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# Preservation Perspectives: Exhibits in Libraries and Archives

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PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVES:  
**EXHIBITS  
 IN LIBRARIES  
 AND  
 ARCHIVES**

DO YOU HAVE A GREAT COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS JUST WAITING TO BE SHOWCASED, OR HAS YOUR DEPARTMENT BEEN ASKED TO PUT TOGETHER A DISPLAY TO CELEBRATE AN UPCOMING EVENT?

Exhibits are wonderful tools for highlighting your collections and connecting with the community you serve. They also enable potential collaborations between donors, departments, authors, and community organizations. The exhibits themselves can be big or small, temporary or permanent—it is the content that matters.



*Small exhibit with original material from the Civil Rights Movement.*

Exhibits start with an idea, a unique photo collection, or possibly a call from the marketing department asking what you have planned for the 100th anniversary of your institution. When preparing for a potential exhibit, here are the questions to ask:

- What story do you hope to tell (the goal)?
  - Highlight a specific collection
  - Educate visitors
  - Remember or celebrate a local, national, or international event
  - Showcase a local family or organization
  - Connect your collections to a theme (for example, Women's History Month)
- Who is the audience: children, adults, community, students, or alumni?
- Will you use original items or reproductions?
- Does your facility have proper exhibit cases, a gallery, or a secure area to display items?

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- Do you have the proper tools (scanner, printer, dry mount press, foam board, easels)?
- Are there financial resources to purchase supplies?
- Do you have the time and experience to create the exhibit? Is this a project that you can handle while continuing to manage regular work tasks?

If you have a clear goal and can answer “yes” for display space, tools, funding and time, you are ready to move forward with planning. Often, if not always, you will serve as the lone curator, designer, and installer. While daunting, this provides the chance to be creative with the theme and design.



Photographic reproductions on exhibit in secure case

First consider the space you have to work with (cabinets, cases, shelves, traveling display board...). Secondly, is the space secure? If you plan to exhibit original material, security and the environment are two areas of concern. Original items should only be displayed in locked exhibit cases that are regularly



Secure exhibit cases in reading room

#### RESOURCES:

Bexx Caswell-Olson. “LibGuide: Exhibiting Library and Archives Materials.” *Michigan State University Libraries*, <https://libguides.lib.msu.edu/exhibittips>. Accessed November 2018.

Brown Mary E. and Rebecca Power. *Exhibits in Libraries: A Practical Guide*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006.

Hamill, Lois. *Archives for the Lay Person: A Guide to Managing Cultural Collections*. Altamira Press, 2013.

Ashley Jones, “Preservation Measures: Exhibit Preparation and Installation.” *Miami University*, <http://spec.lib.miamioh.edu/home/preservation-measures-exhibit-preparation-and-installation/>. Accessed November 2018.

Lacher-Feldman, Jessica. *Exhibits in Special Collections, Libraries, and Archives*. Society of American Archivists, 2013.

monitored by staff and/or security cameras. Preferably the display cases are always within sight of staff. Finally, what about the environment? Consider lighting (both to view the exhibit and as a potential threat to original items), temperature, and humidity.

Today’s technology (computers, scanners, and printers) can help alleviate the stress of security and environment by creating copies of original items for display. On a limited budget, you can scan and print photographic reproductions that look just like the originals. If you are fortunate enough to have a dry mount press, you can mount the exhibit images on foam core for durable reproductions.

Students and volunteers make excellent additions to the exhibit team. My repository is fortunate to have both undergraduate and graduate history students on campus seeking exhibit experience. Every year students design and install exhibits in the reading room and the university library. If you are not on a campus, check with the nearest university history department, or advertise. Today many degree programs require internships or capstones, and students often look to their home communities for potential projects. Also, check with your volunteers to see who has related experience in design, research, writing, wood-working, and so on.



Exhibit created for an author presentation

Creating and installing exhibits can be stressful, but have great potential for education, outreach, publicity, and community connections. These educational and outreach opportunities can help strengthen your repository and draw in new users and supporters.

Next time we will explore the technical side of exhibit preparation, focusing on supplies, suppliers, tools, tips, and techniques.

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