

Exhibition Catalogs

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THE purpose of this article is to suggest methods of procedure for compiling exhibition catalogs, on the basis of experience at the Library of Congress in publishing its series of State exhibit catalogs. Persons in museums, libraries, and historical societies who are doing exhibit work are aware of the difficulties of attempting to issue catalogs that will be popular and at the same time be in keeping with the dignity of the institution and have appeal to the scholar and the specialist.

Exhibition catalogs run the gamut from the simplest list printed on a folded sheet to the elaborate volume containing facsimiles and illustrations in color. All are planned to reach certain audiences, such as bibliophiles, collectors of autographs, students of State and local history, and just average people. They have various reasons for being, and in some cases the purpose is simply to provide the visitor with a chronological list that can be used in looking at the items displayed. Others are designed for study or to stimulate a wider knowledge of the subject of the exhibit. Such publications are an integral part of the exhibition and provide in fact another dimension to the effectiveness of the presentation, as they are designed to reach a potentially larger audience outside the exhibition hall.

The Library's series of State exhibits began in 1945, with the centennial of the admission of Florida to the Union. So successful was this exhibit that it inspired a plan for similar ones for the rest of the States, and there have been 17 to date, all on occasions of anniversaries in the histories of the States. The Florida catalog was compiled primarily as a record of the materials used in the exhibit and without any preconceived notion or plan of what such a catalog should be. But as the series progressed, each exhibit presented a challenge to develop a type of publication that would be reasonably popular, readable, and yet accurate in bibliographical detail and presentable and artistic from the viewpoint of typography and design.

Through conference and discussion among members of the Library staff, aided by comments from viewers of the exhibits and

from readers and users of the catalogs, the Library has gradually evolved a method of assembling such exhibits and of compiling the catalogs.

THE NATURE OF THE CATALOGS

From the beginning, much attention and effort has been given to making the booklets distinguished in appearance, and each one has been produced with a stamp of individuality and character that is expressive of the particular State. Although there is no stereotyped formula for the preparation of the art work and text, there is some uniformity in organization of contents, format, and printing. The catalogs, after considerable alteration and experimentation, have been standardized to include in each (in addition to descriptions of the pieces exhibited) a frontispiece symbolizing the State, a table of contents arranged according to cases and panels, a table of symbols and abbreviations, bibliographical notes, lists of illustrations and photographic negatives for pieces in the exhibit, and an index. Most of the catalogs also contain addresses delivered at the opening of the exhibit by Members of Congress and distinguished authorities on the history of the States.

A fine grade of rag antique laid paper is used for the text and a coated glossy stock is used for illustrations. Our experience at the Government Printing Office has been that letterpress produces the best job and is the most economical within the framework of our operations. Because pictures add considerably to the popular appeal, careful attention is given to the selection of illustrations and to the symbolic cover design. On the average, 30 full-page illustrations printed from photoengraved plates are distributed in groups throughout the booklet. The text is printed in two columns and attention is given to selection and arrangement of types that give the page an inviting appearance. Entry headings are in capitals and titles of books and pamphlets are in italics. In working out the typographical details there is close cooperation with the Division of Typography and Design of the Government Printing Office.

SCHEDULE AND PREPARATION

The actual work of getting out a catalog in time to distribute at the opening ceremony is fraught with many problems, as everyone knows who has had such an experience. At the Library, in anticipation of the rigid printing schedule and to give time for extended reading and research, work is commenced 6 months ahead of the opening date. A minimum of 60 days is allowed for

the printer after the date of submission of copy. With such a schedule it is necessary that the exhibit be planned case by case in advance and that the materials be precisely located. This requires a thoughtful examination of materials selected and the keeping of detailed records.

A floor plan is drawn to show the proposed number and arrangement of cases and panels. The size of the exhibition is based in part upon the amount of space and number of cases available and in part on the wealth and quality of material at hand. A limit, however, in the number of entries is established, of about 150 historical pieces and 75 photographs illustrating the contemporary life of the State. Our experience in observing visitor reaction is that interest and comprehension tend to drop if the exhibit is any larger.

A card file is built up as the items are chosen, and the entries can be arranged and rearranged with complete flexibility. Information is recorded on cards that will be useful in drafting captions or entries, including detailed descriptions of books, manuscripts and maps, photographs, prints and other classes of materials, quotations and such pertinent comments as the page at which a volume is to be opened. The entries are topically arranged under such themes as: "Early Exploration," "Dividing the Land," "Pioneer Life," "Statehood Attained," so that the exhibition can be visualized in its eventual arrangement in the gallery. A final review of all of the selections by the staff results in eliminations and improvements and agreement on what will be shown.

After these steps have been taken, draft captions are prepared. The editorial work is done with careful attention to uniformity in style, which is difficult to achieve at times because the information used is gathered from diverse sources. The dates and titles that appear on binders, folders, and jackets are painstakingly checked with the pieces to eliminate misinformation. Each entry has these elements: a headline, a date, a physical description of the piece, a designation of its location in a record group or collection, a paragraph regarding its significance, its provenance if that is of interest, and occasionally a significant or vivid quotation. The writing of the copy is done in a popular style to serve the widest interest and most instructive use — but not in the glamorous style of the Sunday supplement or the promotional literature of the publisher or the Chamber of Commerce.

Experience in compiling and publishing exhibition catalogs furnishes suggestions that might serve to guide others. Consideration

should be given to the audience to be reached. There is certainly a need for popular publications that are instructive as well as scholarly. Experiments should be made to determine what the form and style of entries should be for each category of material such as books, prints, maps, and manuscripts. Attention should be given to obtaining typography and design that is inviting and interesting because it does not cost much more than ordinary work. The preparation at all stages should not be done in haste; therefore a schedule with the printer should be worked out in advance, allowing sufficient time.

THE VALUE OF EXHIBITION CATALOGS

The State exhibition catalogs serve as a medium for diffusing information. They not only provide a permanent record of what was displayed; they also are used by the Library for reference purposes in the field of Americana. They are being used increasingly in the States by teachers in the field of social science. The catalogs are selective guides to the literature and resources pertaining to the States, in the Library and the National Archives and sometimes in other Federal agencies, and so reflect the wealth as well as the deficiencies in the Federal records and collections. The catalogs provide a selective bibliography for each of the States and as more are published their usefulness will be cumulative.

The materials described are often brought together from scattered and sometimes little known collections, and thus many pieces are shown to the public for the first time. The catalogs have been the means of pointing out collections of State historical materials to curators of museums. For example, the Wisconsin Historical Society had photocopies made of extensive collections relating to the fur trade and to Indians, which the Society had not known about before the publication of the Wisconsin catalog. In the usual course it is doubtful that existence of some of the items described would have come to public notice except through the exhibition. The diligent search for exhibitable material among collections often turns up surprising items. With an eye to the popular appeal of showpieces the searcher is an opportunist in taking advantage of the situation. Pictorial resources such as on-the-spot sketches and plans of fortifications, scattered through manuscript collections, are rarely cataloged by depositories.

Though the State catalogs are prepared for general and popular use, they make contributions to research in various ways. Rare pamphlets and books in the Library's general collections are fre-

quently brought to the attention of the chief of the Rare Books Division and are subsequently transferred to that division. An exhibit was arranged in observance of the District of Columbia sesquicentennial of the establishment of the permanent seat of the Government, which was treated in the same way as one of the State exhibitions. It brought together a wealth of pictorial material that had not previously appeared in books or lists, including a number of early original drawings of the Capitol and early water color paintings of scenes in Washington and Georgetown. A re-examination of the Capitol drawings revealed that the attributions did not agree with those of competent authorities as published in recent articles. The descriptive captions were written in the light of this research. This exhibit was virtually a selected and annotated iconography of Washington before 1850.

BYPRODUCTS

Byproducts or extensions of the State exhibit program were the loans of the California centennial and Ohio sesquicentennial exhibits, under special security conditions, to responsible agencies in those States. At one of the Ohio colleges the exhibition and the catalogs were intensively used by classes. The instructor commented:

Not only is it illustrative of various aspects of local, state, regional, national, and even international history but it has given me unparalleled opportunity to show to my students the "stuff" from which history is constructed and to explain some of its methodology. Otherwise this sort of thing is something to which the average student would never be exposed.

A college has been exploring the possibility of producing filmstrips for use in schools based upon the exhibition for the centennial of the Territories of Kansas and Nebraska. If additional funds and staff were available, sets of panels could be reproduced for use in social science studies. There would be many advantages and savings in such projects, in utilization of the basic work and materials that have been prepared. One encouraging sign of recognition in this direction is the moral and financial support given by the Kansas Territorial Centennial Committee and the Nebraska Territorial Commission in the publication of the Library's catalog of the Kansas and Nebraska Territories centennial exhibition.

The Washington State Historical Society and other societies have independently undertaken their own projects of circulating displays based upon selections from the catalogs. They have

ordered photo-enlargements of items in the exhibitions and have used photostatic copies of the entries in the catalogs for captions.

The interest in acquisition of photoreproductions is not confined merely to historical societies; orders are placed by many organizations and individuals following the distribution of the catalogs. Our attention is called frequently to inquiries of authors and scholars pursuing the search for material on various subjects or about people, as a result of their having read something in the catalogs.

One byproduct of the catalog is the photocopying of the page proof for use as captions or labels for the display. An enlargement of 50% is made from copy that is cut and pasted. Photostats can be used either in the negative or positive form. The negatives are used on the panels of mounted photographs and the positives are used in cases with books, maps, and prints. The result is a clear and readable text, and the saving in installation time is considerable. The one drawback is that the entries drafted for the catalog are usually too long as captions in the exhibition. The ideal length for the latter is two and not more than three sentences. To write captions sufficiently factual to please the scholar and short enough not to weary the average visitor has been one of our most difficult problems.

IMPROVEMENTS AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Refinements and changes are continually being made in the preparation and the form of these publications to increase their effectiveness. If money were available the use of color in reproductions would add greatly to the popular appeal of the catalogs. Some thought is being given to adopting a different type of publication with a narrative account, including in it specific references to outstanding items, and illustrations inserted appropriately at the places where they are described. The full list of entries and bibliographical data would be relegated to an appendix which would consist solely of descriptive detail. The advantage of this approach is that the catalog would be more readable, popular, and instructive and would have a wider appeal. On the other hand, the disadvantages are that it would present challenging and complex problems in layout, design, and perhaps cost. Publishing costs are very high, and because of lack of funds many institutions have had no publications program. The main reason why catalogs are expensive is that services and materials have to be purchased in small quantities and that printed editions are so limited.

A very interesting solution to this problem was a proposal of

the American Museum of Natural History for the cooperative development of popular publications.¹ Some such cooperative plan could have applications to other institutions and it might be feasible to work out plans to have the Library of Congress exhibit catalogs cooperatively edited, printed, and distributed.

LIST OF STATE EXHIBITION CATALOGS

California	Ohio
Colorado	Oregon
Delaware	Tennessee
Florida	Texas
Georgia	Utah
Indiana	Washington
Iowa	Wisconsin
Kansas-Nebraska	and
Minnesota	District of Columbia

¹ Winfield G. Doyle in *Museum News*, vol. 27, no. 13, Jan. 1, 1950.