

The Effect of Restored Exhibition on Small and Medium-sized Museum Exhibitions: Exemplified by Yunnan Railway Museum

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Abstract: *Small and medium-sized museums account for a significant proportion of the total number of museums in China and play a vital role in the country's museum-based social education system. However, many small and medium-sized museums face challenges such as insufficient funding and talent, leading to less-than-ideal exhibition outcomes. Among various exhibition methods, the restoration display method demonstrates strong educational effectiveness. This paper takes the Yunnan Railway Museum, a small and medium-sized museum, as a case study to analyze how restoration display can enhance the exhibition quality of such museums.*

Keywords: Restoration Display Method; Small and Medium-Sized Museums; Museum Exhibitions.

1. THE MEANING AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESTORATION DISPLAY METHOD

1.1 The Meaning of the Restoration Display Method

The restoration display method is one of the many exhibition approaches used by museums. This method is widely applied in various types of museums, especially in archaeological, historical sites, former residence, or social history museums with exhibitions focusing on modern history themes.

The concept is described in the Encyclopedia of China—Cultural Relics Volume—as “a type of museum display that uses scientific processing and artistic reconstruction to recreate cultural relics or historical sites that have either disappeared or been partially damaged [1].” In Basic Museum Studies of China, Wang Hongjun defines it as “scientifically restoring the appearance of cultural relics. The methods of restoration include: complete relic group restoration, relics and environment restoration, relics and models restoration, relics and images restoration, and relics and hands-on restoration [2].”

Thus, restoration display refers to the recreation of a specific historical environment or cultural relics, portraying aspects of life from a particular historical period. This type of display is direct, allowing people to immerse themselves in a specific historical setting and understand the life of a particular era from an experiential perspective. For example, the restoration display of court life at the Palace Museum helps people understand the lives of feudal rulers, shedding light on the culture, economy, and politics of feudal dynasties. The Shanghai Guangfulin Relic Museum recreates hunting scenes from the Neolithic period, which helps the public understand the clothing, tools, and animals hunted by people of that time. Such displays offer a tangible and authentic understanding of history, making them significant for historical research and education.

1.2 Characteristics of the Restoration Display Method

Compared to general exhibition methods, the restoration display places exhibits within a specific environment. In some cases, this environment reflects the original setting of the exhibits, such as in former residence museums; in other cases, the environment is artificially constructed, as seen in the basic exhibitions of the Yunnan Railway Museum discussed in this paper. This method ensures that exhibits are no longer isolated units, but rather part of an integrated display space composed of the exhibits and their surrounding environment. This spatial setup allows for a richer and more intuitive conveyance of information compared to displaying individual objects in display cabinets.

Thus, the restoration display method is undoubtedly an important tool for small and medium-sized museums to maximize the use of their limited exhibits, fulfill their social educational role, and effectively tell “Chinese

stories.” The restoration display method has the following characteristics:

a) Broad Scope

Traditional exhibitions tend to focus on individual collections, placing items in display cases and providing limited explanations through guides or introductory texts. In contrast, the restoration display method emphasizes the whole environment and context of the exhibits, presenting a more complete cultural system. During the exhibition process, the artifacts are organized into a system, and historical scenes are recreated to tightly integrate the relics with their cultural context [3]. Many archaeological museums, such as the Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum and Terracotta Warriors Museum, use this method by building exhibition halls directly over the pits where the terracotta warriors were found, allowing visitors to view the artifacts in their original burial environment for a more intuitive understanding of their arrangement.

b) Higher Scientific and Artistic Value

The restoration display employs advanced scientific techniques to recreate the environment in which the artifacts existed, telling a story through the artifacts themselves. As such, the method requires high standards for exhibition design, including visual effects, lighting, placement of artifacts, and the use of props. This requires the exhibition team to carefully consider these factors during the planning stage. A well-designed restoration display will provide a more complete experience, ensuring that visitors enjoy the best possible viewing experience.

c) Enhanced Educational Value

The scope of the restoration display is broader because it does not only focus on the artifacts themselves, but also considers the environment or system to which the artifacts belong. This enables visitors to learn more about the contextual information related to the artifacts. For example, the exhibition of the “Three-Drop Water Bed” at the Ethnological Museum of South-Central University for Nationalities places the bed within a Tujia ethnic home, along with everyday items like washbasin racks, wardrobes, dining tables, and chairs. This helps visitors not only understand the bed itself but also gain deeper insights into the daily life of the Tujia people.

The restoration display method also serves as a form of protection for traditional cultural relics. Some traditional cultures and cultural relics have gradually been forgotten, such as the blue printed fabric of Xiangxi, Tujia weaving techniques, Miao flower belts, and various folk arts like music, dance, and opera that are at risk of being lost. Restoration displays, through techniques such as scene recreation, bring these at-risk ethnic crafts and performances back to life, raising public awareness about the importance of cultural heritage and relic protection [3]. For example, the exhibition of the Xi Lan Ka Pu textiles at the Ethnological Museum of South-Central University for Nationalities not only displays the beautiful textiles but also showcases the weaving loom used to create them, allowing visitors to learn about the manufacturing process behind these intricate fabrics. This approach helps preserve and protect minority ethnic textile-making traditions.

2. THE CONCEPT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED MUSEUMS AND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

2.1 The Meaning of Small and Medium-Sized Museums

In China, small and medium-sized museums are generally defined as museums located at the county or city level, with collections of fewer than 30,000 items and a building area of no more than 10,000 square meters. Small and medium-sized museums are the most numerous, widely distributed, and closest to the grassroots in China [4]. They play an important role in preserving cultural relics, promoting Chinese culture, and enriching public life. These museums have the advantage of being closely tied to regional culture, showcasing traditional characteristics, and covering a broad audience [5].

For most museum visitors, small and medium-sized museums are also the most accessible type of museum. Therefore, the exhibition quality of small and medium-sized museums plays a critical role in realizing the overall social educational function of museums and deserves attention.

2.2 The Challenges Faced by Small and Medium-Sized Museums

In China, museums are public institutions. However, small and medium-sized museums face significant gaps compared to large museums in terms of policy support, staffing, and infrastructure. As a result, they encounter many challenges, such as insufficient funding, a shortage of professional personnel, limited collections, and low visitor numbers. These issues prevent small and medium-sized museums from ensuring the quality of their exhibitions, research, and educational activities, thus hindering their ability to perform their intended functions effectively.

Given these challenges, how small and medium-sized museums can maximize their exhibition effectiveness with limited resources is a topic worth discussing. The Yunnan Railway Museum, which is a typical small and medium-sized museum, faces similar challenges to other museums of its kind across the country. However, the museum makes full use of its limited collection resources by employing the restoration display method, combining exhibits with artificially created environments. This approach not only emphasizes the theme but also maximizes the value of the limited exhibits, making the exhibition content more intuitive. It is a model that other small and medium-sized museums across the country can look to for improving their exhibition effectiveness.

3. EXAMPLES OF RESTORATION DISPLAY IN THE YUNNAN RAILWAY MUSEUM

3.1 Basic Information about the Yunnan Railway Museum

The Yunnan Railway Museum is located at No. 913, Beijing Road, Kunming. It was established in 1990 and originally called the “Yunnan Narrow-Gauge Railway History Exhibition Hall” at the Kaiyuan Railway Station waiting room. In 2003, the museum relocated to Kunming North Railway Station and was upgraded to a museum. In 2012, the museum was expanded and renovated on its original site.

The museum consists of the South Hall and North Hall, spanning three railway tracks at Kunming North Station. The South Hall is a French-style building modeled after the “Dian-Yue Railway Yunnanfu Station,” while the North Hall is a modern building designed after a high-speed rail station. A skybridge connects the two halls, integrating the museum with the station to form a unique landscape, creating the “museum on the station, and station in the museum” experience.

The museum primarily exhibits various tools and materials used in the construction of Yunnan’s railways in modern times, such as surveying instruments and railway tracks, as well as recreated scenes of tunnel construction and the “Warren Truss Bridge” (a type of bridge). Additionally, the museum features modern locomotive heads and carriages. The architecture of the entire museum highlights distinct railway elements, perfectly embodying the organic combination of classical and modern design, making a bridge between history and the future.

3.2 Examples of Restoration Display in the Yunnan Railway Museum

Restoration display is the primary exhibition method used at the Yunnan Railway Museum. The museum’s exhibition units, including the waiting hall, tunnel construction scenes, the “Warren Truss Bridge,” and modern high-speed rail carriages, all utilize the restoration display method.

In the waiting hall, exhibits such as the “Michelin” passenger rubber-tyred diesel multiple unit, SN Type 29 gauge steam locomotive, narrow-gauge luggage and postal cars, wooden passenger cars, and metre-gauge steam locomotives are displayed side by side to showcase the development of modern trains.

In the tunnel construction scene, the museum designers recreated the process of tunnel construction, while also displaying various types of railway tracks used in modern rail construction inside the “tunnel.”

The “Warren Truss Bridge” uses the two original steel-frame bridge structures inside the building to restore the “Warren Truss Bridge” of the Dian-Yue Railway.

In addition to these exhibition units, the overall design and layout of the museum imitate several famous railway stations in Yunnan from the modern era, such as the Bizezhai and Zhichun stations.

The design of the museum creates a strong immersive experience for visitors, allowing them to gain a more intuitive and direct understanding of the development of Yunnan’s railways and the evolution of trains as they

visit.

In terms of exhibition effectiveness, the extensive use of restoration displays has greatly strengthened both the integrity and thematic coherence of the museum's exhibits. Specifically, the following points can be highlighted:

a) Emphasizing the Museum's Theme

The Yunnan Railway Museum has constructed numerous railway-related scenes within its exhibition halls, allowing visitors to experience the theme in an immersive way. The environment continually reinforces the museum's theme as visitors progress through the exhibit. Due to various limitations, small and medium-sized museums often struggle to cover all aspects of their collections. Therefore, focusing on a single theme and presenting it in-depth is a feasible way to enhance exhibition effectiveness.

b) Improving the Logic and Coherence of the Exhibition

In the basic exhibition at the Yunnan Railway Museum, the changes in the exhibit content are typically accompanied by changes in scenes. For example, the skybridge linking the South and North Halls, and the tunnel construction scene serving as a transition between the two stations, ensures that the flow of the exhibition does not feel abrupt. The strengthening of logic and coherence helps deepen visitors' impressions and makes it easier for them to understand the content displayed in the museum.

c) Enhancing the Contrast Between Exhibition Units

This primarily refers to the contrast between the South Hall and North Hall. The South Hall mainly showcases the construction of Yunnan's railways in modern times, while the North Hall displays the development of modern high-speed rail and railway planning. The changes in the content between the two halls are not only reflected in the exhibits themselves but also in the environmental changes. The contrast between the two makes it easier for visitors to appreciate the rapid development of railway transportation in China.

d) Enhancing the Intuitiveness of the Exhibition

A good exhibition should be easy for visitors to understand, and the restoration display method is one of the most effective ways to achieve this. For example, the combination of railway track models and the tunnel construction scene, along with the display of different types of carriages in the "waiting hall," helps visitors easily distinguish between different track types and the eras in which they were used. This not only improves the exhibition's effectiveness but also enhances the communication of the museum's content.

4. HOW SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED MUSEUMS CAN USE RESTORATION DISPLAY TO IMPROVE EXHIBITION QUALITY

As mentioned earlier, small and medium-sized museums face challenges such as limited funding, a shortage of professional staff, small collections, and low visitor numbers. The exhibition methods employed by the Yunnan Railway Museum can offer valuable insights for similar small and medium-sized museums across the country. However, it is important to note that not all small and medium-sized museums should adopt the restoration display method. Museums should choose the exhibition approach that best suits their theme and collection.

4.1 Using Distinctive Exhibits to Construct Scenes and Highlight the Museum's Theme

Many county and city-level small and medium-sized museums often imitate large museums by displaying collections spanning from the Stone Age to modern times. This broad scope can make the museum's theme less distinct. Additionally, given the limited funding and exhibition capabilities of small museums, displaying too many themes or exhibits can dilute the effectiveness of the exhibition.

These museums can take inspiration from the Yunnan Railway Museum by focusing on a single theme. By categorizing their collections and integrating locally distinctive exhibits into carefully constructed scenes, they can create a more focused and compelling narrative. For instance, the Weishan County Museum in Yunnan could emphasize its significance as the birthplace of the Nanzhao Kingdom, highlighting this characteristic in its exhibitions.

4.2 Using Gradual Transitions in Scene Construction to Highlight Industry Development

For museums focused on specific industries, the main goal is to present the historical development of that industry. Therefore, the exhibitions need to be logically organized and coherent. Gradually transitioning scenes to show the evolution of an industry is often more accessible for visitors than simply showcasing a range of exhibits.

For example, the National Railway Museum in the UK displays the world's largest steam locomotive, Japan's Shinkansen "Hikari," and a replica of Stephenson's Rocket, along with items such as train tickets, uniforms, buttons, watches, maps, and vintage posters. These exhibits provide a comprehensive understanding of the history of British trains and railways, showcasing the progress of technology and the evolution of the times.

4.3 Using Scenes to Explain Exhibits

Exhibits in museums were often tools or materials used during specific historical periods, and they each have their own context of use. Many museums use text or images to explain these contexts, which often requires visitors to imagine the scene themselves. If a visitor has a relevant background knowledge, this may not be too difficult, but for those who lack information or understanding, imagining the context can be challenging. On one hand, this can make the experience feel dull for the visitor, as they may not get the information they are looking for. On the other hand, if visitors misinterpret the context, it can undermine the museum's educational impact.

In the case of the Yunnan Railway Museum, in addition to textual and photographic explanations, it also constructs usage scenes. For example, the different types of railway tracks are displayed alongside the relevant historical contexts. Using scenes to explain exhibits, compared to relying solely on text and images, significantly improves the exhibition's intuitiveness, making it much more engaging for visitors.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the rational use of restoration displays can significantly improve the exhibition quality and effectiveness of small and medium-sized museums, which often face resource constraints. This includes highlighting the theme, enhancing coherence and logic, increasing visitor engagement, and improving the intuitiveness of the exhibition. In the context of the flourishing museum sector today, small and medium-sized museums can effectively utilize their exhibit resources and adopt appropriate exhibition methods to tell their own "stories" and contribute to local public cultural development.

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