

Beyond the Books: Programs for Exhibitions

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Exhibitions of rare books and manuscripts are increasingly seen as an important medium through which curators can make special collections more accessible to both the scholarly and nonspecialist public. However, the installation itself should be viewed as only one mechanism which the curator can and should use to communicate through an exhibition—and it may not always be the most effective one. Publications such as the exhibition catalog provide an alternative avenue of approach; as do exhibition programs in which the visitor can participate, the subject of this article.

As might be expected, there is a spectrum of opinion on the purpose of programming in libraries and museums, ranging from those who consider the program purely as an educational tool, to the “just increase the visitor statistics” attitude. Those who emphasize the educational purpose of programs point out that programming should be a part of the institution’s effort to exploit its resources for its clientele. Programs are an extension of the material on the shelves, and should be used to enlighten, critique, or arouse discussion. When tied to exhibitions, programs offer an opportunity to develop the theme or purpose of the exhibition in ways not possible through the installation itself.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who see programming as simply a way of commanding attention and attracting new users or increased use. In other words, programs “lure” people to the library, and it is not necessary that programs be particularly educational or relate to the institution’s basic function. Good programming is good public relations, and its value to the institution lies in improved visibility.¹ Applying this to exhibitions, the more people who see an exhibition, the better—just find some way to get them into the exhibition room.

These justifications for library and museum programming—education, and increased visibility—are not mutually exclusive. They interact and overlap. Ideally, one could design a program which would educate the public about the topic of the exhibition and also lure a large number of people through the front door (if that is what is wanted). It is important, however, before embarking on the expense and

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trouble of organizing a program, to carefully consider one's reasons for doing it. One cannot judge the success of the program—or, indeed, the success of the exhibition which the program supports—without a clear idea of what it is that one wants to achieve. Nor should the examination of motives and goals be limited to the effect of the program on the here and now. The institution's long-term goals should also be kept in mind. It is usual to think of an exhibition program as a "one-off" event, but it is not. Every event which an institution sponsors incrementally adds to the overall picture its public forms of it.

The Rosenbach Museum & Library, which is both a research institution and an historic house museum, has an active exhibition program, mounting three major exhibitions and sixteen smaller ones every year. An independent nonprofit organization, it has no built-in constituency to serve, as do rare book collections in colleges and universities; rather, its audience is the "educated layperson," and its long-term goal is the fostering of appreciation for literature, history, and art in this audience—admittedly a very broadly defined goal. Because of the Rosenbach's small physical size and intimate nature, it emphasizes personal, one-on-one learning in all its programs. Rosenbach has, however, discovered that this approach, a necessity because of physical constraints, is also one of the most effective ways it has of providing a quality learning experience. Personalized learning is an integral part of the exhibition programming as well. This generally translates to an emphasis on quality, rather than simply the quantity of people served.

However, Rosenbach has also discovered, in trying to reach its audience of "educated laypeople," that there exists a large, untapped reservoir of people who have heard good things about the Rosenbach and have always meant to visit, but just haven't done so yet. This implies a need to create incentives for those would-be visitors to actually come. Exhibition programs are a major way to accomplish this. People are event-oriented—they are conditioned to seek the novel or the occasional.² So, luring people through the front door *is* sometimes the Rosenbach's primary focus in its exhibition programming, as it helps to achieve the institution's long-term goal.

The challenge faced by the Rosenbach in trying to balance quality and quantity in its programs is basically the same challenge faced by all special collections or rare book departments which mount exhibitions. How can the curator convey the concept of the exhibition most effectively, and at the same time use this exhibition to build the library's constituency? The discussion of exhibition-related programs which follows is based on Rosenbach experience, but also applies to different institutional contexts. After all, even in a university community it is unlikely that the entire potential audience for an exhibition will be expert in the area addressed; the majority could be accurately described as the Rosenbach's prototypical "educated layperson."

One of the most effective programs the Rosenbach offers is its individualized tours. These are at the heart of the Rosenbach's educational philosophy as a public institution for personal learning. Tours of the museum and the current exhibitions

are provided not only to teach, but to facilitate learning, to allow visitors to define the course their learning will take. Groups are small, ranging from one person to a maximum of fifteen. Visitors are encouraged to ask questions, to react individually, and to focus on those parts of the collections which best satisfy their intellectual curiosity or educational goals. To borrow a phrase used by Patterson Williams, Director of Education at the Denver Art Museum, the guide's role is that of "a mentor, guiding the inexperienced visitor through unfamiliar territory." Enough guidance is provided so that the visitor does not feel overwhelmed, but not so much that the content and character of the visitor's experience are dictated.³

Before each exhibition opens, the curator talks to the Rosenbach's volunteer guides (docents) about the exhibition, expanding on the information which is part of the installation itself. Often this will take the form of a tour of the exhibition. Since the docents are "educated laypeople," the questions which arise during this session are often those which will arise when the docent is taking a member of the outside public around the exhibition. The curator recommends additional reading for those who are particularly interested in the subject. And the curator is accessible to the docents throughout the run of the exhibition to answer questions which arise.

The Rosenbach's docent-guided tours are invariably cited by visitors as stimulating and educational. The reason a guided tour of an exhibition is appreciated by the visitor is apparent if one spends time observing how many people act in an exhibition room. Most visitors go through with a friend, and they often ask questions of each other. However, since usually neither is very informed about the subject of the exhibition, most questions go unanswered or are incorrectly answered. When a docent is present who *is* familiar with the subject matter, the visitor can receive an immediate and informed response—a more satisfying educational experience than stimulating inquiry but leaving it unanswered. This one-on-one interaction also creates a positive impression of the institution in general, as a place where the individual visitor is valued. This has a long-term and positive impact on constituency-building, even though the number of people who actually have a guided tour of a particular exhibition may not be particularly large. Visitors who have enjoyed a tour are more likely to come back to the next exhibition and bring their friends. And from the curator's point of view, this interaction of the public with docents also affords immediate response on the effectiveness of the exhibit installation and labeling. It is not unknown at the Rosenbach for a curator to rewrite a label during the run of an exhibition.

Most special collections departments do not have a corps of volunteers to give exhibition tours "on demand" as does the Rosenbach. However, it is possible to offer tours of an exhibition on a scheduled basis and to focus on a particular group, using existing curatorial staff. This was the approach used with the exhibition "Editing Shakespeare: The Taming of the Text," where the curator of the exhibition, Eileen Cahill, offered tours targeted to school groups. Unlike many of the exhibitions which

the Rosenbach mounts, this one fit specifically with the school curriculum (and one of the reasons for doing it was to increase the museum's visibility with schools). A month before the exhibition opened, 127 letters were sent out to teachers of English at local secondary schools, high schools, and colleges and universities.⁴ Teachers were offered a package tour that included a short introduction to the Rosenbach; a talk about Shakespeare which continued on to a discussion of the Restoration theatre; then a presentation on the exhibition, discussing reasons why Shakespeare was revised (physical dimensions of the stage, literary taste, contemporary political references, etc.). High school teachers were offered handouts for the students prepared by the curator, giving plot summaries, and a take-home assignment. The entire presentation took about 40 minutes. A charge of \$1.50 per student, with the teacher admitted free (Rosenbach's usual student rates) was made.

Judged in terms of visitor numbers, the result was modest—13 groups, or 221 people. Questionnaires were given to teachers and students afterwards so that the effectiveness of the program could be evaluated. Without exception, participants praised the quality of the information conveyed, and remarked on how helpful it was to have the curator there to answer questions. One interesting fact which emerged was that with all the groups, only one member had been to the Rosenbach before. This is typical of a pattern seen in Rosenbach programs: few people make a completely "cold" first visit, they are either brought by a friend or come on a friend's recommendation. While it is unlikely that offering tours of an exhibition will dramatically increase the numbers recorded in visitor statistics in the short term, it is likely to have a long-term "multiplier" effect, as each new visitor the program brings in is likely to return with a friend. More importantly, guided tours are the most effective way to convey to the visitor what it is the curator wants them to learn from the exhibition. And from the visitor's point of view, because it is personalized, interactive education, they are able to extract, in addition, what particularly interests them. In terms of the quality of the visitor experience, it is difficult to improve upon the guided tour; and in terms of expanding the constituency of the institution over the long term, it seems worth investing staff time in it.

The more usual type of exhibition program, however, is more a mass experience—a public lecture. It is the most common because it is also one of the simplest and least expensive to produce—it requires only a room, a speaker, and an audience. In arranging a lecture in conjunction with an exhibition, the topic should not simply replicate the information in the exhibition itself, but should give it an added dimension. For example, for the exhibition "Carried Away by Indians: Indian Captivity Narratives and the Evolution of a Stereotype," where the material in the exhibition was largely printed books, the lecture emphasized visual, rather than narrative, stereotypes. Dr. Rayna Green of the National Museum of American History explained Indian stereotypes occurring in art, advertising, and in children's games such as "cowboys and Indians." Rosenbach expanded its audience for this

lecture beyond its own members by borrowing the mailing list of another Philadelphia institution, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, whose members seemed likely to be interested in the topic. About 30 percent of the actual audience came from this source. For “Blake to Beardsley: The Artist as Illustrator,” an exhibition of English and French nineteenth-century drawings which included John Tenniel’s drawings for *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass*, Michael Patrick Hearn spoke on children’s book illustration in nineteenth-century England. Again, in addition to the members list, Rosenbach mailed invitations to children’s librarians in the Delaware Valley, many of whom came with their families and colleagues.⁵ Both these lectures obviously relate to the respective exhibition, but they approach the topic from a different direction. From an educational standpoint, the lectures both reinforce the “theme” of the exhibition and expand upon it, taking it beyond the material in the exhibition cases. Further, the lectures enable the institution to reach a different audience, many of whom, without the incentive of the lecture, would not think to visit the exhibition. Programs should be evaluated not only according to success with one’s traditional audience (not minimizing the importance of keeping one’s members or friends happy), but also in the program’s ability to attract new audiences and to arouse ongoing interest in the institution.

Obviously, if the audience is to leave the lecture with a positive feeling about the program, the most important factor is to have an interesting speaker. Such lecturers are often difficult to find, and it may take a great many telephone calls to find someone who has heard a suggested speaker actually speak. It is well worth the time, if only to avoid the deadening bore. Sometimes, however, it is not so much that the speaker is intrinsically boring, as that he or she has not been adequately prepared for the event by the organizer. Speakers should be told the level of the audience and how long to talk, so that they can adapt themselves accordingly.

In order to take full advantage of the opportunity provided by the lecture, do not let the audience immediately disperse. The program is in conjunction with an exhibition, so it is obviously desirable to have those attending the program *see* the exhibition—the purpose of the program is to expand on the exhibition, not replace it. That tried-and-true “carrot”—food and drink—is a most effective inducement for people to linger at the exhibition site. The refreshments do not need to be elaborate or expensive—a few bottles of wine or soft drinks and some crackers and cheese are almost as great an inducement as fancy hors d’oeuvres. Once the audience has reassembled near the refreshments, which should be immediately adjacent to the exhibition space, the staff (wearing name tags so that they can be easily identified) should be available to answer questions, much as if the event were a guided tour of the exhibition, although not so structured.

If one has been successful in providing a stimulating speaker and program, build on that energy afterwards. If the purpose of the program is to facilitate learning, it should be prolonged into a context of more effective one-on-one learning. A

reception is a continuation of the program, giving people the opportunity to reinforce and expand what they have heard in the lecture by talking individually with the speaker. It also gives the public an opportunity to talk to the staff about the program and the exhibition, and gives the staff the opportunity to gauge reaction to the program and to promote the library/institution itself. While receptions add costs to the program in terms of refreshments and the additional staff needed, they can facilitate education as well as promote a general feeling of goodwill.

Perhaps the most successful event the Rosenbach has hosted in recent years combined the “individual” learning of the tour with the “mass” education of the lecture. This was a workshop called “Valuing the Past,” mounted in conjunction with the exhibition “Rosenbach Redux: Further Book Adventures in England and Ireland.” Since the exhibition focused on rare books and manuscripts as commodities in the market, Rosenbach thought it appropriate to offer present-day collectors and would-be bibliophiles a chance to learn first-hand about their family treasures.⁶ Publicity for the workshop urged the public to have their books, manuscripts, and family records examined by knowledgeable professionals who would provide a nonmonetary estimate of their value, significance, and condition.

Held on a Saturday in order to reach as large an audience as possible, the workshop began at 10 a.m. with two 20-minute lectures: “What makes a rare book rare?” by the Rosenbach’s curator of books, and “How to care for family treasures,” by Glen Ruzicka, Chief Conservator of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts. These were each followed by short question-and-answer periods. The lectures were formulated to answer many of the general questions participants would have about rare books and their value and care. From 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., two conservators and four curators looked at books and manuscripts individually.⁷

The workshop was very successful in attracting members of the general public. In addition to mailing brochures about the program to the usual mailing list and posting notices around the immediate neighborhood, Rosenbach was able to interest the local press and received extensive coverage. Articles appeared in the newspaper both the Wednesday and Friday before the program, resulting in a flood of applicants for the workshop.⁸ While the workshop was free, it was necessary to reserve a place; registration was closed at 200, and many people had to be turned away. Registrants were told to limit themselves to three items (although this did not prevent some people from turning up with suitcases full of books).

The atmosphere was one of controlled chaos. After the two lectures, participants were urged to spend time in the exhibition area rather than waiting in line to talk to the evaluators, since it was obviously not possible for six people to handle 200 all at once. Fortunately many people heeded this advice.

Evaluators did *not* put monetary values on the books and manuscripts. If the item was not rare or important, the person was told why (as gently as possible); if it had some value, it was looked up in *American Book Prices Current* and the range of prices

shown and the terminology explained. A list of local dealers and their subject specialties (compiled from the *ABAA Directory*) was distributed. While a very few participants kept insisting that a price be put on their books, most were satisfied to discuss them for a few minutes with the evaluator. Again, the one-on-one contact, although necessarily brief, made it possible to individualize the information given in the lectures, and made for a more satisfying experience. And some people were pleasantly surprised—in addition to the family Bibles and gas bills from 1930 which were brought in, there were first editions of Twain, Whitman, and Joyce, and letters by Stonewall Jackson and Richard Rush, to name only a few of the hundreds which were presented. It was an exhausting experience for the evaluators, who were kept steadily at it for three hours.⁹

Perhaps one of the most cost-effective ways to host an exhibition program is to reverse the usual order of events, organizing an exhibition because an event is being planned by someone else. Such “tie-ins” guarantee at least a minimum level of audience, although one will probably want to reach other audiences as well. As the Rosenbach has no ready-made scholarly constituency, this is one of the methods it uses to reach more specialized scholarly groups in order to heighten its profile in the research community. On several occasions Rosenbach has organized an exhibition to coincide with a conference arranged by one of the many colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area. Thus Joyce exhibitions were mounted for the meetings of the International James Joyce Society in 1985 and 1989, and a Chaucer exhibition in 1986 during the meeting of the Fifth International Congress of the New Chaucer Society. These were major exhibitions; given that the Rosenbach’s usual audience is more generalist in nature, more often one of the smaller (three or four cases) exhibition areas is used. Publicity for the conference includes information about the exhibition at the Rosenbach; and often Rosenbach will host a reception in order to ensure that conference participants are “lured” through its front door. Rosenbach also ties into existing lecture series, as during the Marianne Moore exhibition “Vision into Verse,” where the poet was featured as part of the YM-YWHA Poetry Center’s poetry season, which has been going on now for more than twenty years. Information about conference schedules can be obtained through the local convention and visitors bureau (which often knows several years in advance if a large conference will be in town); through the newsletters of organizations such as the AHA, MLA, and more specialized groups such as the Society for Eighteenth-century Studies; but most importantly, by ensuring that those scholars who use the collection are aware that the library would be pleased to organize a small exhibition and reception should a group they are involved with be interested in a special event.

However, a library’s resources in time and money are scarce. The institution should not only think hard about the reasons for organizing a program beforehand, it should also evaluate the program afterwards. The questions to be asked before and after are the same, but the answers may be different given the experience of the event:

how does this programming contribute to the library's long-term goals? and how did the program accomplish in the short term the more specific purposes for which it was designed? This final step—evaluation—is often overlooked in the pressure of the event and the sense of accomplishment which is naturally felt whenever something is completed (unless the event has been an obvious disaster, in which case almost everyone will see the need to engage in some evaluation). Boyd Rayward, in an article on evaluating library programs, recommends a “qualitative” evaluation, judging a program as one would a book: for content, structure, presentation, and interest. What is important in this kind of evaluation is that it is not simply casual impression hastily assembled, but conclusions based on carefully laid out and delimited objectives and procedures. As such, it does require that data be gathered during the program, necessitating advance planning. During the program, the staff can be alerted to check to see if participants walked out, exhibited enthusiasm, asked questions, or gave other evidence of satisfaction. The program's apparent educational or intellectual value can be assessed by talking to members of the audience afterward. In other words, “qualitative” evaluation is an informed but personal assessment. And, given the limited data collectible by personal observation, the conclusions may be wrong. However, “some attempt at formal evaluation, in full awareness of the limitations of the attempt, is better than no attempt at all.”¹⁰

The type of program which can be mounted for an exhibition is limited only by one's imagination and budget, and the physical stamina of the staff. In addition to tours, lectures, workshops, and conferences, the Rosenbach has held at various times book-signings, poetry readings at the Philadelphia Zoo (some of Marianne Moore's poems about animals, with the animals present), theatre evenings, films, etc. The literature is full of examples of innovative programs, most of which can be adapted to connect with a specific exhibition.¹¹

To quote the words of the immortal Alice (slightly out of context), “What is the use of a book . . . without . . . conversation?”¹² Exhibition programs provide an opportunity to go beyond the books in the exhibition cases to face-to-face conversation between the visitor, the curator, and the library's staff. The rewards for the visitor, and the library, are worth the effort.

A SUMMARY CHECKLIST FOR PROGRAM PLANNERS

Many of the considerations and problems encountered in program planning are unique to the type of program planned, and to the host institution. The following list consists of basic guiding principles; but, as should be apparent from the programs described above, each institution will develop an approach to programs appropriate for its exhibitions, its environment, and its audience.

1. Establish objectives. What audience is the institution trying to reach? What is the most effective way to reach it?

2. Compute the costs (amount of staff time needed, honoraria for speakers, space and equipment rental, printing and postage for announcements, food and drink, etc.).

If the institution decides that the results expected are worth the expense:

3. Allow enough time for planning. A poorly run program can generate bad feeling and publicity with both program presenters and the public.

4. Check for conflicting events which are likely to draw from the program's potential audience.

5. Plan a publicity campaign. If one is planning a major conference, or hopes to draw an audience from beyond the immediate area, be aware that most professional journals and national travel magazines need *at least* six months and often longer to insert even a brief announcement. If the curator wants to place a story about the program, allow more time. The editors of the cultural pages of city newspapers, and even small neighborhood newspapers, generally assign stories one to two months in advance of an event.

6. Plan program mailings to reach those on the mailing list four weeks in advance of the event. This allows enough time for people to plan to come, but is not so far in advance that they forget about it. If using bulk mail to distribute publicity about the program, mail seven to eight weeks before the event; for first class, five weeks will do, except around Christmas.

7. Consider requiring a reservation for the event. While it does involve more staff time in answering the telephone and taking names, it also has several important advantages:

a) people are more likely to remember to come;

b) one can see who the publicity has reached by comparing the names to the members or friends list, and those borrowed mailing lists which might have been used;

c) planning is facilitated in terms of setting up chairs, ordering food and drink for the reception, etc.;

d) if one has absolutely no response, the institution is alerted that something has gone wrong with the publicity campaign. The staff will then have time to gather an audience so that the institution and the speaker are not embarrassed. On the other hand, if response far exceeds expectations, there will be time to find a larger space. Also, late callers can be told that the event is already filled, or warned that they are likely to have to stand.

8. Draw up a *written* operating plan—what has to be done, when, and by whom—and make sure all staff who will be there have a copy. It is a good idea to designate one staff member in charge of security to prevent people from wandering where they should not. The staff member in charge of the program should be a “floater” to see

to the needs of the speaker(s) and to handle any difficult situations, rather than saddled with a job that cannot be left undone.

9. If the program is held off-site, the organizer should take along everything that might possibly be needed. (With slide lectures, extra bulbs for the projector, extension cords, and a three-prong adaptor are essential equipment.)

10. Think about what can go wrong and be prepared for it.

NOTES

1. W. Boyd Rayward, "Programming in Public Libraries: Qualitative Evaluation," *Public Libraries* 24 (Spring 1985): 24–26. See also C. O. Poucher, "Innovations in Program Planning in Academic Libraries," *RQ* 18 (Spring 1979): 264–66.

2. See Danielle Rice, "Examining Exhibits," *Museum News* 68 (Nov./Dec. 1988): 47–50.

3. Quoted in "Focus on the Visitor," *J. Paul Getty Trust Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1990): 6.

4. The maintenance of a good mailing list is essential for the success of any exhibition program.

5. Even though an event may be publicized in the press or through posters, people seem to be more likely to come if they receive a personal invitation. This is the concept behind "targeted mailings." In an academic setting, one could "target" students and faculty in a particular department.

6. The author's experience as an evaluator in a previous workshop, organized by Carol Spawn of the Academy of Natural Sciences for the "Legacies of Genius" exhibition of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, was invaluable. If you are organizing a program of a type you have not done before, it is always helpful to find someone who has organized such an event to alert you to the problems you are likely to encounter.

7. Glen Ruzicka and Maria Fredericks of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts; James Green and Karen Nipps of the Library Company of Philadelphia; Edwin Wolf 2nd, Librarian Emeritus of the Library Company; and Leslie A. Morris of the Rosenbach.

8. The Rosenbach is fortunate in having good relationships, cultivated over many years, with both freelance and staff writers on the local papers. If, however, your institution is not so fortunate, a display ad in the "weekend" section of the paper would, I suspect, attract as many people.

9. We had planned to work in one-and-a-half hour shifts, with four people on the first and two on the second; but because of the size of the response it was impossible to break away. We will try to increase the number of evaluators the next time.

10. Rayward, "Programming in Public Libraries: Qualitative Evaluation," 26.

11. The basic manual is John S. Robotham and Lydia LaFleur, *Library Programs: How to Select, Plan and Produce Them* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981). See also Poucher, "Innovations in Program Planning in Academic Libraries," 264-66. The majority of articles published on programs in the library literature deal with literacy programs and children's programs. The museum world has traditionally been more involved in public programming, and *Museum News* frequently carries short articles describing such programs. The J. Paul Getty Trust in particular has been funding a variety of studies on art museum education; these are summarized in a special issue of the *J. Paul Getty Trust Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1990).

In this article I have not gone into detail about sources of funding for exhibition programs, as fundraising could be a separate article in itself. Much will of course depend on the amount of money needed. State humanities councils and art councils generally look favorably on programs for the general public. "Humanities Projects in Libraries and Archives," part of the NEH Division of General Programs, awards both planning and implementation grants for programs.

12. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ed. Donald Rackin (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1969), p. 115.

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