



Display and Exhibit Cases

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JUDGING FROM THE AMOUNT of information on this topic located in the literature of librarianship, anyone searching for specific details about exhibit and display cases will find it difficult to obtain. *Library Literature* (1952-1963) contains fewer than a half-dozen references that relate, even cursorily, to the subject. It is apparent that librarians who are concerned with equipment for displays and exhibits must rely upon their own experience or on catalogs from manufacturers and on interviews and correspondence with other librarians and planners.

No doubt much of what is known about the advantages or disadvantages of different kinds of exhibit cases has been learned from those administrators who work in museums and galleries, or in libraries. The duties of an exhibition officer are more varied in some of our large privately endowed libraries than in the smaller tax-supported institutions where a staff member may be in charge of exhibits as one of several duties. There may be certain exceptions to this generalization, but from this writer's observation, those libraries with important holdings and the best exhibition equipment generally have the advantage of trained people who manage and plan exhibitions.

Few libraries have found it possible to imitate either the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York or the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, with regard to the elaborate and appropriate display cases installed and the exhibition techniques employed in these institutions. For the many smaller and less affluent libraries, any recommendations that might seem necessary where a Beinecke, a Morgan, a Lilly or a Huntington is concerned, would certainly extend beyond what could be accomplished in a majority of our colleges, universities, and local municipal libraries throughout this country.

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Few museums, historical societies, or special libraries, not counting certain industrial concerns, have the funds needed to acquire the desired exhibition cases for displaying their own valuable and prominent collections. Nevertheless, there are some institutions where modern and approved exhibition cases have been installed in older and less splendid quarters. A good example is the Newberry Library, on Walton Place in Chicago, where improvements were made after costly remodeling and redecorating of a structure that is now more than seventy-five years old. The exhibition cases, as well as other accouterments, now in use complement the attractive and practical interior of the library and provide readers and visitors with more than the usual comforts found in many of our older established libraries.

When planning an entirely new building, it should be possible to specify suitable furniture and equipment which will be appropriate and workable according to the needs and functions of the institution. One established architect, recently expressed his views as follows:

It is my opinion that the types of library equipment acceptable for use in the new building should be determined in conjunction with the early planning of the required areas. This enables the architect to project equipment into his preliminary design. At the same time he is considering rooms, spaces, orientation, and functional traffic flow. . . . This information, combined with the knowledge and flexibility of the selected equipment, permitted much greater freedom of design analysis. . . . Our next thought should be to design all of the equipment spaces to fulfill these functions in the manner best suited to the particular project.¹

For those institutions in the fortunate position of being able to redecorate and refurnish, certain matters relating to exhibit cases must be considered in a different manner. The recommendations presented in this article are based on personal reactions to problems encountered and sometimes solved, by a librarian who has spent over twenty years working in rare book libraries and special collections, industrial, tax-supported and privately endowed on the Pacific Coast, in the Middle West, and in New England. Many of the points treated here have been prompted by inspections of exhibits and exhibition cases in various countries during the past decade, particularly in England and western Europe, as well as in institutional and private libraries from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to San Marino, California. After considerable reflection on the conditions noted for this informal survey, certain factors were identified which may be helpful to anyone interested in

the problems of ordering and installing exhibition cases and displays.

It is apparent that many curators and librarians have made compromises (intentionally or not) in the matter of displays, with the unfortunate result that valuable and irreplaceable documents, printed books, and manuscripts have been damaged beyond repair, or lost for future generations. The common infractions contributing to deterioration of materials on exhibit are discussed briefly in the paragraphs that follow.

Cases that are too small and poorly ventilated, with inadequate or improper lighting (whether incandescent, fluorescent, or natural sunlight) are to be avoided. Direct sunlight, excessive heat, and humidity (or the lack of heat and humidity) are important factors in the control of the rate of deterioration in books, manuscripts, drawings, and other artifacts on display. The evidence collected and studied in our own generation makes it clear that sunlight, strong artificial light, polluted air, dust, and chemical wastes have always had ill-effects on paper, vellum, cloth, and leather. Direct sunlight causes fading and disintegration of fibers in cloth and leather, as well as in paper. One of the chief responsibilities of a curator in the library or museum, as well as of the knowledgeable staff members, is to be aware of the hazards of light, too much heat, excessively dry air, high humidity, and unclean or polluted atmosphere. For a more detailed discussion see W. H. Langwell's book, where many of these matters are discussed.²

With regard to vertical or horizontal cases, the governing principle should be, how are the books and other objects to be displayed. Prints and drawings, properly matted and protected, or framed items, naturally show to advantage in vertical cases, although a strict rule cannot always be applied, for some variations are acceptable, provided of course certain necessary precautions are taken.

At the present time, and for some years past, most exhibit cases are constructed of metal, rather than wood. Special installations have often included wooden bases and frames for the glass, but a majority of the exhibit cases manufactured during the past two decades are made of metal. Strength, permanence, and neatness seem to be qualities required for the better exhibit cases. The metals used are usually bronze or aluminum, although chrome-plated, or even painted, metals are much in favor. There was a period when the technique of applying paint with a wood grain effect simulated wooden cases, but this method is not often used today.

The costs of wood versus metal will depend upon the type of wood

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used and the quality and gauge of metal specified for frames and bases. It is difficult to present comparative costs without some special knowledge of materials. Expensive and exotic woods, beautifully finished, enhance an exhibit case in certain surroundings, but the librarian will need to consider the over-all decor of a building and the other furnishings before specifying the more elaborate designs for an exhibition area. The matter of maintenance is also to be taken into consideration, as wood and metal require different treatments for finishing and cleaning.

It is also necessary to consider, at an early stage in the planning, what will be used for lining the cases as background material. One recommended material is a coarse fabric, but different cloths may be used, provided the matter of resistance to fading and dust is kept in mind. Certain synthetic fabrics developed in the past decade or so may be good solutions in particular instances. Bare metal, and painted metal have been used, although such surfaces show scratches and prevent the use of pins and tacks, which are necessary in many installations. Cork backgrounds are often suitable, as are fiberboard, felt, velvet, cardboard, and paper. All have been used with varying degrees of success.

Although this writer has never worked in a library where light fixtures were installed inside exhibit cases, it should be mentioned, in view of the number of these now in use, that certain problems exist as a result of overheating in these cases. With the development of the cold cathode tube, as well as fluorescent lighting, the amount of heat given off is less than in former times. However, unless they are hermetically sealed, exhibit cases should provide thin vents, properly placed, to allow for circulation of air. If the cases are in an air-conditioned exhibition area or building, there are few problems. However, any vents admit dust and polluted atmosphere, even when the system is working properly, and in the best systems an equipment failure sometimes has had a bad effect on materials displayed in the most modern cases, under what might appear to be ideal conditions.

The use of thumb tacks or glass-headed pins stuck through manuscript letters or fine prints seems indefensible, but trained curators have solved this problem in various ways, and find that vertical displays may be effective when properly placed at a position nearly eye-level, with neatly mounted captions describing the items. In recent years, the availability of non-reflecting, or tinted glass for manuscripts and prints, has proved to be a boon for many galleries and private col-

lectors; and for those libraries that can afford it, such glass is recommended. Although it is more expensive than the usual glass, the importance of this technical improvement is being recognized by many of our best-trained curators.

Those institutions with both horizontal and vertical cases are fortunate, and such libraries as the Morgan and Huntington (among others) find that this combination allows for variety and makes it possible to arrange exciting displays without great inconvenience and with the result that the exhibitions are enhanced and made more attractive to visitors. Libraries with permanent exhibit and display cases may find them inconvenient at times, especially as such factors as narrow width and insufficient depth, as well as insufficient height, contribute to the problems already indicated.

Tall folios, fragile bindings on books and manuscript codices should not be displayed vertically, unless they are properly supported by brackets or lecterns which will prevent further injury to the hinges or loose leaves. Wherever possible, such items should be placed on wooden (or moulded plastic) bases used as cradles, so as to prevent tension and additional spreading. The use of glass weights, or silk ribbon (or acetate cord) for tying the books open, is recommended, but rubber bands, thin silk thread, or paper clips are never to be used for this purpose.

Perhaps the ideal exhibit case cannot be easily described—although anyone who has seen the recent installations at the Beinecke Library at Yale University will agree that the ultimate seems to have been achieved, at least for this great University library.³ At the same time, experienced librarians will realize that it is not always possible to achieve the ideal, without a consideration of costs; and where public funds are limited, the administrator must usually be satisfied with something less than the most expensive and desirable materials.

There are those library buildings (all too many of them) without air-conditioning, whose exhibit cases are placed in large hallways and corridors with high ceilings and without adequate natural or artificial light. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to devise some suitable way to light the cases. Temperature may be difficult to control in such large rooms, and therefore the ventilation as well as temperature and relative humidity in the cases cannot be controlled automatically, with the result that the materials on display may suffer irreparable damage caused by excessive dryness, too much humidity, or lack of air circulation.

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When books and manuscripts are displayed in exhibit cases without proper ventilation or air-treatment, it is often advisable to place small flat dishes of water in the corners of the cases, as inconspicuously as possible, so as to add necessary moisture to the air in the cases. If the case doors are tight-fitting, it is wise to open them occasionally, to prevent mustiness and to allow for the circulation of fresh air. It may be necessary to clean the glass dishes and add fresh water from time to time, especially where excessive dryness is noticed, due to over-heating in the exhibition gallery or the library itself.

Among the necessary and useful props, which can serve as aids to displays of certain materials, are photostats or photographs of reverse sides of letters or printed pages, mirrors for reflecting the backs of objects, bindings, vases, etc., magnifying glasses placed over detailed matter on a map or leaf of manuscript that requires emphasis, and strips of colored paper, ribbons, or small arrows to point to a place in the text or to aid the viewer in locating some specific detail in a book or manuscript page.

With regard to locks on cases, many varieties have been used. It is not necessary to recommend any one type of lock, but certain qualities must be kept firmly in mind if the library is to prevent thefts and annoying problems of tampering and vandalism. The best method by which to prevent tampering is to install small firm locks, hidden at the back of the case or in a concealed position. Manufacturers of exhibition cases for libraries and museums have introduced several varieties of locks, and any one planning to purchase cases for the display of valuable and irreplaceable materials should consult experienced authorities about the best means for preventing loss. Such able administrators as Frederick B. Adams, Jr. at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, Robert L. Feller at the Mellon Institute in Pittsburgh, or Herbert J. Sanborn, exhibits officer at the Library of Congress are men with considerable knowledge on this subject. Of course there are others, and librarians should be in touch with persons of similar experience in their own regions, so as to discuss the best means of specifying proper equipment before the orders are placed.

There is sufficient reason for concern about the matter of thefts, especially in recent years; to avoid embarrassment, as well as financial loss, it seems to be good sense to make certain that every precaution is taken. The matter of proper locks and surveillance is of prime importance to libraries, as well as to museums and galleries. The exhibition officer or administrator should have only a few keys and

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distribute them only to reliable and trustworthy assistants. The experiences of some libraries have been disastrous, especially when unsupervised use of keys is permitted by certain professional, as well as by untrained clerical and janitorial help.

As a final warning, any curator or librarian worthy of his calling will observe certain rules, and never permit himself to rely entirely upon mechanical and automatic equipment. It has come to the attention of the writer, during the past six years, that mechanical (and automatic) equipment is not infallible; and from the instances observed at first hand, it is obvious that the librarian charged with the administration of rare collections must be alert to this possibility. Remedies are few, but where the problems are recognized, the disaster of overheated volumes, mildewed bindings, and dust-covered pages can be avoided, if the curators responsible for exhibitions are cognizant of mechanical and human weaknesses.

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