

EXCLUSIVES

Curating Trios: Making a Big Impression with a Small Exhibit

Assembling a bigger collection does not always make for a better one. Sometimes it's just *more*. In fact, building and sharing mini collections like curated trios can be useful exercises because they push archivists to employ discernment in selecting pieces that tell impactful stories while working on a scale that is just a fraction of what a larger exhibition might be. And while it is true that discernment is not unique to curating collections of any size, curating large collections affords archivists a modicum of flexibility that is simply nonexistent working with only a trio of objects. With just three selections, each piece must be skillfully selected to convey a very specific message.

Define the Trio

Plainly stated, a trio is a set of three. However, the form the set takes can vary. A trio may be:

- Curated to tell a story from different perspectives using the same type of item, such as a set of three related images
- Organized to show progressive iterations using the same type of object, like a set of three cellular phones produced decades apart
- Prepared to communicate cause and effect using the same type of document, perhaps a set of Congressional bills

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A curated trio of Apollo-era items composed of a press photo for the life support systems vest for astronauts innovated by Beckman, NASA-issued mission patch with Apollo 11 insignia, and President Nixon's invitation to the "Dinner of the Century" celebrating the successful Moon landing (shown with exterior envelope).

These examples represent trios composed with similar items. Another form of trio would involve a group of three different items that all speak to the same story. For example, one image, one object, one document—like a press release, a piece of equipment, and a picture of the item in use.

Identify a Goal

As with any archival project, it's useful to consider what needs to be achieved; that is, what the desired outcome would be and how that would support the organization's mission. Perhaps the goal is to generate a higher volume of web content so that the archive can effectively share more with the public than just what appears in the physical space. Or maybe the goal is to tease a future, large-scale exhibition by offering early curated glimpses into it. Other goals might include engaging the public in an organization milestone or anniversary, speaking to a seasonal theme, spotlighting a particular type of material, or partnering on a shared topic with another organization.

Whatever the goal may be, let the formation of a corresponding goal statement be the initial step toward curating a trio. Articulating the goal of the project will help to guide it to successful completion, and maybe even point toward the form that the trio should take.

Select Content

It's tough to imagine an archivist without a never-before-shared object, image, or document occupying their thoughts. If that's the case, start there! Make it the centerpiece of the composition. What story is it trying to tell? Now, think about how to connect it with another object to tell more of the story or offer a unique point of view on the same moment. Finally, turn that pair into a trio by rounding out the story with another object. Has the story been communicated in an interesting, special, or new way

to engage a specific audience? How well do they work together to provide interpretation of the subject matter? Could the story be better served by ordering the objects differently? These are important curatorial questions for the archivist because the answers can influence the way the trio is shared later on.

If an object doesn't readily spring to mind, fear not. Try composing a trio around a time period, subject or theme, individual, or even perspective to create a learning moment.

Prepare to Share

As with larger exhibits, a curated trio should include concise, interpretive object labels, whether the aim is to share with an in-person viewer or online visitor. Let these objects and their labels help craft a title for the collection and add to that a supporting sentence of text that can, in the words of author Beverly Serrell, communicate the "big idea" so that visitors and/or viewers can better understand its "scope and purpose."¹

Finally, use the object label with its descriptive information to prepare captions for social media and to inform notes about how the collection was curated. Curated trios are pithy, visual, and bite-sized in nature so they're fun to create, easy to share, and surprisingly impactful storytellers.

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¹ Beverly Serrell. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, Second Edition*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 7-9.