

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EXHIBIT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

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.

the space required. It also includes a column for dates when the show is scheduled, when the contract is signed, when the receipt is received, when the publicity is sent and when the shipment is made. This scheduling information helps the circulating agency keep a record of each step as work proceeds. When dismantling the exhibit, it offers a permanent file or index of the exhibit, the number of catalogues sold, etc. for future reference.

Insurance records are also an important part of exhibit and travelling exhibit documentation. The liability issue of protecting movable objects has provoked both discussion and enactment of national and international law. UNESCO published its "Recommendation for the Protection of Movable Cultural Property" in 1978.⁵⁴ The UNESCO conference carefully defined "movable cultural property," "protection," "prevention of risks," and "risk coverage." The recommendation included the issues of insurance, standardized identification of inventory and standardized cataloguing, condition reports on each object, protection in installation and transport from all elements (heat, light, humidity, pollution, various chemical and biological agents, vibration and shock) and conservation and restoration workshops. UNESCO recommended coverage against damage or loss due to the risks in transporting temporary exhibitions, and protecting them from environmental changes, inept handling, and faulty packaging. UNESCO also encouraged governmental guarantees and funding for transport and display to cover the risks. For an up-to-date review of international exhibition insurance read Bill Allen's "Risk with Good Reason".⁵⁵

The above examples show a few of the numerous kinds of documents required for exhibits. They demonstrate the need for organization and efficiency. Mary Case⁵⁶ reviews exhibition coordination as a team effort. An article in the Registrar's Report⁵⁷ suggested that registrars divide the handling of materials into three stages: gathering of the materials, handling

54. "Recommendation for the Protection of Movable Cultural Property," UNESCO (Paris: UNESCO, 1978): 210-222.

55. Bill Allen, "Risk with Good Reason", Registrars on Record, Essays on Museum Collection Management, ed. by Mary Case. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1988, 170-171.

56. Mary Case, "What Registrars Do All Day," Registrars on Record, 29-30.

57. "The Registrar's Role," Registrars Report 1 (1978): 1-3.

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of the materials during the tour, and returning the materials safely to the originators. A well marked calendar can keep these stages in control.

The Registrar's Report says that a major source of frustration in circulating exhibitions is that responsibilities are often unclear. Unanswered questions are: (1) Who will arrange forwarding on to the next participant?; (2) Who will pay shipping costs?; (3) What should be done if there is damage?; (4) What to do when organizers do not provide complete and orderly instructions and listings?; (5) How to assess the facilities and personnel when only superficial information is given?; (6) What happens when an occasional participant does not follow necessary procedures (such as condition reports) out of ignorance or neglect? Exhibit policy should include answers to these questions and an exhibit database should help enforce the policies and allow faster access to the answers.⁵⁸

There must be a thorough analysis of existing exhibit documentation systems and a clear understanding of the information that is produced by the exhibit process, to create successful systems for exhibits.

1. FORMS AND DATA ELEMENTS - EXAMPLES OF COMPUTER DATABASES FOR TRAVELLING EXHIBITS IN ART MUSEUMS

At present, some registrars in large art museums use computer databases to organize travelling exhibit documentation, however, the author has located only a few published studies describing the applications of such in-house systems.

58. The Fine Arts Museums solve the above questions by assigning definite roles for each problem: 1) In-house Registrar -outgoing receipts, 2) Borrower -loan form requires next participating venue to pay for transportation, 3) Registrar -Insurance company provides loss claim form, 4) Registrar and Curator must obtain complete instructions and listings during planning process with objects list, handling restrictions, condition reports, and lender list, 5) Registrar -a facility report should be sent before the loan agreement is signed. Direct contact with the personnel is important, 6) Registrar -Loan contracts and incoming/outgoing receipts usually set condition standards.

Suzannah Fabing,⁵⁹ the Acting Managing Curator of Records and Loans at the National Gallery of Art, reported in the Fall 1984 issue of Spectra, Museum Computer Network's quarterly publication, that an exhibition/loan/insurance computer system was in its final stages of development. The system tracks special exhibitions and loans. The exhibit information is entered during the planning stage and once the list of loan objects is final, the computer prints loan agreement forms. When the loan forms are returned, the lender's data is added to the loan agreement by computer input. The system is used to monitor the progress of the exhibition, following the location of the objects and making certain that the insurance coverage is accurate. It also generates reports on exhibition activities. Museum departments inquire on-line about up-to-date information requirements and status of loans.

In 1986, Robin Dowden,⁶⁰ the Art Information System Manager at the National Gallery of Art, admitted that there is a problem with multi-user input into the system. The treasurer's office maintains the system and generates reports for the registrar's office and the exhibits office. Four key fields are all number assignments. They include the exhibit control file number, the lender/borrower file number, the object insurance system number and the geographic assignment number. In 1989, a new on-line relational database on artists will be added to the system.

D. Andrew Roberts,⁶¹ compiled the documentation practices of over fifty museums in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, in Planning the Documentation of Museum Collections. He mentions three U.S. museums, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. and the Detroit Institute of Arts, that have systems that include travelling exhibit loan and insurance needs.

The Museum of Modern Art developed an exhibit management computer system under registrars Eloise Richiardielli and Suzanne Gyergy of the Department of Registration at the Museum of Modern Art. Gyergy is responsible for the transportation, handling, and

59. Suzannah Fabing, "From the National Gallery of Art," SPECTRA 11 (Fall 1984): 1.

60. Robin Dowden telephone conversation with the author, 28 April 1986. Lecture at MDA Terminology conference 23, September, 1988.

61. D. Andrew Roberts, Planning the documentation of museum collections (United Kingdom: Museum Documentation Association, October 1985), 2, 511-538.

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packing of loans to and from the museum, and the documentation of acquisitions and exhibitions. The registrar's department enters data and processes the records. They generate record cards, arranged by artist, donor and number fields. A copy of these cards goes to the curators. The registration department also produces indexes on the collection. Software is the GRIPHOS system, described earlier in this paper and hardware is an IBM 38 computer system.⁶²

Therese Varveris⁶³ wrote a comprehensive article about the Museum of Modern Art and the development of their computer registration system in the 1981 edition of Museum Registration Methods, by Dorothy Dudley. The article contains samples of the computer catalog card and the department collection index. However, there is no mention of travelling exhibit loans. She does stress that computers "perform repetitive tasks quickly and accurately" and that once the information is accurately recorded, "it does not ever have to be retyped again." She gives examples of lists of thousands of records that are printed in a few hours and cards for half a year's acquisitions that take a few minutes to produce.

At the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden⁶⁴, current procedures are based on those developed at the Museum of Modern Art. The registrar, Douglas Robinson, moved from the Museum of Modern Art and applied the same structure to the Hirshhorn's smaller collection. A staff of seven coordinate three major areas, documentation of the permanent collection, loans out and loans in for temporary exhibitions. There are few long term loans and they are put into the computer like acquisitions, but get a separate loan number. There are exhibition history files divided into internal exhibitions and external loans. The registrars use the computer to produce a catalog record that results in a master list, which is updated every six months. The curators receive indexes of the collection.

62. Ibid. Suzanne Greenawaldt (Assistant Registrar MMA), explained in a telephone conversation with the author 6 May 1986, that an incoming exhibit format is not in the computer and that exhibition forms originate from the exhibits department.

63. Therese Varveris, "Computers and Registration: Practical Applications", Dorothy Dudley, ed., Museum Registration Methods (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1979), 340-354.

64. Roberts, Planning the documentation of museum collections, 511-538.

Registrars Judith Schulman and Karen Serota, in the Detroit Institute of Arts, use software called the Detroit Arts Registration Information System (DARIS) and the Detroit Arts Management Information System (DAMIS). They started with an inventory control system and now have a network of nine art museums in Michigan, centered in Detroit. They use a Burroughs 1860 and are thinking of transferring to an IBM system. In 1986, the DARIS exhibit screen was not in use, due to budget and staff cuts. They depend on an IBM PC computer and Lotus software for travelling exhibit documentation because they can sort information more easily in the Crate list and Indemnity list. The curator generates the exhibit budget.⁶⁵

The Detroit Institute of Arts has a very active touring exhibition program with international users. Registrars send out each year 200 to 300 objects on loan from the permanent collection of about 50,000 fine and decorative art items. Many go to nearby museums and some are sent on touring exhibitions. All loans contain a control form, shipping instructions, and a security pass. Registrars note external and internal moves and log them into the computer system. When the system is checked, special attention is paid to location and insurance. All incoming material gets a loan number, arranged according to the reason for entry (whether exhibition, examination, loan, or potential purchase).

In preparation for designing a collection management system, Lenore Sarasan⁶⁶ outlined a do-it-yourself analysis method for the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts (DMFA). She employed a series of worksheets in 1981 to survey the present manual system of about 10,000 fine arts and ethnological objects. The new software, called MILAM, automatically does pre-acquisition activities, accessioning, cataloguing, loan processing, shipping and inventorying. It gives on-line access to collection data and has automatic form and report generation. Changes in object location, value, and condition are tracked by the system, which also stores a history of an object's loans and exhibition activity. Many of these same activities are part of the travelling exhibit process.

65. Schulman and Serota gave the author further details on DARIS in two telephone conversations, 6 and 8 May 1986.

66. Lenore Sarasan, "A System for Analysing Museum Documentation," Museum Documentation Systems, Developments and Applications Richard Light, D.A. Roberts and J.D. Stewart eds. London: Butterworths, 1986, 89-99.

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Ginger Geyer, the previous Assistant Curator of Special Projects at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, has followed the DMFA project throughout. Ginger reports that the collection records of 15,000 objects were put into the MILAM system in 1982. The loan processing system for travelling exhibits was designed and is being presently programmed. Jody Cohen, the current Registrar, says the travelling exhibit documentation process is done in part on an IBM PC compatible.⁶⁷

2. UNPUBLISHED COMPUTER USE FOR TRAVELLING EXHIBITS IN ART MUSEUMS

In 1985-6, about a third of the art museums in the United States presented a new temporary exhibit every other month and sometimes more than one new temporary exhibit a month. This exhibit loan activity involved a large amount of total staff effort during the year. More than half of the art museums had at least one and up to ten travelling exhibits in that calendar year. This means that a large amount of the staff members' time was taken up in preparing museum gallery space, exhibit mounts, or just plain paperwork. An extreme example of this activity, is the Smithsonian. Through their travelling exhibit service, SITES, 110 travelling exhibits were launched that year. However, SITES has a dedicated full-time staff for managing their travelling exhibits. Almost fifty percent of the museums used from 3 to 10 staff members to execute travelling exhibits and involving from 2 to 9 departments.

How many of these art museums used computers in some way to process travelling exhibits? Only 34 percent. Museums were just beginning to take advantage of this new technology tool. What computer hardware did they use? Of three categories: microcomputers, minicomputers, and mainframe computers, 77 percent used microcomputers. The lower cost of microcomputers may have outweighed the advantage of greater data storage in the other two types of hardware. What computer software was used? There was not much consensus on brand name or type but according to function, they used three types: databases, word-processing and spreadsheets. They purchased both off-the-shelf packages and installed software (an original program developed for a set of specific needs and tailored to the museum's hardware).

67. Ginger Geyer, in a telephone conversation with the author, 6 May, 1986. Jody Cohen, telephone conversation, 19 December, 1988.

Word-processing programs were used most, then database, then installed and finally spreadsheets. Most popular programs were Wordstar, dBASE III, and Lotus 1-2-3. These programs were also very popular with the business community and museum use may be the result of Board Member or donor influence or perhaps the advantage of museum users gaining community support (instruction, repair, user groups) for popular software packages.

More than half of the art museums planned further computerization and about half with smaller collection sizes planned to computerize for the first time. Almost all of the art museums that did use computers to aid in travelling exhibits planned to improve or add to their computerization. This is a very positive response. It indicated that they can see other possibilities once they start using computers for exhibit tasks. Museum size may be a factor in computerization. Large and medium sized art museums use computers more for exhibit information than small art museums. Larger collection size, budgets, and available gallery space increase the frequency of travelling exhibits. The type of hardware and software used for exhibit documentation in the United States does not depend on museum size, since microcomputers and a variety of software are used overwhelmingly in all the art museums.⁶⁸

68. Information in this section comes from a travelling exhibit database questionnaire conducted by the author on 115 art museums, covering the period October through October 1985-86,. Chapter III covers the process and general results of the questionnaire.