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Visible Storage for the Small Museum

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The visible storage model of museum presentation has recently received an increasing amount of attention in Canada and elsewhere. Interest in it has arisen from the development in the 1960s and 1970s of an ideal based on the "democratization" of museum collections.\(^1\) According to that ideal, because the public is the true owner of the collections, it should have full access to all museum resources. In some quarters, a perception exists that museums have been "hiding all the good stuff" in storage for the exclusive use of curators and scholars.\(^2\) The visible storage concept is seen as a "radical" departure from the contemporary museum model and is an attempt to open up all of the museum’s resources to the public—to "democratize" the whole enterprise. The philosophy has now been widely accepted in the museum community. Whether the visible storage approach is the best means of carrying out this philosophy remains to be determined.

Visible storage, sometimes referred to as "open storage" or "study storage," combines two functions that modern museology generally considers separate—storage and display.\(^3\) In visible storage, collections are systematically presented in high-density arrangements that lack interpretive labels but include access to the information available on each object.

At first glance, visible storage appears to be simple, straightforward, and close to what small institutions have always chosen or been forced to do—display all of their collections. As curator of a small museum that will be undertaking a major redevelopment project, this writer found the concept to be intriguing. The Sam Waller Little Northern Museum, originally a private collection, is now owned and operated by the Town of The Pas and has a varied
collection of human and natural history objects numbering approximately 10,000. Although the approach may appear to be an attractive option for small museums, the concept is still on trial and has yet to receive the critical analysis necessary for widespread acceptance by small institutions that cannot afford the luxury of museological adventurism.

The information reported here is based on a summary of the available literature and inspection of a number of systems currently in use. The study seeks to determine whether the system has been meeting the goals set for it, discover how to avoid the problems encountered, and how to make the most effective use of the system in the small museum setting.

**ADVANTAGES OF VISIBLE STORAGE**

Key benefits of the visible storage approach are listed here.

1. Visible storage closely approximates the ideal of effectively providing the public with extensive visual access and solving the problem of severely restricted access to collections held in a typical closed-storage format. Minority groups are reported to feel much more comfortable using visible storage without the need for supervision by the professional curator.

2. Visible storage can accommodate a wide variety of interests and levels of participation and stimulate independent exploration and interaction with the objects. The visitor becomes less a passive receptor and more an active learner. Especially in small community museums, visitors have participated in identifying objects and their uses and correcting erroneous catalogue data for the staff. Visitors in the visible storage gallery at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (UBCMOA) were found to be more at ease, animated, willing to engage in conversation with strangers, and less unsure of themselves than visitors in exhibit galleries. Visitors, including children, were observed asking questions and taking particular interest in certain objects—all extremely desirable outcomes.

3. Visible storage can result in positive effects on the care of collections. Conservation attains a high public profile, and visitors often bring problems to the attention of staff. In addition, the microclimates produced in visible storage units (often custom-made) protect objects from fluctuations in relative humidity and temperature as well as dust and other pollutants. Security is not compromised and may be enhanced.

4. Documentation improves. Exchange of information about the collection between visitors and staff leads to the continual upgrading and expansion of the catalogue data.
5. Staff members are affected in a number of ways. They are placed in a much more prominent position with the public than in a typical museum model, where curators tend to be isolated. Time required to change exhibits and supervise inspection of closed-storage collections is reduced.

6. Visible storage reduces the need for separate storage areas and public galleries, thus making more efficient use of space and reducing the need for exhibit construction—especially important for the small museum. Visible storage may be cheaper to maintain than the traditional systems, although there is some disagreement on this point.

7. Visible storage increases public support because visitors gain a better understanding of the museum’s responsibilities, resources, and true social utility. As the community begins to perceive the museum as its own, the institution becomes more fully integrated into community life. Proof of this effect is increase in donations of objects to the collections.

DISADVANTAGES OF VISIBLE STORAGE

Significant problems have been identified; some believe that they greatly outweigh the system’s advantages.

1. First among the concerns is conservation. Visible storage is potentially more damaging to the objects than traditional storage and display. The major concerns are: trauma to objects resulting from opening and closing of drawers in which they are contained; increase in light levels and prolonged exposure to light (as opposed to dark closed storage); temperature problems akin to those found in exhibits; dust; increased security risk; increased handling (in mounting the objects). Some objects are deemed inappropriate for visible storage because of conservation risks. The conservation department of the Glenbow-Alberta Institute has recommended the abandonment of visible storage largely because of the actual and potential damage to the objects.

2. The general public often tends to be confused and/or frustrated by the system. A UBCMOA study found that 59 percent of visitors reported a negative reaction. Familiar with the traditional selective exhibit approach, many visitors are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of objects on display, fail to understand how the collections are organized, and are frustrated by the lack of interpretive labels. Access to the data is crucial since labels are absent—an abdication of a museum’s responsibility to interpret in the view of some critics. In some systems, visitors have found access to the catalogue data too complicated and alien in format. Others are frustrated by the
Visible Storage unit and data books at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. (Courtesy of UBCMOA.)

typically poor documentation of the objects once they have gone to the trouble of searching out the catalogue data. In fact, few seem interested in accessing data. During the study at UBCMOA, only one visitor in four used the data books and then rarely for more than one or two objects. The Glenbow Museum found little or no purposeful use of its computerized system. Visible storage is demanding. Visitors, lacking the specialized knowledge that provides context and meaning and would enable them to make sense of
collections, can simply become confused and/or intimidated. In short, visible storage may not be appropriate for the general public and, as a result, it has been a seriously underused resource, according to some critics.20

3. No doubt resulting from the above difficulty is the misuse of the system. Some visitors have actually abused the drawer units, computer terminals, and other elements of the system.21 Frequent repairs have been required and, in some cases, there has been a need to replace the hardware. At the Glenbow Museum, the visible storage area was closed after two years because heavy drawer units were in danger of falling as a result of rough usage. Visitors often seem more interested in manipulating moving parts (drawers, lights, etc.) than in studying the objects. At the Glenbow Museum, informal evaluation found that, even after being instructed in the system’s proper use, visitors showed little interest and soon moved on.22 Many observations of visitor behavior are not encouraging. The public tends to use the area more extensively (wandering up and down aisles as if in a supermarket) than intensively (studying the objects) as intended.23 This lack of apparent interest is disappointing but may relate to the dearth of related programs. Among children, the goal simply seems to be to open all of the drawers, regardless of what is inside. They were also observed using large areas of visible storage at UBCM OA as a maze for hide and seek—exploratory behavior, but not of the kind intended.

4. Visible storage inhibits the serious researcher, according to critics.24 Duncan Cameron, director of the Glenbow Museum, maintains that the visible storage collection became inaccessible because retrieving specific objects for study was time-consuming and difficult. Some say that it has, in fact, been used to establish a barrier separating the public from staff and research collections.

5. Negative consequences for staff are also worrisome.25 Because all of the museum’s errors, foibles, and insignificant kitsch are placed before the public, staff can be embarrassed more often than is the case with thoroughly researched exhibits. They are under pressure to upgrade and expand the catalogue data (although many regarded this as a positive consequence). They are forced into spending much more time dealing with visitors than would be the case with traditional systems. This may interfere with collections management and/or research. Some observers even make the case that the position, authority, and traditional responsibilities of curators may be undermined. Staff may also find working with a collection housed in a public area awkward and risky in security terms.

6. The initial costs and maintenance of visible storage are higher than the traditional model, some maintain.26 There has been a tendency to “overdesign” the cabinets, and visible storage is seen to
be too elaborate to be a successful storage method. Additional costs also attach to the labor of mounting, providing security, installing individual locking systems, and providing public access to the documentation whether in text or computerized form. Of course, achieving the desired improvement in public accessibility will have attendant costs regardless of how it is accomplished.

7. Some argue that visible storage is inappropriate for small museums, where collections tend to be unsystematic and poorly documented. Critics see a danger of creating a "curio cabinet" full of unrelated objects with no underlying theme or apparent purpose.

SOLUTIONS

Unless squarely addressed and solved—or at least minimized—the problems outlined here clearly negate the advisability of implementing a visible storage system in any museum, much less a small one lacking the means to experiment.

Conservation, Security, and Design—The most significant conservation difficulty is the damage caused to objects by drawer movement. Obviously, the solution requires mounting techniques involving deep slots in drawer liners, padding, and securing of objects. At the Moncur Gallery of Prehistory, a simple and effective system has been installed to slow down the drawer motion and decrease the trauma to objects. Plastic electrical conduit tubing available at any hardware store has been used to develop a shock-absorbing system. Under each drawer, one tube is attached to the back of the case and another to the bottom of the drawer face to fit one inside the other. The air pressure and friction created within the tubes as the drawer is opened and closed slows the movement, thus reducing jarring. Such a system should be mandatory for any drawer units. Of course, the selection of suitable objects for drawer display is the primary defense; fragile items are better presented on shelves in glass-fronted cases. Better supervision, proper programming, and clearly labeling drawers would also serve to reduce the aimless opening of drawers.

Lighting is another conservation problem. Timed switches and exhibit-quality design help to minimize exposure. A drawer system that remains closed most of the time also protects light-sensitive objects. Rotation of collections to decrease cumulative exposure to light is practices by the Dugald Costume Museum.

Although fears have been voiced over security, current users report little or no difficulty. Indeed, they claim that their security is improved over long-term closed storage because of the visibility of missing objects and the availability of location data. Visible storage systems for sensitive collections such as textiles have now
been designed and tested by UBCMOA. The compromises achieved seem to be acceptable to all concerned.³⁰

Visitor Education and Access to Information—There has been a tendency to blame the system's failures on the visitor. However, orienting the general public to the visible storage concept, its use, and potential value has been given insufficient attention.³¹ This might be accomplished most effectively by traditional means, with the Mankind Discovering introductory gallery at the Royal Ontario Museum as a model. Museums employing visible storage have been criticized for abdicating their responsibility to interpret their collections. By focusing didactic exhibit efforts on fostering an understanding of how to learn from objects, museums could be of great assistance to visitors by helping them use the resources housed in visible storage more effectively.³²

Design of the information access system is also important. If visitors are alienated from or unable to use the information, intellectual access is denied, and the whole system fails. Visitors have demonstrated distaste for the data book system. Small museum practitioners recommend keeping the catalogue information in relatively short, manageable books close to the related objects. The data must be accurate, complete (especially as to identification, date, and provenance), presented in layman's language, and delivered in a vehicle able to withstand intensive usage. Access must be simple and logical.³³ Short, readable interpretive essays spread throughout the data books have been suggested to include the identification of uncertainties, gaps in the data, and areas where more research is

A view of a typical shelving unit, data-book placement, and adjacent curator's office in the Alberni Valley Museum. (Courtesy of the Alberni Valley Museum.)
required.\textsuperscript{34} Whether such texts are more successful than similar labels in didactic exhibits (which tend to be ignored by visitors) remains to be seen. At any rate, the information would be available. The Alberni Valley Museum staff are convinced that photographs of objects on the data sheets are important; visitors quickly grasp the purpose of the data books and the system. The availability of staff is important in solving the access-to-information problem; curatorial offices are highly visible and open to the public at Port Alberni.

For some, computerization and interpretive video or laser discs are the only solution to providing access to information.\textsuperscript{35} The use of computers is problematical, however. The Glenbow Museum found that computers became a plaything or the object of attention in competition with the objects on display.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, during the author's visit to UBCMCA, an "out-of-order" sign (unauthorized) was placed on the computer terminal when school groups were in the museum—an evidence of serious unsolved problems with the computer strategy. Among them is logistics. If a small museum cannot afford numerous terminals, access to data is restricted to essentially one visitor at a time. Data books located throughout the exhibit are not so limited.

To combat misuse of facilities, increased stress on orientation is required.\textsuperscript{37} Use of the system needs to be more highly structured by the museum, particularly for school groups. A major failing of the museums currently experimenting with visible storage is that they have neglected to provide adequate programming support. Few if any directly related educational activities have been devised to help visitors learn to use the system in a purposeful way.\textsuperscript{38} Guided tours, task-oriented activities for families, and specific school programs can help to provide a more structured approach to orienting the visitor to the resources available. Staffing the area with curators rather than security staff is another option; curator/visitor interaction provides both with the opportunity to give and receive information.

Maintaining Research Capabilities—Several strategies may be considered to solve the problem of inaccessibility of objects to serious research. Although the Glenbow Museum has concluded that visible storage collections become inaccessible, others would disagree.\textsuperscript{39} Certain times can be provided for direct access during hours when the museum is closed to the public. Use of specially designed units that can be moved into a research lab, as is the case at UBCMCA,\textsuperscript{40} is another solution. For many small museums, which may receive relatively few such requests, this type of availability is not a problem.
CONCLUSIONS

Although some observers feel that visible storage is not appropriate for the small museum, those visited during the course of this study all indicated general satisfaction with its suitability for them. Some maintain that the system in fact works better in small institutions, where the size of the collections to be displayed is not overwhelming and the expectations of visitors, communities, and trustees are different from those of large museums.

The major problems encountered by small museums seem to be solvable with attention to design of the system. Recommendations include the use of solid wood (rather than particle board) for constructing drawer units, the use of heavy-duty hardware and locks, and the avoidance of large wide horizontal as well as vertical drawers, which are difficult for visitors to handle and which jam easily. Large uncovered walk-in cases such as those found at UBCMOA should be avoided because of wasted space needed for access corridors and because they are uncovered, which results in dust problems. The overall layout requires consideration of traffic flow and aisle width to accommodate circulation when the drawers are in use. In general, the design of visible storage systems assumes that the needs of the visitors are on a par with those of staff and conservation. This is a central tenet of the visible storage philosophy.

Staff commitment to the concept is crucial. For curators (argu-
ably the most threatened by the system), this commitment is especially important. Visible storage demands an uncommon level of user/visitor orientation on the part of the curator and a willingness to share his/her work with the public. Many argue that the increased contact (once accepted) has a positive consequence and solves some interpretive problems. Both curators and visitors gain through this closer interaction.

This investigation provided no clear answer as to whether the visible storage approach is more or less expensive to construct and operate than the exhibit and closed-storage model. Some savings may be realized from the combination of exhibit and storage systems. In the end, however, there may be additional costs for providing the fullest possible visual and intellectual access to the collections. Although important, cost should not become the sole determining factor in such fundamental questions as the best means of providing public access to the resources of the museum.

In making the decision to implement visible storage, a number of factors must be considered. The general philosophy, intended purposes, objectives, community role, and desired image of the museum should be determined. Visible storage seems most suited to an institution primarily having intensive local usage, educational support purposes, and research functions. It does not appear to be the most appropriate format for meeting the needs of the typical tourist visitor.

The nature of the collections must be evaluated. The Alberni Valley Museum found that the range, type, and provenance of its collections were not suitable for properly depicting the community's development through traditional narrative exhibits. The visible storage alternative was selected to portray the personal heritage and collecting interests that formed the basis of the museum.

Size of collections is also a factor. Many believe that the system works best with a small, narrowly defined collection that is of manageable size to install, maintain, and comprehend.

The average dimensions and form of objects must also be taken into account. The Dugald Costume Museum, the Moncur Gallery, and the HMCS Chippewa Naval Museum selected visible storage because it handles varied small objects well. Fragmented or repetitively duplicated objects found in archeological collections require close physical inspection and good interpretation and are not generally regarded as suitable for visible storage; however, the relatively small and homogeneous collection of the Moncur Gallery seems to be a satisfactory application. Systematic scientific collections can also be suitable for visible storage. At The Sam Waller Little Northern Museum, visitors exhibit sustained interest in shelves of
Bird Study skin collection at The Sam Waller Little Northern Museum. This system has been in use since the late 1950s, but—as is common for small museums—the related catalogue data on the specimens is not readily available. (Courtesy of The Sam Waller Little Northern Museum.)

glass jars containing wet specimens and bird study skins on display in drawers—perhaps because few other museums exhibit such items.

The conservation requirements of the collections are also important considerations. Sturdy, easily mounted objects are the most suitable candidates for visible storage. Fragile or light-sensitive collections are not good candidates; however, effective compromises have been reached in a textile system developed at UBCMoa.47

Visitors’ familiarity with the objects is another consideration. They tend to pay more close attention to and get more out of an inspection of objects whose context and function are familiar to them.48 Collections of dolls, clothing, or eating utensils, for example, are likely to be of greater interest than esoteric collections or general collections from exotic cultures. The least familiar collections are the least popular in visible storage.

The types and numbers of requests for physical access to the collections must be evaluated. The majority of requests come from students, commercial users, artists, photographers, collectors and hobbyists, ethnic groups, donors, and other museums.49 If most can be served through visual access, visible storage could reduce demands on staff. If requests require hands-on access, visible storage is less efficient than closed storage. If staff is limited and there are no plans to use the collections extensively for research or changing exhibits, visible storage may be an alternative worth considering.
Alternatives to visible storage should be evaluated. First is the traditional model of exhibits and closed storage. Given the desire for increased accessibility, this approach requires policies, procedures, and facilities for providing the public with access to the museum’s complete resource base. Many requests for access can also be met through photographic and laser disc imagery and catalogue records. Another approach is a stratified system which provides traditional exhibits and a study room for hands-on examination of selected reference collections. Traditional closed storage in conjunction with a research laboratory are provided to serve the needs of scholars. One potential alternative is the “technological solution,” in which interactive computer and optical laser disc systems provide high-quality and varied visual records of the object while the computer provides the complete textual database. The technology to accomplish this has already been developed and tested, but the expense of such a system may be beyond the financial means of many small museums.

Utilizing visible storage for only part of the collection may also be considered. The Dugald Costume Museum rotates collections through its visible storage system. This is a highly labor-intensive approach, but the cycle of rotation could be matched to staff resources.

Most museum workers have accepted the philosophy expounding increased public access to our institutional holdings. Visible storage has much to recommend it, yet there are many potential problems involved in its application. For some purposes and for some collections, the difficulties identified are avoidable.

There are certain consequences of visible storage that must be kept in mind. The first is that—whether or not it is understood as such—visible storage is at one and the same time both a storage and a display system. Visitors need to be made aware that this is not the familiar type of thematic exhibit, and, particularly in light of the absence of interpretive labeling, they must be provided with some form of structured orientation and programming. Second, although the visible storage approach puts collections at some conservation risk, every museum function creates a fundamental conflict between use and preservation. The challenge is to find the most effective compromises. In some limited cases, visible storage may indeed be the best middle ground. On the other hand, visible storage will never replace conceptually ordered didactic exhibits. If clearly differentiated for the visitor, the two formats may be ideal foils for one another.

As those who have examined this approach have pointed out, the visible storage concept is rather museologically abstract. As we wrestle with our decisions and the problems of implementing our
ideal of democratic access, we must not neglect to take into account the consequences for the museum’s public. The visitor’s experience with the collections housed in visible storage paralleling that of the curator may be so qualitatively valuable that we in the museum field will need to completely reexamine all of our traditional approaches and, for the sake of truly engaging our visitors with the challenge of becoming their own curators and interpreters, learn to deal effectively with the costs involved.

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FOOTNOTES


4. Institutions visited and staff interviewed were: Alberin Valley Museum: John Mitchell, director; Jean McIntosh, curator; Gordon Bailey, museum technician; the Dugald Costume Museum: Wyn Van Slyck, director; Glenbow-Alberta Institute: Duncan F. Cameron, director; Fred Greene, chief conservator; Brian King, preparator; H.M.C.S. Chippewa Naval Museum: Mike Shortridge, curator; Moncur Gallery of Prehistory; Anna Grace Diehl, director; University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology: Michael M. Ames, director; Elizabeth Johnson, curator of collections; Len McFarlane, museum technician; Christopher Miller, head, Marketing and Development.


12. Mitchell, 70; Mitchell, interview.
21. Duncan F. Cameron, interview, 1 June 1987; King, interview; Wyn Van Slyck, interview, 8 June 1987.
28. L. Macfarlane, interview; Greene, interview. Materials used include ethafoam, surgical tubing, monofilament, Velcro, and polyester netting. An alternative employed by the Alberni Valley Museum is acid-free museum board to which objects are secured with monofilament.
29. King, interview; L. MacFarlane, interview; Mitchell, interview.
30. Johnson and Lambert.
33. Jachimowicz, 32; Blackburn, “Visible Storage,” 26; Mitchell, 70.
37. Blackburn, “Access,” 36, 52, 56, 66 85; Mitchell, interview; McIntosh, interview.
38. Ames, interview; Mitchell, interview; Stott, letter.
39. Cameron, interview is contradicted by McIntosh, interview.
41. Mitchell, interview.
42. Derived from King, Greene, Mitchell, L. MacFarlane, Shortridge, and Van Slyk, interviews.
44. N. Macfarlane, 19.
46. Johnson and Horgan, 20. In fact, the majority of requests for information from museums are in the natural history field according to Blackburn, “Access,” 14, 46.
47. Johnson and Lambert.