

January 1980

Archival Exhibits: Considerations and Caveats

Joan Rabins
Wayne State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rabins, Joan, "Archival Exhibits: Considerations and Caveats," *Georgia Archive* 8 no. 2 (1980) .
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol8/iss2/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Archive by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

ARCHIVAL EXHIBITS: CONSIDERATIONS AND CAVEATS

Joan Rabins

One striking cultural development since World War II both here and abroad has been the steady growth in the popularity of what is often termed "exhibit-going." Museum visits are no longer dutiful and infrequent. Rather, museums are struggling to cope with ever-increasing crowds who attend exhibits as a normal part of their social activities.¹ Other institutions, including libraries, historical societies, businesses, and archives and manuscript libraries, find the public responsive even when rather recondite exhibit subjects are chosen. Because of this favorable climate, agencies for which exhibits are not a primary function must now decide whether or not to embark on such a program.

Archival institutions which face this question must constantly examine their priorities and resources to determine whether, and to what extent, they should venture into this area. This decision must take into account not only the relevance of a proposed exhibit to the institution's programs but also the degree to which the exhibition of archival materials may affect their safety and long-term physical condition. An agency which does begin an exhibit program must plan carefully not only for the display area and the exhibit itself but also for the scheduling and publicity which will maximize the exhibit's effectiveness.

Most archival administrators begin an exhibit program in order to publicize the institution's resources. Through exhibits an archive can dramatize the strong points of its particular collection and thus create a clear identity to which the general public as well as researchers can relate. Even in a university setting,

according to Judith Cushman, it is not uncommon for scholars on the faculty to become aware of the research potential of an archival collection only as the result of an exhibit.²

Albert H. Leisinger, Jr., speaking in 1961, emphasized a different reason for undertaking an exhibit program: the obligation to make "our institutions centers of popular education,"³ or, as the catchword of the time might have put it, "relevant." Since that time there has been increasing pressure on all institutions, both government and private, to open themselves as much as possible to the public and to relinquish any elitist pretensions. To the majority of the public, the word "archives" still has a vaguely dry and forbidding sound, and repositories can use exhibits to persuade the public to venture into the archives and to clarify the place of archives in the educational and intellectual structure. It is from such occasional impressions that the average citizen creates his image of the archives and its function in the community.⁴

In the same way, exhibits enable the archives to function as part of the broader intellectual and cultural community and of the university or cultural complex of which it is a part. It is fitting that the archives draw upon its own unique resources to contribute to the richness of the cultural experience available to the total community. One of the benefits for the archives is that such events provide natural opportunities for interaction with neighboring institutions or even those at some distance from which supplementary materials can be borrowed.

During the bicentennial year the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, a part of Wayne State University and located in a county named for Wayne, mounted an exhibit which exemplified such interaction. This exhibit focused on Anthony Wayne's 1796 visit as a representative of the United States government to accept the transfer of Detroit and Michigan from British rule. A number of institutions in the area, including the

Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, the Michigan State Archives, the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University, and the William L. Clements Library of the University of Michigan, contributed material to the exhibit, making it truly a community undertaking.⁵ The broad public interest in the exhibit testified to the soundness of the choice of theme.

Even archivists who are wary of seeking publicity must confront the economic realities of the purely research institutions in today's world. No matter how well-endowed at the outset, there are few collections which have not been compelled to solicit funding merely to maintain their operations. Scholars' use of archives is increasing steadily, and this increased usage adds to the pressure on the archives to secure more funding.⁶ Government or private support is essential to continued archival development, and a program of stimulating exhibitions which generates publicity and attention is an effective and relatively painless way to keep the presence and importance of the archives before an influential segment of the community.⁷

Archives must also appeal to potential donors of collections of papers and manuscripts. An attractive exhibit provides an opportunity to make a favorable impression on an individual who owns a valuable collection, one whose own personal papers would complement the holdings of the archives, or the decision-makers in organizations whose records the repository seeks. Exhibits are also occasionally used to announce recent acquisitions and give recognition to donors.

One of the side benefits of an exhibits program is that it provides an outlet for the research talents and creative impulses of the staff. Those familiar with the holdings of the archives are uniquely qualified to select and research topics which show the collection to advantage. Tracking down and securing suitable supplementary materials can be an interesting challenge to those creating the exhibit, and the opportunity for

public recognition can contribute immeasurably to staff morale.

For these and other reasons many archives regard exhibitions as an extremely important part of their role. The National Archives, for example, feels an obligation "to place before the general public selected documents that have commemorative interest, exemplifying the traditions and ideals of the Nation, or serve . . . to dramatize or vivify important events and phases of its history."⁸ Presidential libraries devote part of their space to permanent exhibits on the life of the president. These exhibits, which memorialize the president and educate the public about his career and the history of his time, attract a large audience and are often strong tourist attractions. Naturally, such exhibits contribute considerably to the nationwide reputation of the institution.

An article in 1978 by a member of the staff of the Folger Shakespeare Library raises some of the arguments against undertaking extensive exhibits.⁹ These issues deserve serious consideration. The archivist's primary charge is to care for those materials worthy of preservation. It is surely a case of misplaced zeal if the materials are permanently damaged in the effort to enhance the prestige of the institution. Even with the precautions available today to protect papers and bindings from damage by light, improper humidity levels, and dust, the conditions of display cannot replicate the more ideal environment of the stacks or reading room; and there can be no question that the prolonged stress of exhibition takes its toll on original materials. Moreover, there is always the very real danger of theft or vandalism during an exhibit even when security personnel are present.¹⁰

To avoid these pitfalls the imaginative curator can often convey the authentic flavor and impact of the original piece of paper without actually putting it on display. There are numerous processes available today to reproduce a document, possibly enlarging it

and using color which can impart historic atmosphere. Blowups using such techniques often make excellent backdrops for exhibits of three-dimensional objects which are used to amplify the theme of the exhibit. Or, in some instances, a document can be selected of which the archives has more than one copy and which is therefore expendable.

There are situations in which substitution would vitiate the impact of the exhibit, and in these instances the archivist must weigh the advantages of exhibiting against the disadvantages, balancing responsibility to the researcher and the donor against the obligation to serve the public at large.¹¹ Naturally, the more rare and valuable the document, the more reluctant the archivist will be to use it for display for any prolonged time. If the decision is made to use originals for display, every precaution available through today's technology should be called upon to preserve the document in the condition it was before being shown.

The demand which exhibitions make on staff time and the cost involved might also dissuade an archives from beginning an exhibition program. If such a program would jeopardize the quality of service to users, an archives would be wise to forgo the ancillary benefits of exhibiting in favor of maintaining its standards as a repository.

Once the decision to exhibit has been made, the first practical consideration is the selection of the display area. Newer facilities generally include a specific exhibit space in their plans, but lack of a designated area for exhibits need not be a deterrent. It is often possible to convert an area into display space or have it serve a dual function.

The selection of appropriate themes for exhibits is of paramount importance. Topics should be selected on the basis of their timeliness, suitability to the particular collection, and overall appropriateness to

the goals of the institution's exhibit policies as well as their attractiveness to the public. The more an institution can utilize its own resources, the more successful the exhibit will be in projecting the intrinsic character of that institution.

An intangible but vital factor in the success of an exhibit is its aesthetic impact. Though laudable in every other respect, an exhibit which does not appeal to the eye will not achieve its aim. The best exhibits have an aesthetic cohesiveness of color and style, often achieved by a well-designed overall motif, a signature identified in the viewer's mind with the theme. Exhibit information must be translated into forms which will capture the attention of the viewer, and the message must be imparted by visual symbols rather than long, detailed captions. Often it is wise to highlight only a small portion of a manuscript, that sentence or two which sums up the whole. Care also must be taken not to overtax the patience of the viewer. A few arresting, well-chosen objects are preferable to cases crowded with redundant examples.

Another major element in the success of a program of exhibits is careful and realistic scheduling based on the budget and staff size of an institution. It is better to aim for a few notable exhibitions rather than an overly busy schedule of mediocre or amateurish attempts. Not every exhibit on a schedule can be a magnum opus. For the sake of the staff as well as the public, it is advisable to alternate major efforts with smaller ones.

Sufficient lead time for each exhibit is vital.¹² Research, arrangements which must be made with cooperating institutions, printing, and construction require considerable time, and allowance also must be made for the inevitable delays which can wreak havoc with a tight schedule. Time must also be allotted in the schedule for dismantling each exhibit and returning borrowed items. Thus the time scheduled between shows

must realistically reflect the capabilities of the staff.

An exhibit schedule should also be flexible enough to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities for staging exhibits--visits by dignitaries, local events, anniversaries. Nor should an archives be committed to taking down an exhibit before it has lost its public appeal. A good schedule also takes into account holidays and vacation seasons which, particularly in a university community, can have a marked effect on attendance and staffing.

Once a schedule is settled, the full benefit can be derived from each exhibit by planning as many events as possible to tie in with it. A reception for the exhibit opening, for example, creates excitement and often assures press coverage. An exhibit is also a natural opportunity to set up symposia and lectures on related topics. Or the archives can reverse the process, planning an exhibit to coincide with an anniversary or talks being given either at the archives or at a neighboring institution.

The traffic flow through most archives is not so great that most repositories can rely on attracting exhibit viewers from among casual passersby as can a library or museum. Only by industriously generating publicity can an archives draw enough people to justify the effort and expense of an exhibit program. To interest the maximum number of people in an exhibit, it is essential to utilize the greatest variety of means available to reach the potential audience.

An effective publicity program begins with an up-to-date list of sources to be routinely informed of all events. Many newspapers and radio stations carry a weekly calendar of events, and concise, well-written press releases can sometimes lead to a mention in the columns of local papers. Media may also decide to provide coverage of newsworthy individuals who visit the exhibit, and this can reach an enormous audience.

An archives newsletter is a natural vehicle for articles and photographs of exhibits and related events. An archives volunteer "friends" group can provide enthusiastic support and help to interest others. The archives which is part of a university complex can utilize the various official and student publications; and, when appropriate, notices should go out to academic and trade journals.

An attractive, well-written publication providing background information should accompany the exhibit. Such a pamphlet, designed with taste and imagination, contributes to the impact of the exhibit and provides a convenient way to acknowledge those who contributed work, funds, or materials for the show. Extra copies can be used in mailings to attract an audience and sent afterwards to those interested in the archives as evidence of its activities.

A more elaborate catalog providing information to supplement the captions in the cases, although more costly to write and print, has the virtue of being salable. In many instances such a catalog can be sold long after the exhibit has closed and frequently will even become a profit-maker for the institution.¹³ This type of publication also has a certain prestige value and can be used to indicate the quality of an archives' exhibit program to a person or institution from which the archives seeks to borrow material for a future show. One historical society prepares carefully researched catalogs as a service to teachers who lead the numerous school groups to which the society's exhibits cater.¹⁴

Detailed record keeping during and after each exhibit provides a reservoir of expertise for the staff. Taking photographs of each case and recording all texts and captions facilitate the re-creation of the same exhibit at some future date with a minimum of effort. Carefully itemized accounts help with future budgeting. Mailing lists should be kept current and samples should be kept of all press releases and publications. Detailed plans of any special construction should be kept

in case a similar need arises in the future.

The final step in closing the book on an exhibit should be a detailed, critical report by the exhibit staff. Other members of the staff and selected viewers should be encouraged to contribute frank evaluations and suggestions on ways to improve the exhibit. This type of feedback is important to educate the staff and maintain a high standard for exhibits which will be a credit to the archives.

At this point many archives amortize the cost of an exhibit by sending their exhibits out on the road. Traveling exhibitions publicize the archives to a much wider audience and foster good relations with borrowing institutions. Preparing a touring exhibit requires considerable extra work and special staff expertise, however, and arranging for periodic transfer and supervising needed repairs consume additional staff time.¹⁵

The decision to tour an exhibit should be made before design and construction of the exhibit begin. Then display panels and cases can be used which can be packed into shipping crates without being disassembled. These insure greater safety in shipping and are economical both in terms of material cost and staff time. Once an exhibit is away from the supervision of those who designed it, there is an increased chance of damage or theft; and therefore only reproductions should be used for traveling exhibits.

Rather than originating traveling exhibits, most archival institutions would probably be more interested in using the traveling exhibits mounted by a great number of museums, government agencies, industrial firms, and other organizations. One of the largest and best-known collections is the SITES (Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Service) program which currently offers almost two hundred exhibits on a wide variety of subjects.¹⁶ The fees charged vary and are based on the size and estimated value of the exhibit. SITES specifies the level of security which must be provided by

the borrowing institution as part of the agreement and rules regarding shipping, damages, insurance, and cancellation penalties. In general, their regulations are fairly typical of those which would be imposed by any other supplier of traveling exhibits.

Most archives draw upon traveling exhibits to fill out their exhibit schedules. This lightens the load on personnel who, in the typical archives, have duties other than those connected with exhibits. Most report favorably on their experiences with borrowed exhibits. The very fact that an exhibit emanates from another source means that it will be different in appearance and approach and will give variety to the archives exhibit program.

Any exhibit must be created with an eye to those factors which will insure success and bring prestige to the repository. An effective exhibit should be attractive to the prospective audience, done in a professional manner with a high level of visual appeal and aesthetic sophistication, and related to the noteworthy characteristics of the collection. Final success depends on the care which is given to publicity and scheduling and the extent to which the staff is able to build on past experience to steadily improve their offerings. If sufficient attention is devoted to these problems, an exhibit program can become the most effective means for an archives to promote its identity and mission.

There are many reasons which impel an archives or manuscript library to incorporate exhibits into its programs. Some institutions, because of the nature of their holdings or financial or staff limitations, will decline to enter this area. For those who do, the benefits which accrue to the institution are numerous and tangible.

NOTES

¹The Belmont Report quoted in Museums, Imagination and Education (Paris: UNESCO, 1973), p. 91.

²Judith Cushman, "Creating and Managing an Exhibit Program," The Midwestern Archivist 1 (1975): 28.

³Albert H. Leisinger, Jr., "The Exhibit of Documents," American Archivist 26 (January 1963): 77.

⁴Kenneth W. Duckett, Modern Manuscripts (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), pp. 257-58.

⁵Information on the exhibit furnished by Margery Long, Audio Visual Curator, who is also responsible for exhibits.

⁶"Publicity for Records," Archives 8 (April 1968): 113.

⁷L. A. Kenney, "Public Relations in the College Library," College and Research Libraries 25 (July 1964): 263.

⁸Leisinger, "Exhibit."

⁹Sandra Powers, "Why Exhibit?: The Risks Versus the Benefits," American Archivist 41 (July 1978): 297-306.

¹⁰Ibid. Very often the greatest danger of theft exists when an exhibit is being assembled and dismantled. For this reason most authorities advise completing these tasks outside public visiting hours so that control can be maintained over the number of people who have access to the objects on display. Duckett, Manuscripts, pp. 253-54.

¹¹Powers, "Why Exhibit?," p. 303.

¹²Ideally, the exhibit should be in place one week before the official opening to permit those responsible to view it as a whole and make any alterations necessary to achieve its maximum effect.

¹³P. William Filby, "Techniques of Exhibitions," The 1968 A. B. Bookman's Yearbook, Part Two: The Old and the New (Newark, N.J.: Bookman's Weekly, 1968), p. 9.

¹⁴Lucille Kane, "The Exhibition of Manuscripts at the Minnesota Historical Society," American Archivist 15 (January 1952): 40.

¹⁵Telephone interview with Betty Odle, Exhibit Designer, Cranbrook Academy, West Bloomfield, Michigan, October 17, 1978.

¹⁶Letter, November 4, 1978, from Mary Lou Cocker, Registrar for Scheduling, SITES, Washington, D.C.