

A Collaborative Conservation Perspective: Ensuring Preservation, Access, and Safety in Exhibits

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Jennifer Herrmann¹ 
and Dong Eun Kim² 

Abstract

Ensuring preservation, access and safety in exhibits relies heavily on collaboration. This paper describes some examples of ways conservators and scientists at the National Archives collaborate with archivists, collection managers, and exhibit staff in preparation for exhibitions to support NARA's mission of public access to high-value federal government records.

Keywords

exhibition, case study, collections, access, activities, conservation

Introduction

Preserving and making cultural heritage collections accessible to the public through a regular exhibition program are central activities for a conservation professional. To balance the dual mission of preservation and access, the increased handling, exposure to light, and environmental extremes while on display must be controlled to preserve the exhibited collections. Conservation staff work to proactively address concerns about exhibit case design, use of stable materials for cases and mounts, and exhibit duration limits for objects, by establishing restricted illumination levels and collaboratively approaching exhibit access and safety.

¹National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, USA

²US National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Dong Eun Kim, US National Archives and Records Administration, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20408-0001, USA.

Email: dongun.kim@nara.gov

The most successful exhibits rely on all departments, including archivists, curators, collection managers, conservators, exhibit specialists, facilities staff, and security members working together in close collaboration. Mutual support and coordination allow all partners to understand the perspectives and goals of each specific group in meeting the exhibit concept while keeping the objects, visitors, and staff safe. A collaborative focus shifts perspective to shared long-term goals and supports the balance of exhibit access now and in the future.

Balancing conservation and access can be a delicate process. Often, difficult decisions must be made regarding the use of new material in exhibit cases, or in determining limited display times for light sensitive collections. For example, if a new material initially suggested for fabrication is found to off-gas acidic volatiles which can tarnish metals, it should not be used (Samide and Smith 2020). Similarly, a light sensitive photograph will be equally important in years to come, but if it fades completely now, future generations will not have access (Casella and Tsukada 2012). By bringing all stakeholders to the table, exhibit planning can proactively address concerns and approach exhibit access and safety in a collaborative manner. This short paper will address two successful examples of collaboration between conservation and exhibits staff at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Light Levels

Once an exhibit concept is determined, conservators work with collection managers to select appropriate objects and set their display time based on both exposure intensity and duration. Conservation and exhibit staff seek to balance the time on exhibit, the visibility, and the light levels so that the object can be accessed and enjoyed by current and future generations. Visibility often sets a threshold for minimum levels for proper access and safety and access of patrons. Lighting maps, a modification of the light plans described in *Museum Lighting* by David Saunders (2020), are useful tools used at NARA. A lighting map is created by annotating a gallery display floor plan with the actual light and UV levels experienced at the object level. This is done at the beginning of each new temporary exhibit and each rotation for permanent exhibits, as well as when specially protected and or significant holdings are placed on display. Measurements are taken outside the case, which is safer for the object, as each time the case is accessed the risk to the object and the staff member accessing the case increases. Conservation and exhibits staff created lighting maps that will become part of the object record so that they more accurately reflect the actual conditions of the object. Future plans at NARA also include making a lighting map during gallery events outside normal museum hours. While a map would not be made for every event, the information would provide data to help track the extra light during these events that is often forgotten during light budget calculations.

Exhibit Materials

Conservation works with exhibit specialists to design displays using safe materials to minimize risk from off-gassing. Scientists test and review new materials, checking products as frequently as possible to reconfirm that known substances of concern are not used in the formulation (Samide and Smith 2020). Online resources can be useful to check how a product suggested for use in a display case might affect metal or sensitive objects on display. One example is the AIC Wiki Material Testing Results which compiles Oddy testing results from around the world with the date completed. NARA mines product literature for information that may distinguish two products and help choose the one that would be less risky to use around sensitive objects. Because the product information sheets, including Safety Data Sheets (SDS), are often aimed at human safety, using this information to help select safer products based on object needs often means that both the object and the staff/visitors around the displays are safer—while it is true that not all object hazards are human hazards, trying to minimize the risk to one often helps minimize the risk to the other. Working together with designers and fabricators allows conservation to understand their needs while explaining the needs of the object. Such collaboration results in cases that promote access while minimizing risk.

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ORCID iDs

Jennifer Herrmann  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0278-9264>

Dong Eun Kim  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5719-849X>

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Author Biographies

Jennifer Herrmann is, Senior Heritage scientist at the National Archives & Records Administration (NARA), specializes in analyzing holdings and exhibit materials. Previously, Jennifer worked with currency at the Bureau of Engraving & Printing and the vast collections of the National Park Service. She has a Ph.D. in Analytical Chemistry (University at Buffalo).

Dong Eun Kim is Exhibits Conservator at the National Archives & Records Administration. She has worked at Center for Jewish History, Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Yale Center for British Art. These appointments often included teaching/lecturing duties. Dong Eun earned an MA in Fine Art Conservation (University of Northumbria, UK).