

Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries. By Jessica Lacher-Feldman. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013. 208 pp. Index. Softcover. \$69.95. \$49.95 for SAA members.

In 2008, to provide continuity across the profession and acknowledge skills needed for effective stewardship of special collections materials, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) approved *Competencies for Special Collections Professionals*. This document explicitly contends that those responsible for special collections materials must be “committed to promoting the appreciation and use of special collections materials to a variety of audiences. . . .” and “skilled in planning and implementing programs and publications that promote and interpret collections, such as exhibits. . . .”¹ Indeed, at one time or another, most archivists and special collections librarians face curating a display or exhibit. Despite this, modern resources on exhibit preparation geared to special collections are lacking, leaving staff to glean guidance from general library exhibit publications or to turn to colleagues in the museum field for the most current materials on exhibits. Jessica Lacher-Feldman’s book, *Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries*, attempts to fill this void in the literature.

With over a decade of experience in rare books, outreach services, and exhibit production, as well as a successful series of workshops for the Society of American Archivists on creating exhibits, the author is uniquely qualified to write on this topic. Using her background to her advantage, her enthusiasm shows in the tone of her writing, and she encourages readers to “proceed and be bold” in approaching exhibit work (p. 6). Some relish curating exhibits, and others see it as a burdensome task. She acknowledges that for most, creating exhibits is done in addition to other duties; it is seldom one’s only responsibility, and it is rare to dedicate staff solely to producing exhibit content. But this shouldn’t stop or discourage archivists, librarians, and curators. She asserts that we have many of the required skills, even if they are not immediately recognizable in the application to exhibit work. For example, exhibits require historical research, writing, editing, collaboration, and teaching skills, all things special collections professionals do every day. For archivists or librarians with lingering doubts or reticence to tackle exhibits, Lacher-Feldman’s book focuses on allaying those fears.

Creating an exhibit need not be complicated, but considerations are numerous. One of the author’s stated goals is to offer “practical and structured guidance” (p. 5). With 16 chapters, 6 appendices, case studies, templates, and exercises, the book is methodically organized, beginning with the theoretical “why exhibit?” (pp. 7–16) and exhibit process overview and proceeding to a breakdown of the steps involved. These steps—as further exemplified in both the mini- and expansive chapter-length case studies—are the most compelling. In just two hundred pages, Lacher-Feldman touches on everything related to exhibits: identifying topics, supplies, documentation, policies, design, online components, publicity, outreach, and assessment.

In particular, the author makes effective use of the recurring theme of drawing on skills common to archivists and librarians. Archivists document not just the records of others, but our own processes, procedures, and best practices. Exhibits are no different, and the author includes a sample exhibit policy outlining mission, scope, identification of responsibilities, loans, and security. She extols and shows through case studies the

benefits of collaboration, from using coworkers, students, or others from outside the repository as cocurators, to integrating exhibit development into the daily work of the repository, as exhibit inspiration can and should be identified during collection acquisition, processing, and reference. In a nod to “More Product, Less Process,” the author gives the reader unequivocal permission to use just what’s needed for each exhibit. For example, not every exhibition needs a companion publication, catalog, or brochure. Likewise, considering quick turnaround times between displays and juggling other work duties, it is entirely appropriate to be a “temporary expert” on an exhibit subject.

The lengthiest chapter concerns design and layout. Some may be tentative when it comes to creativity, but Lacher-Feldman successfully argues it is an opportunity for empowerment. She urges special collections staff to take a fresh look at their collections to mine hidden exhibit themes such as using the format of an item (diaries, bindings, advertisements, or letterhead) as the basis for an exhibit. Similarly, she offers an exercise to rethink current exhibit space, not to plan for an expensive remodel, but to look for opportunities to rearrange cases, adjust lighting, or use wall space in an inventive manner. Exhibit design and layout is not limited to just the arrangement of materials inside a case, but also involves the display of the exhibit area itself.

Lacher-Feldman’s approach is practical and hands-on, and she includes numerous sample forms, templates, exercises, supplier lists, and case studies to bolster and expand upon exhibit theory. It is apparent that these materials come from her experience in special collections exhibit development and in teaching workshops on the topic, and it serves the reader well. Rooted in realism and experience, she acknowledges that not all responses to the interpretation of collection materials for a public audience will necessarily be positive. Extensive case studies address both public and in-house issues regarding controversial or sensitive exhibit content.

It would be remiss not to draw attention to Fernanda Perrone and Flora Boros’s excellent literature review in appendix A. The review is inclusive, arranged topically, and covers the limited resources pertaining to special collections exhibits. Not surprisingly, the most relevant and up-to-date resources originate in the field of museum studies. These sources, combined with Lacher-Feldman’s practical, step-by-step guidance, form a significant resource for exhibit development by special collections professionals.

Exhibits in Archives and Special Collections Libraries is comprehensive in scope, but it does have a few limitations and omissions. In particular, the author recognizes that some charged with exhibit work are lone arrangers, but leaves it up to them to glean what they can from the book as every repository will have differing circumstances. While this is true, a case study with content geared toward overcoming the unique obstacles a lone arranger may face would have been welcome. Additionally, the work lacks details regarding the creation of a digital exhibit. Last, with the exception of the front and back covers, the images in the book, though exemplary, are in black and white. Visual cues offer powerful inspiration, and presenting color choice is inherent in showing examples of good exhibit design. While important to note, these issues do not diminish this work’s impact. This book shouldn’t be the only resource used when tackling exhibits, but it should be required reading. For those with experience, it serves as a tune-up to get back into good habits and perhaps revisit or establish best

practices. For students and those new to exhibit work, it is a core text that makes exhibit development achievable, enjoyable, and less daunting.

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1. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Competencies for Special Collections Professionals*, July 1, 2008, accessed 20 May 2014, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/comp4specollect>.