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ACADEMIC MUSEUMS. CATALOGUE, HUBERT KOWALSKI ET AL., WARSAW 2017, PP. 364, ILL.

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Abstract: *Muzea uczelniane*. Katalog is a comprehensive, excellently illustrated collective work with perfectly balanced proportions between the written word and the image. The publication was issued by the Association of Academic Museums, which at present has over 20 members. The catalogue, which fills an enormous gap in promoting knowledge about this little-known but truly valuable branch of Polish museology, lists an overwhelming majority of more than 50 museums associated with schools of higher learning in Poland. The presented publication brings the general

public closer to diverse zoological, mineralogical, and artistic collections or those of scientific aids and documents about the history of schools of higher learning, amassed by the latter. Due to its lucid alphabetical arrangement based on the names of towns, high quality photographs, and professionally written descriptions this book is a genuine scientific and publishing event. It will without question become a milestone in research on the history of Polish science and academic museology, and quite possibly an inspiration for establishing a National Natural History Museum, planned already in the 1930s.

Keywords: schools of higher learning, academic collections, history of science, archival material, museology, geology, medicine, zoology, arts.

In October 2017 I took part in an international seminar on Academic Museums in Europe, held in Berlin. Since the event was organised by Humboldt University the participants were shown almost all the museum collections of this institution which, just like the University of Warsaw, was established at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that I studied history of art at a department of the Collegium Maius complex of Jagiellonian University and enjoyed almost daily contact with the vast collections of the University Museum, I found the expanse of the Berlin scientific collections located in assorted buildings to be immense. Soon afterward, at the beginning of 2018, I read *Muzea uczelniane. Katalog*. My admiration for this publication was even greater than the one experienced at the German seminar – this is a book that evokes an impression of the expanse of Polish collections, almost unexpected due to wars and plunder; at the same time, it renders the reader aware of academic museums as depositories of extremely interesting collections, which deserve to be ascribed a greater role than has been the case

up to now. These are not merely successors of first European museums, created already prior to the Enlightenment, but also treasuries of knowledge about history, technical progress, and all the complex paths of our civilisation.

Muzea uczelniane. Katalog is a copious, lavishly illustrated book in which the balance of proportions between the word and the image is perfect. The authors, following the example of Seneca's *Moral Letters to Lucius*, were well aware that when mention is made of little-known or totally unfamiliar issues a reader can be convinced much more quickly by a pictorial exemplum than excessive verbal argumentation. The introduction: *Muzea wyższych uczelni – 2017 states: Naturally, [we possess an] awareness of the fact that this publication does not deplete the topic [but that it will be] an important voice in a public debate conducted in our country.*

The titular publication is a work of the Association of Academic Museums, which only recently incorporated slightly more than ten institutions and at present has over 20 members. The catalogue discusses an overwhelming

majority of over 50 museums associated with schools of higher learning. It is also the outcome of several conferences held in numerous scientific centres in Poland, but predominantly remains the outcome of great enthusiasm and pragmatism. One of the prime conceptions inspiring the development of the Association and the origin of the catalogue was derived from the University of Warsaw Museum, which since December 2015 possesses a permanent modern multimedia exposition and creates an ambitious perspective of further progress. A significant role was played in this undertaking by the Museum of the History of Medicine and Pharmacy in Białystok, which opens the catalogue in accordance with the alphabetical order of the presented towns.

The configuration of the book is extremely lucid and takes the reader on a tour of academic museums – those of universities, technical universities, and art academies from Białystok, Gdańsk, Cracow, Łódź, Poznań, Rogów, Sosnowiec, Szczecin, Toruń and Warsaw all the way to Wrocław. The first contact with the publication produces a number of questions: did we know anything about the Museum of Mineral Deposit Geology in Gliwice, the Centre for Documentation of Deportations, Expulsions and Resettlements at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, the Museum of Wood and Forest in Rogów, or the Prof. Kazimierz Maślankiewicz Mineralogical Museum at the University of Wrocław (whose patron is, i.a. the author of an acclaimed book about volcanoes)? More, have we ever toured the Stanisław Józef Thugutt Geological Museum at the Faculty of Geology of the University of Warsaw or the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw? How many of the 13 academic museums in Cracow discussed in the catalogue have become the objects of our interest? As a rule, we are familiar only with the magnificent Museum of the Jagiellonian University Collegium Maius, exceptional in every respect. The discussed publication – the work of many authors – brings the reader closer to all the museums in an almost impeccable fashion. Let us take a look inside the Museum of the Opole University of Technology and X-ray Tubes (pp. 210–217). Naturally, Grzegorz Jezierski, Ph.D. Eng., the author of this particular presentation, concentrated on the history of X rays and the unique tube. It is worth adding that the Museum was established upon the basis of his private collections. A concise outline informs about the brief history of the Museum, dating back to 2011 and owner of a collection of X-ray tubes unprecedented on a global scale. A total of 1000 exhibits – 442 donations from all over the world – are arranged in three showrooms 222 sq. m. large together with specialist Polish and foreign books and invaluable artistic X-ray photographs. Nonetheless, both this and other catalogue entries lack bibliographic directives and

do not mention at least one or two publications indispensable for those who are interested in the topic and intend to enhance their knowledge.

The slightly older Museum of the University of Rzeszów was established in 2002 and is a year younger than the University. Such a rapid organisation of a museum and prompt arrangement of collections (at present totalling 6000 items), which had to be granted exhibition space, constitute a truly admirable accomplishment. Hopefully, the publication of the catalogue will render the authorities of the University of Rzeszów aware of the fact that the possession of an academic museum is an extremely important step in creating the identity and prestige of their institution.

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) has recently achieved much for the sake of the availability of its collections – in particular those of art – to wider social circles. Exhibitions of KUL collections held in Warsaw proved to be a genuine event. A successive step in the propagation of knowledge about this important institution is the dis-

ussed book – nine pages of the catalogue (pp. 179–187) feature a brilliant combination of reproductions of selected works of art: mediaeval sculptures, modern paintings, porcelain and drawings (i. a. by Stanisław Noakowski), together with a commentary. Dr Krzysztof Przylicki first sketched a synthetic outline of the history of the Museum and then went on to propose a professional presentation of chosen objects. The quality of the descriptions equals that of the text by Joanna Ślaga presenting the Museum of the Jagiellonian University Collegium Maius, the acknowledged “king” of all academic museums in Poland. In both instances we perceive scientific maturity and an excellent selection of objects; in a word, we read about museums with a great tradition accompanied “in unison”

by outstanding familiarity with the objects and precise descriptions. Nonetheless, both in the case of Collegium Maius and the KUL Museum there is no trace of even a brief suggestion concerning further reading matter or publications whose number is, after all, quite imposing.

Reading or even browsing through a book, especially a beautifully illustrated one, is a neurocognitive journey of sorts; our attention is drawn by those objects with which we are already familiar, even if only from other photographs, but also by those whose attraction lies in their enigmatic qualities since we have never seen them before and in which we detect something special and mysterious. Having read the discussed book earlier I toured the previously mentioned Geological Museum of the University of Warsaw encouraged by its presentation by Dr Marek Stępiszewski and Mariusz Niechwędownicz in *Muzea uczelniane* as well as an exceptional photograph on p. 308. Taking another look at this depiction of a showroom and recalling my visit at the Geological Museum



displaying the Professor Thugutt collection and its fascinating agates, meteorites, ammonites, trilobites, etc., I once again became aware of the magnificent collections in our possession and how little they are known to wider circles.

As a result of reading *Muzea uczelniane* – a publication with numerous admirable photographs of zoological specimens, i.a. in Rogów and the Natural Education Centre in Cracow – and following the suggestion made by Dr hab. Hubert Kowalski, one of the main initiators of the book and, at the same time, chairman of the Association of Academic Museums – I toured a storehouse of zoological collections in Field Station Łomna-Las, belonging to the Museum and Institute of Zoology at the Polish Academy of Sciences (part is composed of the former zoological collections of the University of Warsaw). Thousands of superior specimens include almost 200 years old taxidermied bisons and only slightly younger panthers, elks, horses, eagles or vultures. These wonderfully well-preserved objects wait for the establishment of a Natural History Museum, which Warsaw still lacks. The discussed book gives rise to assorted positive reflections by making readers aware of the diversity of our scientific collections, many of which are unique on a global

scale. With its brilliant graphic layout the catalogue, opening a perspective of further in-depth studies, is a call of sorts for appreciating the collections presented therein and thus their better financing. A further acquaintance with *Muzea uczelniane* urges to tour the Museum of the Faculty of Earth Sciences of the University of Silesia in Sosnowiec, the Museum of the History of Medicine and Pharmacy in the magnificent Branicki Palace in Białystok, the Tradition Hall of the Gdynia Maritime University, the Museum of the History of Medicine in Warsaw, or the Museum of the University of Wrocław in its splendid seat in the Baroque main building of the University, designed by Christoph Tausch and situated on a river bank of the Odra.

Although certain introductory texts and entries in *Muzea uczelniane*. Katalog do not quite meet the expectations of a critical reader the book must be recognised as a genuine event in Polish popular science literature in the best meaning of the term. It will also undoubtedly become a milestone in studies on the history of Polish science and academic museology and quite possibly inspire the establishment of a National Natural History Museum, planned already in the 1930s.

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Table of contents 2018: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/10809>