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## *Past Meets Present*

Essays about Historic Interpretation  
and Public Audiences

Jo Blatti, Editor

*Photographs by Patricia Layman Bazon*

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Jo Blatti

*Editor*

January 1986



## *Exhibition as (Art) Form*

Barbara Fahs Charles

What is a museum exhibition? Is it a creative, intellectual enterprise? Can we be so bold as to call it an artistic form? How should exhibitions be reviewed? These are the questions I would like to address from the perspective of a designer who has worked with museums for nearly twenty years.

As a general rule, museum exhibitions fall into three categories: those in which the artifact is primary, those in which the concept is preeminent, and those that emphasize both by using artifacts to express concepts. The first type is usually found in art or decorative art galleries, the second in science/technology centers, and the third in history museums.

In exhibitions that focus on the artifact, the pieces, typically paintings and sculpture or decorative arts, are arranged to be viewed individually in some straightforward manner—chronologically, for example, or by school, or by manufacturing technique. Every other aspect of the exhibition is subsidiary to the individual works: the labeling is discreet, wall colors are chosen to show the works to their best advantage, and the spacing is generous so the viewer can focus on one piece at a time.

When the concept is preeminent, an exhibition takes on virtually the opposite character. If the art gallery is passive and contemplative, the science/technology center

is aggressive and active. The exhibits "sell" scientific principles; they are a bustling marketplace of ideas, with each device competing for visitor attention. Here all manner of techniques are used—large signs of explanation and direction, graphic elements, blazing colors, computer terminals, video games, hands-on devices. Anything is fair game if it gets the concept across.

It is, however, when trying to use artifacts to express concepts that one encounters the most challenging and complex exhibition form. It is one that history museums, and natural history museums to some degree, undertake on a regular basis because of the themes they consider and the materials they have to display. These exhibitions borrow from both sides—the finest artifacts are often treated with the reverence one might expect in an art exhibition, while video and computer units are used to convey points vital to the story but impossible to express with artifacts alone, or ones that can be presented more clearly with such interactive devices. In fact, for many history exhibitions, recordings, film, and more recently, computers are artifacts as integral as any photograph, costume, or piece of machinery.

For its creators, the challenge of the history exhibition is the diversity of materials, the complexity of the story, and the myriad parameters of both. Even the least complex historical topic—an individual person, the engineering genius of Isambard Brunel, for example, or specific event, such as the 1830s expedition of Prince Maximilian of Wied and Karl Bodmer up the Missouri River—will use materials as varied as manuscripts, paintings, costumes, machinery, and photographs. A more complex theme, such as the automobile in twentieth-century America, might address our increasingly mobile society, the impact of the car on architecture from houses to restaurants, industrial design as practised in Detroit, or "speed" alone as a goal, with artifacts as diverse as magazine ads, dragsters, and drive-in eateries. Introducing visitors to such new ways of thinking about their everyday environment demands intellectual and visual acuity.

As with more traditional art exhibitions, these historical projects—be they straightforward or complex—require solid scholarly research, and often, given the diversity of materials, the expertise of more than one curator. Beyond that, they nearly always need additional skills—especially design talent to make visual cohesion of such disparate materials. If recordings, slides, films, or computers are incorporated,

still more specialized services are involved. At their best, historical exhibitions are highly creative efforts. If an art exhibition can be described as a scholarly monograph, history exhibitions might well be explained as the cross-fertilization of one of Boorstin's books and a Broadway play. Such shows must have solid scholarly research, a strong point of view, and be delightful entertainment. The artifacts are the players, the storyline gives them dialogue, the installation gives them life.

What are the elements common to these interpretive exhibitions, regardless of their size or scope? In outline, they are similar to those of a simple art exhibition but are employed differently. The primary element is the theme. By their very nature historical exhibitions are collaborative efforts, but they must still reflect a clear vision. Everyone involved, from the person who first conceptualizes the show to the final viewer, needs to understand the perspective from which the artifacts are presented.

In the beginning stages this is done with a brief position paper, usually prepared by the primary curator. The importance of such a short statement cannot be underestimated. As the identification, selection, and organization of diverse materials becomes increasingly complex and as additional people join the creative team, the theme statement becomes the intellectual scale on which curatorial and design decisions must be continually weighed. And, if the curatorial team has assembled the materials from a particular perspective, it is only fair that the viewer be let in on the secret. The name of the exhibition, the opening statement, and the headings for each of the sections all play important informative roles. They are the equivalent of the title, introduction, and table of contents of a book. They help the viewer "read and summarize" the exhibition.

The secondary element (though certainly primary to the viewer) is the materials displayed. Unlike an exhibition where each work of art may contribute to a total study but is best appreciated by itself, historical exhibitions are a compilation of materials with the sum making a greater impression than the individual parts. While these artifacts need not have great artistic merit, they must be skillfully chosen for the individual role they play in the assemblage. Some carry a major part of the story, some reinforce underlying points, while others en masse offer visual alliteration. Still, each individual item must have the ability to excite—not only the viewer but also the team writing and designing the show. And often the process of assembling the

materials to be displayed, as with research for a book, will reveal new aspects of the theme, forcing a slight or major change in direction from what was originally conceived.

Labels, the third element, are clues to understanding the artifacts. The public doesn't attend exhibitions to read labels, though they will devour them when they are well written and well presented. As visitors move through an exhibition, they look at the artifacts first, adding meaning from their own experience. Then they read the accompanying labels to verify their conclusions or answer lingering questions. If the labels are well written, they will not only identify and give context to the piece, but will engage the viewer, causing him to look again with new insight.

Besides being interesting and informative, labels should be placed so visitors can find them easily, read them, and recognize their significance to the storyline. Just as changes of size and weight of type within a book indicate importance and emphasis, the public assumes such signals have meaning in an exhibition. The relationships among type size, typeface, and position should have continuity throughout, because as the visitor views the show he uses these elements to identify headlines, main thematic statements, and subsidiary ones.

While the artifacts, be they paintings, photographs, machinery, costumes, or paper ephemera are key to a successful exhibition, it is the way in which they are displayed, the fourth element, that brings such materials alive and underscores relationships and importance. It is the design of an exhibition that can make a smaller but more significant artifact take precedence over its larger or more imposing neighbor. It is the techniques of the installation that can group objects to make them "speak" in sentences or whole paragraphs rather than as individual words. It is the design that directs the viewer's eye.

The overall design, from the advertisements to the opening area and the colors and surfaces within, without being cloyingly cute, should reflect and underscore the concept of the exhibition as well as enhance the artifacts. The design sets up expectations and reinforces concepts. An exhibition about the death of John F. Kennedy would have a somber look while one about political campaigning should be exhilarating. Similarly, classic serifed typography would be appropriate to a show about the great sailing ships while contemporary sans-serif type might be best for

exhibitions about space exploration or modern design. Just as scenery and costume designers use color and details to set a mood for a show or various scenes, so must the museum exhibit designer envelop the viewer in subliminal clues to the period, people, and events being presented.

The underlying design structure of the exhibition is the floor plan. It follows the curator's outline in theory, but rarely in reality. Creating the floor plan is the challenge of solving a three-dimensional puzzle—making an intellectual story told through myriad objects fit an architectural space. Luckily it is possible to adjust storylines and camouflage architectural spaces, ideally so both are enhanced. The placement of artifacts is critical. By locating major pieces or displays at vista points, the public, without being particularly aware of a plan, will easily follow the storyline from topic to topic. When the visitor looks up as he finishes one area, he will move naturally to the next, much like bees searching for honey, if the elements are well situated.

Within each area of an exhibition, the visitor should be able to visually grasp the section in totality. He may never be aware that he is peripherally taking his bearings, but to feel comfortable as he progresses through an exhibition, the visitor must at least subliminally understand the extent of the subject into which he is embarking and be allowed to make decisions about whether to delve in or bypass this area for another. Such decisions are made on the basis of interest and/or curiosity versus the apparent time investment required. The design can lure the visitor into topics he may have thought dull or formidable or it can repel him from ones that should have been his cup of tea. Whatever he decides, the visitor *must* be a willing participant in how he views an exhibition. Linear, tunnel-type exhibitions that demand that one section be viewed before the next with no clues about what the future holds can be extremely unpleasant experiences. Going to an exhibition should be an adventure in discovery, not the museum equivalent of cave exploration.

Within the design of an exhibition there are technical standards that must be met. Primarily these standards involve continuity. Not unlike a missed step in a ballet or a bad cut in a film, jarring elements cause a loss of concentration, a suspension of belief. Casework, for example, may vary because of changes in function, but should be from the same design family—related molding details, similar handling of labels, compatible colors. Likewise, works of art and other artifacts that are hung on walls

should maintain a basic "centerline." Even if works are double or triple hung, there needs to be an underlying level that visitors will recognize and follow subconsciously. As with the need for correct grammar in a written piece, the purpose of technical standards is to make the visitor's stay as comfortable and conducive as possible to doing what he has really come for—to see the "stuff."

Visitor fatigue, caused by the very labels and designs that are supposed to help, probably circumscribes more museum experiences than any other cause. The more time a visitor spends trying to understand a badly written label, adjusting his bifocals to read ones that are poorly sized, or craning his neck to see an awkwardly placed object, the less time he will spend really seeing and enjoying the exhibition as a whole, and the quicker he will give up because the effort is too great for the rewards.

At the same time, making everything the same can be boring. What should vary is the artifacts themselves, not only in type, but in number, method of display, and emphasis. Some, for example, the founding documents and instruments of Chicago at the Chicago Historical Society, need to be treated as icons. The surveying equipment is merely typical for the time and the city incorporation announcement makes less of an impression than most broadsides, but it is the exhibition setting that can give such seemingly insignificant pieces a presence strong enough to cause the visitor to stop and look more closely. On the other hand, museums might have artifacts that are extremely rare or unique, but difficult to comprehend. A photographic background showing the piece in use might enhance the visitor's understanding. A photograph or diagram on the label would be equally informative but less impressionistic.

In many cases, however, it is neither the historic association nor the rarity of the artifacts that is important but rather their ubiquity. The exhibition should show their widespread use and seemingly infinite variety. To give an example: an assemblage of posters and photographs from World War I Liberty Loan drives helps explain the broad patriotic support the campaigns received, while a massing of political memorabilia from nearly two hundred years of American presidential campaigns gives both a sense of repetition and of change in themes and materials.

Sound, film, or computers, if well handled, offer an excellent counterpoint and alternative way to convey a theme. But because of their very ability to command attention, to the detriment of adjacent artifacts, their content must be carefully

chosen and the installation thoughtfully designed. The café booth and wall jukebox in the Library of Congress's "The American Cowboy" exhibition was such an example. It not only presented the western songs of the singing cowboy, but put them in a period setting. Further, it provided a welcome rest spot three-quarters of the way through the exhibition. A Disney cartoon encouraging the saving of fat in an exhibition about the homefront in World War II, or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in one about the civil rights movement, or an interactive computer design program on Detroit styling in a show about automobiles would all be similarly appropriate and powerful artifacts offering new insight into the themes.

Varying the ways in which concepts and materials are presented is similar to the pacing of a Broadway musical. There must be changes in mood and style—quiet areas, explosive areas, intense areas, relaxing areas. The show must have a beginning that slowly envelops the visitor, some production numbers that keep him amused, and an ending that gives him something to contemplate as he leaves. Exhibitions are as much entertainment as education. If we want people to attend them we must provide both stimulation and excitement.

While it is art exhibitions that have traditionally received more media and critical coverage because of the spectacular nature of the materials being exhibited, I believe that it is the historical exhibitions that have pushed the boundaries of the medium as a creative undertaking. Historical exhibitions need to be seriously reviewed, not only by peers in the professional journals in the way scholarly books are critiqued, but also in the popular press, since the public is the ultimate audience. All too often, when exhibitions are covered at all, only content is discussed; one could just as well be reading a review of a well-illustrated book. The scholarly aspect is important, but the very complexity of the exhibition (art) form needs to be addressed.

What should the thoughtful reviewer evaluate? First and foremost, the theme. Is it worthy of the creative time and expertise (not to mention money) that have been spent bringing it forth? Has it been developed in a curatorial and design manner appropriate to its basic premise? Second, the critic should assess the materials displayed. Are they interesting? Do they support the theme? Were better examples left out? Were there limitations of source (i.e., . . . from the collections of) and if that seriously affected the impact, should the exhibition have been undertaken? Third,

the critic should evaluate the labels. Are they not only informative, but interesting? Overwhelming or cursive? Do they encourage further study? Are they presented in a logical order? Fourth, the reviewer should consider the complete environment. Does it promote enjoyment of the exhibition? Does it enhance understanding? Does it add something beyond the artifacts without overpowering them? Does it make studying the artifacts and reading the labels comfortable? Have high technical standards been scrupulously maintained?

Finally, does the show work as a whole? Does it have a unity not only in the artifacts, but in intellectual conception and design? Is the sum greater than the parts? Does it excite or does it bore? Henry James has suggested that a book is excellent "in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mold"\*—a valuable criterion for judging exhibitions.

\*Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York, 1908) III, x.