



**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

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**From the Selected Works of Paulina Borrego**

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Summer June 2, 2020

# Necessity as a Liberator: A Decade of Creating Low-Cost Exhibits for Outreach and Engagement in a Science & Engineering Library



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# The Journal of Creative Library Practice

## Necessity as a Liberator: A Decade of Creating Low-Cost Exhibits for Outreach and Engagement in a Science & Engineering Library

June 2, 2020

Essay

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*Editor's note: This article presents ideas for library spaces that may be unworkable during pandemic-related closures, but may inspire creative outreach at a time of of budget and staff constraints.*

It is said necessity is the mother of invention. It may also be true that the greatest gift of necessity may be the resulting liberation necessity allows. When things need to get done rapidly, there is little time to fret, overthink, or keep in line with previous conventions. Alternative avenues are explored without the luxury of dwelling on things. Solutions that might have been out of the realm of consideration are now possible.

Such was the case when the Science and Engineering Library became responsible for its exhibits. Prior to 2007, exhibits at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Science and Engineering Library were under the purview of the W.E.B Du Bois Library Exhibits Committee. The Exhibits Committee found, planned, and funded exhibits in the main library, as well as in the branch Science and Engineering Library. Due to a change in committee charge, the Science and Engineering Library found itself maintaining its own exhibits space on a modest budget with limited staff.

This change in exhibit responsibility brought challenges for a small group of librarians already handling the requisite responsibilities of a large research university, each with their assigned liaison departments. This new responsibility brought with it opportunities for outreach and engagement with the community. With no previous experience of what types of exhibits would be best, all options were explored, from the professional to the new and unusual. We embraced this new opportunity for outreach and engagement.

The result of this effort was a series of successful and varied exhibits. Our goal was to have three exhibits per year, coupled with the fall and spring semesters and summer break. A document was created outlining the parameters of the physical exhibition space and exhibit expectations to share with prospective exhibitors. Librarians secured exhibitors through chance meetings and casual conversations. Potential exhibitors are invited to the space and discuss the variety of services the library could provide to support the exhibit. Artists are offered the services of the Libraries' Communications Team for help creating an exhibit poster, postcard, and press release as well as other publicity. The library also arranged and funded a modest exhibit reception. In total, each exhibit costs a modest \$225, with \$100 of that for the printing of the posters and postcards, \$50

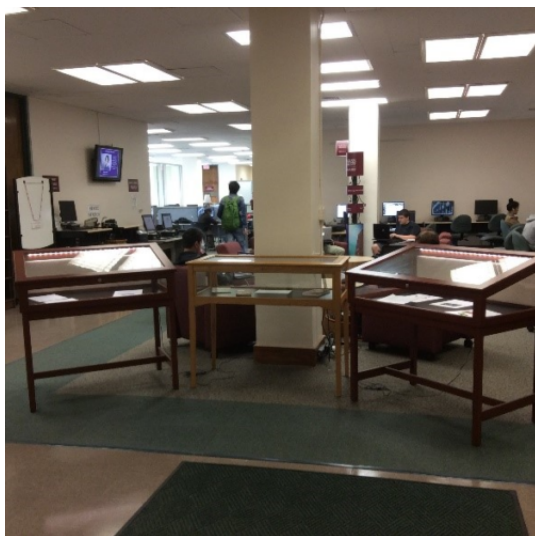
for materials such as easels and tags, and \$75 for a reception.

The types of exhibits produced by this model fall into several different categories:

- Promoting faculty research
- Library staff engagement
- New artist
- Exhibits by other campus staff
- Established artist
- Connecting with programs on campus
- Outreach to a particular department
- Connecting with the greater community

## Perfectly imperfect exhibit space

The exhibit space in the Science and Engineering Library is less than ideal. Located in the entrance lobby near the service desk, the space contains one two-foot and seven six-foot wall hanging strips located along walls above computer workstations, a copy machine, and scanners. The exhibit space has no direct lighting to showcase the artwork. The distance from the viewer to the artwork is, on average, two feet, which limits direct close viewing. The library also has a number of locking exhibit cases, some with lighting and some without. The hanging system is old, finicky, and is the greatest obstacle due to the amount of adjustment time required. Overall, the space is not a professional gallery space. Yet, it has served our needs and allowed for a series of unique exhibits over the years.



*Science and Engineering Library exhibition space*

## Promoting faculty research

Despite the obvious drawbacks, this is pretty standard for an exhibit space housed in a Science and Engineering Library. Our library mission is to support faculty research and student education, so understandably we want to find exhibits that help further those goals.

The very first exhibit installed under our new charge was an exhibit by researcher Jeff Podos showcasing photos he had taken during numerous trips to study birds in the Galapagos Islands. These photos were breathtakingly beautiful and were excellent at making the connection between researcher, research, and life

passion.

We quickly learned that one of the main obstacles of having researchers commit to an exhibit is the amount of time required to print, mount, frame, and hang a show. While Professor Podos was eager to share his work, some real obstacles needed to be resolved, including that he had no frames to house his work. After some investigation, we found some cast-off frames in the Image Collection Library that could be repurposed for this exhibit. While not perfect, they sufficed, and Professor Podos was able to showcase his work in the spring of 2008.



### Images: Neotropical Birds

An Exhibit of Photographs  
by Jeff Podos

Associate Professor of Biology  
UMass Amherst

Spring / Summer 2008

ISEL: Integrated Sciences  
& Engineering Library  
UMass Amherst

Cover: Galapagos finch (*Geospiza fortis*) and  
cactus flower (*Opuntia echinos*)

*Postcard advertisement for the Podos exhibit*

## New artist

Having a new artist install a show is a win-win on many levels. When talking with prospective exhibitors, it is especially important to allay their fears and provide encouragement. We provide a document outlining the measurements of all the various exhibit spaces, including walls and cases, along with the details about what the libraries will provide. We make sure to emphasize that this is a low-stakes first show and they will work with the Libraries Communications Team to gather all the necessary documents. We have created a simple checklist for the artist, stating precisely what is expected and what support is provided.

In the fall of 2017, Carol Pike hung her very first exhibit showcasing photographs she had taken during a trip to Cuba. Carol had recently made the transition to retirement after a long career of teaching high school mathematics. Her new life chapter allowed her to elevate a past hobby to a new and professional passion. In preparing for her first exhibit, she learned a great deal and had to prepare documents such as an artist's biography and price list of all her exhibit works. By this time, the Science and Engineering Library had invested in a number of basic black frames of various sizes to loan to exhibiting artists. This collection of frames has become invaluable and informs the implementation of future exhibits.





*Postcard advertisement for the Pike exhibit*

## Established artist

Established artists are experienced at installing a show and therefore require minimal coaching. One issue that did come up when courting experienced artists was the non-traditional lighting and set up of the physical exhibit space. Several artists declined an invitation to mount a show due to the limitations of the space. In one case, a faculty photographer commented that his black and white photographs required direct lighting. Another artist with smaller items wanted viewers to be able to get close to the artwork, which was not possible due to the natural layout. The exhibit space in the Science and Engineering Library is not a dedicated gallery, therefore, only certain types of items will display well.

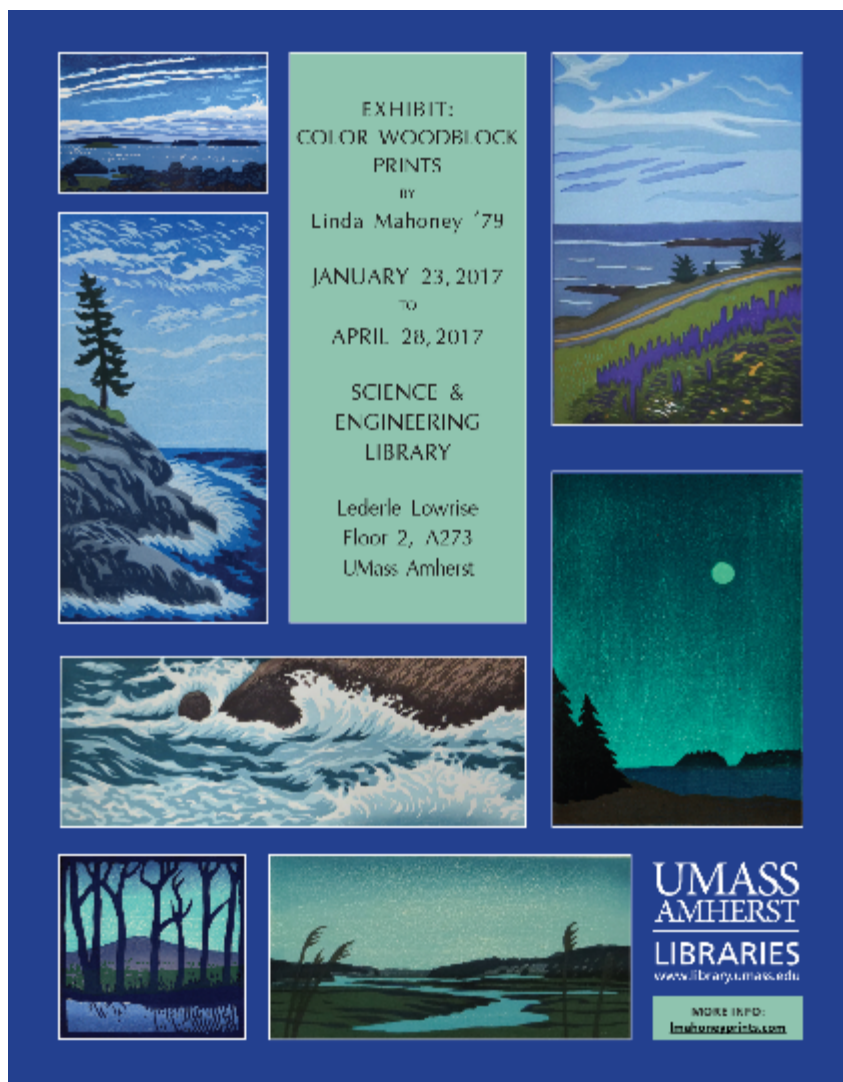
Linda Mahoney, an experienced local artist, mounted a show in spring 2017. She came to the venue as a seasoned exhibitor and required minimal direction. Her successful show included a variety of colorful block prints of nature scenes, and the exhibit cases were filled with items describing her process.



LINDA MAHONEY  
COLOR WOODBLOCK PRINTS



*Postcard for Linda Mahoney exhibit*



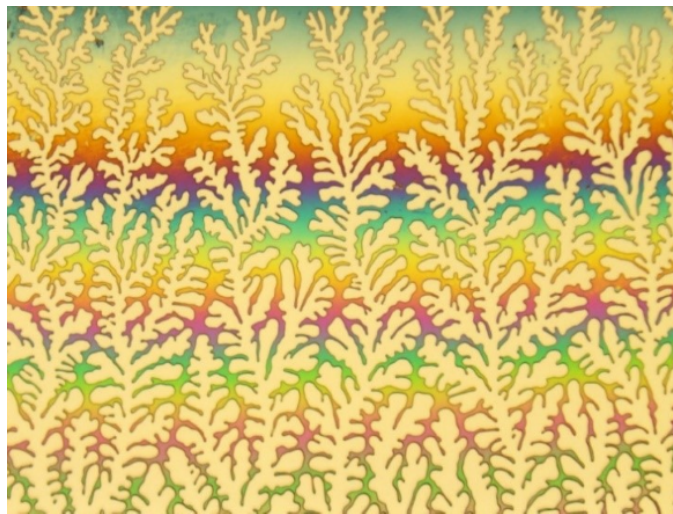
*Poster for Linda Mahoney exhibit*

## Outreach to a particular department

An exhibit that draws focus and attention to a specific department's research is always welcome and highlights the connection and engagement opportunities that such an exhibit can bring. Having such an exhibit can be used to invite specific faculty and department members who might not be otherwise frequent the physical library space due to the now vast availability of electronic resources. The exhibits present an opportunity to reach out to department members and invite them to view the show and attend the exhibit reception and sign the guest book.

In the fall of 2009, the VISUAL program exhibited a series of scientific photographs taken by graduate students in the Polymer Science & Engineering Department. The photos were not only colorful and intriguing but also scientific. Each photo was accompanied by a placard describing how the image was captured and the underlying research taking place in the laboratory. Graduate students were proud to see their work exhibited and gave them a completely different way to share their research with the community.





### “More Images from VISUAL”

#### Ventures in Science Using Art Laboratory

VISUAL (Ventures in Science Using Art Laboratory) is an educational outreach program of the Materials Research Science and Engineering Center at UMass Amherst.

Exhibit: September 2 - December 19

Reception: September 23, 4-6 pm

ISEL: Integrated Sciences &  
Engineering Library  
Lederle GRC Lowrise, Floor 2  
UMass Amherst

Cover photo: Plasma Etched Imprint Resist by Isaac Moran

*Postcard advertisement for the VISUAL exhibit*

In the spring of 2016, Alicia Hunsicker exhibited a series of images she created relating to experiments done at CERN. Alicia had been an artist in residence at CERN around the time the Higgs-Boson was discovered. Her other-worldly images capture the mystery of particle physics and the universe. This exhibit offered an excellent opportunity to connect with both the physics and astronomy departments. These two departments, which are great fans of the libraries, are often reclusive in nature due to their research taking place off-site and literally out of this world. Her exhibit captured the spirit of discovery and quest for the unknown.



*Postcard for the Hunsicker exhibit*

## Library staff engagement

If nature abhors a vacuum, then it follows that an exhibit space abhors blank walls. Through the years, some exhibits are created simply out of the necessity to fill the walls with color. Nothing is worse and more depressing than when an exhibit is taken down, and there is nothing to take its place.

The “Our Other Lives” show was devised to fill the Science and Engineering Library exhibit space with color. This was by far the lowest cost exhibit we have ever done, relying entirely on library staff donations. A call was put out soliciting librarians and professional staff to submit artwork, photos, or physical items to display what they do outside of the workday. “Our Other Lives” was a fun exhibit showcasing the passions, hobbies, and talents of library staff. An array of items was included, such as a full-size quilt, a hat decorated and worn to the Kentucky Derby, handmade jewelry, knitted items, a scrapbook documenting a unique adventure, a pinned together quilt of marathon race pinnies, some blacksmithing items, and several photos of staff doing things they love to do. Photos were printed out in color on 11 x 17 paper using the office printer, mounted using some premade frame matting, and placed in simple black 16 x 20 frames. Each item was described by the show contributor. Overall, this exhibit was fun for the staff and informative for library patrons to see and get to know a bit more about the people who work in the libraries.



*Photographs of the array of items submitted by library staff*

## Exhibits by other campus staff

Along the lines of the Library-centric “Our Other Lives” exhibit, showcasing the work of staff from other campus departments is a great engagement opportunity. Offering exhibit space to campus members is an excellent way to build a community partnership and provides opportunities to engage with the campus community. This fulfills the library’s mission in its role as a central meeting point to exchange and communicate ideas. The exhibiting artist may be from an entirely different department, school, college, or part of campus. In welcoming the campus artist, you also welcome new people to the library, increasing visibility.

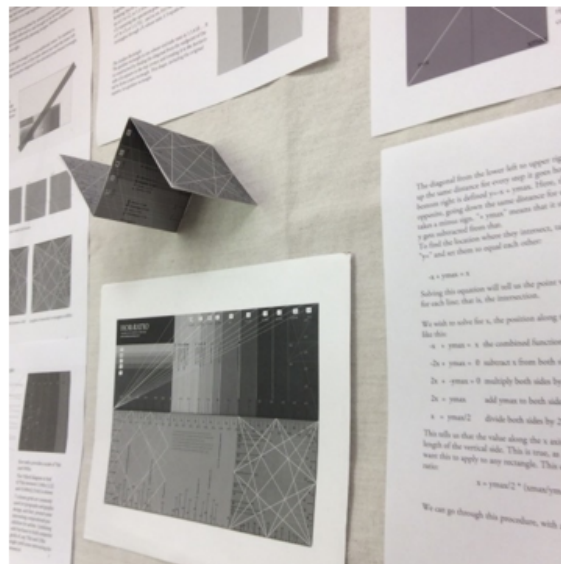
Matthew Mattingly was a regular to the Science and Engineering Library as his office is in the same building. Although working in a different department, he was familiar with the space and the various exhibits that had



been showcased during his work career. As an established artist in addition to his work in the Information Technology Department, he is a known local exhibitor. Exhibiting his work at the Science and Engineering Library was a nice way for him to share his passion with the community where he had worked for so many years. His exhibit reception was well attended by colleagues in his department, on campus, and those who had retired previously.



*Postcard for the Mattingly exhibit*



*photographs of items arranged in the exhibit cases*

## Connection with programs on campus

Alongside exhibits that promote faculty research, an exhibit that supports and showcases a particular program or initiative on campus is special and rewarding. If all the stars align, an exhibit space can be



transformed to not only educate but elevate a particular idea or ideal and propel it forward. This idea that an exhibition space can be revolutionary should not be underestimated. In this day of fake news and an attack on truth, an exhibit space can be a way to showcase the unheard, give respite, and provide a neutral space for conversations.

The “Building Bridges” show in the fall of 2018 was by far our greatest exhibit achievement. It was truly revolutionary and a kumbaya moment in which the exhibit space was transformed by the energy of the contributing artists. Building Bridges is a UMass Amherst campus engagement initiative focused on equity and inclusion. The exhibit at the Science and Engineering Library featured a wide array of work contributed by over 20 worker artists from around campus who may clean the campus restrooms, serve food in the dining commons, tend the grounds, or engage in clerical and administrative tasks. This exhibit celebrated the artistic talents of those who serve and enrich the university community.

While sometimes unwieldy to deal with so many artists at once, the exhibit proved well worth the effort. The Science and Engineering Library exhibit space was transformed into a visual tapestry of worker stories, artist expressions, and demonstrations of the value each person brings to a community. The show was so successful that there were several sponsored receptions to harness the energy of the exhibit and allow as many groups on campus to see the works and interact with the artists.



Artist signed poster advertisement for the Building Bridges exhibit

## Connecting with the greater community

Working on a university or college campus can be special for the sheltering, dedication to ideals, and unbridled energy and optimism of the youth it serves. Exhibits are an excellent way to inform, educate, and promote campus initiatives, but what about engagement with the outside world? Having artists exhibit who are not part of the campus community is an excellent way to invite the outside in.

Another opportunity to be explored with exhibits is to bring the university world to the local community. It is a matter of record that the vast majority of people who view exhibits at the Science and Engineering Library are in some way associated with the university. Our campus is located in a rural setting, and off-campus patrons are put off by the hassles of parking and navigating a large campus.

The idea for the “Unlocking the Past” public domain exhibit came about when Laura Quilter, Copyright and

Information Policy Librarian, informed the librarians about previously copyrighted items entering into the public domain beginning January 2019. Librarians were asked to research and find items within their disciplines that were coming into the public domain. A collection of images of book covers, paintings, movie posters, sheet music, sculptures, and other fixed expressions of art coming out of copyright was assembled into an exhibit. Once again, the images were printed in color on 11 x17 paper using the office printer and the images placed in basic 16 x 20 black frames with premade matting. Each image had a description, and credit was attributed to the contributing librarian. The exhibit took place celebrating the release of images into the public domain in January 2019.

The “Unlocking the Past” public domain exhibit offered a perfect opportunity to engage with the public outside the borders of the university campus. The exhibit was boxed and offered to local public libraries as a pick-and-choose premade exhibit complete with an editable exhibit poster and informative handout to accompany the exhibit. For a few months, the exhibit traveled to three local public libraries, and in one case, was accompanied by a presentation on the topic of copyright by Laura Quilter. Offering an already framed and curated exhibit to the local public libraries was very easy and a wonderful way to engage with our neighboring public librarians and community members.

## UNLOCKING THE PAST

### A PUBLIC DOMAIN EXHIBIT

At Leverett Library during February 2020

On January 1, 2019, works published in the U.S. in 1923 came out of copyright and are now free for public use and sharing. To celebrate, the UMass Amherst Libraries are curating a traveling exhibit featuring some of these materials. This is the first time since 1998 that the public domain has grown substantially, unlocking movies, music, paintings, sculpture, books, poems, and scientific publications. The exhibit features works by Willa Cather, Agatha Christie, Cecil B. DeMille, Sigmund Freud, Robert Frost, Kahlil Gibran, Rudyard Kipling, Pablo Picasso, and others.

**EXHIBIT TALK** by Laura Quilter,  
Copyright & Information Policy Librarian, UMass Amherst

Reception to follow  
Thursday, February 27, 6:30 pm

UMassAmherst Libraries  
Science and Engineering

*Poster advertisement for the Public Domain exhibit*

The Libraries Communications Team has played a significant role in the success of the exhibits at the Science and Engineering Library. Having a team that is both passionate and organized is vital. At every step of the way, the Libraries Communications Team was willing to work with the librarian and artist as multiple issues were addressed. They worked to satisfy the needs and tastes of the artist and kept the librarian, as well as other library staff members, informed along the way. The team was enduringly patient as design iterations of exhibit posters and postcards were negotiated to a point where both the artist and designer were satisfied.

All of these exhibits were special in some way. What they all have in common is a low-cost way to engage with the community on a variety of levels. Through the years, we have learned that while we (librarians) strive to change minds with information and facts, sometimes it is relationships and community building efforts that can truly change others and ourselves along the way.