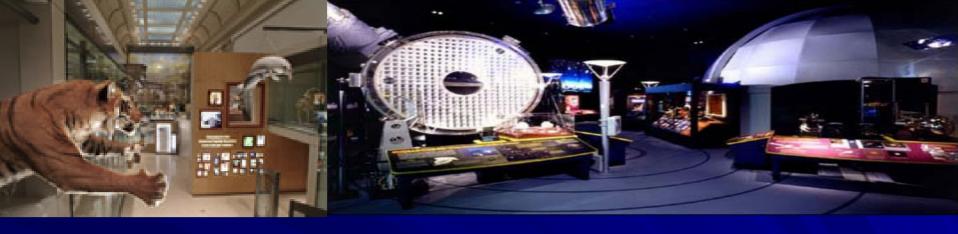
## Raising the Bar

A Study of Exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis March 2005



# Exhibition-making is a Major Activity at the Smithsonian



In FY 1999 and FY 2000, ....

#### 200 new exhibitions

Occupying 1,200,000 square feet
Costing \$40 million in direct expenditures
Costing \$60 million (or more) in staff time

(Excluding SITES)

## About half of SI exhibitions are art exhibitions Art exhibitions are much less expensive





Art

Average direct cost\*

Average size

Average cost/sq.ft.

\$90,000

4,200 sq. ft.

\$19.40

Non-art

\$450,000

3,400 sq. ft.

\$91.89

## **Exhibition Quality**



### High Quality...

In studies of 11 SI exhibitions before 2004, 20% - 50% of visitors scored them in the top satisfaction category

#### ...But Not as High as Elsewhere

At the Holocaust Museum, and Cincinnati Art Museum, 70% or more of visitors score the exhibitions in the top satisfaction category

# Major Weaknesses of SI Exhibitions

- Narrow range of design approaches
- Rarely immersive and interactive
- Limited appeal for diverse audiences
- Safe, conservative interpretations
- Subject-specialist perspective dominates
- Poor intellectual and physical maintenance

#### The Path to Improvement

Make meeting the needs of visitors

- as visitors define them 
a leading principle of SI exhibitions.

Promote and reward creativity and innovation.

Include on-going maintenance in all exhibition budgets and protect the funds.

### **Guiding Principles for Quality**

Exhibitions should be visitor-driven

Exhibitions should serve a wide range of audiences



#### **Each Unit Acts Alone**

- No master exhibition schedule
- No central database of planned exhibitions
- Little sharing of resources and staff
- Little joint planning
- Little sharing of information and experience
- Limited sharing of collections for exhibitions
- Little training and staff development

#### As a result...

While each unit is subject to limitations and bureaucracy due to the size of SI,

it does not make use of the advantages of SI scale and expertise across units.

#### Planning is Inadequate

- Little strategic thinking about exhibitions
- Few attempts to draw new audiences
- Excessive homogeneity of presentation within individual museums
- Poor systems of idea selection and concept development
- Overly long permanent exhibitions

#### Processes are Deficient

- Voice of the visitor not represented in exhibition-making
- Exhibition teams rarely look to other industries for ideas
- Project teams are dominated by subjectmatter experts
- Incentives and accountability are weak

#### The Path to Improvement

Six Steps

- 6. Training staff
- 5. Sharing information
- 4. Leveraging across units
- 3. Involving visitors
- 2. Improving processes
- 1. Planning strategically

#### 1. Planning Strategically

#### Across SI as a whole:

Which audiences will be targeted?
Which themes will be linked/integrated?
How will audiences be engaged?
What standards will measure performance?

How will visitorship be made more inclusive?

How will approaches show more variety?

#### 2. Improving Processes

Generate a wider range of exhibition ideas

 Encourage more innovative approaches to concept development

 Give exhibition developers, designers and other exhibition professionals equal voice with subject specialists in some projects

#### 3. Involving Visitors

- Investigate what visitors to Smithsonian exhibitions are seeking
- Incorporate visitor studies and prior evaluations into the exhibition development process
- Establish panels of actual/potential visitors of different ages and backgrounds to comment on plans

#### 4. Leveraging Across Units

 Maintain strong pockets of exhibition expertise in different units

 Engage these professionals in projects across units through internal contracting

 Promote temporary exchanges of exhibition staff among units

#### 5. Sharing Information

 Set up mechanisms to capture and share exhibition planning information

Establish and maintain a master exhibition schedule

Require de-briefings on all exhibition projects

#### 6. Training Staff

Set aside adequate training funds

 Provide SI-wide training seminars in exhibition-related areas

 Offer a system of travel grants for exhibition specialists

#### Cultural Obstacles to Change

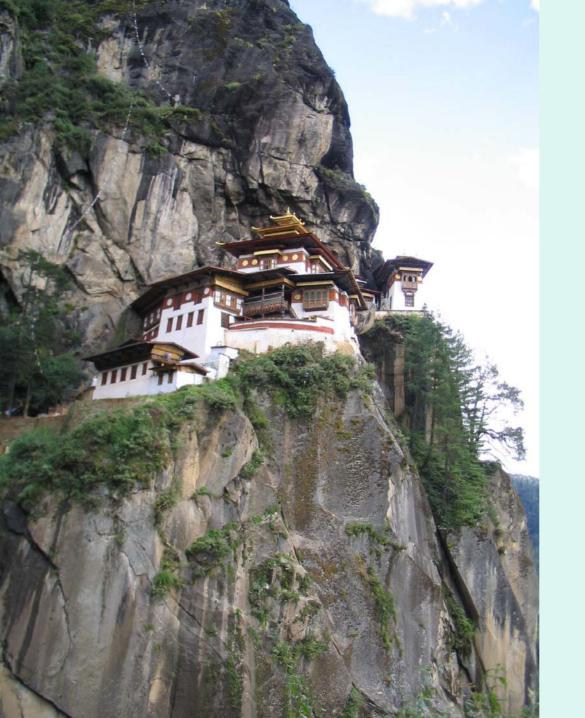
- Academic orientation is the foremost value
- Subject specialists have greater influence than others on the exhibition team
- Many subject specialists are more committed to their discipline than to visitor needs
- The Smithsonian is risk-averse

#### Improvement Requires Leadership

To provide clear guidance

To foster coordination and support

To alter longstanding habits



The path to excellence is worth the climb.