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Developing Archival Exhibitions



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Editor's Note: The idea for a technical leaflet series originated with the New York Caucus of MARAC. The series, as developed by the Caucus, is intended to provide brief, practical information about selected archival topics suitable especially for beginners in the profession.

The series editor welcomes proposals for future publications and comments from readers.

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Developing Archival Exhibitions¹

by Shawn Aubitz and Gail F. Stern

Introduction. You have just been assigned the task of organizing an exhibition based on the collection of your archives. You are a well-trained archivist, but you've never developed an exhibit before. Where do you begin? How do you choose a subject or theme? On what basis do you make a selection of exhibit material? What will you need in order to create an effective display?

With any exhibition, the fundamental educational mission is to make the institution's holdings accessible and available to the public. As historians, curators, and archivists, we have an obligation to educate a broad spectrum of constituents. One important way of fulfilling this obligation is to help them to better understand their cultural heritage through exhibitions, which can provide a visual counterpart to textbooks, scholarly publications, and other writings.

A subcommittee report to the British Records Association in 1949, noting the importance, need, and value of archival materials in exhibitions, stated: "It has been found by experience that the best means of arousing local interest in the preservation of records and demonstrating their educational value is by holding displays of documents, maps, and photographs."²

¹This text is based on a published article entitled, "Archives For Education: Using Archival Materials For Exhibition," by Nancy Allyn, Shawn Aubitz, and Gail F. Stern (*Museologist*, Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, Vol. 50, No. 175, Winter 1987)

²British Records Association, "Exhibition of Documents: Report of a Subcommittee Appointed by the Council," *Archivist* (Fall 1950).

Although the subcommittee's report was directed primarily toward British libraries and archives, today, nearly four decades later, most American conserving institutions, including many museums, continue to realize the educational potential of incorporating archival materials in exhibitions. Broadly defined, such materials may include manuscripts (unpublished documents); organizational records; personal papers such as letters; newspapers; treaties and other government records; and pictorial material such as architectural drawings, cartoons, posters, advertisements, maps, photographs, and calendars. Put simply, archival materials (used here interchangeably with "documents") are sheets of paper with enduring value that have some type of illustration, symbol, or writing on them. They enable us to know something about a historical event, person, or institution.

Virtually all human ideas, activities, customs, and achievements are based on the transmission of information in written form.³ Because they are written in the first person, letters, diaries, and other documents offer immediacy and a sense of participation for the visitor and can explain or provide a context for an object. In approximately 5,000 archival institutions in the United States, manuscript material is available to document the lives of painters, furniture makers, industrialists, poets, immigrants, laborers, or any other occupational, social, or cultural group. By making the right choices, curators can employ photographs, architectural drawings, advertisements, musical scores,

³Nancy Malan, from an outline prepared for an AASLH workshop.

and other materials imaginatively to complement works of art or scientific, technological, or historical materials. Although documents may be perceived as dull and uninteresting, many have extraordinary visual appeal and can even be the sole subject of an exhibition.⁴ The following seven steps provide an overview of the exhibit planning and preparation process.

1. Select the topic or theme. Evaluate the strength of your collections. Do they contain any particularly rare or unusually important historical materials? Are there enough interesting items in any subgroups that together will form a coherent visual presentation? Most likely you will want to exhibit a specific part of your collection, a collection or group of records that your institution is very strong in. Perhaps you have accessioned some new material or you have found some interesting items while doing "holdings maintenance." It would be wise to ask your staff to keep a log book indicating locations (room, row, shelf, box, number), name of collections, items, and a description of such materials for future reference.

Exhibition themes can range from a historical event, celebrating a significant anniversary (e.g., that of the Constitution or Statue of Liberty), to documenting a particular social practice (e.g., Lewis Hine's photographs of child labor). The challenge in each case is to choose

⁴Albert Leisinger, Jr., "The Exhibit of Documents" *American Archivist*, 26, (January 1963): 75-80; William K. Jones, "Exhibit of Documents: Preparation, Display Techniques," Technical Leaflet #75 (Nashville: AASLH, 1974); Gail Farr Casterline, "Exhibiting Archival Material: Many Faceted Manuscripts," *Museum News*, 58 (September/October 1979): 5-52.

materials that have strong documentary value as well as visual impact. Materials also should be exhibitable from a conservation standpoint.

2. Select the exhibit items. Exhibit items must be selected according to the purpose and type of project undertaken. In evaluating manuscripts, legibility, unusual calligraphy, color, embellishments such as seals, or other visual considerations might be a factor in selection. For example, Chief Red Wing's letter of appeal to President Grant in 1876 is a powerful and important historical document in the holdings of the National Archives, but it is difficult to read. While the significance of its message might warrant its inclusion in an exhibit on western expansion, its illegibility might preclude its use. Well-worded exhibit labels are the best way to provide a context for illegible documents that are selected for exhibition.

Letters that must be read all the way through and published materials -- in addition to interpretive labels -- all conspire to overwhelm the viewer with words. For this reason, one carefully selected manuscript exhibited in conjunction with strong visual images can often make a greater impact than a group of documents with accompanying texts. Visitors are also more likely to read the document.

A document can be evaluated by considering how it, by itself, symbolizes an event or individual. This kind of document has a certain identity as an icon. Its visual appearance, written message, and historical importance all combine together with mythology or folklore, or the ideals of an audience, to give the document an

importance that rises above its actual physical presence. The most obvious examples are the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. For most Americans, these documents require little interpretation. The text of the Declaration, because of its flaking ink and heavily screened glass, is practically unreadable, but its symbolic importance is so strong that its visual impact alone leaves a strong impression on the viewer.

If your collections consist exclusively of flat materials, you may wish to augment them by borrowing three-dimensional artifacts from other sources, including museums, historical societies, churches, synagogues, businesses, fraternal groups, private collections or families. A press release to a local newspaper or organizational newsletters, describing your proposed exhibition and the kind of materials you wish to borrow may prove effective in locating visual materials to complement your collections.

Along with three-dimensional artifacts, repositories often use a variety of original documents in their exhibitions. In its recent exhibition, "Italian-American Traditions: Family and Community," the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia exhibited original family photographs with a display of passports, immigration papers, inspection cards, steerage tickets, passenger lists, and other documents to highlight the experiences of Italian immigrants to the Delaware Valley. Visitors came to the exhibit to see themselves, their families, and friends. This direct involvement makes the entire documentary exhibit more immediate and personal. Exhibiting family photos and individual portraits also

reminds the public of the value of such documents and of the need to preserve them.

Because of their visual impact and familiarity to most people, some archival materials provide strong subjects for exhibitions by themselves. One such exhibit at the National Archives, "Uncle Sam Speaks: Broadside and Posters from the National Archives," traced the art of persuasion through 200 years of our history. The exhibition was a popular one, with wide appeal to a broad spectrum of visitors to the nation's capital.

Similarly, the Balch Institute, with the cosponsorship of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, has mounted exhibitions such as "Ethnic Images in Advertising" and "Ethnic Images in the Comics," whose subjects, through their familiarity and graphic quality, have captured public attention and at the same time educated visitors about important issues related to ethnic stereotyping.

3. Consider using facsimiles. Consider the advantages of using facsimiles in exhibitions in place of or to supplement original materials. Sometimes conservation concerns warrant the substitution of facsimiles for original materials. When using reproductions in an exhibit, identify them as such to your audience.

For the "Advertising" and "Comics" shows described above, facsimiles were produced in high-quality Cibachrome to provide durability over the three-year period when the exhibitions traveled to sixteen other

museums and institutions across the United States and Canada.

In addition, for many documents, the rapid technological advances in laser color copiers facilitate true-to-life color photocopies of original documents at a minimum of cost (approximately \$4.00-\$6.00 per 8 1/2" X 14"). Some documents may require other techniques to produce an exhibitable reproduction. Locate a company that provides these services and discuss alternatives.

For the National Archives Mid-Atlantic Region's exhibition, "Courting the Constitution: A History of the U.S. Courts," the staff incorporated color copies of Presidential pardons so that both sides of the documents could be exhibited and read. Thus, visitors can read the text which explains the pardon and the Presidential signature.

However, printing firms with the capability to make laser color copies require that the document be left with them for extended periods of time. Archivists must decide whether to trust documents to the care of others or to give up valuable time to "baby-sit" the document while it is at the printer.

Facsimiles also can be made in order to maximize visual impact. Blow-ups of photographs and manuscripts can be effectively juxtaposed with the original document (archivally matted and mounted) so that visitors can view the "real thing" as well as the enlargement which offers clarity and detail.

At all times the decision to use originals or facsimiles should be based on the following questions: What is the physical condition of the original? Will the exhibition travel or be displayed at a permanent site? What type of environmental and climate controls will be placed at the exhibition site? How secure is the area? And how much access will the public have to the site? How long will the items be exhibited?

4. Develop the preliminary design. A variety of factors influence the design of the exhibition. In addition to the exhibition theme, the use of facsimiles or originals, and climate and security concerns that have already been discussed, other considerations include the exhibit budget and the available exhibit space.

5. Design a cost-effective exhibition. First, decide what to use for documentation and visuals. Then determine how to fit the materials onto your panels and into your exhibition space. A system of reusable panels and moveable display cases would be a wise investment if there is a commitment to a temporary exhibition program. These can be custom-made or purchased ready-made through a variety of sources. There are number of commercially available, preconstructed systems that should be listed in local telephone books under categories such as, "displays", "exhibit builders", and "exhibit fabrication." A useful guide for selecting a panel system is: Lothar P. Witteberg, *Good Show! A Practical Guide for Temporary Exhibitions* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1981). An inexpensive in-house alternative can be created using solid, finished

interior doors (about \$25.00 a door), painted a suitable color or covered with burlap or carpet.⁵

Floor plans and/or three-dimensional models are very helpful in trying to visualize the final exhibit. Using one of the many computer-assisted design software packages, the exhibit can be designed three-dimensionally on the computer screen. Alternatively, a low cost three-dimensional model can be constructed by cutting the exhibition panels and cases to scale from foam board and mounting them on a floor plan drawn to scale on graph paper.

A basic alternative to computer-aided design and to three-dimensional modeling is a simple floor plan drawn on graph paper indicating the locations of panels, cases, and lights, and expected visitor flow. Prepare detailed elevation drawings to scale for each exhibit wall or panel. The panel layouts should reflect the relationship of items to each other as well as visual balance and symmetry. A very useful guide in helping you design your exhibition is Gail F. Casterline, *Archives and Manuscripts: Exhibits* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980).

6. Determine the most effective method of display. Professional framing services tend to be expensive. Consider investing in a metal framing

⁵Other useful references for exhibit fabrication include: Arminta Neal, *Exhibits for the Small Museum* (Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History, 1976) and Neal, *Help! For the Small Museum* (Boulder Colorado: Pruett Publishing Co., 1969).

system (with metal frames, sizes can be altered to fit your specific needs) and a mat cutter. With a little practice anyone can become proficient at cutting mat windows and assembling frames.

As an alternative to framing, exhibit materials can be encapsulated and mounted behind filtered plexi-glass. Mounting supplies such as mylar sleeves and corners, mat board, and tapes, that are readily available from archival supply houses are suitable for exhibit purposes.

7. Vary the visual format.⁶ Use the selected items creatively to produce an exhibit that will be visually entertaining. An effective technique for exhibiting photographs is to juxtapose black-and-whites and color photos of the same or similar subjects. Older black-and-white photos of buildings or neighborhoods, for example, can be exhibited alongside newer, color photos of the same buildings or streets. The older photos serve as documents of the past and the newer ones provide the viewer with a familiar perspective. Sepia-tone photographs (either originals or copies) also provide visual change from black-and-white photos, which tend to have a "documentary" appearance. The inclusion of hand-tinted black-and-white prints, if available, also varies the visual format.

⁶Leisinger. Jones. Gail Farr Casterline, *Archives and Manuscripts: Exhibits*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980); Shawn Aubitz, "Museum Exhibitions in an Archival Environment" (Final paper, Career Intern Development Program, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 1986).

One means of highlighting individual documents, especially photographs of people or buildings, is to mount facsimiles on gaterfoam or masonite and cut them out to produce three-dimensional silhouettes.

Handbills, newsletters, and pamphlets can be used innovatively for visual impact. The focal point for, "The Japanese-American Experience," a Balch Institute exhibition, was a partial reconstruction of a barracks from a Japanese-American relocation camp during World War II. The Institute's designer, Lanny Bergner, made photocopies of handbills and newsletters produced in the camps and tacked them onto the outer walls of the barracks so that visitors could read them and at the same time view them in context.

If a document's legibility is a concern, as in the letter from Chief Red Wing described in section 2, one alternative is to exhibit the document with an accompanying typescript, as well as photographs or prints, to enhance the visual effect of the presentation.

8. Labels. Well-written and visually pleasing labels pull together the exhibit for the audience. Using large, bold type to highlight major themes and smaller type to present additional, more detailed information allows visitors with varying levels of interest and available time to appreciate the content of the exhibit. As with the computer-aided design of exhibits discussed above, there are many software packages on the market that are suited to the preparation of labels. Alternatively, the completed text for the labels can be taken to a printer and typeset. A worthwhile and complete guide to the preparation of labels is *Making*

Exhibit Labels, A Step-by-Step Guide, by Beverly Serrell.

Conclusion. An exhibition encompassing a wide variety of documents is an excellent vehicle for demonstrating that libraries and archival institutions hold interesting cultural, social, and historical records. Archival exhibits also are an effective means of teaching visitors what museums and libraries do and how they do it as well as demonstrating why they must rely on the public for financial assistance.

Suggested Reading

- Allyn, Nancy, Aubitz, Shawn, and Stern, Gail F. "Using Archival Material Effectively in Museum Exhibitions." *American Archivist*, (Summer 1987): 402-404.
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