

THE CHALLENGE OF PRESERVING THE ARTIFACTS OF OPTOMETRIC HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at optometry museums around the world. There are only five general optometry museums: three are hosted by optometric institutions in three countries, Australia, Britain and the U.S.A., one is hosted by a Canadian university that has an optometry school, and one is in private hands in Southbridge, Massachusetts. They are supplemented by six excellent corporate museums in France, Germany and Italy, but these museums focus on either spectacles or ophthalmic instruments, rather than optometry in general. Two of the optometry museums were founded over 100 years ago, and two have had their 50th birthday, but can they survive forever? Museums are expected to preserve collections for posterity for the edification and enjoyment of future generations, yet all institutions are at risk of disruption: few institutions last more than a couple of hundred years. This paper discusses strategies optometry museums might pursue to guard against mismanagement and neglect and provide for the protection of their collections in the event of the demise of the museum or its host institution.

KEYWORDS

History museums; optometry history; medical and science museums; ophthalmic collections

The best vehicle for preserving artifacts of history is a museum, but what exactly is a museum? The International Council of Museums defines a museum as a not-for-profit permanent institution that is open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches and exhibits material of aesthetic, cultural or historic significance for education, study and enjoyment.¹

There are a great number of museums around the world that more or less fit this definition. The directory *Museums of the World* lists more than 55,000 museums in 202 countries,² and without doubt that does not count many of the numerous small, local or special subject museums.

There are not very many comprehensive optometry museums. By my count there are only four museums in the world that have their principal focus on optometry, and a possible fifth.

A comprehensive optometry museum is one that

encompasses the whole scope of optometry from spectacles and other aids to vision and the tools for optical dispensing as well as instruments for assessment of visual function, the measurement of refractive error and the examination of the eyes and diagnosis of diseases affecting vision. A general optometry museum also might preserve books, documents and memorabilia that document key events in the profession of optometry and chart its historical development.

Only two of the five general optometry museums I identify are listed in *Museums of the World*, though those that are not should not be dismissed. Aggregating directories are never complete.

MUSEUMS ARE FOR POSTERITY

An important attribute of a museum is that it can be trusted to preserve its collection in perpetuity. The definition of the International Council of Museums describes museums

as being “permanent institutions” that hold their collection in trust for the benefit of society.³ The UNESCO 2015 recommendations on the protection of museums call on its member states to ensure their museums will pass on their heritage collections for the benefit of future generations.⁴

The codes of ethics and accreditation standards of the International Council of Museums and national museum associations place great importance on policies to guard against improper disposal of items held by museums and expect museums to have legally enforceable provisions for proper placement of their collections in the event that the museum or its host institution is wound-up^{5,6,7}

This requires museums to have a system of governance and management that ensures long-term preservation. If they do not, they are not museums, they are simply collections.

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

This is not to say that collections have no value. Collectors, be they individuals or institutions, assemble their collections under a coherent theme and care and preserve them while they have an interest in them. However, when the collector loses interest or the capability to continue, the collection is at risk of being dispersed or simply lost.

It is a good news story when an important private collection is given to an appropriate museum. The British Optical Association Museum in London records some notable private collections that have been donated to it⁸ though the museum’s curator, Neil Handley, in a personal communication⁹ lists three of the well-known private collections in the UK that have been disbursed recently with, at best, only parts of the collections finding their way to a museum. Of course, private collections sold through auction houses may be bought by museums or by another keen collector and may continue to be cared for and valued, but some will find their way to the tip.

The Madame Alice Heymann Collection: Dispersed, but Not Entirely Lost

An example is the wonderful optical collection of Madame Alice Heymann. Madame Heymann, (née Schloss 1844-1925) came from a wealthy family, as did her husband Alfred Heymann, whom she married in 1865. Both were well connected in Paris society. They lived on Avenue de L’Opera in Paris and owned a fine home in Saint-Cloud just west of Paris. After her husband died in 1897, Madame Heymann devoted much of her time to collecting fine optical objects. She travelled extensively and became a very passionate

collector. Her collection included highly decorative spectacle cases from the 16th to 18th century, antique spectacles, lorgnettes, ornate spyglasses, optical fans, optical charms, scissors-glasses and monocles. She acquired some of the most fantastic spyglasses in existence.¹⁰

Her collection is documented in her book *Lunettes et Lorgnettes de Jadis*, published in 1911,¹¹ itself now a rare collectors’ item because only 300 copies were printed and only 50 are known to have survived. The Kett Optometry Museum holds copy No. 110.

After Madame Heymann’s death in 1925, the collection became dispersed by bequests, gifts and possibly by sale. Dr. David Fleishman, a well-known figure in the world of antique spectacles, with advice from several fellow enthusiasts, located over 300 items from the Heymann collection now held in nine different museums, but much of the original collection is lost.¹⁰

Regrettably, most of the discovered items are in storage and can be seen only by arrangement. Large public museums cannot be expected to permanently display small collections of antique spectacles. However, Fleishman has images of many of the discovered items, which are accessible on his website¹⁰ and are available on a DVD in digital format.¹²

OPTOMETRY MUSEUMS

The four optometry museums I have counted are:

1. **The British Optical Association Museum (BOA)** in London was founded in 1901. It flourished under the stewardship of the BOA Secretary, John Hamer Sutcliffe (1867-1941), and subsequently through the enthusiastic attention given to it by his successor George Giles OBE, who was the BOA Secretary from 1941 to 1966. It has a remarkable and well assembled collection of some 27,000 items. It is now the responsibility of the UK College of Optometrists following the establishment of the college in 1980 and the consequent dissolution of the British Optical Association.¹³ It became a registered museum with the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in 2003 and was fully accredited in 2010 by the Arts Council for England. Neil Handley is its full-time curator.
2. **The Archives and Museum of Optometry** in St Louis, Missouri, USA, traces its origins back to a library established in 1908 by the physiological branch of the American Association of Opticians, the forerunner of the American Optometric Association. Much of the original heritage material came from three optometrists involved

in the work of the Association. AOA Secretary Ernest Kiekenapp began accruing organizational records at the national headquarters in 1953; former Vice President Joseph M. Babcock donated his professional papers in 1965; and AOA Past President and collector E. LeRoy Ryer made a large donation of ophthalmic antiques in the same year. It was named the International Library, Archives and Museum of Optometry in 1972, at which time it became incorporated as a separate not-for-profit body. Since 2008, it has continued under the auspices of Optometry Cares – The AOA Foundation, and is now named The Archives and Museum of Optometry. The library was deaccessioned and the focus turned to preservation of optometric archives and heritage materials.^{14,15} Its curator is Kirsten Hébert.

- 3. The Museum of Vision Science** located in the School of Optometry and Vision Science at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.¹⁶ It was founded by Dr Edward (Ted) Fisher (1913-2003) during his tenure as Dean of the Ontario College of Optometry from 1948 to 1967.¹⁷ He was the museum's founding curator.
- 4. The Cyril W Kett Optometry Museum and Archive** located in the Australian College of Optometry in Melbourne, Australia, had its beginnings in 1970 with a bequest of items of historical interest to the college by Melbourne optometrist Cyril W. Kett FBOA, FSMC, FVOA (1890-1970), one of the founders of the college in 1940. For three decades it was not much more than a repository for gifts of equipment, books and antique spectacles made by retiring optometrists or their estates. It was curated by two honorary archivists who kept a card catalogue of the holdings and did their best to store the material safely. It did however receive a gift in this period of a valuable collection of rare books relating to ophthalmic science and early optometry dating back to the 17th century. This is now known as the Michael Aitken Collection of Early Ophthalmic books and continues to acquire books. A new zeal for what was then called "The archive" began in 2000. This brought about a new name, an on-line electronic catalogue, a web site,¹⁸ improved storage facilities, better policies for acquisition and cataloguing and more vigorous marketing. It now holds over 3,500 catalogued items and has five volunteer curators.

Identifying these four "optometry museums" may be unfair to the many small collections held in schools of optometry and optometry associations around the world but these

small collections are mostly uncurated, uncatalogued and not in the public domain. It is probably also unfair to the ophthalmic museums set up by optical industry corporations, a number of which are indeed very impressive, but while they hold a great deal of material that is relevant to optometry, the core purpose of these collections is to present the history of the corporation and its products. Then there are several important museums of ophthalmology, which also hold much that relates to optometry, but their focus is on ophthalmology.

Table 1 lists some of the main institutional, private and corporate collections open to the public.

Are Four Optometry Museums Enough?

Four general optometry museums within optometric institutions in four different countries is not very many.

However, there are five corporate museums that may have a narrower scope than a general optometry museum, but nevertheless are important collections that are well presented and open to the public.

A weakness of corporate museums is that their longevity, a key attribute of a museum, is not assured because corporations have a limited life: few last beyond two or three generations. Markets and company leadership change, and competition can force mergers and closures. It is noteworthy that the Optical Museum in Jena founded by Zeiss has placed the museum in the hands of a foundation.

The Optical Heritage Museum in Southbridge, Massachusetts

This museum deserves special mention. It is a private collection that had its origins within the American Optical Company, a company that was very important to optometry.

The museum began as the American Optical Museum, which opened in 1983 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the American Optical Company (AO). American Optical was a major manufacturer of ophthalmic equipment, lenses and spectacle frames, which along with its competitor, Bausch and Lomb, had a profound effect on the development of optometry by supplying innovative instruments and optical goods. The products of these two companies provide a great number of the historical artifacts that now reside in and are treasured by optometry museums.

The American Optical Museum was originally located on the company's industrial estate in Southbridge, but as a result of restructuring and mergers, the building in which the

Table 1. Optometry Museums around the World			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Owner</i>
Museums in optometric institutions or universities with optometry schools			
British Optical Association Museum	London, UK	Optometry in general	College of Optometrists, UK
The Archives and Museum of Optometry	St Louis, Missouri, USA	Optometry in general	Optometry Cares – The AOA Foundation
The Museum of Vision Science	Waterloo, Ontario, Canada	Optometry in general	University of Waterloo
The Cyril W. Kett Optometry Museum and Archive	Melbourne, Victoria, Australia	Optometry in general	Australian College of Optometry
Museums belonging to or founded by optical corporations			
Optical Heritage Museum	Southbridge, Massachusetts, USA	Optometry in general with particular strength in the history of the American Optical Company	Founded under the auspices of the American Optical Company, now private not-for profit and supported by Carl Zeiss Vision
Musée de la Lunette	Morez, France	Spectacles	Essilor Group
Optisches Museum Jena	Jena, Germany	Optical and ophthalmic instruments, especially those made by Zeiss	Formerly the Ernst Abbe Foundation: since 2016 the German Optical Museum Foundation
Zeiss Museum der Optik	Oberkochen, Germany	Optical instruments, spectacles	Carl Zeiss
Galleria Guglielmo Tabacchi	Padua, Italy	Spectacles	Safilo Group
Collezione Ottiche e Occhiali	Agordo, Italy	Spectacles	Luxottica
Museo dell'Occhiale	Pieve de Cardore, Italy	Spectacles	Safilo Group
An important collection in a university			
Universiteitsmuseum Utrecht	Utrecht, The Netherlands	General science museum that holds a collection of equipment designed and used by F. C Donders and H. Snellen	Universiteit Utrecht
<p><i>This Table does not include all optometry-related museums. It does not include some excellent ophthalmological museums, notably those in London and San Francisco. Some small but well-known private collections open to the public are also not included. A more comprehensive list can be found on the website of the College of Optometrists UK.¹⁹ See also Michael Aitken's tour of European optometry-related museums for more information.²⁰</i></p>			

museum was housed was demolished and the site is now occupied by a hotel and conference center. The museum's collection went into storage in January 2000. The American Optical Company ceased to exist as a separate trading entity in 2006 following a merger with Zeiss Ophthalmic.²¹

The AO Museum has now been reborn as the Optical Heritage Museum and it includes a room devoted to the AO collection. The new museum holds a collection of over 3,000 items including antique spectacles, ophthalmic lenses, protective eyewear and ophthalmic equipment. It also holds the original Herbert Morton Stoops paintings of early American optometry, prints of which adorned the walls of many 20th century optometric practices. (Figure 1)

The Optical Heritage Museum is open three days a week and has an excellent website.²² Dick Whitney, a long-time employee of American Optical Company, is the driving force behind the present-day museum and its predecessor and is the new museum's executive director. It is governed by a Board of Trustees and has financial support from Zeiss Vision. It merits every support to ensure its longevity.

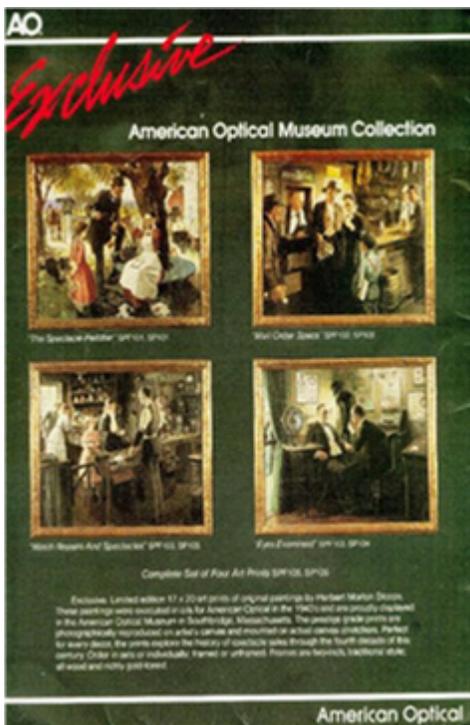


Figure 1: American Optical brochure dated 1986 offering prints of the four paintings by Herbert Morton Stoops (1887-1948) of early American optometry commissioned by the American Optical Company and painted in the 1930s. Optical Heritage Museum, Southbridge, MA.

A Strategy for the Future

Maybe four good general optometry museums are the best the world can hope for. We can take heart in that they are backed-up by some very good corporate optical museums and by private ophthalmic collections as well as scattered holdings in a number of major and smaller public museums.¹⁹

Setting up a new museum is not easy. There is no Aladdin's lamp to rub. There is no burning imperative to create a specialist museum, or for that matter make an existing one better. Most people give little thought to their historical origins and some are adherent to Henry Ford's dictum that "history is bunk."²³ Too few know the adage, "If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree."²⁴

Museums usually have their origin through the enthusiasm of an antiquarian, a generous bequest, the enlightenment of the directors or senior management of an institution, or to demonstrate pride of achievement. They just happen and without these ingredients existing museums can wither or close.

Perhaps the best strategy is to make existing optometry museums very good museums and guard them jealously from decay or dissolution, while keeping an eye open for any opportunity to create new ones.

How to Make Good Museums Better

If the strategy is to make our existing museums better and stronger, we should reflect on how this might be done. Here are some observations, which are simply derived from the expected functions of a museum and the guidelines of museum associations.

1. **Museums are for posterity.** The need for a legally enforceable constitution. The first and foremost goal of a museum is to preserve its collection for posterity. This is an implicit expectation of all museums, small and large. Handing down the evidence of heritage to future generations is the defining attribute of a museum. The longevity of large public museums and the integrity of their collections is normally assured by public support, government backing and enabling legislation, but this is not necessarily so for other kinds of museums.

Collections hosted by large, traditional universities are probably safe because universities typically have a long life and understand the value of history. However, this is not an absolute guarantee: universities are under competitive challenge and are open to disruption from changes in government policy, competition from private tertiary education providers and online learning.²⁵

Moreover, the safety of small, specialized collections in a university may depend on the strength of the discipline group within the university to which the collection relates.

Professional associations usually have a long life but will not necessarily sustain enthusiasm for a museum. A change in management, a merger of associations, budget stringency and even a move of premises may threaten collections within a professional association. Professional associations that value their heritage should take note and guard against these risks.

It has already been noted that corporations most often have a limited life, even great ones that are seemingly an enduring part of society. American Optical is just one example.

What should be done? In order to guard against these contingencies, every museum should have a constitution adopted by the governing body that states the mission of the museum, identifies the trustees and defines how they are appointed and their responsibilities. The first of these responsibilities is preserving their heritage collection for posterity.

Most importantly the constitution must have wind-up clauses that state how the museum's collection is to be preserved in the event of the museum or its governing institution winding-up. The constitution should be in a form that has legal force, for example as a trust fund or by incorporation, in order to thwart a lazy governing body sending the collection to the tip, or a brutal bankruptcy administrator selling the museum's assets.

- 2. Proactive management is essential.** Museums can decay through neglect. Every museum must have proactive management that agrees on a forward plan, has clear policies and reporting lines to managers and trustees. It is imperative that museums have at least one enthusiastic and competent curator, whether salaried or volunteer, and that they are supported by the trustees and appropriately directed and supported by management.
- 3. Preservation and conservation.** Preservation is a core business of all museums. The collection should be protected by good documentation and storage that will guard the collection against the risks of fire, water, extreme temperatures, insects, vermin and radiation damage. Conservation is repairing past damage, which may be beyond the reach of the budget of a small museum other than for a few exceptional objects.

- 4. Research to have something to say.** Research is an expectation of museums, but how much research is done will depend on the resources of the museum. However, there is a minimum because every museum worthy of the name must catalogue its collection and that inevitably requires items to be dated and the creators identified. That research often leads to discovering more about the catalogued items and something of their historical context. When this occurs, the information can be preserved and made accessible to the public in the item catalogue records. The online catalogue of the Kett Museum has fields for recording the results of research done when items are catalogued. Many of the BOA Museum's Online Exhibitions have extensive text that reflects the Museum's in-depth research.²⁶

- 5. Accessible to the public.** Some museums are not open to the public and do not actively seek to engage with the wider community, as is expected of a museum.¹ This may be because of the lack of resources to do so or because the collection is so specialised that there would be very little public interest. Such museums still serve the important purpose of preserving heritage, but it is risky. Closed-shop museums without a public profile are open to the risk of neglect and decay unless they are governed by a committed and long-lived host institution.

Small museums holding specialized collections have a small market and cannot hope for large numbers of visitors, if indeed they have the resources to promote the museum and organize events. The digital era provides a solution.

The internet, email and social media make it easier for museums to become known and accessible to the public. The first step is a website and all five of the general optometry museums in Table 1 have good websites.

Given a website it is not hard to put the museum's catalogue on it and give it a good search function. This makes the catalogue accessible worldwide to anyone with access to the internet. The catalogue can also be opened to Google searches and to aggregating online platforms to widen the public net. Sixty-five percent of visitors to the Kett Museum website are from outside Australia.

The Kett Optometry Museum has an online catalogue open to Google searching, as does the BOA Museum. Recently the Kett Museum became a contributing partner with TROVE, the online aggregating

platform for the National Library of Australia. Each month the online catalogue of the Kett Museum is harvested by TROVE and new material is added to its searchable database. Visits to the Kett Museum's website increased 300% following its partnership with TROVE and opening its catalogue to Google.

Virtual museums are on the way. The BOA museum and the Kett Museum have low-resolution images of objects held in their collections, which accompany the catalogue record, and are discoverable through the online catalogue or by Google search. The Kett Museum has high-resolution digital images of most of its collection, which are available free of charge on request for non-commercial purposes.

More elaborate online galleries are not uncommon in museum websites. The BOA museum is well advanced in presenting highlights from its collection in its "online exhibitions" web pages.²⁶ It has 15 online exhibitions and no doubt more are to come. They are well worth a visit. The Waterloo optometry museum website has picture galleries of highlights in its collection.

The BOA Museum's Web Gateway gives links to 10 other virtual museums related to optometry.¹⁹ These include Dr David Fleishman's voluminous virtual museum "Antique Spectacles and Other Visual Aids".¹⁰

Soon museums will have high-resolution images of their collections online, images that can be rotated and magnified to see details and accompanied by layers of information about the objects and their place in history. Optometry museums should be moving in this direction.

- 6. Promotion.** Make the museum well known. Museums need to promote themselves and in doing so provide education and enjoyment, other functions that are expected of museums.¹

Promotion is also necessary for survival. The little-known museum is at greatest risk of neglect or closure. This is easy to say, but promotion requires resources, something small museums do not usually have in any abundance.

A website is one vehicle for promoting museums but is limited because contact is initiated by the visitor, not the museum. Museums must reach out to their constituencies. The means for this include newsletters, emails and events.

The Kett Museum has long had a small supportive constituency made up of its honorary archivists and donors. Its outward communications to the profession

are one or two pages of news and stories in the quarterly newsletter of its host institution, the Australian College of Optometry, and in the College's annual report. The museum has recently established a "Friends of the Museum" group to which it sends quarterly emails and invites the Friends to one or two events a year.

The Kett Museum has also recently built functional links with the national and six state optometric associations to assist them in preserving the heritage material they hold. Heritage items owned by the association can be added to the Kett Museum's catalogue, while the item itself remains with the association, or the items can be given to the Kett Museum, with credit to the association for making the gift. This process of liaison makes the museum better known.

The Take-Home Message

The general public may not give much thought to history, but they do value its preservation. Travellers enjoy visiting important museums and exploring historic buildings and streetscapes. There is admiration for societies that work to preserve heritage buildings and landscapes. Public outrage often follows the loss of important heritage. However, the public (or a profession or senior managers) cannot be counted on to give much thought to the possibility that heritage may be lost sometime in the future if care is not taken.

Museum trustees and curators have the responsibility to preserve heritage. The work of museum curators involves looking at the past. They and their trustees must also look to the future. Museums are for posterity, for handing on heritage to future generations. Trustees and curators need to give thought to the risk to their collections through managerial neglect or the winding-up of the host organization. The risk can be minimized. This paper reflects on what can be done to achieve that.

Optometry has a 700-year history if the starting point is taken to be the invention of spectacles. The profession of optometry has a 150-year history if its starting point is the publication of Franciscus Donders' book in 1864. Quite a bit of heritage has been accumulated over those periods of time. The profession should guard it zealously.

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