Appropriate Design Solutions

Exhibit cases offer a range of protection that open display cannot match.

B:2 Exhibit Format and Layout

☑ ***Use enclosed display when possible.*** Avoid open display except in historic house museums and some gallery settings or when an object's size makes enclosure impractical. Open display should never be a routine exhibition option or one chosen solely for financial reasons.

☑ ***Allow sufficient room for traffic flow.*** Design the exhibit to avoid accidents. Provide adequate space through the exhibit and around exhibit cases for the easy movement of individuals, groups, and people in wheelchairs.

☑ ***Group similar objects.*** Consolidating the location of collections with similar conservation criteria will make it easier and less expensive to meet the design goals.

Open or Enclosed Display?

Any group of objects displayed without protective enclosures can be defined as an open exhibit. Given the inherent problems for collections care and preservation, open display is rare for long-term museum exhibits, except those in historic buildings and sculpture or painting galleries. Usually, open displays are limited to temporary exhibits and the display of reproductions or oversized artifacts. The ultimate decision to display objects outside protective enclosures must consider the following variables:

- length of the proposed exhibit
- sensitivity and condition of the proposed objects
- environmental conditions of the exhibit space
- likelihood of visitor contact with or handling of objects
- likelihood of vandalism and theft
- availability of curatorial maintenance resources

Open display requires special security arrangements and regularly scheduled maintenance procedures, which involve long-term, frequently ignored costs. An added problem in such displays is the importance of limiting dust infiltration and moderating the environmental conditions in the entire exhibition area.

Although display in cases is the norm for most museum exhibits, the benefits of enclosure are rarely calculated methodically. If designed appropriately, an exhibit case can protect its contents from most forms of physical damage and deterioration.

An exhibit case can be designed to:

- prevent object handling and incidental touching;
- decrease the threat of theft and vandalism;
- stop insect and rodent access;
- block out dust and foreign substances;
- buffer collections from rapid changes in temperature and relative humidity;
- remove or limit harmful light radiation; and
- allow for the use of environment modifying agent (such as absorbers for atmospheric pollutants, moisture responsive substances, and oxygen scavengers).

Traffic Flow

Pathways through the exhibit and around freestanding casework must allow unrestricted, safe movement of people and wheelchairs. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards call for a minimum of 36 inches for any walkway and a 60-inch diameter for turns. Cases or other display components that protrude from a wall should allow a 27-inch clearance from the floor.

A well-designed floor plan also allows for human behavior. For example, a freestanding case should not be placed where it is likely to be bumped. A fragile object is at risk if visitors can touch or brush against it, if its display pedestal or case can be rocked or moved, or if it is not mounted securely to prevent falling over. The educational programs associated with many exhibits require an area where schoolchildren and tour groups can gather. Such spaces should be located away from areas of heavy object density.

Object Location

While interpretive and practical considerations are the primary criteria when designing the exhibition layout, creative, thoughtful design can alleviate conservation-related difficulties within the exhibit space. For example, blocking windows can allow safe display of light-sensitive objects. Grouping objects that have similar humidity requirements within the same case means that a micro-climate display case is both practical and cost-effective. Likewise, grouping light-sensitive objects gives the designer more flexibility in the exhibit lighting plan.

The presentation of displayed objects involves overlapping design and conservation strategies. Thoughtful arrangement of objects inside a case facilitates their installation, periodic maintenance, and emergency removal.

Objects that must be displayed in the open, especially oversized objects, require sufficient space and specialized mounts to prevent accidental damage. However, the need for barriers increases the overall space required for the safe exhibit of these pieces. On the other hand, a high-security exhibit case protects its valuable contents from theft but strongly influences the interpretive and aesthetic options.