

# University museums in a university town: University of Tartu Museums in the service of the local community

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## Abstract

*University museums bring academic potential to bear on community development in culture, education and tourism. Tartu as the seat of Estonia's oldest and only classical university provides an excellent example of this. Tartu is a town with a university that has for a number of centuries played an important part in shaping the face and identity of the entire nation. This article will discuss the role that the museums of the University of Tartu – the University History Museum, the Art Museum, and the Natural History Museum – play in the cultural and educational life of Tartu. The author will also touch upon the role of the museums as tourist attractions and support to the museums by both the municipal council and the university.*

## Introduction

Tartu is a university town. It is home not only to the oldest and the only *universitas*-type university in Estonia – the University of Tartu – founded in 1632, but also to the Estonian University of Life Sciences and several other higher education institutions. Tartu is a town with a rich cultural heritage. The University of Tartu has always played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in the whole country but also in Tartu's development and in shaping the town's cultural environment. Tartu's numerous museums include three museums of the University of Tartu: the Natural History Museum, the Art Museum and the University History Museum. The first two, founded in 1802 and 1803, respectively, are the oldest museums in Estonia. The university's museums are open to the public and attract visitors from the entire Estonia and also from other countries. The present paper focuses on the role of these museums as cultural, educational and tourist attractions in the local community and in the Tartu region. The paper will also discuss how the development of this role is currently conceived by the town administration and the university.

## The role of the university's museums in the development of local culture, education and tourism

The University of Tartu museums boast a tradition of community outreach spanning two centuries. Created to preserve and manage the university's teaching and research collections, the museums have been open to public since their inauguration. Although the number of visitors at certain periods in history has been even higher than it is today, it is safe to say that the museums' community outreach work has never before been more fully and purposefully developed.

The nature of the collections, the high qualifications of the museums' employees and the museums' attractiveness to visitors, coupled with the high reputation of the university in Estonian society, means that the university's museums can exert significant impact on the town's cultural life and the development of its tourism industry. In Tartu, the University is an important marker of identity for the whole region.

The collections of the university's museums are unique in Estonia. The Museum of Natural History holds the largest natural history collection in the country. The Art Museum has a rich graphic art collection and Estonia's only collection of antiquities. The University History Museum is the only science history museum in Estonia. The history of the University of Tartu Museums and their collections up to the present day has been outlined in *Mapping of the Collections of the University of*

*Tartu in 2006-2007*, an overview put together by the University of Tartu History Museum (LUST & LEPPIK 2007).

The value of the collections and museums is greatly enhanced by their highly qualified staff. It is important for visitors to have the opportunity to meet and talk to museum specialists. Besides their own staff, the museums can also obtain assistance from specialists affiliated to other units of the university.

The University of Tartu museums are located in historical university buildings, which represent popular



Fig. 1 - The University of Tartu Art Museum has preserved a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century interior and Pompeii-style wall paintings. Photo by Andres Tennus, University of Tartu

sights and symbols of the town, thus adding to the tourist value of the museums' exhibitions. The Art Museum, for example, is located in the university's main building which makes it easy for its visitors to see also the university's assembly hall and the historical student lockup in the same building (Fig. 1).

The University History Museum is located in several old university buildings on Toome Hill, the site where a complex of university buildings was constructed at the

beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The museum's main exhibition is displayed in the former university library that was installed in the ruins of a medieval dome cathedral rebuilt for that purpose at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The museum also organizes visits to remaining dome cathedral ruins and to the viewing platforms built on the bases of the cathedral's two towers (Fig. 2). The University History Museum also operates in the Old Anatomical Theatre and is about to start restoring the old observatory, so that it can be opened to the public as a museum in 2011 (Fig. 3). All these buildings are located in the downtown area, within the immediate vicinity of the town hall square, and are usually visited as part of any guided tour of the town.

The museums are a natural part of the town's cultural landscape and form a network with other museums and cultural institutions in town. The museums offer diverse educational programs, which are aimed at the townspeople of Tartu (Fig. 4). According to a poll administered on behalf of the municipal council to a selection of tourists who visited Tartu in the summer of 2008, Toome Hill and the ruins of the dome cathedral were regarded as the town's most popular attraction. The main building of the university placed third among the popular attractions.

### **Cooperation experience and prospects**

As defined in the Republic of Estonia Universities Act, and in the University of Tartu Act, the university is not only an institution that engages in research and education, but also one that fosters culture. Local and national support to the university is crucial to the success of this third area of the university's

mission. The municipal council, in particular, can do a lot by providing assistance and cooperating with the museums to contribute to their success on the local level. University museums co-operate with agencies of the town in various everyday activities and in larger projects. Of the more important co-



Fig. 2 - The University of Tartu History Museum is situated in the former university library that was built in the ruins of the medieval dome cathedral in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by Margot Sakson, University of Tartu

University museums are regarded as competitive advantage to the university among other universities (BOYLAN 2002), but in the context of Tartu as a university town, the university museums should be seen as an asset for increasing the competitiveness of the whole region. The development of the university's museums is best outlined in Tartu's Development Plan for Culture, Sports and Youth Work (2008), in the town's Tourism Development Plan (2008) and in the strategy Tartu 2030 (2006). The first of those documents sees the development of the university museums as a necessary prerequisite



Fig. 3 - The observatory of the University of Tartu will be opened as a museum in 2011. As part of Struve Geodetic Arc, the observatory has been included in the list of UNESCO's World Heritage.

operation projects that have received funding from the municipal council, mention should be made of the renovation of the roof and the tower of the observatory, the partial restoration of the ruins of the dome cathedral, and the educational program of the University History Museum in the history of medicine at the Old Anatomical Theatre.

Museums participate in developing the region.

for diversifying the cultural life of Tartu and for creating a stimulating cultural environment. The development plan for culture provides a list of museum facilities that require investment in order to facilitate the town's development. The university itself has also set a series of goals for serving the society through culture work. The cultural mission of the university is also included in the university's strategic plan 2009-2015 (2008). The relevant strategic tasks

include the development of tourism and education services offered by the university and the introduction of the collections of the university's museums to the public. The university's heritage

stands to benefit from the academic community's interest in communicating science to society (SOUBIRAN 2008).

The university's co-operation with the town hall has yielded some success stories, but there is room



Fig. 4 - A group of children at the exhibition in the University of Tartu History Museum. A museum specialist explains an exposition of Adam Johann von Krusenstern's circumnavigation which took place in 1803–1806. Photo by Andres Tennus, University of Tartu

for improvement. For example, the financial contribution of the local council needs to be more predictable. Financial support from the municipal council is especially important because no national government support exists for the community outreach activities of the university museums. University museums' cultural and educational services are financed mainly by the university, supplemented by grants from various sources.

The lack of financial resources, however, may significantly restrict, or lead to termination of some university services to

the community. For example the lack of resources to repair old showcases that are no longer safe, or to provide access for handicapped persons may require restricting public access. The university's resources that can be invested in the museums are limited because the university's research and teaching needs take precedence. Thus, only projects that have the highest priority for the university will receive the green light.

## Conclusion

The university's museums play an important role in the cultural and education life of the town and constitute a significant tourist attraction. The plans of both the municipal council and the university include goals to develop the museums. Support and co-operation between the town and the university are the prerequisite for success.

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