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Pharmacy Museum of the University of Basel

The museum as a museological object – The Pharmacy Museum at the University of Basel

ABSTRACT

Founded in 1925, the Pharmacy Museum of the University of Basel is the only museum in Switzerland dedicated to the History of Pharmacy. It houses a unique and extensive collection, with a focus on historical pharmaceuticals, pharmacy furniture, laboratory utensils, ceramics, instruments, books, art- and craftwork. It is located in the old-town of the city of Basel in a building which dates back to the late medieval times. It used to even be visited by the famous Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus in the 1520's. Today, the city of Basel and its region are an international hub for the pharmaceutical industry. The history of the museum is connected to the developments of the pharmaceutical practices, sciences and industry in the 20th century, when they experienced fundamental changes. The Pharmacy Museum itself underwent major changes in the past two decades but has kept its historical exhibition mode, dating back to the first half of the 20th century, making it a historical object on its own. By placing the Museum into a framework of cultural, social and technological development, and treating the museum itself as a museological object of study, this article reflects the historical and contemporary position, function and structure of the Pharmacy Museum at the University of Basel.

Keywords: History of Pharmacy, Pharmacy Museum, University of Basel, Josef Anton Häfliger

From private collection to public museum

The foundation of the Pharmacy Museum goes back to the private initiative of the pharmacist Josef Anton Häfliger (1873–1954). In 1924, Häfliger became the lector in practical pharmacy and galenics at the pharmaceutical institute in the University of Basel, founded in 1917 (Fig. 1). Shortly after he took over this position, Häfliger offered

Fig. 1. Origins of the Pharmacy Museum: The private collection of the pharmacists Josef Anton Häfliger. Author unkown, Copyright Pharmacy-Museum of the University of Basel

his vast private collection of obsolete materia medica, recipes, apothecary jars and instruments to the University of Basel. He intended to use the objects of his collections as a means of demonstrating traditional and historical pharmaceutical practices to the students and educate them in the history of the discipline, and the profession, of the pharmacist. The University accepted the offer and provided rooms to set up the collection within the Pharmaceutical Institute. After having finished his habilitation in 1926, the same year as the Society for the History of Pharmacy was founded by George Urdang and Ludwig Winkler, Häfliger became a private lecturer for practical pharmacy and history of pharmacy. His efforts not only allowed him to establish a historical approach to pharmacy within the university context, but also the foundation of a museum for the history of pharmacy. In 1927, when the Swiss Pharmaceutical-Society (Schweizerischer Apothekerverband) held its annual meeting in Basel, the collection received the official statutes as the "Swiss Collection of the History of Pharmacy". Since then, the collection was consequently expanded by Häfliger, who received major donations from the university, the government, the chemical industry and pharmaceutical associations. Within a few years, the collection reached the limits of its rooms and new space was needed. From 1931 to 1932 the collection moved to an adjacent building which had formerly served as an employment office. When the Society of the History of Pharmacy met in Basel for its annual meeting in 1934, the former office building had been transformed into an exhibition space. As curator of the collection, Häfliger had free reign in arranging

the objects according to his concept on the history of pharmacy, which he published in several books and articles (Häfliger 1930; 1932; 1937).

In the first half of the 20th century, the collection evolved in direct connection with the developments in pharmaceutical practice. The entire field of pharmacy, from the research to the production and distribution of drugs, underwent fundamental changes. A growing number of pharmaceuticals were produced in the factories of large companies. Equally, pharmacists were no longer trained exclusively in pharmacies, but increasingly went to the university to learn their profession. The change affected the material culture of pharmacy, as many types of objects, which had served for centuries in the traditional pharmacy, became obsolete due to the evolving pharmaceutical science and industry. Not only the tools of pharmaceutical production but also the products, the pharmaceuticals, became more and more refined. "Natural" products, such as dried plants, minerals or animals, which provided traditional remedies, were replaced by synthetically enhanced chemical compounds. As a pharmacist who owned a pharmacy, Häfliger experienced these changes firsthand. To him, technological progress was a threat and a loss to the established pharmaceutical profession and tradition. He gave an account on this in his description of the purpose of a collection of historical pharmaceutical objects.

> Today, with increasing, even impetuous speed, the production of chemically, but also galenic preparations is migrating from the pharmacy laboratories to the chemical factories with their biological test stations. The old technique used by small businesses has disappeared for the most part, and with it, the devices and equipment, which are no longer in use. The change has been so rapid and thorough that there will be only so much left of these things as can be saved in collections. (Häfliger 1930, p. 157–158)

By collecting, Häfliger intended to save the objects, which represented the status of the pharmacists as producers of remedies and also the skills, craftsmanship, instruments, tools and raw materials required for their production. His intention was to create a "rescue institution", which should not only preserve the material culture of pharmacy, but also the knowledge required for the use and application of the objects. While pharmacists in general have been attributed with an affinity for materials and the practice of collecting, which comes along with their profession (Dilg 1994), Häfliger followed a pattern, which in the context of contemporary museology or museum studies can be characterized as the compensation from an experience of loss, inflicted by technological advancement and change (Marquard 1996); however, the threat to the material culture and the history of pharmacy was quite real, as many objects which were rendered obsolete in the course of the industrialization had been disposed of by the pharmacies.

Likewise, but in a broader context, the foundation on the history of pharmacy, as a scientific sub-discipline, can be regarded as a direct result of the technological changes and the shifting responsibilities and functions of pharmacists at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The establishment on the history of pharmacy followed the process of the "scientification" of pharmacy. Until the 19th century, the education of pharmacists followed a tradition of craftsmanship and trade. While medicine and chemistry had been established as scientific disciplines since the 18th century, pharmacy did not yet have this status until the second half of the 19th century (Parascandola 1995). At the University of Basel, the foundation of the Pharmaceutical Institute in 1917 can be regarded as the final recognition of pharmacy as a science. In the aftermath of the

intellectual movement of historism, pharmacists, who pursued the history of pharmacy, sought to prove the long scientific, as well as artisanal, tradition of the profession of the pharmacist, building up a new professional identity. Not surprisingly, most of the earlier historians of pharmacy had been pharmacists. The process is similar to the rise of other branches in the history of the sciences, which were studied mainly by followers of specific disciplines like medicine, chemistry or physics, as the history of pharmacy was mainly pursued by pharmacists. They pioneered a new field of research, as the historians with a background in the humanities were more interested in political, social or cultural history and less in the history of the sciences.

In Basel, Häfliger was very successful as a promotor on the history of pharmacy, as he achieved at founding an institution devoted to the collecting of the historical material culture of pharmacy in a university context. Moreover, he was one of the first designated lecturers on the history of pharmacy at any university.[1] The fact that the 4th international congress on the history of pharmacy in 1934 was held in Basel, marks the high international standing of the institution in the first decade of its existence. During the time of World War II, international exchange was reduced to a minimum. After the war, the museum found itself in a new position, as the former director of the pharmaceutical institute, Karl Josef Zörnig (1866–1942) had retired in 1937 and his successor, Tadeus Reichstein (1897–1996), limited the resources and room for the museum, resulting in an increasing separation of the museum from the pharmaceutical institute.

Häfliger was the leading figure of the museum until 1954. After his death, the future of the collection came under discussion; proposals included joining together with the Basel Historical Museum. Regardless, the collection of pharmaceutical history remained independent and was subsequently led by Dr Alfons Lutz, a pharmacist and friend of Häfliger, under the supervision of a museum commission. The lectures on the history of pharmacy came to a halt until 1965, when Lutz was appointed an honorary lecturer. In the same year, the art-historian Lydia Mez-Mangold began the considerable task of cataloguing and labelling the museum's objects. In 1972, after Lutz resigned from the museum, she became the first non-pharmacist to be appointed curator of the museum. She was succeeded in 1979 by the archaeologist Laurentia Léon, who presided over the museum until 1986. Since then, the pharmacist Michael Kessler has held the position of the director of the museum.

Until the end of the 20th century, the Pharmacy Museum could have been characterized as a "one-person" and honorary operation, as until 1979, there were no salaried positions. For the public, visiting the museum was only possible via application. The situation started to change after 1999, when the pharmaceutical institute moved into a new building, leaving many rooms and materials, which had formerly served as research and teaching infrastructures for the use of Museum. Under the direction of Kessler and due to many investments, as well as the employment of new staff, the Pharmacy Museum transformed into a public museum in the beginning of the 21st century. With special exhibitions, public guided tours and a large variety of activities, the Pharmacy Museum

[1] Pharmacists like Schelenz or Urdang held lectures on the history of pharmacy earlier, but only because they've already held chairs or professorships in pharmacy, however their academic-chairs were not labelled with history of pharmacy. Scientific institutes or professorships with a focus on history of pharmacy had not been found until the second half of the 20th century.

attracts a rising number of visitors each year. Despite those and many other changes, the Pharmacy Museum has kept its original structure and exhibition model of an academic teaching collection, making it an object of interest not only on the history of pharmacy but also on the history of collections and museums overall. The connection to the pharmaceutical sciences are still very close, as the museum is a unit of the department of the pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Basel. A lecture on the history of pharmacy is included in the curriculum of the study program.

The collection and exhibition in the 21st century

Before visitors can enter the Pharmacy Museum, they must first step into the picturesque courtyard of the house "Zum Sessel" where the printers Johannes Amerbach and Johannes Froben worked in the 16th century, and other famous guests such as the humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam and the famous alchemist and physician Paracelsus stayed. Those who enter the museum will be welcomed by an aerial mixture of hundreds of herbs. The reception of the museum is designed as a pharmacy around 1900, including original furniture of the old Barfüsser Apotheke. The reception is paired with the museum shop, the so called Herbarium, which sells high quality herbs and spices along with self-made soaps and other souvenirs (Fig. I). The setting illustrates the atmosphere of a pre-industrial pharmacy, when pharmacists still produced remedies themselves. The exhibition starts on the first floor. The first room, materia medica, is filled with historical and obsolete medical substances. A special section is devoted to folk-medicine and the application of charms and amulets as healing devices. The room vividly demonstrates that the definition of a medicament is derived from its use and could be applied to any object used to cure or prevent sickness and disease. The next room gives an insight into the vast pharmaceutical literary tradition, starting with medieval herbal-books up to the modern pharmacopeia. Alchemy is the subject in the next room, completed by one of the most striking objects of the museum, a fully equipped alchemy laboratory. The next room demonstrates a lack of space for a larger exhibition, as just a few square meters must suffice to illustrate the progress in the chemical and pharmaceutical sciences in the late 18th and 19th century. Next to various historic scales, measuring tools and microscopes, visitors will also find the first industrially produced remedies by Basel located companies such as Hoffmann-La Roche or Sandoz, CIBA and Geigy, which later merged into Novartis. As international leaders in the health-care sector, these companies today play a major role in the city's economy, linking the history of the pharmaceutical industry with the local and social history of the Basel region. At the top of a narrow stairway, which serves as a legacy to the buildings former function as an employment office, the upper floor of the museum shows the tools and materials of the apothecary-craft and trade. After walking by a pharmacy and stepping through a replica of a 1800s chemical laboratory (Fig. II), visitors will be struck with a view of the marvellous material chamber of the Innsbrucker Hofapotheke, dating back to the middle of the 18th century (Fig. III). The last room is dedicated to the art of pharmacy, represented by a precious collection of apothecary jars, faiances and

ceramics. Here, visitors learn that medicine and pharmaceuticals made by apothecaries had once been valuable and exclusive goods.

Although the presentation of the collection does not seem to follow a strict storyline, a museological perspective on the arrangement of the objects and their spatial distribution does reveal a narrative, which has been implied by the museum since its foundation. It is a storyline on the emergence of the profession of pharmacists, beginning in the prehistorical medical practices through antiquity and the medieval period, up to the rise of the natural sciences in the 17th and 18th century. The end of the narrative is marked by the climax of the establishment of pharmacists as artisanal scientists in the 19th century, while the diversification of the profession in the 20th century is only implied. From a critical perspective, this narrative has a positivistic tendency, depicting pharmacists as a thriving force in the progress of health care. While this is acceptable, many aspects on the history of health care, especially aspects of industrial production, which are so important to the history of the city of Basel, are not or under-represented in the exhibition. This exclusion is owed to the fact that the collection and exhibition was mainly formed in the first half of the 20th century. Furthermore, the history of pharmacy as a social and cultural history of health care is a field too broad to be comprehensively represented within the limited space of the Pharmacy Museum. The "selectiveness" of the exhibition is taken into account by the staff and direction of the museum is legitimized by the approach to preserve the historical exhibition and give reverence to the unique historicity of the museum and its collection.

Continuity in a changing environment

The changing environment of the Museum has offered many opportunities for the further evolution of the museum, however, the large variety of options is also a challenge for the museum. Compared with other contemporary museums, the exhibitions of the Pharmacy Museum seem to be out of date. But as the collection, its structure and mode of exhibition is representing the historical changes of pharmacy on one side, and the evolution of the history of pharmacy on the other, the preservation of the exhibition has been included into the museums mission. Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological approaches and practices in the field of the pharmacy's history have changed in the past decades. Many influences came from neighbouring disciplines, especially from the historical sciences, scientific studies and medical humanities. The traditional approach on the history of pharmacy as a history of a profession and scientific discipline has widened broadly. The contemporary history of pharmacy is a transdisciplinary field that seeks to understand the many complex facets of the interaction of people to the phenomenon of health and sickness by the use of substances or objects. On the other hand, the material culture of pharmacy has taken a new dimension in the past century. Research and production today are conducted within an immense scientific and industrial infrastructure and require thousands of different objects. Therefore, the collection of objects, which reflect contemporary evolutions in the field of the pharmaceuticals sciences as well as in the production of pharmaceuticals, is a complicated task. With the rise of the

new information technology age of the Internet, the profession of the pharmacist again undergoes a transformation process. Today, even prescription drugs can be ordered and obtained online. The technological advancements also come with a dark side however, as the quality of the drugs ordered online is often not guaranteed and their use often becomes uncontrolled and excessive. While these subjects would provide interesting fields of study on the new approaches to a more recent history of pharmacy, resources are scarce, as taking care of the collection still requires a lot of time. The documentation and exploration of the collection, as well as keeping it up to date, is intensive. New database-software offer many opportunities, but must first be identified and implimented into the workflow of the museum staff. Furthermore, objects which have rested in depots or within the collection for decades, have received a higher interest as materials for new scientific research. New methods of analysis offer new opportunities and maybe lead to a better understanding of the evolution on the history of pharmacy. A recent example of such an approach at the Pharmacy Museum, is the collaboration with the University of Glasgow for a study called terra sigillata, which has been a high prized remedy since antiquity. The traditional drugs, which are literally only pressed clay, were analysed with new bio-chemical methods in order to understand the potential use of the substance, historically and contemporarily. In the first study, some of the terra sigillata from the collection of the museum has revealed an unexpected antibacterial effect (Photos-Jones 2017). Such an object study has only been possible due to cheaper and easier possibilities in bio-chemical analysis and the understanding of antibiotics. It is a good example on the potential of historical objects and substances for contemporary research and drug discovery, adding a higher value to the collections of such objects. But a museum, as an institution in service of the public as defined by ICOM, can neither solely focus on its collection nor on research. Objects must be presented, special exhibitions must be planned and organized, visitors must feel welcome, and the material and immaterial content of the museum made accessible for everyone. By paying respect to the history of the building and the history of the collection, and by adapting to an ever changing environment, the Pharmacy Museum as a modern cabinet of curiosity and an institution devoted to the scientific research and teaching of the history pharmacy, is well positioned for the changes that the future might bring.

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