

A History of Library Exhibitions and Their Development

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Abstract—Exhibitions have been an important aspect of librarianship throughout history. Without an understanding of their past, the current efforts and impacts of exhibitions are undervalued. Through a literature review that focuses on the history of exhibitions with roots in Europe and related contemporary issues in the United States, the authors argue that exhibitions are part of a library's identity. They also make recommendations for how to document library exhibitions for the future, including following library exhibition best practices, forging institutional collaborations, and expanding librarian professional development opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Exhibitions in libraries currently serve a function beyond simply displaying books or rare materials. They invite participation, inspire curiosity, and promote creativity. They are contrived, evocative, and experiential by nature. They deserve greater attention and investigation as an essential element of librarianship. This article explores many types of library exhibitions, including hosted traveling exhibitions, exhibitions created from a library's collection, and exhibitions partnered with other units, such as special collections.

WHY LIBRARY EXHIBITION HISTORY?

In a recent interview, Jessica Lacher-Feldman, author of *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries*,¹ stated that “exhibit work is library work and library work is exhibit

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1. Jessica Lacher-Feldman, *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013).

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work.”² In libraries, exhibitions have been used to highlight collections, enhance user experience, and create community engagement opportunities for patrons.³ Exhibitions in libraries range from a display of books and archival materials to a large-scale production with interactive components. The rigor and intentionality of exhibitions in US libraries are reflected in the growth of interest groups and conference sessions hosted by major professional associations. For example, the Art Libraries Society of North America formed an Exhibitions Special Interest Group in 2016, the College Art Association 2020 annual conference offered a session titled “Hands-On to Eyes-On: From Material Collections to Digital Exhibitions,” and the Society for American Archivists Exhibits and Events Standing Committee “serves as a nexus for learning, innovation, and collaboration for archives-centered exhibits and events.”⁴ In academic institutions, there is a growing interest in examining the convergence of exhibitions and libraries, particularly in the area of professional training and competency development for librarians.⁵ Libraries are seeing a dramatic paradigm shift of exhibitions moving from the periphery to the core of their identity. However, the qualitative and multidimensional understanding of exhibitions is still perceived as supportive of other functions within a library, resulting in a lack of representation in the historic record of a library, in the library profession as a whole, and in organizational support within a library for exhibition work.

American philosopher John Rajchman posited that the history of exhibitions is more than the philosophical history of aesthetics and more than simply the act of appreciating shown and presented items. Instead, the history of exhibitions concerns the public experience of concepts and information, contributing to an “aura” and shared atmosphere.⁶ Library exhibitions embody critical literacy, engaging visitors in practicing empathy, reasoning, and judgments of sentiment and taste. Understanding the history of exhibitions helps librarians and art information professionals reflect on their creative work and instructional approach.⁷ This understanding evaluates their ability to articulate their role in serving their community, moving the public

2. Jessica Lacher-Feldman, interviewed by Carol Ng-He and Elizabeth Meinke, “Exhibitions Special Interest Group: Author Talk, Jessica Lacher-Feldman,” interview April 9, 2020, on Art Libraries Society of North America Learning Portal/Kultura Channel, https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/Exhibitions+Special+Interest+GroupA+Author+Talk%2C+Jessica+Lacher-Feldman/1_9loffgg3/208298113.

3. Carol Ng-He, “Exhibits for All: Fostering a Creative Culture for Community Growth,” *Illinois Library Association Reporter* 37, no. 3 (June 2019): 12–16, https://www.ila.org/content/documents/reporter_0619.pdf.

4. College Art Association, 108th College Art Association Annual Conference, February 12–15, 2020, <https://caa.confex.com/caa/2020/meetingapp.cgi/Session/4755>; Society of American Archivists, Exhibits and Events Standing Committee, 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/reference-access-and-outreach-section/exhibits-and-events-standing-committee>.

5. Jeonghyun Kim, “Building Rapport between LIS and Museum Studies,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 53, no. 2 (2020): 149–61, www.jstor.org/stable/23249105; Kiersten F. Latham, “Lumping, Splitting and the Integration of Museum Studies with LIS,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 56, no. 2 (2015): 130–40, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.56.2.130>.

6. John Rajchman, “*Les Immatériaux* or How to Construct the History of Exhibitions: Landmark Exhibitions Issue,” *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (Autumn 2009), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/les-immateriaux-or-how-to-construct-the-history-of-exhibitions>.

7. Char Booth, *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning: Instructional Literacy for Library Educators* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).

toward a more just world, and shaping the history of humankind. A question from Rajchman guides librarians in their reflection:

In what ways have exhibitions, more than simple displays and configurations of objects, helped change ideas about art, intersecting at particular junctions with technical innovations, discursive shifts and larger kinds of philosophical investigations, thus forming part of these larger histories?⁸

Knowing the history of library exhibitions and being proactive in documenting this history is to manifest the philosophy of librarianship. This article encourages readers to:

- Recognize that exhibitions are a critical part of library work and have always been;
- Enhance the awareness of some current themes of library exhibitions and how they inform future service directions; and
- Advocate for best practices for documenting the history of library exhibitions to make exhibition work more sustainable and understood.

THE ENTWINED HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LIBRARIES AND EXHIBITING INSTITUTIONS

THE SCOPE OF THE OVERVIEW

The authors acknowledge the existence and significance of vibrant book cultures in North and Central Africa, Asia, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and in the Arabian Peninsula.⁹ In light of the authors' personal exhibition experience and exposure to current exhibition practices, in this article more emphasis is placed on the developments of collections in Western history and how this history influenced exhibition practices in the United States. This is not to say that library exhibitions are exclusively a Eurocentric phenomenon. Rather, the article serves as a starting point for further discussion and exploration of the history of library exhibitions beyond the United States to other parts of the world.

As libraries were essential to America's founding generation, and European colonialism influenced collections in the United States, the birth of libraries in the United States was interwoven with the history of the young country.¹⁰ Publicly accessible collections, particularly the institution of the public library, grew rapidly in the United States in the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries.¹¹

Library exhibitions have been in existence as long as humans have been collecting and creating collecting entities. It is important to understand that these entities and

8. Rajchman, "Les Immatériaux."

9. Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 25–45; Stuart A.P. Murray, *The Library: An Illustrated History* (New York: Skyhorse Press, 2009), 18–19, 44–46.

10. Library of Congress, "History of the Library of Congress," <https://www.loc.gov/about/history-of-the-library/>.

11. Ernestine Rose, *The Public Library in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 13.

actions may have not been formally titled or understood as “a library,” “a museum,” or “an exhibition,” but examples of collecting, displaying, and comprehending objects, however informal, have remained consistent throughout this history. In addition, this historical overview attempts to show that it is only since the Industrial Revolution that the definitions surrounding these actions and entities became so fixed that libraries became perceived as a place only for accessing text-based knowledge and museums as places only for object interaction. In fact, these roles are far more complex and intertwined.

ORIGINS OF EUROPEAN COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING INSTITUTIONS: HIGHLIGHTS FROM ANTIQUITY TO RENAISSANCE

The Library of Alexandria, located in the Roman Empirical port city of Alexandria, was both a physical and a metaphorical construct where reading text, object exhibition, and tactical, performative, and observational actions were deemed important. The collection consisted of papyrus scrolls, though this was only one part of the Mouseion of Alexandria, which was a stone megastructure that also housed a garden, a specimen zoo, living quarters for scholars in residence (Euclid, Callimachus, and Hypatia), lecture halls, and exhibits.¹² In a sense the library demonstrated an early interest in and practice of multimodality of experiences.

During the Middle Ages, around the fifth to the thirteenth centuries, after the collapse of the Roman Empire the act of exhibiting beautiful and meaningful objects was critical to the Catholic Church. The churches, of which libraries were an integral part, were also the only places where objects were publicly exhibited.¹³ Pilgrims and worshippers were immersed in these visual displays, ranging from the gilded altars adorned with precious relics to Biblical frescos. During the Renaissance, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, there was a reexamination of Classical-era ideals, such as the multimodal approach to learning at the Mouseion of Alexandria. In *Gesta Grayorum* of 1594, philosopher Sir Francis Bacon described the merits of obtaining knowledge through a multifaceted combination of auditory experience, visual observation, physical interaction, and text reading.¹⁴

Influenced by dynasties such as the Medici family, members of the European ruling class permitted access to their personal collections of wondrous objects. At the height of their popularity in the seventeenth century, these collections were referred to as *wunderkammern* because items were purposefully arranged in a cabinet or specified room.¹⁵ Acquired not just for prestige, these collectives of books, art, or natural specimens became

12. Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History*, 28–29.

13. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Orders of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 68–84. The Abbey Church of Saint Denis exhibited jewels, vestments, missals, and exotica like a “griffin egg” and a “unicorn horn.” The Cathedral of Seville favored items from the natural world, such as alligators and elephant tusks.

14. Francis Bacon, *Gesta Grayorum* (1594, 1688; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 34–35. Bacon describes his ideal library as having four equal and essential components: a universal collection of print and manuscript works, a botanical and animal specimen garden, “a goodly huge cabinet” of both manmade and natural objects of aesthetic or instructional value [exhibits], and “a stillhouse furnished with mills [makerspace].”

15. Werner Gundersheimer, “Two Noble Kinsmen: Libraries and Museums,” *RBM Librarianship* 3 (Fall 1988): 91–92.

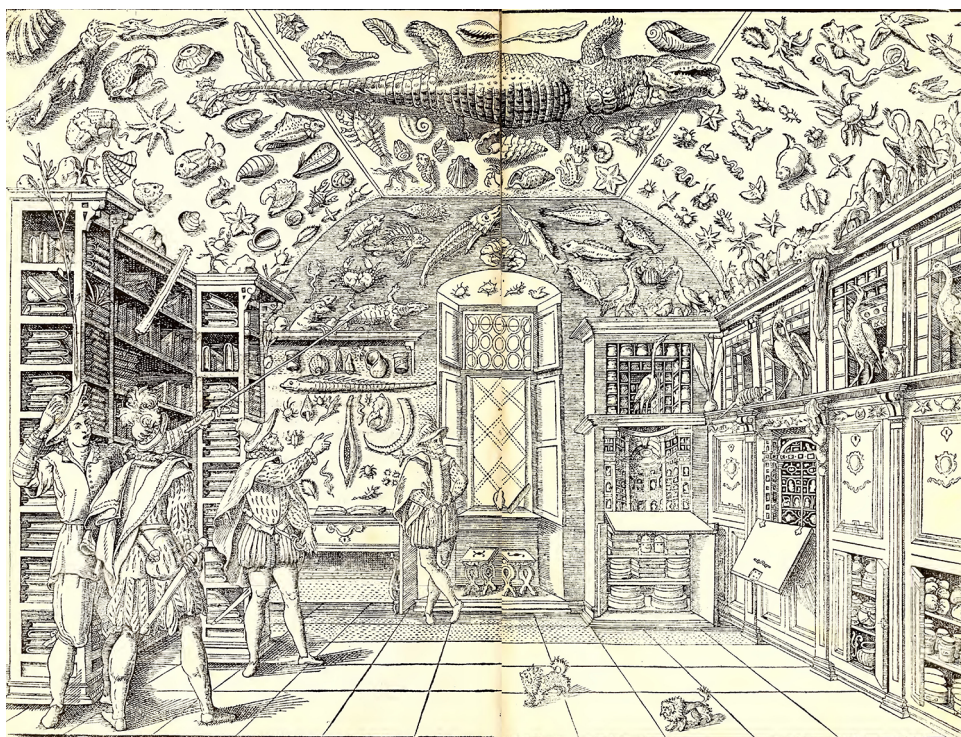


Figure 1. Engraving from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'istoria Naturale di Ferrante Imperato Napolitano libri XXVIII*: (Napoli: Nella Stamparia à Porta Reale, per Costantino Vitale, 1599), foldout. Held by the Smithsonian Libraries. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/183177#page/12/mode/2up>.

equated with public betterment in Western culture. The first published pictorial example of such a “cabinet of curiosity” was that of Ferrante Imaprato, found in *Dell'istoria Naturale* in 1599 (Figure 1).¹⁶

ENLIGHTENMENT SHIFT

Twentieth-century philosopher Michel Foucault famously defines the post-Renaissance world as an epistemic age of creating hierarchy and forming order.¹⁷ In the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, libraries of books and manuscripts became associated with only one type of information: words. The colonization of what was to become the United States predominately by England marked the beginning of the history of libraries in the United States, including the adoption of exhibitions for literacy instruction. Characteristics of the Enlightenment were logical observation, curiosity, reading, and creativity, embodied and exemplified by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin and his circle of inquisitive tradesmen established The Library Company in 1731, the

16. Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'istoria Naturale di Ferrante Imperato Napolitano libri XXVIII: Nella Quale Ordinatamente si Tratta della Diuersa Condition di Miniere e Pietre: Con Alcune Historie di Piante & Animali* (Napoli: Nella Stamparia à Porta Reale, per Costantino Vitale, 1599), foldout, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/183177#page/4/mode/2up>.

17. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9–16.

first subscription library in the United States. The collections included specimens, objects of antiquity, and oddities. More importantly, The Library Company hosted several scientific experiments, including Franklin's early experiments with electricity, and housed scientific apparatuses as part of the collections.¹⁸ This reinforces the precedent of optimal learning through multimodal experiences, as explored by Bacon in the Renaissance period, and it is the root of exhibiting in collecting institutions and libraries in the United States.

The first exhibiting institutions in the United States—the Du Simitiere Collection (founded in 1782), the Charleston Museum (1773), and Charles Wilson Peale's Philadelphia Museum (1786)—operated like The Library Company in that they were not just a way for the theoretical “average person” to self-educate, they were equally places where that average person could experience, observe, learn, socialize, and be entertained by the variety of the collections that included art, specimens, and text.

More evidence for the multimodal approach to learning at libraries is found in the Athenaeum movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as framed by the Neo-Classical era when Greco-Roman culture and history was fetishized. Named after Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, these Athenaeums exhibited art and scientific objects and hosted related events. Like subscription libraries, Athenaeums were privately chartered and funded by memberships. Many of these collections still exist today. Some prominent examples include the Boston Athenaeum (founded in 1807) (Figure 2), the Salem Athenaeum (1810), and the Philadelphia Athenaeum (1814).

THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

For centuries most books were handmade works of art that were owned by a few and could be read only by a limited number of people. With the arrival of industrialized printing techniques in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the value of books' materials and handicraft diminished, and obtaining books became easier. Libraries displayed books to meet and pique public interest. Despite the perceived diminished value of physical books in the nineteenth century, the value of the information they contained did not lessen.¹⁹ The appetite for free public education through collections and exhibitions in both privately endowed and publicly funded institutions flourished during this time. Thanks to philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, over 1,700 public libraries were funded and established throughout the United States and overseas until 1919, when the last funds were distributed. In metropolitan public libraries, exhibitions became a popular tool to enhance patrons' educational experience while visiting the library, especially with the influx of immigrants into the United States. For example,

18. Edwin Wolf, *At the Instance of Benjamin Franklin: A Brief History of the Library Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1995), 11–13. The text collection of The Library Company was diverse in subject area: literature (20 percent), theology (10 percent), philosophy (10 percent), history (30 percent), and social sciences and the arts (30 percent). Franklin said of subscription libraries: “these Libraries have improved the general Conversation of Americans, made the common Tradesmen and Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries.”

19. Henry Ward Beecher, “The Duty of Owning Books,” in *Eyes and Ears* (Boston: Ticknor and Field, 1862), 156. Beecher observed, “Let us congratulate the poor that, in our day, books are so cheap that a man may every year add a hundred volumes to his library for the price of what his tobacco and beer would cost him. Among the earliest ambitions to be excited in clerks, workmen, journeymen, and, indeed among all that are struggling up from nothing to something.”



Figure 2. *Boston Athenaeum*. Interior. Photograph by Thomas E. Marr, 1910. From Digital Commonwealth. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/ht24xc38s>. CC BY-NC-ND.

the New York Public Library's Webster Branch hosted an exhibition of "fine Czech editions and printing, panoramic view of Prague on case above exhibit of books"²⁰ to serve their Bohemian community. The Boston Public Library organized an exhibition about the 1915 Exposition²¹ (Figure 3). At the Pasadena Public Library, "art reproductions of statuary were placed on tables in the library's Reference Room."²²

Progressive thinking about the use of libraries for art displays and exhibitions was reflected in social settlements. At Hull-House, Chicago's first social settlement co-founded by social reformers Jane Addams and Ellen Gates-Starr, immigrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds gathered together to engage in critical and socio-political dialogues, while learning new skills to live in their adopted country. As Addams wrote, "we had before been sustained in the contention that an immigrant population

20. *Webster: Interior Views, Exhibit of Fine Czech Editions and Printing, Panoramic View of Prague on Case Above Exhibit of Books*, lantern slide, New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-8167-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

21. *Boston Public Library. Exhibit, Boston 1915 exposition*. Photographic print, 7 3/4 × 9 in., Boston Public Library, Digital Commonwealth, <https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:c821h195m>.

22. *Pasadena Public Library, Reference Room*, ca. 1901, photographic print, 7 1/4 × 9 5/8 in., California State Library, SoCa Digitization Project, https://cslib.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01CSL_INST/hbrhd2/alma990013850420205115.



Figure 3. *Exhibition of the Public Library of the City of Boston 1915.* Photograph by Boston Public Library, 1909. From Digital Commonwealth. <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/c821h187x>. CC BY-NC-ND.

would respond to opportunities for reading when the Public Library Board had established a branch reading room at Hull-House.²³ To further enrich the residents' intellectual life, an art gallery, exhibitions, and a reading room were crowded into the Hull-House design. Addams wrote,

The first building erected for Hull-House should have been designed for an art gallery, for although it contained a reading-room on the first floor and a studio above, the largest space on the second floor was carefully designed and lighted for art exhibits, which had to do only with the cultivation of that which appealed to the powers of enjoyment as over against a wage-earning capacity.²⁴

SUB-ROSA: ENTERING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

John Cotton Dana, the American library and museum director, explicitly suggested that libraries adopt a “visual instruction” approach to activate learning. He saw that libraries were excellent places to promote inclusion and relevancy to patrons.²⁵ He also proposed

23. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 315.

24. Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 149.

25. John Cotton Dana, *The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana* (Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum Association and The American Association of Museums, 1999), 118–27.

that the success of the public library model is its evolution “from a closed temple of ‘wisdom undisturbed’ to an open workshop of delight and learning.”²⁶ Exhibitions fit into this description of “workshop of delight and learning.” Dana successfully implemented his theories as the head of both the Newark Museum and the Newark Public Library from the early 1900s to the 1920s. Exhibitions, such as one featuring clocks, were used in the library as an inquiry for the public to explore the design of time.²⁷

Exhibitions consistently remained a component of libraries throughout the decades in the twentieth century. Most of the newly built Carnegie branch libraries included areas for display. However, efforts to document the history of library exhibitions were not comprehensive, and formal documentation of these exhibits remained underreported.

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, some libraries organized exhibits at state fairs as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration projects, and artists were hired to paint murals on the walls of libraries as part of building renovations.²⁸ The economic hardship did not end the ambition for visual learning experiences as annual exhibitions still took place during that time, such as the Children’s Book Exhibit at St. Paul Public Library that recorded an attendance of 2,280 adults and children.²⁹

Organizations such as archives, historical societies, and specialty libraries saw tremendous growth in the twentieth century and were receptive to exhibitions as a form of engagement. Smaller specialty collectives—often operating with fewer resources—recognized the potential of exhibitions as frontline advocacy for both the collections and the work of library professionals.³⁰ Between World Wars I and II, an interest in promoting African American history and culture arose as part of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Vivian Harsh, the Chicago Public Library system’s first Black librarian, actively used exhibitions at the Hall Library to foster public education on a variety of topics, ranging from practical food canning demonstrations to more cultural and political features on individuals or topics relating to key Black figures, including Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, George Washington Carver, and Marian Anderson.³¹ Under the helm of Harsh, the Hall Branch utilized events and exhibitions as critical components of operations, modeling itself as a Schomburg Center of the Midwest.³²

26. John Cotton Dana, “A Small American Museum: Its Efforts Toward Public Utility,” *Museum Work* 4 (November 1921–February 1922): 149–50.

27. *Interior View, Newark Public Library*—3, photographic print, 5 × 7 in., Newark Public Library, <http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15109coll4/id/146>.

28. *Library Booth, Works Progress Administration Exhibit*, State Fair, 1938, photographic print, Minnesota Historical Society, <https://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display?irn=10755629>; *Works Progress Administration Handicraft Exhibit*, Saint Paul Public Library, 1939, 5 × 7 in., photographic print, Minnesota Historical Society, <https://collections.mnhs.org/cms/display?irn=10826593>; University of Kentucky, *View of one end of former Browsing Room before the 1963 addition to King Library, Shows WPA mural on west wall*, 1933, photographic print, https://exploreuk.uky.edu/catalog/xt75736mos6q_107_5.

29. Saint Paul Public Library, *The Library Beacon July–December 1933* (Saint Paul, MN: Saint Paul Public Library, 1933), <https://reflections.mndigital.org/catalog/spp:758#/image/o>.

30. Aleksander Gelfand, “If We Build It (and Promote It) They Will Come: History of Analog and Digital Exhibits in Archival Repositories,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 11, no. 1–2 (2013): 53–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2013.882160>.

31. Laura Burt, “Vivian Harsh, Adult Education, and the Library’s Role as Community Center,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 44, no. 2 (2009): 240–42, 247, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25549550>.

32. Emily Guss, “Cultural Record Keepers: Vivian G. Harsh Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago Public Library,” *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 45, no. 3 (2010): 359–63, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/392235>.

The growth of libraries and museums continued in the twentieth century, and the modern perception of such institutions was shaped. This solidified the inaccurate view that libraries are exclusively the place for text-based learning, and museums are the only place for learning through experience. This narrow interpretation can be traced partially to the formalizing of the library profession with the founding of library schools and library professional organizations, including the establishment of the American Library Association in the late nineteenth century. These professional educational programs and organizations at the time favored a hierarchal, formal, and book- and text-centric approach to instructive engagement with patrons.³³ More informal types of library instruction and engagement, such as exhibitions, were deemed supportive, or worse, superficial. This perception pervaded library school pedagogy and the profession well into the late twentieth century. This occurred despite the fact that the most prolific, impactful, and progressive library work at the turn of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century actively incorporated exhibitions and related patron-focused programming as a prime function of the library.

THE DAWN OF THE MILLENNIUM AND THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION:
USER EXPERIENCE (RE)INVENTED

Exhibitions slowly gained attention in the late twentieth century, and they also faced critique and skepticism of their usefulness in academic libraries and special collections. They were frequently seen as ancillary to the library services. However, in the 1980s, discussions of library exhibitions began to find their way into the professional literature.³⁴ By 2000, the word exhibition even appeared in the first volume of *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*.³⁵

Libraries experienced technological leaps, thanks to the development of computers and the internet in the second half of the twentieth century. Libraries gradually automated their catalogs to increase public access and reduce costs by eliminating card production and associated maintenance. They also adopted emerging technologies to enhance “user experience,” a term coined by American scholar Don Norman while working at Apple Computer in 1994. In *Information Technology and Libraries*, the peer-reviewed journal of the Library Information Technology Association, the term “online” can be traced back to issues from the 1980s.³⁶ In June of 1992, the Library of Congress developed what is believed to be the first online exhibit, *Revelations from the Russian Archives*.³⁷ The New York Public Library started digital exhibition activities around 1996 when it created a number

33. Burt, “Vivian Harsh, Adult Education,” 243–44.

34. Amy Chen, Sarah Pickle, and Heather L. Waldroup, “Changing and Expanding Libraries: Exhibitions, Institutional Repositories, and the Future of Academia,” in *The Process of Discovery: The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program and the Future of the Academy*, ed. John C. MacLachlan, Elizabeth A. Waraksa, and Christa Williford (Arlington, VA: Council on Library and Information Resources, Pub 167, September 2015), 64, <https://perma.cc/R3MZ-3HGU>.

35. Chen, Pickle, Waldroup, “Changing and Expanding Libraries,” 64.

36. Mark Dehmlow, “Information Technology and Libraries at 50: The 1980s in Review,” *Information Technology and Libraries* 37, no. 3, (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v37i3.10749>.

37. Gelfand, “If We Build It,” 66.

of web-only presentations based on their collections and websites, inspired by some of the physical exhibitions presented at their research centers.³⁸

The pedagogical value of exhibitions was further recognized in libraries through their role in supporting large-scale, community-wide reading initiatives. In the 1990s, the American Library Association Public Programs Office (ALAPPO) began coordinating traveling exhibitions for libraries across the country. Traveling exhibitions were, and still are, regarded as special events to “help identify libraries as important cultural centers.”³⁹ The “One Book” movement was initiated in 1998 by Nancy Pearl, executive director of the Washington Center for the Book in the Seattle Public Library, as “If All of Seattle Read the Same Book,” with funding by national and local sponsors. Recognizing the growing popularity across the country, in 2003 the ALAPPO began providing training on the planning and execution of the “One Book” initiatives to workers at libraries and associated organizations.⁴⁰ Exhibitions were included in the training manual, noting that they are “an effective way to bring many of the details and related issues to the public in an accessible format that does not depend on specific scheduled events.” One of the first “One Book” hosting libraries, the Phoenix Public Library, exhibited the art of a Southwestern artist that explores the role of art, nature, and literature in Arizona life.⁴¹

OBSERVATIONS OF CURRENT TRENDS

More recently in the United States and Canada, exhibition-focused librarians and library workers have demonstrated a vested interest in four major areas.⁴² They include, but are not limited to:

- Developing library exhibitions best practices, with specific interest in developing approaches to dealing with controversial exhibitions;
- Forging institutional collaboration and advocacy to promote social justice through digital projects;
- Establishing methods to document library exhibition history; and,
- Expanding professional development opportunities and profession-wide accommodation for the work that exhibition librarians do.

EXHIBITION BEST PRACTICES DEVELOPMENT

Several of the professional exhibition-related associations—the American Historical Association, the American Alliance of Museums, the International Image Interoperability

38. New York Public Library, “Online Exhibitions,” <https://www.nypl.org/events/online-exhibitions>.

39. American Library Association, “ALA Public Programs Office: Traveling Exhibitions,” <http://www.ala.org/tools/programming/exhibitions>.

40. John Y. Cole, “One Book Projects Grow in Popularity: News from the Center for the Book,” *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* 65, no. 1 (January 2006) Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0601/cfb.html>.

41. American Library Association Public Programs Office, *Planning Your Community-Wide Read* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2003), <http://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/onebook/files/onebookguide.pdf>.

42. The Art Libraries Society of North America Exhibitions Special Interest Group membership consists of around 200 librarians and library workers that develop library exhibitions and contribute to such efforts. Since 2019 the group has been regularly discussing these topics in formal synchronous meetings, in Q+A portions of events, and informally over asynchronous communication such as listservs and email.

Framework's Museum Community Group, and the Digital Exhibitions Working Group at AthenaPlus in Europe—offer statements and standards on the practices of collection stewardship and exhibitions that address historical subjects.⁴³ While these are helpful references for librarians, they are focused on museums. The Rare Books and Manuscripts division of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) partnered to publish exhibition standards, although these standards consist primarily of legal agreement language for loaning rare books and manuscripts between institutions and are not comprehensive of the intricate components involved in exhibition development and execution.⁴⁴ More widely accepted and encompassing standards for library exhibitions are still needed. To fill this void, the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) Exhibitions Special Interest Group formed a task force in 2020 to develop new exhibitions best practices, which were published in 2021.⁴⁵ The goal is to provide library practitioners with the fundamental framework of planning, implementing, and evaluating exhibitions in a library environment. In response to the growing interests expressed within the SIG and the Society, the best practices will encompass topics such as staffing, financial planning, curating, marketing, programming, and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as required professional training. The formalization, communication, and advocacy for the best practices could entice broader interests and elevate the status of exhibitions in institutional conversations.

When addressing controversial subjects, collective efforts in shaping the exhibition best practices provide library workers with a framework to balance different viewpoints while guiding them to act effectively as an agent for change. Like collection management, library exhibitions require curation.⁴⁶ Community-developed best practices offer the necessary support to address evolving local needs. To promote critical citizenship, library exhibition best practices also support the ALA Library Bill of Rights that recommends libraries develop procedures for the public to submit complaints against an exhibition if desired.⁴⁷ Library professionals who engage in planning and coordinating exhibitions need to communicate explicitly with their constituents about their exhibition

43. American Historical Association, "Standards for Museum Exhibits Dealing with Historical Subjects," updated 2017, <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/standards-for-museum-exhibits-dealing-with-historical-subjects>; American Alliance of Museums, "Collections Stewardship Standards," <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/collections-stewardship-standards/>; International Image Interoperability Framework, "IIIF Museums Community Group," <https://iiif.io/community/groups/museums/#purpose>.

44. Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the American Library Association and the Association of College & Research Libraries, "ACRL/RBMS Guidelines for Interlibrary and Exhibition Loan of Special Collections Materials," approved 2012, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/specialcollections>.

45. ARLIS/NA Exhibitions Special Interest Group, "Best Practices for Library Exhibitions," updated November 2021, https://assets.noviams.com/novi-file-uploads/arlisna/pdfs-and-documents/research_and_reports/Best_Practices_for_Library_Exhibitions__2021_.pdf.

46. Stephanie Beene and Cindy Pierard, "RESIST: A Controversial Display and Reflections on the Academic Library's Role in Promoting Discourse and Engagement," *Urban Library Journal* 24, no. 1 (2018): 20.

47. American Library Association, "Library Bill of Rights," amended January 29, 2019, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>; American Library Association, "User-Initiated Exhibits, Displays, and Bulletin Boards: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," amended June 25, 2019, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/exhibitsdisplaysbulletinboards>.

policies, including content selection, inclusion and accessibility issues, and dispute resolution.⁴⁸ Because points of view may conflict and exhibition content may cause controversy, exhibitions can create dialogues.

INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH DIGITAL PROJECTS

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis forced institutions to close temporarily and restrict public access. To maintain their services and practice of equitable access, many museums and libraries created digital exhibitions to engage their patrons and inspire them to use the collections. Elena Gonzales, author of *Exhibitions for Social Justice*,⁴⁹ proposed numerous strategies for libraries to use digital exhibitions to promote social justice, including co-curating with community members, building resonance with all people through the arts, and upholding transparency in library spaces. As learning experiences are shifted virtually, Gonzales further explained the urgency for libraries, artists, and museums to join forces to leverage resources to maximize exhibitions' impact and widen public access to unique materials.⁵⁰

Gonzales's strategies have been employed by several different library exhibitions in the past years. For example, in 2020 three public libraries in Illinois collaborated with the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum at the University of Illinois at Chicago, with support from Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS), to launch two virtual exhibits—*Why Women Should Vote* and *True Peace: The Presence of Justice*—to celebrate the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote in the United States. A series of associated virtual public programs were offered to engage the public in discussions about race and rights and the history of African American women's political lives in America.⁵¹ Libraries are moving away from the institution-based mode of exhibitions to one that is collection-oriented, where materials from multiple sources are blended for enhanced discoverability. User experience is no longer about just a single institution; instead, it is about helping people pursue the topics in which they are interested.⁵² Moreover, recent research demonstrates that university librarians want more support and collaboration in developing touring exhibitions, both nationally and internationally.⁵³ Collaborative exhibitions give libraries “the opportunity to break us out of

48. Mary Kandiuk, “Avoiding Controversy: Academic Freedom and the Library Exhibit,” *Art Documentation* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 97–102.

49. Elena Gonzales, *Exhibitions for Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

50. Elena Gonzales, interviewed by Carol Ng-He and Elizabeth Meinke, “Exhibitions Special Interest Group: Author Talk, with Elena Gonzales, PhD,” interview June 3, 2020, on Art Libraries Society of North America Learning Portal/Kultura Channel, https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/Exhibitions+Special+Interest+GroupA+Virtual+Author+Talk+with+Elena+Gonzales%2C+PhD/_bz8yex3n/208298113.

51. Gail Borden Public Library District, “Celebrate the Centennial Anniversary of Women's Right to Vote,” 2020, <https://gailborden.info/library-info/2780-b-women-vote>.

52. Rare Books School, “Books as Bridges,” June 23, 2020, video, 1:14:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjzMQgdHGsl&feature=emb_logo.

53. Francesca Marini, “Exhibitions in Special Collections, Rare Book Libraries and Archives: Questions to Ask Ourselves,” *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues* 29, no. 1–2 (2019): 8–29, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0955749019876122>.

our ideological box” —they can also create space for patrons to challenge biases and assumptions and develop empathy towards others.⁵⁴

THE DOCUMENTATION: CONSTRUCTING EXHIBITION HISTORY

Exhibitions . . . are archival work and it is librarianship . . . And oftentimes, they [may be] the only way we connect with users that might not think of visiting collections otherwise.⁵⁵

The record of library exhibitions at an institution can be used as a tool to communicate the validity of exhibitions while making them more visible to stakeholders. Preserving the record of exhibitions is part of an organization’s institutional and operational memory. This record tells the story of exhibitions and their relationships to a library’s community, thus enriching the history of a library and the impact it has made.

There is no uniform way to record an institution’s exhibition history. It should start with open conversations within an organization about the value exhibitions have added to the organization’s mission and the best approaches to recording their history. Conversations promote scholarship when communities of researchers and professionals “engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.”⁵⁶ Exhibitions are scholarly endeavors, and so are the conversations surrounding developing plans for exhibition documentation. This documentation could be created by forming internal working groups and developing archival practices and procedures, or consulting with museum colleagues.

Different strategies are needed for documenting physical versus digital exhibitions. For physical exhibitions, good record keeping involves documenting items displayed in the exhibitions and photographing the installed exhibition. Marketing materials, exhibition catalogs, and digital files of captions should be preserved. Some of these materials can be included on a library’s website or social media as a way to tell the story about the creative endeavors of a library. These narratives and materials should be routinely incorporated into library annual reports or equivalent publications as well. When planning digital exhibitions, initial consideration should be made for how they will be archived, in particular the exhibition’s intended interactivity for users. Various aspects to consider in archiving include the different platforms and devices visitors may use to experience that exhibition, how the exhibition embeds good instructional design, how the exhibition proactively facilitates learning and for whom, how the exhibition exemplifies a balance between learning and leisure, and how too much text can interfere with the learning experience of that exhibition.⁵⁷

54. Chris Steele, “Art Exhibit on Black Panther Challenges Library Patrons to Face Violence of Mass Incarceration,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 7, no. 4 (2015): 171.

55. Lacher-Feldman, “Exhibitions Special Interest Group: Author Talk.”

56. Association of College & Research Libraries, “Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education,” adopted January 11, 2016, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

57. Sylaiou Styliani, Liarokapis Fotis, Kotsakis Kostas, and Patias Petros, “Virtual Museums, A Survey and Some Issues for Consideration,” *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 10, no. 4 (October–December 2009): 520–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2009.03.003>.

LIBRARIAN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A 2013 Pew study shows that many library patrons expect exhibits: 47 percent of respondents stated libraries should “definitely” have exhibits, while 38 percent answered “maybe,” and 12 percent answered “definitely not.” The study further notes that this expectation was most popular with younger (under age fifty) patrons and with diverse populations.⁵⁸ Indeed, an increase in literature examining the relationship between library and information science education and museum studies education indicates growing expectations that librarians formally pursue an exhibition curating role to meet current users’ information needs.⁵⁹

To meet these patron expectations, librarians today face new opportunities and challenges. The article “Exhibits: Illegitimate Children of Academic Libraries?”⁶⁰ aptly summarizes the attitude toward library exhibition programs within the past quarter century. An exhibition’s ephemeral and qualitative nature hinders the acceptance of library exhibitions alongside other organizational initiatives.⁶¹ This attitude is inherited from the preference shown to quantitative over qualitative results in American professional culture. The impact of exhibitions is typically shown more powerfully through qualitative results. Susan Brandehoff, the program director for the ALA Public Programming Office, stated in 2005 that library exhibitions “draw the largest audiences to the library and stimulate more civic participation and media coverage than nearly any other type of library public program.”⁶²

Despite this affirmation, many libraries are reluctant to formalize an exhibition program. Not only do librarians require professional exhibition training, but library organizations ideally should appoint at least one full-time exhibition librarian or exhibition professional as well as provide support and resources. Unfortunately, libraries often divide the job responsibilities of the designated professional between exhibitions and other work, thus reinforcing the perception of library exhibitions as secondary or supportive of other initiatives.⁶³ Unlike museums where more robust resources are dedicated to exhibition development, libraries have competing priorities in their service model. Staff preparedness to plan, organize, implement, and document exhibitions is another challenge. Specific skill sets, such as graphic design, curation, installation, promotion, or conservation, as well as requirements for the physical environment, such as climate control, security, and lighting, are necessary to meet contemporary exhibition standards.⁶⁴ A recent job posting for an exhibits librarian stated that “a familiarity with trends, issues,

58. Pew Research Center, “Library Services in the Digital Age: What People Want from Their Libraries,” 2013, <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/01/22/part-4-what-people-want-from-their-libraries/>.

59. Gelfand, “If We Build It (and Promote It) They Will Come,” 75–78; Juan Denzer, *Digital Collections and Exhibits* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Carol Ng-He and Patti Gibbons, *A Practical Guide for Librarians: Exhibits and Displays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

60. Laurel G. Brown and Peter J. Roberts, “Exhibits: Illegitimate Children of Academic Libraries?” *College & Research Libraries* 54, no. 5 (1993): 410–11.

61. Brown and Roberts, “Exhibits: Illegitimate Children of Academic Libraries?,” 410–11.

62. Norman Morrison, “Beyond Public Exhibits to Partnerships,” *American Libraries* 36, no. 10 (2005): 45.

63. Chen, Pickle, Waldroup, “Changing and Expanding Libraries,” 67.

64. Gundersheimer, “Two Noble Kinsmen,” 93.

standards, and best practices in the description, care, management, and exhibition” is essential.⁶⁵

Another reason for librarians to seek formal training is that exhibitions are an inseparable part of broader information literacy instruction. Visual literacy, as defined by the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, is “a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media.”⁶⁶ Exhibitions allow patrons to critically view and interpret visual content, as well as find meanings in it. Reinforcement in learning the relationships between exhibitions and visual literacy should be further explored in library and information science programs.

Three LIS programs—San Jose State University, Simmons University, and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—offer exhibitions-related courses to students as electives to support education in this area. The topics include Curating Exhibitions from Archival Collections, Cultural Heritage Outreach, and Museum Informatics.⁶⁷ Additional hands-on experience for library science students in the curation of exhibitions is highly desirable.⁶⁸ Students must also learn how to introduce various digital exhibition platforms to faculty, students, and other library users, and be able to demonstrate the platforms’ applications. The online publishing platforms that have gained traction include, but are not limited to, Omeka, Scalar, WordPress, Artsteps, Spotlight, BePress, Sitecore, and Calisphere, and popular design apps include TimelineJS, Adobe Creative Cloud Express, and ArcGIS.⁶⁹

Librarians are known to be lifelong learners, so it is no surprise that they continue to seek out exhibition experiences that go beyond a two-dimensional design. Shea-Tinn Yeh et al.⁷⁰ note that adaptive computing applied in interface design responds to and adjusts the display of the items throughout an exhibition to encourage serendipitous discovery. Virtual reality and 3D technologies have also been gaining more traction in library science. Currently there is a lack of literature about the use of these technologies in library exhibitions, and they are worth further exploration to enhance and personalize the learning experience.

CONCLUSION

Exhibitions in libraries provide one of the most qualitatively impactful forms of information engagement in the library because they foster visual object interaction and

65. Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, “Position Announcement: Exhibits Librarian,” *Rare Books and Manuscripts Section* (blog), last modified March 5, 2020, <https://rbms.info/blog/news-events/position-announcement-exhibits-librarian-2/>.

66. Association of College & Research Libraries, “ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” adopted October 2011, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>.

67. San Jose State University, “Electives—MLIS,” <https://ischool.sjsu.edu/mlis-electives>; Simmons University, “All Courses,” <https://internal.simmons.edu/students/academics/slis/current/courses/course-descriptions/all-courses>; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign School of Information Sciences, “Course Catalog,” <https://ischool.illinois.edu/degrees-programs/courses>.

68. Marini, “Exhibitions in Special Collections,” 16, 23.

69. Art Libraries Society of North America Exhibitions SIG “Exhibitions SIG Virtual Exhibitions Show ‘n’ Tell,” July 10, 2020, on Art Libraries Society of North America Learning Portal/Kultura Channel, https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/Exhibitions+Special+Interest+GroupA+Virtual+Exhibit+Show+%27n%27+Tell/1_ggtl39ob/208298113.

70. Shea-Tinn Yeh, Jeff Rynhart, Thomas Dressler, and Fernando Reyes, “3D Adaptive Virtual Exhibit for the University of Denver Digital Collections,” *Code4Lib Journal* 29 (July 15, 2015), <https://journal.code4lib.org/articles/10653>.

multisensory experiences. Curating an exhibition can be far more complex than writing an academic article because one needs to make an argument using a variety of media, while balancing the different learning styles of a diverse audience. The greatest challenge facing many exhibition librarians and library workers remains the perception that exhibition work is out of the realm of librarianship or the services that libraries offer. A review of the history of library exhibitions in the context of individual institutions and the field at large will result in a much richer and more accurate story about the library and its identity in relation to its community.

In reviewing the issues addressed in this article, the following questions remain:

- Applications of library exhibition best practices. *What are the successes and lessons one could learn from adopting these best practices? Who should implement the best practices?*
- Practices of developing, sustaining and evaluating collaborative exhibitions for social justice. *How can libraries achieve transparency to initiate and maintain relationships with other institutions when resources are limited especially during the current social and economic turmoil?*
- Practices of documenting library exhibition history. *How can libraries build an effective and sustainable infrastructure to support these practices?*
- Librarian education in curating and developing exhibitions. *How can museum studies, art education, literacy and curriculum studies inform librarian education? What can individual libraries do to support and sustain exhibitions in their organization?*

In an increasingly digital and visual-oriented world, and especially in the difficult times during the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries find themselves in a critical position where they need to develop innovative ways to engage their communities with their collections. Library exhibitions remain an area of untapped potential despite their long history. Compared with exhibition professionals in museums, librarians are well positioned to exhibit a wider range of materials and create exhibitions with more diverse topics. Melanie Chu notes that librarians, “as mediators of curriculum and curators of collections, can further adapt museum-based practices to transform our common learning spaces, exhibits, and instructionally related programs.”⁷¹ Like Dana’s multi-functional library ideal as a “workshop of delight” or the iconic Mouseion of Alexandria, exhibitions are an integral part of the library’s function and identity.

71. Melanie Chu, “Out of Context: Understanding Student Learning through Museum Studies,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (May 2, 2018), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/out-of-context/>.