

## The Display of an Exhibition

Number 58, Spring 1970

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58100ac>

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Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

(1970). The Display of an Exhibition. *Vie des arts*, (58), 72–73.

# THE DISPLAY OF AN EXHIBITION

Jack MacGillivray, installations officer at the National Gallery of Canada, discusses with Pierre Desjardins the installation of the exhibition *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada*. Before coming to the National Gallery, Mr. MacGillivray was director of the Edmonton Art Gallery for which he helped design a new building.

PHOTOS JOHN EVANS

**Q.**—What is involved in the work of an installations officer?

**A.**—The installations officer is responsible for what people see when they come into the gallery. The job essentially consists of displaying the works of art in the very best light possible and showing them to their greatest advantage with a minimum of security risks. One must also think in terms of the whole group of works together as creating a particular mood. The National Gallery presents a particular problem, never having been designed as a gallery building. It is really an office building made into a gallery.

**Q.**—How far ahead do you plan the installation of an exhibition?

**A.**—Several months, as much as four or five months ahead. The exhibition *Masterpieces of Indian and Esquimo Art* was the largest and the most complicated installation that we have done since I have come here. The exhibition was presented in Paris last Spring and Summer before coming to Canada, so I went to see the installation there. At the Musée de l'Homme, everything was installed in the dark with minimal lighting and special lens to give dramatic sharp shadows and highlights. This emphasized the mysterious and magical qualities of the works, presented as precious objects in small boxes with peep holes. This was very attractive but this type of display had already been done often enough in North America to have become somewhat of a cliché. So we preferred a less dramatic, more straightforward presentation to show the objects for what they are and to be able to examine them closely with more freedom, as works of art, with an interest in the painting, the colours and the sculptural quality.

**Q.**—How do you prepare the installation concretely?

**A.**—We have a scale model of the galleries, ½ inch to the foot which we paint in the colours planned for the exhibition. We then install scale models of the objects and paintings to determine the space allotted to each work and their relationship to each other. This enables us to put the objects directly in place as they are unpacked, thus saving unnecessary handling of the works and the resulting risks of damage.





For the Eskimo and Indian masterpieces, the gallery space was divided up by means of panels hung in frames that ran from floor to ceiling and could be assembled into walls to isolate particular works. The objects were surrounded by space and large areas of white. The lighting created dramatic interest and emphasized the colour of the objects and masks. Because of the very efficient guard system at the Gallery, masks could be hung directly on the wall with only minimal protection from a simple barrier of white plastic clothesline which didn't disturb the esthetic effect of the white environment.

The pieces of clothing were presented more as works of art than as anthropological objects, for the interest of their design and fine crill work, by putting large sheets of plexiglass right up against them so that the visitors could examine the details at very close range without danger to the objects. Where the objects were interesting both in front and back, they were sandwiched between two sheets of plexiglass and seemed to be floating in space. The large areas of plexiglass presented the problem of reflections, so every sheet was made to face a blank wall without opposite lighting. This determined in part the location of the cases.

There was also the difficulty of presenting the many small objects properly lit at eye level so that one could walk around them. The solution was to make the cases as small as possible and run them from floor to ceiling to avoid security risks and a cluttered look. This gave the impression of trees and, thus, the solving of the technical problems gave rise to the esthetic effect.

The individual cases were made of four sheets of plexiglass with a fabric covered wood bottom. A metal grill at the top hides the lighting fixture.

**Q.**—How much concern is there for the educational aspect of the displays?

**A.**—Only inasmuch as the education department wants a particular aspect emphasized. In this case an area was set aside to show a group of photographs of Indian villages on the Queen Charlotte Islands taken about a hundred years ago and also colour slides taken by an archeologist of what remains nowadays. These were shown in rear view projection on an eight-foot high split screen, with an accompaniment of Indian music. Slides also illustrated the use of the masks with the appropriate lighting. This area also provided a space where the visitors could sit and rest.

**Q.**—Was there any reaction from the public to this installation?

**A.**—Very little. It perhaps had a shock value by way of its understatement. Good installations generally pass unobserved.

