CHAPTER 2

The Idea

The best exhibitions, whether they exist in a gallery space or online, start with an idea. The idea, or concept, behind an exhibition is what will set it apart from a random collection of objects or, in the case of an online exhibition, images. An idea, well conceived, thoroughly thought through, properly executed, and carefully illustrated with objects, can provide the visitor not only with an educational experience, but also with an experience that will provoke further exploration of the topic. In the case of an online exhibition, this further exploration may be encouraged through the addition of supplemental materials or hyperlinks to other resources. Visitors to an online exhibition may also be intrigued enough to visit your collection or their own local collections that can assist them in their explorations.

WHERE TO GET IDEAS

According to Plato, an idea is a model or archetype of which things in the real world are but imperfect representations. Though in most cases, our exhibitions will never match the perfect conception we have of them in our mind’s eye, the generation of exhibition ideas does not have to rely on shadows cast on the wall of a cave. The topics for an online exhibition are all around us and the materials to make those topics successful exhibitions are on our shelves.

A few general topics for which every library or archive can find materials around which to build an online exhibition include the following:

- Anniversaries of births, deaths, or significant events in people’s lives
- Notable events in the life of an institution or region
- Specific materials from certain collections or subcollections
- Themes built around materials in the collection
- Treasures
- Work done by various departments of the library, archives, or other units or departments of the parent institution
- Odd and unusual

Each of these areas can be tailored and focused to reflect the strengths of your individual library or archive. Examples of these themes, with comments on how they can be developed, are detailed below.

**Anniversaries**

Centennials, sesquicentennials, bicentennials, silver and golden anniversaries, diamond jubilees, or any other magic number that ends in a five or zero can be the impetus for an exhibition. An exhibition themed around an anniversary will allow you to revisit the past, highlight current collections or programs, and look forward to the next five, ten, one hundred years!

*From Smithson to Smithsonian: The Birth of an Institution*, an exhibition by Smithsonian Institution Libraries, is a prime example of an anniversary-themed exhibition. Created for the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Smithsonian Institution, *From Smithson to Smithsonian* traces the history of Englishman James Smithson’s gift to the United States for the founding of an institution “for the increase and diffusion of knowledge” (see figure 3).

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the World’s Columbian Exposition celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s contact with the Americas. One hundred years later, the Library of Congress documented the
quincentenary of this event with 1492: An Ongoing Voyage. An online version of this exhibition was later created that reflected much of the content of the gallery exhibition.

An exhibition from Ohio State University Archives, 1997: A Year of Many Anniversaries, focuses not on a single anniversary but on the year 1997. In that year were anniversaries of nine separate events (ranging from the establishment of Benton County in 1847 to Professor Harold Evans’s election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1972) that are documented through a photographic exhibition created from archival holdings.

**Notable Events**

Major events are perfect topics for online exhibitions. Libraries and archives often hold substantial materials related to significant, interesting, or even sometimes just entertaining events. An event-themed exhibition allows the library or archive to draw on a range of materials and in some cases collaborate with other institutions, such as historical societies, museums, or businesses.

*The Chicago Fire*, from the Chicago Historical Society, offers an overview of the great fire of 1871. The exhibition tells the story of the fire through photographs and an extensive collection of documents related to the fire, including testimony from Mrs. O’Leary (of cow fame).

Similarly, another event of historic importance, if less well known, is documented in *The Capture of Fort William and Mary, New Castle, New Hampshire, December 14–15, 1774*, from the University of New Hampshire, Milne Special Collections and Archives.

At the same time, very local events are also suitable for online exhibitions. The Public Library of New Orleans opened a new main library on December 15, 1958, at 219 Loyola Avenue. The exhibition *219 Loyola: Building a Library for New Orleans*, created by the New Orleans Public Library, explores the idea of building a new public library by examining (through the use of photographs, archival records, and printed materials) the planning for the new building, the construction, and the public and critical reaction to the structure.

**Specific Materials**

Special collections are the logical first place to turn when looking for an exhibition topic based on specific types of materials. Examples of special materials include such obvious ones as photographs, sheet music, and manuscripts, but may also include unique collections of postcards, bookbindings, and even postage stamps.

As an example of this last format, the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University Libraries of Notre Dame, has created an exhibition, *The Dr. Charles Wolf Collection of Irish Postage Stamps*, which centers on an Irish philatelic collection donated by Dr. Charles Wolf.

Maps and other cartographic materials provide a wealth of ideas for online exhibitions. *Canada at Scale: Maps of Our History* (National Archives of Canada / Archives nationales du Canada; see figure 4), *Exploring Africa: An Exhibit of Maps and Travel Narratives* (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina), *The Earth and the Heavens: The Art of the Mapmaker* (the British Library), *Highlights of the Map Collection, National Library of Scotland*, and *The Cartographic Creation of New England* (the Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education, University of Southern Maine) all use maps or cartography as their basic exhibition idea.
The range of special materials that appear in online exhibitions reflects the creativity of the exhibitions’ creators. For example, postcards form the basis for *California Pacific Exposition: San Diego 1935–1936* (San Diego Historical Society); paper bindings are the focus of *The Enduring Legacy of Paper Bindings* (New York University’s Bobst Library); and Soviet children's books take the spotlight in *Children's Books of the Early Soviet Era: Yesterday, Today and . . . Tomorrow* (Rare Books and Special Collections Division, McGill University Libraries).

Perhaps the most common exhibition idea is the themed exhibition. This type of exhibition will be built around a specific idea and designed to develop that idea. Themes can range from individuals to professions, poems, social movements or phenomena, collectors, and specific media.

*Dr. Seuss Went to War: A Catalog of Political Cartoons by Dr. Seuss*, from the Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego, is an example of a very specific theme: the wartime cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel. Arranged in chronological order, the cartoons show a side of Dr. Seuss that is not often seen. Similarly, *Churchill: The Evidence*, from the Churchill Archives Center, traces the life and times of Winston Churchill.

More examples of exhibitions that use as their idea a specific theme include *Connies* (State Library of Victoria, Australia), which celebrates Melbourne’s tram conductors; *The Night before Christmas by Clement C. Moore, Illustrated* (Brown University Library; see figure 5), which uses an array of illustrations from the poem; and *Girls Fight for a Living* (created for Women’s History Month by the University of Louisville Special Collections), which draws on a number of resources to examine the role of women in the workplace.

For an example of a medium used as the basis for an exhibition theme, one can look at *The History of Railway Photography* (Library Archive, The National Railway Museum, Great Britain). Because the exhibition relies exclusively on photographs to tell the story of British railways, its dual themes, railways and photographs, are focused and direct.
A special subsection of the themed exhibition is the exhibition that highlights treasures of a collection. How different institutions will define just what part of their collections are their treasures varies greatly. The Library of Congress’s *American Treasures of the Library of Congress* is an exhibition of documents such as Lincoln’s first draft of the Gettysburg Address, Lafayette’s copy of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and Jefferson’s draft of the Virginia Constitution (see figure 6). By any measure, these are unique treasures and ideal for online exhibitions. However, a wide range of materials can serve as the basis for treasure exhibitions. Other national and state libraries have mounted such exhibitions. A few additional examples include *Treasures of the Royal Library*, from the State Library of Denmark, and *Treasures from Europe’s National Libraries*, from the Conference of European National Librarians.

The American Philosophical Society, in the exhibition *Treasures of the APS*, defines as treasures any items that stand out for the “extraordinary stories they tell about the history of this nation, the workings of science, or the culture in which we live.” The Library of Virginia, in the exhibition *The Common Wealth: Treasures from the Collections of the Library of Virginia*, places “personal photographs, business records, and family histories that document the lives of all Virginians” in the treasure category. In a similar vein, *Treasures of Florida Libraries: A Celebration of Rare and Unique Materials*, from the University of Miami Library, brings together a host of materials from twenty-nine Florida libraries. On a much smaller scale is the University of Kansas Libraries’ *Irish Treasures from the O’Hegarty Irish Collection*. This exhibition displays eighteen images from the libraries’ Irish collection.
Of the more than 121 million items in the Library of Congress, which are considered “treasures”? Of course Thomas Jefferson’s handwritten draft of the Declaration of Independence is a treasure, not only because of its association with Jefferson but also because of what it reveals about how one of the founding documents of America was written and rewritten and finally agreed upon by dozens of men in the midst of a political crisis.

But what about Jelly Roll Morton’s early compositions? Or Maya Lin’s original drawing for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? Or one of the earliest known baseball cards? Or the first motion picture deposited for copyright? The Library holds all these and more.

Thomas Jefferson, whose personal library became the core of the Library of Congress, arranged his books into three types of knowledge, corresponding to Francis Bacon’s three faculties of the mind: Memory (History), Reason (Philosophy), and Imagination (Fine Arts).

Although the Library organizes its immense collections according to a system created at the end of the 1800s, the treasures in this exhibition have been placed in the same categories that Jefferson would have used, had he been deciding where to put Alexander Graham Bell’s lab notebook or George Gershwin’s full orchestral score for Porgy and Bess.
A much different approach to the treasures concept was taken by Texas A&M University's Cushing Library. In the exhibition *Fruits of a Research Collection*, the uses of a special collection for nontraditional research are highlighted. Steven E. Smith, Special Collections Librarian, noted that the “collections . . . have also been used by many . . . people for many other purposes—for example, journalists writing articles for national magazines, film producers creating documentaries, student groups making t-shirts, and book editors in search of cover art.”

**Work Done**

An exhibition that focuses on the work done at the library or archive or at the parent institution can serve many purposes. In addition to bringing publicity to an area of the institution, an online exhibition that highlights, say, recent acquisitions or a new building will help to raise staff morale. The ability to take something like a recent acquisition or a quick library history and turn it into an online exhibition or display can often be done simply and by staff who may not regularly work on full-fledged gallery exhibitions. A fine example of a library history exhibition comes from Houston Public Library. This exhibition, the *History of the Houston Public Library*, is a simple narrative history of the library interspersed with photographs of the library’s various buildings, events, and staff.

A much different approach to this type of exhibition idea is seen in *Keeping Our Word: Preserving Information across the Ages* from the University of Iowa Libraries. This exhibition, which “celebrates the myriad efforts made over time to preserve information,” both serves as an exhibition of the work being done in preservation at the University of Iowa Libraries and provides a fascinating overview of the preservation of library and archival materials.

In addition to being able to celebrate their own work and staff, libraries and archives are often in a unique position to highlight the history of their parent institutions or their staff. The Perry Library at Old Dominion University and the Harvey Library at Hampton University worked together to create *From Exposition to Development: The Legacy of Composers at Hampton University*, which uses images and archival documents to trace the contributions of five composers to the music composition heritage of Virginia.

**Odd and Unusual**

Though all of the above make wonderful topics for online exhibitions, sometimes it is the odd and the unusual that will both educate and entertain your online exhibition visitors. A good example of this is *Celebrating the Boar* from the University of Waterloo Library. Taking as its starting point a seven-hundred-pound bronze boar statue donated by a faculty member, the exhibition goes on to examine the role of the boar in art and in history.

Only from Las Vegas could come the exhibition *Dino at the Sands*, an exploration of the life and career of Dean Martin from the UNLV Libraries Special Collections (see figure 7). A similar exhibition, *The Jackie Gleason Collection*, from the University of Miami’s Otto G. Richter Library, focuses not on the entertainer’s show business career but rather on his collection of occult and parapsychology materials, which he donated to the library.
Michael Belcher (1991, 37), in *Exhibitions in Museums*, defines an exhibition as “showing for a purpose,” the purpose being to affect the viewer in some predetermined way.” Though we have outlined a host of potential ideas, it needs to be said that not all ideas are created equal and that some ideas are best left in the closet of their thinker’s mind, never to see the light of day, virtual or otherwise. 

An idea might not be suitable for an exhibition for a number of reasons. The library or archive may not have, or may not be able to borrow, the proper objects to see the idea through to completion. In other cases, the objects themselves may not be suitable for use in an exhibition. The fragility of an object is of less concern in an online exhibition than in a gallery exhibition. Still, the physical state of an object may keep it from being either directly digitized or photographed for secondary digitization.

Lastly, even the best of ideas cannot be converted into an online exhibition if the proper support and staff are not behind it.

Rare is the idea that, like Athena, springs forth fully formed from the head of Zeus. Once the initial idea for an exhibition is settled on, the idea will need to be further developed. Development includes vigorously analyzing the idea and teasing out all its possibilities. Examine the idea from all sides and angles to see what additional elements can be added from the collections to flesh it out in an online environment.

Librarians and archivists, particularly special collections librarians and curators, can never hope to “fling wide the golden gates and let the public in” (Low 1942, 7) to the totality of their collections. With the right idea and the proper execution, however, your collections can take on a new life and generate a whole new audience.

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