

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EXHIBIT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

CHAPTER III. RESULTS OF 1986-7 SURVEY AND CASE STUDY OF ART MUSEUM TRAVELLING EXHIBIT AUTOMATION

A. A NATIONAL SURVEY OF ART MUSEUMS

In 1986, the author conducted a two part study. The first part was a survey of art museums by questionnaire to learn the use and potential use of travelling exhibit database management systems. The second part was a study of a travelling exhibit database management system at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Two research methods were employed throughout - the descriptive method and the observation method. The first part of the study, the results of the survey questionnaire, laid the foundation for the Fine Arts Museums study.

1. SURVEY - PURPOSE AND METHOD

A questionnaire was developed to assess how art museums handle their travelling exhibit documentation.⁶⁹ The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine:

- * The activity of the exhibit loan process in each museum and in comparison to other art museums
- * The types of software programs and computers used in the travelling exhibit process
- * Integration of records used by different departments in the travelling exhibit process
- * Generation of reports
- * Future plans for integrating travelling exhibit records on computer

69. The questionnaire design was taken from, Asking Questions, A Practical Guide to Questionnaire Design, by Seymour Sudman and Norman Bradburn. Kittu Gates, Director of the Registration Department at the De Young Museum in San Francisco and her assistant, Paula March, Exhibits Registrar, reviewed the questionnaire. The John F. Kennedy University Thesis Advisor, Adrienne Horn and Subject Specialist, Lynda Mancebo from the Chancellor's Office at University of California, Berkeley, both made suggestions for improvement.

Before the questionnaire was sent, five art museum registrars pretested it and it was revised according to their recommendations. The registrars were: Judith Schulman, Registrar at the Detroit Institute of Arts; Aileen Chuck, Assistant Registrar at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Robin Dowden, Art Information System Manager at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; Carol Harsh, Registrar for Scheduling at the Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibit Service; and Stephen Ringle, Exhibits Preparator at the University of Maine Art Collection. The revised questionnaire was sent to registrars or exhibit managers, or those personnel who were responsible for the exhibit loan or the exhibit management and planning process. Follow up post cards were sent two weeks after the mailing as a reminder to those museums that had not responded to the initial mailing.

The survey was directed to art museums in the United States that were using computers. Identification of this population came from three computer user sources: the "Museum Hardware" list by the Museum Computer Network, Inc., 1984; the "Reference List of In-House Computer Use in Art Museums," by the Art Museum Association of America, 1984, with a 1986 AMAA computer survey update; and the museum list from Museum Collections and Computers, by Lenore Sarasan, 1980. Since the population was taken from these lists, it was believed that all surveyed museums presently used computers and that almost all computer-using art museums were identified. Collection size varied from fewer than 50,000 items to more than 500,000 items. Museums with collections of no more than 50,000 objects were considered "small"; 50,000 to 500,000 objects were considered "medium-sized"; "large" museums were those with more than 500,000 objects.

2. SURVEY RESULTS - DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 115 questionnaires were returned from the original 190 questionnaires sent. The response was just over 60 percent.

The major conclusions from the survey are:

Many museums have yet to tackle the task of controlling their travelling exhibit documentation by computer. For those that have made this effort, there is a general agreement on what information to include and that microcomputers should hold the information. The choice of software has been diverse. A large

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percentage of museums either want to develop computer systems to help with or improve their travelling exhibits, or want to add to their systems.

Specifically, the survey showed that:

1. There are very active travelling exhibit loan programs launched by more than half of the responding museums. Large museums do show more activity and do use computers more than medium or small museums.
2. Since travelling exhibits require a great deal of staff time, computers tend to aid in lightening the paperwork responsibility. There seems to be a positive interest in using computers in this way.
3. Reports generated by the travelling exhibit process are standardized in type and are voluminous in number. Object Specification, Budget, Object Insurance, Condition Reports and Loan Agreements are just a few examples of often used reports.
4. The questionnaire served as a dated snapshot and gave a current picture of progress, in travelling exhibit documentation control. Collection sharing between museums brings objects and their associated information to a wide audience and adds to the museum personnel's expertise. The internal collaboration necessary in developing computerized information management for travelling exhibits encourages internal coordination between staff members and departments. Since each department is responsible for a different phase of the loan preparation or loan acceptance, the departments depend on each other to process and prepare for the loan. Staff members use an up-to-date progress list to keep the process running smoothly.

3. SURVEY UPDATE

In June 1988, a brief update of the questionnaire was made in preparation for this publication. The thirty-nine surveyed museums that used computers to process travelling exhibits were sent a simple software checklist to verify present software usage. An additional forty-two surveyed museums that had expressed interest in 1987 in developing computer records for exhibits received a one page questionnaire asking if they had started using software and the names of the particular types they were using. Six software vendors were also asked to supply screen examples of exhibit functions. About half of the eighty-one museums and vendors responded.

The results of this update effort showed that many museums have added a least one type of software within the last year, and that the software choice was as diverse as the first survey. Many museums have upgraded their software. Popular packages like dBASE III Plus, WordPerfect and Lotus 123 were chosen by several museums, just like the response in the first survey. See Appendix B. for a list of operating exhibit systems. It is composed of responding museums from both 1987 and 1988 questionnaires. Vendors are included in this list.

B. A CASE STUDY AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF ONE MUSEUM

Like many other museum directors, F. Whitney Hall, Chief Administrative Officer of the Fine Arts Museums, recently explained the funding shortfall in the budget "had to be offset by special sources of funding, donations, and extraordinary exhibition earnings. Until endowment income and annual donations grow to meet annual funding requirements, the Museums' financial well-being is dependent on bringing a blockbuster exhibition to the Bay Area at least once each two years" ⁷⁰ Exhibition program finances in recent years have come mainly from outside private support. ⁷¹ Before 1980, the City and County of San Francisco and Federal sources provided major exhibition funding. Proposition 13, and cut-backs in federal C.E.T.A. funds in 1978-79, reduced the Fine Arts Museums operating funds and resulted in staff lay-offs. Exhibition support staff, who totaled 34 before 1980, are now twelve. The Museums are closed to the public on Monday and Tuesday, and starting July 1, 1986 the admission price was raised one dollar, to \$4.00 for adults. Wages for temporary help to design, install, guard and maintain the 26,000 square feet of temporary exhibition space at FAM (de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor) must come from the granting agencies - not the museum operating budget.

The Museums were faced with the need to increase their endowment funds while maintaining their program of travelling exhibits. In 1986, the Fine Arts Museums showed sixteen temporary exhibits. Ten of them were travelling exhibits. ⁷²

70. "Biennial Report of the Fine Arts Museums," 1983-1985.

71. Debra Pughe, Exhibits Manager FAM, "FAM Financial Outlook Report," September 1986. Interview with the author.

72. Debra Pughe, Exhibits Manager FAM, May 1987.