



## Art Museum Exhibitions in the Library

Joana Stillwell

### Abstract:

Typically, museums are seen as the primary venue for exhibitions. However, an interest in library exhibitions has been growing as indicated by increased literature in the library field, albeit with a large focus on academic libraries. On a broader scale, library exhibitions continue to be under-researched as indicated by the continuing lack of library exhibition evaluation standards, library exhibition reviews, and exhibition-related professional training for librarians. In this 2021 study, interviews were conducted at eight Washington, DC-based art museum libraries: The National Gallery of Art, The National Museum of Women in the Arts, The American Art and Portrait Gallery, The Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The National Museum of African Art, The Phillips Collection, and the George Washington University Textile Museum. This paper is an examination of the current state of exhibitions in art museum libraries and aims to establish a set of best practices to help foster the production of art museum library exhibitions.

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## **Art Museum Exhibitions in the Library**

Joana Stillwell, Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archive, United States

Library exhibitions were generally an under-researched field until recently. The growing interest in library exhibitions has largely been focused on academic libraries; however, more recent publications dedicated to art museum libraries, and specifically their exhibitions, have emerged. Library exhibitions have become an increasingly valuable and popular avenue to reach patrons and establish connections between collections and communities. Lee Ceperich in *The New Art Museum Library* states, “Art museum libraries that leverage their special and archival collections are well positioned to support progressive institutional missions and to flourish in the rapidly and continually evolving information landscape,” (Ceperich. 2021, 79). While museum professionals are focused on producing information for their users to consume, library professionals are poised to help users with retrieving the information they are seeking. A partnership between the two can expose audiences to more source information that could further a visitor’s understanding and interpretation of an exhibition or museum object. “When juxtaposed with art objects in exhibitions, the objects from special collections serve to make connections between audience and object in a meaningful way,” (Ibid, 84).

In 2021, I conducted a small, local examination of the current state of exhibitions in art museum libraries and interviewed nine librarians at eight art museum libraries located in Washington, D.C. Initially interested in how art museum libraries utilize archival and library materials, the research pivoted towards museum and library relationships after many conversations regarding the difficulties of mounting exhibitions in their library spaces. The following is a summary of the findings.

### **ART MUSEUM LIBRARY EXHIBITIONS**

The librarians were interviewed over Zoom, phone, or email due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of the eight art museum libraries, seven produced exhibitions. Of the seven libraries, five were expected by their museums to mount exhibitions, two were optional, and one did not have space, although the librarians wished they did.

### **OUTREACH AND ACCESS**

Four of the libraries’ main forms of outreach were exhibitions. Three libraries relied on blogs, social media, and “pop-up” temporary displays in their museum spaces. When reviewing their presence on their respective museum’s website, three libraries had robust and up-to-date information regarding the library and their exhibitions, four libraries had partially hidden and outdated information, and one had no exhibition information and little library information.

## **PRIMARY USERS**

The main users of the library across all libraries were the museum staff, researchers, artists, teachers, and the general public. The libraries have various levels of physical accessibility. The library that did not have space for exhibitions was additionally located on a restricted area of the museum. Three libraries were by appointment only and four could accommodate walk-ins.

## **LIBRARY STAFFING**

All but one library employed less than four full-time library staff. When asked if the library's relationship with their museum was collaborative, supportive, or independent, three described their relationship as collaborative, two as supportive, and three as shifting from supportive to collaborative.

## **EXHIBITION METRICS**

All eight libraries followed standard library metric tracking practices, which include headcount, book circulation, and reference. No library had a separate system to track their library exhibition metrics.

## **WAYS FORWARD: BEST PRACTICES**

A change in culture between museums and libraries needs to occur for museums to see the libraries as equal institutions and librarians as peers. This prevalent culture results in library exhibition production challenges in museums, including but not limited to, issues of space, staffing, budgets, work tension, library siloing, and more. The following recommendations are advised:

- Museums should collaborate with their libraries on larger museum initiatives beyond general back-end support for museum exhibition research.
- Museums should give libraries space for public outreach, including for their own exhibition initiatives.
- Museums should promote their library beyond internal museum staff usage to the general public, especially to museum visitors.
- Museums should support their libraries with more funding for more staff dedicated to exhibition development and visitor outreach.
- Museums should provide support for exhibition space and display cases, especially for ADA compliant cases.
- Museums should give libraries more tools to support and engage with community interests, such as pop-up table opportunities where visitors can interact with collections and converse with librarians and museum staff.
- Museums should share and work with libraries about visitor evaluation methods.

- Museums and libraries should collaborate to provide opportunities for community-based exhibitions and programming.
- Libraries should develop evaluation strategies for their own exhibitions and keep more in-depth metrics regarding users consistent within ethical best practices, and allow for more formalized feedback from visitors.
- Libraries should collect and assess visitor feedback and implement it in their curation as well as to the rest of the museum.

Further, librarians should undergo exhibition training as part of their Library Science programs. They should be introduced to and familiarized with concepts of curation, design, and exhibition production. There should also be exhibition-oriented professional groups that involve librarians, archivists, and museum professionals. This would help eliminate some of the barriers between institutions and if well-outlined, create more collegial and equal relationships between peers.

There are 2,620 art museums in the United States and about 200 have staffed libraries embedded within them (Ng-He, 2021, 106). At this critical point in time, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and with renewed mainstream attention towards civil and human rights, what role will these cultural institutions play? Museums and libraries are continually undervalued and underfunded, and it would be productive for the two to collaborate and reify each other to create the best case for their relevancy to visitors. Libraries are not known or thought of regarding exhibitions or exhibition production, but it does prove to be a very attractive form of outreach. Additionally, libraries have the positionality to meet visitors at their point of information need as well as the flexibility to produce exhibitions directly for their constituents. “The once well-defined functional boundaries that siloed libraries in museums are now less rigid as institutions examine their role and desired impact in their community and beyond,” (Lurie, 2021, 121). Collaboration between museums and libraries is not a particularly new idea. Museums and libraries have been gradually pivoting back towards each other since their nineteenth-century division. Libraries have been curating exhibitions and museums have been striving to make their collections more accessible to visitors. It is time to reexamine these partnerships and note that the questions about museum and library focus are changing from “how to educate and inform the public” towards more of a “community role,” (Dilevko and Gottlieb, 2003, 162). Looking at the untapped potentials in museum libraries is worthy of additional exploration. In 2008, museum professional Elaine Gurian asked, “What if our profession created a museum in which visitors could comfortably search for answers to their own questions regardless of the importance placed on such questions by others?” (Clough, 2013, 32). The posited answer involved accessible digital technologies and networks (Ibid). I argue that another possible and complimentary answer could be staff and resources already possessed by some of these museums – their libraries! While the art museum libraries presented in this set of case studies allow for a localized yet national reading of the state of art museum library exhibitions, a broader study along with further investigations into community-curated library exhibitions found in academic libraries, archives, and community museums would be a promising step forward.

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**About the author**

Joana Stillwell is currently the audiovisual archivist at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archive (MARMIA) in Baltimore, Maryland, United States. She holds MLIS and MFA degrees and has worked on projects with the National Gallery of Art Archives, University of Maryland Libraries, and the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives.