ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES   ASSOCIATION DES CARTOTHEQUES CANADIENNES

BULLETIN

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DESIGN OF DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITIONS

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Note from the Editor:

Welcome/Bienvenue to the second installment of writes through passage/écrire à travers passage. In this installment, I could not engage with the author directly, and with no new suggestions coming in, I stepped into the pulpit to speak to some "text accompanying a slide presentation". The piece of writing was a very important part of a presentation I gave at CARTO 2025, which looked at the freedom of displays vs. exhibitions.

At the start of the 1980s, the Bulletin title camouflaged into green. According to the QGIS colour sampler, the green is HTML notation #499154. The colour hex website goes into greater detail, noting that this decimal-based number's RGB value is (73,145,84), and includes a percentage breakdown: Red 24.17, Green 48.01, and Blue 27.81. Meanwhile, Gemini sirens "a desaturated, slightly cool green, often used in design for nature-themed or muted, earthy palettes". This above is a tad exhibitionist, and we need to remain displayed, so let's call it "pool table green ready for racking".
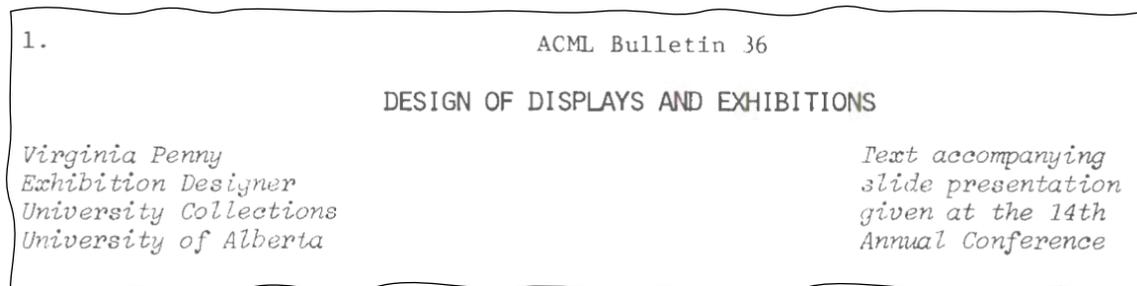

1.   ACML Bulletin 36

        DESIGN OF DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITIONS

Virginia Penny   Text accompanying
Exhibition Designer   slide presentation
University Collections   given at the 14th
University of Alberta   Annual Conference

Figure 1: Penny, V. (1980). Design of Displays and Exhibitions - Association of Canadian Map Libraries and Archives (ACMLA), (36) https://doi.org/10.15353/acmla.n36.6990

Design of Displays and Exhibitions by Virginia Penny is two and a half pages of "text that accompanied a slide presentation" given 46 years ago at the 14th Annual Conference held in Edmonton at the University of Alberta. This was also the *article* that got me thinking about the differences between a display and an exhibition. Though brief, Penny provides definitions, breaks down design into three components: aesthetics, organization, and communication, and outlines a short formula for developing exhibitions.

Display in Latin is *displicare*, meaning to scatter, and disperse. In Middle English, it means to unfurl and unfold.[2] Both these terms align with, wapahtihiwewin ◁·<�⩗·▽·◌·ᵖ, Cree, for the act of displaying or showing; demonstration; display; rendition.[3]

Through scattering, and unfolding, a printed map display mirrors the debris field of an ongoing colonial wrackline. A lithic scatter of inks embedded in wood pulp. Yet, sans water, fire, and/or vermin (including mice and poor institutional decision making), the printed map is a sturdy artifact. If physically and financially curated over the long-term, it will outlast their digital surrogates, and the more recent, inaccurate re-inscriptions by the environmentally unslakable, morally obtuse and klepto-centric AI. here again, the AI wall appears. Reaction? Immediately bash the head against the wall. Be calm, remain displayed. Run its length, hand gracing textures, until a corner is traced. Then, return to where one began. A head knuckled bash or two (if required). Then, run the other length.

When crafting a display, map staff scatter, and unfold spatial items across map cabinet top broadsides, interspersed with virtual tethers (QR Codes), text, and associated images. On the fly, quick turnaround, and creative dexterity benefit both the curator, and by extension, any prospective audience. All without a formal request to table an exhibition.

Exhibition in Latin is *exhibere* meaning to hold out.[4] Wapahtihiwew, Cree for showing something.[5] This is a useful etymology origin story. Here, an exhibition has an air of the curator holding out, while hanging on to the map "look, but do not touch". With the display, curators let go and

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[2] https://www.etymonline.com/word/display

[3] Online Cree Dictionary. Wapahtihiwewin ◁·<ᵦᶮ▽·◌·ᵖ (AE Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary, Earle Waugh). Accessed 2026/03/01. Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority (MWCEA).

[4] https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=exhibition

[5] Online Cree Dictionary. Wapahtihiwew ◁·<ᵦᶮ▽·◌·ᵖ (AE Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary, Earle Waugh). Accessed 2026/03/01. Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority (MWCEA).

encourage tactile engagement. Touch, trace and most importantly trance(ify) thyself in this unfolding encounter.

However, this is where Penny's text struck me. *The most important idea is that the display is being mounted not for the benefit of those involved, but for the benefit of the prospective audience.*[6] It made me wonder, "Have all of the displays we have created been self-serving"? Even under the banner of promoting the print collection visually. By not moving into an official exhibition realm, that may employ a designer, or at the very least other perspectives on *creating visual relationships among the items displayed,*[7] *transform*[ing] *... abstract ideas into ... physical exhibition,*[8] and *increased efforts to involve the spectator more completely in the exhibition, and give the audience the 'feel' for a subject and not overload them with facts.*[9] Yet, even when confronted with this, the effectiveness of putting a display quickly (ideally, within the map space), without extra layers of sign-offs and/or commitment, is the most effective way to highlight the map collection. As Sven Lindqvist states: *dig where you stand.*[10]

If a call came from the library for an "official exhibition" involving maps, I would return to Penny's text, as it is clear and concise, on the role of a designer and the refrain that *the main principle to remember is that an exhibition is initiated for people and purposes other than the preferences of those involved.*[11]

Reflection

As noted, I could not contact Virginia Penny, and beyond the job title of "Exhibition Designer University Collections, University of Alberta", I had no information about what became of the individual who wrote the "text to accompany a slide presentation". So, I turned to the University of Alberta Library's digitized collections on the Internet Archive.

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[6] Penny, Virginia. (1980). DESIGN OF DISPLAYS AND EXHIBITIONS. ACML Bulletin no. 36.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Lindqvist, S., Flinn, A., von Rosen, A., & Library Stack, distributor. (2023). Dig Where You Stand : How to Research a Job. Watkins Media.

[11] Ibid

Piecing the fractals of information together, one can state that Virginia Penny has maintained a presence in the exhibition and communication aspects that emerged in their 1980 paper. Virginia was the designer for the Ring House Gallery (1981). Stepped in to curate the Treasures of Inner Mongolia Exhibition (1987). The same year Virgina Penny graduated with a B.F.A. (Visual Communications Design in Art and Design) from the University of Alberta publishing the thesis: Final Visual Presentation for the degree of Master of Visual Arts: Visual Communication Design (Textual Component).

One of Virginia Penny's major exhibitions was as the curator of IN THE SPIRIT OF TIBET: which ran from February 4 to April 2 in 2006 and was advertised extensively in the publication Vue Weekly. Virginia Penny was also a perennial volunteer at the Edmonton Folk Fest and the president of The Friends of the Devonian Botanic Garden.

From 2009-2010 Penny created book designs for the University of Alberta Press, including:

- Coleman, D., & Kamboureli, S. (2011). Retooling the Humanities: The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities (1st ed.). University of Alberta Press.
- Kroeger, A. (2009). Retiring the Crow rate: a narrative of political management. University of Alberta Press.
- Major, A. (2010). Memory's Daughter (1st ed.). University of Alberta Press.
- Wishart, D. (2009). The rose that grew from concrete: teaching and learning with disenfranchised youth (1st ed.). University of Alberta Press.
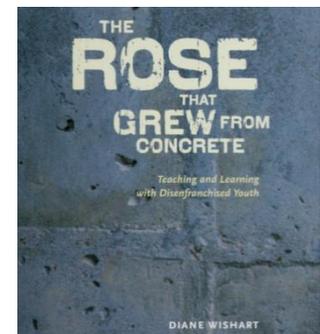

Figure 2: Screenshot of Wishart's book cover

Finally, I would surmise, based on the temporal evidence and the chalk outline derived from the Internet Archive, that Virginia Penny was, at the time of the 1980 conference, an undergraduate, working for University Collections, and had an opportunity to give a presentation because the conference was on their campus. These types of student presentations are still highly encouraged by ACMLA. Furthermore, to have an undergraduate present in a thematic area they are enthralled with, and then to go on and engage in the area outlined in their presentation, is an amazing professional arc.