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PREPARING A WINNING EXHIBIT

By John Eshbach

John Eshbach, a professional numismatist for more than 50 years, passed away on December 4, 2011. A member of the ANA and the Pennsylvania Association of Numismatists, he was a national figure in the field of numismatic exhibiting. His two-part article on how to prepare a winning exhibit has been in circulation for a number of years.

The following is a guide for developing exhibits for display at numismatic conventions. It is not intended to be a rigid format for exhibit building, but rather, an outline of the steps required in developing an intelligent educational exhibit for viewing by the general public.

The format of this guide follows the official American Numismatic Association exhibit/judging rules as developed by the American Numismatic Association Exhibit Committee. Most numismatic organizations, local, state and regional, use the American Numismatic Association judging rules, or a modified version, for competitive exhibit evaluation. The ANA judging corps uses these rules at the association's conventions at selected cities in the United States.

Much of the following information is or was used in a week-long seminar on exhibit development held at the American Numismatic Association headquarters in Colorado Springs, Co. During the week of instruction, the students assembled an exhibit from donated materials.

An Idea Is Born

The logical starting point of any exhibiting effort is the idea or concept of wanting to exhibit special items in a collection because of the artistic beauty, rarity or pride of ownership. In many instances, this starting point is just the beginning of the search for specific information needed to explain and develop the exhibit. In most cases, building an exhibit is a learning process for the exhibitor more so than for the viewer of the exhibit. For a ribbon exhibit (first, second or third place award), homework in researching the numismatic material is necessary and most important. A few words of caution pertaining to the numismatic material included in any exhibit - **no material can be exhibited that is contrary to Federal law.**

The standards for evaluation of numismatic exhibits as developed by the American Numismatic Association are: 1) numismatic information, 2) presentation, 3) completeness, 4) degree of difficulty, 5) condition and 6) rarity. Numismatic information is further divided into two parts: numismatic and special information. Presentation is sub-divided into three parts: creativity and originality, attractiveness and balance. The remaining elements stand as single criteria.

The first item to consider is: Title and Scope - 5 points.

The rating sheet states: The title should be obvious. If necessary, there should be an explanation of what the exhibitor intends to show.

The **title** must be sufficiently large to be obvious to the viewer and should be placed in the first case. A reasonable choice of letter size for the title is 1" to 1-1/2". Titles can be easily made with current computer technology with any number of color combinations, borders, or shading. Plastic letters and numbers are readily available in 'white only' and easy to read. The letters can

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be easily spray painted if it is desirable to add color to the title. The letters can be mounted or glued to poster board or any other rigid surface or can lie flat on the background material without any means of fixing. One word of caution when working with loose or unattached letters or objects; a bump to the case can cause them to move out of alignment and affect the attractiveness of the exhibit.

It is important to remember to arrange the exhibit to read from left to right. If several exhibit cases are required for the exhibit, the same arrangement is preferred, reading from the first case on the left to the succeeding cases to the right. The title can be repeated in each case if necessary but it is not desirable to do so because of repetition and poor utilization of exhibit space. A long title can bridge between cases, for example: *"A Pedigreed Selection of Gold and Silver Coins from the Philadelphia and Branch Mints from 1860 to 1873"* can flow from case to case or broken into two lines and placed in the first case.

Many exhibitors tend to make the title too small and buried in the text or much too large. Some exhibitors place the title flat in the case; others prefer tilting or raising the title for better viewing. This is a personal decision.

A statement of purpose or scope is often necessary to establish the boundaries of the exhibit. In many situations, the exhibit may contain only a few coins of a very large series, for example, the 1943 steel cent. These coins are part of the Lincoln series so a statement that the exhibit is only on the steel cents of 1943 and not the few struck in 1944, etc. The title and statement of scope establish the contents of the exhibit and the information and numismatic material must correspond to these statements. Some exhibitors include the scope statement as the beginning statement of the basic numismatic information segment. It is a personal decision.

Avoid **weasel** titles, such as, "My Favorite Coins" or "A Collection of Proof Sets" or "The Most Desirable Lincoln Cents." Be specific and state in the title exactly what the exhibit contains. The examples above could read: "My Favorite Coins are the Panda Coins of China" or "A Collection of Proof Sets From 1955 to 1964" or "The Lincoln Cents of WW-II."

The number of points awarded for the title and scope comprise only 5 points, but it establishes the entire purpose of the exhibit and must be selected accordingly.

The next item for consideration is: Basic numismatic information - 15 points.

The rating sheet states the numismatic specifications of the exhibited items should be described to the extent needed by the exhibit's scope to answer the questions of other numismatists. Examples: mint and mintages, composition, dimensions, designer, engraver and variety identifications.

The important part of the above is underlined. The basic information about the numismatic material, as outlined by the title and scope, must be included somewhere in the exhibit, generally under or near the numismatic material. This information could include the items listed in the examples above.

Exhibits of paper money and numismatic literature do not require the same kind of basic information that is required for coins, tokens medals, etc. In these exhibits, signatures, vignettes, plate engravers, security features, plate number location and census figures are also considered part of the basic numismatic information.

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There are exceptions when little of the above is necessary. Depending on the title and scope this information would not necessarily be important or included as part of basic numismatic information. For example, if the exhibit title is 'The Impact of Ancient Coins On Modern Coin Designs' or 'Architectural Designs on U. S. Commemorative Coins', most of the criteria discussed above are not appropriate. Germane to these titles could be the progression of coin designs from the ancient to the Middle Ages to modern coinage or styles of building designs associated with the commemorative issues.

The basic numismatic information segment is worth 15 points and merits an aggressive effort to include all the pertinent data to explain the numismatic material as outlined in the title and scope.

Special numismatic information - 15 points

The rating sheet states: Enough additional information should be given to answer the questions of a general viewer. Examples: historic, biographic, geographic, economic, artistic, and bibliographic information.

This category relates to the people side of the exhibited material. Topics such as: biographic information about the sculptors, or engravers, or signers of paper currency, or monarchs, or rulers, or statutes that effected the issue, or mint locations, or economic conditions during the time the material was produced, or important mining sites, or the reason for issuing or making the numismatic item(s), translation of foreign words or phrases on the subject material, or stories relating to hoards or recent discoveries, or explaining the minting process, or explain how error coins are made, or anything relating to the numismatic material that may be of interest to the viewer.

- Pictures are often used to illustrate or enhance exhibits, such as showing portraits of individuals or buildings or some special event that is related to the numismatic material. Often, they are much too large or too small to effectively work into an exhibit. It is worth the time and expense to get color copies of the appropriate size.
- A list of reference works used in researching the exhibit must be provided and placed in the exhibit. Generally, it is placed at the end or last case of the exhibit in the lower right corner. The name of the author, title of the book or publication, the publisher and date are generally listed.

It is easy to overwhelm the exhibit with special information and pictures, so select only the more important items to illustrate or explain specific aspects of the exhibit. With proper selection and judicious editing, a high point score can be obtained in this 15-point category. This concludes the 35-point numismatic portion of the exhibit.

Creativity and Originality - 10 points

The rating sheet states: The exhibit should be novel and imaginative.

This is perhaps the most difficult criterion to satisfy because most ideas and themes have been applied to numismatic exhibits over these many years. As 'faint heart never won fair girl,' it is always a challenge to tackle this category optimistically. Much can be done with the layout of the material and use of ancillary objects to illustrate the material in the exhibit.

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The specific items can be displayed on different levels, giving the exhibit a three-dimensional effect, or the background material can be designed to further illustrate the theme of the exhibit. For example: a farm layout painted on the background material was the principal tool to illustrate medals depicting barnyard animals. Another exhibitor used a toy train and tracks to illustrate a "hobo nickel" exhibit. Another idea, which required much work and carpentry skills, allowed the viewer of the exhibit to rotate the coins from outside the case. These examples illustrate the intent of this criterion.

- It is difficult to effectively use mirrors to show the reverse of coins or other objects that may require viewing of both sides. There is no guarantee that exhibits will be placed under lighting favorable to the application of mirrors in exhibit halls at conventions. Copper coins are most difficult because of the dark color; silver and gold coins can be effectively shown but with difficulty. Some exhibitors have effectively used mirrors with some success particularly when a two-tier approach was used. The coins were placed on a transparent support and the mirror placed below and because the arrangement involved the entire exhibit case, sufficient light was available to illuminate the reverse side reasonably well. This is one category where ingenuity and creativity pay big dividends.
- Follow proper flag etiquette when displaying the American flag in the exhibit.

This is a 10-point category and worth special attention to generate as many points as possible.

Attractiveness - 10 points

The rating sheet states: The exhibit should be neat, well designed and eye-catching, the color scheme should be pleasing and effective. The title and text should be easy to read and not dingy from repeated display.

Type size: The selection of legible type size and typeface is very important. The exhibit should be easy to read even in poor lighting. Not all convention sites are blessed with uniform bright lights and no auxiliary lighting is permitted. The location of an exhibit within the confines of the convention exhibit area is at the discretion of the exhibit chair, not the exhibitor. Many exhibitors use standard typewriter text, anything smaller should not be used.

Another important aspect of the printed text is the style of the type font. Some are very difficult to read: others may be too gaudy or flashy. Some examples:

All the fonts illustrated above are 14 point. The last font is close to what the majority of the people are accustomed to seeing in newsprint and is a favorite with exhibitors. The text should be concise and easily understood. Long lines of text should be avoided in favor of two columns of shorter lines.

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Review and comments on text preparation:

- Select a simple text face; use more ornate fonts for titles or subheads and then only, if they are legible.
- Do not use more than two families of type.
- Be sure the type is large enough to read with ease in poor light.
- Allow adequate space between lines of text.
- Always use upper and lower case for text, reserving capital letters for titles or subheadings.
- Use justified text only if word spacing can be controlled, otherwise use "flush left, ragged right" text. Try both formats and select the most attractive,
- Break up large blocks of text into smaller paragraphs Skip a line between paragraphs and/or indent the first line of new paragraphs.
- Keep the width of your paragraphs to 6 to 8 inches, depending on the type size. Long lines are difficult to read.
- Proofread the text at least three times. Check spelling.

Backgrounds: The background material must fill the entire bottom surface of the exhibit case. The dimensions of the exhibit case are spelled out in the exhibit rules. The type of material used is a personal decision but it must be neatly positioned within the exhibit case. Some exhibitors use a fabric, others use poster board or plastic. Any material can be used as long as it is attractive and covers the bottom of the exhibit case. The eternal problem with background material is transporting it. Some exhibitors cut the material in two or four pieces so it will fit in a suitcase; or roll the material on cylinders for easy packing. Still others prefer the full-size rigid format. Regardless of the method used, the background must be attractive and complement the color scheme of the exhibit.

Collateral material: Collateral material can be any item(s) used to enhance the exhibit. Choose these items with care so as not to clutter or crowd the exhibit. The items selected should relate to the exhibit as basic or special information. For example: An exhibit on Civil War tokens could include toy soldiers or replica artillery pieces or other Civil War memorabilia. At a recent convention, an exhibit of coins related to animals, Animal Coins, used several stuffed animals to jazz up the exhibit; it was a prize-winning entry, innovative and pleasing to view. Exhibits of love tokens often use valentines and error coin exhibits use drawings or pictures of the minting process to illustrate the text as collateral material. Be conservative in using this type material and don't overwhelm the exhibit.

Story cards: Story cards are the boards or material on which the text of the exhibit is written. Inexperienced exhibitors tend to use typing paper and find that during the course of the exposition it will curl like a banana, distracting from the attractiveness of the exhibit. There are several solutions to prevent the curling caused by the lighting and humidity in the exhibit area. The most common is to place some sort of frame over the text to keep it flat. It can be a picture frame with the text inside or simply mat board available from any picture frame or photo shop. This is an inexpensive solution and attractive, if cut properly, and can add color to the exhibit. Another approach is to use coated paper stock for the printed text. Coated paper stock is best purchased from the local print shop, which can provide guidance in using this kind of paper. It can be used without any kind of frame and is also available in some colors, although a bit

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pricey. Should story cards larger than the regular 8-1/2 x 11 common paper size be necessary, again, visit the local print shop for special sizes of paper.

Color: The use of color is a tried and true technique to attract attention and is used universally by advertisers. The same holds true for numismatic exhibits and the proper color selection can determine the score received for this category. Red is a preferred color in advertising but may not be the best selection for a particular numismatic exhibit.

For example, an exhibit of Olympic material can be placed on a white background because the Olympic flag has the Olympic rings on a field of white. The exhibit can be further color coded by using a green tinged story card for the Summer Games and a blue tinged story card for the Winter Games.

An exhibit of gold coins could be exhibited on a red background or blue or green or even black depending on the mood of the exhibit text and material. If the exhibit is of a solemn nature (funeral or disaster materials), a darker color scheme could better serve the mood of the exhibit. If the material suggests an Art Deco or Art Nouveau mood, red or light green is a likely choice.

For silver coins combinations of blue, black or even light gray seem to work well, giving an elegant appearance. Copper or dark material is the most difficult to complement color wise. Suggested colors are various shades of brown, green or yellow. Color schemes for paper money exhibits should be subtler, so as not to detract from the numismatic material; of course, an exhibit of Santa Claus notes must be on a background of red. From the above discussions, it is obvious that color selection is not a well-defined science and is mostly a personal decision depending on the aura the exhibitor wishes to convey to the viewer.

Balance - 10 points

The judging sheet states: The numismatic items, the information, and the related materials in the exhibit should be balanced and related to the exhibit's scope.

Balance as reflected in the statement above relates to the quantity of the three principal parts of the exhibit: the text, numismatic material and collateral material. The three should be balanced in respect to the scope of the exhibit and not be overwhelmed by one of the three. In many instances, the text is a large part of the exhibit while the numismatic material may consist of only a hand full of coins. Paper money exhibits may contain lots of notes or currency with little text. These two examples may be extreme, but not unusual. If it is necessary to include lots of text in an exhibit, it may be prudent to segregate it by degrees of importance. This can be accomplished several ways by using color flags or visual stops or different type (font) size to add a bit of life to the exhibit. Use collateral material that is appropriate to the scope of the exhibit without cluttering or crowding it.

Completeness - 5 points

The exhibit should present all of the numismatic material necessary to support the title and the statement of scope. Allowances should be made for lack of material that is not generally available to collectors or for which there is insufficient exhibit space.

The exhibit should be as complete as possible for the average collector. Although the explanation above suggests that the evaluation of the exhibit should reflect a benevolent score if material is not exhibited, in real life, points will be deducted if the exhibit is not complete as

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outlined by the scope in the introductory statement. For example: two exhibits of Indian cents, one with and one without the 1877. Assuming they are complete otherwise, the exhibit with the 1877 must be rated higher in completeness than the exhibit without the 1877. The completeness category score is related directly to the scope statement as outlined in the introductory statement.

Degree of difficulty - 10 points

The exhibit should show dedication to collecting, in that the numismatic material or the related information was difficult to assemble or to present. Examples: multiple rare numismatic pieces, new research, a collection that took years to assemble.

The Degree of Difficulty category awards points to the exhibitor that worked diligently over many years to assemble a collection of obscure rare coins or paper money. For example: A collection of gold medals from each of the modern Olympic Games or a die variety set of bust half dollars. Both of these examples require years of effort to complete and may not be possible for the average collector, but the effort as presented in an exhibit can be rewarded by a high score. A collection of two-cent pieces or Franklin half dollars or any current numismatic series is not considered a difficult enterprise since most are readily available and therefore, not a candidate for a high point award. The serendipitous find of an obscure or unknown medal or token or coin in a dealer's junk box does not necessarily qualify as a point getter unless much research is required to positively identify and attribute the numismatic item.

Condition - 10 points

The numismatic material should be the best that is reasonably available to the exhibitor, who may make a statement about availability for the benefit of viewers or judges.

The condition of the material exhibited must be of the highest state of preservation available. Numismatic material of lesser grades will erode the point score. Scarce numismatic items that are known only in lower grades must be so stated in the text. For example: The Ugly Head cent, in poor condition, in a collection of Colonial coins should be identified as one of the better specimens known, since all known specimens are of low grade. It is important to identify any unusual aspects of any of the numismatic material in the exhibit. If it is a condition census coin or a poor specimen, but the best affordable, tell the world about it.

Rarity - 10 points

Rarity is judged by the number of like pieces believed to exist, not by the value of individual pieces.

An excellent illustration of the above explanation is the 1879 flowing hair Stella. It is a high-priced coin but not rare. One or two are readily available at most regional or national conventions or in many of the monthly auctions held by the several auction houses. Many medals or decorations are "one of a kind" items and, although inexpensive, command a high point score for rarity. A statement indicating the degree of rarity of the numismatic material can be stated in the text.

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Illustration

The following exhibit was assembled by the students enrolled in the Learn To Build an Award Winning Exhibit, at the American Numismatic Association Summer Seminar at Colorado Springs. The exhibit was entered in competition at the ANA Money Show in Chicago, in 1999. The exhibit received the 1st place award in the tokens category. It is displayed here as a review of the guidelines explained or reviewed above.

The exhibit told the story of the Civil War tokens issued by a Samuel H. Zahm of Lancaster, Pennsylvania during the early part of the conflict.

Title: The title of the exhibit was "Samuel H. Zahm's Civil War Tokens." One-inch plastic letters were attached to a red poster board backing with an adjustable hinge and positioned at the top of the exhibit case at a forty-five-degree angle for easy reading. The plastic letters (large and small capitals) were spray painted a 'sand' color to complement the other colors of the exhibit. The title can also be computer generated but the colors may not be as vivid as with actual dimensional letters and numbers.

The scope of the exhibit is defined in the first paragraph of the left storyboard and reads:

Civil War Tokens - A Solution to A Problem

What do you do if you are a store owner and have no coins for making change? In 1860, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was populated mainly by frugal, industrious farmers of German ancestry. The "putting back," hoarding, of coins, books, Indian artifacts, and other items was widespread in this stable economy. This hoarding increased drastically as the Civil War continued, leading to a coin shortage and problems making change. These problems were noted starting in July of 1862 in the Lancaster Inquirer, the local newspaper. The problem became so acute that one man, who had bought several pounds of butter and had his dollar note refused for payment because the merchant lacked change, became upset, emptied the butter out on the pavement, and said that "he wouldn't take any butter today." Similar scenes were repeated daily, resulting in "thrifty housewives (who) went home with long faces, light baskets and heavy hearts."

Samuel H. Zahm, an enterprising Civil War grocer in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, tried to solve the problem by issuing tokens that could be used as change. They also advertised his new sideline enterprise as a coin dealer.

This exhibit shows Zahm's tokens and tells about the man and his "money."

Basic Numismatic Information: The storyboard on the right side of the exhibit outlined the numismatic information pertinent to the subject. The obverse and reverse designs were detailed including the diesinker, diagnostics and die erosion during striking. Diameters, weights and individual specific gravities were provided for each token. Rarity and probable mintages were also mentioned along with the first newspaper advertisement announcing Zahm's new venture as a coin dealer.

An example of the numismatic information on the right-hand storyboard reads:

(The 4th paragraph). This token has a diameter of 19.5 mm (approximately the size of the US

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small cent) and a plain edge. It comes in three different metals and is listed by Fuld as number 525A 1a-1f (1a = copper, 1b = brass, 1e = white metal, and 1f = silver). Although Fuld lists silver specimens, he also notes, "All W-M pieces seen of this issue have a light silvering and no authentic silver specimens have been observed - all were plated W-M pieces." The current review of this token verifies his remarks.

Special Numismatic Information: The storyboard on the left of the exhibit related the life of Samuel H. Zahm. His family, schooling, business ventures, politics, community service, travels and military status were outlined. The economic circumstances that necessitated the issuing of the token were also outlined.

Examples of special numismatic information are illustrated in the newspaper remarks.

Creativity and Originality: The physical layout of the exhibit was neither necessarily original nor creative but some of the material in the text was new and interestingly written. One aspect of the exhibit not observed by the viewer was a piece of sheet metal centered in the exhibit case under the background material and small magnets in the bases of the pedestals to keep them in their proper place should the exhibit case be bumped.

Attractiveness: The dominant color of the exhibit is red: the most used color in the advertising world. The second choice was green. The two storyboards were of coated 60-pound stock 8'1/2" x 13-1/2". The tokens were mounted on 1" pedestals spray painted a sand color to match the color of the paper used for the storyboards. As noted above, the letters used in the title were of the same color. Three enlarged pictures of the tokens were also part of the exhibit, one obverse and two reverses. A picture of S. H. Zahm was the centerpiece centered below the title. Two of his advertising cards were placed above each storyboard to balance the exhibit and add a bit of trivia to the exhibit. Captions under each token listed the Fuld number and type of metal alloy. A small bibliography card was centered at the bottom of the case listing references or other information that could be helpful to anyone wanting to learn more about the tokens in the exhibit.

Balance: A one case exhibit for four tokens is a reasonable compromise. A few pictures were included in the exhibit and the selection of a large typeface provided an easy read of the text.

Completeness: The exhibit is complete as outlined in the text and scope of the exhibit. There are three different types of the Zahm token and each is exhibited including one additional token showing the obverse design. The subject of a silver specimen was also addressed in the text as mentioned above.

Degree of Difficulty: The Zahm token is listed as an R-4 (200 to 500 pieces) or R-5 (75 to 200 pieces) depending on the type. Most are in reasonably good condition ranging from extra fine to mint state. Much of the material in the text was new information on both Zahm and the token. For example: the activities and travels of Zahm, the local economic conditions during the Civil War, the striking progression of the tokens, and corresponding die erosion illustrated extensive research in preparing the text of the exhibit.

Condition: No statement in the exhibit relates to the condition of the exhibited tokens. It was just a visual observation of the numismatic material displayed.

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Rarity: Indication of the rarity of the Zahm token was given in the text suggesting an issue of 70 to perhaps 500 depending on the type of token, either the brass, copper or white metal piece.

The scores given the Zahm exhibit at the Chicago ANA convention were 93/95/95, a relatively high score for an exhibit on a Civil War token. The score is attributed to the detailed information contained in the text relating to the token, its issuer, and the presentation of the information.

Chronology for Developing A Numismatic Exhibit

The following is a guide or check list for developing an educational exhibit for competition at any numismatic activity that sponsors or solicits competitive exhibits. It may be necessary to become a member of the organization to enjoy the privilege of exhibiting, as is the case for competitive exhibiting at the American Numismatic Association conventions. The requirements are simple; complete the membership application, have it signed by an ANA member and send it with the proper registration fee to the ANA, 818 N. Cascade Ave., Colorado Springs, CO.

Preliminary steps:

- Get the exhibit rules
- Choose a category within which to exhibit.
- Apply to the exhibit chairperson for exhibit space.

Building the exhibit:

- Select a theme.
- Research the numismatic and biographic materials.
- Write exhibit text.
- Edit text, check/correct spelling.
- Lay out exhibit according to the space allotment as defined in the exhibit rules.
- Proof read text, check spelling, make final layout.
- Make map of exhibit layout and list of contents.
- Pack exhibit. Double check all exhibit items as they are packed. Don't leave anything behind.
- Check all exhibit items for proper placement and alignment. *
- Check the glass of the exhibit cases for finger marks and dust and clean if necessary. The exhibit chair generally has the necessary supplies to clean the case.
- Enjoy the convention.
- The American Numismatic Association has several seminars devoted to exhibiting, judging or review of the exhibits and judging procedures. Participation in the practice judging activity is beneficial to better understanding the art of exhibiting and judging.
- The exhibit judging procedure requires three judges to evaluate the competitive exhibits. The rating sheets are generally returned to the exhibitor and may contain remarks both complimentary and constructive. Review the evaluation sheets and seek guidance in bettering the exhibit or explaining scores by contacting the chief judge or any of the other judges or exhibitors. Most exhibitors and judges are willing to discuss or critique exhibits.

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*The following is a short list of common mistakes made by exhibitors in placing exhibits that seem to be repeated time and again. 1) The numismatic material is not related to the caption (meaning the numismatic material or the caption is in the wrong position). 2) The coin or token is placed upside down or the wrong side shown. 3) The most heartbreaking and humiliating mistake is realizing that a few pieces of the exhibit are still at home.

- Where to find it: Exhibit building requires not only knowledge relating to the numismatic information, both basic and special, but also color coordination, proper use of language, spelling and the proper selection and arrangement of the exhibit materials. In most cases, the local book, hobby, art or arts & crafts shop is the source for many of these kinds of supplies.