

Annual Conference for University Collections

(Re)Activation („(Wieder)instandsetzung“)

Transformative Preservation as Collection Practice

The 17th Annual Conference for University Collections will take place from September 10 to 12, 2026, at Otto-von-Guericke-Universität Magdeburg (OVGU). It is jointly organized by the Office of Collections („Kustodie“) of OVGU and the Gesellschaft für Universitätssammlungen e. V. (GfU).

University collections contain many different types of objects that provide starting points for reflecting on practices of (re)activation. Questions of how objects can be (re)activated and what happens to them in the course of these processes can be explored through diverse case studies, including historical electronic devices. Currently, within the 3ioS project at the OVGU, medical technology devices formerly used in GDR hospitals are being (re)activated in order to reintegrate specific (technological) functions into interdisciplinary teaching and research.

The (re)activation of historical collection objects raises a fundamental question: should the preservation of university cultural heritage prioritise the conservation of material substance or the „retention“ – or reconstitution – of its functionality? This issue has been discussed previously, including at the 7th Annual Conference for University Collections in Freiberg. It became clear that very different types of objects – such as steam engines, dinosaur bones, and coins – can be reexamined in terms of their possible (re)activation.¹ Building on this discussion, the 17th Annual Conference for University Collections in 2026 seeks to reconsider function, substance, and preservation through the critical concept of (re)activation as a practice of transformative preservation.

(Re)activation emphasizes the possibility of integrating objects into a wide range of contemporary applications and research contexts. These generate knowledge about the objects' histories as well as other forms of object-related knowledge – for example, through the sensory or functional „enrichment“ of the object. The concept of (re)activation also draws on repair as a “process of transformation [...] that reconfigures discontinuity and continuity without resolving their tension,” as well as on performative “RRR” methods (“Reconstruction, Re-enactment, Replication, Reproduction and Re-working”), which explicitly challenge linear temporalities and unsettle the distinction between original and copy.² It is therefore the productivity of the gap – the interruption between different functional contexts, for example in the past and present – that is made productive under the concept of (re)activation.

¹This question was discussed at the 7th collection conference at TU Bergakademie Freiberg and TU Dresden in 2015. Meng, Stefan. (2016). “Substanzerhalt vs. Funktionserhalt, Erhalt vs. Nutzung”, in: Zaun, Jörg; Vincenz, Kirsten (Ed.). *Zwischen Kellerdepot und Forschungsolymp*, Web: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:105-qucosa-213282>, pp. 40–41.

²Hanstein, Ulrike; Klaut, Manuela; Mangold, Jana. (2022). “Reparaturwissen: DDR. Einleitung in den Schwerpunkt”, *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 10–23, p. 22 and Dupré, Sven; Harris, Anna; Kursell, Julia; Lulof, Patricia; Stols-Witlox, Maartje. (2021). „Introduction“, in: Dupré, Sven; Harris, Anna; Kursell, Julia; Lulof, Patricia; Stols-Witlox, Maartje (Ed.) *Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 9–34.

This conference seeks to draw on the diversity of academic collections in order to examine questions concerning the preservation of functions and practices of (re)activation from different perspectives. From a postcolonial perspective, for instance, the very notion of „functionality“ of objects preserved in collections may be called into question. Can the function of objects appropriated in the course of colonialism even be “preserved” or (re)activated if the preserving institution has, in some cases, erased their original context of use? Against this background, contributions addressing the following questions – as well as further related topics – are welcome:

- How can collection objects be (re)activated?
- What happens to specific objects during processes of (re)activation?
- What relationships exist between conservation practices and (re)activation?
- How does working with specific object groups – e.g., instruments, sound carriers, software, or industrial steam engines affect the concept of (re)activation?
- What role does interdisciplinary and non-academic expertise play in (re)activation?
- What are the potentials and limits of museum (re)activation practices?

In addition, the “object lesson” format first tested at the Annual Conference for University Collections 2022 in Vienna will be reintroduced. Proposals are invited for on-site, analogue object presentations highlighting specific features, historical traces, or special qualities demonstrated through a selected object, ideally opening up particular epistemic possibilities that arise through the materiality of the thing itself.

The following formats are planned:

- Individual papers (15 minutes)
- Panels (3–4 papers of 15 minutes each)
- Workshops (60–90 minutes)
- Poster session (A1)
- Object lesson

Conference languages are English and German. Please submit your proposal by April 12, 2026 via email to kustodie@ovgu.de. Your submission should include an abstract (max. 400 words) and a short biography, and the email subject line should read “CfP (Re)activation”. This conference is organized within the framework of the BMFTR-funded 3ioS project by Dominique Merdes, Theresa Stampfer, and Clemens Janke. Further information can be found at www.3ios.ovgu.de.

The GfU awards up to 20 travel grants of €200 each to conference participants upon application. Eligibility requires active participation (presentation, poster, lecture, or workshop contribution). Grants are primarily awarded to students and/or doctoral candidates holding no more than a 50% position and who do not receive travel funding from their home institutions. Informal applications must be submitted by August 1, 2026, to the GfU secretary, Prof. Dr. Ernst Seidl: sekretariat@museum.uni-tuebingen.de.

In addition, the GfU awards three poster prizes for outstanding poster presentations (1st prize = €300.00; 2nd prize = €200.00; 3rd prize = €100.00, each including one year of free GfU membership). The prizes will be presented during the closing event. Evaluation criteria include consideration of the specific characteristics of the poster medium (relationship between image space and text), design consistency, use of color and typography, image selection and quality, clarity and conciseness of content, comprehensibility of the project, its aims and methodology, as well as the oral presentation during the conference.