

CURATORS VS. EXHIBITS AND EXTENSION:  
DEFINITIONS

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As museum activities, exhibits and extension offer enormous potential for public enlightenment and education. Yet both are among the least perfect of our endeavours. Somehow the end product of research and display planning invariably ends in disappointment for curators. And it appears as if the same is true in the field of extension. Manifestations of failure such as art over artifact, shallow message content, and inadequate public responsiveness are now commonplace in the exhibit galleries. Similarly, many curators are increasingly unhappy with the subject matter, presentation methods, and publicity resulting from the current wave of museum extension programmes. For some reason, however, curators are reluctant to strongly oppose such trends, preferring it seems either to suffer in silence or to complain amongst themselves, with the inevitable result that whatever moral position they may have had will be lost to their successors through apathy and neglect.

In my view this need not happen. Rather, I think it is a relatively simple matter for curators to play a leading role in the extension and exhibit processes. Moreover, I believe that if they do so with energy and enthusiasm, their contributions will be regarded by others as both positive and constructive. Thus in these first issues of the Material History Bulletin, I want to discuss certain methods that I have found useful in keeping a central role for the curator in both exhibit and extension programmes. This is best begun by considering some basic definitions for use in the discussions that will follow in later issues.

In my mind both museum exhibits and extension are:

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Offerings of the curators' collections and  
the curators' ideas on the collections.

The curator chooses what he wants to show to whom. Furthermore, he decides what he wants to say about the objects in question and why. In other words, he has a basic thesis which he wants to convey to a specific group, and he expects to have a certain impact on the ideas and attitudes of those to whom he offers his message. What normally differentiates his method of conveying information from that of writers, painters, film makers and others who are likewise trying to convey information and ideas is, of course, the use of the collection which the curator is personally responsible for (and presumably most expert in). Considerations of how and when and where should be both secondary and technical, though it seems that these latter factors are becoming the primary imperatives in museum exhibits and extension projects.

Plainly, then, I am urging the curator to be interpreter as well as collector. Yet in the face of large interpretation, exhibits, education and extension divisions the curator is not always able or eager to assume this position. Indeed, many directors would argue that copy writers, teachers and public information officers were hired because curators had failed to communicate adequately with the public. Regrettably, there is more than a little truth in this premise, and it should remind us that there can be good reasons for having specialized public services' divisions within our museums. It does not, however, indicate that the process of reaching the public has to be divided up assembly line style. In fact, whenever this occurs the results tend to be highly disappointing, often because somewhere along the way the curator has lost too much control over both his collections and his original message.

Assuming curators wish to retain an optimum level of control, then we may fairly ask how this can be achieved both as a matter of course and without causing unhealthy tensions between curatorial and service divisions. Actually the solution is quite simple, if the situation has not yet deteriorated too far, and surprisingly easy to implement. Structural reforms

such as promotions, administrative reorganizations, project planning, on-stream work flows and cost accountability are all useful tools in strengthening the curator's hand. But they are no substitute for good leadership which is really at the heart of any effective exhibit or extension project. And this brings us to a second definition:

Leadership is the act of influencing  
others to achieve a common aim.

When we pause to consider the vast number of decisions required in planning and completing displays, publications or lecture series, it is obvious that we are faced with a complex, demanding, decision-making process. Several methods for organizing the work of others are available in museums, ranging from strict authoritarian rule to near anarchy. For my own part, I prefer to go the democratic way, enlisting the views and support of all those involved to any significant degree. I think this is realistic, too, for curators rarely have more bureaucratic power than they are able to exercise within their own divisions. Still, there is such a force as moral authority that stems from judicious use of knowledge. Assuming the curator is more knowledgeable about both his field and his collection than anyone else in the museum, he automatically has a leadership advantage. Hence, a curator who wishes to have his materials displayed and interpreted to his satisfaction is obliged to step in from the start, to clearly establish his moral authority over all those who would use his collections.

Taking charge in the beginning can be as simple as approaching the exhibits or extension staffs, suggesting to them that it would be desirable to have a travelling display or lecture series or film festival on a given subject, emphasizing at that point what the curator himself would be prepared to do. In short, he states a common aim and acts through influence rather than demand to set others in motion. Conversely, if approached by another division with an exhibit or extension plan, the curator can re-define the aim (if he chooses), and initiate a schedule of planning, co-ordination, work, supervision and follow-up that always gives him control over his collection and the message content. In either instance, the curator must

be an integral part from beginning to end, co-operating and delegating wherever possible. If so, and if he displays both good judgment and sound knowledge, he is bound to become the project's natural leader, notwithstanding any structural obstacles.

On the other hand, the curator who sees himself providing no more than objects and script usually discovers someone else designing the project and interpreting the collections -- someone invariably less knowledgeable and often less able than the curator himself. Complaining at this stage serves no useful purpose and tends only to widen the gap between curators and those who would really appreciate curatorial leadership. After all, do any of us resent the advice and assistance of the expert, particularly when it flows naturally as a consequence of interest and enthusiasm in the project? I think not. But it is also true that we do resent unwarranted interference when someone oversteps the bounds of their moral authority to encroach on our own expertise. Thus it is the wise curator who limits the exercise of his power by drawing on the respective strengths and skills of other divisions. I have found that if I have correctly defined the aims, delegated work sufficiently and monitored progress carefully, the amount of effort I have to expend in ensuring results tapers off dramatically as we pass from purely curatorial tasks into the design, construction and presentation stages. If I have not been adamant at the beginning, however, I am bound to fret increasingly as the project progresses. And I am never confident as to the outcome. So, then, let us think of the curator as leader in addition to collector and interpreter.

I have attempted above to define some very basic terms in this consideration of curatorial participation in exhibit and extension programmes. In further issues, these terms will be applied in discussing various kinds of exhibit and extension projects that curators can find themselves in, and more importantly, in indicating how they might become happier for the experience.