

Regional

Barnett directs the University Museum at SIUE

Museums have had a very long history and have played important roles from the time of the ancient Greeks to today. And it is this history of museums that is in many ways as exciting as the treasures that they hold.

"I teach my students that the original collecting was a matter of conquest. Collections belonged to a royalty or very privileged few and it has only really been since the French Revolution that we have been democratizing museums, both in terms of who has access to them and the various things that they try to collect and represent," said Eric Barnett, director of the University Museum at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. And this democratization of museums is making people demand more of them. Born in Missoula, Mont., Barnett received his bachelor's degree in art and design and a master's of public administration from SIUE.

"People just don't want to see the glorious wonders of the world, they want to know about the social context, about the way things are made and how they are used," said Barnett. "So people have been inquiring deeper and deeper into the objects." The Internet has increased public access to museum information, making them more relevant in this information age and allowing people to "visit" their collections from their own homes. But Barnett said that there are limits to virtual museum visits.

"I like to use the old phrase that a picture is worth a thousand words,"

said Barnett. "Well, the tangible, physical object is worth a thousand pictures, because there is more to an object than a two-dimensional view on a screen. People learn with all their senses, so being here at a university gives us an opportunity to bring students into our collections area and let them put their hands on the objects." Museums, however, are adapting to new technologies, including 3-D approaches to their exhibits.

"Several years ago at the Field Museum in Chicago, we did their paleontological exhibit," said Barnett. "They incorporated an electronic newscast to 'report' on a major species



Professor Eric Barnett (standing at the extreme left) with some of his SIUE students.

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die off back when the dinosaurs were in the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods. They had things like metal tubes through which you could blow air to see what sound was made inside the skull of different dinosaurs based on the shape of the sinus areas inside. They had a little place where you could pull back a cover and smell what a dinosaur's breath would have smelled like. They engaged your ears and nose as well, and it was tremendous

fun for people."

What people see at museums is usually a fraction of their entire collections, most of which is accessible only to researchers. While people recognize the efforts of museum workers to create the exhibits, there is much more work behind the scenes in terms of preservation and research of the objects. Museums must find a balance between exhibition and conservation.

"There is a tension that exists in this regard," said Barnett. "In many academic fields, it is about ideas, and the deeper somebody goes in research in a field like philosophy, let's say, the more it is just about the ideas. But in the museum we are always trying to connect those ideas with tangible physical objects. We don't want people to become disassociated from the tangible world." This is also true for univer-

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

sity museums, such as the one at SIUE.

"We wrap ourselves within the mission of the institution as a whole and we have to be cognizant of changing demands on the institution as a whole," said Barnett. "We don't want to just set our own agenda, our own priorities for our collections. We have to be integrated into the university. Collecting artwork was part of the original vision. It wasn't necessarily the idea of a museum per se, but during the very first planning meetings that they had was the idea that artwork would be part of everybody's daily experience."

Many of the pieces that are in the university museum collection have been donated, from paintings to archaeological pieces to historical ones such as TV sets from the 1940s. "What we are trying to do is collect anything that has a relationship to any of our academic programs," Barnett explained.

One of the most recent donations received by the museum was a large collection of artwork by the famous Cuban-American artist Emilio Sánchez, an initiative that Barnett developed in partnership with the Cuban and Caribbean Center at SIUE and representing the increasing interest in cultural exchange between both countries. "I'm finishing up re-cataloging all the puppets and I am getting ready to put on an exhibit of Emilio Sanchez's works of art. We acquired 490 of his works this year and they are going on display."

For more information about the university museum at SIUE go to: <http://www.siu.edu/universitymuseum/>

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.