




INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Issue 73 | November 2017

PROTECTING COLLECTIONS DURING EXHIBITION

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

We often discuss how to protect our collection items when they are in storage, but we do not as often consider how to protect them while they are on exhibit. This month we are discussing some of the ways to ensure that items on display are being cared for in the best way possible.

It is important to recognize that objects on display will always be in less-than-perfect environments, which is why items highly sensitive to elements of their environment are suggested to be on view for short periods of time and then returned to storage for a resting period. We will talk a bit more about those types of items later.



[Briefing Area for Mr. Zwerner's Grocery Store Exhibit.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

The temperature of museum galleries is often a talking point with regards to comfort. Trying to balance visitor comfort and object comfort can be difficult. However, keeping galleries between 68 and 72 degrees Fahrenheit will provide comfort to both objects and visitors. As we all know, galleries tend to heat up the more people are in them, so keeping the temperature on the lower end allows for some temperature rise without negatively affecting the objects.

Gallery lighting is another thing to consider with objects on display. The light levels that feel comfortable for the viewing public are often higher than desirable for light-sensitive objects, like papers, photographs, and textiles. One important thing to remember is that the human eye will adjust to the amount of light available. Although a gallery may first feel too dim, as long as the light level is consistent throughout the gallery, the visitor's eyes will adjust and the lower light level will not pose such an issue. Using indirect light as much as possible can also help. By utilizing lights from further away to light a certain item, it is possible to not only lower the light level on the object, but also lower the heat level near the artifact that often comes from too-



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bright lights.

Another issue often seen with exhibition areas versus storage areas are the inclusion of windows. Be mindful that windows bring with them a variety of issues. If they open and close, there is the threat of pests. However, even if they are not ever opened, windows provide an entry point for both light and heat from the sun. Watch carefully throughout the year to see where the stream of sunshine comes in at different times of year and different times of day. It can be helpful to create an outline of the sun cast so you can reference it when planning for object placement in exhibits to ensure that particularly light-sensitive items are out of the direct sun stream. If possible, block out the windows completely with exhibit panels or light-blocking curtains, which will also take care of heat. If the windows are a necessary element, try using UV protective film on the windows; although it will not eliminate the heat it will at least greatly reduce the harmful UV rays.



You Are There 1863: Letter Home from Gettysburg. (Indiana Historical Society exhibit)

To keep pests out of exhibit areas, keep outside doors and windows closed as much as possible. Be sure to monitor exhibit areas for pests and put preventative pest measures near the doors and windows, obviously hidden from visitor view.

Open doors and windows, along with HVAC vents, also pose the threat of dust, air pollution, and intense air movement. Check air vents to make sure the air being pushed through them by the HVAC system is not blowing directly on delicate items causing them to blow gently. This can be

detrimental to delicate textiles and papers. Also, keep an eye on the dust and air pollution threats posed by opening doors and windows. Obviously it is necessary for the outside door to open to allow for visitor entrance, displaying items near the door in covered cases can help protect them from debris that may be dragged in by visitors. Placing mats near the door that will catch debris from the bottom of shoes can help as well.

Items on display should be properly supported to prevent strain during display. Using appropriate mounts for books, textiles, and other items can go a long way in preventing accidental harm. Along those same lines, make sure object labels are correctly placed. If it is necessary to "attach" an object label to the object, simply place it near or on the object, but only if the label is made of a non-acidic material, and never use pins or adhesives to stick labels to objects. It is better to reprint a label half-way through the exhibit than to ruin the object by improperly affixing a label.

Having a rotation schedule is another important piece of the collection-protection side of exhibits. If an exhibition will be on display for more than six months, consider creating a rotation of objects that are light sensitive, like paper, textiles, and photographs. Not only will you save the artifacts by giving them time to rest in prime storage situations, but you will also provide visitors with an opportunity to view even more of the collection throughout the course of the exhibition.

By taking the objects themselves into account when designing a museum exhibit, you can ensure the object's safety. Most of the time it takes only a few tweaks and adjustments to make collection protection possible and rarely, if ever, at the detriment to the visitor experience.

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