

Developing Dynamic Displays

ROBERT DESMARAIS reflects on exhibition design at the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections & Archives.

ALL IS QUIET in Bruce Peel Special Collections & Archives this winter, and not because its reading room is buried deep below layers of snow and soil in the basement of the University of Alberta's Rutherford library complex. Our non-circulating library has closed its doors to everyone until May 2016 while it undergoes an extensive renovation, expanding from the basement tiers (library stacks accessible only to collections staff) into five upper floors recently used to house publicly accessible government documents and periodicals for the Humanities and Social Sciences Library. A key feature of the renovation is an anticipated 25 extra years of expansion space for rare books and archives, and that means many more opportunities to acquire, store, and exhibit great research collections.

So these are very exciting times for the Peel library and its staff, as we consider how to continue transforming our space into an even greater centre of research and discovery. While the facility is closed, we, like staff at many special collections libraries, are evaluating how our exhibition program can do an even better job of feeding curiosity about the world of rare books and manuscripts.

To risk stating the obvious, exhibitions are the heart and soul of special collections libraries, because they provide a public area for discovery and learning. However, since exhibitions are typically among the most expensive and labour-intensive of initiatives, librarians, curators, support staff and administrators expect a significant and measurable return on their investment, in the form of increased attendance, visitor engagement, brisk catalogue sales and an elevated collection profile.

As we at the Peel library look to the future, we are considering how exhibition techniques from the museum world might further enrich the quality of visitor experiences within special collections libraries.

Unlike museums, special collections libraries

do not typically have digital signage, dioramas, and interactive technologies to enliven their displays. In developing exhibitions of rare books and archival materials, we invest a lot of time and effort in preparing printed interpretive materials and exhibition catalogues to orient visitors to the exhibition theme.

MOUNTIE SHOW TAUGHT LESSONS

A few years ago the Peel mounted an ambitious exhibition about the life of legendary Mountie Sir Samuel Benfield Steele (1848–1919). The show was installed at the university's downtown campus in a space normally reserved for large museum displays, and this experience taught us a great deal about how to make exhibitions of special collections material more accessible and relevant for a wide range of visitors.

Acquiring a museum space for four months was a rare opportunity for our small library team to experiment with conceptual and aesthetic approaches to exhibiting special collections materials. We wanted visitors to have a meaningful and memorable learning experience, so at the outset we decided that we needed much more than labels and text panels to read.

We aspired to a truly immersive experience that would include docents/storytellers, an introductory film, historical artifacts, 14-foot pictorial wall graphics, children's programming (such as moustache-making events, scavenger hunts), audio tours, curriculum materials for busloads of visiting students, and a gift shop.

Looking back on the experience of mounting this exhibition, I confess to feeling equal measures of pride and exhaustion. It was not a run-of-the-mill special collections display, but we certainly learned that special collections libraries can make their exhibitions more appealing and educational with a little elbow grease, good design and generous donors.

One of the more significant features of



Visitors to the Sir Samuel Benfield Steele exhibit were greeted with an introductory film and historical artifacts to set the stage.



Walls featured massive, 14-foot graphics that showed Steele at various points in his personal and professional life.

the Steele exhibition was a 100-foot historical timeline that traced Steele's remarkable career—from his role in the Fenian Raids in 1866 through the 1870 and 1885 Riel rebellions, the Boer War and World War I—offering the public an opportunity to see how he participated in many of the seminal events in the history of the British Empire as an iconic militiaman, soldier and Mountie.

Once inside the exhibition space, visitors had the opportunity to use iPod Shuffles with pre-recorded audio that guided them from case to case featuring the voices of actors who played the roles of Sam Steele and his wife Marie. The actors' lively conversation interpreting many of the letters and photographs brought the Steeles' personal documents to life, offering visitors intimacy and a sense of participation in the dramatization.

THEMES, OBJECTS, MULTIMEDIA

This was the first large-scale public display of the Steele Collection where the public could see the family archives as a national treasure. Although we wanted visitors to grasp the magnitude and importance of the research collection (stored for decades by Steele's descendants in

85 banana boxes!), we certainly did not want to overwhelm them. Knowing that even the most keenly interested visitors can only process or organize so much information, we decided to guide visitors with oversized pictorial graphics. Strategically placed labels allowed visitors to seek out greater detail at their leisure, from quick facts to fulsome historical descriptions.

One important lesson we learned is that major concepts need to be emphasized strategically by theme, object or display area to engage visitors and hold their attention. We designed our exhibition and its accompanying catalogue around six major themes of Steele's life. Our goal was to employ these themes to educate a broad spectrum of visitors, from the military historian to curious schoolchildren, so we chose materials with significant historical value as well as visual impact.

The cohesive display of numerous Victorian photo albums, individual portraits and original documents, along with three-dimensional artifacts on loan from museum partners (including a taxidermal horse, cannon and machine gun), worked together to create the impression that archives and special collections libraries are



The exhibit included a gift shop (left), as well as a 100-foot timeline that put the displays in context (right).



Audio tours allowed visitors to take in the exhibit at their own pace (left), while strategically placed labels allowed them to dive deeper at their leisure.

dynamic places that are much more than secure depositories for antiquarian books and historical papers; indeed, they are making profound changes to help patrons better understand their cultural heritage through exhibitions.

Special collections libraries have an important role to play in promoting their collections to the public, and there are numerous ways they can collaborate, build partnerships, and share best practices to improve the design and experience of their exhibitions. At the Peel library, we are implementing new exhibition techniques so that we can welcome visitors not as passive spectators but as active participants in a new framework for learning and discovery.

Whenever possible, our displays will include,

- multimedia elements, including audio tours, online exhibits, video loops, slideshows and touch-screen kiosks that provide visitors with additional information
- interactive technologies
- museum partnerships, such as for the loan of relevant artifacts

- banners, column wraps, posters, labels and other oversized graphics
- appealing exhibition catalogues

We have undertaken a commitment to experiment with new and updated models of exhibitry for rare books and manuscripts.

The Peel library is in a fortunate position to have over 100,000 rare books and hundreds of metres of archival material with significant research potential. We are eager to show highlights from our collections to the broadest spectrum of people in our flourishing exhibition program, so please consider visiting us when we reopen. If travel to Edmonton is not feasible, our exhibition catalogues can be purchased from the University of Alberta Press (www.uap.ualberta.ca), online retailers or the Peel library (<https://bpsc.library.ualberta.ca>). We look forward to welcoming you!

~ Robert Desmarais is head of Bruce Peel Special Collections & Archives at the University of Alberta and also teaches History of the Book at the university's School of Library and Information Studies.