

# ART TO ZOO

News for Schools from the Smithsonian Institution, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Washington, D.C. 20560

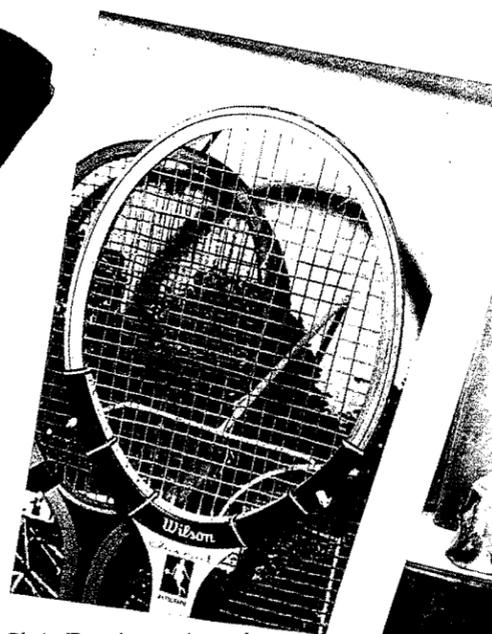
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1983



Pieter Bruegel,  
The Wedding Party



Head of Egyptian  
Queen Nefertiti



Chris Evert's tennis racket



Tent from M\*A\*S\*H

## History Close to Home: Creating Your Own Special Museum

There are many different kinds and sizes of museums, ranging from the enormous Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., to the very compact museum you see pictured here. The sixth graders in this photograph



Sixth graders showing off their Civil War Museum

are proudly sharing the museum they themselves created in their Fairfax County, Virginia, classroom. The museum features Civil War artifacts and documents, many of which originated in the vicinity of the Manassas Battleground near the students' hometown. In the process of making their own classroom museum, the students were able to sharpen their data-gathering, organizational, writing, and problem-solving skills—while experiencing the excitement of learning about the past through clues found close to home.

No matter where you live or what the background of your community, your students can benefit from a similar experience by drawing on the materials of their own school, homes, and neighborhoods. This issue of *Art to Zoo* tells you how to guide your students through the process of making their own classroom museum from

**Where else can you see everything from the sculpted head of an Egyptian queen of the year 1390 B.C., to the joyful movement in a Bruegel painting, Chris Evert's tennis racket, or Hawkeye's tent from M\*A\*S\*H—but in a museum!**

start to finish. And when they're through, the children will have created a museum that is uniquely their own, to share with parents, friends, and fellow students. Besides gaining experience in research, writing, and problem solving, they will have learned about the history of their community, as well as fundamentals of exhibit design.

But before they begin to make their own classroom museum, you will want to discuss with your students what a local history museum is and does.

### What Is a Museum?

*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines a museum as an institution "devoted to the gathering, care, and display of objects of lasting interest or value." Museums grow from collections of special things—of things that are beautiful, or rare, or very old, or of historical interest.

Besides *forming* a collection, the major functions of a museum include preserving, displaying, and interpret-

ing the collection. *Preserving* means cleaning, restoring, and keeping the objects safe. Sometimes it also means storing certain of the objects or arranging them in special drawers or containers for use in scholarly research.

*Displaying* calls upon design skills that have become increasingly sophisticated over the years. It used to be that museum objects were arranged row upon row in cases—and that was that. Now visitors can walk through an authentic Egyptian tomb, or settle down to view 400 live penguins "gossiping" behind glass in a meticulously recreated Antarctic setting.

*Interpreting* the objects in a museum requires, first, careful research to gather information. This is often accomplished in libraries, in other museums, or out in the field (such as on archeological digs). Then what *methods* to use to explain the objects to visitors must be thought about. Such methods might include: labels (*see page 4*), guided tours, and audiovisual materials like tapes, slides, and films.

### What Is Local History?

Local history is the history of a street, a neighborhood, a city, a county, or sometimes a somewhat larger region such as "the Berkshires" or "the Willamette valley." Local history is personal, *close to home*, and highly specific. Because it relates to the student's own personal experience in a way that he or she can reach out and touch and really see, it provides an excellent, concrete way of sparking children's interest in history on a broader scale. After discussing the definition of the terms "museum" and "local history" with your students, ask the class as a group to write its own definition of a

"museum of local history." Here is our definition:

A LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUM IS AN INSTITUTION DEVOTED TO THE GATHERING, CARE, AND DISPLAY OF OBJECTS OF LASTING INTEREST THAT CONCERN THE HISTORY OF A STREET, A NEIGHBORHOOD, A CITY, A COUNTY, OR A REGION.

**Museum Visit**

Once your students know what a local history museum is, they should, if at all possible, be given the opportunity to see a real one. Plan a class trip to a nearby museum or historic site or house. The purpose of your visit will be to examine the various ways in which objects are displayed and interpreted to museum visitors.

Call the museum at least two weeks in advance of your visit to ask that a museum staff member be on hand to answer your students' questions. And before you go, discuss with the children the meaning of the term "exhibit" as included in the glossary on page 4 of this issue of *Art to Zoo*. Depending upon the museum's resources, your students should view as many of the following kinds of exhibits as possible:

- a mural exhibit: an exhibit of objects with a painted backdrop
- a panel show: an exhibit in which documents and photographs are mounted on the wall
- a period room: an actual or recreated room using authentic objects from a special time period
- a diorama: a three-dimensional representation of a particular scene
- a case exhibit: objects arranged (usually on shelves) inside a glass-fronted case.

For recording essential information in the museum, you may want to give each of your students a worksheet like the one shown here. Note that there is space on the sheet for a sketch of each kind of museum display. Ask the children to take their time with their sketches and to really look at each exhibit closely so as to discover its different elements. Ask the students to note also where the exhibit labels are placed, and how the displays are lighted.

Kind of exhibit	Period Room	Diorama	Mural Exhibit	Panel Show	Case Exhibit
Sketch of exhibit					
What the exhibit tells us	How people lived in the 19th century. What inside of a living room looked like.				
How objects are interpreted or explained	One large label beside exhibit. Arrangement of furniture and other objects to make a scene.				

Back in the classroom, encourage your students to share the information they have gathered in the museum. Then discuss the following questions with them: What methods of displaying objects do you find most appealing? What are the elements that make those particular kinds of exhibits effective? Did lighting play a part? Labels? Positioning of objects? What else? Do certain kinds of exhibits seem better suited for conveying certain kinds of information? If so, explain. Why are museum exhibits often placed behind glass? What would be some other ways of protecting an exhibit from damage?

You might also ask your students to describe for their classmates exhibitions they have seen and enjoyed in other museums or historic houses.

Once all these matters have been considered and discussed, the children will be ready to actually make their own museum by completing the following steps:

- choosing a theme or themes for their museum
- collecting objects and information relating to that theme
- deciding how the objects will be arranged in the exhibits

- installing the exhibits
- explaining or interpreting the exhibits to visitors
- publicizing the museum so that people will come and see it.

**Step No. 1: Choosing a Theme or Themes for Your Museum**

Have the children pretend they are museum curators assigned the task of creating a museum about the history of their community. Their first job will be to decide what aspects of that history they wish to emphasize: transportation . . . home life . . . life at school . . . the history of a local sports team or newspaper . . . how the leading business got started and grew . . . or whatever else appeals to them most.

The children may decide to develop four or five themes—or only one. In the event that more than one theme is chosen, the class should be divided into groups and each group should be assigned one of the chosen themes as its own particular area of specialization.

**Step No. 2: Collecting Objects and Information for Your Museum**

Information may be gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the recollections of persons who were "on the scene" during the time period to be depicted in the museum, as well as documents such as old report cards, letters, and ledgers. Secondary sources include newspaper and magazine articles and other second-hand accounts. These sources can be found in a wide variety of places, as you will soon see.

The following instructions show you how to gather objects and information relating to two different themes that your students may wish to choose for their museum: (1) the history of their school (a good theme to choose if the school is more than 15 years old) and (2) the history of their own houses. (Each house should be more than 15 years old in order to qualify.)

*History of the School*

FIRST, have the children interview the school principal using the format below:

On what date did the school open? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Who was the school named after? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What did that person do that was important? \_\_\_\_\_

Who was the school architect? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What additions have been made to the school since it opened? \_\_\_\_\_

What was the land on which the school is located used for originally? \_\_\_\_\_

Please give us the names and addresses of several retired teachers (or principals) so that we can interview them \_\_\_\_\_

Museum resources that may be collected from the principal include:

- A picture of the person for whom the school was named

- Blueprints of plans for the school
- Pictures of the school taken before and after the additions were made
- Early pictures of the school and its students
- The interview itself. (If the interview is tape recorded, excerpts can be used to help explain the museum exhibits.)

THEN have another group of students interview a retired principal and one or two retired teachers, if possible, or a teacher who has worked at the school for a long time. Questions to ask in these interviews include:

When did you first start teaching here? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What subjects did you teach? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What were the favorite subjects of students in those days? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Describe your earliest memories of coming to work at the school, and what the school looked like then. \_\_\_\_\_

How, if at all, were the students different then from now? \_\_\_\_\_

For example, did they wear different clothes? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Were their attitudes different? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Were they better or worse behaved? \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any assembly programs or school plays that stand out in your memory? If so, please tell us about them. \_\_\_\_\_

Did anything dramatic happen while you were at the school (such as a fire, the pipes freezing, the lights going out)? \_\_\_\_\_

Please describe the most exciting day that you spent in this school \_\_\_\_\_ and the worst day. \_\_\_\_\_

Museum resources that can be collected in the course of this interview include: early textbooks, photographs, report cards, and school trophies, as well as (again) the audiotape of the interview.

• ALSO: ask a group of students to interview the physical education director to discuss the history of school athletics and to provide, if possible, old gym uniforms and trophies for display in the museum.

• And assign a group of students to visit the school janitor's office to search for old desks, chairs, hardware, or other fixtures to display in the museum. The janitor may have information on the lighting and wiring of the school and the planting of the grounds as well as important reminiscences to contribute.

• The PTA and the local League of Women Voters sometimes prepare histories of local school systems. Ask your students to get in touch with each of these two groups.

• Have the children place an ad in the local newspaper asking for school memorabilia.

• Write to obtain an enlarged front page of either the *New York Times* or a major newspaper in your own region. This will tell what was happening in the United States in general and the world at large on the date the school opened. An 11 x 14 inch copy of a readable front page will cost you \$14.95, plus shipping, when ordered from University Microfilm International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106. Attention, Front Page Department. Phone: 800-521-0600.

*History of the Students' Own Houses*

• FIRST, ask between four and six of the children to interview their mothers and fathers, using a tape recorder, to find out as much as possible about their own houses—including dates of construction, when and why families bought the houses, and some early memories of living there.

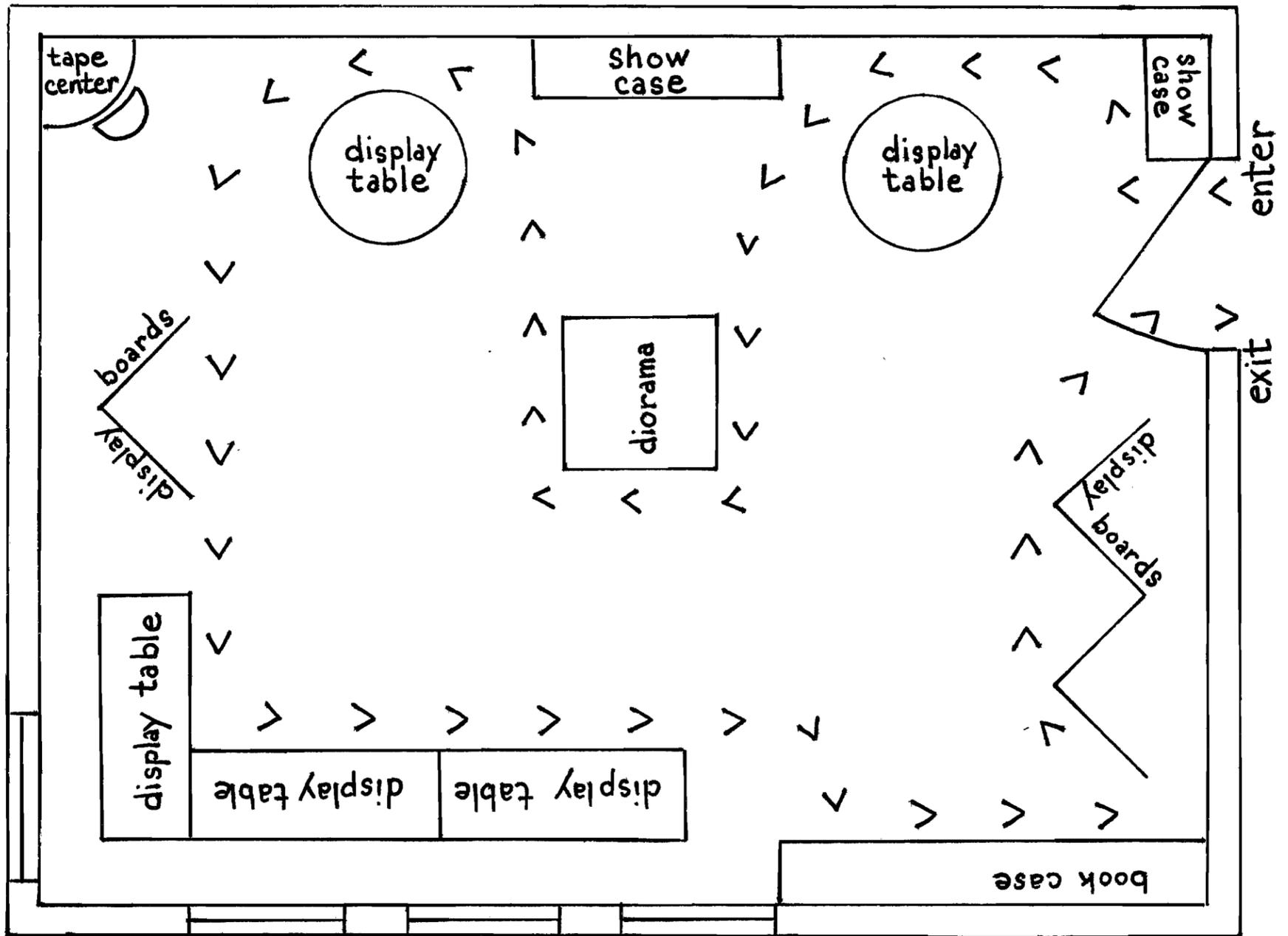
• Have the children ask their parents for architectural plans of their houses if such plans are available. Also ask them to gather any photographs showing the houses before and after additions to the building were made. Up-to-date pictures of the houses, including the children's own drawings, should also be sought.

• Have the children describe, in writing, the architectural styles of their houses, including a brief discussion of the particular architectural genre and period to which each house belongs. The materials used in the house construction should also be described. Samples of old brick, hardware, or moldings may be gathered for display in the museums.

• Ask each child to Xerox documents concerning the land and house, including the deed. (Parents will have some of the documents in their own files; others can be obtained at town or city hall.)

• Each child should also try to interview former owners of his or her house and ask for contributions of photographs and other memorabilia. (The real estate

# Museum Floor Plan



Floor plan of an exhibition

agent who sold the family the house may know who these former owners are and how to get in touch with them.)

- Through real estate agents or documents at town or city hall, have the children trace the history of the land on which their houses were built. An older resident of the neighborhood may be able to describe what the area looked like before houses were built on the site. Perhaps that person can also provide pictures of the scene back then.

- Have the children look carefully at their back and front yards; then have them make diagrams of the plantings in the yards and find out who planned the layout. Ask each child to bring in, for museum display, a piece of bark from the yard's oldest tree.

## 1984 History Day Competition

Your class may be interested in entering its classroom local history project in the 1984 History Day competition. Entrants must be sixth graders or older. The theme for the competition is "Family and Community in History." Write for information to Dr. Lois Scharf, National History Day, Inc. 11201 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44106. Phone: 216-421-8803.

## Additional Resources for Exploring Local History Themes

**Tape-recorded interviews with longtime residents.** Descendants of the earliest families that founded your town or city, the person who has run the corner store for fifty years, or a grandparent who has lived in the area for a long time can contribute reminiscences about how and where things used to be.

**Photographs.** Grandparents and other relatives as well as your library or newspaper archives or historical society are all good sources of old photographs.

**Local historian.** Many communities have professional or amateur local historians who can provide students with information and help to direct their research.

**City or town records.** Town halls and city halls contain census records and records of the earliest meetings of community governing bodies. Sometimes these records reach back to the community's founding.

**Archeology.** Archeological digs can provide background information on everyday life in earlier days.

Check with state park departments as well as with the National Park Service for the site of the nearest dig.

**Newspaper.** Most newspaper offices maintain archives containing articles and photographs dating back many years.

**Library.** Pertinent magazine articles and books can often be found in a special section of the library devoted specifically to local history.

**Post Office.** Old post office guides show former locations of businesses and residences.

## Step No. 3: Deciding How the Objects Should Be Arranged

Have your students draw up a floor plan like the one reproduced here showing how the objects will be arranged in their museum. The plan should show the location of each exhibit, as well as "traffic flow" (in what direction visitors will walk through the museum). If the museum tells a story, that story should be told in sequence, beginning at the entrance to the museum and ending at the exit.

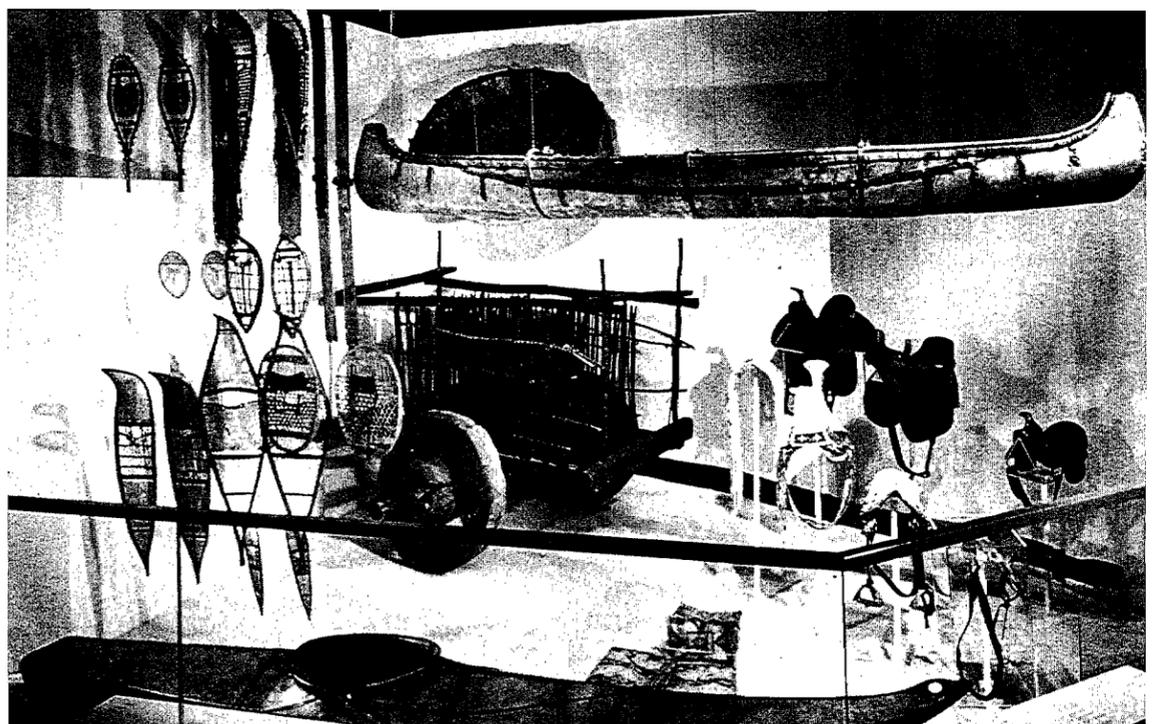
## Step No. 4: Installing the Exhibits

Exhibits can be set up on tables, book cases, and even chairs. Artwork, including maps, murals, and dioramas can help to enhance the objects. (Directions for making a simple diorama are included on the Pullout Page of this issue.)

*continued on page 4*

## NOW AVAILABLE!

A two-part slide/tape package to introduce children to the purposes and functions of museums, and to encourage them to create classroom museums of their own. The "Museum Idea" package costs \$35 and includes a boxed set of 106 slides, a taped narration, and a teacher's guide. For more information, or to order your set, write to Evelyn Reese, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.



Museum objects carefully displayed



Collecting

Photographs and documents can be mounted on portable display board panels, available in many schools. Stacked cardboard boxes covered with construction paper or colored kraft paper make excellent display cases for objects. Old clothing and other "hangable" items, such as pictures, can be hung with clothespins on a clothesline strung across the room.

A study center where children can sit and read material related to the exhibit and an audio center where they can listen to tapes are helpful adjuncts to a classroom museum.

### Step No. 5: Interpreting the Exhibit

Labels and audiotapes are two important methods of interpreting museum exhibits to visitors. In addition, student-guided tours of the museum can be offered, based on the students' own written narrations.

**Labels.** Here are some rules of thumb to help your students with their label writing:

- A label should be inviting, instructive, brief (two to four sentences in length), and placed close to the object or objects it is identifying.

- Besides crediting whoever lent the object to the museum, a label should give the name and date of the object, tell where it's from, and explain why it is important.

- A label should not take over an exhibit; rather it should *support* the exhibit by directing the visitor's attention to the objects themselves.

- A label should be printed or typed so as to be easy to read.

**Sample label for a 1935 report card donated by a former student of the school:**

This is a report card received by Ellen Strong in October, 1935, when she was a student at this school. Notice how this report card differs from the report cards we receive now.

**Narrative audiotapes.** Before taping, students should write out exactly what they want to say and then rehearse it with their fellow classmates. A taped narration using not just one but two voices can be produced fairly easily by interspersing segments of a previously recorded interview with the students' own commentary. For example:

(NARRATION) Our school opened its doors in the autumn of 1947. Miss Bartholomew was teaching fifth grade that first year. Here are some of her early memories.

(EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH MISS BARTHOLOMEW.) The tape recorders with earphones can be placed on a table in the museum with directions for their use.

### Step No. 6: Publicity

Appoint a museum publicity committee of five or six students. Have these children make a list of the various means of publicity used by the cultural organizations (such as museums, libraries, and parks) in their community. Then ask them to decide which particular ones are best suited to publicizing their classroom museum.

The children may decide that posters to hang in strategic locations around school, "radio spots" to be announced over the school p.a. system, and articles to be published in the school or community newspaper are all good ways of getting people to come in and see the results of their hard work. Different committee members may be assigned the tasks of creating and hanging the posters, writing articles and script materials, seeing that the articles are published, and making p.a. system announcements.

Now your classroom museum is ready to open at last! But before you open, why not stage a pre-opening party, just for the people who did all the hard work—you and your class, and the people who lent some of the objects. Good luck and have fun!

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Note: Photo of Queen Nefertiti is from Christiane D. Noblecourt, *The Acanthus History of Sculpture: Ancient Egypt* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1960). Photo of *The Wedding Party* is from Thomas Craven, *A Treasury of Art Masterpieces* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939). Photo of Chris Evert's tennis racket is by Alan Gartenhaus.

### Glossary of Museum Terms

**MUSEUM.** An institution devoted to the gathering, care, and display of objects of lasting interest or value.

**EXHIBIT.** The display of an object or collection of objects.

**CURATOR.** A person in charge of exhibits, research activities, and personnel of a museum.

**DIORAMA.** A three-dimensional representation of a particular scene.

**PERIOD ROOM.** A room fashioned after the style of a particular era.

**DOCENT.** A person who guides visitors through a museum or art gallery and discusses and comments on the exhibits.

### ART TO ZOO

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THE ANACOSTIA NEIGHBORHOOD MUSEUM  
 THE CHESAPEAKE BAY CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES  
 THE COOPER-HEWITT MUSEUM OF DECORATIVE ARTS AND DESIGN  
 THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN  
 THE MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART  
 THE NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM  
 THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART and the RENWICK GALLERY  
 THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY  
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 THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY  
 THE NATIONAL ZOOLOGICAL PARK

Smithsonian Institution Press

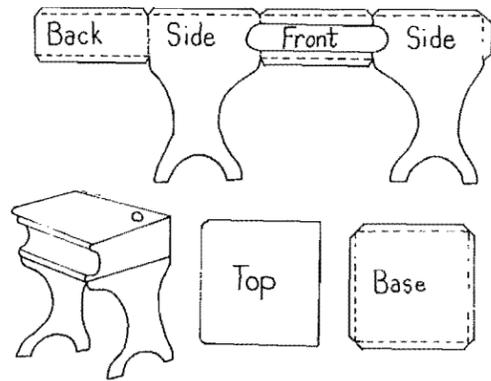
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*Art to Zoo* brings news from the Smithsonian Institution to teachers of grades three through eight. The purpose is to help you use museums, parks, libraries, zoos, and many other resources within your community to open up learning opportunities for your students.

Our reason for producing a publication dedicated to promoting the use of community resources among students and teachers nationally stems from a fundamental belief, shared by all of us here at the Smithsonian, in the power of objects. Working as we do with a vast collection of national treasures that literally contains the spectrum from "art" to "zoo," we believe that objects (be they works of art, natural history specimens, historical artifacts, or live animals) have a tremendous power to educate. We maintain that it is equally important for students to learn to use objects as research tools as it is for them to learn to use words and numbers—and you can find objects close at hand, by drawing on the resources of your own community.

Our idea, then, in producing *Art to Zoo* is to share with you—and you with us—methods of working with students and objects that Smithsonian education staff members have found successful. This is the first of four issues to be published this school year.



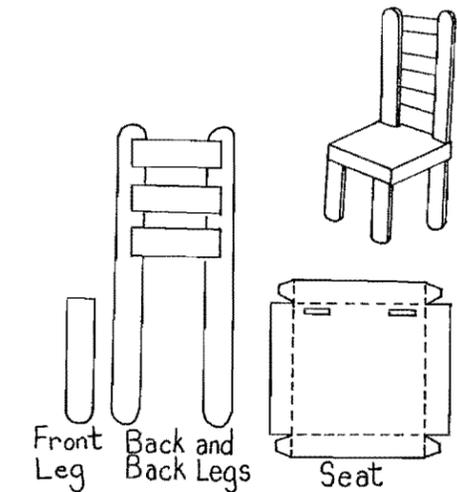
Desk

Either paint the walls with tempera or acrylic paint, or paper them with construction paper or scraps of real wallpaper. Linoleum scraps or pieces of foam core with small patterns can be used to cover the floor. Lighting fixtures can be made from such items as beads, straws, and toothpaste caps.

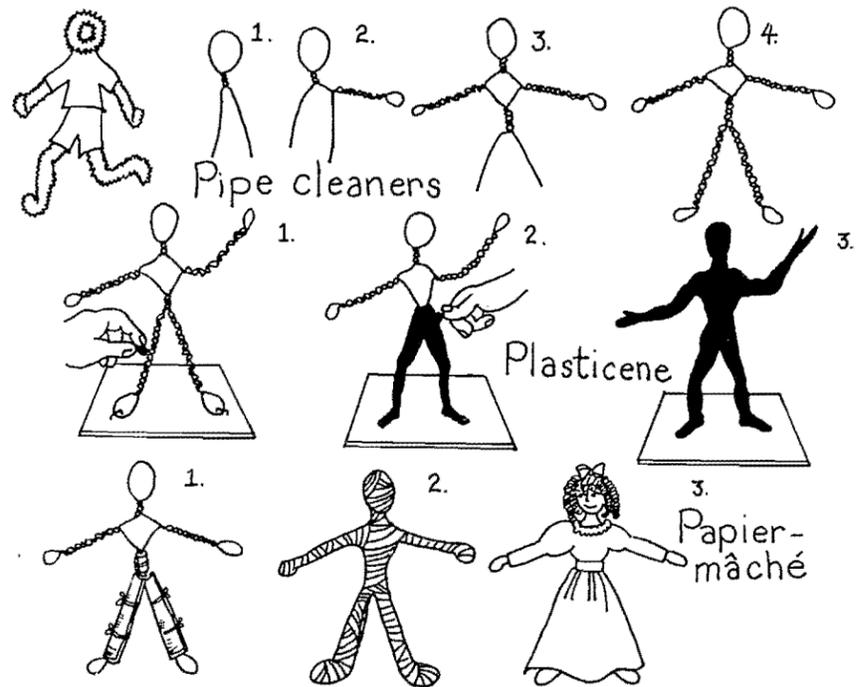
Paint and decorate the outside of the box if you wish, and cut out windows. Then furnish the inside to make a scene. If you have chosen an old-fashioned schoolroom for your diorama, here are some ideas for furnishings:

To make desks, use corrugated cardboard or tagboard and follow the steps shown in the illustration. Chairs can be constructed of popsicle sticks or tongue depressors. Human figures can be made of clay, pipe cleaners, or papier-mâché, as shown here.

And most fun of all are the accessories: the pictures that go on the wall, the school flag, school bags, chalk and erasers. What about framing stamps for the pictures on the wall. . . . But by now you probably have lots of your own ideas!



Chair



Human figures



Accessories

# PULL-OUT PAGE



## Local History That Grew . . . and Grew . . . into a National Exhibit!

It's hard to imagine that you once could find an amazing jumble of things like a horsecollar . . . ginger in tins . . . hightopped shoes . . . and even *suspenders* in a post office. Well, it's true. A hundred years ago you could go to most post offices to buy those objects, or a pound of sugar and some cloth for a dress. At the same time you could pick up your mail and mail your letters. Post offices then were general stores and post offices, sometimes all in the same room!

Carl Scheele, from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, wanted to bring a 19th-century post office / general store to the Smithsonian. He wanted museum visitors to get a taste of a slow-paced way of life that began to disappear early in the 20th century.

Little did Mr. Scheele know that his hunt for the perfect post office / general store would turn into a three-year journey. The trip would carry him more than 10,000 miles around the country. In the process he would examine over 300 post offices.

Mr. Scheele began his post office hunt with the aid of an old printed postal guide. This little book listed all the post office / general stores that existed in the 19th century. Mr. Scheele was looking for a post office typical of a small town. He wanted it to be a one-room post office about a hundred years old or more. He wanted it to date from the mid-1800s because that was an exciting time for the United States postal system. Thousands of new post offices opened then, all around the country.

Interior view of the 19th-century post office at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.



Mr. Scheele also had more practical things to consider in choosing his post office. For instance, in order to fit inside the museum, the post office couldn't be more than 14 feet high. And the building had to be made of wood. This was because a building of stone or brick can't be moved as easily as one made of wood.

Finally in 1970, after three long years of searching, Mr. Scheele heard about an old post office / general store in the tiny town of Headsville, West Virginia. The post office had been closed for forty years ever since the time of the Great Depression. You can imagine how Mr. Scheele felt when he slowly unlocked the door and looked inside. It was almost exactly the same as it had been all those years before! It still had buggy whips hanging from the ceiling. Underneath the dust and cobwebs were brooms and scythes just as they looked when they were for sale. The shelves were piled with hightopped shoes and ladies' and men's hats. Tins, dusty with age, of cocoa, allspice, gelatin, and corned beef were stacked next to the clothing. Mr. Scheele felt as though he had entered another age when he walked in, and he knew at once this was the post office he wanted for the museum. Before the post office was moved every board in the building and every object on the shelves was marked to show its exact position on the north, south, east, or west side. Then the entire building and its contents were loaded, piece by piece, into a big van and taken to the museum.

Back at the Smithsonian, it took five weeks to put the old post office together again inside the National Museum of American History—and three more weeks to get it ready for museum visitors. Now thirteen years later, the Headsville Post Office is still a big attraction at the Smithsonian. Hundreds of people stop by each day to get a taste of the past. And if they want to, they can even mail letters and postcards, hand-stamped by the post office, to friends all over the country.

## Make Your Own Diorama

Remember the scenes at the museum that looked so real you felt you could walk inside and become a part of them? These three-dimensional scenes are called *dioramas*. In many museums, dioramas are a favorite way to display objects and depict everyday life. Here are some ideas to help you make your own museum diorama.

First, choose a scene to portray. An old-fashioned schoolroom is one idea. Or maybe a room in an old house . . . or the corner store as it looked many years ago . . . or the city room of an old-time newspaper.



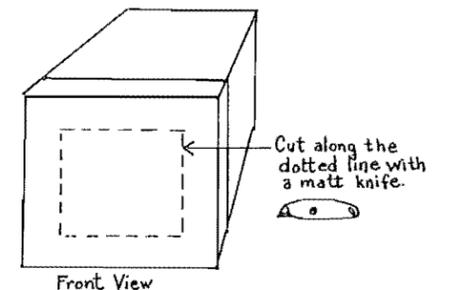
Diorama of a schoolroom

Next, think about the size of your diorama, which may be as small as a shoebox or as big as a washing machine, or anywhere in between. Just make sure that the diorama will be big enough so that museum visitors can see it easily.

Now find a heavy-duty cardboard box with a lid. The box should comfortably contain a diorama of the size you have chosen. Using a matt knife (ASK YOUR TEACHER OR ANOTHER ADULT TO HELP YOU), cut out a section in the lid of the box to make a viewing window. When you have completed your diorama inside the box, you will replace the lid so as to make it appear as if the visitor is looking at the scene through a large picture window.

The box is the shell for your diorama. Decorate the walls, the ceiling, and the floor of the box; then work on the figures, furniture, and other objects that will go inside.

### Diorama Construction



Box and lid for a diorama