Teaching & Learning through Museum Collections

Freshman Seminar Instructors are very welcome to use Harvard’s world-renowned museum collections in their teaching. Some objects can be lent for specific classes and all the museums have collections viewing spaces for class use. Museums will also help individual students with object-based research as part of a class. Some museums can work with faculty on teaching displays – either curated by the faculty in advance or by the students themselves.

Examples of classes that have used collections

In a seminar on Darwin, students read On the Origin of Species, paying close attention to the science as well as the man. Then they visited the MCZ to accompany their readings about slave-making ants, the Botany Libraries to examine the extraordinary herbals and old botanical volumes, and to the Arnold Arboretum where they explored carnivorous plants, movement in plants, climbing plants, and recreated Darwin’s classic experiments.

In an archaeology tutorial, students worked closely with Peabody Museum staff to curate a small exhibit case, Tradition & Tourism: Rethinking Authenticity that explored the notions of commercialism, craft, and culture change. Through woven Tlingit baskets and molded Mexican dogs, students critiqued the idea that indigenous authenticity lives in the past. The exhibit case is on the third floor of the Peabody, and in the “Collections Online” section of the museum web site:

FAS Museums
Information on all FAS museums can be found on the Harvard Museums of Science & Culture web site, http://hmsc.harvard.edu: go to the “Education” in the menu for Harvard Faculty Resources.

Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments (http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~hsdept/chsi.html): 20,000 objects representing a broad range of scientific disciplines.
Contact: Dr. Jean-Francois Gauvin, gauvin@fas.harvard.edu 617 – 496 1021
Online Database:
Contact: Dr. Adam Aja, aja@fas.harvard.edu, 617 – 495 3123

Harvard University Herbaria (http://www.huh.harvard.edu): more than 5 million specimens covering botany, paleobotany and economic botany.
Contact: Michaela Schmull, 617 – 495 0665
Online Database: http://kiki.huh.harvard.edu/databases/

Mineralogical and Geological Museum (http://www.geomus.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do): rocks, meteorites, minerals and ores.
Contact: Dr. Raquel Alonso Perez, ralonso@fas.harvard.edu, 617 – 496 2401

Contact: Dr. Linda Ford, lford@oeb.harvard.edu, 617 – 495 - 3748
Online Database: http://mczbase.mcz.harvard.edu/SpecimenSearch.cfm

Contact: Dr. Diana Loren, dloren@fas.harvard.edu, 617 – 495 7535
Online Database: http://pmem.unix.fas.harvard.edu:8080/peabody/

Other Harvard Museums
Arnold Arboretum (in Jamaica Plain, Boston) (http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu): 281 acres, 15,000 plants, 1.3 million herbarium specimens, and an extensive library.
Contact: Amie Evans, amieevans@fas.harvard.edu, 617 – 384 5421
Online plant inventory: http://arboretum.harvard.edu/plants/plant-inventory/
Online herbaria database: http://arboretum.harvard.edu/plants/herbaria/

Harvard Art Museums (http://www.harvardartmuseums.org)
The Harvard Art Museums will reopen in fall 2014 after renovations. While the galleries are closed, faculty and students are encouraged to use the Harvard Art Museums' digital resources for their teaching and research. Museum educators, curators, conservators, and technologists are available to consult with faculty from across disciplines on how the collections might support course goals. For more information, contact Jessica Levin Martinez at jessica_martinez@harvard.edu or Erin Northington, 617-495-1595.