

## UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS IN WALES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

#### Galler'deki Üniversite Müzeleri: Bir Keşif Araştırması

Bu çalışma, Galler'deki üniversite müzelerinin çok yönlü rolünü inceleyerek tarihsel gelişimlerini, zengin koleksiyonlarını, kamusal etkileşimlerini, erişilebilirliklerini, eğitim ve araştırmaya katkılarını ortaya koymayı amaçlayan bir keşif araştırmasıdır. Nitel yöntem kullanılan bu araştırmada, Galler'deki üniversite müzelerinin evrimi, işlevi ve zorlukları hakkında temel soruları ele almak için kamu erişimine açık kaynakların içerik analizinden ve müze personeliyle yapılan yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, Aberystwyth, Swansea, South Wales ve Bangor Üniversitelerindeki müzelerin akademik mirası koruma, farklı kitlelerle etkileşim kurma ve disiplinler arası öğrenme ve araştırmayı destekleme konusunda kritik bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Fon kısıtlamaları ve kurumların değişen öncelikleri gibi devam eden zorluklara rağmen, bu müzeler, etkilerini artırmak için bölgesel ve uluslararası iş birlikleri de dahil olmak üzere yenilikçi stratejiler benimsemektedir. Bu çalışma, söz konusu müzelerin uzun vadeli başarıları ile Galler'in kültürel ve eğitim mirasına katkılarının garanti altına alınması için hem akademik kurumlardan hem de kültürel politikalara yön veren organizasyonlardan gelecek sürekli desteğin önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

**Keywords:** Üniversite Müzeleri, Galler Müzeleri, Galler, Müze Çalışmaları, Katılım

## 1. Introduction

With the new museology discourse that spans the postcolonial mindsets of repatriation, inclusion and accessibility, the museum sector has turned to educational initiatives that would potentially allow them to increase their outreach efforts and grow their communities. Within this framework, university museums deserve closer attention due to their organizational state of duality, being both educational and museological. Since the regional context of university museums significantly influences their collections and management, it is imperative to examine these institutions within their localized parameters. Following this mindset, this paper looks into the university museums in Wales of the United Kingdom (UK).

The Welsh region is home to a variety of heritage and memory institutions, each with a specific identity and remit. Within this geography, the Welsh university museums occupy a very particular place, having employed assertive and collaborative approaches and initiatives, despite being limited in number. This exploratory research examines these institutions with a focused emphasis on historical development, collections, public engagement and accessibility, along with their contributions to research and education.

This study aims to explore and posit the Welsh university museums within the wider context of the museum sector in Wales through the scrutiny of the diverse challenges and opportunities they face and their contributions towards the conservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of Wales. Since university museums in Wales have not been subjected to focused academic research, this study fills an important gap within the existing literature on the fields of both Welsh museum studies and university museum studies, by way of an extensive assessment of the source materials and publicly available information pertaining to the museums of

interest.

This research into university museums in Wales has been informed by a series of questions such as: How many university museums are there in Wales? What are their statutory designations? How have these museums changed, and what are the key drivers for such change? What sort of collections do they have, and how do these collections align with the teaching and research goals of their parent institutions? What is the role of the university museum in terms of public engagement and education, and how do they engage with a range of different audiences across Wales? What are the contributions towards research and education and what are the resulting benefits to students and staff? What challenges and opportunities are faced by them, and in what ways might they be supported in order to secure their sustainability? In addressing such questions, this study provides significant underpinning insight into the sociocultural role of university museums in Wales, and it forms a foundation upon which future scholarly research might approach these largely neglected organizations.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. The Identification of University Museums in Wales

The official source for the university museums established in Wales is the Welsh government, which has listed four university museums with respect to their accreditation status (Welsh Government, 2024). Accordingly, there are three accredited university museums: The School of Art Museum & Galleries at Aberystwyth University in Ceredigion, a county in the west of Wales, Egypt Centre / Y Ganolfan Eifftaidd at Swansea University in Swansea, a coastal city in the south of Wales, and Art Collection Museum at University of South Wales in Rhondda Cynon Taff, a county borough in the south-east of Wales (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Accredited University Museums in Wales (Welsh Government, 2024)

Museum	University	Location (County)	Accreditation number	Date of last review
The School of Art Museum	Aberystwyth University	Ceredigion	1912	05/10/2023
Egypt Centre	Swansea University	Swansea	1879	30/03/2023
Art Collection Museum	University of South Wales	Rhondda Cynon Taff	2023	09/05/2024

Apart from these, there is only one university museum that has not been accredited yet, but in the process of receiving accreditation, and that is Bangor University Museum at Bangor University in Gwynedd, a county in the north-west of Wales (see Table 2). This study considers these four university museums, as listed by the Welsh government.

**Table 2:** University Museums with “Working Towards Accreditation” Status in Wales (Welsh Government, 2024)

Museum	University	Location (County)	Accreditation number	Target application date
Bangor University Museum	Bangor University	Gwynedd	T5656	22/12/2024

**2.2. The Qualitative Aspects of University Museums in Wales**

University museums around the world have long been considered some of the richest repositories, many of which were established due to academic and research needs within the scope of collegiate departments (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.11). In the UK alone, a number of well-known institutions are located in Oxford, Glasgow, and Manchester, where collections were originally assembled to support research and teaching (Stanbury, 2000, p.4). These collections now form part of a more general vision of national heritage. Collections in Welsh university museums are also substantial collections in their own right and constitute a part of the wider cultural heritage in Wales in both historic and academic interests (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.10). The collections are becoming increasingly accessible to the general public, who become acquainted with the cultural heritage of Wales through universities that act as educational mediators (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.13).

Welsh university museums’ collections are pivotal for a number of academic purposes in courses that require direct student learning, such as medicine, veterinary science, and the arts. Hence, university museums are significant educational tools not only for university students but also secondary students through providing extended museum collection engagement (Stanbury, 2000, p.6). This situation aligns with the argument that the academic environment is strengthened by university museums, reinforcing the prestige of universities as places of

learning and innovation (Erbay, 2018, p.4).

Public engagement has become one of the main functions of university museums, which can perhaps be considered part of a wider trend in the general museum sector. Most university museums in Wales have concentrated their efforts on public engagement through the development of exhibitions, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.10; Hawcroft, 2009, p.120). This is also in line with the ongoing trends in the UK, where there is an increasing integration of academic functions with the needs of the public (Hawcroft, 2009, p.124). This type of outreach expands not only the audience but also museums’ function as caretakers of cultural heritage, even as vehicles for raising social consciousness (Erbay, 2018, p.2). By engaging the public in this manner, these institutions reinforce their value beyond academia through contributions to lifelong learning and community engagement (Arnold-Forster 2000, p.10).

Welsh university museums face financial challenges. Many campus institutions have to rethink their roles due to the fact that their budgets are reduced, and the teaching priorities are changed. Resulting from this process, new initiatives have been created using technology to enhance object-based teaching and research (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.14). In addition, as universities adapt to changes in scientific and technological knowledge, university museums also change in conjunction with it, aligning with new pedagogies and societal interests (Erbay, 2018, p.4). Engagement in research initiatives generates additional avenues for innovation, thereby augmenting the university’s reputation as a frontrunner in the domain of research and development (Erbay, 2018, p.3).

Despite these challenges, university museums in Wales remain integral to the academic and cultural fabric of their host institutions. The professional curatorial staff, often concurrently holding academic positions, are key drivers in the implementation of both the educational and public access policies of these museums (Hawcroft, 2009, p.120). In addition, they have facilitated educational outreach programs by using their acquired collections to their advantage in order to integrate more fully into the larger museum world (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.10). Networking and collab-

orative works with other museums both regionally and internationally are also necessary as a solution for addressing common issues and improving management services (Arnold-Forster, 2000, p.13; Warhurst, 2012, p.221).

### 2.3. The Quantitative Aspects of University Museums in Wales

The museum sector in Wales has been under the close radar of various quantitative studies to inform decisions over the planning and financing of such institutions. These studies have been gathered under the annual Museum Spotlight Survey since its inception in 2006 (Welsh Government, 2023). The survey itself provides a particular opportunity to further enhance its impact on the Welsh government and the wider museum sector as a whole.

According to the survey report of 2022, the Welsh museum sector actually showed some very real signs of recovery, particularly in the period of post-COVID-19, though clearly with challenges. Museum attendance regained 69% in 2022 compared with pre-pandemic levels, while for university museums this recovery was particularly strong, over 80% (Welsh Government, 2023). Nevertheless, the finances available to university museums have taken a lot of pressure, which is a part of the broader challenges faced by both independent and local authority museums in maintaining good financial positions. From 2018 to 2021, university museums saw a reduction in their average operating budgets. This reflects the overall trend of cuts seen across the cultural sector in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023; Museums Association, 2024e).

Staffing trends within the sector create a very different picture. Full-time equivalent staffing levels at university museums have grown since 2019 by 32%, against the decline in volunteer numbers across the wider museum sector. In contrast to the overall trends in the period, university museums actually increased their volunteer contingent and, thus, feature more overall in providing both jobs and broader community engagement across the Welsh museum sector (Welsh Government 2023). All the same, this investment is due to the decrease in public funding, which cannot go unnoticed. In Wales, 40% of local government revenue funding for culture and leisure services has been cut since 2010, adding further pressure on university muse-

ums (Museums Association, 2024b). These cuts have been extended by the Welsh Government's proposed reductions in its budget for 2024/25, which may further increase such problems. This can have impacts such as exacerbating issues like job losses and even the reintroduction of an admittance fee for some museums and cultural institutions (Museums Association, 2024e).

There are, however, strategic efforts that could bring limited relief to the sector in view of these challenges. For instance, the Welsh Government's Draft Priorities for Culture initiative concerns the commitment of the government towards fostering a resilient cultural landscape, particularly in supporting local heritage and museums. Institutions like Swansea University's Egypt Centre is known for benefiting directly from the grants for collections care and technological enhancements that are provided under this draft (Museums Association, 2024c). In addition, the recent appointment in 2024 of a new Minister for Culture, Skills, and Social Partnership, Jack Sargeant, may point to a more holistic approach to cultural policymaking. Sargeant's brief covers national museums, local collections, and the historic environment and may therefore offer some possibilities for closer collaboration and funding opportunities which might extend to university museums in Wales (Museums Association, 2024a).

There are university museums throughout much of the UK, including parts of both Scotland and England, which play an integral role in both the internal functions of each separate institution and the greater research community at large. For instance, while university museums in Scotland are facing severe cuts in funding, those in England are receiving Museums, Galleries, and Collections Funding, provided by Research England, which is a UK initiative that funds and engages with English higher education providers (Museums Association, 2024d). This example illustrates that university museums have a critical role beyond the parameters that have been set forth for their parent institutions. Should the university museums in Wales be sustainable yet meaningful institutions, they have to handle financial constraints and policy changes but still provide cultural and educational resources for their communities at large.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs an exploratory research design to investigate the role of university museums in Wales, utilizing a qualitative methodology with content analysis as the primary analytical tool. All the relevant data was collected from publicly accessible sources, including museum websites, news, reviews, books, archival materials, journal articles, and official documents such as research reports, that provide context on the development, management, and function of these institutions. In cases where publicly available data was insufficient, structured interviews were conducted with museum staff to fill the gaps and provide deeper insights. The content analysis involved both deductive and inductive approaches, allowing for the examination of key themes such as the historical development of university museums in Wales, the nature of their collections, public engagement efforts, and contributions to research and teaching. As an exploratory study, this research lays a foundation for further investigation, offering a preliminary understanding of the university museums in Wales.

### 4. Results & Discussion

Following the Welsh government's categorization of university museums based on their accreditation status (see Table 1 and Table 2), this study undertakes the same approach. Accordingly, the results and discussion are provided in two sections: Accredited university museums (see Section 4.1), and university museums with "working towards accreditation" status (see Section 4.2).

#### 4.1. Accredited University Museums

##### 4.1.1. The School of Art Museum & Galleries (Aberystwyth University)

The School of Art Museum & Galleries is an accredited university museum at Aberystwyth University among the leading academic establishments that have given immense responses to the intellectual and cultural lives of not only the students and the academics but also the local community of Ceredigion, where the university is located. Since its establishment in 1872, the museum has found and placed itself as a key repository by emphasizing the development of the artistic expressions in fine and decorative arts from the 15th century up to

the present times (Aberystwyth University, n.d.b; n.d.c). The museum plays an internationally pivotal role within the educational and research goals at Aberystwyth University, embracing a wide range of primary research resources for students and faculty alike, as well as outside scholars interacting with the community through various exhibitions. The purpose, functions, and influence of the museum would be reflected in the contributions it has made to modern academic and cultural discussions and its responsiveness to changes in the social and economic conditions.

The collection assembled in this museum runs into excess of 20,000 pieces that altogether provide the visitors with an extended historical and modern interpretation of creative expression, including quality European prints and photography, ceramics, and works by Welsh and British artists (Aberystwyth University, n.d.f). This collection itself acts not only as a testament to the institution's ambition for curatorship but also to the significant contribution made by patrons such as the late George Powell, who was a Welsh antiquary and a collector, and the Davies Sisters, who were Welsh philanthropists and patrons of the arts (Aberystwyth University, n.d.e). The part played by Welsh patrons underlines the museum's role in the preservation and promotion of the national heritage. While there is great emphasis on Welsh and British art, this is also a double-edged sword in that it implicates proximity to the local and the national heritage. The international artistic representation from outside the West is rather in need of critical review. Working within an increasingly global artistic context, many museums are often expected to reach well beyond national borders in order to interact with a more diverse set of artistic experiences that help enhance scholarship and civic understanding.

The Ceramic Gallery of this museum presents more than 2,000 items of non-industrial ceramics, among which are porcelain works from Swansea and Nantgarw (a village in south-east of Wales), testifying to a very concrete domain of the history of art (Ceramics Aberystwyth, n.d.; Aberystwyth University, n.d.f). This follows the general emphasis of this curatorial institution, but the question is how such collections might be mobilized in the promotion of interdisciplinary research and cre-

ative work. For example, the focus that the gallery places on ceramics permits the arts and the sciences to meet at a crossroads through collaborations across departments such as material science and anthropology, among others. Such collaboration may boost the status of the museum within the academic system of the university and create new outlooks both for research and practical implementation.

The exhibitions the museum develops out of its collection, including those of the works by contemporary artists, and national touring exhibitions, demonstrate a lively interaction between historic works and contemporary artistic practices (Aberystwyth University, n.d.a; n.d.b). However, the fact that only part of this collection is regularly displayed, and the rest by appointment only, reveals a larger concern with access as part of the management of this museum's collection. There might be valid practical considerations of space and preservation, such as limited number of galleries or the humidity levels due to the climate of Wales, but the museum should benefit from working out solutions to increase the level of accessibility of its collection. It is usually digitization that presents itself as a valid work-around in terms of providing greater access to the collection for both scholarly and general audiences. Museums worldwide are increasingly creating virtual exhibitions and online archives, allowing people easier and fairer access to artworks and scholarly materials. While Aberystwyth's museum is committed to increasing public engagement, these ideas could be further explored to expand the collection's reach and accessibility.

How far the museum aligns itself with the research and teaching priorities of Aberystwyth University is open to further discussion. The archival material, including press reviews, personal diaries, and an extensive photographic record of the collection, has enormous research potential for scholars (Aberystwyth University, n.d.f). As an accredited museum, it supports student specializations in the areas of art history, fine arts, and museology with adequate facilities (Aberystwyth University, n.d.g). However, in view of these subject areas, this could still be significantly better achieved in the context of an integrated and research-based partnership. While the museum no doubt fosters

academic success, there is further room for deeper and more cooperative relationships with other departments of the university, such as cultural studies, digital humanities, or, given the ongoing climate change, environmental studies. These can be achieved through jointly curated exhibitions, cross-disciplinary research projects, and public programs that extend to be inclusive of broader social concerns.

Financially speaking, the museum relies on trust funds, grants from the Arts Council of Wales, and donations from private benefactors, which highlight the issues applicable to small museums that do not receive direct government funding, in contrast to larger university museums in England (Aberystwyth University, n.d.c; n.d.d). This raises major questions about its sustainability and financial framework, but the museum has succeeded in thriving despite such limitations. As government funding to the arts is increasingly becoming a matter of uncertainty, institutions like the School of Art Museum & Galleries must keep finding ways of acquiring resources, including improved donor networks, partnerships with corporate entities, or even larger projects that require active community participation. Hence, the diversification towards sources of income on which the museum survives becomes crucial in order to ensure continuous development of its collections, research, and public programming agenda.

The fact that the museum is in a historic building makes it difficult to meet modern standards for a physically accessible facility (Aberystwyth University, n.d.d). While the museum is taking steps towards inclusion, its overall approach to both intellectual and digital accessibility needs reexamination. Much like updating physical access to buildings, modern museums are increasingly expected to consider ways in which they might reform themselves for different audiences through programming that is culturally inclusive and representative in perspective. While the museum at Aberystwyth demonstrates commitment to community, its leadership certainly could do more to reach out to underrepresented groups in ways that would extend its cultural discourses.

Operating despite a variety of challenges, Aberystwyth University's School of Art Museum & Galleries performs functions related to a necessary

knowledge base, a holder of cultural heritage, and a means of creating art. The museum's collections not only reinforce the academic mission of the university but also represent one of the area's most important public resources, providing insights into historical and contemporary artistic expressions. Through exhibiting its collections and taking part in various academic discourses, the museum actively works to achieve a rich cultural dialogue beyond the constraints of space and nationality.

#### 4.1.2. Egypt Centre / Y Ganolfan Eifftaidd (Swansea University)

Known in Welsh as Y Ganolfan Eifftaidd, the Egypt Centre is located at Swansea University in Swansea, serving as an important facility in the current state of conservation and research of Egyptian archaeological pieces (The Egypt Centre, n.d.c). Its significance lies not merely in its status as a museum but also in its function as a transformative educational space that aims to dismantle barriers between academia and the public at large. From its nascent stages since 1994, wherein the institution was closely related to the Department of Classics and Ancient History, to being established in 1998 by Sybil Crouch, who was the previous Chair of the Arts Council Wales, the growth of the museum reflects one of the broader changes in institutional emphasis upon inclusivity and public participation (The Egypt Centre, n.d.e). This represents a broader development of museums as institutions that function in the public sphere, because the traditional role of curatorship and display has vastly changed in the 21st century to encompass educational programs, community outreach, and social impact. The Egypt Centre is another example of this movement insofar as it seeks to democratize the perceived elitism of scholarship through making information and involvement in academia more accessible.

While the Egypt Centre is currently the only museum owned and run by Swansea University, it is certainly not the first one. When the Swansea Museum (the longest standing museum in Wales, founded in 1841, by the Royal Institution of South Wales (RISW), a Welsh learned society, founded in Swansea in 1835) could not be supported by the RISW anymore, Swansea University was induced to enter into a legal partnership with the RISW in

1973, whereby the university assumed responsibility for the museum (Wheatcroft, Moore & Rolfe, 1990, p.298). The university appointed a full-time keeper while the RISW continued to curate the collections. Even though this partnership was a significant development, the financial troubles of the time affected the educational institutions in the UK, eventually falling on Welsh universities in the early 1980s. As a result, Swansea University withdrew its support in 1986 (Wheatcroft, Moore & Rolfe, 1990, p.299), and the museum's ownership was transferred to the City Council of Wales (Sandu et al., 1992, p.309). This short-lived partial ownership was certainly a learning opportunity for the university to identify dos and don'ts of running a museum. Thus, it can be proposed that the case of the Swansea Museum paved the way for the establishment of the Egypt Centre, not so long after the university opted out of the management of Swansea Museum.

A great part of the collection at the Egypt Centre relates to the colonial past and Europe's involvement with Egypt, especially through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, the collection of the artifacts by a British pharmacist and avid collector, Sir Henry Wellcome, reflects the complex and often fraught stories related to many museum collections in Western backgrounds (The Egypt Centre, n.d.b). Although objects in question had reportedly been taken legally from Egyptian sources, the broader context of European imperialism raises deeper questions about the issues of ownership and the cultural appropriation of heritage from formerly colonized regions. As with many of the artifacts within this collection, questions of the object's provenance are unclear. This, in turn, reflects the broader debates within the field relating to the return of artifacts to the country of origin. The Egypt Centre, by being cognizant of such an ontological complexity, places itself within modern discourses on postcolonialism and the ethical responsibilities of museums in how they must confront their own histories of complicity with colonialism.

Most of the collection consists of Egyptian objects, but various artifacts from Cyprus, Greece, Rome, and the British Isles are also included in the collection (The Egypt Centre, n.d.f). These objects represent a far broader interdisciplinary approach

than one which had previously been largely restricted to Egyptology, per se, therefore expanding potential scholarship. The museum makes active efforts to expand its collection even more, mostly via major gifts from institutions such as the British Museum and National Museums and Galleries of Wales, as well as many private donors (The Egypt Centre Online Collection, n.d.a). The recent addition of over 800 objects from Harrogate Museums (located in Harrogate, a spa town in the district and county of North Yorkshire, England), on a three-year loan starting from February 2023, with the aim of studying both the objects and their former collectors, already shows the commitment of the institution to further research and public engagement (Collections Trust, 2024). Accordingly, the Egypt Centre staff teamed up with research students from Swansea University, and together they studied all the objects from the borrowed collection within the first ten months. The objects were catalogued, photographed from multiple angles and the images were made accessible online. Thus, it is proposed that easy accessibility of data gave way to the collaborative research of the Harrogate objects and for further understanding of the existing collection of the Egypt Centre (Collections Trust, 2024).

The Egypt Centre gives a great deal of thought to its educational outreach efforts. As an institution committed to object-centered learning, interactive educational experiences are designed by way of creative engagement with the artifacts in the collection. In doing so, the museum aims for students and volunteers to develop more critical ways of thinking beyond conventional academic formats (The Egypt Centre, n.d.e). For instance, the museum partners with the conservation program at Cardiff University (a public research university in Cardiff, the capital and largest city of Wales) that allow students to gain practical skills in conservation (The Egypt Centre Online Collection, n.d.b). By providing experiential learning opportunities in which the participants get into direct contact with the collection items, the museum furthers equal access to knowledge, and serves as a focal point of scholarly research, professional training, and community service. This is challenging to the conventional hierarchical model embraced in most memory institutions, where knowledge normally

flows one way from meta-narratives to passive audiences. In contrast, the museum's programming creates an opportunity for participants to be more proactive interpreters of history, with a consequent increase in interactivity and engagement with the collection items. In addition, the museum contributes to academic education at Swansea University through facilitating Egyptology courses and specialized modules, including a Master of Arts (MA) degree in Museology (The Egypt Centre, n.d.e). This type of collaboration furthers not only academic wealth but also the learning experience of students that bridges the gap between theory and practice.

The Egypt Centre's proactive attitude on making the institution more accessible and inclusive testifies to its general commitment to democratizing museum experiences. The provision of wheelchair accessibility, special arrangements for people with disabilities, and the availability of special services catering to the needs of cognitively or sensorially challenged visitors demonstrate that the museum space and services can be adjusted for many underrepresented groups (The Egypt Centre, n.d.a). The museum's receipt of the Autism Friendly Award and participation in the Sunflower Lanyard scheme, which is an "initiative [that] features lanyards adorned with a sunflower pattern, signaling that the wearer has a hidden [non-visible] disability" (Cord-Cruz, 2024), shows that the leadership is experienced in accommodating visitors with hidden disabilities (The Egypt Centre, n.d.a). Such initiatives support the museum's commitment to current museological discourse, within which social inclusion and community involvement have become integral parts of mainstream practices.

Another dimension of the museum's progressive approach that relates to accessibility is its response to the challenges thrown up by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of embracing digital technology. A strong example of this is seen in the digital collection database that was developed by the volunteer student, Sam Powell, attesting to the ability of the museum to adjust its services according to ever-changing circumstances without compromising its cultural and educational missions (The Egypt Centre Online Collection, n.d.a). This digital database expands the museum beyond the physical limit of its galleries and makes the entire



collection accessible from anywhere with internet connection.

Ultimately, the Egypt Centre's contributions to education, inclusion, and heritage preservation signal its potential to bring forth discussions on museums, accessibility, and postcolonial discourse. Through its advocacy of an inclusive and participatory approach to learning, the museum preserves ancient history while facilitating critical reflections on the present. The diverse outlook of collaborations and outreach efforts ensure that the museum remains an importantly responsive academic and cultural center in the region with an exemplary mode of operation: a place of critique and social cohesion for active learning.

#### 4.1.3. Art Collection Museum (University of South Wales)

Art Collection Museum at the University of South Wales, located in Rhondda Cynon Taff, not only serves as a repository for Welsh visual culture but also plays a significant role in the preservation and dissemination of regional artistic heritage. Its significance is rooted in both its collection and the location of its exhibition spaces in Tŷ Crawshay – a 19th century listed building formerly owned by William Crawshay II, who was a Welsh ironmaster and industrialist (University of South Wales. n.d.a). The museum's setting adds layers of contextual depth to its exhibitions. This juxtaposition of industry and art highlights the museum's dedication to anchoring modern and contemporary visual culture within the socio-economic history of South Wales. By emphasizing this link between historical setting and artistic content, the museum embodies a convergence of regional identity and industrial heritage, which resonates with the area's historical narrative.

The institution was registered as a museum in 2002, and it received accreditation in 2009 (University of South Wales. n.d.c). Such recognition led the museum to collaborations with national organizations such as the Arts Council of Wales and the Contemporary Art Society for Wales. As a result, it was enabled for the museum to purchase and acquire items that expanded the collection and the corresponding historical and contemporary representations. (University of South Wales. n.d.b). With all these acquisitions, the scope of the collection that the Art Collection Museum safekeeps allows the visitors

to trace the historical development of Welsh art and culture right from the start of the 20th century to the present (University of South Wales. n.d.c). The works dating back to World War II provide a distinctive point of view through which one may perceive the association of art and industrial life. Artworks produced during wartime, as seen in works by Ceri Richards and Vincent Evans, for example, are not simply representations of an industrial world but spoke volumes about more solemn social issues. These works stand as visual testimonies to what constituted as labor in wartime and how that labor was used in terms of industrial development of Wales. Thus, the collection can be considered as a repository of experiential and personal narratives that recognize a rich artistic heritage wherein artists like Richards and Evans serve as pivotal figures in shaping both regional and wider British art movements (University of South Wales. n.d.c).

The rise of modern Welsh art, as documented by the museum collection, mirrors the political and cultural shifts of the past, particularly the late-20th century devolution process (University of South Wales, n.d.a). When the UK Parliament passed the Government of Wales Act in 1998, it was presented as “a commitment to equality, sustainable development, partnership working and parity of treatment for both the Welsh and English languages” (Senedd Cymru, 2024). Eventually, this legislation gave way to the National Assembly for Wales, which met for the first time in 1999. With 24 of the 60 newly elected members being woman, the National Assembly was a significant change in the male-dominated Welsh politics of the time. Accordingly, the museum's collection that contains works produced in this timeline is reflective of this socio-political shift and the accompanying cultural heritage in the region. This historic stratification allows for a refined understanding of the artworks and the complex interplay between art, politics, and culture in Wales (University of South Wales, n.d.a).

The collection captures the broader transformations in Welsh society as well, especially through the lens of post-industrial decline and renewal. Among the artists represented in the collection are Nicholas Evans, Jack Crabtree and John Selway, whose works embrace the industrial and post-industrial settings, the themes of deindustrialization and cultural change, and the heightening of emotional expression that places the museum within

the scope of wider mid-20th-century European artistic developments (University of South Wales. n.d.c). This serious rupture in the earlier, more representative depictions of industrial work require viewers to engage with both the physical and emotional repercussions of such labor. By placing Welsh industrial heritage within a global conversation about work and industrialization, the museum deepens the universal narrative without ever losing its roots in the local. Thus, the collection constitutes important considerations for an emerging identity of Wales from a state of industrial hub to its postindustrial condition today; as such, they reflect ways in which art can serve the function of recording and shaping social and economic shifts in the region (University of South Wales. n.d.c). The ongoing curatorial strategy, which involves a meticulous selection process overseen by a curator and an art committee, ensures that the museum remains an evolving and dynamic space for contemporary artistic practices that correspond to the museum's broader mission of preserving the past and enabling an educated dialogue between historical and contemporary art forms (University of South Wales. n.d.b). This kind of curatorial practice ensures that the museum remains committed to acquiring works that engage with current artistic trends while reflecting on historical contexts, which, in return, promotes the debates on Welsh identity and creativity. This is not a pure example of a place of exhibition; rather, it is more of an intellectual and cultural institution where the works of art, history, and the site interact with each other. The treasures in the collection contribute to further understanding of how visual culture relates to regional identity and shapes the historical and contemporary relations of Welsh society. Thus, this junction of education, cultural heritage, and artistic development posits itself as a point of reference for scholars, artists, and the greater public alike.

## 4.2. University Museums with “Working Towards Accreditation” Status

### 4.2.1. Bangor University Museum (Bangor University)

As the only not-yet-accredited university museum in Wales, Bangor University Museum presents a unique case. While the Welsh government lists the museum under university museums with “work-

ing towards accreditation” status (see Table 2), there is no public information available regarding a university museum of this name. To clarify the status of the collections and museums under Bangor University's leadership, a structured interview was conducted in early October 2024 with a senior official involved in managing the Bangor collections. According to this individual, while Bangor University Museum does not yet formally exist, the university's extensive and diverse collections are considered to be of museum-quality. These collections are housed in various buildings across campus, reflecting the university's commitment to integrating academic resources into its broader educational mission. Even though this dispersion complicates the formal classification of the collections as a traditional museum, Bangor University is actively pursuing accreditation for its collections, a process that, once completed, would confer official museum status on these holdings. The senior official mentioned that certain collections, such as the herbarium and the ocean science collections, are currently excluded from this accreditation process but may be included in future phases.

Just like Swansea University, Bangor is not unaccustomed to running a university museum. Formerly known as University College of North Wales (founded in 1884), the institution was responsible for Museum of Welsh Antiquities, which held collections of prehistoric, Roman and Early Christian antiquities, mainly of North Wales provenance, along with collections of costume and furniture of Welsh interest (Ho & Moore, 1990, p.94). Even though the museum received funding from a number of statutory authorities and voluntary bodies, the university had trouble keeping up with the overall costs. When the external financial support was also reduced, the university had to team up with local authorities. As a result, in 1991, the museum fell under the joint management by the university, Gwynedd County Council, and Afon District Council, each holding administrative power proportional to their financial input (Sandu et al., 1992, p.308). The museum soon came under full ownership of the Gwynedd Council, thus, becoming a local authority museum known as the Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery, and later changed its name to Storiel in 2016 (Crump, 2016).

While Storiel, which is located near Bangor University, is owned and operated by the Gwynedd

Council, it has a joint board for the overall governance that consists of members from both the council and the university, says the interviewed senior official. As an accredited museum, Storiel houses about 70% of Bangor University's collections on long-term loan. Moreover, the university's investment pays for the museum's activities, and a curator post is jointly shared between the two partners. The relationship between Storiel and Bangor University reflects the blurred boundaries between the traditional museum institution and academic collections, such that the university's holdings serve as educational resources and public cultural heritage at the same time. The arrangement ensures that Bangor University's collections are accessible to the community outside educational circles while maintaining the university's academic mission.

According to the senior official, the only museum that Bangor University currently operates is the Natural History Museum, housed within the Brambell Building, which contains the University's zoological and geological collections. While the museum itself is not an accredited institution, it is worth noting that the two collections that make up the museum are already part of the university collections that are currently undergoing the process toward accreditation. When these collections gain formal accreditation, the Natural History Museum would be part of the future Bangor University Museum.

The zoology collection of the Natural History Museum comprises approximately 40,000 items (Bangor University, n.d.). They range from full skeletons including those of a two-headed lamb and a Tasmanian devil to skulls, taxidermy specimens, 7,500-year-old Irish elk antlers, preserved specimens, and endangered specimens including a *kākāpō* - an owl parrot unique to New Zealand. On the other hand, the geology collection consists of approximately 8,000 rock and mineral specimens and 3,000 fossils (Bangor University, n.d.). While the collection itself provides a comprehensive overview of geological history, the items mostly represent the region of North Wales. Specimens from Anglesey, which is an island in north-west Wales, are of special interest, because they were documented by Dr. Edward Greenly, who was an English geologist known for his detailed geologi-

cal survey of Anglesey in the early 20th century. Initially assembled for educational purposes, this rich collection of the Natural History Museum, with its carefully selected displays of zoological and geological items, serves far more than an academic purpose, enriching the university's liaison with the local and international discipline of natural history.

Along with the zoology and geology collections, Bangor University cares for several other important collections that contribute to its profile as a center of research and culture. Among these collections are the art collection, comprising approximately 600 works, dating from the 17th to the 21st century, and featuring various works by Welsh artists alongside British artworks; the ceramic collection, which consists of around 500 pieces, surveying British and European porcelain and tin-glazed earthenware from the 18th and 19th centuries, alongside significant Asian pieces from China and Japan dating back to the 16th century; the ethnographic musical instruments collection, amassed by English musicologist Peter Crossley-Holland, that contains approximately 600 instruments from Africa, Europe, North America, India, and Tibet, including 325 pre-Columbian clay instruments; the herbarium, containing over 30,000 plant specimens that serve as an archive of global vegetation, with particular emphasis on native British species and the flora of North Wales; and lastly, the timber and damaged wood collections, containing thousands of wood samples from around the world (Bangor University, n.d.).

The accessibility of these collections posits a challenging situation. Due to a number of reasons including the accreditation process, limited gallery space, and the fact that the items are scattered throughout the university buildings, the collections are not fully accessible. Accordingly, the Natural History Museum is not open to the public on a regular basis, however, limited access can be granted on occasional open days that are organized by the university; most of the artwork in the art collection is hung throughout the university, particularly in the Main Arts Building, which is open to the general public during the time that the university is open; the oil and acrylic paintings in the collection are added to the digital database of Art UK (an arts charity registered in England and Wales with

a digital record of the UK's collection of paintings and sculpture) and are available online (Art UK, n.d.); most of the ceramic collection is on display in the Council Chamber Corridor in the Main Arts Building and can be seen during the open hours of the university; the ethnographic musical instruments collection is currently being researched by the School of Music and is not accessible to members of the public; the herbarium is located next to the Natural History Museum in Brambell Building, and the collection will be available online in the future due to the ongoing Herbarium Digitization Project with the aim of producing a digital bilingual catalogue of high-quality images of each specimen; the timber collection is kept in glass-fronted cupboards on the landing of the 2nd floor of the Thoday Building; the damaged wood collection is currently being reassembled, part of it will be on display in one of the lecture rooms in the Thoday Building, the remainder being archived in storage boxes (Bangor University, n.d.). Collections held at Bangor University reflect a powerful integration of academic, cultural, and scientific resources into both university life and the broader community. Through partnerships, like that with Storiell, and the ongoing pursuit of museum accreditation, the university aims to increase visibility and accessibility of its collections. Despite certain limitations in public access and spatial availability for collective displays, Bangor's collections are no doubt significant academic and cultural assets. Their further development and possible future accreditation will considerably enhance Bangor University as an institution of educational and cultural heritage.

## 5. Conclusion

This exploratory study lays out the significant role of university museums in Wales as dynamic institutions that balance academic, cultural, and public engagement functions. The four university museums explored—Aberystwyth University's School of Art Museum & Galleries, Swansea University's Egypt Centre, University of South Wales' Art Collection Museum, and Bangor University Museum—illustrate the diversity of collections and functions within the Welsh university museum landscape. These museums not only preserve and showcase the academic and cultural heritage of

their parent institutions but also serve as crucial educational tools, enabling hands-on learning and research across various disciplines.

As this research has shown, university museums in Wales have evolved in response to both internal academic needs and broader societal trends. They embrace educational programs, cultural partnerships, and public engagement that extend their influence beyond the academic sphere. This reflects a shift in the museum sector towards greater integration of academic and public functions, aligning university museums with contemporary societal needs and emphasizing their role in lifelong learning and social consciousness.

Ultimately, the findings of this study underscore the value of Welsh university museums as multifaceted institutions that contribute to both the academic success of their universities and the cultural enrichment of their wider communities. By continuing to adapt to new challenges and opportunities, these museums can maintain their position as vital resources within Wales' cultural and educational ecosystem. The ongoing support of both academic institutions and cultural policymakers will be crucial in ensuring that university museums in Wales continue to thrive and fulfill their potential as centers of knowledge, memory, and heritage.

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