

Firsthand

Display's The Thing

By Barbara Charles
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At least once a week I am asked the proverbial Washington question, "What do you do?" When I answer, "Design museum exhibitions," the response is, "Which museum do you work for?" Inevitably there is incredulity when I explain that I am a partner in one of a handful of independent studios that specialize in museum design.

Generally, the largest museums have their own designers, but many medium-sized institutions don't. The Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha is a typical example. For most shows, the curators select the wall colors and position the paintings and sculpture. But in 1981, when the Joslyn began to plan the exhibition "Views of a Vanishing Frontier" to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the expedition of Prince Maximilian and Karl Bodmer up the Missouri River, it quickly became evident that this wouldn't be the usual art show. More than 125 original watercolors by Bodmer would be featured, together with ethnographic materials, fauna, journals, account books and maps. If the show was to have continuity throughout the tour, it would need an installation designed not only for Omaha but for all the then-unidentified stops.

That fall, project curator Marsha Gallagher chose three firms to prepare preliminary designs. We were each given a small stipend and asked to develop an overall plan and a budget, and to solve some specific problems. How would a buffalo robe be exhibited? Could individual watercolors be given controlled environments? Could the watercolors and artifacts be displayed so neither overpowered the other? Would the small scale of the watercolors be boring?

Our overall concept was selected, though not all of our solutions were ultimately used. For the buffalo robe, we speculated that a conical shape covered with textured linen would hold the robe in place without attachments. (It worked!) For the watercolors, extra-deep frames with compartments for silica gel would be mounted in special panels. In concept, ideal relative humidity levels could be maintained, but this had never been tried with so many artworks. We advised against experimenting with the priceless Bodmers, and the staff at the Joslyn's Center for Western Studies concurred—instead, the watercolors would receive conventional frames and be monitored during the tour.

The panel system, though no longer required technically, nevertheless survived, because it unified the show and provided a quiet, neutral environment for the watercolors. As for balancing the art and the artifacts, they were essen-



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tially treated as equals. Labels would comment on the connections, but, more importantly, artifacts that related to specific watercolors would be placed so viewers could easily make their own comparisons. The small scale of the paintings would be broken up by a series of 8-by-12 foot enlargements marking key places where Maximilian and Bodmer stopped.

By early summer 1983, the Joslyn staff had selected most of the show and confirmed the museums on the tour—opening at the Joslyn in February 1984, then to the Amon Carter in Fort Worth in the spring, San Francisco's DeYoung Museum in the fall and finally to the Smithsonian. Now the real design work began.

The panel system, which could be installed flat or in convex or concave curves, was engineered. Cases were designed to maintain the artifacts at required levels of relative humidity—metal would need one level, wood and natural fibers a higher one. Walnut frames large enough to include labels were selected, and type styles and sizes were agreed upon. Maps tracing the trip had to be drawn. Maximilian's 1843 report "Reise in das Inner Nord-America" showed the route but did not locate Indian tribes—for 1832-1834, Joe Porter, the Joslyn's western historian, would have to determine tribal domains, which changed depending on weather, warfare and white encroachment.

By December 1983 the panels, cases, frames and mats were almost completed, the enlargements from the aquatints were being hand-colored. By mid-January the fabricator, Exhibits Unlimited of Alexandria, was shipping the panels and cases to Omaha and beginning the set-up. Meanwhile, the artifacts were arriving. Too valuable to be shipped unaccompanied, most would be brought by couriers from the lending museums. Late in the month my partner, Bob Staples, would be in Omaha to make the individual brackets for 50 ethnographic pieces and numerous books, birds, even a turtle. By Feb. 8 all was installed and the last cases were being cleaned late into the night. The next morning everything would be ready for the press preview and opening festivities.

Having been primary players just the night before, we would now recede to the background. Our work was the stage for the watercolors, artifacts and story line that would delight the audience. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country would see "Views of a Vanishing Frontier," now at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History through March 31. Most would never know someone designed it.

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