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*FROM TEACHING COLLECTION
TO EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING SPACE:
EDUCATION ON A HIGHER LEVEL AT THE
UNIVERSALMUSEUM JOANNEUM*

Abstract

This paper examines the Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz as an educational institution from its foundation in 1811 to the present, focusing on the continuity and transformation of its relationship with universities and its role in art education. Founded by Archduke Johann as a “national educational institution” accessible to all social classes, the museum emerged from Enlightenment ideals that sought to connect theory and practice, research and teaching, and collections with public education. In its early decades, the Joanneum functioned primarily as a teaching and research institution closely linked to emerging scientific disciplines and higher education in Graz. The article traces how this educational mission shifted over time through the expansion of art collections, the professionalization of art history, and the establishment of specialized exhibition spaces such as the Neue Galerie. Particular attention is given to the development of art education and mediation practices since the opening of the Kunsthaus Graz in 2003. Selected case studies demonstrate contemporary forms of collaboration with universities that integrate artistic, curatorial, performative and inclusive approaches. Methodologically, the study follows a qualitative and interpretative framework, combining historical analysis with case studies and institutional reflection. The analysis highlights the persistence of the Joanneum’s educational mandate and positions the museum today as a participatory, research-based space of shared knowledge production at the intersection of museum, university and society.

Keywords: university–museum collaboration; knowledge production; art education (Kunstvermittlung)

The Museum as a place of education

The Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz was founded in 1811 by Archduke Johann. It is one of the oldest public museums not intended as a representative court museum, but as a museum 'for all classes' („für alle Stände“). Unlike earlier museum foundations, which often opened treasure chambers as princely collections, the Universalmuseum Joanneum was founded as an independent "national educational institution" (Fliedl, 1988, p.31). This makes it unique and means that the links, collaborations and interconnections between the museum and the universities in Graz have existed since the beginning.

From today's perspective, it is interesting to reflect on this because it addresses foundational questions about the role of museums in society that remain highly relevant

in the present. The Joanneum's founding as a museum "for all classes" speaks directly to contemporary debates about access, inclusion and social responsibility in cultural institutions. At a time when museums are critically reassessing whom they serve and who feels addressed or excluded, the Joanneum's early commitment to public education offers a historical reference point. The museum's conception as an educational institution highlights the museum's role not merely as a place of preservation or display, but as an active site of learning, research and knowledge production. In today's context—marked by rapid social change, misinformation and complex global challenges – this educational mandate is increasingly significant. Reflecting on the Joanneum's origins helps to question how museums can function as trusted spaces for critical thinking and public discourse today. In particular, declining budgets, which allow for fewer exhibition productions, make it urgently necessary to focus on the discursive and participatory possibilities of the museum in order to consolidate its relevance in society as a respected and, above all, highly trustworthy place of knowledge production.

In addition, in the context of austerity measures, it is increasingly important to focus public attention not only on the inevitable (finite) maximization of visitor numbers, but also on its core tasks. The educational mission of the present must continue the critical discourse of the Enlightenment in a contemporary manner, in accordance with its historical founding charter. This applies in particular to fundamental ways of thinking about knowledge, power, freedom, and the public sphere that still shape modern societies—and at the same time not only challenge critical reflection, but are also being put to the test overall. Furthermore, the long-standing collaboration between the museum and universities resonates strongly with current discussions about interdisciplinary knowledge transfer and the relationship between academic research and public engagement. As universities and museums seek new forms of cooperation, co-production and socially engaged research, the Joanneum's historical model demonstrates that such collaborations are not new but deeply rooted – and therefore worth rethinking and renewing under contemporary conditions. Finally, revisiting this history allows us to critically examine how Enlightenment ideals of education, progress and public access have been transformed, challenged or reinterpreted over time. This reflection is crucial for understanding the museum today not as a neutral institution, but as a historically shaped space whose educational mission must continually be renegotiated in relation to society.

Back to the roots

From the outset, the founding history of the Universalmuseum Joanneum in 1811 by Archduke Johann was motivated by educational and socio-political considerations, centred on the idea of a nation that, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, viewed the people as sovereign and abolished the estates. The founding statute was also formulated in the spirit of the Enlightenment, setting out the goal of the newly founded museum as stimulating curiosity spreading intellectual education among young people, and facilitating learning, with the aim of increasingly bridging the harmful gap between concept and perception, theory and practice (Erzherzog, 2011).

The initial motivation was therefore to provide sensory and vivid teaching and research experiences through the museum's collections. Until 1887, the Universalmuseum Joanneum was primarily an educational institution that provided closely related 'teaching institutions' (Lehranstalt) with objects for research and study. It was also made available to the general public as a 'teaching collection' (Lehrmittelsammlung) with the aim of educating the population. This educational concept was intended to promote agricultural, commercial and industrial progress. For the founder, Archduke Johann, science and education were prerequisites for progress in all areas. He took a hands-on approach to education policy, networking with a high level of personal commitment, as evidenced by the establishment of numerous institutions, including a publicly accessible library and reading club. From 1825/26, the Joanneum's main building was also greatly expanded with the addition of a south wing, "in order to set up urgently needed classrooms". (Moser, 2009, p.54)

A separate director of studies was also appointed to oversee teaching. Unlike the other museums of the monarchy at that time, the Joanneum was clearly conceived as a place of study, offering "freely accessible teaching" as its main purpose, according to the first annual report of 1812. This included public lectures on chemistry, botany, astronomy, mineralogy and zoology (Stifter, 2009, p.136). The Archduke's early bourgeois concept of a museum meant that it was not only learning-oriented, but also accessible to a wider audience thanks to its opening hours. The natural science collections in particular served to comprehensively document the province of Styria. Consequently, chairs were established in various scientific disciplines. Mining and technical universities were also founded, leading to the museum becoming increasingly known as the "show museum of the province" from 1888 onwards. Until then, exhibitions had played a subordinate role to the collection and education (Fliedl, 2009, p.40).

The founding location, Lesliehof at Raubergasse 10, was chosen deliberately. At the beginning of the 19th century, there was enough space next to the building to create a botanical garden. This garden was intended to expand the collections and to be used for teaching, research and public education. Crops such as grafted fruit were cultivated there, and cuttings were distributed to the population in large quantities with the aim of improving agriculture in Styria and ensuring greater food security.

The botanical garden connects the Universalmuseum Joanneum with the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, founded in 1585 as a Jesuit university. It is considered an early example of "successful knowledge transfer between museum, university and society". (Pakesch & Muchitsch, 2011, p. 8)

"The democratization of access to education and knowledge, which Archduke Johann initiated in Styria at the beginning of the 19th century, was in fact one of the first institutionally anchored measures on Austrian soil that was also and above all aimed at the adult population." The focus was on the "popularization of (natural) science, with learning and teaching strongly oriented toward concrete practical examples and the methodological-didactic principle of clarity." (Stifter, 2009, p.141)

The role of art

In the early years, art was part of the cultural-historical collections. As the museum's holdings grew rapidly, the "ständische Zeichnungsakademie" (drawing academy) had to move out of the Joanneum in 1818. With this move, a picture gallery was also founded as a collection of role models, which took in the paintings of the Joanneum and whose first director, Josef August Stark, also furnished it with a wealth of works of art. Generous donations and bequests rapidly expanded the art collection, so it was decided to build a separate museum building in the city for the first time, which would house not only the art collections but also the arts and crafts. Since the picture gallery also had to contend with space problems from the outset, an additional floor was added as soon as possible to accommodate the provincial picture gallery, the drawing academy, and the copperplate engraving cabinet. (Leitner-Ruhe & Rabensteiner, 2016, p.42) The idea of building a new museum in Neutorgasse followed that of museums of applied arts, such as the first of its kind – the Victoria and Albert Museum in London – but above all the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, today's MAK, which was the first on the European continent to be initiated under the aegis of Josef Eitelberger, following the English model. From the outset, the museum had its own school attached to it (Fliedl & Oberhuber, 1986).

The construction of the new building in 1895 also brought about a change in Graz. From 1910 onwards, the art collections – the provincial picture gallery and the sculpture collection – were entrusted to a scientist rather than an artist, as had been the custom until then. The new director, Wilhelm Suida, had studied art history in Vienna and was also a professor of art history at the University of Graz (Woisetschläger, 1969).

The Neue Galerie was established in 1941 as a spin-off from the Provincial Picture Gallery, focusing on art from 1800 to the present day. This division became necessary due to the growing collections, which required maintenance and, above all, accessibility and understanding for visitors in a museum-like yet lively setting. In addition to moving to the Palais Herberstein and safeguarding the collections amid the chaos of World War II, the majority of the gallery's activities focused on art education (Aldrian, 1969). Art history lectures were held every Wednesday from October to June. The number of exhibition rooms grew steadily. Alongside the art collection, holdings for art education were created, comprising a collection of reproductions and slides that served as an art history image archive for the lectures and were also loaned to schools. A friends' association was founded to organise the Wednesday lectures.

From today's perspective

Art education and higher levels from 2003

The Kunsthaus Graz opened in 2003. The plans included a room dedicated to education and communication. Since 2004, a variety of special projects and initiatives for different groups and events have been developed and implemented there. This room is also used for various collaborations with universities and further training for educators. Looking back, the Kunsthaus Graz's consistent collaboration with universities has been important for art education since its establishment, although different motivations can be cited here.

Since 2004, annual Student Days have invited students from all Graz universities to explore the Kunsthaus Graz, its architecture, exhibitions and neighbours Camera Austria and Haus der Architektur. The event aims to raise the profile of the Kunsthaus Graz among a younger audience (Kunsthaus Graz, n.d.). Over the years, however, a number of collaborations have also been established with various courses dealing with diverse artistic, curatorial and museological issues.

Example 1: Terry Winters. The Painter's Cabinet

The starting point for the first Example is the exhibition "The Painter's Cabinet. Terry Winters' Dialogue with Nature", which took place at the Kunsthaus Graz from 11th March to 21th August 2016 and was curated by Peter Pakesch. Terry Winter is an American Artist born in 1949. His abstract paintings explore forms that also occur in nature. For the 2016 exhibition at the Kunsthaus Graz, he was invited to select objects from the Universalmuseum Joanneum's natural history collections and juxtapose them directly with his own paintings. This "cabinet of curiosities" allowed visitors to view and compare the objects, opening up many levels of reflection on nature, humanity, existence and the cosmos (Holzer-Kernbichler, 2016). For this exhibition, a collaboration with the Institute of German Studies at the University of Graz was initiated and realized together with Monika Schmidt. After thoroughly viewing and discussing the exhibition, the students were asked to select a work. Based on this, they were to choose a short literary text that they found interesting. They then used these texts as part of their speech training and finally recorded them in front of the works. To this end, they chose the position in the room from which they wanted to recite the literary text or text excerpt in relation to Terry Winters' work. Most of the students also chose a suitable outfit very carefully, which once again underlined the appreciation of interdisciplinary art appreciation in a special way. Afterwards, the audience was invited to listen to these texts via an audio guide or watch the recorded videos on the website. This added another dimension to the exhibition space. The students viewed the exhibition in a different way and used the art as a starting point for further exploration. The literary texts also offered everyone who heard them a new way to experience the exhibition – an exhibition that, due to its basic concept, could not hide its poetic nature.

Example 2: INARTdis

"INARTdis" was a large-scale research project at the Universalmuseum Joanneum. The initiative was part of a larger European research and educational project that investigated and tested social inclusion through arts education. The event was held within the framework of the Erasmus+ EACEA project, entitled "INARTdis – Promoting Social Inclusion through Artistic Education", and ran from 2020 to 2023. Comprehensive and detailed documentation and information about this project can be found on its website. (inartdis.org).

INARTdis addressed the question of how art, culture and art education can be conceived and practised from an inclusive, power-critical perspective, particularly with regard to disability. The project aimed to enable people with disabilities to have equal

access to art, culture and artistic education, and to identify and break down barriers to participation in museums and educational institutions. Inclusion was considered in architectural, linguistic, cognitive, and organisational terms. The University of Education Styria coordinated the research component, conducting a needs assessment that examined current approaches, obstacles and ideas for inclusive educational work in museums. Based on these findings, creative, participatory formats for engaging with art and museum spaces inclusively were developed, tested and documented at the Universalmuseum Joanneum.

One concrete outcome of this collaboration was the participatory exhibition “Architectures of Life”, presented at the Kunsthaus Graz from 04th July to 27th August 2023 as a central practical project. Over several months, several groups from schools and inclusive institutions worked alongside teachers on artistic and creative productions, accompanied by museum visits, inclusive education, and creative work. The results were jointly curated for the exhibition and prepared and communicated on many levels of inclusion: The exhibition space was easily accessible without any physical barriers and offered sufficient space for wheelchair users and strollers. Information was available in simple language, Braille, large print with maximum contrast, and also as an audio guide translated into sign language. In addition, there were tactile elements and areas where visitors were invited to try things out and get involved.

Example 3: Freeing the Voices - Let it out!

The collaboration between Kunsthaus Graz and the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (KUG) took place in close connection with the exhibition “Freeing the Voices,” which was on view from February 28 to August 24, 2025. An extensive musical and performative accompanying program was developed. The focus was on the concert series “Let it out!”, which was developed by students and teachers of the PPCM master's program “Performance Practice in Contemporary Music – Vocal.” These events presented contemporary, experimental, and performative vocal practices and explored the voice as a means of artistic expression and action. The concert series was in direct dialogue with the central themes of the exhibition – the power and diversity of voices, the act of listening, and the expression of identity and resistance – and was intended as a performative extension of the curatorial exploration of the theme of “liberating the voice.” Concerts took place both in the event space and directly in the exhibition.

Example 4: Books of wonder

Considered a pioneer of educational work in Austrian museums and exhibitions, Heiderose Hildebrand bequeathed a large part of her educational archive, along with a previously unknown aspect of her life's work, to the Neue Galerie Graz: the Wunderbücher (books of wonder). She also transferred her art collection to the Styrian Firefighting Museum in Groß St. Florian. These two collections were brought together for the first time in an exhibition in three chapters as part of a course in the winter semester 2024/25. At the Neue Galerie Graz, students explored the Wunderbücher. At the firefighting museum, all doors to the exhibition rooms, depots and archives were opened

to facilitate a participatory process. Working in three curatorial teams, students of art and design at the University of Education in Graz paired selected 'books of wonder' with pieces from the art collection. Five were chosen from 75 handmade books containing collages, pictures, texts, fragments, diary entries and philosophical musings on life. These unique books, which could be seen and felt, gave rise to a wealth of reflections and exhibition ideas. Based on the catalogue of works, an initial selection of 338 pieces was made, and the originals were then studied in more detail in the depot in terms of theme, technique, size, and materiality. This selection process was collaborative and based on considerations relating to content, such as travel, distance, home, gender, memory and the students' personal interests. The groups discussed the theme, the selection of works, the spatial concept, the design and the textual preparation of the content, which established connections to the students' current lives.

Example 5: BANG! Educational Archive Neue Galerie Graz

The Neue Galerie Graz's educational archive is an institutional collection of materials, documentation and concepts relating to art and museum education. Serving as a resource for research, teaching and practice, it was made publicly accessible in 2024 through the initiative of art educators, based on a donation by Heiderose Hildbrand. Since then, the archive has grown continuously. It includes documentation of projects, workshops, educational programmes, and exhibition materials. These include photographs, sketches, plans, worksheets, and evaluation documents. The archive serves as a research base for art and museum education methods and inclusive educational work. It supports students, teachers, and scholars engaged in museum practice, participatory art education, and exhibition didactics. Materials from the archive are used in courses, workshops, and continuing education programmes to promote critical reflection and the further development of educational work in museums. The education archive is a strategic tool for collecting, reflecting on and passing on practical knowledge from art education, forming a central interface between museum work, research and teaching. Most recently, the archive served as an essential source for the book "Methoden der personalen Vermittlung im Museum" through the book project (Doppelbauer et al., 2025). As the authors, Angelika Doppelbauer, Monika Holzer-Kernbichler, Eva Meran and Franziska Mühlbacher, received requests from a variety of parties, particularly from non-English-speaking countries, for an English translation of their book on methods of learning at museums, they have announced that the book is in the process of being released in English. The primary objective of this book was to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge regarding methodologies. The research was primarily based on German-language literature and archives such as BANG at the Neue Galerie in Graz. A compendium of methodologies employed in the context of direct interaction between educators and audiences has been collated. This project emerged from the recognition that, while knowledge of diverse methodologies is pervasive and exchange is prevalent, numerous museum education departments continue to encounter challenges in identifying or devising novel approaches. There appears to be contemporary interest in the archiving, collection and documentation of knowledge regarding educational methodologies. The

primary objective of this research focus of art education at the Universalmuseum Joanneum is to raise awareness of the educational archive and to emphasise its potential for utilisation in student research and theses. The archive plays a pivotal role in professionalising the art education profession and fostering closer collaboration with humanities and education departments. Ultimately, the objective is to establish a programme for the training of the next generation of museum professionals, through a collaborative effort between academic institutions and museums in this region.

Conclusion and Outlook

From its foundation in 1811 to the present day, the Universalmuseum Joanneum has consistently positioned itself as a place of education, research and societal engagement. Conceived from the outset as a “national educational institution” accessible to all social classes, the museum embodied Enlightenment ideals of knowledge transfer, practical learning and public participation long before these concepts became central to modern museum discourse. Unlike courtly or representative collections, the Joanneum was designed as an institution that actively connected scientific inquiry, education and public benefit. The close interweaving of collection, teaching, research and public access – supported by early collaborations with universities and educational institutions – formed a structural principle that continues to shape the institution today.

Throughout its history, the Joanneum demonstrates a remarkable continuity in its educational mission, while repeatedly adapting its formats, actors and emphases to changing social, scientific and cultural conditions. In its early decades, education was embedded in concrete, practice-oriented forms of knowledge production: collections functioned as teaching tools, public lectures addressed a broad audience, and infrastructures such as the botanical garden exemplified early models of experiential and sensory learning. Knowledge was not understood as abstract or exclusive, but as something to be shared, demonstrated and discussed in public contexts.

The gradual shift from a primarily teaching-oriented institution to an exhibition-based museum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not replace education but rather transformed it. As disciplines professionalized and exhibition-making gained importance, educational work increasingly took place through interpretation, mediation and contextualization. Art collections, exhibitions and publications became spaces of reflection and dialogue, addressing both specialist audiences and the broader public. The professionalization of art history, the establishment of the Neue Galerie, and the development of systematic art education formats testify to this evolution. These developments also reflect broader transformations in museum practice, in which education moved from direct instruction toward interpretative and discursive engagement.

From today’s perspective, particularly since the opening of the Kunsthaus Graz in 2003, education and mediation at the Universalmuseum Joanneum have expanded significantly beyond traditional didactic models. Education is no longer understood as a supplementary service accompanying exhibitions, but as an integral, research-based and often experimental component of institutional practice. Collaborations with universities

now function not merely as channels of knowledge transfer, but as co-productive processes in which artistic, curatorial, scientific and pedagogical perspectives intersect.

The presented examples illustrate this shift in concrete ways. Projects such as *The Painter's Cabinet*, *Terry Winters' Dialogue with Nature* demonstrate how artistic practice, natural history collections and literary engagement can be brought into dialogue, creating multilayered interpretative spaces. Students and participants are not positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active contributors whose voices, texts and perspectives become part of the exhibition itself. Similarly, performative formats such as *Freeing the Voices – Let it out!* expand educational practice into the realm of embodied and auditory experience, transforming the museum into a space of resonance, presence and collective encounter.

Particularly significant are inclusive and power-critical approaches exemplified by projects such as *INARTdis*. These initiatives foreground questions of accessibility, participation and structural exclusion, challenging the assumption of the museum as a neutral space. By addressing barriers related to disability, language, social position and institutional norms, such projects redefine education as an ethical and political practice. They demonstrate that art education is not only about explaining content, but about critically reflecting on who is able to participate, under what conditions, and whose knowledge is recognized.

Equally important is the growing attention to archives and institutional memory as educational resources. Initiatives such as *Books of Wonder* and the establishment of the *BANG! Educational Archive* at the *Neue Galerie Graz* make visible the histories, methods and discourses of art education itself. By opening these archives to students, researchers and practitioners, educational practice becomes an object of research and reflection. This not only contributes to the professionalization of art mediation, but also strengthens the relationship between museum practice, academic research and teacher education.

Looking ahead, several key fields of future development emerge from this history. First, the long-standing cooperation between museums and universities could be further strengthened through sustained research partnerships, joint curricula and long-term laboratories for experimental mediation practices. Rather than relying on short-term projects, such collaborations could provide stable frameworks for critical inquiry, methodological innovation and mutual learning.

Second, inclusive, participatory and power-critical approaches – as exemplified by projects such as *INARTdis* – should be structurally embedded within institutional strategies rather than remaining project-based. Accessibility, diversity and participation need to be understood not as optional additions, but as foundational principles of museum work that shape programming, staffing, infrastructure and decision-making processes.

Third, archives of art education, such as the *BANG! Educational Archive*, offer significant potential as sites of historiography, reflection and innovation. By linking past practices with contemporary challenges, these archives enable a deeper understanding of how educational concepts evolve over time and how they can be critically adapted for the future.

Finally, the Universalmuseum Joanneum's historical roots as a place that bridges theory and practice, concept and perception, remain highly relevant today. In a time marked by social transformation, political polarization and increasing demands on cultural institutions to justify their relevance, museums can build on this legacy by positioning themselves even more clearly as spaces of shared knowledge production, critical inquiry and cultural negotiation. In doing so, the museum affirms its role not only as a place for students, researchers or experts, but as a public institution that actively contributes to democratic discourse and societal reflection.

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