

Fundamental best practices that every museum can
implement regardless of financial
or staff limitations.

PRODUCED BY

The State Historical Society of Iowa
REAP/Historical Resource Development Program (HRDP)

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The Iowa Museum Association

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*HRDP is part of the Resource Enhancement and Protection Program

What is The Field Guide for Museums and why was it created?

Due to changes in the Historical Resource Development Program (HRDP), a need was identified and this handbook is an attempt to address it. What is the need? Guide- lines for standards and disciplines that a museum or organization can use as a compass to function as a successful museum.

There are hundreds of professional reference books available, but unfortunately the institutions most in need of assistance will not have ready access to them. Therefore, this handbook is to be used as a guide when facing questions that need answers and need them fast!

The handbook is called The Field Guide for Museums with the notion that if a person were in the wilderness and needed to make a fire it wouldn't be in their best interest to learn the history or theory of fire. The immediate need would be how to start a fire in order to survive. Likewise, this "field guide" is designed to help you survive. It is only a guide however, and because every museum has its own peculiarities - be it architectural, staffing or unusual collections - not every statement will apply to every situation or organization.

When in doubt, ask! Educate yourself by accessing the reference books, phoning other museum professionals, joining museum organizations and surfing museum web sites. It is better to ask if in doubt, than to assume the answer and be sorry later.

The suggested reference books come with sources to obtain the books. If it says "*Available from AAM*", then the book can be purchased from The American Association of Museums, or a bookstore. If the source listed says "*Available from SHSI*", the book is part of The State Historical Society's Resource Center and is available for check out. To check out one of the SHSI books, *phone*: (515)281-8754 and ask for the Resource Center. Also listed in this book are current museum websites on page 40. These sites are full of good information and provide additional connecting sites.

Good luck with your museum!

The Field Guide For Museums

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DRAFTERS OF THE FIELD GUIDE FOR MUSEUMS

Without the help and dedication of the following people, this handbook would not have been possible. *Thank You!*

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TAKE TWO
MUSEUM ORGANIZATION
STICKS.

Points to consider and
essential documents every
Historical Society
or Museum should
strive to obtain.

MISSION STATEMENT

- ❖ *The central purpose of a successful museum is found in its mission statement. The mission statement describes specific areas of research and education that the museum will focus upon.*

Sample questions to ask when writing a mission statement:

- ❖ Whom do you serve and why?
- ❖ What service do you provide that is different from other museums in your area?
- ❖ How and what methods will you use to reach your stated purpose?

Reference Books

Organizing Your Museum: The Essentials

Resource Report

American Association of Museums

(Available from AAM)

[Includes sample bylaws, mission statements, long-range plans, job descriptions, collections management policies, and readings.]

Museum Basics

Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine

ICOM and Routledge (publishers)

(Available from AAM)

[A guide to “best practices” in every aspect of museum work.]

Starting Right

Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo, 1989

AltaMira Press/ AASLH

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[A basic guide to initial museum planning.]

BY-LAWS AND GOVERNING DOCUMENTS

❖ *Documents such as By Laws, Articles of Incorporation and Charters answer the following questions:*

- ❖ What is the purpose of the institution and what is the role of the board?
- ❖ What are the basic legal documents a museum needs to operate?
- ❖ Who is ultimately responsible?

Reference Books

Manual for Museums

Ralph H. Lewis
National Park Service U.S.
Department of the Interior,
Washington, D.C. 1976

Starting Right

Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo, 1989
AltaMira Press/ AASLH
(Available from AAM & SHSI)
[A basic guide to initial museum planning.]

A Primer for Local Historical Societies

2nd edition
Laurence R. Pizer
AltaMira Press/AASLH
(Available from AAM & SHSI)
[Subjects include choosing a building, collections care, registration, exhibits, conservation, staffing, financial management, fundraising, etc.]

ORGANIZING A BOARD OF TRUSTEES

- ❖ *It is helpful to recruit a balanced board whose talents can provide your museum with access to useful services and who reflect the constituency you serve.*

Examples may include:

- ❖ Attorneys
- ❖ Educators
- ❖ Certified Public Accountants
- ❖ Local historians
- ❖ Business leaders
- ❖ Representatives of the geographical region
- ❖ Bankers
- ❖ Special audience representatives.

It is important to educate the board by creating a policy outlining issues such as conflicts of interest, ethics and legal responsibilities. In addition, each new board member should be educated about the museum's mission, its goals and its accomplishments.

Reference Books

Strategic Planning and the Nonprofit Board

Dabney G. Park Jr., 1990

[A guide for developing a strategic plan for a nonprofit board.]

Nonprofit Board Answer Book: Practical Guidelines for Board Members and Chief Executives

Robert C. Andringa and

Ted W. Engstrom

National Center for Nonprofit Boards

(Available from AAM)

[Covers nearly every issue likely to be encountered by a nonprofit board in an easy-to-follow question-and-answer format.]

Developing the Nonprofit Board: Strategies for Educating and Motivating Board Members

Maureen K. Robinson

National Center for Nonprofit Boards

(Available from AAM)

[Topics include conducting a thorough orientation for new board members, how to get board members to review the mission, conducting training workshops, planning board retreats and conducting a formal board self-assessment.]

COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT POLICY

❖ *A collection policy should address the following:*

- ❖ What is the museum collecting? How do the items relate to the mission statement and fulfill your purpose?
- ❖ How are items acquired?
- ❖ Who decides what is accepted?
- ❖ How will the museum properly care for the object?
- ❖ How will the museum handle donor requests/restrictions?
- ❖ If the museum purchases items, who has the authority to make offers?
- ❖ How are collections processed, recorded and cared for?

- ❖ **Collection access**
 - Who can have collection access and for what specific purpose?
 - May the collection be photographed or replicated?

- ❖ **Lending and Borrowing**
 - Will the museum lend its artifacts?
 - To whom will you lend? (i.e.: only museums with suitable facilities and for specific periods of time?)
 - Will your museum borrow? If so, for how long and can you insure borrowed materials?

- ❖ **Deaccessioning**
 - Who decides?
 - As a courtesy notify the original donor, through a good faith effort, that deaccession procedures have begun.
 - Will the museum transfer or trade with other museums?
 - If the museum decides to sell the item, do so only at auction.
 - The board and staff should not be allowed to bid at auction of deaccessioned materials.
 - Apply revenue from the sale to the museum's collection support.
 - Destroy materials that pose a threat to the collection or public safety.

Reference Books

The Museum forms Book

Revised Edition

Edited by Kenneth D. Perry

Texas Association of Museums/Mountain-Plains Museums Association

(Available from AAM)

[Over 300 sample forms on collection management, development, education, security and rights and reproduction.]

Museums in Motion

Edward P. Alexander

AASLH, Nashville, 1979

(Available from SHSI)

Caring for Collections: Strategies of Conservation, Maintenance and Documentation

AAM, 1984

(Available from AAM)

[Discussions on ways to improve environmental collections in museums, manage inventory, register objects and enhance public awareness of museum collections.]

A Deaccession Reader

Edited and introduction by Stephen E. Weil

American Association of Museums

(Available from AAM)

[Designed to assist those who are responsible for developing a deaccession program.]

Accreditation Resource Kit

American Association of Museums

(Available from AAM)

[Includes the following: a guide to the accreditation process, a self-study guide for self-evaluation and examples of case studies.]

Introduction to Museum Work

Burcaw, G.Ellis

AASLH, Nashville, 1975

(Available from SHSI)

A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections

Marie C. Malaro

Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 1985

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[Looks at collection-related problems and legal entanglement issues.]

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- ◆ *Avoid instances that may constitute a conflict of interest. For example, it may be a conflict of interest if a board member, volunteer or staff person stands to gain financially, personally or for his/her business by his/her actions on the board or through his/her employment.*

- ◆ *If a board member, volunteer or staff person has collecting interests that are similar in nature to the museum's, the person should be made to understand that he/she should not compete with the museum's collection interest.*

Reference Books

Professional Codes of Ethics

Museum News Reprint

Package

(Available from AAM)

[Articles include: code of ethics for curators, conservators, registrars, museum stores, and museum education.]

Code of Ethics for Museums American Association of Museums 1994

(Available from AAM)

[The current code of ethics for museums as adopted by the AAM.]

ADDITIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

◆ *Security Procedures*

- ❖ Who has access keys?
- ❖ Who is notified in emergencies and is there a back-up person?
- ❖ Are appropriate measures taken for fire protection?
- ❖ Are appropriate measures taken for theft protection?

◆ *Emergency Response Procedures*

- Fire (during and after hours)
- Severe weather alert
- Theft
- Flood
- Collection & Facilities Recovery Plan

Reference Books

Standard Facility Report

2nd Edition, revised

American Association of Museums/Registrars Committee of the AAM

(Available from AAM)

[Provides the opportunity to record the latest information about an institution's physical specifications and staff practices - available on computer disc.]

PREP: Planning for Response and Emergency Preparedness

Edited by Mary Candee and

Richard Casagrande

Texas Association of Museums

(Available from AAM)

[Includes sample disaster plans, resource lists, sample forms, procedural checklists and guidelines for assessing building facilities and more.]

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE BOOKS ON RELATED TOPICS

Historic House Museums

Sherry Butcher Youngmans, 1993

(Available from AAM)

[A practical handbook for the care, preservation and management of historic house museums.]

The Manager's Guide: Basic Guidelines for the New Store Manager

Museum Store Association, 1992

(Available from AAM)

[A step-by-step guide for running a museum store.]

Investing in Volunteers: A Guide to Effective Volunteer Management

National Trust for

Historic Preservation, 1995

[A how-to manual for designing and managing a successful volunteer program.]

The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging

Robert G. Chenhall

AASLH, Nashville, 1988

(Available from SHSI)

[A reference book used when identifying objects for classification and cataloging.]

The Management of Small History Museums

Carl E. Guthe

AASLH, Nashville, 1964

(Available from SHSI)

Standards and Guides for Museum Internships

New England Museum

Association, 1993

[A guide book for museums seeking to introduce or upgrade internship programs.]

The Board Member's Guide to Fund Raising: What Every Trustee Needs to Know About Raising Money

Fisher Howe

Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers

(Available from AAM)

[A review of fund raising as part of overall board responsibilities.]

Board Member Manual

Board & Administrator

Newsletter, 1997

[A basic guide for non-profit board members.]



Recommendations and procedures to aid staff and visitors to locate artifacts and to increase the life span of the collection.

LEGAL FORMS OF OWNERSHIP

- ◆ *Temporary Receipt: Issued when an item has been brought into a museum for consideration to become accessioned. It is a document that has two functions.*
 - ❖ It informs the museum **who** brought **what** into the museum for consideration.
 - ❖ It is a paper-trail item, forcing the museum to DO something with the item. This avoids an item from becoming “shelved” and/or misplaced for a long time.

- ◆ *Deed of Gift: This form is issued when the item has been officially accepted into the museum. It is a legal document that transfers ownership of the material from the donor to the museum. This document must be signed and dated by both the owner or legal representative and a museum official.*

Reference Books

Registrars on Record: Essays on Museum Collection Management

Edited by Mary Case

Registrars Committee of AAM

1998

(Available from AAM)

[A collection of 13 essays reviewing the role of a registrar.]

A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections

Marie C. Malaro

Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 1985

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[Looks at collection-related problems and legal entanglement issues.]

Museums and the Law

Marilyn Phelan

AASLH, 1982

(Available from SHSI)

DOCUMENTATION

◆ *When the artifact has been accepted into the collection, begin an acquisition file. An ideal file would include the following:*

- ❖ A copy of the temporary receipt
- ❖ A deed of gift
- ❖ A photograph of the artifact
- ❖ Biography or history about/of the donor
- ❖ History of the object
- ❖ The object worksheet
- ❖ An 8283 form (If necessary, an IRS document which the donor completes)
- ❖ Condition report or conservation records

◆ *Finding Aids - Created in order for the staff and the researching public to easily find the object.*

❖ **Object catalogue card** (May be produced by computer)

It contains the following information:

Accession number in the trinomial system.

For example: 1999.001.1

1999 = Year of Donation from the Deed of Gift

.001 = Chronological order of donations received that year

.1 = object number

Nomenclature (object name) classification
(or other system of identification)

Date of acquisition, taken from the Temporary Receipt

Date of transfer, (legal title): taken from the Deed of Gift

The object's complete three dimensional measurements

Description of the object. Written with enough detail that the artifact can be visualized (i.e.: color, material, function, etc.)

Markings: The maker of the object, etc.

Donor provenance: The story behind the object

Location: Where the object is stored or on display.

Should have initials of the person who moved it there

◆ *Accession Log - a book, binder or other bound item that is a record of day to day accession happenings. It would include the following information:*

- ❖ Accession Number
- ❖ Log in date
- ❖ What the item is
- ❖ Who gave it.

When this book is full, it is sent to the museum's archives as a permanent record of museum activities.

NOTE: A computer is a tool for cataloging, but should not be relied upon to store your catalog information. A paper, manual catalog should also be maintained. As a general rule, all cataloging should have a backup file.

- ◆ *The creation of an alphabetical donor catalogue is useful for quickly finding and locating an artifact when only the donor's name is known.*
- ◆ *Physical numbering of artifacts - Every artifact must have a physical marking on it, not unlike a tattoo. There are different methods for different artifacts. Always place the number or tag in an unobtrusive area.*

DO NOT USE:

staples
metal tags
engraving
nail polish
metal prongs
wire
spray varnish
ball point pen
masking tape or any sticky tape
iron-on tags or adhesive paper tags

DO USE:

paper tags with cotton strings
twill tape
(for garments and flat textiles)
varnish with ink

“Sharpie Pens” may be used on twill tape, but the tape must then be washed in soapy water and completely dried before it is attached to the artifact.

Reference Books

The New Museum Registration Methods

4th edition

Edited by Rebecca Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore

AAM, 1998

(Available from AAM)

[The “bible of museum registrars”, updated with 50 all-new chapters.]

Registration Methods for the Small Museum

3rd edition

Daniel B. Reibel,

Altamira Press/AASLH, 1997

(Available from AAM)

[A simple and concise guide for small museums.]

The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging

Robert G. Chenhall

AASLH, Nashville, 1988

(Available from SHSI)

[A reference book used when identifying objects for classification and cataloging.]

Identifying American Furniture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, Colonial to Contemporary

Milo Naeve

AASLH, 1981

(Available from SHSI)

[A reference to identify the furniture in your collection.]

Starting Right

Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo, 1989

AltaMira Press/ AASLH

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[A basic guide to initial museum planning.]

Museum Archives: An Introduction

William A. Diess

Society of American Archivists

1994

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[Intended to encourage museums to preserve their historically valuable records, offers guidelines on how to establish a museum archive.]

Documentation of Collections: A Bibliography on Historical Organization Practices

Frederick L. Rath

AASLH, 1979

(Available from SHSI)

Basic Art Handling

Gallery Association of New York State

1998

{VIDEO}

(Available from AAM)

[Illustrating the best methods for handling artworks and artifacts.]

Caring for Your Art

Jill Snyder

Alworth Press

(Available from AAM)

[An easy to understand publication that introduces basic art handling in lay terms.]

LOAN FORMS

- ❖ *These forms are a record of the artifact and an agreement of required conditions to display the artifact.*
- ❖ Request a facilities report of the institution that is borrowing the artifact/s that will include environmental and security conditions.
- ❖ There are two forms needed: an incoming loan form and an out-going loan form. Both contain the following information and are kept in working files for the duration of the artifact's display.
 - Lender Information
 - Credit Line to be used on label, credit panel or publication and promotional materials
 - Purpose of the loan: research, exhibition, etc.
 - Beginning and ending dates of the loan agreement
 - Description of the object, including maker or origin, materials, dimensions, and accessories such as containers or bases
 - A photograph of the artifact may be included with the form
 - Insurance value

STORAGE ENVIRONMENT

- ❖ *Light levels in storage: Brightness and UV levels are damaging to collections and should be controlled.*
 - ❖ Keep lights off when no one is in the storage area
 - ❖ Cover all lights with UV filters, especially florescent tubes
 - ❖ Refrain from storing any artifact in an area with sunlight

Reference Books

Environmental Monitoring Kit

Available from the State Historical Society of Iowa

Contact: Pete Sixbey

600 East Locust Street
Des Moines, Iowa 50319
(515)281-4648

e-mail: Pete.Sixbey@iowa.gov

The Care of Antiques & Historical Collections

Bruce A. MacLeish

AASLH, 1985

(Available from SHSI)

A Guide to Environmental Protection of Collections

Barbara Applebaum

Sound View Press

170 Boston Post Road

Madison, CT 06443

(203)245-2246

HUMIDITY LEVEL AND TEMPERATURE LEVELS

- ❖ *Extreme changes in temperature or humidity must be avoided at all times.*
- ❖ *Any changes in temperature or humidity should be gradual.*
- ❖ *As a general rule, temperatures should be kept near room temperature: 65 to 75 F. Storage areas can be as low as 65 to 70 F*
- ❖ *Generally, a safe humidity level is: 45 - 60 %*
- ❖ *Evaluate your building periodically.
Does it have leaks?
Is the HVAC system working properly?*

NOTE: A museum should consult with a conservator and/or HVAC engineer experienced with museum environments in order to establish optimum conditions for its particular collections. Historic house museums may have entirely different needs than the guidelines offered here. An environmental survey may be needed.

Reference Books

National Park Service Conserve-O-Grams

[Technical leaflets for a 3-ring binder]

Contact:

Carolyn Wallingford
United States Department of
the Interior
Midwest Archeological Center
Federal Building, Room 474
100 Centennial Mall North
Lincoln, NE 68508-3873

The Museum Environment

Gary Thomson CBE

2nd edition

Butterworths, 1986

(Available from AAM)

[A two-part book that covers conservation techniques in depth.]

Canadian Conservation Institute Notes

1030 Innes Road

Ottawa, Ontario

K1A 0M5

Phone: (613)998-3721

FAX: (613)998-4721

SHELVING MATERIAL

- ❖ *It is best to use stable materials in the construction of cases. However, if for example, unstable materials need to be used because of financial reasons, there are precautions that may be taken to minimize harmful effects.*
- ❖ Seal all wood with a water-based polyurethane sealant (recommended: Camger Gloss Polyglase Waterborne finish - phone (508)528-5787) or contact MarvaSeal. Covering the wood with metal foil will work also.
- ❖ Used industrial shelving is an option for ready-made storage solutions. Cover the shelving with stable materials appropriate to the collection: i.e., ethafoam, volara.
- ❖ Use dust covers for open shelving. Unbleached cotton muslin works well for many solutions. Cloroplast and Tyvec are equally successful.
- ❖ In an ideal situation, purchase powder pigment coated metal shelves.
- ❖ If using wood, it is recommended to use Medite II particle board.

Reference Books

Collections Management

Anne Fahy

Routledge

(Available from AAM)

[Detailed text answers important questions on how to develop standards for collections management.]

A Guide to Environmental Protection of Collections

Barbara Applebaum

Sound View Press

170 Boston Post Road

Madison, CT 06443

(203)245-2246

Canadian Conservation Institute Notes

1030 Innes Road

Ottawa, Ontario

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Phone: (613)998-3721

FAX: (613)998-4721

BOXING MATERIAL

❖ *Always use stable materials when boxing artifacts.*

- ❖ All boxes should be made of acid-free, archival material which may be found at several suppliers such as:

Gaylord

University Supply

Talas

Light Impressions

- ❖ Textiles that are stored in boxes should have as few folds as possible.
- ❖ Choose a box size appropriate to the artifact. Do not “stuff” the artifact into a box that will harm the item in the long run.
- ❖ Line the box with acid-free tissue and pad any folds in textiles with acid-free tissue.
- ❖ Label the exterior of the box with its contents.
- ❖ Avoid layering garments in the box when possible. If unavoidable, place the most fragile objects on top.

Reference Books

National Park Service Conserve-O-Grams

[Technical leaflets for a 3-ring binder]

Contact:

Carolyn Wallingford

United States Department of
the Interior

Midwest Archeological Center

Federal Building, Room 474

100 Centennial Mall North

Lincoln, NE 68508-3873

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1030 Innes Road

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Phone: (613)998-3721

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HOUSE KEEPING

- ❖ *Museums should have a routine schedule of basic cleaning that includes sweeping, vacuuming, and eliminating clutter, food stuffs and trash. Particular attention to frequently used visitor areas, such as restrooms or lobbies, will enhance the museum experience for the visitor.*
- ❖ *A schedule should be kept for cleaning the artifacts and exhibit cases. Due to the sensitive nature of many artifacts, museum personnel should consult with a conservator for correct cleaning methods appropriate for particular artifacts.*

Reference Books

Canadian Conservation Institute Notes

1030 Innes Road
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0M5
Phone: (613)998-3721
FAX: (613)998-4721

Basic Deterioration and Preventative Measures for Museum Collections

Shelly N. Reisman Payne
AASLH
{VIDEO}
(Available from SHSI)

National Park Service Conserve-O-Grams

[Technical leaflets for a 3-ring binder]

Contact:

Carolyn Wallingford
United States Department of
the Interior
Midwest Archeological Center
Federal Building, Room 474
100 Centennial Mall North
Lincoln, NE 68508-3873

PEST CONTROL

- ❖ *An integrated pest management system (IPM) should be utilized by museums to control pests. The goal of the IPM for museum collections is:*
 - ❖ To protect the museum and its collection from pests which damage the collections.
 - ❖ To reduce the amount of pesticides used in the facility because they have been found to damage some collections and cause health problems for the staff and visitors.
 - ❖ To utilize a combination of monitoring and control practices, including staff vigilance, regular inspections, pheromone traps and good housekeeping practices.

Reference Books

National Park Service Conserve-O-Grams

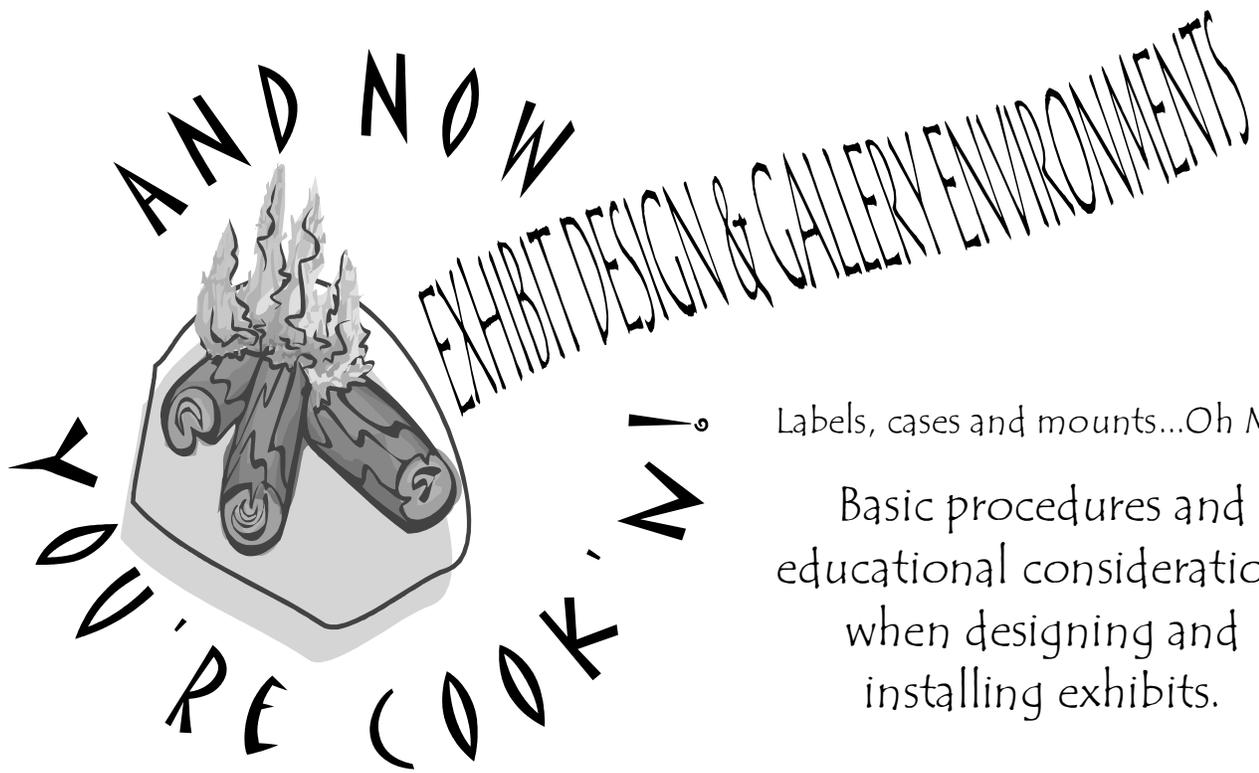
[Technical leaflets for a 3-ring binder]

Contact:

Carolyn Wallingford
United States Department of
the Interior
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Federal Building, Room 474
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Lincoln, NE 68508-3873

A Guide to Environmental Protection of Collections

Barbara Applebaum
Sound View Press
170 Boston Post Road
Madison, CT 06443
(203)245-2246



Labels, cases and mounts...Oh My!

Basic procedures and educational considerations when designing and installing exhibits.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF AN EXHIBIT?

EDUCATION

- ◆ *When research, design and construction begins, these thoughts should be in the minds of the exhibit team:*
 - ❖ What do we want our visitors to learn from this exhibit?
 - ❖ What is the purpose of this exhibit?
 - ❖ How does this exhibit's story fit into what is/was going on in the rest of the world?
 - ❖ Why should the visitor care about this story, what makes it unique?

Reference Books

Learning in the Museum

George E. Hein

Routledge, 1998

(Available from AAM)

[Learn how to maximize the educational experience of every visitor.]

Developing Museum Exhibitions for Lifelong Learning

Edited by Gail Durbin

The Stationery Office, 1996

(Available from AAM)

[This book combines learning theory with consideration for the needs of different museum audiences and offers practical information about setting up displays.]

User Friendly: Hands-On

Exhibits That Work

Jeff Kennedy

Association of Science-Technology Centers, 1990

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[Topics in this book include designing legible, accessible labels; designing user-friendly viewers and eyepieces and selecting exhibit controls (such as joy sticks, handles, levers and pushbuttons) and more.]

EXHIBIT GALLERY CONDITIONS

◆ *There is no standard design or layout for exhibit gallery space in museums. Exhibit design plans will always vary from topic to topic and space to space. However, there are a few “rules of thumb” that should be adhered to:*

- ❖ Keep the topic in mind when considering design elements.
- ❖ Make the space “user-friendly” for all patrons, including those with physical limitations, children, the elderly and large groups.
- ❖ Remember safety issues for patrons and security issues for artifacts.
- ❖ All construction materials should be made of inert materials or sealed with coatings that are water based.
- ❖ Mounts should provide protection and safety for an artifact, yet be as undetectable as possible.
- ❖ Labels should be easy to read and brief.
- ❖ The design should enhance the artifacts without distracting the visitor and overwhelming the artifact.

Reference Books

Exhibition Planning and Management: Reprints from NAME’s Recent and Recommended Reprint Package

American Association of Museums
(Available from AAM)

[A primer on the core elements of exhibition planning and management from the National Association of Museum Exhibition.]

Exhibitions in Museums

Michael Belcher
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992
(Available from AAM)

[This book covers every stage of exhibit planning, design and presentation. It includes discussions on safety, climate and lighting.]

Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice

David Dean
Routledge, 1994
(Available from AAM)

[Examines planning, design and evaluation of exhibits, in addition to other topics.]

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA) SPECIFICATIONS

❖ *Accessibility to public places should follow state and federal guidelines for individuals with disabilities, under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. General guidelines include:*

- ❖ Railings and barriers should be at a height so that objects and labels can be viewed from a wheelchair.
- ❖ Aisle widths should be no smaller than four feet, (ideally the aisles would accommodate two wheelchairs side by side.)
- ❖ Turn around space should be no smaller than five feet.
- ❖ The bottom of exhibit cases should be no higher than 36 inches from the floor.

Reference Books

Standards for Making Buildings Intended for Use by the Public Accessible to and Functional for People with Disabilities.

Iowa Commission on Persons with Disabilities
Department of Human Rights
Lucas State Office Building
Des Moines, Iowa 50319
(515)281-5969

Access to the Past: Museum Programs and Handicapped Visitors

Alice P. Kenney
AASLH, 1980
(Available from SHSI)

Part of Your General Public is Disabled: A Handbook for Guides in Museums, Zoos and Historic Houses

Janice Majewski
Smithsonian Institution, 1987
(Available from SHSI)

SECURITY

- ◆ *Floor plans should be as unobtrusive as possible, providing few “blind” spots and the ability for staff or guards to view visitors with ease.*
- ◆ *Mounts should provide adequate security without obstructing or intruding upon an object.*
- ◆ *During exhibit planning, anticipate human-caused damage, such as vandalism or theft, and try to plan deterrents.*
- ◆ *Cases should be locked or otherwise secured with items such as security screws.*
- ◆ *Create physical barriers such as railings to protect large artifacts from human contact.*

Reference Books

On Display: A Design Grammar for Museum Exhibitions

Margaret Hall

Lund Humphries, London

1987

(Available for use at the SHSI Library)

[A brief look at some basic security practices.]

CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS

❖ *All construction materials used for cases and platforms should be free of acid and other harmful volatile materials.*

- ❖ If plywood must be used, choose either the marine grade exterior plywood AA or BB, or MDO board painted with latex paint.
- ❖ As a precaution, when using any wood, seal it with a water-based polyurethane sealant or high quality latex paint.
- ❖ After painting, let the case “cure” for a minimum of three weeks before any artifact is installed.
- ❖ The case should have vents to allow air exchange.
- ❖ Only inert materials should touch an artifact.
Do not place an artifact directly on an unstable surface.

Appropriate buffers are:

- ◆Mylar
- ◆Ethafom
- ◆Undyed cotton or linen
- ◆Formica
- ◆Brass (cover brass with shrink tubing)
- ◆Plexiglas
- ◆Acid-free paper or board

Reference Books

Exhibiting Your Community's Heritage

Tom McKay & Deborah Kerntz
State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985
[1 manual and 5 video tapes]

(Available from SHSI)

[A hands-on demonstration of how to construct many elements of an exhibit. Targeted audience is the small historical society or museum.]

Help! for the Small Museum

Arminta Neal

AASLH, 1986

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[A practical guide to designing and creating temporary exhibits.]

Good Show! A Practical Guide for Temporary Exhibitions

Lothar P. Witteborg

Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1981

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[This book offers practical guidance on creating temporary and small exhibitions.]

BASIC MOUNT MAKING RULES AND MATERIALS

- ◆ *Mounts should be designed to protect an object in its case or area during the exhibition life. The object will not fall off or from a mount due to jarring or bumps to the case by visitors.*
- ◆ *Original artifacts **MUST NEVER** be drilled, trimmed, tacked, nailed, screwed, or glued down. A properly mounted artifact will be exactly the same when removed from the mount as it was when installed into the mount.*
- ◆ *Do not use original hooks, strings, straps or handles on the artifacts as supports. Always create a mount that will bear the body of the artifact. Never put weight on thin or delicate parts of an item.*
- ◆ *Never strain an artifact to fit a bracket, mount or exhibit space.*
- ◆ *Mounts should not be made of materials that will harm the artifact. Use non-volatile materials such as:*
 - ❖ *brass, Plexiglas (best case scenario, choose UV Plexiglas) and acid-free mat board*
- ◆ *Original documents, artwork and photographs (if they **MUST** be displayed without reproducing them) should be framed and matted with acid-free board with a Plexiglas cover.*

Reference Books on Basic Mount Making Rules and Materials

Storage of Natural History Collections: Ideas & Practical Solutions Vol. II

Carolyn L. Rose &

Amparo R. de Torres

Published by the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections

1995 Second Printing

(Available from:

The Society for the Preservation of

Natural History Collections

c/o Julia Golden

Department of Geology

University of Iowa

121 Trowbridge Hall

Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1379

(319)335-1822)

[Besides collection care, this book provides illustrations for some types of basic mounts.]

LIGHT LEVELS

- ◆ *Exposure to light causes irreversible damage to organic materials, especially textiles and paper.*
 - ❖ Limit exposure to ultra-violet light by covering windows with shades, drapes or UV film.
 - ❖ Place UV tube filters over florescent light bulbs.
 - ❖ Keep light levels in the exhibit gallery at the lowest level that allows the visitor to comfortably read labels and navigate throughout the exhibit.
 - ❖ Use indirect lighting, do not focus lights on sensitive material.
 - ❖ Consult with a certified electrician if electrical work must be done in the gallery or exhibit cases.

Reference Books

Exhibits: Planning and Design

Larry Klein

Madison Square Press, Inc.

1986

(Available from SHSI)

[A good idea book filled with photographs of exhibits from around the world. One chapter is dedicated to lighting techniques.]

TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY LEVELS

- ◆ *Avoid drastic changes in humidity and temperature at all times.*
- ◆ *As a general rule, temperature and humidity guidelines set for storage areas are appropriate for exhibit gallery areas as well.*
- ◆ *If the exhibit gallery contains a door used by the public to enter and exit the museum, do not put artifacts near the door in order to avoid extreme changes in temperature and humidity.*

Reference Books

Caring for Your Collections

The National Committee to Save
America's Cultural Collections,
Arthur W. Schultz, Chairman.
Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers,
New York
1992

[One chapter dedicated to creating and maintaining the right environment.]

INSTALLATION OF ARTIFACTS

- ◆ *Handle all artifacts as seldom as possible.*
- ◆ *Always use white gloves with appropriate artifacts.*
- ◆ *All construction must be completed before artifacts are installed in cases, dioramas or on walls.*
- ◆ *When moving or installing large artifacts, use two or more people where appropriate.*
- ◆ *Never handle an artifact by a thin or delicate attachment. Always cradle an artifact with two hands at its heaviest or most stable area.*

BASIC EXHIBIT GALLERY DISPLAY METHODS

❖ *Labels and Label Production*

Labels convey basic information about the exhibit subject and the objects. All information conveyed in the labels must be documented and, to the best of the knowledge of the researcher, accurate. All labels should be designed for ease in reading, for both visibility and for comprehension.

❖ **The Basic Label Types Are:**

Title Panel or Title:

Contains the title of the exhibit and subtitle, if any.

Primary Label:

Provides general information for an area, case or section in an exhibit.

Secondary Label:

This label provides more information, interpretation or description about the artifacts found under the primary label.

Identification Label (ID label):

Provides the basic information about the artifact.

An example of an Identification Label:

<p>Cooking Pot Iron 1843 <i>Loan:</i> The Smithsonian Institution</p>
--

❖ **Label Readability**

Use dark letters on a light background. White on black for large amounts of text produces viewer fatigue.

Never produce label text in type smaller than 18 pt. (3/16"), ID labels should not be in type smaller than 12 pt. (standard typewriter height). Generally, the larger the type, the easier to read.

Fonts, (type style) should be chosen for readability. Fancy or flamboyant type should be avoided for label text, but may be used where appropriate for short titles.

Additional Label Concerns

Label text should be targeted to an 8th grade reading level with sentences that are to the point and brief. Avoid creating long paragraphs, as visitors generally do not linger over lengthy copy.

Every exhibit should contain a credit label that conveys the following information:

- ▲ The exhibition team
- ▲ Institutions or individuals who loaned artifacts or graphics to the exhibit.
- ▲ Donor names who donated artifacts to the museum that are used in the exhibit.
- ▲ Financial donors to the exhibit.
- ▲ Volunteers who worked on the exhibit.

Reference Books

Making Exhibit Labels: A Step-by-Step Guide

Beverly Serrell

Published by AASLH

1983

(Available from AAM & SHSI)

[Basic label production and writing.]

Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach

Beverly Serrell

AltaMira Press/AASLH

(Available from AAM)

[Includes label planning, writing, design and publication.]

Text in the Exhibition Medium

Edited by Andrée Blais

La Société des Musées Québécois

(Available from AAM)

[This book addresses what should be said about objects displayed in museums. It assists museum personnel with label clarity, effectiveness, design, impact and utility of text.]

Standards Manual for Signs and Labels

AAM/Metropolitan Museum of Art

(Available from AAM)

[Standards for signs and labels

addressing the needs of wheelchair users and the visually impaired in addition to the general public. There are many photographs, diagrams and examples.]

LABEL PRESENTATION AND INSTALLATION OF LABELS IN AN EXHIBIT

- ◆ **NEVER** attach a label to an artifact
 - ❖ *In general labels should be mounted on a stiff backing board of either foam core or mat board.*

- ◆ *Placement of labels*
 - ❖ Place the label so that the visitor can clearly view the object the label describes.

 - ❖ Always place labels in a comfortable viewing range for all visitors, including those with disabilities.
 - A generally accepted viewing range is between 36" to 67" from the ground.
 - Do not lay labels flat on the bottom of a case. Tilt the label so that it may be read by those with bifocals and those who may be in wheel chairs.

- ◆ *Title or Title Panels for cases or areas*
 - ❖ Tend to be dramatic

 - ❖ Contain a graphic element that represents the exhibit subject and is easily identifiable.

DISPLAY OF TEXTILES

- ◆ Wear clean white gloves when handling textiles.
- ◆ **NEVER** pin or tape anything to a textile.
- ◆ Inspect the item for pests, especially wool items
- ◆ Display large flat textiles on a muslin covered panel tilted at a slope. This avoids putting stress on the artifact if it is displayed vertically.
- ◆ Do not allow the item to come in direct contact with glass or Plexiglas.
- ◆ Any support system that displays a garment must be well padded at the areas where pressure from gravity will occur. For example: at the seams of the shoulders.
- ◆ Rotate or exchange textiles and garments during a long term exhibit to reduce environmental damage.
- ◆ Make the display form fit the garment. **NEVER** force the garment onto the form.

Reference Books

On Display: A Design Grammar for Museum Exhibitions

Margaret Hall

Lund Humphries, London

1987

(Available for use at the

SHSI Library)

[A brief look at some basic security practices.]

GRAPHIC REPRODUCTIONS

- ◆ Best practice is to have a photo-negative created of the original so that a negative can be kept on file for future use and safe keeping. This also eliminates repeated exposure to handling and light, thereby extending the life of the object or photograph.
- ◆ If need be, make photocopies or color photocopies of originals *as seldom as possible*.
- ◆ **NEVER EVER** mount original photographs with anything BUT archival corners.
- ◆ **ONLY** reproductions, (**never originals**) may be permanently mounted to a backing board.
- ◆ Use Plexiglas in frames
- ◆ Always use reproductions when originals are too fragile to withstand exhibition.

PROPS WITHIN AN EXHIBIT ENVIRONMENT

- ❖ *Props are often helpful to create a mood or ambience in a vignette or room setting. Remember that purchased or found props may have hidden dangers that can harm or contaminate artifacts or the museum environment.*
 - ❖ All props brought into a museum should be free of fungi insects, or other pests.
 - ❖ Dry or combustible materials such as paper, cloth or insect-free/mold-free leaves should be treated with a flame retardant.

Reference Books

Learning in the Museum

George E. Jeom

Routledge

(Available from AAM)

[A practical guide on how to adapt museums to maximize the experiences of every visitor.]

Interpretive Master Planning: For Parks, Historic Sites, Forests, Zoos, and Related Tourism Sites for Self-Guided Interpretive Services.

John A. Veverka

(Limited availability, it is out of print, but may be found by contacting Amazon Books.)

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

- ◆ Does your program fit your museum's mission?
- ◆ Does your program involve the visitor?
- ◆ How do you evaluate the success of your program?
- ◆ What do you want the visitor to learn from this program?
- ◆ For what age group is the program targeted? Is it appropriate?
- ◆ How does an educational program enhance understanding of the museum exhibit or museum collection?
- ◆ When creating an educational program, keep in mind learning styles and physical abilities of the targeted participants. It is essential to maintain historical accuracy, yet it is desirable to be sensitive to material that may be considered offensive to various cultures or ethnic groups.

MUSEUM RELATED WEB SITES

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

www.aam-us.org

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS BOOK STORE

www.aam-us.org/newbookstore/

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

www.aaslh.org

IOWA MUSEUM ASSOCIATION

www.iowamuseum.org

IOWA CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION CONSORTIUM

<http://web.grinnell.edu/individuals/stuhrr/icpc.html>

SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

www.uni.edu/museum/spnhc

CONSERVATION ON LINE (COOL)

<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu>

(It has information on nearly all the collection care topics. You can also search the discussion list archives for information as well as links to other conservation related sites.)

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSEUM EXHIBITION

www.n-a-m-e.org

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

www.si.edu/start.html

NORTHEAST DOCUMENT CONSERVATION CENTER

www.nedcc.org

(A good site for the preservation of paper-based materials.)

AMAZON BOOK STORE

www.amazon.com

(Go to book search, search by subject - enter Museum Techniques. Many of the books recommended in this handbook are available through this vendor.) [You might also try Borders.com and Barnes & Noble.]

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