



Richard Doty  
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EXHIBITIONS: AN AMERICAN VIEW*

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## TEMPORARY NUMISMATIC EXHIBITIONS AN AMERICAN VIEW

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For this afternoon's presentation, I shall confine my remarks to temporary exhibits prepared by or for numismatic museums. I shall discuss such shows in light of the practices and experiences of the three major numismatic cabinets in the United States - which have traditionally been responsible for most money-related exhibitions in our country. These institutions are my current home, the Smithsonian Institution; my former employer, the American Numismatic Society; and the museum of the American Numismatic Association, whose Curator, Robert Hoge, has presented me with information on exhibit practices there.

Any temporary numismatic exhibit will fall into one of two categories, largely depending upon the self-ascribed role of the museum which constructs it. That is, an exhibit may be temporary but stationary, in which case it will probably be mounted in a space traditionally set aside for the purpose: the public coming in to visit it. Or it may be temporary but travelling, in which case it will come to the public. Montages in this latter category, travelling exhibits, are what I wish to discuss today, for they are, I think, the best way for a museum to reach out to not just one but many communities - and they are becoming increasingly popular across the United States of America.

The Smithsonian Institution has been something of a pioneer in this concept. Most of its shows form part of SITES (the Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service), which was set up in 1952 to bring the museum's objects and historic interpretation before a wider audience. Today, SITES is a huge organization whose current catalogue lists fifty shows, either available to interested institutions at the time of printing - or available in future, if interest warrants. These exhibits may go out for display to recipients for anywhere from four to twelve weeks, and they may range from simple photographic montages (occupying as little as twenty running meters, with a 'contribution' from the host museum of a few hundred dollars) to elaborate, multimedia, interactive extravaganzas, many nearly as large and complex as anything mounted in Washington (with a display space of up to five hundred square meters and a monetary contribution of up to one hundred thousand dollars). Many of the shows are done in conjunction with other museums within or occasionally beyond the United States. SITES lays down very precise guidelines as to security, shipping arrangements (the host institutions must recreate the displays and, exceptionally, even send them on to their next venue), and environmental controls.

The subject matter of these displays tends to focus on American history and popular culture, especially as related to minority groups in the country's past and present. This is in line with the parent Institution's self-perceived role in our diverse society; but it also serves the needs of

smaller museums, where specialized expertise in these subjects is likely to be lacking.

Thus far, none of the Smithsonian travelling exhibitions has dealt with coinage, currency, or other exchange media - although that may be changing, and we may be mounting a travelling exhibit sponsored by MasterCard in the near future. When the National Numismatic Collection has attempted to go to the people, it has had a definite public in mind, and a specific place where it hopes to make contact. That public is comprised of collectors, and contact has traditionally been made at coin shows and conventions, by means of simple displays of highlights of our collections.

These exhibits have generally stressed rarity and monetary value over descriptive content - choices which we are now rethinking due to security concerns. For example, a display of great American rarities in gold, scheduled for show at the American Numismatic Association's annual convention in August, was set aside due to the irreplaceable nature of the objects, combined with the greater perceived risks to federal property after the Oklahoma City bombing. Instead of these unique objects (which were intended to stand on their own, without much in the way of an explanatory text), an exhibit which actually tells a story about American numismatics (but does it with inexpensive articles, all replaceable) will be sent out.

While it is my hope to bring various aspects of the National Numismatic Collection to a wider, non-collecting public by means of participation in the ES program, I must also admit that this is a long-term goal; for the present, we must continue to bring our message before those groups already predisposed in its favour.

This must also, I think, be the posture of the country's other two numismatic cabinets, the American Numismatic Society and the American Numismatic Association. The American Numismatic Society is not now doing travelling exhibits - although it made a brief foray into that field during the early 1980s. It eventually prepared three shows, one of which might be on display at an area school or museum while the second one was being shown at the Society - and the third was being readied for the summer convention of the American Numismatic Association. The displays were freestanding, and they involved a 'sandwich' approach, wherein coins or other objects were mounted in cut-through depressions in one sheet of plastic, which was flanked front and back by two other sheets of a similar composition. The panels were large, extremely heavy, and very difficult to assemble and disassemble - indeed, the unwieldiness of the basic display concept was a major reason why the Society abandoned its travelling program after the mid-1980s. As far as I know, there has been no serious discussion about reviving it.

But, travelling exhibitions are currently being prepared and sent by the third of our cabinets, the American Numismatic Association. That museum is located in Colorado Springs, well away from primary centres of population: for that reason (and owing to its greater orientation toward the

collector), the Association has performed yeoman service in the sphere of the travelling show.

Many of its activities are related to exhibitions at its own summer and spring conventions - where as many as fifteen thousand hobbyists and their families may be expected to congregate over a period of several days. Some of these assemblages relate to new acquisitions to the permanent collections; others are smaller versions of the full-scale shows which form part of the Association's main travelling exhibit service.

Often prepared with the help of outside contributors, these major displays are seen at a variety of museums, banks, and collector organizations across the country, and they travel for several months at a time. Thus far, the American Numismatic Association's travelling exhibitions have been dedicated to early America; to the life and art of the American medallist Gilroy Roberts; to ancient coinages; and to a general concept called 'From Bartering to Banking: Tales Told by Money'.

The American Numismatic Association is currently the most active among the three major United States museums in the realm of the travelling exhibit. It is also most active in a related activity: it regularly lends out specimens from its collection, so that other institutions can prepare displays of their own with a numismatic content. The American Numismatic Society is also active in numismatic loans, while the National Numismatic Collection has been much less so. But this last could change, and change soon: shrinking public funds make it incumbent upon us to find new, less expensive ways of bringing our objects and the stories they can tell before the public, and the careful remission of interesting and important coins and notes to museums across the country will give us a wider reputation and the public a greater learning opportunity. I look forward to more and larger loans of our materials in the future and I hope to see our participation in the SITES program as well.