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### Our Museum- An Artist's View

Nathan Mohler

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Harvey Gunderson

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

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The plans on the exhibit designer's drawing table are usually the first indication that a new exhibit is underway.

## Our Museum — An Artist's View

Museums seem to be all things to all people. Some visitors come to the museum in search of information on specific questions. For others, a visit to the museum with friends is more of a social occasion which makes the acquisition of knowledge become not only a learning experience, but one of entertainment as well. For still others, the museum represents an amalgam of zoo, circus, and perhaps a bit of the carnival sideshow. Certainly the heroic proportions of the restorations of extinct animals, the somewhat macabre mummies, along with the "world's largest elephant," suggest to some the excitement and wonder of "the greatest show on earth."

The University of Nebraska State Museum is essentially a natural history museum composed of nine divisions. Exhibits are designed to introduce visitors to the vast scope of knowledge encompassed by such disciplines as anthropology, geology, paleontology, and zoology. The Museum staff members (curators, educators, exhibit designers, technicians, and preparators) who develop these exhibits must consider the wide range of age, interest, and educational levels, as well as the cultural background of the museum visitor. The intellectual appetite of the eager little first grader, whose attention span can be brief indeed, must be satisfied, while the interests and needs of the Univer-

sity student must also be met. Exhibits vary from the simplest presentation of an artifact, piece of taxidermy, or fossil, to highly complex displays. The more complex displays include miniature dioramas; life-size ecological dioramas, like those in the Hall of Nebraska Wildlife; and elaborate mechanical and electronic presentations such as Ceres the transparent woman.<sup>1</sup> The techniques, media, and ideas used in the creation of museum exhibits are so varied that museum artists need to be people of considerable versatility since they never know what they will be called upon to do next.

The plans on the exhibit designer's drawing table are usually the first indication that a new exhibit is underway. The placement of various elements (artifacts, labels, lettering, and areas of color) which compose the layout can be determined on the scale drawing. This eliminates having to make costly and time consuming changes in the actual display case.

Most people are curious about the methods and materials used in the preparation of the more elaborate exhibits. One of our dreams, yet unfulfilled, is to establish an area in the Museum where the visiting public could actually see artists and technicians at work, much as "sidewalk superintendents" peer through knotholes to watch the progress of construction at new building sites.

With this in mind, it occurred to me that our readers might like to know about a series of displays which probably evoke more how-do-you-do-it questions than any in the Museum. I am referring to the habitat groups in the Hall of Nebraska Wildlife. Incidentally, "habitat group" is "museumese" for the large life-like dioramas which usually feature taxidermy in a setting simulating a natural environment.

The special skills of a number of people are needed to create a habitat group. After the carpenters, steel workers, and masons have completed the half-dome shaped shells which are used for these exhibits in the Museum, the work of the artists, technicians, and lighting experts begin. While the mounted animals and accessories (plants and rocks) are important, no habitat group is any better than the painted background on which the whole display is based.

After the subject and locale of the exhibit have been decided, the background artist usually makes color sketches and color notes, along with photographs taken at the chosen site. In Nebraska this can mean field trips of hundreds of miles. These field trips can also prove to be something of an adventure — everything from coping with rattlesnakes to the vagaries of Nebraska weather. Two Museum artists vividly recall being marooned in their jeep for the night by the flood waters of an August cloudburst. This was in Banner County at the site of the bobcat group, the first display of this type to be installed at the Museum. I also recall spending a June 13th in a Scottsbluff hotel, waiting for a late spring

<sup>1</sup>One visitor asked where "the woman who gets all lit up" could be found.



*The large, apparently rotting tree stump in the skunk diorama has been modeled in paper mache.*

snowstorm to pass so that habitat fieldwork could proceed in the Wildcat Hills.

Complete information concerning the animal and plant life, as well as the geology of the region, must be obtained at the site of the proposed habitat group. Planning for the proposed exhibit is facilitated by making a mock-up of miniature animal models. This information is then passed on as instructions for the taxidermist to follow.

Every effort is made to achieve accuracy and authenticity in the habitat grouping. Nature is either simulated or preserved in every detail. Rocks, soil, and plants are collected on the site and transported to the Museum. Dried leaves and grasses can be used, but it is often necessary to enhance the faded natural colors with

artist's oil colors. Usually dried plant life is processed in solutions of alcohol, acetone, and glycerine. This process keeps the dried grasses and other plant life from becoming too dry and from eventually disintegrating. Insects which could be very destructive in the finished exhibit can also be eliminated in this process.

It is often necessary to reinforce and stiffen natural grasses and other plants with wire. Many of the plants, such as upright reeds, grasses, and cattails seen in the Sand Hills lake exhibit (featuring the whooping cranes) had to be reinforced in this way. Attention to such details contribute to the permanency of the display, which in most instances, is expected to enchant the museum visitor for many years. It would hardly be worth the time and expense involved if the finished habitat group

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could not be considered a creation of reasonable permanency.

Green plants must be simulated in various materials such as paper, wax, plastics, acetates, balsa wood, and other materials. At times, combinations of natural materials and artificial simulations seem to best satisfy our requirements. Many visitors wonder, when viewing the beaver exhibit, whether or not the tree trunk and the tree stumps are real. They are completely artificial. The actual stumps, from which the tree trunks had been gnawed away by the beavers, were photographed in color. The stumps were then taken to the Museum laboratory. There, latex molds were made from the natural tree stumps. Using the latex molds, the stumps were cast in plaster and were later painted in oil colors. The artist used the color photos taken in the field as a guide. The large, apparently rotting tree stump in the skunk diorama has been modeled in paper mache.

The museum artist feels he has achieved a degree of success when the visitor has difficulty in determining where the three-dimensional foreground ends and the painted background begins. Various stratagems are used in an effort to create an illusion of space. The smaller the diorama the more difficult it is to "fool the eye." Every diorama presents particular problems in this respect. The next time you are strolling through the Hall of Nebraska Wildlife, stop in front of the red fox exhibit and notice that even though the case is very small, a feeling of distance has been achieved.

One of the "tricks" used in creating this feeling of space concerns the placement of the oak leaves which cover the ground. The leaves were sorted according to size and placed with the largest leaves in the foreground and continued in gradually diminishing sizes to the painted background, about six feet from the viewer.

We are advised by a popular television commercial that "it isn't nice to fool Mother Nature," but it is possible to fool a bumble bee. A bumble bee paid me, as a museum artist, the highest compliment by flying through an open window of the studio and alighting on a goldenrod blossom which I had just fabricated. The bee seemed reluctant to leave the artificial flower, so we decided to collect the bee with the possibility of adding another touch of realism to the display. The curator of entomology was consulted to make sure the bumble bee was of a species appropriate to the exhibit site in west-



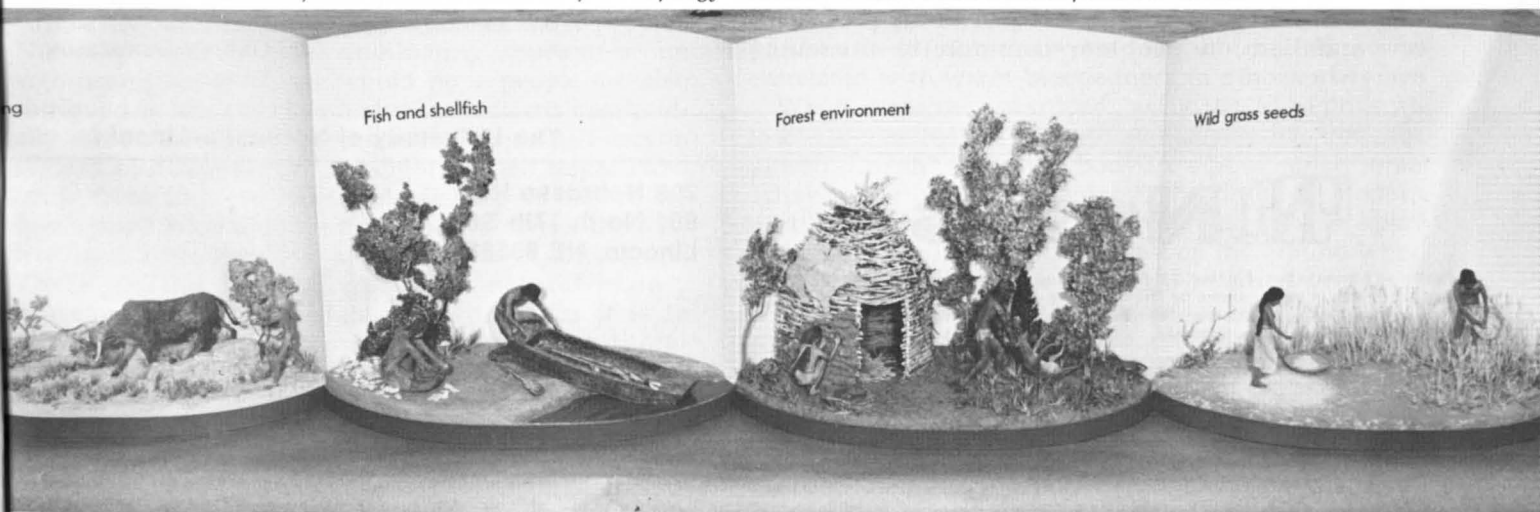
*A bumble bee came to look and stayed to be looked at.*

ern Nebraska. That same bumble bee can be seen today, perched upon the artificial goldenrod, our State flower, in the exhibit which features Morrill County's historic Chimney Rock.

There are many small museums around the country, including the museums of local history in almost every county. Most of these museums share the common problem of having to create exhibits with budgets which are either woefully inadequate or perhaps nonexistent. At the State Museum, we have had a great deal of experience in coping, in one way or another, with meager display budgets.

Expensive materials are not always necessary in building interesting and attractive exhibit accessories. Ingenuity and resourcefulness, along with long hours of painstaking work, will go a long way in overcoming the handicap of insufficient funds. For example, a series of small dioramas in the Hall of Anthropology in the State

*A series of small dioramas in the Hall of Anthropology illustrate what can be done with inexpensive materials.*





*This small brass cannon from the Philippines is kept well polished by inquiring hands.*

Museum illustrates what can be done with inexpensive materials. These little dioramas were made to illustrate various aspects of the life style in the Mesolithic period. The figures of people and animals as well as many of the accessories are made of such common materials as bits of wire, paper mache made from paper towels and white glue, and bristles from a scrub brush, all finished in living color from tubes of artist's watercolors and acrylic paints.

The successful museum exhibit must please the eye (color, composition, texture, and lighting are all important) while telling an informative and authentic story and, occasionally, entertaining the museum visitor as well. Some of the most successful museum exhibits are those which permit the visitor to touch or participate actively in the museum experience. Unfortunately, some of the brightest ideas for involving the exhibit viewer are made impractical because of the prevalence of vandalism, a problem common to museums everywhere.

However, we find that simply being able to touch and feel a museum specimen has great appeal, particularly to our young visitors. Children, especially, love to use their knuckles to rap the brass gong from the Philippines. A beautiful Lantoka, a small brass cannon from the Philippines found in the Museum's John J. Pershing collection, is kept well polished by admiring and inquiring hands, both large and small.

And that is what the museum experience is all about — inquiring minds and hands of interested visitors being stimulated by exhibits which have evolved because of nature's systematic beauty and wonder, and the hard work, knowledge, and infinite patience of many people.

NATHAN MOHLER  
Exhibits Designer

HARVEY GUNDERSON  
Editor

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA STATE MUSEUM, WITH PLANETARIUM

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### The University of Nebraska-Lincoln

209 Nebraska Hall  
901 North 17th St.  
Lincoln, NE 68588