

From Private Collection to Public Exhibit:  
Designing a Native American Exhibit at the Houston Museum of Natural Science

## **Introduction**

Exhibit design is the perfect mix of museum collections and museum education. The combination of intriguing objects and informative text panels pull visitors into an educational experience that museums are uniquely qualified to provide. This professional project gave me the opportunity to pull from my educational background in museum collections, museum education, and exhibit design to create an exhibit with the potential to be displayed in a metropolitan natural history museum in the State of Texas.

## **Project Background**

This project developed out of a need of the Houston Museum of Natural Science (HMNS) in Houston, Texas. In 2009, the HMNS acquired a large collection of Native American artifacts from Gordon W. Smith (1920-2010). Mr. Smith was a native of Fort Worth in North Texas, and he wanted his collection to continue to have a presence in the Fort Worth community. As the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History (FWMSH) is not primarily a collecting institution, the HMNS acquired the collection. However, the two museums entered into a cooperative sharing program, which would allow selections of the collection to be shown at the FWMSH through exhibits.

The last exhibit from this collection displayed at the FWMSH was in 2009, and in the summer of 2013 there was a need for another. Lisa Rebori, the vice president of collections at the HMNS, contacted Dr. Ellie Caston, the director of the Mayborn Museum at Baylor University in Waco, to see if there would be a student interested in the endeavor. I had become very interested in exhibit design after taking a course on the topic as part of my graduate studies

at Baylor University. After separate meetings with Ms. Rebori and Dr. Caston, the project was outlined and approved to fulfill the final requirement necessary to earn a Master of Arts from Baylor University's Department of Museum Studies. The FWMSH did not have a specific date for the exhibit, so the project did not include the installation process. Instead, it involved the complete design of an exhibit up to the point of installation, which included: choosing an exhibit theme, selecting objects, writing text panels and object labels, and providing other supplemental elements.

### **The Houston Museum of Natural Science**

The Houston Museum of Natural Science is located on Hermann Park Drive in the museum district of Houston, Texas. The HMNS was established in 1909 by the Houston Museum and Scientific Society, and it has been housed at various locations around Houston over the years, including the Houston Zoo. The Museum's permanent exhibition areas include: paleontology, with the hall being one of the largest paleontology halls in the nation; gems and minerals; the Americas; Texas and African wildlife; mollusks; and a living butterfly center. With their large and diverse collections, the HMNS is one of the premier natural history museums in the country.

### **The Donor and Collection**

Although Gordon Smith only collected from 1925 to 1939, he amassed a very large collection. He began his collection after receiving his first piece, a rattle, from Chief Two Guns White Calf at Glacier National Park, Montana at the age of five. Mr. Smith was enamored with Native American culture, and was even inducted into the Lakota tribe in 1934, taking the name, High Bear. His collection was so impressive to the community that he displayed select pieces at the Texas State Centennial in 1935.

His collection contains more than 600 pieces from over 60 tribes and regions in both North and South America, although the majority of the pieces come from the North American Great Plains, particularly the Lakota tribe. The collection consists of items from basketry and pottery to clothing, bows and arrows, and jewelry. Although Mr. Smith remained engrossed in the Native American culture throughout his life, he discontinued collecting because he felt that the collecting landscape had changed after World War II. Due to the demand of the pieces, many of the objects were no longer made in the same traditional ways.

### **Project Summary**

Before I could begin putting together the exhibit, I needed to familiarize myself with Gordon Smith and his collection, and while doing this I put together a list of potential exhibit themes. I began by reading Mr. Smith's autobiographical manuscript: *The Quest for High Bear, A Boy's Odyssey Through Indian Country: 1925-1939*. In this autobiography, Mr. Smith shares stories of his childhood concerning why he collected, specific items he collected, and what the culture meant to him. It was important to me that I read this manuscript because I was able to learn more about Mr. Smith's motivations. I also wanted to understand what concepts were important to him and try to incorporate those ideas into the possible themes. After I finished reading the autobiography I went through the entire collection, piece by piece. I had an idea of what was in the collection due to Mr. Smith's autobiography and the collection inventory; however, actually seeing the items gave me a greater feel for the beauty, significance and condition of each piece.

While going through these steps, I simultaneously put together a list of potential themes. I chose themes that included a sizeable portion of the collection, reflected important ideas in Native American culture, and were of interest to me personally. To narrow the choices I created

an outline for every theme. I also combined themes that were too narrow to stand on their own, and I ultimately narrowed the list of themes down to ten choices.

In addition, I also attempted a small-scale front-end evaluation by trying to involve the public through social media. Using Facebook, I created a status that briefly explained the topic, listed some of the themes I had in mind, and then asked what others would like to see in a Native American exhibit. This endeavor was met with some challenges. First, I thought by including the Houston Museum of Natural Science in the status I would be able to involve their audience as well. Unfortunately, this did not work like I hoped, and I only received a total of thirteen responses from my small group of friends. I also received a wide variety of ideas, without many which overlapped. Additionally, some of the responses would not be feasible within the parameters of the collection. For example, one of the suggestions was to include agriculture or the tools that were used, but there were no items to represent this theme in the collection.

Many aspects of this project were more difficult than I anticipated. The first major challenge I met was choosing the theme from the list I had created. With guidance from Ms. Rebori I ultimately chose the theme of Plains Indian Clothing and Accessories. I decided the exhibit would explore what materials were used to make clothing and accessories, how they were made, and present examples of different pieces. This topic was also able to combine multiple themes from the original list, such as: beads and beadwork, everyday objects as art, clothing and jewelry, and the war and hunting culture. I further narrowed the topic to strictly Plains Indians. While there were objects from other tribes which could have been represented, the majority of applicable objects were Plains. Since the Plains region was so highly represented, it made more sense to narrow the tribal focus, instead of interspersing the exhibit with very few objects from tribes outside the region.

Once the theme was chosen, I went through the collection again to select the objects to be included. I entered these objects into a separate spreadsheet, which included the object name, date range, location, materials, measurements, and condition. After the pieces were chosen it was much easier to organize the exhibit in a way that made sense. I laid out pictures that corresponded to an outline I created for the topic, and after conferring with Ms. Rebori and the Curator of Anthropology, Dr. Dirk Von Tuerenhout, the layout was finalized and the research and writing could begin.

Research was the most important step in this entire process because my background was not in Native American material and culture. I learned some basic information through Gordon Smith's autobiography and going through the collections, but there was much I didn't know. My research included books from the Museum's collection, as well as books from a Houston-area library, and the library at Baylor University. I was also fortunate to have access to digital academic resources through Baylor University. There were still gaps in the information I was able to find using these means, so I also used resources produced by other museums.

Once my research was completed I began the writing process, which was probably the hardest step for me. To be of interest to a diverse audience, exhibit writing cannot be like academic journal writing. The words must flow in a way that any visitor, regardless of background, can understand. After struggling with this for the first few text panels, I eventually got into a rhythm. The panels ultimately turned into an accompanying story for the exhibit pieces. The object labels were, in a way, easier to write, but they had their own unique sets of challenges. I overcame these challenges by writing some of the labels for similar groups of objects, instead of each individually.

The exhibit title was also very difficult to create. After attempting to create a title early on in the process, a working title was ultimately chosen about a week before the project was finished. After a brainstorming session at the HMNS, I created the working title of, *Wearable Art: Plains Indian Clothing and Accessories from the Gordon Smith Collection*. A working title will allow for flexibility if the receiving institution creates a different name.

At this point, I created an exhibit proposal to be presented to the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. The proposed exhibit consists of 117 objects, 12 text panels, and three accompanying documents: an exhibit overview, an object list, and an exhibit packet. The exhibit overview is a two-page summary of the exhibit, which along with the object list will be sent to the FWMSH to explain the primary theme and highlights of the exhibit. The exhibit packet is a 49-page document which contains the layout of the exhibit, every text panel, every object and object label, and some suggested supplemental materials to be included.

### **Learning Opportunities**

As with most projects, I encountered some challenges which became learning opportunities. The earliest challenge was technology. I originally attempted to do most of the work on a laptop in my workspace at the HMNS. Due to the age of the machine, I quickly realized this would not be the most efficient way to work on the project. I solved this problem by bringing my own laptop to the museum, which I then used for most of the writing and research. I still occasionally needed the museum computer to access their server, but using a faster machine made the process much less tedious. This also reinforced that museums cannot always provide the most up-to-date technology, but you still must find a way to make due in order to complete your work.

Through this project I was also able to experience working with multiple institutions, and working with donor families. Working with multiple institutions could be a challenge, as occasionally it is difficult for everyone to stay on the same page. For this particular project I simply continued work on the exhibit, while Ms. Rebori communicated with the FWMSH representative about the details of the project. However, I know institutional collaboration is common in the field, and I will almost certainly experience working with another museum in my future. In addition, I also had the opportunity of meeting and having lunch with Gordon Smith's son, Dee. The luncheon opportunity came up suddenly, so I initially felt unprepared, but we had a great conversation about his father and the direction of the exhibit. I knew this experience was important because interacting with donors is integral to museum work, and I was glad to be given the opportunity, regardless of how unprepared I originally felt.

Working with collection objects and in collection storage can also be a challenge. This particular collection had been in the storage area since the previous exhibit concluded in 2009, and while most of the pieces were in their correct locations, there were others that were more difficult to find. With the help of one of the collections staff, Beth Copeland, I was able to find all of the pieces, but it occasionally was a challenge to locate pieces in large collection areas. There was also the potential challenge of sensitive objects, specifically related to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Concerning the objects in the Gordon Smith Collection, there were no pieces affected by NAGPRA. However, there were some religious items included in the exhibit, which had the potential to be problematic. After seeking advice from the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., it was decided that these items would be optional for the physical exhibit and would not be included in any future online exhibits.

I additionally struggled with learning to delegate work to others. I hesitated to delegate work, such as photographing the objects included in the exhibit, because I was still unsure of how much work was required of me for this project. However, I was reassured by both Ms. Rebori and Dr. Caston that delegation is essential in the successful completion of projects like this. I also struggled with my own tendency to procrastinate, particularly concerning writing the object labels and text panels. This has been a constant struggle for me in the past, but I needed to fight this temptation for the successful completion of this project.

### **Project Future**

Now that the exhibit proposal is complete it will be sent to the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History and considered for a future temporary exhibit. The HMNS marketing department is also working to create an online exhibit, which will include the text panels, as well as object images and labels. This digital representation will help fulfill the agreement that Mr. Smith's collection would be available around the world. Finally, this vast and diverse collection has the potential for many more exhibits to be created from it in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Although I had some exhibit development experience through the course I took at Baylor University, I did not know what to expect going into this project. Ultimately, I emerged from the experience with many new skills that will greatly benefit me in the future. I now understand exactly what designing an exhibit entails and how hard the process really is. As a result, I have a new appreciation for every exhibit I see because of this new found knowledge of how grueling a task it is.

I look forward to seeing my project become a reality at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, as well as a potential digital product online for people around the world to



utilize. No matter what the future brings with the proposed exhibit, the opportunity to work with such a fine collection alongside museum professionals at the Houston Museum of Natural Science has been invaluable to me.