



NEGOTIATING NEW BORDERS FOR SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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Special collections administrators face particular challenges as they try to craft an effective mission and strategic policy for what is collectively and commonly called outreach. In the archives profession, outreach is defined as “client-centered or audience-directed activities.” The two terms are used synonymously and assigned a broad compass. The activities can be an exhibition, a published guide, a tour, a conference, a workshop, a speech, any activity, in fact, “that contributes to a greater awareness of archives and what they do.”¹

In the keynote address at the 1998 ACRL President’s Program, titled “The Value of Values,” the writer William Gass complained that libraries “devote far too much of their restricted space and their limited budget to public amusement” in what he chastised was a “futile competition with the Internet.” In doing so, Gass argued, “libraries have succumbed to the same pressures which have overwhelmed the basic cultural functions of museums and universities—the sustaining of standards, the preservation of quality, the conservation of literacy’s history, the education of the heart, eye, and mind.” These aims, Gass insisted, “should remain what

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they were, not because the old ways are always better but because, in this case, they were the right ones.”

So angry was Gass at this perceived devolution by libraries into the arena of “edutainment” that he threw down the gauntlet and called for the creation “of a comic-book hero, now that we have no other kind, who is commanded to and will be capable of cutting off every hand at the end of that hypocritical and condescending gesture called outreach.”²

“Whoa!” pretty much sums up the audience’s audible reaction. You can hear it on the tapes of the program. It’s worth listening to, both for the passion driving Gass’s voice and the reaction his declaration elicited. Gasps give way to uncomfortable laughter as the audience realizes just how serious Gass is about challenging an increasingly omnipresent component of the working lives of special collections staff at all levels—omnipresent either because they are already involved in outreach activities or because the expectation that they become involved in them looms omnipresently.

Gass was not specific about what aspects of outreach offended him so much. Maybe he just hates the word. But as museum visits more closely resemble a day at the theme park—complete with admission fees, waiting lines, onsite restaurants, front-end gift shops, and, yes, opportunities to sit at terminals and look at digitized images of art, the originals of which are on display only a few galleries away—similar “cries of desecration and trivialization”³ are heard from the art world. A fact that Gass and critics of art museum tactics overlook is that the gimmickry is a practical response to real-world competition for audience and is perhaps no more than an inelegant means to a still-noble end. The end itself being “the prospect of seeing [actual] art or the artifacts of history.”⁴ Victoria Newhouse lauds museums as “sacred space,”⁵ which have established themselves as “civic monuments that are also a community center”; a place that “uniquely combines inspiration, instruction, and entertainment.”⁶ One could say this as well about special collections whose specificity of mission, uniqueness of collections, and expertise of personnel so closely resemble that of museums.

While I disagree with Gass that outreach is perforce hypocritical and condescending, I accept the spirit of his objection. The effectiveness and value of public programs (to the degree either can be measured in qualitative ways) are better assured when outreach is an integral and strategic part of an institution’s mission. Outreach initiatives fail, I believe, when they are conceived primarily as publicity or fundraising stunts rather than genuine efforts to provide meaningful service or aesthetic and intellectual experience to an extended audience. When the effort is superficial, public support drains through the transparency of the objective. Some specific examples of recent public programs may serve as models for how individual librarians, library institutions, and our professional association can articulate programmatically Gass’s list of the old right aims—sustaining standards, preserving quality, conserving literacy’s history, and educating the heart, eye, and mind—in ways that transcend the hypocritical and condescending gestures Gass perceives the library profession as a whole to be making. And while

attending to the old, it is important, too, to anticipate and articulate new right aims, whatever those might prove to be.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art recently initiated an "Adopt-A-Masterpiece" program in which anyone willing to contribute \$500 a year will be identified as the foster curator of the artwork of their choice. "Class or Crass?" trumpeted the headline in the *New York Times* front-page article reporting this initiative.⁷ The usual high culture vs. mass appeal debate between detractors and promoters was written up even though, it turns out, the museum did this once before in "a half-hearted early '90s version," where selected donors and members were asked to contribute \$1,000 each to sponsor an object for three years. The revived initiative took a more populist thrust with a postcard solicitation sent to more than 17,000 prospective adopters.

Arnold Lehmann, the museum's director, is quoted as hoping that the program will "tie people to the collection," that "they'll think of the object as a member of their immediate family," that they'll have their pictures taken with "their" object and will bring their friends to see it. Foster parents will receive "an adoption certificate and a tour of the object's gallery with the relevant curator." But there is every reason to suspect that the museum's attention to this new generation of Everyman donors will fade and that, in time, their nameplates too will be displaced in favor of a newer generation of grass-roots philanthropists. After all, the wall label that cited the names of their predecessors in this experiment came down in 1996, a fickleness practiced at some of the best U.S. art museums in which "donors' names [change] with alarming frequency."⁸

A more substantive re-examination of a cultural heritage institution's role vis à vis its audience appears in the Huntington Library's January/February 1999 newsletter. In a report of a trustee/overseer's retreat, President Robert A. Skotheim acknowledged "the more recent 'public face' of the institution as well as the traditional 'private face' of scholarly research." This expanded focus on the public has shaped significantly the Huntington's new mission statement, which says that the library does what it does "through the growth and preservation of its collection, through the development and support of a community of scholars, and through the display and interpretation of its extraordinary resources to the public." For Skotheim the outcome objectives of this mission are threefold: First, the library must maintain, conserve, and develop the collections because their richness is the foundation of the library's greatness. Secondly, it must ensure that access policies and "policies concerning outreach through new technologies" allow the collections to be put to uses that are of value "to the larger society as well as to the smaller community of scholars and connoisseurs." Finally, the value of the collections themselves can only be realized fully through "curatorial organization, scholarly interpretation, and public appreciation."

What is important to note here is that seeking the public's appreciation is a fully integrated component of the Huntington's mission, not a mere afterthought. In brief, Skotheim's take of the situation is that without richness of collections, there can be no scholarly interpretation. Without scholarly interpretation and explication, no good use is made of the richness of collections. Many of us would stop here. But Skotheim

completes the triangle by insisting that without public appreciation, the value of the collections goes unrealized, diminishing the value of the institution to society at large.

The Huntington has taken this public component of its new mission statement seriously and has acted on it successfully, to judge from the historian Edward S. Morgan's review of its current exhibition, "The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic."⁹ In the review, Morgan asks some fundamental questions about library exhibitions that any of us responsible for planning or curating them would find constructive to answer for ourselves. "What do people get out of viewing an exhibition of words on paper in glass cases?" "Why ... have we been invited ... to read fragments of what has long been available in print?" "What will schoolchildren [and the rest of us] get from the trip that could not be had by sitting at home with a book?" "What [are] libraries up to in mounting exhibitions like this?" His unspoken comparison is that this kind of blockbuster exhibition is seen at museums all the time, but who would have expected it from a library?

Morgan's answers to these questions are instructive. If the exhibition is done successfully (an important caveat), what people get out of viewing words on paper in glass cases is a "consciousness of the past" presented at a level "which is not merely sentimental but not simply intellectual either." "The cumulative effect of walking through the Huntington exhibition," he concludes, "is to sense, however remotely, the presence of the man" through the "relics of the man." Morgan sees library exhibitions "evolving as a new genre of communication"; one that is all about movement: moving people to come into the exhibition, moving people through it, and moving people to think about what they're seeing in it. While crediting the considerable skills of the exhibition's curator, John Rhodehamel, Morgan's highest praise goes to the exhibition designer, Thomas Hartman of I.Q. Magic, Inc., noting that a good exhibition design can "be enjoyed sensually, theatrically, even spiritually" as well as convey an educational message.

Of course, Morgan notes, if libraries reach out like this they can expect to be responded to, but not always with applause. Curatorial selectivity in choosing items for display results in a corresponding subjectivity that is often "obscured by the authenticity of the objects," yet is given authority by "the lure of the design in which they have been placed." The violent protests leveled against recent exhibition plans at the Smithsonian (the *Enola Gay*), the New York Public Library (the *Irish in New York*), and the Library of Congress (Freud), Morgan argues, stem from the opposing view's frustration that it is unable to "present a conflicting interpretation with similar authority." As Morgan put it: "The thesis of a book can be answered with another book, but how do you answer an exhibition" whose premise you disagree with?

Because grand-scale exhibitions are very labor-intensive and expensive to create, Morgan recognizes that the bottom-line goal of doing them has to be extending the library's constituency. This, in fact, is true of any outreach initiative, which can be labor-intensive and expensive. But Morgan fears that this pressure to attract new audiences at all costs may cause libraries to avoid controversial topics in exhibition

planning. Morgan urges library institutions to “define and defend a new kind of freedom to exhibit,” one that ensures our ability to raise some hackles, to spark debate, and to “resist organized ethnic and ideological pressures.” He sees this as possibly being easier to do at a university library rather than an independent cultural institution, such as the Huntington, because at a university library “an exhibition might claim a share in accepted principles of academic freedom.” College and university library special collections can accept this challenge and lead the way in asserting the freedom to explore controversial topics in their exhibition programs, even though ideological pressure can be exerted just as strongly within academia as outside it.

Not all special collections can afford to mount a blockbuster style exhibition such as the Huntington’s (a collaboration with the Pierpont Morgan Library that is reported to have cost \$2 million), but they can make their mark in quieter ways; through more daring exhibitions and through other programmatic activities that seek both to foster discussion and, through discussion, to develop a library’s constituency and influence.

I want to return for a moment to Skotheim’s dichotomy of a library’s “private face” and “public face” and look at some ways in which each can be made over to be more appealing to more people. The private face can extend its audience reach through more favorable access policies and fellowship programs. Fellowship programs, Morgan asserts, have caused libraries to become “think tanks for the humanities [and] indispensable adjuncts to the academy,” an assertion that holds true, one hopes, even if the library is part of the academy. For the public face, Morgan identifies a trend over the last 30 or 40 years for libraries to “assume a [greater] public role that makes them much more than repositories of books and papers.” They have done so with exhibition programs, yes, but Morgan notes also an increase in offerings of public lectures, concerts, and conferences as a mechanism that allows libraries to “bypass the academy” and “reach a wider constituency.”

Morgan does not mention the Web, the one outreach mechanism in widespread use by special collections that can bring the private and public faces of an institution into focus for the public. The Web allows us to serve a multitude of users in a single venue. It is both reading room and exhibition hall. It has broadened our constituencies in ways we could never have imagined and in ways we hoped never to have to deal with. It, too, is labor-intensive and expensive. But increasingly, the Web is an institution’s most broadly visible face and the first one the public looks to and encounters. Certainly for special collections with limited resources, it may be the best outreach bang for the buck.

In 1998, the Rosenbach Museum and Library announced an expansion of its education program. The objective was to explore “new methods of interpreting its collections for a wide range of audiences.” These methods included teacher training workshops in which “elementary, middle and high school teachers ... explored] how [Rosenbach] collections [could] be used as creative teaching tools”; the creation of traveling trunks containing “Rosenbach-related materials that can

be borrowed for classroom use"; and "off-site outreach presentations [featuring slide talks and hands-on artifacts] for senior centers, retirement homes, and other venues for special needs audiences."

The Rosenbach also increased the number of more traditional programs, but with specifically targeted audiences in mind. The parlor exhibition on the life of Rebecca Gratz emphasized the family's prominent role in Philadelphia and local Jewish history. A site-specific installation by the artist Virgil Marti, titled "For Oscar Wilde," opened in conjunction with Philadelphia's Gay and Lesbian PrideFest symposium. And this year, Rosenbach sought the help of a performance troupe to see if James Joyce's *Ulysses* could be made intelligible to fourth graders! Rosenbach's reach seems to have very successfully extended the programmatic mantra K-12 to embrace Gay-12 and even Gray-12 audiences. And their Web site is an effective example of virtual outreach.

Teacher training workshops, trunks of artifacts that can be loaned out to classrooms, and off-site visits are not new outreach methods. The museum and archives communities have relied on them for a good while, but the application of these outreach practices to a college or university special collection is less common and presents new challenges. Of course, the first question to be answered is, Does an institution need or want to extend its reach beyond traditional, adult, academic audiences, especially into the elementary, middle, and high school level?

This will, of course, be an individual institution's decision. But it is not always entirely one's own. The Ransom Center has become involved, to a degree, in K-12 work by virtue of its membership in the Austin Museum Partnership, a new collaborative of 31 Austin-area museums which works with the school district to better incorporate museum resources into the curriculum through a corresponding Austin Collaborative of Cultural and Educational Sites and Schools (ACCESS). The Ransom Center has limited its participation so far to developing the occasional curriculum guide to exhibitions, but efforts are being made to position teachers between the Ransom Center and the student.

Then too, one's degree of involvement in community outreach may be imposed by university administrations as they seek to erase the borders separating gown from town. The University of Texas (UT) now sponsors a biannual UT Interactive Day so that the general public can come see what happens on campus. UT's Development Office contracted out rights to Ransom Center images to a start-up venture of UT business school graduates. And when the university administration produced a capital campaign "We're Texas" video to be shown at all the Big 12 conference football games, they featured an image of the Ransom Center's copy of the Gutenberg Bible that was filmed, artfully, against a stained glass window. The film had a voice-over by UT alumnus, Walter Cronkite, who intoned, "We are the trusted and privileged guardians of one of only five complete Gutenberg Bibles left in the world. And a longhorn named Bevo. Amen." In this kind of outreach into special collections (outreach as ingress, rather than egress)

and use of special collections as a content provider of unique and distinctive materials, the greatest challenge is controlling the presentation and terms for such uses.

Adopting meaningful outreach practices now also requires retraining existing staff or hiring new staff, such as an education officer who is an experienced teacher and who understands the concept of curriculum development and ways of incorporating library and museum materials into it. Ideally, one will benefit from an experienced public programs planner with an eye to popular appeal. In dreams, this person will also have exhibition planning and design skills and understand that the average exhibition goer spends only a short time looking at any one item and even less reading label text. If you open doors you must be prepared for the possibility that people will come in; sometimes by the bus-load. If you want to reach a more general public without inviting them in bodily, then you may want to consider taking your exhibitions and programs off campus and into community spaces. In at least one instance, grant funding sought by the Ransom Center for exhibition-related public programs was withheld until we made arrangements to hold at least half of the events at off-campus sites. The logic of offering public programs away from the exhibition they were meant to attract people to escaped us. But the funding agency saw the university campus as inaccessible and we accommodated their request. I have to admit that the programs held off-campus (one was at a local, historic beer hall) were much more successful than we anticipated and the audience really did appreciate our bringing the programs to them. In another instance, the Ransom Center partnered with the LBJ Library and Museum, a federal facility on UT's campus, to mount an exhibition about the career of the *Life* magazine photographer, David Douglas Duncan. As the most popular tourist attraction in Texas, second only to the Alamo, the LBJ Library is much more accessible and visible than the Ransom Center. Attendance for this exhibition has averaged 25,000 visitors a month, statistics we could never hope to approach in our current exhibition spaces.

As we find our profession retooling, the RBMS section can be of very practical assistance by offering continuing education programs that enhance the outreach skills of special collections practitioners. How to put together a curriculum guide for use by schools in conjunction with a physical or virtual exhibition; developing presentational skills for K-12 or other sought-after audiences; workshops on effective exhibition design and label writing, designing a Web page of maximum use and public impact, and conducting an effective collaboration are but a few ideas. At the more theoretical level, as a professional organization, the section's name suggests a focus on media—rare books, manuscripts and other unique materials—and the work associated with collecting, cataloging, and making such media available for study in a library setting.

We can't neglect this important work, but could we advance the public's understanding and perception of our profession if we changed the name and the

goals of the section to reflect a focus on message instead? Can we more closely identify and promote our profession as an integral part of a collective of cultural heritage caretakers that includes antiquarian dealers, librarians, archivists, museum curators, conservators, exhibition designers, and the community of scholars that offers interpretations of the cultural heritage materials we keep? RBMS, through its former Outreach Committee, with its telling modifier, has taken some steps in this direction, as the ABAA's offer of a booth at its three major national book fairs attests. But in doing so, are we really reaching out to a new audience? Could the section develop ways of presenting the expertise of the section members to an even wider audience through a variety of other activities such as fostering a collaborative travelling exhibition (one of these might take the form of an exhibition displaying items from past Exhibition Catalogue Award winners), supporting initiatives undertaken by a partnership of special collections residing in a particular region (the Philadelphia-area special collections were a model for this), or encouraging the publication of articles on special collections issues in a wider array of publications?

A chronic concern of the profession is how we replace ourselves as a body of professionals. But in truth, we have not figured out yet a good way to perpetuate ourselves. The reason for that may be that we need to reinvent ourselves instead. Carry what is good about the old, right aims of today's profession over into tomorrow's, perhaps very different model. For example, on campus, special collections might be aligned more effectively with a campus-wide cultural heritage complex rather than with the library program. If this model were to be adopted at UT, for example, seven separate museums and special collections would be united into a single administrative entity. (Ideally, they would be united physically as well, but that would be a very difficult undertaking indeed.) The result would be consolidated identity with a common cultural purpose; economies of means as all components of the complex shared cataloging, conservation, and other support resources; and greater visibility and political clout. In theory, this is a more viable option for an institution that operates within a university environment but outside the administrative control of a university library system, as the Ransom Center does. But because the Ransom Center operates independently within the university hierarchy, it has more latitude to chart its own course. As a result, the Ransom Center is evolving into a curious hybrid, not, as a former staff member once put it, "equal parts research library, art museum, and Berlin in the Thirties," but an independent cultural institution affiliated with a university campus. And as such, it may be in a good position to spearhead such an experiment.

In my opinion, there is a finite audience for the work that we do. I believe there is an absolute number of scholars and members of the general public for whom our collections and the interpretations of them have appeal. Beyond that number, no amount of creative or contortive outreach initiatives will expand the audience allotted to us. Why bother with outreach then? Because, fortunately, we have no way of calculating the finite audience number, so the elusiveness of the

outer limit affords us hope and the imagination play space. Our audience may be finite, but it is inquisitive, educable, and, best of all, renewable.

Notes

1. Pederson, Ann. *Public Programs* (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 1982), p. 9.
2. All quotes from Gass's address were transcribed from an audiotape made of the entire ACRL President's Program. Not all quotations crossed over into the published form of Gass's address, "In Defense of the Book; On the Enduring Pleasures of Paper, Type, Page, and Ink" (*Harper's Magazine*, November 1999, v. 299, no. 1794, pp. 45–51.)
3. Huxtable, Ada Louise. "Museums: Making It New." *The New York Review of Books [online] Archive*, 22 April 1999, p.4. In a review essay of Victoria Newhouse's *Towards a New Museum* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 4–5.
5. Huxtable quoting Newhouse, *Ibid.*, p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
7. Dobrzynski, Judith H. "'Adopting' Masterpieces: Touch of Class or Crass?" *The New York Times*, 6 June 1999, pp. 1, 53.
8. Huxtable, p. 2.
9. All quotes by Morgan are from :Morgan, Edmund S. "Mr. W. on Show." *The New York Review of Books [online] Archive*, 4 March 1999, pp. 1–6. A review essay of the exhibition and catalogue *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*.