

VOGT PRODUCTIONS

motion picture and video production

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COVER STORY ▶▶▶ Collaborative Acts - Producing For Museums Multi-Media and Museums Go Hand-in-Hand

Early in Queen Victoria's reign, the first great museum designers faced a daunting challenge. Vast collections, amassed over centuries for private enjoyment, were going on public display, inviting any and all to ogle a world of discoveries. And those in charge of the stuff had to figure out how to show it off.

By the 1880s, museums had become popular family destinations, and the subject of some debate as curators struggled balance spectacle with correctness.

Fast-forward another 120 years. Today's museums offer increasingly sophisticated approaches to showcasing objects and ideas with accuracy and appeal.



At the Altoona Railroaders Museum, rear screen video programs, produced by Vogt Productions, immerse visitors in early 20th Century details

With media woven into their daily lives, most visitors expect some screen sizzle as part of their museum experience. Exhibition designers understand this and look for ways to capitalize on the inherent power of film and video to tell stories and illuminate ideas.



Visitors to the Rosa Parks Museum and Library experience the Vogt-produced three-screen introductory program

There are fertile opportunities for producers and directors willing to participate in this unusually collaborative type of program making.

Museums are endlessly varied. Some are artifact driven and rich in collections of objects. Others are fundamentally interpretive. Still others immerse visitors in the experience of a time and place by appealing to all the senses.

Many exhibitions are a hybrid of these. Regardless of size or focus, any museum must appeal to varied interests to be successful. Beyond age, gender and cultural background, people process experiences differently and want different things when they attend exhibitions. Some visitors are fact seeking and text oriented. Others want an interactive, exploratory challenge. Some seek personal meaning from what they take in, while dynamic learners want an immersive encounter to decide what they would do in a particular situation.

Evolving video and film technologies have enabled museums, especially those with smaller staffs and budgets, to reach new audiences and create meaningful experiences for diverse visitors.

Film and video programs are useful tools to support development efforts and attract funds from increasingly demanding museum supporters. They often serve as stand alone stories to introduce a major exhibition's themes. And increasingly, they are used in novel ways as integral parts of a comprehensive display.

A film (or video) is almost endlessly elastic in the ways it can support an exhibit. It is particularly effective in presenting the broad strokes of a story -the overview- and connecting a story to a broader context. At the same time it can illustrate otherwise invisible features such as fragile artifacts or the interior workings of an engine.

And most powerfully, it can call up the precious commodity of recollection over and over, so that each visitor can connect through emotion and memory to learn how it felt to be in a given time and place.



Altoona Railroaders Museum, Altoona Pennsylvania

All of these uses come together in the Altoona Railroaders Memorial Museum. Nestled in the Allegheny region, Altoona was once the largest railroad shop community in history. In its hey day, generations of families worked three shifts daily to construct, repair, test and run the massive Pennsylvania Railroad.

The museum began as a grassroots effort in the early 1970s by residents whose family histories were knitted into the fabric of the railroad era now long past. It was several decades before the new museum opened with an innovative, media-intense program.

Nearly half of its exhibition design budget was devoted to film, video, audio and multi-media components – substantially more than the typical 25 to 30 percent allocation.

Altoona At Work-An Era of Steam, a 27-minute theater program produced by Washington, DC-based filmmaker Peter Vogt, is its centerpiece attraction. The film takes audiences into the foundries and production shops operating in the early 20th Century. With full surround sound sensory impact, audiences are introduced to the forces that built, sustained and later abandoned Altoona. Thirteen additional video and audio interactive installations throughout the museum, also produced by Vogt, invite participants to explore issues and recollections delivered by people whose lives were shaped by the town's history.

In one of the most inventive displays, visitors enter an authentic period barroom. As they perch on stools and lean against the foot rails to face the mirror behind the bar, their own reflections fade and they are transported to a video projector-enhanced dramatic reenactment of that same bar room on a busy, steam era Altoona night. The jostling and banter of the bar's characters, played in the video by professional actors, reveal the underlying issues and concerns of the time.

"The decision to use video so significantly was the direct result of collaborative thinking," said Peter Barton, then executive director of the museum and now vice president of the exhibit's designers, Boston-based Christopher Chadbourne & Associates. Early in the museum's Conceptual development, CC&A brought Vogt into the process.



Visitors to the Altoona Railroaders Museum watch as their barroom reflections dissolve into a projected video drama in that same bar nearly 80 years earlier

"The filmmaker served as the media production consultant on the initial master planning team. We were so impressed with the final concept that he and the designers were retained to execute the program," Barton said, "Usually, museums and designers have everything in place before asking producers how they can execute the story. But I'm convinced that including media production expertise in the planning stages is the best way to use resources wisely and effectively. And it brings out creative solutions that might never have been considered otherwise."

The Rosa Parks Museum-Using Dramatic Media

Ben Lawless, vice president of Kansas City (MO) Eisterhold Associates Inc., agrees that film and video offer potent options for enhancing museum work. "We're strong in designing exhibitions that use historical programs. It's always best if we can show archival footage and recollections of people who experienced the history."

EAI is noted for its work in several prominent civil rights museums, including the Troy State University Montgomery (AL) Rosa Parks Museum, which opened to critical acclaim in 2000 on the site where Mrs. Parks' refusal to cede her bus seat to a white person sparked the Montgomery Bus boycott and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement.

"When we started, we had no idea what the museum would be. But we wanted to be historically accurate and not a 'white university' interpreting history for people," said Ray White, who oversees the museum. "We wanted to create a self-interpretive experience where visitors reached their own conclusions from viewing historical documents, archival images and video testimonials of people who lived this piece of history."



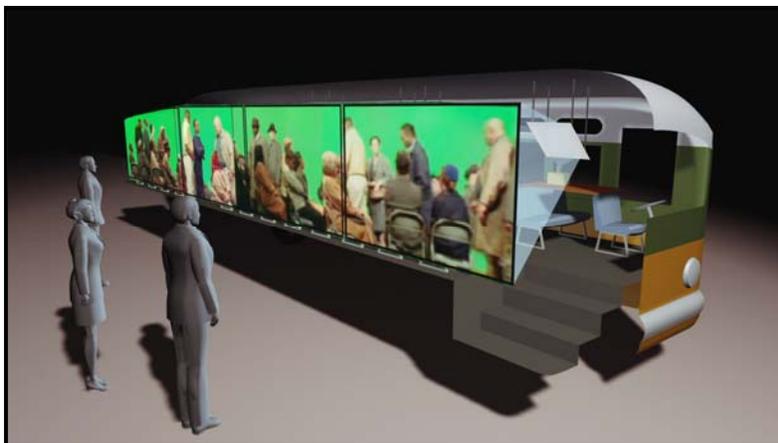
Peter Vogt and Ben Lawless consider video in a history exhibit

The designers' challenge was to create a whole museum with almost no artifacts to display. "They had little more than a city bus from the period, and even that could not be authenticated as the bus that Rosa Parks rode," noted Lawless.

EAI convinced the university to make the bus the centerpiece of the 3,700 square foot museum. "We wanted to somehow use the bus to take visitors through a dramatic telling of the historic events of that fateful bus ride as they unfolded," said Lawless. Vogt was brought in to help the design team determine the best theatrical approach.

"My original notion was to project silhouettes against the windows of the bus because it was easier," Lawless laughed. "Peter really didn't like that and persuaded us to go for a much more realistic and vastly more complex solution."

In the completed exhibit, the bus appears to come to life with the driver, passengers, Rosa Parks and the police who were called to arrest her. The video-projected drama unfolds through the bus windows, as surround sound audio, lighting and props envelope viewers in the illusion they are curbside watching historic events play out before them.



*Rosa Parks Museum Bus Drama
Figure 1 Video layer of actors which
Vogt filmed against green screen*



*Rosa Parks Museum Bus Drama Figure 2
Bus interior which Vogt digitally
combined with actor layer creates two-
dimensional image*



*Rosa Parks Museum Bus Drama Figure 3
Completed visual effects are combined
with surround sound and lighting effects
to create the illusion of movement and the
unfolding Rosa Parks drama*

Though other information presented with video, text and other means precedes and comes after it, the bus theater is clearly the museum's central attraction. "We were all nervous about pulling it off," said Lawless, "but it's gotten rave reviews from local people as well as more than 100,000 national and international visitors so far." **(See Sidebar Feature: Anatomy of An Exhibition)**



"As technology has advanced, it's enabled us to do more," Vogt said. "The Montgomery bus theater project was a logical evolution, allowing us to deliver a particularly compelling visitor experience."

"Meeting conceptual challenges is an evolutionary process as well. The Altoona project led to solutions for Montgomery, and an earlier Smithsonian project taught us things we could use in both places."

Smithsonian Information Age Exhibition-The Essential Role of Video

Some twelve years prior to the Montgomery project, Vogt and Lawless worked together in the early stages of a development video Vogt produced for a Smithsonian Institution campaign to raise nearly six million dollars for its ambitious and far reaching permanent exhibit,

Information Age- People, Information And Technology.

For more than a year, the development video was the only tangible visual representation of the coming exhibit that would open in 1989 and had a significant influence over its development, noted Vogt, who provided video and film production as well as creative consulting for the installation.

"It was one of the Smithsonian's most innovative exhibits, and certainly our most intensively media-driven," said David K. Allison, who served as its chief curator and is now chairman of the National Museum of American History's division of Information Technology and Society. "It was the first to focus on social as well as technical and historical aspects of computers and communications, and the first to have information networks that ran through the exhibition, connecting all the components. It was also unprecedented in terms of the sheer number of interactive computer and video displays."



Written, directed and co-produced by Vogt, a unique 100-seat Video Wall Theater gave visitors a concluding experience. Twelve computer-synchronized video laser disc players tied to twelve 40-inch projection monitors delivered full-wall moving imagery and extensive multimedia effects with stereo sound.

It was an unusual synthesis of 35 mm motion film, High Definition video, proprietary video image-splitting and digital component editing.

In addition, Vogt produced nearly 50 other supporting video spots for interactive stations throughout the exhibit, as well as a continuous play recreated newsreel documentary. "This is an intensely object-oriented museum, so our challenge is to use media to provide additional information and help people focus more on the objects themselves," said Allison.

"For example, in the Information Age exhibit, we displayed iconic objects-Morse's telegraph and Bell's telephone- and used video to show them in operation. As technology develops, gets smaller, becomes more porous, we'll be able to do more with media to intensify that relationship to the object."



There are compelling reasons why film and video production will continue to play a role in museum environments.

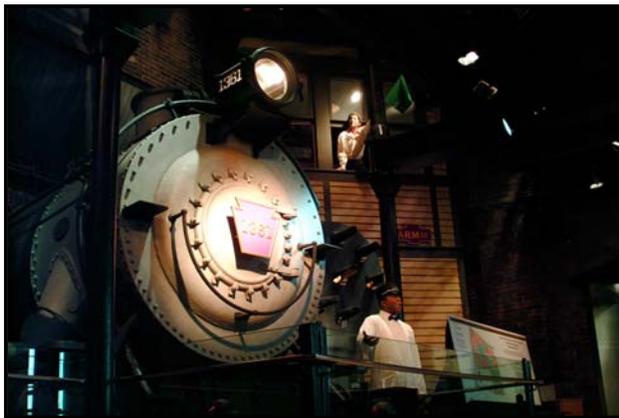
Competition among museums for funding is more intense than ever. Development efforts must both deliver a consistent message and strum heartstrings in order to loosen purse strings. Corporate and institutional donors are also more demanding. They want the bells and whistles, and see media as important to attracting visitors.



Audiences are more media driven, have shorter attention spans, and expect a high degree of entertainment in their museum experiences.

They also read less now. As Barton noted, "If you want to give them your theme in a narrated form, you need to do that in a sit down, theatrical experience to work best."

Today's hardware is smaller, less bulky, and easier to place than even a few years ago. Meanwhile, prices for equipment and programming have come down. "It may not cost me any less," said Barton. "But I can be more effective with the dollars I spend for media."



Finally, from sensor switches to image projection technology, innovations are poised to integrate film and video content more seamlessly onto and around objects, and within installations in increasingly clever ways.

For film and video producers willing collaborate with other specialists to tackle unusual challenges, museum work may be just the ticket.

For more information, project descriptions and video samples, contact:

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Anatomy of an Exhibition-Creating Magic For the Rosa Parks Museum

The small (3,700 square foot) TSUM Rosa Parks Museum presented a unique opportunity and big challenge for its designers. With few artifacts available, Eisterhold Associates and filmmaker Peter Vogt crafted a complete interpretive experience for visitors to learn about the life and times of Rosa Parks and events that helped galvanize the civil rights movement 50 years ago. At the core of this history is Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger one December night, her subsequent arrest, and the massive bus boycott that followed. To dramatize that night, the producer and designers conceived a multidimensional projected video re-enactment, creating the illusion for viewers of standing curbside and watching through the bus windows as those events of 1955 unfold inside.

After a three-screen introductory experience, visitors enter a new environment. The bus lights switch on, its engine revs up and the doors open. The windows fill with passengers coming and going, lurching in unison as the bus chugs along while old Montgomery streets rush past in the far windows. The audience is engulfed in surround sound, with streetlights, telephone booths, a theater marquee and other props supporting the illusion as the drama rolls toward its climax.

Creating the bus theater was a breathtaking mix of technology, wizardry, faith, a whole lot of sweat, and a unique collaboration that grew to include Montgomery citizens, craftspeople and University personnel, as well as post-production muscle. Audiences would "see" into the bus itself and out through the far windows to streets rolling past. To create the illusion, realistic interiors and exteriors needed to blend seamlessly with historical recreation.

For the reenactment, Vogt worked with Dr. Tonea Stewart, director of theater arts at Alabama State University, who helped cast and rehearse talent, outfit them in period clothes, hair and makeup, and choreograph their actions during the shoot. "I found people in malls, on the streets and in casting calls. We whittled some 430 candidates to our final group of principals and passengers," said Stewart. "Most of them had a direct connection to this history. Some had lived it, and one was the man who convinced Martin Luther King to come to Montgomery." White and black participants welcomed the opportunity to accurately capture this part of their city's history she noted. "Who could portray it better than people who grew up here and understood the layers of mistrust and fear that drove people's behavior at that time?"

Shooting took place in a theater temporarily converted into a green screen soundstage across the street from the museum space where the design team had temporarily installed the bus and video projectors. As actors sat on chairs to simulate bus seats, shooters operated four cameras, each focused on different parts of the action to supply separate video feeds to the museum projector monitors through existing underground fiber optic cables. This was the only way to ensure the end result would match bus window views and audience sightlines curbside.

Vogt directed, with a lot of dashing back and forth between the sound stage and the bus set-up, and Stewart line directed so actors moved in unison and on-cue to simulate bus movements and people coming and going. Actions and words of the principals also needed to match the audio narration heard in surround sound in the final piece. Because of these complexities, each take ran through the entire dramatic sequence without stopping. Four master videos of multiple takes, one for each camera, were generated and later matched for continuity. The green screen was replaced in post with the bus interior and the city view beyond it.

Creating that view was another technological sleight-of-hand. Streetscapes authentic to the period no longer existed, so Vogt experimented with high speed B&W still film to document appropriate building facades from the proper angle to match audience sightlines in the finished program. Computer graphics talent digitized and collaged the images into long façade sequences, and composited into video images with interior room lights and other illusions to create a nighttime exterior. The resulting experience for museum audiences is a one-of-a-kind opportunity to bear personal witness to one of history's defining moments.