

# On the Display of Archives

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*This paper is substantially the text of a talk given to the NSW Chapter of the Australian Society of Archivists in November 1982. Its nature was not to provide an instant panacea to all the difficulties and problems associated with mounting exhibitions of archive material nor to examine all the problems. (Important areas such as lighting, conservation, and audio-visual usage were omitted, principally because of the extent of written works covering these fields). Rather it was intended to briefly point to three areas, planning, labelling and design, where some attention, often with little effort, could substantially improve an exhibition.*

## **Planning**

It is quite obvious that planning should be the first step in an exhibition. However, the value of extensive planning, and particularly forming this into a written proposal, is often not realised. The written form becomes a guide not only to the exhibition designer but to others involved with the display. It can give them a sense of purpose and as well can be the basis for budgets and later submissions, either to obtain permission to stage the exhibition, to obtain documents from other institutions or to obtain financial backing.

The planning process can be broken down into a series of steps.

- (1) *Selecting the Theme or Topic.* Although it should seem an obvious point, many exhibitions do not have one. Perhaps in such cases people have had a jumble of items and have not tried to see a common identifying link between them all. In these instances the result is usually a "jumble sale" appearance which is too often seen in small country museums. Visitors, confronted with this confusion react by wandering, and if they have entered the exhibition to see a particular topic, the confusion repels them and they leave. One cannot expect to communicate anything other than by chance in this situation.

Once a topic has been chosen, the labelling of the exhibition should then be planned so that people viewing know what it is. Beware of being too artistic in the choice of names. For example "The Land of the Midnight Sun", although understood by some, cannot be

presumed to be understood by all. The simple solution is to use the title "Finland — The Land of the Midnight Sun".

Finally, when selecting the topic, do not be afraid to attempt to deal with what may seem boring. For instance, the economic problems of building the local town hall, although superficially dull, may be quite enlivened when the conflicts, insults etc. involved in the project are revealed. The reverse, of course, can also be true. What may seem an interesting topic can, either through poor exhibition or lack of material, be shown in a thoroughly boring manner.

This choice of how to present the topic is the second planning decision.

- (2) *Presentation or the Intent of the Exhibition.* A topic may be presented in different ways depending on the interest of the exhibitor. Approaches such as the didactic, thematic, chronological, aesthetic may be adopted as may mixtures of these. Within such approaches the type of emphasis must again be established. In the town hall example, for instance, if a thematic approach was chosen one could emphasise the economic and historical aspects of how, as growth occurred in a community, a demand arose for a grandiose monument to civic pride. The thematic approach could also use the negative side to show how a decision to build the town hall, taken in a period of economic growth, later placed a costly burden on the community. Alternatively, a purely aesthetic approach may involve showing the magnificence of the design through the architect's plans and sketch drawing.

For any topic the possible emphasis is probably unlimited, but must necessarily be strongly evident in the final exhibition. This is not often achieved if the old saying that "the objects tell the story" is assumed. When a series of old letters is shown referring to some event, although the archivist may "see" from reading them that a story exists, the casual visitor, often too lazy or preoccupied with other thoughts, may merely "see" a nostalgic collection of old letters and note perhaps how nicely or strangely people wrote in those days. Labels directing people's attention to the story and the selective use of emphasis on the letters themselves could enlighten the visitor as to the reason for the exhibition.

This need to guide visitors through the exhibition's theme with the use of well written labels is crucial and must be well planned.

- (3) *Audience.* The next planning step is to ask what sort of audience the display will be designed for. Although this may not be necessary if the exhibition is for the general public, in some instances the target audience may be more specific, for example schoolchildren, the handicapped, tourists, etc.

A decision to tailor the exhibition towards a specific group may change the exhibit materials and the number and type of labels. For a general audience designers usually set the educational level of labels at about the 15 year mark.

- (4) *Research.* Initial research may have been conducted to define the topic of the exhibition. However, at this point it is necessary to closely study the theme chosen for the display as a precursor to the choice of objects.

In depth research of the theme and the way it is to be approached may lead to a reassessment of initial plans, but should allow the next step, the selection of appropriate objects, to proceed.

- (5) *Location and Selection of Material.* In many cases archivists would select exhibition topics based on their archives' own holdings. In other instances the topic may be such that the material or part of it is to come from elsewhere. It should be remembered that if the material is not from the archivist's own institution more time and money must be allowed to view the objects before selection, arrange for their loan, insurance, transport and return.

The objects that could be used in the exhibition should initially be listed at the research stage of planning. Following this, careful examination and selection should result in the final choice of the objects to be used.

This is an easy statement to make, but the choices the archivist makes at this stage will be crucial to the outcome of the display. Thus a number of simple criteria can be used to help select the documents:

- (a) Is a document so fragile and damaged that it is unintelligible? In this case it is of no use in telling the story, but may be used to evoke an emotional response from the visitor, eg a bloodstained letter from a soldier.
- (b) Is a document so fragile that it cannot be displayed without damaging it? In this case it should not be used unless it has undergone conservation, or a reproduction is made for exhibition in place of the original. These processes may be expensive.
- (c) The materials chosen should be related to each other. A fine object not related to the topic should be excluded.
- (d) There should not be too few or too many objects. With too few objects more labels are needed to explain the theme. When too many objects are used (especially with documents) the display becomes cluttered, overwhelming, difficult to follow and consequently boring. The criterion should be that enough objects are chosen to adequately explain the exhibition. One should not attempt to cover a subject entirely; this is better accomplished in a book.
- (e) Be careful when selecting old handwritten papers. People nowadays

are not used to reading cross-hatched writing, medieval script or even many forms of running writing. Schoolchildren since the early 1960s have been taught, and are used to, a script called modified cursive and find other types difficult to read. Except where a document is used for aesthetic or emotional purposes, it may be best to provide a transcript of the relevant section next to the original.

- (f) It is often best not to use an entire document even with an arrow to guide people to the point to begin reading. Rather reproduce the piece needed for the exhibition or use a window to mask out the unnecessary parts.
- (g) To create an interesting effect try to mix the type of materials chosen, eg letters, typescript, telegrams, scrapbooks, diaries, cartoons, maps, etc.

Once the objects have been selected the initial planning processes, or, if you prefer, the theoretical processes, give way then to the practical decisions of choosing the best location, designing the exhibition, labels and catalogues, arranging transport and insurances, and inviting people to the opening etc. However, all these later operations and the ultimate effect of the exhibition are solely dependent on how the designer planned the first steps — without careful decisions being taken then, as mentioned previously, the display usually finishes up lacking direction and failing to explain why it was shown.

However two of these late processes, design and labelling, deserve some attention since they can also materially affect the appearance and success of the exhibition.

### **Layout and Design**

The dilemma in exhibiting archive material is that the objects, ie the papers, etc, are often visually boring due to the sameness in their size and colour. As well, many archival displays, because of the way information exists in the objects (written or printed words), require the visitor to read not only labels but objects as well.

The essence of designing an archival exhibition is to avoid these problems and to interest and excite the visitor into wanting to read what you have put on display. There are a number of simple inexpensive ways of doing this.

- (a) Try to create an interesting effect by mixing the type of materials chosen for the exhibition.
- (b) Use size and colour in the exhibition. Documents of different sizes and colours should be chosen where possible. As well, the background colour of the display should be chosen to highlight the documents. Often strong and rich colours may be used successfully (eg golds, reds, greens, etc) both for the backgrounds or for colouring window mounts

or sections of reproductions for emphasis. Care should be taken that the backgrounds are not too shiny and that the contrast between object and background is not too great since these factors can reduce visual acuity, making detail more difficult to see.

- (c) Use texture in the design. A textured background like a coloured felt contrasts well with the flat even “smoothness” of documents and shows them to advantage. Since the eye is attracted to the shiniest or brightest point in the visual field, when darker textured background is used it should serve to concentrate the visitor’s attention on the papers.
- (d) The creative use of light can, in combination with points (b) and (c) highlight their effects.
- (e) The flat visual effect of an archival display can be dispelled by not laying all documents flat against the background. Some should be raised on simple perspex or felt covered stands or boxes for effect or emphasis. Some documents can be placed at angles to one another to reduce the linear effect produced by rows of similar sized papers.
- (f) To reduce the effect of having too much two dimensional material in the display, consider using a small number of three dimensional objects. These could either relate directly to the subject or to its time period. The most usual instance of this occurring is when an exhibition involves a person, his or her memorabilia are often exhibited.
- (g) Some of the problems of enticing visitors to read documents can be overcome if the papers are displayed with illustrations or scenes of the events or period described. The visitor may then want to know more about the images and be led to read the papers. Maps, photographs or enlarged drawings or graphics from illustrated magazines of the time are useful for this.

These visual cues may also be used to introduce an exhibition or to lead people through it.

- (h) Don’t expect visitors to read large sections of documents. Use windows or arrows or reproduced sections of papers to emphasise what is important. As mentioned earlier, don’t expect people to read script they may find difficult. Give transcripts of difficult to read passages or use other documents.

Generally, when a display is designed for more than aesthetic purposes the use of reproduced material becomes important for telling the story clearly.

Having made these points about design and layout, what must be remembered above all is that the exhibition design is meant to enhance the display, not to overpower it.

## Labels

Exhibitions seem often to have either too many labels containing excessive information or too few with inadequate information. The quality and use of labels affects the quality of the entire display. They should show the visitor the significance of the materials, establish the context in which they are being presented and above all, explain the story of the exhibition, leading the visitor through the display and expanding the subject to its conclusion.

To do such things some time and effort should be spent on writing the labels and in assessing what has been said. It is surprising how obvious or ridiculous some labels can seem, even to the people who wrote them, when the exhibition is complete.

The first and most important label is the display's title. This should tell the visitor what it is about. It may very well have a cryptic main heading, but a few smaller lines after it should explain the nature of the exhibition. This "tiered" system of labelling is a preferred way to present differing levels of information for different types of visitors. Usually a larger faced main heading is followed by a few short lines of slightly smaller faced explanation. Should more detail be necessary it can be supplied in another smaller faced tier under the first two. The system should allow a browsing visitor to extract the information needed to understand the display from the first two groups, while a person with more time or more interest may go on to read the third more detailed description.

This particular system is in fact similar to the way newspapers present stories. Interestingly, people are familiar with this sort of format and find it easy to read. Likewise, we find serifed upper and lower case script in short lines easier to read than long lines all with capitals.

A number of generalisations may be made for the labels:

- labels should be written so as to link objects and show the theme of the exhibition.
- they should not be too academic, in fact it is suggested that they should be written for an average educational age of about fifteen. They should avoid polysyllabic words and unusual sentence constructions.
- they should not state what is obvious, eg "a letter written by John Smith 1890" is obvious and perhaps better written as "1890 — John Smith complains to his father about the appalling conditions on board his ship."
- they should be kept as short as possible, eg in the multi-tier label, the second tier should be kept to no more than 75-100 words, the first tier to 20 or less.
- they should not be set in long lines; short lines are preferable.

- they should not use all capitals; upper and lower case with a script with a serif is better. The size to be used is very much up to the designer's own choice, but for a main heading 40-75mm letters are best, while no script should be smaller than 2.7mm or 12 point.
- the letters used should be clear and preferably not hand written. For the larger faces a good range of cheap cork, vinyl, polystyrene and Letraset letters are available, while for small script one can use a good electric typewriter with white or coloured paper. The advantage of typewritten work is that it can be blown up onto any colour of paper using an enlarging photostat. Alternatively, photographic (eg Artiscope) reproduction gives a good finish.
- labels should be mounted onto cards or onto one of the light polystyrene boards so as they do not twist or roll up while on exhibition.

There is a multitude of ways of extending the ideas put forward in this paper and it is recommended that those interested in this field should read Brian Bertram's book *Display Technology for Small Museums* (Museums Association of Australia [NSW Branch], Sydney, 1981) for a good comprehensive introduction to exhibits. It is easily within the ability of everyone to create a good exhibit. What is needed is thought and planning which make the difference between the interesting and the boring.