration with various interested individuals and institutions who may have differing ideas about the value of scientific heritage and different reasons for engaging with it.

The session will discuss these interwoven practical and principal issues. We will take ongoing international discussions as a starting point and raise questions and present perspectives based on experiences from different institutional contexts.

Planned program:

1. Introduction (20 minutes)
Bjørn Vidar Johansen, Anne Vaalund og Jon Kyllingstad. MUV: Department of university history at Cultural history museum. University of Oslo.
2. Short presentations (20-25 minutes all in all)
 - Thomas Brandt. The Norwegian university of science and technology.
 - Svein Atle Skålevåg. University of Bergen.
 - Frode Weium/Ellen Lange. Norwegian museum of science and technology.
3. Panel-discussion 40 minutes

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Equipment required: Power point.