



The Library and the Display of Text

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Abstract:

Today the exhibition of heritage collections to a general audience is becoming an increasingly important part of the work of libraries which possess such collections. Partly this is because of the growing pressure to make collections accessible to a wider audience than the scholarly researchers who visit the reading rooms, and partly because of increasing awareness in the library sector of the role of heritage collections as a tool for outreach and promotion, and growing consciousness of the responsibility of sharing these collections with the people whose heritage they are.

*But in looking for models for the best practice in constructing exhibitions, and for guidance about good methods of interpretation, we often have to rely on examples and theories derived from the museum and gallery sector, and from the display of artefacts and images. Drawing on the ideas which my collaborators and I have developed in the joint Edinburgh University/National Library of Scotland report *Exhibiting the Written Word*, in this paper I will argue that the unique properties of text give rise to issues which differ from those involved in the display of other objects – for instance, often only a small piece of the larger whole can be shown; the pages of a book which are most visually interesting may not be representative of the complete text.*

*In *Exhibiting the Written Word*, through research and work with librarians, educators and curators, we arrived at a set of key issues for the display of text, which we hope will make a contribution to the development of best practice for the exhibition of documentary heritage. Firstly, we came to the conclusion that a fundamental part of any text-based exhibition should be the opportunity for the visitor to ‘read’ the text on display within the exhibition, although this ‘reading’ may consist of orientation around a text, for example one in an unfamiliar language or script. Secondly, libraries should consider the role of exhibitions in generating reading or other*

engagement with the texts on display, which leads to the possibility of developing pre- and post-exhibition orientation into and out of these texts. In this librarians can take advantage of the unique property of text in that in many cases it is not dependent on its original form: a reader's encounter with the Iliad in a modern translation may be a different experience to their encounter with the earliest surviving manuscript, but not an inferior one. Practical ways of developing these encounters range from simple reading lists to city-wide reading programmes. Finally, consideration needs to be given to the library, rather than the gallery, as a site for exhibitions whether real or virtual, and the potential for embedding exhibitions in a space for reading or otherwise encountering the library's collections.

Introduction

A lot of the papers which we are hearing at this session are based on the experiences of individual librarians and individual libraries. Rather than talk about NLS exhibition practices, I am going to try to look at the bigger picture – at what ideas and principles might underpin the kind of exhibitions we put on in our libraries. The first session in our programme contained the words ‘the library as a museum’, and the last paper of the day also asks the question ‘is this a library or a museum?’. What I want to consider is how libraries are *not* museums and thus the ways we showcase our collections in exhibitions can differ from museum practice.

When it comes to the exhibition spaces we have in our libraries and the way we display our materials, the models we have to draw on, and the theories and examples of best practice for exhibitions, almost all are drawn from the museums and galleries sectors. The ideas developed in museums and art galleries have given us important and valuable models to follow, but there is very little published material available which gives us theory or principles to draw on when displaying text. There is, increasingly, a body of publications in the English-speaking world which does this work for museum exhibitions – books such as Beverley Serrell's *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretative Approach*; David Dean's *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice*; J. Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, to name but a few. But there is nothing which discusses the display of *text* as distinct from the display of objects and works of art – discussion of best practice with regard to interpretation and design, development of suitable supporting exhibition elements such as interactives; analysis of audience reaction, and so on. Equally absent from the body of theory is any special consideration of the role of the library as a space for exhibitions, or the options open to libraries for developing interaction with the texts they put on display in or outside the exhibition space.

Of course we do not think about our exhibitions in an entirely blank space. Increasingly we have a solid body of facts, advice and standards on which to rely for the *physical* display of books and other textual artefacts, and conferences such as this one, and the 2011 CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group conference in the UK, offer a chance for those of us who put on exhibitions to share stories of what has worked for us and the lessons we have learned. But given the increasing attention paid to exhibition theory and practice, it is increasingly important that we do develop our own sector's practices rather than depend on those developed for objects and works of art.

I certainly am not going to propose in this one short paper a complete theory of the exhibition and the library: this paper offers rather some suggestions of principles of library exhibitions – suggestions for how we might draw together our best practice and our best visions to provide a model for what a library exhibition should try to do. What I am going to say in this paper is based on a 2011 project investigating this subject which was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, called ‘Making Our Connections: Collaboration, Community and the Exhibition of the Written Word’. This project was a collaboration between James Loxley and Lisa Otty from the University of Edinburgh’s English Department, Joseph Marshall, Rare Books Librarian at Edinburgh University Library, and me, and I am indebted to my project colleagues for many of the words and ideas which I will talk about today. The outcome of this project was *Exhibiting the Written Word*, a brief presentation of the conclusions of our research and suggestions for further lines of investigation. This is available online and in print, and I will silently quote from it throughout my paper.¹

There are of course some areas in which the theory and practice developed by museums and galleries can offer useful and inspiring models to follow, particularly in the general issues of planning an exhibition, setting goals for what responses we want to provoke in our visitors, and methodologies evaluating the success of exhibitions. The research which has been done into exhibition visitor behaviour, and how visitors interact with objects on display and their interpretation, can give us valuable insights which must be incorporated into the way we think about designing our exhibitions and interpreting their content. Sometimes we display items from our collections in exactly the same way as a museum, highlighting their significance as artefacts or beautiful objects – manuscripts in the hand of famous authors; documents such as the United States of America’s Declaration of Independence which lie at the heart of historical moments; beautiful bindings; more homely objects such as schoolbooks of a previous generation. In all these examples, the reason for displaying these objects is not, primarily, to enable exhibition visitors to encounter the texts, although they may pick out some words as they look at such items on display, but to enable them to have a different kind of experience – an encounter with the past, whether recognition of its familiarity or shock at its difference; an emotional reaction to an iconic object; a sense that this object can give a clue to the person who once owned it, or provide a connection between that person’s life and the person who looks at it in its case today. Here we can, indeed, learn from the ways museums and galleries have developed to display objects to enhance these reactions and experiences.

The word in a glass case

However, not all our exhibitions in the library can or should be assimilated to this model. The word does not always thrive in a glass case. Books (and other pieces of text) are most often designed to be read in some way, not to be displayed, and by selecting one particular opening of a book to be displayed in an exhibition, we are somehow doing something different, less fulfilling, than is the case when, for instance, an artwork is displayed in a gallery.

¹ <http://www.nls.uk/about-us/working-with-others/rare-books-in-scotland/documents/exhibiting-the-written-word>

So the question is, how do we deal with this? It may be appropriate to play up the artefactual aspect of a book, as I have just mentioned, choosing to display a binding or an illustration, rather than any text at all. But we may want to foreground the text, rather than the materiality of that text – to display a book for its content and not its format. In a display about a particular author, we may want to display some examples of that author's publications, such as the first editions of Jane Austen's novels, or Molière's plays. We may want to tell the story of an historical event through texts – illustrating the Reformation through Lutheran tracts, or humanism through Aldus Manutius' editions of classical authors. Those of us who are responsible for special collections may want to put on an exhibit which explains why some of the books in our collections are so important – Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, for instance, or the Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, symbol and product of the French enlightenment.

This presents a different set of problems. How interesting is text as an object in a case? Can the text locked in the case really be read? This is a question as much about the practicalities of display as about the philosophical debate: I am sure many people here can think of examples where lighting levels, or the distance of the text from the glass barrier, or the angle of display, have made it hard for anyone really to read the text on display. Behind glass, the book can easily become an object which is not a text – not to be read or understood, but simply to be looked at. Yet visitors to exhibitions *do* try to read the text that is displayed for them. Certainly visitors to the National Library of Scotland exhibitions do complain when the physical conditions of display make it hard for them to read the books – for at least some of our audience, this is the point of putting the book on display in the first place. People who might never actually visit our reading rooms to consult the items we display can see exhibitions as their opportunity to 'read' these treasured early editions. They want to know why this particular book is displayed, and the first thing they look at to find an answer is often not the interpretation but the book itself. The first principle that I would like to put forward, therefore, is that **an exhibition of texts should always want to promote engagement with the texts displayed.**

This has to affect the choices we make about what we put on display. It is easy to select a title page, which may in fact not really 'represent' the book. Since exhibitions almost always include the title of a book in the interpretation, why duplicate this information, in effect offering visitors a chance to read the same words in the original book and in the label beside them? There are also practical problems with the display of title pages: there is a certain visual tedium to an exhibition consisting primarily of books all open at a title page (with blank page facing them); our awareness of lux levels and how damaging it can be to display the same page of a book repeatedly or for a long period of time forces us to consider ways of rotating the pages of a volume that we display. To display the title page and no extract from the text itself deprives the viewer of an opportunity to pass their own judgement on that text. How far can we let a book speak for itself? In many cases, particularly where a vernacular work in roman type is displayed, if people are capable of reading your label, they are also capable of reading the text. People relish the opportunity to encounter a famous passage – Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, or a significant quotation from the first vernacular translation of the Bible into a particular language – in the form in which it first appeared.

Interpretation and orientation

My second principle, then, is that **the interpretation around a text-based exhibition should try to do some of the work of reading** which normally a person would be able to carry out by picking up the book and leafing through it. This might be to reveal more of the story of a novel in a label or handout than one particular opening of an edition of it can show; to orientate visitors to a European exhibition of Chinese manuscripts as to the direction in which the text goes, and how it relates to the illustrations on the page; to explain the function of a document or the significance of the handwriting on a printed page. Even where many exhibition visitors could not actually read the text, as is the case today with the Latin volumes which make up such a great part of most early printed collections, we should make sure that they can understand *how* such a text is to be read – the relationship between the text of the *Aeneid* and the medieval commentaries that surround it in an early edition of Virgil's works; the function of the rubrication in a missal or breviary. Taking as a starting point the visitor's questions 'What am I looking at? And why?', rather than starting with our own knowledge of the bibliographical and cultural history of a work can be helpful here.

In other cases a different approach is necessary. As I said, the part of a book we display is not the whole, and a part of the text may not represent it adequately. Sometimes it is the ideas in a book, rather than any particular words, which are the point of interest. A display consisting of pages of text and densely-written labels can easily overwhelm with 'textual overload'. Promoting engagement with the texts has to consider communicating what makes them exciting and worthy of examination. I know that to some people this may seem a difficult task, particularly if they think there is a gulf between the people who carry out serious scholarly research in the reading room, where they can actually read these books, and the people who visit our exhibitions. But this gulf can be bridged. The exhibition can be a way to give access to those treasures which few have a scholarly need to see: it can simulate the reading room experience with interpretation that shares not just the results of research but the process of research. This can involve asking readers to look at two different editions side by side, or using arrows or other signals to mark out a part of a page of particular interest.

Another possibility is to provide interpretative materials in a different way to the traditional label which does all the work of interpretation. We can offer translations and quotations from a text and leave the exhibition visitor to look and do their own work of interpreting, guiding them towards a conclusion rather than telling them the whole story. Within the exhibition itself, we must consider ways of using the whole exhibition space at our disposal to convey the significance of the texts on display. This is obviously easiest to do with better resources and professional designers at our disposal – one example is the recently-redesigned Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway, Scotland, where text from Burns' poems appears all over the building in an array of materials – lighting, wood, stone – alongside more conventional printed labels. But in this age of photoshop and colour printers, even a small display in traditional library cases can be enlivened by key quotations pulled from the texts on display, or perhaps a quotation from a modern scholar, or from an early reader which gives a sense of why this particular text matters.

And the unique property of text is that, for all the importance of the editions that we hold, a text itself is almost never simply reducible to one particular manifestation. Quite the contrary: compared to other historical objects, and to works of art, text is uniquely reproducible. While we all know that much can be gained from the examination of a text in a particular form – the original manuscript, a particular edition, even a particular annotated copy – the reader who picks up a modern paperback rather than the first edition loses nothing of the ability of the words to work their own magic. If we want readers to engage with the texts on display, we should try to promote that engagement outside of the actual exhibition space.

This is my third principle: **The planning of exhibitions of text should always consider providing orientation into and out of the texts on display**, connecting to texts which can be read in another space. Ideally such alternative reading could happen before or after the visit to an exhibition. With text we are already at an advantage in that it can be relatively easy for our visitors to find their own copies of the texts we display – not just paperback editions of novels but print-on-demand and downloadable versions of obscure and early books; increasingly we can direct them to a complete set of digital images made available from libraries around the world of early books from their collections. Making the connection can be as simple as providing a reading list posted on a website and available for readers to take away, or it can involve a whole collaborative programme working with other organisations. In some cities, exhibitions have successfully linked to city-wide reading programmes, such as the 2007 Edinburgh campaign relating to Robert Louis Stevenson and his novel *Kidnapped*; more particular programmes could be developed with local schools or adult reading groups. There may also be the possibility of tie-ins with local bookshops, QR codes offering free e-books or linking to copies available for loan in our own non-special collections. The objective of encouraging people to engage with the texts we display can drive the use of social networking and other online tools in relation to an exhibition; it may lead us to relate our exhibition schedule to our digitisation, education and events programmes, as happens already in many libraries.

The library as exhibition space

Just as text is qualitatively different to other kinds of objects, libraries are different to other kinds of places where objects are displayed. Museums and galleries may, in their different ways, offer the opportunity for people to encounter texts, but as a rule their primary public space is the exhibition gallery, and it is assumed that in almost every case the normal way for a visitor to the museum or gallery to encounter their collections is through a visit to this exhibition space.

Libraries, of course, are very different. In almost every case, the normal way for most visitors to use libraries is through visiting their reading rooms, which often contain substantial proportions of their collections on open access. Research libraries, and the historic collections kept in closed storage and only issued to readers under staff supervision are the exceptions to this rule. Some libraries do have dedicated exhibition spaces, which function exactly like museum/gallery exhibition halls, with their primary function being to offer visitors a sample of the collections. But in many cases there is also the option of a display within the ‘working’ areas of the library –

the spaces where our visitors read books, browse the shelves, and use the dedicated spaces for private study.

Exhibiting the Written Word contains a short essay on this subject by Julie Johnstone, the librarian of the Scottish Poetry Library. This institution currently sits in a small modern building in central Edinburgh, designed specially to house it in 1999. It combines a lending library and reference collection with a mission to be a resource centre for both readers and writers of poetry, offering educational programmes and other events as well as mounting exhibitions. In the small space available to it, there is no exhibition gallery: exhibitions take place in the same room which contains the lending collection. Julie writes:

A visitor may have come for the collection or to use the library – the exhibition is superfluous to their perceived need. They may not even notice it. A visitor drawn to the building for the exhibition alone may be initially confused. Where is the exhibition? ... Does it matter that they will be distracted away from the exhibition to look at shelves of books, or vice versa?

Any exhibition in the space needs to find a balance between standing out and being noticed, and not adversely impacting day to day library use. It must accentuate the experience of visiting the library, but not inconvenience or irritate existing users. It must sit well within the context of the library – quietly distract and intrigue, but also hopefully complement and encourage exploration of the broader context provided by the collection.

This, then, is the final principle I want to put forward: **an exhibition in a library site should consider how to use that context to relate back to the library itself.** By this I mean that the library is, today, both a repository of texts and a way for people to access those texts in different ways. In some cases it might be appropriate to want visitors to an exhibition who are not already members to join the library – but in other cases, such as with many university libraries, we may want to use the exhibition as a window on the collection and think of other ways to ‘complement and encourage’ this kind of exploration. For those of us who look after historic collections, this can be where the text-as-artefact marries up with the text-as-text: a first edition or manuscript can provoke an exhibition visitor to engage with the text in the form of a modern edition which can be borrowed from the library’s general collections or consulted in the reading room. Where it is an easy step from looking at an exhibition to being a reader in a reading room, we can try to facilitate that journey – and also try to move people in the opposite direction. This does not have to involve permitting every exhibition visitor to consult the original books – we can point people to modern editions available in a local public library or bookshop, to secondary works which may do more to answer their questions, to online or downloadable versions that allow them to read for themselves in their own preferred format.

Conclusion

I began by saying that we developed these principles in the *Exhibiting the Written Word* project as a starting point for exhibitions involving text. Most of what I have said largely has displays of printed books in mind, but I think it should be possible to develop these principles so that they can relate to any kind of text, although in some cases the way they would play out would be very different. As museums and galleries increasingly develop their critical thinking about the exhibitions they put on, it matters that we develop our own principles for exhibiting our books and manuscripts, in a way that allows us to take advantage of the properties of text rather than feeling ourselves the poor relations of museums able to create glamorous exhibitions of fascinating objects, or art exhibitions filled with beauty and colour. I look forward to hearing responses today. But to conclude I want to stress that there is one idea lying behind all of these which cannot be changed: that we *want* to introduce our collections to the wider public, and to provoke engagement with them. I think this can happen without ‘dumbing down’ – engagement can be serious and involve a response of wonder and admiration – but it involves thinking about exhibitions as a way of opening our collections up rather than using them to provide a carefully-controlled avenue of access to our hidden treasures.

References

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