

# **Organizing Exhibitions**

A handbook for museums,  
libraries and archives



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libraries and archives

**Freda Matassa**



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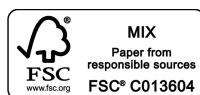
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*Dedication*

To my parents

William Johnston and Phyllis Mary Wood  
with love



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# Preface

Any subject can be the inspiration for an exhibition. It may be large or small, may consist of one exhibit or hundreds of items, and can range from unique, high-value works of art to small-scale, local-interest topics of no financial value. Once the domain of museums, exhibitions may be held in non-traditional venues and can be organized by anyone. In fact, any suitable space can be used to display cultural objects in a curated and organized way for the delight and benefit of the public.

Producing an exhibition can be exciting and absorbing. The process is challenging and creative and the results can have significant impact. Exhibitions do not organize themselves, however, and the range of possibilities for selecting objects, arranging displays and choosing venues can lead to a greater potential for things to go wrong. It is also important to understand exhibition rules and regulations and the laws governing loans, particularly if borrowing from abroad.

Each exhibition is unique: the same objects look completely different when shown in another space. The fundamentals of process, planning and organization, however, apply to any exhibition. Selecting objects, negotiating with lenders, and arranging transport and installation all need to be arranged so that everything goes smoothly. Ethical issues such as due diligence must be taken into account and legal requirements, including customs and excise and copyright law, must be followed. The objects must be properly cared for and safely returned, and the exhibition should open on time and on budget.

This book explains everything an exhibition organizer needs to know. Part 1 is a step-by-step process. Each stage, from initial idea through installation and maintenance to closure and evaluation, is set out in a clear

sequence. Any project can follow the procedure and ensure that no key stage is left out. Part 2 is a reference section for readers who require in-depth advice on specific aspects of exhibition organization. It features international standards, law and due diligence and includes information on subjects such as copyright, hazardous materials and managing unclaimed loans. The book includes a list of the most common mistakes in mounting an exhibition as well as the top ten tips for a successful display. Using examples from real organizations and drawing on international standards for cultural collections, the book provides guidelines rather than rules and can be adapted to any situation.

**Freda Matassa**

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# Introduction

Exhibitions of cultural objects can be stimulating, informative and inspiring. They allow stories to be told, new ideas to be expressed and unique items of artistic, scientific or historic importance to be displayed and interpreted in the best possible way. Although temporary in nature, exhibitions can have significant impact. The influence of the Armory Show in New York in 1913<sup>1</sup> and of the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1874<sup>2</sup> cannot be overstated. Even the Great Exhibitions of London in 1851<sup>3</sup> and Paris of 1855,<sup>4</sup> which introduced the latest in science and engineering as well as art, are still the subject of research and discussion today.

Exhibitions often attract huge numbers of visitors. *Treasures of Tutankhamun*,<sup>5</sup> which was held in The British Museum, London, in 1972 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1976, attracted more visitors than any previous exhibition. In 2012, the top three most visited exhibitions in the world each averaged over 7000 visits per day and were in Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro and St Petersburg.<sup>6</sup>

As well as being held in major museums and art galleries, exhibitions can take place in almost any suitable space and may be about any subject. Visitors expect libraries, archives and universities to have exhibition galleries. Seeing the latest ideas or viewing cultural objects that are not normally accessible continues to attract attention locally, nationally and internationally. There are often many associated events and programmes which encourage visitors to participate both actually and online. And after the exhibition has closed and the objects returned, there are catalogues, images, a web page and a variety of other methods of continuing to connect to a temporary display.

## **Exhibition organization**

Everything about exhibition organization can be exciting, from the initial idea to the moment when the doors open to the public. Selecting the objects and working on a theme are absorbing and creative processes. Design, signage, marketing and outreach all call for new ideas and dynamic thinking. Exhibitions always involve teamwork; working together on a theme is inspiring and can generate a great deal of creative energy.

Whether putting on exhibitions is your profession or if this is your first display, the success of the venture depends on a number of key stages in preparation and planning. Organizing exhibitions is a process; objects do not appear on display by magic and every exhibition is the result of planning and organization. A unique idea and a selection of inspirational objects may not necessarily result in a good exhibition, while a simple, low-cost theme with one or two well presented items can be a huge success.

All exhibitions start with a theme, but the idea may not necessarily be best explored by a curated display. Why should this be an exhibition rather than a film, a book or a website? An exhibition is a visual experience and needs to be based around interesting original objects. Some exhibitions seem heavy on text and rely on information panels and monitor screens to tell the story. This subject could be more suited to the internet or a television programme. An exhibition requires unique and stimulating objects to present the subject visually and to attract visitors who want to see original items.

The key components for an exhibition are:

- an original theme and a number of objects to illustrate it
- a suitable space to house the exhibition
- the support of a team of people
- an exhibition budget.

Be clear about the subject of exhibition. The subject should either be an original idea or one that has not been presented in this way before. You will need to generate interest, support and funding so you must be able to convince others. Is the purpose to tell a story, to display another culture, to illustrate the life of a famous person or to explain an idea or a scientific theory?

If the exhibition takes place regularly, for example an annual art competition, you should still be able to demonstrate its importance for both the organization and visitors. The famous art fairs such as the Venice

Biennale and Shanghai Biennale and renowned competitions such as the Turner Prize at Tate, London, or the Future Generations Art Prize at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kiev have a similar format each year but continue to attract crowds by remaining fresh and guaranteeing to show something new every time.

### **The successful exhibition**

The success of an exhibition does not depend on size, money or visitor figures. Any exhibition can be a success with careful planning and good organization.

### **Top 10 tips for a successful exhibition**

- 1 Good planning and organization
- 2 Adequate budget
- 3 Documentation
- 4 Teamwork
- 5 Good communication and negotiation
- 6 Keeping to the schedule
- 7 Clear areas of responsibility
- 8 Emergency response
- 9 Good maintenance
- 10 Legacy.

### **Top 10 mistakes**

- 1 Unclear purpose
- 2 No single person in charge/no clear lines of responsibility
- 3 No budget/over budget
- 4 Poor communication
- 5 Leaving everything to the last minute
- 6 Ignoring the small details
- 7 Verbal agreements/keeping everything in your head
- 8 No contingency plan
- 9 Display becomes tired/shabby/uncared for
- 10 Losing interest once the exhibition is open, 'now on to the next one'.

## **Background**

Until the mid to late 20th century, museums and art galleries had relatively static collections, most of which were arranged to show their objects chronologically or by group or school. These displays could remain unchanged for decades and were altered only when a new curator was appointed or new objects added to the collection.

The first public exhibitions in the UK were arranged by William Hogarth in the Foundling Hospital, London, in 1746, while academies in France and Italy were exhibiting student art nearly 100 years earlier. The most famous venue was the Royal Academy of Arts in London (established in 1768), where, as well as the Summer Exhibition of contemporary work, there was a Winter Exhibition of Old Masters, begun in 1870 and showing works borrowed from outside the institution. In the 20th century, there were a few famous examples of important items travelling for temporary exhibition, such as the loan of the *Mona Lisa* from The Louvre to New York and Washington in 1963 and loans from Cairo to the exhibition *Treasures of Tutankhamun* in the British Museum and other international museums in 1972.<sup>5</sup> Apart from these high-profile cases, most museum space was devoted to displaying the permanent collection.

In the late 20th century, there was a move towards temporary exhibitions in museums and galleries as well as the creation of display spaces in libraries and archives. The reasons for this include a reduction of public funding, with the need to generate income, an increased public interest in visiting exhibitions, a desire to share cultural collections with other cities and countries, the development of cultural tourism and advances in the packing and transport of fragile goods. Many more people visit a museum or gallery when there is a temporary exhibition than just the permanent collection.

Libraries and archives formerly regarded as only research institutions now often have attractive display areas. This can open up the collections, attract new users and make items available to a wider range of users. Visitors may be attracted to a specific exhibition and learn more about the resources available, while researchers may be encouraged to view the exhibition, learn more about the institution and use the collections and facilities in new ways.

Many organizations use most of their display space for temporary display. Most museums, art galleries and libraries have a number of exhibition spaces and show different types and sizes of exhibition at any one time. These can range from small one-room, in-focus displays, perhaps showing a new acquisition to the collection, to large, high-budget 'block-buster' exhibitions,



which may travel to other venues, possibly overseas. Many storage and conservation facilities also have exhibition areas, such as National Galleries of Scotland at their Edinburgh storage centre and the Danish National Conservation Centre in Vejle, Jutland.

A quick glimpse into library exhibition spaces at the time of writing reveals that The British Library is showing one main exhibition: *Mughal India: Art, Culture and Empire*, with over 200 different types of object, and one small exhibition, *Murder in the Library: An A-Z of Crime Fiction*, a small display of books and images with 63 objects, in the Folio Society Gallery.

The Library of Congress in Washington has four exhibitions, ranging from the major *The Civil War in America* in its main South West Gallery, with over 200 items, and three smaller exhibitions, including *Down to Earth*, in one of the reading rooms, comprising 39 cartoons and photographs.

Display spaces allow the collection to be circulated and refreshed on a regular basis. This is particularly important for libraries and archives as works on paper can only be exposed to light for limited periods of time. **[See Light and lighting, p. 268]** A permanent display space can be expensive to design and build and may become obsolete or inviable if objects have to be removed for conservation or loan. One or more spaces for temporary exhibition enable collection items as well as loans to be displayed in a flexible way.

### **Exhibition benefits**

An exhibition can be held in any suitable space. Many public buildings such as town halls, universities, hospitals and theatres have an exhibition space. Many private organizations and companies show their own collection or borrow works of art to enhance the atmosphere for staff and visitors. Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, Arlanda in Stockholm and O'Hare in Chicago are examples of display spaces in airports, improving the experience of passengers and allowing local museums to showcase their collections to a very large audience. Some shopping centres, such as at Łódź in Poland, feature exhibition spaces and many new public arenas are designed with a display space at the centre of activities.

Major events such as conferences or concerts often have an exhibition component. For example, it is widely believed that the 2012 Olympic Games was awarded to London because of the emphasis on the Cultural Olympiad: organizations throughout the country were invited to create exhibitions with

an Olympic theme. Attaching an exhibition to an event can add a sense of history, a new experience and a seriousness of purpose.

An exhibition can take place in a moveable space such as a large truck or a train. Each year, the exhibition *Art on Track* in Chicago invites six local artists to decorate a carriage of a special train, which travels round the city for one evening, inviting visitors to board and enjoy the art.<sup>7</sup>

Exhibitions are an excellent way of showcasing a theme or an organization, making a point, attracting attention, putting culture on display, opening eyes, engaging the public, enlightening, educating and illustrating other countries. They can also be used diplomatically to forge international links and in situations where the repatriation of objects may be an issue. For example, the co-operation between The British Museum and the National Museum of Iran resulted in the exhibition of the Cyrus Cylinder in Tehran in 2010–11, allowing over a million Iranians to view a unique part of their heritage.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural heritage is seen as a vital component to the quality of life. Governments and local authorities recognize that, as well as jobs and schools, people need culture to give them a sense of security and increase their enjoyment and to engender an understanding of heritage. The Museums Association report *Museums Change Lives* demonstrates the impact of culture on social wellbeing.<sup>9</sup> Many rapidly developing countries place exhibitions at the heart of new ventures, such as the five-museum complex on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, UAE,<sup>10</sup> and the current building of approximately 100 museums per year in China.<sup>11</sup>

## **Planning an exhibition**

Whether your exhibition is large or small, there is a step-by-step process to be followed from beginning to end. Not all exhibitions will require all of these steps and the time spent on each will vary. The stages may overlap, take place simultaneously or happen in a different order. They are:

- 1 Idea
- 2 Planning and budget
- 3 Organization
- 4 Delivery of objects (transport)
- 5 Installation
- 6 Opening

## INTRODUCTION

- 7 Maintenance
- 8 Closure
- 9 (Touring exhibitions)
- 10 Legacy.

Each stage is important and should be allocated a time period with target dates. In this way, progress can be measured against the planned programme and changes made if necessary. Obviously not all exhibitions go on tour, so Stage Nine is optional. It is important to make sure all goes smoothly during the exhibition run and that any problems are swiftly dealt with. Finally, although all exhibitions are temporary, successful exhibitions leave a legacy behind and continue to provide access, information and delight.

Exhibition organizers need to manage the process during all stages, watch the budget, adhere to the schedule and ensure the effective use of resources. They must understand the legal aspects of borrowing cultural goods, such as copyright law and customs regulations, and of ethical considerations, such as checking the history of the borrowed object. The main focus, however, is on the objects and their safe return. All of these aspects are laid out in the following pages.

Part 1 gives a timeline or 'critical path' of organizing exhibitions. The reader is taken step by step through each stage of the planning process with detailed descriptions of what happens and when. Part 2 provides in-depth information and technical specifications for those requiring a higher level of knowledge or working to international exhibition standards. The text is cross-referenced throughout to show when additional information is available.

## **Notes and references**

- 1 The *International Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Armory, New York, in 1913, introduced Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism to the USA.
- 2 The Société Anonyme Coopérative des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs held its first exhibition at the former studio of the photographer Nadar in Paris, 1874.
- 3 The *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* took place in Hyde Park, London, in 1851.
- 4 The *Exposition Universelle des Produits de l'Agriculture, de l'Industrie et des Beaux-*

## ORGANIZING EXHIBITIONS

*Arts de Paris* was held in the Champs-Élysées in Paris, 1855.

- 5 The exhibition also toured to seven museums in the USA as well as to Canada, the USSR and Germany.
- 6 *Masterpieces from the Mauritshuis*, Metropolitan Art Museum, Tokyo; *Amazon: cycles of modernity*, Centro Cultural Banco do Brazil, Rio de Janeiro; *Nineteenth-century Italian Painting*, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.
- 7 Art on Track, CTA, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 21 September 2012.
- 8 The Cylinder, inscribed in Babylon after Cyrus the Great, the Persian Emperor, captured the city in 539BC, was found by a British excavation in 1879.
- 9 Museums Association (2013) *Museums Change Lives: the MA's vision for the impact of museums*, [www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives](http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives).
- 10 Guggenheim, Louvre, Manarat al Saadiyat, Maritime Museum, Zayed National Museum.
- 11 In China 390 new museums opened in 2011. There will be major investment in museums in the next ten years: [www.chinanews.com](http://www.chinanews.com), 10 October 2011.

# **Part 1**

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A step-by-step guide to organizing  
exhibitions



# **1**

---

## **Idea**

### **Fundamentals**

Every exhibition begins with an idea. Once you have your subject and believe it will make a good exhibition, you need to develop the theme to see if the exhibition is feasible and to convince others that it is a viable project.

This first stage of exhibition planning is the most important. Adequate time should be allocated for the idea to be worked up into a fully thought-through product. There should be as much research as necessary and this stage can take a few months to many years. Make sure that your idea addresses an important subject that hasn't been done before, or at least not in this way. Consider who you need to get on board, including those who have expertise or knowledge that you don't have. Be clear about the purpose of the exhibition and the target audience. What will you want to have achieved by the end and what will be the legacy?

There should be good answers to all the above questions before detailed planning (see Chapter 2) begins. Mounting even the smallest exhibition needs time, resources, careful consideration and a variety of skills. It is important to produce good arguments, as you will be spending time and money. This will create not just backing for the project but active enthusiasm. This first chapter looks at the key things you will need to consider at this stage.

### **Concept**

If this is an original concept, you should make sure that it really is unique and hasn't been done before. Research the subject, both within your organization and nationally, and internationally if necessary. Find out if any

other organization is planning to do something similar in the near future. If so, this is not necessarily the end of the project: it could lead to collaboration and an even better exhibition.

If you are looking for a subject, consider themes that haven't been presented in your organization or in your region. Is there an area, theme or period of history that hasn't been explored? If you are part of a large organization such as a museum or library, is there a need to balance large exhibitions with small ones? Are there objects in store that haven't been seen for a while or books, manuscripts and other works on paper which can only be exposed to the light for short periods? Look at new acquisitions or recently conserved objects for their display potential. Is there an event or anniversary to commemorate?

If the exhibition is an annual event and has been done many times before, you still need a clear purpose and to consider what makes it a success. What is unique about this subject, why is the exhibition important and is the timing right to do it now?

To research the idea and find information on other past or potential displays, the following could be used:

- lender's information
- exhibition catalogues
- sales catalogues
- published articles
- museums
- libraries
- archives
- the internet.

The initial idea should be worked up into a viable project. There is no point in approaching colleagues, lenders or potential sponsors until you are clear about the project and can present it in a way that will engage others. A potential lender will only respond if shown the importance of the exhibition and a good case for the loan. Any approach to a lender must be clear and compelling.

When borrowing from public organizations such as museums and archives, suggest that this particular object is vital to the success of the venture. Making a vague request for a particular class or type of artefact will not be well received. Do the research into what objects they have in the collection and make a good case for why you need these particular objects.



See the Museums Association's *Smarter Loans*<sup>1</sup> for suggestions on how to approach a lender. National museums, libraries and archives have a duty to share collections as part of their remit but loans can be heavy on resources, so they need to be convinced.

What structure or format will demonstrate the theme most clearly and display the objects to their best advantage? Scale is also important at this early stage: will it be a large exhibition with hundreds of items or will the subject be more effective in a small-scale, one-room area or front-of-house foyer?

Use this time to evaluate the proposal with colleagues. You may gain useful insights on the shape or form of the proposal or ideas about key objects and lenders. Consider when to involve management and decision-makers. Try to come up with a simple one-page synopsis. Discussion will help you to see if the idea matches the overall aims and objectives of the institution and fits in with other exhibitions and activities. Figure 1.1 provides a possible template for a successful exhibition proposal.

#### EXHIBITION IDEA FORM

Type of project  
Working title  
Subject  
Scale of exhibition  
Proposed location  
Key works  
Target audience  
Potential programmes  
Estimated cost  
Any special resources  
Description of project

**Figure 1.1**  
Sample template for an exhibition proposal

## Objects

At this stage you should be thinking about the objects. There may be one single major object, perhaps a new discovery or an iconic item, or there could be a long list of potential exhibits to be considered for their relevance or impact.

If your organization has a collection, consider which objects will fit the theme. Revisit items that may not have been on display for some time or objects that could be displayed together in a new way. The more items you can use from your own collection, the simpler it will be to put on the exhibition. Explore the possibilities of your own collection first before going outside for loans.

## **Researching objects**

It is important to research an object before submitting a request. Many major lenders receive repeated requests for the same well known items. Consider less famous items and those not normally on display. If you ask for objects which are currently in store, your choice will be widened and the object more likely to be available. When considering a loan request, lenders often look at whether an item has been out on loan recently and are more likely to lend something that has not been exhibited for a while.

You may already know where the objects are; if not, you will have to research locations. For museum, library and archive collections in the public domain, this is fairly straightforward, as most public collections are available online. For privately held items or pieces with unknown or little-known ownership, you can research locations on the internet, by library research or by consulting colleagues.

Museum and library curators are experts in their field. They often know which items are in private collections and can act as a contact to the owner and smooth the way for the loans process. Auction houses and dealers are also excellent sources of information on the current ownership of cultural items and could assist in loan requests. They may know of an object which is available locally when you were considering borrowing from a public collection abroad. Conservators may have detailed knowledge of specific objects as well as a general knowledge of types of materials. They may also have new research or be able to provide unpublished information such as X-rays that can add significantly to the impact of the exhibition.

## **Number and type of objects**

During this process, the type and number of objects will gradually become clear as the theme is sharpened and particular items become available. An exhibition is not just an assembly of items; it presents and interprets them. The idea of a 'curated exhibition' has expanded to mean any selected and presented group of objects in any field, such as 'curating' a music concert or even a party by choosing a theme, a place and the presentation.

Objects should only be chosen if they contribute directly to the subject. Don't include something just because it looks good or because it is available. Ask what each item contributes to the exhibition: is it really essential and what will it add to the overall narrative and display? Consider how many items you need to make a viable exhibition. Many exhibitions suffer from