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“You Want the Civil War Letters Exhibited Where?” Archives, Exhibits, and Preservation Concerns

By Sally Childs-Helton, Ph.D., Butler University

Museums are created with the primary expectation of exhibiting their collections, while archives expect to collect for research use. Archivists get almost no formal education about exhibits, yet we're often asked to create them on short notice, with no budget, and in poorly designed venues that damage materials. As with all archival processes, exhibits walk the thin line between preservation and access. This article will look at the many aspects of protecting paper materials on exhibit.

Exhibits compromise preservation efforts, but, with careful planning, damage can be minimized. Preservation issues often are overlooked when design, budget, or deadline concerns take precedence. Good (and responsible) exhibit design must address the preservation of materials on exhibit; it must be at the top of your priority list. Consider exhibit areas and cases as extensions of your storage and reading areas, and treat them as such. The goal is to give displayed items the same protections they have in your archives. If you're lucky enough to have a conservator in your organization, involve him or her from the beginning. Otherwise, consult a conservator as necessary, and continue your own education on the topic through readings and workshops.

Most people have no idea what goes into creating an attractive, educational, and preservation-friendly exhibit. Educate your staff and administration about the damage exhibiting materials can do and give them realistic expectations and guidelines for exhibit areas, cases, preparation, and timetables. An excellent and inexpensive way to do this is through an exhibits policy. This should be addressed in your overall preservation policy and program, yet few non-museum institutions have an exhibits policy in place.

Depending on the size of your institution, the archivist or archives staff can oversee the policy, or you may need a more formal exhibits committee. The policy should incorporate the American National Standards Institute/National Information Standards Organization (ANSI/NISO) standard Z39.79, “Environmental Conditions for Exhibiting Library and Archival Materials.” Further, it should define the preservation analysis of materials, venue, and cases, and state how materials will be preserved and protected during an exhibit. It should include a formal application process, preservation guidelines (condition

of materials; conservation care needed prior to exhibit; environmental standards, including light, temperature, and humidity; exhibit case and support materials), security and insurance, and policies for borrowing or loaning materials for exhibit. These guidelines should be developed in consultation with a conservator, adapting ANSI/NISO Z39.79 to your institution.

The same things that damage materials in your archives damage them on exhibit: light, fluctuations in temperature and humidity, poor support, contact with acidic or other damaging materials, air pollution, poor security, mold, and insects. In almost all cases, damage is cumulative and cannot be reversed. Never display valuable materials permanently, especially paper artifacts. Many conservators recommend displaying copies of originals since color photocopying and scanning can create very high-quality copies. You can also display second or duplicate copies of books, etc., kept specifically for exhibit purposes. The less control you have over the conditions of the exhibit, the more you should use copies or duplicates. When you must exhibit originals, here are preservation considerations:

Light

All forms of light are harmful to paper. Paper, ink, book cloth, and photographic emulsions are extremely sensitive to light damage. Ultraviolet (UV) light is especially damaging and comes from natural light, fluorescent lamps, and tungsten-halogen (quartz iodine) lamps. UV filters can be installed on windows and cases, and filter sleeves can be used on fluorescent and tungsten-halogen bulbs. Because lighting technology is changing quickly, check with a conservator before buying filtering materials for lights. Incandescent bulbs (old-style household bulbs) do not give off ultraviolet light but, as with all light sources, emit heat. In general, use curtains, blinds, or UV film on windows; use indirect lighting and dimmers; never put light sources in cases; and use filtering films or sleeves as appropriate. Cover cases with cloth and turn off lights when visitors are not present. If you keep an exhibit up for several months, make sure the path of the sun does not strike the cases directly as the year progresses. Also consider keeping a log of cumulative light exposure for originals. Purchase a UV light meter and consider using light exposure cards in your cases.

(Continued on page 30)

(Continued from page 29)

Temperature and Humidity

Stable temperature and humidity are vital to protecting materials on exhibit, yet this can be hard to achieve. In general, aim for 35–50 percent relative humidity and 70-degree temperature, but stability is more important than exact numbers. Aim for no more than a five percent variation in either. Purchase an inexpensive hygrometer/thermometer and keep it in your exhibit area. You also can use humidity-absorbing silica gels in the cases. When you have poor temperature and humidity control (old buildings, exhibits in foyers, etc.), use copies or duplicates; if you must use originals, create micro-environments in the case by framing or encapsulating them to slow down the fluctuations in temperature and humidity.

Cases, Props, Supports, Adhesives, and Case Dressing

Materials used for case construction can be harmful, including wood, wood sealants, paints, adhesives, cloth, gaskets, etc. These materials, including old wood, can off-gas or are acidic. Be aware of what the case is made of and what goes in it, including any supports, props, and case decorations, and make sure these do not contribute to the deterioration of the exhibit materials. Ideally, cases should be chemically stable and made of anodized aluminum or epoxy-coated steel frames and glass. If you must use wood cases, know that many woods, especially plywood and oak, are very acidic and off-gas. Seal the wood using a water-based polyurethane, two-part epoxy sealer, or MicroChamber paint/sealant. Allow at least three weeks for the sealant to dry and air out after application. Check with a conservator for a recommendation, as the formulation of such products changes over time.

After sealing, also use barrier materials between the wood and the displayed items; line the bottom and sides of the case with passive or active barriers. Passive materials include polyester film (Mylar), Marvelseal, or acid-free Bristol board. Active barriers react chemically with harmful gasses and trap them; the best-known products are MicroChamber boards, sheets, or emulsion paint.

Cloth can be acidic (silk) or off-gas (wool), so select undyed cotton, linen, polyester, or cotton-polyester fabrics for use in exhibitions. Wash the fabric to remove sizing. Regardless, no exhibit materials should come into direct contact with the cloth; use one of the barrier materials noted above. Gaskets, which seal the case, should be Teflon or acrylic, not rubber. Props and supports should be chemically stable. Any commonly used conservation glues can

be used in cases (methyl cellulose), as well as Scotch 415 tape or other archival paper repair tape.

Displaying Books and Paper

All books and paper materials need support while on exhibit. In general, books should be displayed unopened, either horizontally or at a slight angle, with proper support and never upright. If a book is to be displayed open, it must be supported at an angle that does not damage the binding; never display an open book flat. Use book cradles or wedge props. Turn the pages every few days to reduce light damage. Keeping an open book on display for long periods can damage it structurally.

Paper items, including letters and photographs, should be mounted to acid-free support boards slightly larger than the items for both support and as a barrier. The item can be put into a hinged mat or mounted to a board using archival photo corners or polyester film strips; this avoids using adhesives on the item itself. Items also can be encapsulated using polyester enclosures. If you encapsulate very acidic items, deacidify them first. If you frame an item, make sure the mats and backing are acid-free and that the glazing and frame materials do not touch the item.

Resources

As the steward of the materials in your care, you cannot allow them to be damaged by poor exhibit conditions, any more than you would allow them to be damaged by poor storage or handling. A well-planned exhibit that also protects the materials on display is a wonderful tool for education and outreach. Below are resources to give you specific recommendations regarding all the topics briefly discussed above:

- National Information Standards Organization, *Environmental Conditions for Exhibiting Library and Archival Materials*, 2 March 2001, <<http://www.niso.org/standards/z39-79-2001>> (9 May 2011).
- Mary Todd Glaser, *Protecting Paper and Book Collections during Exhibition*, 2007, <http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/2The_Environment/05ProtectingCollections.php> (9 May 2011).
- Regional Alliance for Preservation, “Publications and Resources,” <<http://www.rap-arcc.org/publications-resources/bibliography/category/exhibition>> (9 May 2011).