



HERITAGE AND THE UNIVERSITY

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The introduction of heritage into the university as a field of knowledge is both recent and ancient. Long before the accumulation of knowledge by and within the university, materials of all sorts were being stored, allowing for the birth of subjects that gradually became transformed into disciplines. One by one, these disciplines imposed themselves on the university with a logic whose stages corresponded to an advance in the evolution of human thought, and therefore, in the university. The presence of "things" to know, which went back as far as time, eventually made up the mass of acquired knowledge in humanity's progress toward greater material and spiritual well-being. It is a sort of magma, produced by human intelligence, a well from which all intellectual endeavours draw the study matter allowing for the advancement of knowledge. Heritage is therefore not only the world's memory bank, but the organization of what humanity wishes to preserve for its future. It is not only a guarantee of survival, but a means of moving beyond mere survival.

This brief perspective forces us to acknowledge the wealth of this accumulation stored in a vast number of institutions, supported rather unequally by societies and civilizations of all ages--with their libraries, archives, and museums, which attempt, often quite awkwardly, to contain all of the world's wisdom. In this context, the university becomes a passageway that encourages the acquisition of knowledge amassed over time for use by a given society. In turn, the society must continually renew the cognitive stock within the immense storehouse, preserved in specific places.

This observation has great social value and is becoming to be shared more and more widely. Without a doubt, heritage existed long before the university, and indeed, is at the origin of all intellectual endeavours that hold the promise of new knowledge.

Not only does heritage have deep historical roots, both as a source and extension of all knowledge, but it also has a more recent past as an emerging discipline. It opens the door to a reflection on a phenomenon characteristic of contemporary societies, both industrialized and less so. The study of this new reality inevitably leads us to examine the long process of the accumulation of knowledge and its random sorting along the way. This rather recent reality is of constant concern. Heritage thus becomes an occasion for regenerating knowledge because it calls for a new approach to the massive foundation on which our scientific building now stands. This leads to a poignant question regarding humanity's future, or rather, its field of action.

The fundamental question of course remains unanswered, taking us to dizzying heights: what collective future lies in store for the range of cultures, both past and present that will make up the blend of tomorrow. This cultural mix appearing on the horizon will undoubtedly provide some answers to today's many questions. The circumstances that have led us to this highly contemporary crossroads point to the urgency of concerted action in the field of heritage occupied, as always, by the university. This social and cultural end point highlights the need for collaboration between the various fields of research and teaching dealing with heritage. This focusing of energies will necessarily require a mobilization of resources downstream from the university,

Forum UNESCO - University and Heritage, which has set 2001 as the year for achieving these objectives, participates in this shift. Those involved with heritage must become more conscious of the growing social role they are called to play. Henceforth, universities can participate in sharing responsibilities. Not only is it our responsibility to pass down heritage, but also to find a better balance between the resources of some and the overwhelming needs of others. This is, therefore, an appeal to an improved collaboration among the fifty-odd countries present heretoday. It is a tall order for a relatively small group, but one that is likely to grow, both through new networking technologies and the immediate participation of competent authorities. At a time of large-scale upheavals in the world, an appropriate reflex of consolidating past and future efforts in the field must be stimulated. The intimacy that united universities and heritage had long ago must finally be recovered.