

# Digital Exhibits Guide

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## What, Why, How

**What:** Digital exhibits, like their physical counterparts, use objects to make claims and arguments, and tell stories. (Here, the word “object” is meant as a stand-in for the exhibited items.) Objects can be digitized or “born digital” media of various types (e.g., digitized photographs, rare books, films, 3D models, audio files, or born digital government documents).

What distinguishes digital exhibits from general digital publishing is the way objects are prioritized—they are an object of study and not just illustrative—and the way the content is curated and organized—there is a great deal of critical thought given to object selection, captions, the relationships between the objects, the relationship between objects and text, the contextual information, and the structure of the site the exhibit is on.

Generally speaking, exhibits are structured as **linear**, **non-linear**, or **mixed**.

- Linear - Users are either compelled to move through the exhibit in a linear way based on how it is structured and organized, or users are given ways to navigate the exhibit linearly because that is how it is best understood.
- Non-linear - Users are neither compelled to move through the exhibit linearly nor do they need to move through it linearly to best understand the content.
- Mixed - The exhibit has linear and non-linear aspects.

Digital exhibits can have components, such as searchable digital collections made of the materials featured in them. In this case, the objects are described using consistently applied metadata that uses a schema (e.g., Dublin Core) or one created for the particular project. Interactive maps, timelines, and other added elements can be incorporated to expand and enrich the exhibit’s content.

**Why:** Digital exhibits afford researchers opportunities to closely examine and contextualize objects and/or use objects to examine and contextualize a historical event, a literary work, a philosophical theory, etc. In many exhibit platforms, other tools can be incorporated that allow for additional layers of analysis and contextualization as well as interactivity.

## How

Exhibit platforms are presentation and organizational tools that allow for making claims, arguments, and the telling of stories through the curation process. The curation process includes selecting objects, researching, writing text (contextual information, captions, and/or object labels), and grouping and arranging the objects. Typically, the time it takes to create an exhibit is devoted more to the curation and design process and less to the technical aspects, that is, if an “out of the box” tool like Collection Builder or Omeka is being used. If the exhibit site is being created from the ground up, so to speak, the technical component will take considerably more time.

Some exhibit platforms include:

- [CollectionBuilder](#)
- [Omeka](#)
- [Exhibit.so](#)
- [Scalar](#)
- Wordpress and other website platforms

## Process of Creating a Digital Exhibit

The following is an overview of the digital exhibit creation process. ([See these presentation slides](#) for more information and helpful visuals. There are slide explanations in the notes section.)

- **Object Selection** - The object selection process requires careful consideration and includes determining whether any digitization is needed and whether there are any intellectual property concerns.
- **Object Organization** - The order in which objects go and how they are grouped and arranged are major components of the curation process. It is helpful to play around with the organization, even if only to ensure your final choices are the best ones.
- **Exhibit Platform Selection** - Choose the platform most appropriate for the content and the desired type of interactivity. It is best to base the platform selection on the content as opposed to shaping the content to fit into a given platform.

- **Textual Content** - Write exhibit content for the informative pages (e.g., introduction and historical context, object labels, and group labels). Write accessibility text (i.e., alt-text, video captions, and transcripts).
- **Site organization\*** - Organizing the site means designing the information architecture (IA) (e.g., site structure, navigation, taxonomy, etc.) and page structure (e.g., the use of headers and subheaders). The choices made here shape the experience and flow of the exhibit. They also have a major impact on its usability and accessibility.

\*Some platforms are less customizable and require/allow for less consideration of IA.

- **Design Decisions** - Design decisions (e.g., choosing [fonts](#), [colors](#), and page layouts) have a major impact on the tone, usability, and accessibility of the exhibit. Clean and simple is better than having it be busy, if not for the visual appeal than for the site's usability.

## Basic Exhibit Criteria

- Media quality should be high. This means visual media (e.g., video, images, and 3D objects) are a high enough resolution to look sharp (not pixelated or soft). Pixelated images heavily detract from the exhibit and should not be used. Sometimes, it is hard to avoid having soft images due to the rarity of some media, so having a few is okay; it is just not ideal. Similarly, audio files need to be audible. (It is expected that older audio clips may be of lower quality.)
- Visitors to the site should immediately know or be able to find what the exhibit is about quickly. Think about how physical exhibits typically have introductory text visible as you enter them. (You want visitors to know what they are “stepping into” before they proceed.) An exception to this would be if the exhibit is deliberately designed to withhold such information because of some intended effect initially.
- The navigation needs to be obvious, intuitive, and consistent. When the navigation is confusing, visitors will quickly become disinterested or frustrated.
- Objects need to be relevant. Having unrelated or extraneous objects will detract from the other objects and weaken the claims/arguments. This also means there must be text (or some other means) by which the object's relevance is made clear.
- All objects are well described, be it in the form of metadata or captions, and are easy to trace back to their origin (e.g., the repository, museum, or archive they came from).
- [Accessibility standards and guidelines](#) are followed in the design of the exhibit site.

- Additional components like maps and timelines need to enrich the content in a way that fits within the project's scope. For example, don't just add a map to have a map. Have a map because it will help explain the geographical context of the objects or illustrate the particular event the exhibit focuses on.

## Exhibit Rubric

	<b>Exceptional</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Needs work</b>
<b>Exhibit Organization</b>	<p>The exhibit content is effectively grouped and arranged so that it logically flows and can be easily navigated.</p> <p>The organization is so well-considered that it elevates the content</p>	<p>The exhibit content is effectively grouped and arranged so that it logically flows and is easily navigated for the most part.</p> <p>Any less well-organized aspects do not greatly detract from the exhibit's effectiveness.</p>	<p>Much of the exhibit content is disjointed in its organization and, therefore, doesn't flow.</p>
<b>Object Selection</b>	<p>All objects fit within the exhibit's scope, are well incorporated, and further the claims/arguments.</p>	<p>Most objects fit within the exhibit's scope and are well incorporated into the claims/arguments.</p>	<p>Not enough objects fit within the exhibit's scope, and there is not enough clear correlation between them and the claims/ arguments.</p>
<b>Metadata (for digital collections)</b>	<p>An ample amount of metadata is given to all objects (e.g., title, creator, date, description, provenance, and location.), and a consistent schema (e.g., Dublin Core) is used in its application.</p>	<p>At least a medium amount of metadata is given (e.g., title, creator, date, description), and/or the schema is consistently applied for the most part.</p>	<p>The metadata is slim (e.g., title, creator, date), and/or a schema is not consistently applied</p>
<b>Text</b>	<p>The text is engaging and concise so that the it does not drowned out objects or overwhelm visitors.</p> <p>There is a clear and consistent voice shaped for a particular audience (e.g., academics, the general public, high school students).</p>	<p>The text is engaging and concise for the most part.</p> <p>There is a clear and mostly consistent voice shaped for a particular audience (e.g., academics, the general public, high school students).</p>	<p>The text is long to the point that it overwhelms users. Or, the text is spars to the point that it does not provide enough information.</p> <p>The voice may be inconsistent, and the audience may be unclear.</p>



<b>Aesthetics &amp; Visual Design</b>	<p>The visual design has a visual style that aligns with and elevates the exhibit topic/content.</p> <p>The design is constantly applied to create a cohesive viewing experience across the exhibit and site.</p> <p>All media is high in quality (e.g., images are sharp, audio is clear)</p>	<p>The visual design is clean and tasteful (e.g., font choice and color are well-considered)</p> <p>The design is constantly applied to create a cohesive viewing experience across the exhibit and site.</p> <p>All media is high in quality (e.g., images are sharp, audio is clear)</p>	<p>The visual design detracts from the content, e.g., the colors are distracting, or the visuals make the page look cluttered</p> <p>Much of the media is lower in quality.</p>
<b>User Experience, Usability, and Accessibility</b>	<p>Accessibility standards are followed (<a href="#">see list</a>).</p> <p>The navigation is clear and consistent throughout the exhibit and site.</p> <p>Additional steps have been taken to increase the user experience, e.g., there are added wayfinding elements that make the site easier to navigate.</p>	<p>Accessibility standards are followed (<a href="#">see list</a>).</p> <p>The navigation is clear and consistent throughout the exhibit and site.</p>	<p>The few or no accessibility standards are applied.</p> <p>The navigation is inconsistent and/or confusing.</p>
<b>Interactive components (e.g., maps and timelines)</b>	<p>The component(s) elevates the exhibit contents' effectiveness, e.g., it strengthens the claims/arguments.</p> <p>The design and functionality of the components align with the quality of the exhibit.</p>	<p>The component(s) fit within the scope of the exhibit content and align with the claims/arguments.</p> <p>The design and functionality of the components are near the quality of the exhibit.</p>	<p>The components are extraneous and potentially detract or distract from the exhibit content.</p>

## Examples

Often, digital exhibits tell fascinating and visually engaging stories about historical events, art movements, scientific discoveries, etc., but do not have the kind of analytical and critical layer needed for digital humanities projects. The following exhibits also lack that layer. They do, however, provide insight into exhibit creation as much for what is good about them as for what could be improved. When better examples become available, they will be added. (Perhaps it can be yours!)

### [Japanese Digitization Project](#)

Platform: [Scalar](#)



## Before the War

*Issei and Nisei in the West*

 **Japanese Americans in the West:** Between 1885 and 1924, 380,000 Japanese immigrated to Hawaii and the mainland United States. Despite success at creating communities, institutions, farms and businesses, the Japanese in the U.S. only faced racism and anti-Japanese sentiment. Laws throughout this period prevented this first generation of immigrants (Issei) from becoming citizens, owning land, attending public schools, and marrying whites. Even second-generation Japanese Americans (Nisei), faced discrimination in employment and housing as well as in other community activities, although they spoke English and were American citizens. This “yellow peril,” though not unlike discrimination against other immigrant groups, was especially virulent in the West Coast. Despite these impediments, Japanese Americans became part of the fabric of the Western U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s.

Source: [Densho Encyclopedia](#)

Image Source: [Japan Day Parade](#) (CSUDH)



Exhibit poster, "Japanese Americans in the West, 1880s - 1941"

This exhibit uses objects to tell the story of Japanese nationals and Japanese American WWII internment.

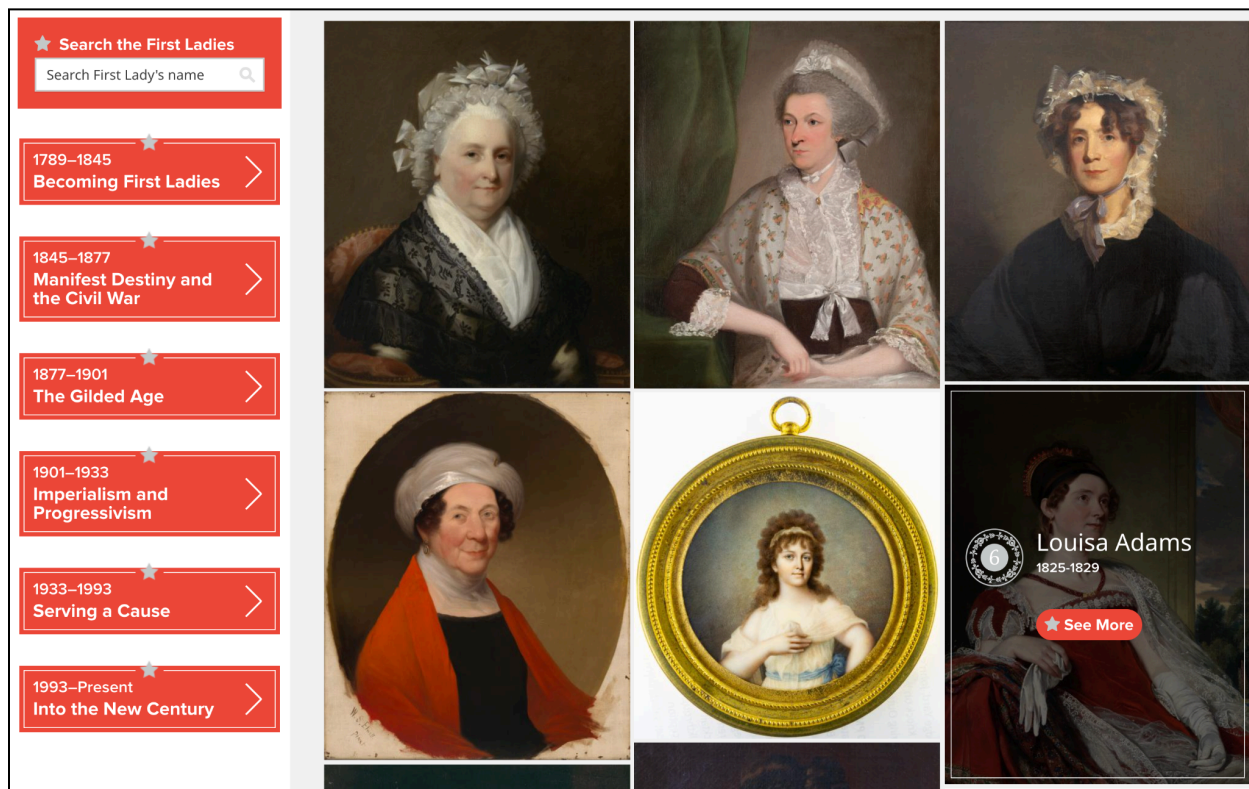
**Strengths:** The objects provide powerful insight into the Japanese and Japanese American internment experience. They are well organized, high quality, and can easily be traced back to their collection. The themes in which the exhibit is divided, e.g., “Before the War” and “Incarceration,” are effective as they by themselves tell a story.

**Weaknesses:** Some of the weaknesses have to do with the platform it is in, Scalar and the fact that the default template is being used. (Customizing it would have helped not everyone has the skills and/or time to do that.) There is the linear navigation,\* which guides the user well but also makes it less obvious how to get back to previously viewed information. The page layout effectively breaks up the content, but the default spacing sometimes leads to too much black space between content blocks and a page layout that is not pleasing to the eye.

\*Scalar uses linear paths that, at times, can be discombobulating. Visual design elements that distinguish paths and create wayfinding elements can reduce this issue. Customizing the gray navigation bar at the top (e.g., changing the color and increasing its height) so that it is more obvious would also help.

## First Ladies of the United States

Platform: Most likely, this is a Smithsonian-created platform



This *First Ladies* exhibit is a good demonstration of how a non-linear exhibit allows users to skip around to different objects easily.

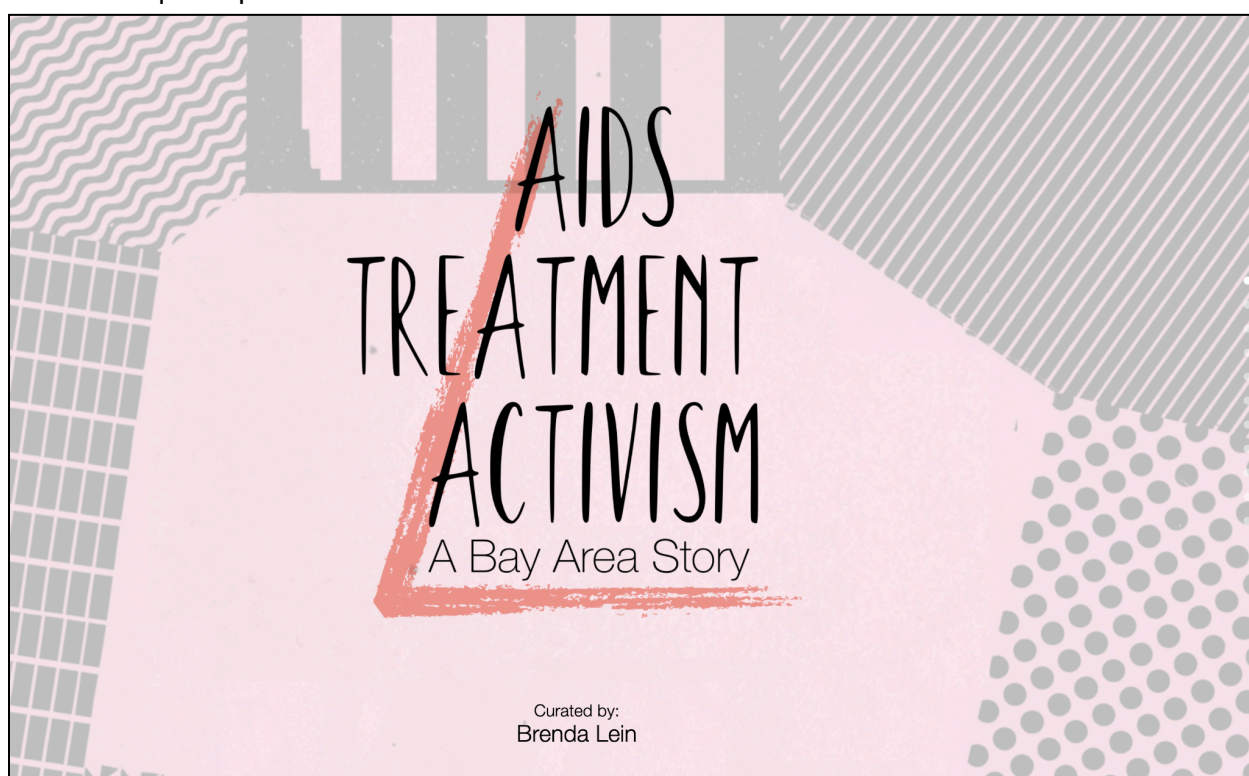


**Strengths:** The object text is well-organized and punchy. The way the Ladies are grouped into eras and having that organization so visible provides a layer of insight into the subject matter. The pages are well layed out and the media is high quality.

**Weaknesses:** While the portrait images and their layout is visually appealing—the navigation and banner color, fonts, and star icons make the site look less sophisticated or like the main audience is elementary and middle schoolers, which could be one of the intended audiences. Having it be a child friendly color that is also appealing to adults would be a better choice. (A lighter blue might do the trick.)

## **AIDS Treatment Activism: A Bay Area Story**

Platform: Squarespace



This exhibit on the AIDS crisis and activism is an example of a linear exhibit that uses “long scrolling” instead of a series of pages.

**Strengths:** The objects are compelling, enriching, and well-incorporated into the story being told. The themes “Silence=Death,” “Knowledge=Power,” and “Action=Life” are clear, punchy, and attention-grabbing. The visual design has a strong style that creates a 1980s/early 1990s feel, a very particular time that is synonymous with the AIDS epidemic for many people.

**Weaknesses:** While the visual design lends itself well to the subject matter, it, in combination with the page layout, can be distracting and cause the content to feel disjointed. The

inconsistent font sizes contribute to this problem as well. The design could be improved if there was more of a pattern to the page layouts and fonts. A header hierarchy would also help as it would make it easier for sighted people to navigate and read the page and for screen readers used by the visually impaired.

## **Other Exhibits**

For a bit of visual design inspiration, explore exhibits from the [German National Library](#) and the [Tenent Museum](#).