

# THINK LIKE A CURATOR

How to Design an Exhibition



**THEARTGALLERY**  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

# Vocabulary

**Curator** – an art specialist responsible for a museum's collection and exhibitions.

**Exhibition designer** – designs exhibition spaces, paints walls, arranges artwork, usually under the supervision of the curator.

**Center line** – The imaginary line exhibition designers use to hang artworks. The middle of the painting usually falls between 54 and 62 inches.

**Accent wall** – A single wall painted in a contrasting color from the rest of the space. It focuses viewer's attention and directs people around the space.

**Anchor Piece** – usually the largest or strongest pieces of an exhibition

**Wall text** – information provided by the curator for each artwork. It is the curator's choice as to how much information is to be provided.

# Select a Theme

Decide the *theme* for your exhibition. A *theme* is a unifying idea or motif.

The broader the theme, the easier it is to find works that fit the theme. The narrower it is, the more cohesive your show will look and feel.

## EXAMPLE

Printmaking vs. contemporary silk screen rock posters = A VERY large pool of work to choose from vs. a smaller, more specific pool.

# Know Your Space

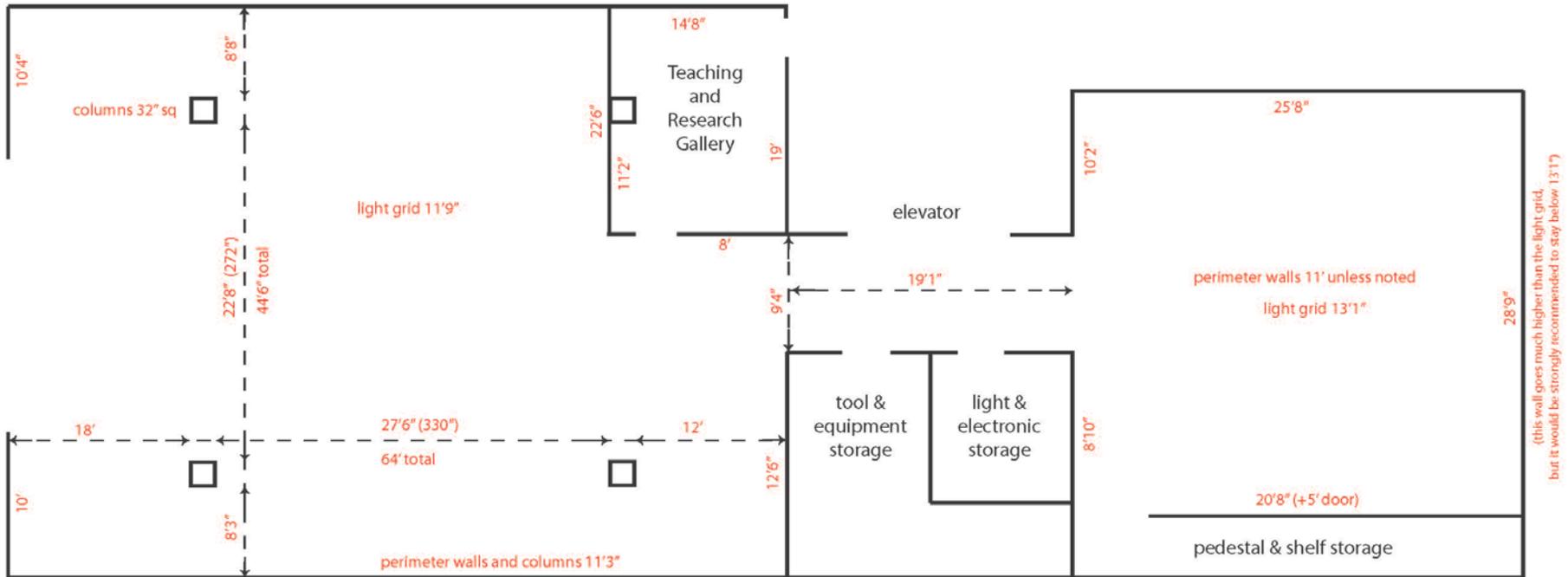
Know the parameters of your space, and let that guide how many pieces should be exhibited.

## **Think:**

- How many pieces will fit in the gallery?
- How does putting many pieces in an exhibition send a different message than putting just a few?

# Know Your Space

The Art Gallery  
The University of Maryland  
301-405-2763



(diagram not to scale)

# Providing Information

Think of curating an exhibition like writing an essay – you want to present your work in a certain way.

## **Think:**

- Would you like the work set up chronologically?
- If so, will you provide a timeline?
- Do you want to provide other content? (Photographs, other artworks, historical objects, quotes from the artist, etc.)

# Selecting Artworks

Start by choosing a lot (30 to 40) of artworks.  
Next, narrow down your selection to best fit  
your theme.

*When you do a research paper, you don't use all of those sources you read but choose what supports your thesis the strongest.*

## **Think:**

What artworks best tell the story of your exhibition?

# Write a Label

*Wall texts* are a way to directly communicate with the viewer.

## Standard Labels

Includes:

- Name of the artist
- Title of Work
- Dimensions of the object
- What the artwork is made of (the media)
- Date of creation
- Owner of work

## Didactic (or extended) Labels

Includes:

- All of the information as a standard label PLUS additional information on the work (e.g. history, reason why it fits in the exhibition) related to the exhibition theme

# Exhibition Design

When designing your exhibition, always keep your viewer in mind.

Just like in writing, you must **ask yourself**:

- Who is my audience?
- What do I want to communicate to them?
- How do I do that in the gallery space?

*These questions will help guide your design decisions.*

# Pick a Wall Color

The color of the walls can effect the mood and shape of the space

White walls are clean and sterile and suggest the experience is mainly about the work.

Painting an entire room can change the feel of the space.

## **Think:**

- How will a wall color affect the mood of the space?
- What happens when I paint all the walls black? Bright yellow? Deep Red?
- Should I use one color or more than one?

# Hanging Your Work

## Center Line

- The institutional standard
- Artworks are hung with the center of the artwork hitting between 54" and 62"



## Salon Style

- Artworks are hung from ceiling to floor



## Think:

- What are the pros/cons of these two styles?
- What will help me convey the theme of my exhibition?

# Guide Visitors Around the Space

Most people walk into a gallery and go to the right. As a result, curators often use that fact and an *accent wall* to lead their viewer into and through the space.

## Think:

- How can I lead my viewer into and through my show?
- If my viewer went the wrong way, would my theme still work? Why or why not?

# Guide Visitors Around the Space

When you start to arrange the artworks, certain pieces will stand out as *anchor pieces* (often the strongest or largest artworks).

Select three or four anchor pieces and spread them out in the gallery. (Do not group them together!) This will help steer your viewer through the space.

## Think:

- What makes this artwork an anchor piece?
- How will this anchor piece direct my viewer through the space?

# Get Creative!

Think about activities or walls that ask the visitor to join in or somehow contribute to the exhibition.

## Think:

- How can I engage my visitors?
- After viewing the work, how can I get my viewer to respond?

**START PLANNING!**

# Resources

Find a great list of museum definitions here:

<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/5aa/5aa24.htm>

Find SketchUp Tutorials Here:

<http://www.sketchup.com/learn/videos>