

UMRA Cabinets of Curiosity, 2023-2024 – Report in June 2024

Background:

The UMRA Cabinets of Curiosity program provides curated tours exploring behind-the-scenes access to research collections of books and artifacts that are typically not readily available to the public. Each event provides access to rare materials that underlie faculty research and teaching. Topics range from the natural sciences to the social sciences and humanities, and the expert curators and librarians who host demonstrate how collections are acquired, assembled, preserved, and utilized. As in cabinets of curiosity in the seventeenth century, the encounter with physical artifacts and discussions with curatorial experts becomes as once social, intellectual, and often aesthetic in response to unexpected discoveries for a university community. Collections are a dimension of the academic life of a university that is fundamental to its productivity.

Program Dimensions

Since the program's initiation in the spring of 2023, there have been seven visits to sites across the Twin Cities campus balancing experiences on the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses. The variety of collections draws quite different sets of attendees to events that reflect their interests or stimulate their curiosity. Because the locations often have space limitations, the number of registrants is between 18 and 30, and typically there is a waiting list. This year the program visits included the

- 1) Bell Library housed in Anderson Library with Marguerite Ragnow and Anne Goode
- 2) Goldstein Museum of Design in McNeal Hall with Jean McElvain
- 3) Insect Collection and Natural History Library in Hodson Hall with Robin Thompson, Amy Gmur and Philip Herold, and
- 4) CBS Conservatory and Botanical Collection with Jared Rubenstein

Planned tours for the coming year will be at the Andersen Library at the Arboretum, the Kerlan Collection of Children's Literature, the Herbarium, and the University Archives.

Some Observations:

- 1) These UMRA tours typically attract members, especially new ones, who want to explore the many facets of the university or are keen to learn more about a particular topic.
- 2) Curators are willing to take time to prepare a brief introduction and organize a display because this is a receptive audience and may attract volunteers interested in working with the collections. They often are surprised to learn more about the extent of UMRA activities and may be potential members in the future.

3) The social aspects of walking around a site and talking with others who stop to look at something in which they share a common interest is a way to broaden our interactive retiree community.

4) A post tour conversation at a restaurant or pub extends this social aspect and allows for more reflections about the collection visited and possibilities for future programs.

5) Having a trio of leaders with distinctive skills and willingness to try new projects has made this an effective working group.

Program Coordinators

The tours are planned and coordinated by Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, Cathy Lee Gierke and Jan Morlock.

Submitted by Sally Kohlstedt, Chair