



# Taking Control: A Conceptual Framework for Choosing Traveling Exhibitions

by Ken Yellis

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It was as if an underground cult from all over New England had emerged blinking into the light of the museum's first floor. The exhibition halls buzzed with excited conversations about rods and reels, lakes and rivers, fish and insects, Alaska, New Zealand, Siberia. Visitors swarmed around fly-tying benches and the other activities colonizing the galleries. Hot off the presses, copies of the first issue of the Peabody's magazine *Discovery* devoted entirely to one exhibition (Peabody, 1992) were available for purchase.

*Anglers All* had opened at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.

It was a traveling exhibition.

*Anglers All* remains a model for how the Peabody develops multi-disciplinary shows and takes ownership of traveling exhibitions. With the insights and knowledge of Peabody curators and staff, a Robin Parkinson design, casework and cabinetry by the Peabody fabrication crew, art and graphics from the museum's graphics lab, and preparation and object installation by the museum's preparator and collections managers, it was handsome and engrossing.

Interestingly—and, I think, revealingly—when *Anglers All*, which originated at The Fly-Fishing Hall of Fame in Manchester, VT, was first put before the Peabody Museum Exhibits Committee, it was rejected. The committee, then essentially a sub-committee of the Board of Curators, regarded the show as not tied closely enough to the Peabody's main interests. A year later, when Curator of Anthropology—and avid fly-fisher—

Michael D. Coe returned from leave, the exhibition was brought up again and adopted.

What had changed? I think Coe argued convincingly that *Anglers All* was a show the Peabody could adapt for its own needs and purposes. As it turned out, he was right: the Peabody had a lot to bring to this story. In addition to its intellectual resources, the Peabody had robust in-house fabrication, cabinet-making, graphics, and preparation capability and, in this case, relevant collections. The fact that *Anglers All* was not a turnkey exhibition was a good thing. The exhibition furniture, casework, graphics, texts, and labels came from us. We made the exhibition ours, and our version resembled no previous installation; in fact, exhibit elements we created were later incorporated into the traveling exhibition.

As the museum staff and the Exhibits Committee began shaping the future of the exhibition program as a whole, *Anglers All* defined our approach to traveling shows. We concluded from the reaction to *Anglers All* that for the Peabody to have a robust exhibition program we had to limit ourselves to traveling exhibitions that could be fully, seamlessly, organically integrated into it. We needed to be highly selective because that was how the curators wanted it, because our financial resources were limited, because most of our temporary exhibit spaces were ill-suited to turn-key shows, and because we were looking for shows we could put our stamp on in both content and form, regardless of where they originated.

The Peabody's "Guidelines for the



Area of Anglers All devoted to fish biology and behavior, including "A Phylogeny of Living Fishes" (upper right) and "What Anglers Need to Know about Fish" (lower left), among many exhibit elements developed by the Peabody Museum. Photo by William K. Sacco, © 1992, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

Development for Exhibits," (Peabody, 1993), codified and shaped the process:

The Exhibits Committee...reviews proposals submitted by curators, staff and others, as well as traveling exhibitions organized outside the Museum. The advice and recommendations of staff and scholars, experts, and members of the public are often sought as part of this review. Proposals are reviewed for timeliness, suitability for exhibition treatment, scholarly or scientific value, anticipated public interest, feasibility, fundability, and appropriateness to the overall pattern of exhibitry at the Peabody. **No exhibit idea is accepted without the designation of a curator-in-charge, who has overall responsibility for the exhibit's scholarly and scientific significance.** [*Emphasis added.*]

The rigorous review process was the same for traveling exhibitions as for those we originated ourselves. The rigor helped ensure that there would be internal consensus for a project once it was approved and that visitors would be able to recognize the Peabody stamp on every

exhibition we presented.

The Guidelines stated that the Exhibition Program:

seeks to interpret, and communicate to a diverse public, the Museum's research and world-class collections. In particular, it aims to balance projects in all areas of the Museum's endeavors—anthropology and the natural sciences—and also balance the need for dynamic short-term exhibitions with systematic revision, refurbishment and replacement of long-term installations.

Exhibition proposals addressed a series of mission-related and practical questions, including how the project would be paid for. They were then distributed to the Exhibits Committee for consideration. The review process dealt with concerns of feasibility, timing, audiences, resources, spaces, related activities, and the project's connection, if any, with Peabody or Yale research.

Once a project was accepted by the committee, the chair submitted a recommendation for approval to the Board of Curators, and the committee

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From *Anglers All*, a detail of "A Fly-fishers Workbench" designed and arranged by avid fly-fisher Raymond J. Papedis, Collection Manager, Peabody Museum Department of Entomology. Photo by William K. Sacco, © 1992, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

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appointed a sponsoring curator-in-charge and an exhibition coordinator, usually me. The Guidelines outlined in detail the stages of an exhibition project, laid out a typical 18-24 month timetable, described the process of object survey and assessment, and listed the roles and responsibilities of all the key figures in exhibition development, production, and installation.

The point of all of this was to impose a discipline of thought on the Exhibits Committee and to make the process transparent. This ensured that those who proposed projects and those who would be involved in developing it knew what they were in for. It did not ensure that there would be no surprises or changes, but it did make it easier to resolve problems and make mid-course corrections.

Since traveling exhibitions were no easier for us to develop or install than our own, traveling shows had to pull their weight in terms of the program's mission and the visitor experience. The Peabody adopted the view that effective exhibitions and a robust exhibition program require a framework of reflection and analysis (Yellis, 2010). We understood individual exhibitions and the program as a whole as complex constructs, shaped by multiple constituencies and audiences, responding

to multiple learning styles, and comprising multiple components, objectives, and creative contributions. No individual exhibition was a freestanding event; each was part of a larger vision, a continuum, a kind of curriculum.

### Mine-ing the Traveling Exhibition

Articulating that framework was the critical step in program definition. We asked everyone at the museum the same question: "What is the typology of Peabody Museum exhibitions." Everyone had part of the answer and those parts were assembled into a key Guidelines component, the "Categories of Peabody Museum exhibits," which were:

- Showcase Exhibits display object structure, composition or function, their role in nature or culture, varieties of form, setting, use, rarity; type specimens; pieces of puzzles.
- Explanatory Exhibits elucidate scientific ideas, theories, controversies and phenomena.
- Exhibits of Conscience explore environmental, ecological and conservation ideas.
- Science at Yale Exhibits address the history of science in American life through the lives of scientists,

Peabody history, and science at Yale.

- Regional Exhibits focus on the geology, biology and ecology of New England, and the history and pre-history of its human inhabitants.
- World Cultures Exhibits record, study and explore peoples, present and past.
- Experimental Exhibits incorporate multidisciplinary approaches, video and other media, computer interactives, hands-on components, models and the like.

This typology guided us in conceiving, selecting, and developing exhibitions. Maintaining a balance between the types was challenging, but the program's health required that we try. The typology was useful externally, too, making clear to the Yale community, the media, and the public our sense of the logic and purpose underlying our choices.

The typology also served to communicate our exhibit vocabulary to visitors. Anecdotally and from a handful of visitor studies, it emerged that our repeat visitors—about 60% of our audience—had registered that there were patterns in our exhibitry, that there were themes and ideas we explored over time, and that almost all of our exhibitions were the outcome of a mindful and proactive process. Visitors told us they understood each exhibition as a stage in a journey we were taking together.

One of the traveling exhibitions taken by the Peabody that best illustrates this process was *China's Feathered Dinosaurs*,



Reverential setting for the iconic China's Feathered Dinosaurs fossils, conceived by Peabody exhibition designer John Maisano. Photo by William K. Sacco, © 1999, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

a 1999 exhibition based on a small group of extraordinary fossils circulated by the National Geographic Society. *China's Feathered Dinosaurs* perfectly fit three of the categories defined by the Guidelines: it showcased structure, composition, and function of these remarkable objects, their role in nature, their form, rarity, and significance, and the great puzzle of which they were critical pieces; it explained and elucidated important scientific ideas, theories, controversies and phenomena; and it addressed the history of science in American life through the lives of scientists, living and dead, in Peabody history and at Yale.

Even more than was the case with *Anglers All*, we felt *China's Feathered Dinosaurs* belonged at the Peabody. The remarkable fossils provided strong evidence of the link between dinosaurs and birds first posed by the Peabody's first Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology, O.C. Marsh, in the 19th century. This link was one of the major themes of the great career of the Peabody's 20th century Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology—and discoverer of *Deinonychus*—the late John Ostrom. It was also a significant element of the work

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Aerial view of a turkey skeleton arranged by Marilyn Fox, Preparator, Peabody Vertebrate Paleontology Preparation Lab, in the avian death posture identical to that of the Feathered Dinosaurs fossil specimens. Photo by William K. Sacco, © 1999, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

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**Footnote:**

<sup>1</sup> Cladistics is a method for classifying species of organisms into groups, called clades, which consist of an ancestor organism and all its descendants and no other organisms. Birds, dinosaurs, crocodiles, and all descendants (living or extinct) of their most recent common ancestor comprise a “clade” or single branch on the tree of life. Cladistic classifications (called cladograms) are intended to reflect the relative recency of common ancestry or the sharing of similar features.

of Ostrom’s successor, Jacques Gauthier, whose cladistics-based<sup>1</sup> approach both structured the exhibition and was explained by it. Indeed, so powerful was this connection that Prof. Gauthier both served as Curator-in-Charge of the exhibition and organized a major symposium, “New Perspectives on the Origin and Early Evolution of Birds,” held in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition in February, 1999, the proceedings of which were published (Gauthier Gall, 2001).

The exhibition design by Peabody staffer John Maisano paid tribute both to the science and to these iconic objects. A slew of graphic, design, and interpretive techniques drew visitors into the science of the deep past. Examples include: an enormous wall-mounted “cladogram” showed where these specimens fit in; the interpretive rail answered questions visitors actually ask, like “Did T-Rex have feathers?”—the answer was, yes, so it seems; a turkey skeleton was arranged into the same “avian death posture” as the fossils. The exhibition also spoke to the visitors’ spirits and to their intelligence: the fossils were displayed

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in an altar-like arrangement, in honor of their significance in a longstanding controversy; translucent banner images of each fluttered overhead; an eerie soundtrack provided auditory cues.

**Making Traveling Exhibitions Your Own**

It is hard to know how applicable the Peabody experience is to other museums, but parts of it must be relevant to some. It is the rare traveling exhibition that speaks as profoundly to the core of what a particular museum is about as *China’s Feathered Dinosaurs* resonated with the Peabody. Still, as *Anglers All* demonstrated, resourceful museums can deploy a range of techniques and strategies to make traveling exhibitions their own. Moreover, while it is somewhat easier for museums with the intellectual heft and robust in-house capacity of the Peabody, there are a lot of creative and talented content developers, designers and design/build firms out there looking for a chance to help you take ownership of shows that come to you from other sources.

For me, the most important—and most difficult to replicate—aspect of what the Peabody did was its development of a conceptual framework for the exhibition program. Perhaps the specific “Categories of Peabody Museum exhibits” don’t make sense for you, but, as we discovered, there is a typology embedded in the mission and institutional memory of every organization waiting for you to tease it out. It is one of the most empowering steps you can take in shaping your exhibition program into a cohesive, integrated, and defining component of the visitor experience. ✨