

# **ARCHIVAL INFORMATICS TECHNICAL REPORT**

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## **Functional Requirements for Exhibit Management Systems**

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# FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EXHIBIT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

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## INTRODUCTION

Exhibit planning and preparation in museums is a complex balancing act, involving many museum personnel. To expedite the planning process, museum staff need to have an efficient record management program. Even more complex are travelling exhibits, developed in-house or borrowed from other museums. Originating and recipient staff must coordinate donors, governmental agencies, transportation companies and funding agencies.

A well-planned computer system containing the information used in planning and preparing an exhibit provides a distinct advantage over the present manual method. A computer database can help organize information, assist curators and administrators in combining their efforts, and save time and costs. Also, automation in exhibits planning could make future exhibits more effective.

This report defines exhibit management through its various activities, explains the use of exhibit software support in museums, and compares systems currently used for exhibits. Relationships between collection management and exhibit systems are examined.

The author discusses the exhibit process, through a survey of current literature on the subject. Art museums use different structures in database systems to manage and document exhibits than science and history museums. By following the paperwork trail of acquisition, administration and reference, a structure for automation emerges. Forms and data elements are suggested as aids in designing exhibit automation.

This report is based on a survey and case study undertaken for a masters thesis at John F. Kennedy University in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> It had three purposes. First, to study the demands of travelling exhibits systems and the needs these demands create for data standards. A proposed set of minimum data standards<sup>2</sup> for travelling exhibit management in a medium-sized to large art

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1. Rozell Overmire, "Records Management in Museum Travelling Exhibits, Planning a Computerized System," JFK University, August 1987.

2. Chenhall and Homulos, "Museum Data Standards," Museum News, (July/August 1978): 43-48.

museum is set forth in the Data Dictionary, Appendix A.<sup>3</sup> Second, to develop recommendations for a more integrated system of travelling exhibit information flow. Recommendations are in Chapter III and IV of this report. And third, to suggest ways that computers can be more useful in the exhibit process by being a part of the everyday information flow, with staff putting in and retrieving information from the system on a daily basis.

To plan an exhibits system, the author first sent out a questionnaire to survey present automated systems used in art museums throughout the United States. And second, made a case study and needs assessment to explain how a travelling exhibit database system could be produced in the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The role of automation within exhibits, as a presentation medium on the exhibit floor, has been omitted in this report. It deserves a full study on its own merits. Recent articles in the Fall-Winter 1987 Museum Studies Journal have approached the topic. Howard Besser's "Digital Images for Museums" explains how the University Art Museum in Berkeley provides visitors the chance to dip into the collection database and view other works of the artist on display, with an electronic workstation. James Beniger's "High Tech - The Dilemma for Museums" discusses the pros and cons of the Greek Vase Videodisk Project at the Getty Museum. And the "Resources" section has fourteen "Systems and Projects for Exhibition, Education, and Communication" that show the range of electronic exhibits.

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3. Lee Kimchee, "American Museums, the Vital Statistics," Museum News (October 1980): 53-57. Large art museums refer to art museums that have annual operating budgets of over one million dollars. Annual operating budget is used in this paper to classify museums into small, under \$100,000, medium, over \$500,000, and large, over \$1,000,000. Among other measures of size are the staff size and the collection size. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, which includes the M.H. De Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, are large art museums with a combined annual budget of over nine and a half million dollars, a staff of over two hundred and a collection of over 200,000 objects. ("Statement of Financial Condition," and "Staff," Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Annual Report (1982-1983): 67-68, 86-87.)