

Protect, Preserve

By Bill Butler

Virtually all of the original documents that the U.S. government deems to have permanent value are preserved by the National Archives. Every day, difficult decisions are being made by curators, conservators, registrars, exhibit designers, and archivists about the safest, most responsible way to protect and exhibit these rare historical icons. Over the past several years the visual presentation of these documents has evolved as the techniques and importance of preservation framing have taken a more prominent role in the display design process.

A case in point is the original Emancipation Proclamation, which is in so vulnerable a condition that it is exhibited only three to five days a year. Abraham Lincoln composed this order “giving freedom to the slaves in the South, for the purpose of hastening the war” and presented it to the nation on January 1, 1863. The document is comprised of five pages of text written on three pieces of paper (front and back) that each measure 22”x13-1/2”. Handwritten in iron gall ink that is susceptible to fading, it has degraded considerably from being over-exposed to light many years ago.

Over the past two decades, various displays have been created for this important document. The evolution of these creative presentation frames shows the increasing



President George W. Bush reads the Emancipation Proclamation in its most recent display format at the National Archives.

How the framing and display of the Emancipation Proclamation evolved over the past two decades at National Archives

& Exhibit

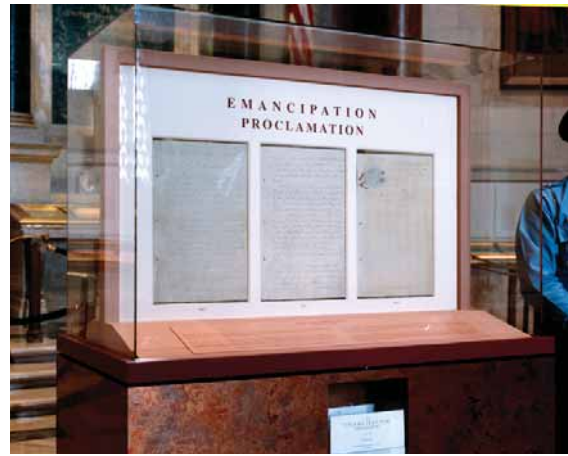
sophistication of the exhibit process to improve the safety, ease of exhibition, and protection of the document for generations to come.

First Display

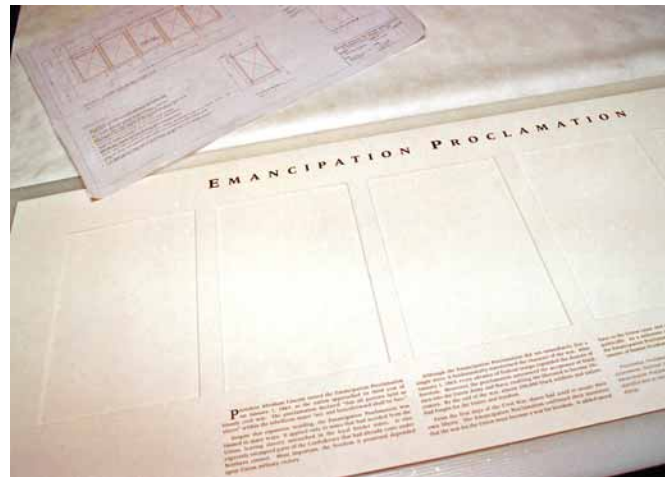
In November 1992 the Archives decided to display the Emancipation Proclamation after 18 years out of the public eye. Archival Art Services in Washington, DC, was contracted to create a display for the Proclamation in a new state-of-the-art display. Designed by Allan Kaneshiro, exhibit designer for the National Archives, the display required a standing two-sided frame that would allow both sides of each page to be viewed.

The design featured two 12-ply mats cut with three openings each, with the document title silk-screened above and with page numbers below each opening. The mats were hinged back to back. To allow the pages to “float” within the mat windows, each document sheet was encapsulated in Mylar and secured with 3M #415 tape around the capsule perimeters. A Plexiglas “sandwich” was then created using two pieces of UV-filtering acrylic to cover both front and back, with the sandwich edges sealed with J-Lar tape.

A standing frame holding the document sandwich was custom milled from basswood and then primed and painted. It was supported by a heavy 16”x4”x44” base milled from a single piece of basswood, with the front and rear beveled toward the viewer at 15 degrees. The three-sided frame was joined to connect to the base. Both the frame and base were milled with a 3/4”x1/2” rabbet to accommodate the sealed Plexiglas sandwich. While the sandwich was set into the slotted base, a second technician lifted the three-sided frame and slid it down onto the base and then secured it with screws on each side. The standing frame was then



An upright front-and-back frame display of the Proclamation in the early nineties presented the document effectively while providing preservation protection. However, its overall size and the need to go from one side to another to read the document created a need for a new design.

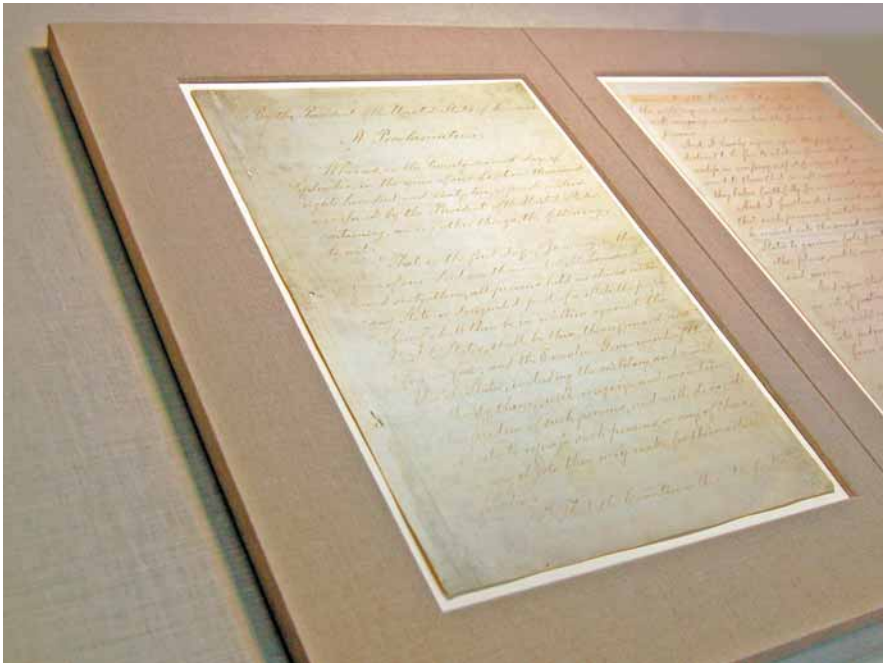


A second contemporary display, which took up less space and allowed the document to be read with a minimum of moving around, featured commentary and explanation of the document screenprinted onto the primary window mat.

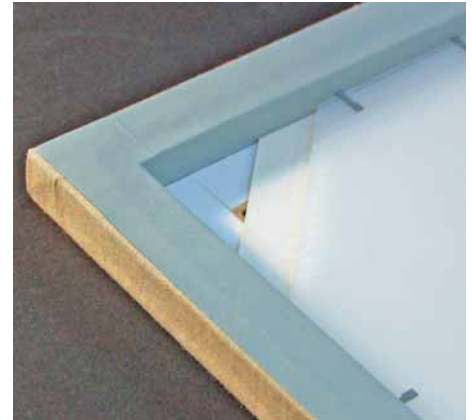
set onto a display pedestal. Finally, a five-sided acrylic cover was lifted above the display and lowered into place to provide further protection.

While this presentation was elegant, it also created problems. As people tried to read the document in its entirety, they had to move from one side to the other because page two was on the back of page one and so on. This created a logjam as viewers moved from the front of the display to the back and then back again. Handouts containing reproductions of the complete writings didn't seem to help.

Another major concern involved the installation and de-installation of the display. First, it was a bit awkward for exhibit specialists to lift and hold the sealed documents in the 33”x44” acrylic sandwich



The third and latest display features a simplified design, with the document laying at a slight angle and framed by a window mat covered by unbleached linen fabric. The pages are sealed in Mylar and the back covered by Coroplast.



while the three-sided frame was lifted and slid into place. More harrowing was lifting the heavy, five-sided acrylic vitrine above their heads and over the document and frame. Although it was manageable, a better approach seemed necessary.

Second Display

After using the first display for several exhibition seasons, a new presentation was designed. Archival Art Services provided a five-opening window mat with a hinged back to allow original pages one, three, and five to be shown while pages two and four would be shown as facsimiles side by side with the originals. The mat was again silk-screened in the studio to provide the title, page numbers, and original/facsimile information. Viewers would no longer have to move from the front of the display to the back. The conservation department also realized that by alternating pages in facsimile with the originals, the total exposure time for each page would be cut in half.

The completed presentation was displayed in a sealed case on an inclined deck, with a five-sided acrylic cover above. The cover still needed to be raised above the document, but now it was at a much lower and more manageable height. The only possible concern was that the mounted document in the mat housing measured about 55" x 38". This required a large cart and many hands to deliver it from conservation to the rotunda for display.

Because of the overall size, the individual pages also needed to be removed from the mat housing to be stored after the exhibit.

Current Display

More recently, as the Archives was beginning a major renovation of the rotunda and exhibition galleries, a plan was hatched to produce a traveling exhibit that would feature many of the most significant documents in the collection. In addition to the Emancipation Proclamation, "American Originals" would also feature the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, Thomas Edison's Patent Application for the Electric Lamp, and the original draft of JFK's Inaugural Address. There were more than 100 items in all.

Since all artifacts would be displayed on inclined, fabric-wrapped decks inside waist-level, enclosed cases, a simple presentation for the documents was all that was called for. These items traveled to nine different venues over three years and needed to be handled several times during each installation. This meant that the housings needed to provide protection and structural support without being too heavy. As a result, to reduce layers of reflection in the case, all of the documents would be encapsulated in Mylar with an alkaline insert behind but receive no glazing. Working with Michael Jackson, chief exhibition designer for the National Archives, Archival Art Services produced a prototype for a mat housing that offered the structure of a frame but the look of a window mat.

The prototype provided an 8-ply window mat wrapped in unbleached natural linen, the same fabric that was used to cover the inclined decks. A 9/16"x1" wooden support frame was adhered to the back of the mat with buffered PVA adhesive and mounted flush with the outer edge of the mat. This support frame received two coats of acrylic gesso to fully seal the wood and was then wrapped with Lineco aluminum barrier Frame Sealing Tape. The linen mounted to the window mat had an additional inch of material around the exterior edges, which were wrapped to the back of the support frame and adhered. This provided a "frameless" frame with a 1" rabbet to allow installation of the encapsulated documents mounted to 4-ply museum board and 6mm archival Coroplast backing, held in place by framers' points.

Before actual installation, a sample of the prototype was provided for an Oddy test, which evaluates the archival safety of materials used. It passed, allowing the final design to be completed.

For the Emancipation Proclamation, five individual mat housings displayed original and facsimile sheets side by side in its own display case. This final

travel presentation is now used to exhibit the document in the Archives' main rotunda. It allows very easy installation and de-installation, permitting the conservation department to rotate documents and facsimiles for the least exposure to light. Each mat housing is stored in its own Permatan folder, so there is no need to unfit the pages for storage in the vault. The linen-wrapped mats blend seamlessly with the linen-covered display deck and provide a minimal presentation that allows the pages to be the most prominent feature in the display.

Further changes may evolve over future exhibitions, but careful thought and planning have resulted in an elegant, safe method for sharing Mr. Lincoln's vision well into the future. ■



Bill Butler is president of Archival Art Services, which has provided framing for museum exhibitions, private galleries, and collectors for more than 20 years. The company, which has a studio and design showroom in Washington, DC, has also made frames and displays for the Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, and Louisiana Purchase.