

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EXHIBIT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

CHAPTER II. EXHIBIT PROCESS

A. EXHIBIT PROCESSES IN ART, HISTORY, AND SCIENCE MUSEUMS

Art Museums and History Museums have an advantage in documentation over Science Museums. Their collections are usually small enough to be catalogued and stored by one Registrar or a centralized Registration Department. Science Museums have enormous collections that require each curatorial department (Entomology, Herpetology, Botany etc.) to catalog their own collection.⁴⁸ Collection managers within each curatorial department act as registrars for their own departmental collection. Unless the Administration is good at overall planning, there will be a diverse array of different manual and electronic cataloguing systems in Science Museums making information exchange difficult during the planning and execution of an exhibit. Automation tends to highlight this weakness since different hardware and software programs often make file transfer and thus information exchange, impossible.

As the Curatorial and Exhibit Departments begin to organize an exhibit, they may use different vocabularies than the Education, Registration or Administration Departments. To help reduce this confusion, many museums have attempted to standardize their cataloguing terminology and to standardize their software programs throughout the different departments. This is a monumental task in museums with large collections, especially if systems need changing after initial investment in a system. The exhibit or registration departments often act as a buffer between the expert curator, the generalist educator, and the financially oriented administrator.

In computer cataloguing, data definition (data content and structure) is critical in planning the information put into each file, each record and each field. Vocabulary and data control directly affect the efficiency of retrieving information from the computer. In England, the Museum Documentation Association has carefully defined standard data fields in their catalog cards.

48. California Academy of Sciences, Annual Report 1984-85 showed a collection size of 7.4 million insects and arachnids in Entomology. According to Margaret Santiago, "The Registrar in the Cabinet of Curiosities," in Registrars On Record, the U.S.'s largest science museum, the National Museum of Natural History, holds a collection of 118 million compared to the largest art museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with 3 million.

In the museum profession, the issue of standards in vocabulary control has been a widely expressed concern. Chenhall wrote Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging: A System for Classifying Man-Made Objects in 1978, to aid history terminology control (revised in 1988). An Australian publication, The Cataloguer's Manual for the Visual Arts, was written by Therese Varveris to help in computerized syntax control for art terms. This publication includes Authority lists (lists of acceptable terms for certain data fields). Both Chenhall and Varveris suggested proposed vocabularies.

A recent article by the Peabody Museum⁴⁹ describes a good example of developing a science travelling exhibit computer system. As the Peabody prepared for computerization, curators established "authority" lists of nomenclature; these lists identified the anthropological terms that described the collection. They provided each department with a list of data (information) fields, organized differently for each department. For example, the Conservation Department required a printout on fields organized by material, artifact catalogue number, quantity, and description; the Photographic Archives needed fields on material, artifact catalogue number, dimensions, conservation status, and description. Clearly, the Photographic Archives information was built on the work that the Conservation Department had done. The Peabody staff members felt that several advantages came from computerization. They were able to keep accurate records, avoid record duplication, and easily correct and amend data. The database of information is now accessible for future use. Most significantly, they improved their permanent museum records.

Many conferences around the world have addressed problems of travelling exhibits. In 1976, UNESCO and ICOM organized a major conference on the use of computers in museums in Barcelona, Spain. One section concerned the study of the scientific and technical aspects of preserving movable cultural property, and another section discussed modern methods of inventorying movable cultural property with the possible application of computer technology to these problems. As a result of the meeting, fourteen of the international participants met to discuss inventorying. These fourteen participants recommended that inventories of cultural property contain certain minimum information. These data standards include: (a.) the name of the

49. M. Banta, G. Juneau and L. McChesney, "Saving the Sacrificed, Exhibition Collaboration and Computerization," Museum News (October/November 1986): 48-53.

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museum, the identity of the object and a unique reference number given the object by the museum; (b.) a reference to a reproduction of the object such as a photograph; (c.) a brief description of the object for identification; (d.) a brief history of the object before its acquisition, particularly when and where it was made and by whom, and other historical associations; (e.) important events in the history of the object, e.g. exhibitions, major restorations, conservations.⁵⁰

Since the UNESCO and ICOM conference twelve years ago, ICOM members have established an international documentation committee (CIDOC). In 1988, of the CIDOC eight working groups, one of them is concerned with vocabulary controls, another on data standards.⁵¹ Another ICOM international committee on exhibition exchange (ICEE) produced, in 1986, a bibliography on organizing travelling exhibitions and a directory of sources for international travelling exhibitions.⁵²

B. PAPERWORK: ACQUISITION, ADMINISTRATION & REFERENCE

Exhibit documentation falls into three general categories of printed records for specific purposes: acquisition, administration and reference. A loan agreement, object and lender lists, and incoming receipts are part of the acquisition process. Developing and maintaining an exhibit budget, and an exhibit schedule are administrative functions. Reference paperwork may be a catalog, gallery labels, or an exhibit summary.

An example of an administrative aid is a schedule sheet. Osborn and Morley⁵³ show how the schedule sheet keeps all the details in order for each exhibition. It includes: exhibition name, total value for insurance, valuation per box for shipping purposes, number of boxes per shipment, weight of exhibition, fee for exhibition, period of rental, number and items included, and

50. Chenhall, "Museum Notes - Museums and Computers: a Progress Report," Museum 30 (January 1978): 52.

51. Eleanor Fink, report on CIDOC at the International Conference on Terminology for Museums, 18-24 September 1988, Cambridge, England. Sponsored by the Museum Documentation Assoc.

52. Suzanne Peters, Librarian, ICOM Library, Paris, 1988.

53. E. C. Osborn and Grace Morley, Temporary and Travelling Exhibits, (Paris: UNESCO, 1963), 63.