



Mounting a Costume Exhibit:

A Didactic Approach to Teaching Costume Museum Management

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Our apparel program is fortunate to have a large historic costume collection, and access to an exhibition gallery. We have a class on costume museum management. It is an elective, and low enrollments in the class have been a problem. Until recently the course had primarily been taught through standard readings and lectures, followed by some work with garments in the collection. Students found the course to be somewhat boring, and only became enthusiastic at the end of the semester when they were able to work with actual historic garments. Recognizing the need for students to be more actively engaged in learning, we shifted our approach to using experiential and deductive learning methods two years ago. Enrollments have doubled as a result, and our students are now joined by non-majors (often from history, fine arts and communications) who bring fresh perspectives and skills to the class. Now in this course, students engage in a variety of hands-on activities which are designed to educate them about the importance of museums, preservation and exhibitions, while inspiring an appreciation for material culture. Exhibits are seen as visual methods of teaching concepts or ideas. This presentation will focus on the didactic approach we use to teach the costume museum management and exhibitions class, and a discussion of the efficacy of this method.

The class begins with field trips to area museums and students analyze, evaluate and critique their exhibits. Extensive written analyses are submitted. Next, the class is divided into four groups each of which will mount a small historic costume display. Each group determines the focus of their display, researches, develops and installs it in a display case in our lobby. The displays are peer reviewed. In the process students learn basic exhibition skills. This small project is a springboard to the big exhibition project which dominates the class. This large costume exhibit opens during Women's History Month (March).

In 2012, our Collection received a donation of garments, quilts, and items from an alumnae whose grandmother was a milliner and dressmaker between the 1890s and 1912. Many of the items came from her shop. In Spring 2013 the museum management class developed an exhibit based on this donation, and in the process, researched and accessioned the items.

The exhibition project began with the curator suggesting ideas as to potential exhibit topics for this donation. The class toured the exhibit space, then developed an overall concept for the exhibit. Students joined workgroups from the following list: research, artifact selection, installation, public relations/opening event, and signs, graphics and gallery guides. Each group had a small meeting room that was theirs for the duration of the project, and it became their 'home away from home'; this stimulated brainstorming and aided in group cohesion. The curator/professor regularly met with each group as they developed their plan of work. The curator/professor took the role of exhibit developer and focused on keeping all groups aligned with the overall concept, and on schedule.

The research group used both primary and secondary sources to find information about the dressmaker/milliner, and studied the specific items that we received from her granddaughter. That information was used for signs, graphics, a gallery guide and publicity. The entire class reviewed and edited all written material, as did the professor. The materials group selected the specific artifacts to be used in the exhibit. Next, the installation group developed a floorplan of the exhibition space and brought the concept into a 3D design, and installed the exhibit. Everything came together in time for the opening reception, which was well attended due to excellent publicity via radio, print and social media. As the students were responsible for every detail of the exhibit's creation, they realized the real-life difficulties of curatorship as they experienced the process first hand. Not only were the students responsible for designing an aesthetically pleasing, informative exhibit but they also had to account for the safety and security of the artifacts and visitors as well; elements they hadn't before considered.

To assess the efficacy of the project in teaching museum methods and exhibit development, an open-ended survey with eight questions was given to students (78% return rate). Students routinely noted that reading about how to do effective history exhibits was inadequate. One student said; "Nothing has taught me more about exhibits and putting them together than doing it first hand". The class was surprised to find that organization, communication and commitment were critical, and that each group was dependant on the others. Another student noted that there was "a domino effect- when one group was late, it impacted the quality of everything else." All students surveyed expressed they did not understand the job of a museum curator before taking the class. Following the projects students noted that they now understood the multi-faceted nature of costume museum collections and the complexity of mounting exhibitions. Some noted the similarities between exhibits and visual merchandising in retail environments. Others found transferrable skills for event planning, and project management. In sum, students felt that learning was significantly enhanced by using active learning with a hands-on approach.