

Reorganizing a 20th century cabinet of curiosities into a museum for the 21st century

ISABEL M. GARCÍA FERNÁNDEZ

Abstract

This paper describes the life of a university museum that was born in the 1980s and transformed in the 21st century. Over a period of 25 years Professor Reverte collected more than 3700 objects and set up an authentic cabinet of curiosities dedicated to the fields of anthropology and forensic science. Despite the diversity of its contents, the museum had a recognized scientific interest. It has now undergone changes in order to meet the requirements of new academic demands and public accessibility, but without losing reference to its origins.

Introduction

In Spain the oldest collections were inherited from Enlightenment institutions and the consolidation of scientific and educational collections took place during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the second half of the 20th century the country underwent a major expansion of its university system: new universities were founded and older ones underwent further development; new fields of study were introduced and the number of students and research projects increased. One consequence of all this was the creation of new collections (BARATAS 2008).

In 1836 the Complutense University, which had been founded in the 15th century, moved to Madrid. In 1927 building started on the campus known as 'university city' (Ciudad Universitaria) where most of the faculties, schools and official buildings are now located. As the biggest and oldest university in Spain, the Complutense owns the most varied collections and museums of all the academic institutions in the country, with a total of twelve museums and six major collections.

With respect to its faculties and departments, autonomy of management is facilitated by its size. This also influences the different origins of its collections, forms of access and the various states of conservation.

For this paper we have chosen one particular collection from the Complutense: the medical, forensic and criminal anthropology and paleopathology museum. This is an unusual case within the university that gives rise to an interesting scientific and personal dilemma. The original museum was basically a one-man creation. After almost three decades of continuous growth, it has been transformed and a completely different museum has been developed in response to new institutional needs and visitor requirements, which at the same time attempts not to lose its essence.

The first museum

This is the story of the creation of a university museum in record time, thanks to the effort and dedication of one man: Professor Reverte Coma, ex-director of the School of Legal Medicine, who collected and organized an incredible number of objects. Although they were based on his personal tastes and interests, they filled a large gap with respect to Spanish collections and research in this field.

In barely 25 years (from 1980 to 2005) Professor Reverte was able to collect more than 3,700 objects and specimens related to the fields of anthropology and forensic science (fig. 1–2).

He was the only person behind this project and, although the museum was officially created in 1994 by a university act, it was not until the year 2000 that it was given his name: the Professor Reverte Coma Museum. He organized it as an instrument for education and research in the following areas:



Fig. 1 - The Medical and Forensic Anthropology Museum is located in the Faculty of Medicine belonging to the Universidad Complutense of Madrid.



Fig. 2 - Professor Reverte Coma in his office.

forensic anthropology, medical anthropology, criminal investigation, paleopathology, cultural anthropology, anatomy (human and animal), the study of mummies, scientific instruments and botany.

The different areas were not clearly defined in the exhibition space. The most comprehensive were the criminal anthropology and criminology sections, which included subjects such as weapons, instruments of execution, terrorism, forgeries and the skulls of famous killers.

We may well wonder how he managed to collect so many objects with very little support and practically no money. The answer to that question lies in his personality. Professor Reverte is a man of great enthusiasm. During his professional life he travelled all over the world, especially to South America and Asia, which he visited with great frequency. A large part of the collection is made up of his own purchases, which are a true reflection of his varied interests. As an extremely active and involved criminal investigator he was able to amass a wealth of material derived from his research work, including material obtained from archaeological excavations. He had

many friends in the police department, courts and customs services and received a considerable number of valuable donations for his museum (although we should mention that not everything was worth keeping in a museum). Other objects came from previously existing institutions, although much of this material was lost when it was moved to the new campus. Among these donor institutions were the School of Legal Medicine at the San Carlos Hospital in Madrid and its museum of crime, and the old Hospital of San Juan de Dios whose collections were in poor condition due to many years of neglect. He also received an important donation consisting of a collection of bizarre objects from the emblematic Carabanchel prison in Madrid, which was in use from 1944 to 1999.

Accessions were constant; numerous gifts from private individuals would arrive at the museum every month and almost everything was put on display. It was not long before Reverte had to look for additional display space and took to using hallways to house showcases and information panels. The donations he received were not restricted to objects or specimens; thanks to his contacts, he was also able to acquire money for furnishing the museum. This included multimedia devices and a system for visually impaired visitors.

The educational aspect of the museum was always present and its use as an educational tool for students and regular visitors meant a constant search for appropriate media. Reverte designed 23 backlit panels which were used to illustrate and clarify certain aspects of the museum discourse. A CD-Rom and a webpage were also created for the museum.

The reports he wrote personally in the years 2000 and 2001 are a testimony to the enormous amount of work he put in during a very short period of time (fig. 3–4).



Fig. 3 and 4 - The museum was from its origins an authentic cabinet of curiosities created in the 20th century.

The creation of his museum was inspired by the Dupuytren Museum, the Orfila Museum and the Hunterian Museum, all founded by eminent physicians and professors of medicine in the 19th century. William Hunter and Pierre Guillaume Dupuytren also shared a passion for collecting and were able to gather together a unique array of objects related to medical practices and advances. Prominent among their collections are those related to anatomy and pathology, which include some very interesting and striking specimens.

Professor Reverte recognized his own work in these examples. He also had a closer model in Dr Velasco, who in 1875 assembled the oldest physical anthropology collection in Spain; objects and specimens from the original collection can be found today in the National Anthropology Museum, the National Archaeological Museum and the Natural History Museum. The second half of the 20th century saw a loss of interest in physical anthropology collections and these were abandoned. Most of them ended up in universities where in recent years they have been put to use in general terms. This circumstance emphasizes the importance of the project developed by Professor Reverte.

In the case of the Reverte Museum, not only do the collections contain pieces of important historical value, they are above all highly comprehensive. This is due to the variety of subjects presented and their extensive geographical provenance. Professor Reverte's intention was to show anthropology as the great science of man. However, this idea was defined by his counterparts as a project that was impossible to carry through (RONZÓN 1991).

Despite its anachronistic beginnings and the limited space available for the collections (less than 200 square meters, comprising three exhibit rooms, a laboratory, an office and a small storage area), the museum was of great significance. It contained certain specimens and objects that were unique and one of the largest collections of mummies in Spain. In its relatively short life it received many curious visitors from both within the academic world and outside it (RUIZ 2008). Reverte was in charge of the guided tours and the visit was always an unforgettable experience, thanks to his ability to communicate his own enthusiasm about every subject and object.

His legacy when he retired seemed overwhelming. On assuming the responsibility of new director, his successor, Dr Sánchez, also realized that a change in the discourse and orientation of the museum was called for. It turned out to be a difficult task since part of the essence of the original museum could be lost.

The first step was to analyze the content and characteristics of the collections in order to devise a new classification. In museum vocabulary, the notion of the term 'collection' has many different definitions and connotations. This is shown by the following three examples:

1. "The collected object of a museum, acquired and preserved because of their potential value as examples, as reference material, or as objects of aesthetic or educational importance" (BURCAW 1983, 4).
2. "A collection is deemed to be not only the outcome but also the source of a scientific programme aimed at acquisitions and research through material and immaterial evidences of mankind and his environment".
3. A more open definition states that a collection is a "set of objects brought together intentionally according to a very specific rationale which allows them to preserve their individualism" (ICOFOM 2009, 60–61).

When all the above is taken into consideration, it is obvious that what was inherited was a true collection containing reference materials, most of them of great scientific and educational interest. It followed a specific rationale that emanated from Professor Reverte's personal viewpoint:

„My idea of a museum is like a living creature which is constantly being fed and grows unremittingly, and the soul behind its creation and whoever helped him are always present in its display cases, exhibit rooms and collections. It sends constant messages, both obvious and hidden, to the mind of the visitor, whose impression of the museum will remain with him for the rest of his life.“¹

The creation and consolidation of museums and collections takes time. In this case the time period was very short so an evaluation of the selection criteria was necessary. In the new project, extending the collections is not considered a priority but studying them is essential in order to establish the most appropriate educational methodology.

New project

The new project was started in 2005. The first task was to redefine objectives. Very intensive research and work on documentation has been carried out and is still ongoing since in most cases the museum only had a list of objects, with no indication of their provenance.

After evaluation of the museum collections and assessment of their scientific relevance and the visitor profile, a new arrangement was proposed. The display was divided into seven subject areas: medical and forensic anthropology, the history of anthropology and criminal investigation, evolution in anthropology, paleopathology, cultural anthropology and ethnobotany. It was also proposed to set aside an entire room dedicated to mummified human remains. This room is especially controlled because of the nature of the subject and its delicate state of conservation. Collections with emotional value have been excluded and some of the objects have been put on display in a special area dedicated to Professor Reverte (Ruiz 2008).

¹ www.gorgas.gob.pa/museoafc/home.html (accessed December 1, 2010).

As a result, a selection of significant objects is now on display and the rest will be made accessible to researchers and students. A major part of the collection is on permanent loan to other museums within the university and what remained has been packed away and stored.



Fig. 5 - Dr Sánchez, Mónica Ruiz and Mercedes González, the driving force of the new museum working on the new arrangement.

Transformation work turned out to be slow but it was constant. The following people were involved: the new director, an intern and a large number of volunteers, including an architect, university professors, a museum conservator, a group of dedicated and enthusiastic students from the fields of forensic medicine and criminal investigation and postgraduate students from the M.A. in conservation and M.A. in archaeology programmes (fig. 5).

We are still working on a collection management plan that includes a preventive conservation plan involving the reorganization of storage and improvement of climatic conditions for

display purposes. In addition, we have prepared a protocol for the handling and use of the collections, to be followed by museum and school staff, students, researchers and visitors alike.

The museum has recently started lending objects to other institutions and is developing an intensive research policy, taking into account that most of the objects and specimens have never previously been studied or published. We are well aware that there are many precious materials waiting to be discovered.

Museography

The new display arrangement in the exhibition spaces is based on two major scientific areas: medical anthropology and paleopathology. All the areas in which the museum was originally organized are represented in this new arrangement, but with a different layout.

It could be said that we have moved on from an accumulative and storage-like exhibit to the presentation of representative objects of scientific, cultural or historical value.



Fig. 6 and 7 - The new display arrangement in the exhibition spaces is based on two major scientific areas: medical anthropology and paleopathology.



Fig. 8 - The special display case dedicated to Professor Reverte is still in construction.



Fig. 9 - This picture shows the old (past) and new (future) signs of the museum. The name of Professor Reverte Coma appears in both.

University Scientific Collections) and the research group 930420 Técnicas de Documentación, Conservación y Restauración del Patrimonio. (Documentation Techniques, Conservation and Restoration of Heritage). The author wishes to express her gratitude to everyone who has made this project possible and above all to its very soul and driving force, Professor Reverte himself.

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Space was extended with the addition of a small room and the museum now has four display rooms. The original display cases have been used after slight modifications. A new logo and information panels have been designed and we are currently working on a new webpage for the museum.

The museum was opened on July 14th 2009 and it has already been visited by a number of interested groups from outside the university (fig. 6–8).

In the new discourse, research and teaching are fostered by answering questions about the lives of our ancestors: what they were like, how they lived, what they ate, how and when they died, whether they were wealthy ... It is easy to identify the clues but visitors need to take time to think about them and this in turn enriches the learning process (fig. 9).

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Contact

Isabel M. García Fernández

Professor for Museology at the Fine Arts School, Complutense University of Madrid

Address: Painting and Restoration Department, Fine Arts School, Universidad Complutense Madrid,
C/ Greco, 2, 28040 Madrid, Spain

E-mail: [museoig\(at\)art.ucm.es](mailto:museoig(at)art.ucm.es)

www.museorevertecoma.org

