

Using Archival Materials Effectively in Museum Exhibitions

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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."¹ Though 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 potential of incorporating archival materials in exhibitions. Broadly defined, such materials may include organizational records, personal papers such as letters, newspapers, treaties and government records, and pictorial material such as architectural drawings, cartoons, posters, advertisements, maps, photographs, and calendars. Put simply, archival materials are sheets of paper with some type of illustration, symbol, or writing on them. They convey information about a historical event, person, or institution.²

Virtually all ideas, activities, customs, and achievements are based on the writ-

ten transmission of information.³ Because many forms of archival material are written in the first person, letters, diaries, and other personal documents can offer intimacy and a sense of participation for the visitor and can explain or provide a context for an object. In approximately five thousand archival institutions in the United States, manuscript material is available to document the lives of painters, furniture makers, industrialists, poets, immigrants, laborers, and other occupational, social, or cultural groups. By making the right choices, curators can imaginatively employ photographs, architectural drawings, advertisements, musical scores, and other materials to complement works of art or scientific, technological, or historical materials. Although documents are commonly perceived as unattractive, many have extraordinary visual appeal and can be the sole subject of an exhibition.⁴

The fundamental mission of any exhibition is to make the institution's holdings accessible and available to the public. Historians, curators, and archivists have an obligation to educate a broad spectrum of constituents, from the scholar to the curious, from school children to

¹British Records Association, "Exhibitions of Documents: Report of a Subcommittee Appointed by the Council," *Archives* 1 (Fall 1950), quoted by Gail F. Casterline, *Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980), 7.

²Casterline, *Exhibits*, 7-8; Albert H. Leisinger, Jr., "The Exhibit of Documents," *American Archivist* 26 (January 1963): 75-80; Gail Farr Casterline, "Exhibiting Archival Material: Many-Faceted Manuscripts," *Museum News* 58 (September/October 1979): 5-52.

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

⁴Casterline, *Exhibits*, 7-8; Leisinger, "Exhibit of Documents," 75-80; Casterline, "Exhibiting Archival Material," 5-52; William K. Jones, *The Exhibition of Documents: Preparation, Matting and Display Techniques*, Technical Leaflet #75 (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1974), 1; *Intrinsic Value in Archival Material*, Staff Information Paper 21 (National Archives and Records Administration, 1982).

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adults. One important way of fulfilling this obligation is to help all individuals better understand their cultural heritage through exhibitions, which can provide a visual counterpart to, and relief from, textbooks, scholarly publications, and other writings.⁵

Exhibition themes can range from choosing a historical event or 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 materials that are exhibitable from a conservation standpoint, and have strong documentary value as well as visual impact. This ideal marriage between form and content is not always easy to achieve. 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 historically important document in the collection in 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, visual considerations might preclude its use. When legibility of exhibit materials is a concern, as in this instance, an alternative is to exhibit an accompanying typescript, as well as photographs, prints or other pictorial materials to enhance the visual quality of the presentation.

Letters that must be thoroughly read, published materials, and interpretative labels conspire to overwhelm the viewer with words. For this reason, one carefully-selected manuscript exhibited in conjunc-

tion with strong visual images can often make a greater impact than a group of documents with accompanying texts. It is also more likely to be absorbed by viewers.

A document can be evaluated by considering how it, by itself, symbolizes an event or individual or has a certain identity as an icon. Visual appearance, written message, and historical importance all combine 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 very little interpretation. They need only to be present and visible to satisfy the viewer. In fact, the text of the Declaration, due to fading and heavily screened glass, is practically unreadable. But its symbolic importance is so strong that it supersedes visual and documentary considerations. Documents with strong iconic value are relatively few. One problem that institutions such as the National Archives encounter is that public demand requires too much exposure of a relatively small number of such documents, causing conservators serious concern and perhaps warranting the use of facsimiles.

Facsimiles might also be employed for purely visual considerations. Enlargements of photographs and manuscripts, for example, can change the scale of an exhibit and provide maximum impact. An enlargement also can be effectively juxtaposed with the original item (archivaly matted or mounted) so visitors have the benefit of viewing both. Another means of highlighting individual documents, especially photographs of people or buildings, is to mount facsimiles on

⁵Leisinger, "Exhibit of Documents," 77; Casterline, "Exhibiting Archival Material," 49-50; Barbara Franco, "Exhibiting Archival Material: A Method of Interpretation," *Museum News* 58 (September/October 1979): 55-59.

gaterfoam or masonite and cut them out to produce three-dimensional silhouettes.

Another successful technique for exhibiting photographs is to juxtapose black and white with color photos of the same or similar objects. 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 anchor the viewer to the familiar present. Sepia-toned photographs (either originals or copies) can also provide a visual change from black and white photos. Inclusion of original hand-tinted black and white prints can also vary the visual format.

In documenting ethnic communities in Philadelphia and the region, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies frequently incorporates photographic collages of community residents. Visitors come to the exhibit to see themselves, their families and friends; their direct involvement makes the entire documentary exhibit more intimate and personal. The exhibition of family photos and individual portraits is also a reminder to the public of the value of these kinds of documents and the need to properly preserve them.

The Balch Institute also often uses a variety of original documents in its exhibitions, along with three-dimensional artifacts, including works of art, and related manuscripts and photographs. In "Italian-American Traditions: Family and Community," original family photographs were exhibited in conjunction with passports, immigration papers, inspection cards, steerage tickets, passenger lists, and other documents which represented the experiences of Italian immigrants to the Delaware Valley. An innovative use of documents such as handbills was seen in another Balch exhibition, "The Japanese American Experience." A focal point of the exhibit was a partial

reconstruction of a barracks from a World War II Japanese American relocation camp. The Institute's designer, Lanny Bergner, tacked photocopies of handbills and newsletters produced in the camps onto the outer walls of the barracks so that visitors could both read and view them in context. The facsimiles were nearly identical to the originals.

Because of their visual impact and familiarity to most people, some archival materials provide strong subjects for exhibitions by themselves. The National Archives, for example, recently mounted "Uncle Sam Speaks: Broad sides and Posters from the National Archives," which traces the art of persuasion throughout two hundred years of our history. The exhibition is popular, 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." These 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. In each exhibit, high-quality Cibachrome facsimiles were employed in order to allow for travel to ten other sites in the United States over a three-year period.

An exhibition encompassing a wide variety of documents can be an excellent vehicle for demonstrating that libraries and archival institutions hold interesting records in areas other than predictable ones such as politics, military affairs, and diplomacy. Exhibits can also be an effective means of teaching visitors what museum curators, archivists, and librarians do, how they do it, and why they rely on the public for assistance, donations, and financial support.