

GUIDE TO MANAGING HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Developing a significant collection

Exhibitions on a shoestring

Daisy Searls

The aim of this section to assist small museums and historical societies professionalise the look of their displays and keeping costs to a minimum.

Improvements can come through thoughtful selection of themes and objects as well as finessing displays with clean, clear labelling. There are benefits for visitors and members alike. For the visitors a thoughtfully laid out display can stimulate ideas on a subject they may not have encountered before. A memorable experience is one which can illicit return visits, ongoing support and positive publicity. For the members and volunteers of a society, seeing their collection shown to advantage will underscore the importance of their endeavours, encourage perseverance and perhaps even be a catalyst for new ways of thinking about their collection.

The shortage of storage in historical societies is a perennial problem. For some the only way to store the large proportion the collection may actually be within a display as 'open storage'. Visitors might be familiar with displays crammed full of objects and while there is some charm to this notion of a 'cabinet of curiosities', cramming a showcase full of 'stuff' does not an exhibition make.

It is my experience that people— members, volunteers, visitors and directors are surprised at how much thought and particularly time goes into preparing a single cabinet, let alone a whole exhibition. For most societies time is one commodity that is freely given. It would seem that using this free commodity to advantage could make an exhibition or display for less cost than most people think.



Whether implicit or explicit, interpretation is embedded in the act of display – in how a thing looks, what surrounds it, what is said or not said about it.¹

Educators on Exhibit Teams: a New Role, a New Era. Lisa C Roberts

In revamping an existing display or planning a new display there is a list of considerations - space, theme, style, interpretation, selection of objects, object conservation, labelling, installation. Each of these consideration affect, reflect and relying on each other.

Writing an *Exhibition Brief* is effective way of setting out the priorities and guiding the exhibition planner through the how, *what*, *where* and *when* of exhibitions and displays. There is a useful template available for Exhibition design brief in *Exhibitions: a practical guide for small museums and galleries* -Museums Australia (Victoria) 2007.

Theme

In selecting a theme or topic one must consider - what is the display for?

- Is it to promote history? Are you highlighting a local personality or event? Is it to celebrate a forthcoming anniversary? Is it temporary or permanent?
- Will it promote a facet of your organization? Showcase your collection, or your expertise at whatever you do and alert the community to your resource.

Is it to educate and or entertain?

- At what level are you pitching the information? In other words are you intending to tailor it to a particular audience? Even if you feel you are not specializing it is worth considering the kinds of people will be viewing it.
- Is the exhibition to entertain? Is it a program for the school holidays or an art exhibition or part of a festival?

Space

Different societies have different space constraints - consider the exhibition area available.

- Is it to fill a foyer?
- A room or a building?
- Is it single wall, cabinet or showcase?

Will it be temporary or permanent?

- Perhaps it can be a permanent position with changing content.

Styles of display

How will I use the objects and labels together in the exhibition? Here are just some examples of common display configurations.

Contemplative display - showing objects which are inspiring or beautiful on which the visitor can contemplate. The kind of display used in most art galleries.

Didactic display – directly informs and educates the visitor about a story or topic. The kind of display often to describe the lifecycle of the frog.

Reconstruction display – Illustrates a fact or story by means of constructing a genuine or imaginary scene. (Tableaux)

Grouped display – Objects from a single topic grouped together. The kind of display many are familiar with as it is found in museums all over the world. Cabinets full to the brim with arrowheads and bone fragments; easy to organize and requires little thought, but can be the least useful except to specialists.

Visible storage – similar to the above and less defined.

Discovery displays – There is no overall order given to the display but visitors are encouraged to go unprompted or prompted by various means and make discoveries of their own. The prompting cues might be given in the form of a booklet or soundguide.

Objects

Be selective in the choice of objects – by using fewer or single items to illustrate your point. For the most part the saying ‘less is more’ holds true for putting a point across. If it is true that *a picture tells a thousand words* than putting too many things together creates a cacophony of messages.

Selecting objects for a chosen topic is obviously governed by availability and limitations of your own collection. Selecting an object is moulded the interpretation of the topic but it is important to consider conservation and how any item should be displayed safely. When displaying photographs and works on paper try using scanned facsimiles instead. Make sure 3D objects are placed safely in showcases and secure them with mounts or stands or lay them in a position where they cannot fall if there is a possibility of the showcase being bumped. Make sure light levels do not pose a threat to objects in a showcase. Use window shades or shrouds coverings when the building is not in use.

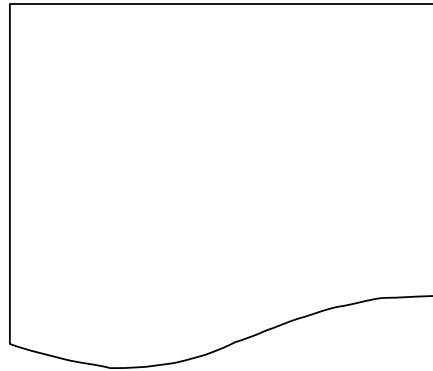
Interpretation

An empty bottle in a collection might represent many things. For instance, a local industry, a technique of preservation unique in its day, a local entrepreneur whom founded an empire on the product it contained which went on to fund a railway, a religious holiday, a nostalgic take on a contemporary popular topping or a milestone in medical history.

Consider how the objects in your collection convey the stories or information you want to communicate?

Making a list of all the different aspects of your topic is a way creating an outline for your story, using each facet of the topic like chapters or sections of a book. A display or exhibition can explore many or examine just one.

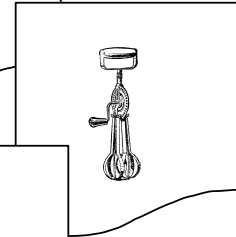
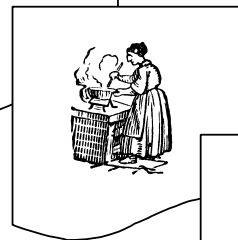
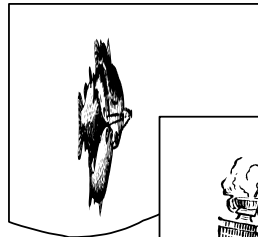
Using food as an example



Highlight and contrast old with the new or focus on a forthcoming food festival or a local food industry.

The history of food

- Hunting and gathering
- Cooking
- Equipment
- Preserving
- Traditional meals
- Feasting/festivals
- Customs



Hunting and gathering – ingredients eg fish or fishing

- The popular local fish
- Environmental changes to your region – maybe fish are extinct
- how the local Indigenous community fished
- If it isn't fish it might be some other food

Cooking – wood stove

- Kitchen design. Issues of fire and smoke (separate kitchen building). How few conveniences there were in the past.
- Examine the old gender bias in the kitchen compare with current standards. Research how many hours women spent cooking
- Find some ‘ancient’ recipe that might have been popular using unusual ingredients.
- Has immigration influenced cooking menus in your region.
- Talk about variations or improvements in stove manufacturing

Equipment - egg beater

- Bring on nostalgia! Old cooking equipment is common and lies dormant in many cabinets – mainly because youngins don’t know what they are looking at and oldies already know. Your organisation might have something better than an old eggbeater but give whatever it is some adulation. Remember it was a ground breaking device at the time.
- Perhaps there is a local or personal story about the item
- Use it as a prop alongside the ‘ancient’ recipe.

Preserving -pickling

- Pickling was an important form of food preserving. Early settlers staple diet had many forms of pickled food.
- Is there a local product?
- Discuss forms of food preservation before refrigeration

Traditional meals – festivals customs - medieval banquet

- Importance of food sharing in different cultures.
- Local events where there were feasts or banquets
- Family feast (Christmas dinner – dishes and incidents)
- How did the cross get on a cross bun?
- Compare current eating habits

Labelling

Most visitors get their information from the museum text and yet research shows that most visitors only 10% of that text available to read. Some visitors will want lots of information in the form of text and some find the stories drown in text, feel alienated, lost and give up. It does no harm trying to find a balance and one way is to produce brochures or information sheets with additional information to give ‘hungry’ visitors what they want. These brochures have been found also to assist volunteers with quick reference for visitors asking questions. They can be designed to be reused. See *Other forms of labelling* later in this section.

For the overall scheme of your display or exhibition the conventional system of text is to create a hierarchy of labels.

The Introductory Panel recommended no more than 150 words

- This panel introduces your visitors to a broad topic. It might come at the beginning of a permanent or temporary display and should give visitors an overview of the ideas and objects they are about to view.

The Section Panel can introduce a section of your topic no more than 200 words

- For example - if the big story is Tea you might have a section on ceramics and the development of the teapot.
- It will be a paragraph or two and lead visitors to cases with these separate items

Object Labels should be no more than 40 words

- This third level of labeling will be a description of a particular item.
- The object, the maker, the date, the material it is made from.
- This label may explain why the object is significant

Text size

- Recommended size is 16 point certainly no smaller than 14

Font

- No more than 2 font styles per label and really no more than 3 styles overall.
- Certainly try decorative font styles for your Topic heading but make sure it is not overly ornate – when in doubt be restrained.

- The general rule in typography states that a san serif typeface is best for headings (eg. Arial or Helvetica) and large sections or body text read better with a serif typeface (eg. Times, or Times New Roman)
- Headings may be in bold
- These days it is simple to add images onto labels. This may assist with a description or highlight the topic. Used like a logo can bring continuity to a particular exhibition.

Colour

For readability black type on white background is best and clearest. While some suggest it can look too stark in an exhibition room where the walls might be painted a colour, the starkness can alert visitors better to the location of the information. There is a fashion to print the text on clear labels and then stick them on the wall so they blend with the wall better. This looks very smart but for some it can be impossible to read. A compromise might be to print on a pastel colour that is close to the colour of the wall.

Other forms of labelling

In one use of coloured labels, creating some labels in an exhibition a different colour can alert visitors to a certain level writing. For example a colour label might be directed at young visitors creating a trail of ideas which will appeal to them in particular. This kind of colour coding be done for any group.

If there are photographs on the walls of your society which do not tell a particular story – that they are there for storage or just because they have always been there. Have the courtesy of telling your visitors what they are. They do not require labels on

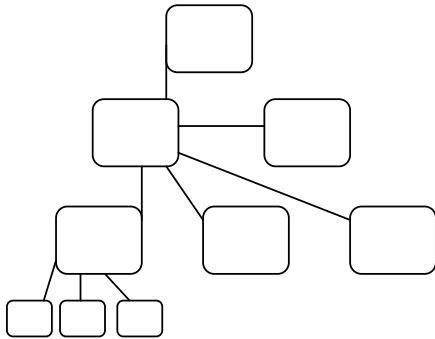
the wall next to each one. Create a sheet with thumbnail images (digital is easy these days) with a description of who or what they are if they are.

This kind of sheet or brochure can be used if more information is needed or wanted on particular objects or sections of the display. Laminate them and keep them at the entrance or in a plastic stand conveniently located. This system is particularly useful if there is an area of special interest within the topic of your exhibition. For instance if it is an exhibition on railways and the section is carriages, you might have a sheet on construction of carriages. These plasticised or laminated brochures can be reused. Consider printing brochures in different languages.

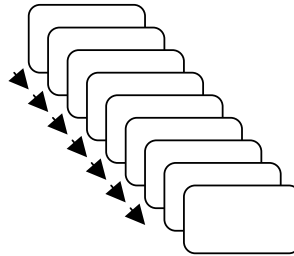
Save your text panel documents into a folder on your computer so that you can re-print or re-write at a later date. You will find the information very useful to save as it contains a comprehensive summary list of your work including a list of all the objects. It might be called on as a reference by a researcher or used as an outline of a report on the exhibition.

Appendix

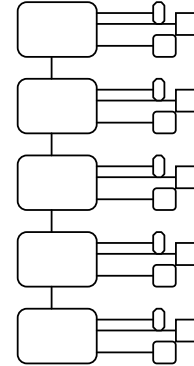
Examples of selecting a theme or topic and possible ways of interpretation



A



B



C

A. The example of the empty bottle the boxes show different aspects of the bottle in separate stories. Linked by the one object but branch into separate pockets.

B. Linear story – for example the lifecycle of the frog. A set of facts evolving in one direction A-Z.

C. Each box might represent a different year or different TV personality the smaller boxes to the side tell snippets of stories about each of them. They are all linked by kind (ie; TV personalities or years)

Using a particular feature of your collection. Provide the main facts and figures but in some small part of the display try and personalize them.

- If you are housed in a courthouse you might have a listing of when and who built it, and with this listing you might also include what your collection is used for and brief general description of what is in it. It might not contain things purely Judicial but it will highlight to people what you do and orient them to what they are standing in. To also capture their imagination you might also want a display on a particularly interesting (infamous) court case, court reporter, criminal or law person... lawyer, judge, witness.
- If you have predominantly paper based collection of archived documents and manuscripts, which amongst other things might be rich in newspapers, you could highlight that particular colourful part of the collection by a small display (of copies or sections) of the life and times of local journalists/editors, display an array of attention-getting headlines, stories that galvanized the local community into action. Highlight the research value of the resource (displays on how useful

local newspapers are in researching family history, local, national and international events and personalities. A small flow-chart in a display can show how to gather, requisite and used the documents and images in the collection.

- If you have a large photograph collection create slideshows on DVD of local themes. Parks, Personages, Pubs, Schools. These can be played on a loop on a computer screen. Alternately if there is not a computer screen, use scanned copies of photographs and create a 'flip book'. These can be handled freely and are interesting to the general public and useful for researchers.
- Partnership with an annual or special event. An example might be a small display to coincide with *Irish Week* or similar multicultural event. If it has a long history – a retrospective same event in previous years and how the event first started. If your collection happens to be maritime based, focus on all the Irish immigrant ships, or a particular Irish seaman, Irish sea shanty etc. Make sure you draw attention to your shopfront– you want to make sure people know you are included in the local festivities.
- if the town is holding a film festival then try and link in with some of the festivities by way of showing slide nights, lantern shows, old news reels, maybe make your building available to act as a venue for some event or talk.
- Well know public identity – Ned Kelly been to your town? God rest his soul.
- Showcase of your areas predominant features even if it is just the name of the town and why it was named... or a list of local landmarks.

Exhibition Kit

Art and office

Paper
Foam core
Enclosures
Card
Labels
Pencils
Cutters
Chalk
Perspex display stands
Scorer
Erasers
Adhesive corners
Velcro dots
Blue board Cutters
Mylar
Mylar book holds
Mylar enclosures
Metal ruler
Cutting Matt
Matt board
Acid free paper
Acid free tissue
Unbleached calico
Small sewing kit
Blue tac
CD
DVD
A4 adhesive labels (Avery)
Double sided tape
Beanbags weighted
JAC paper

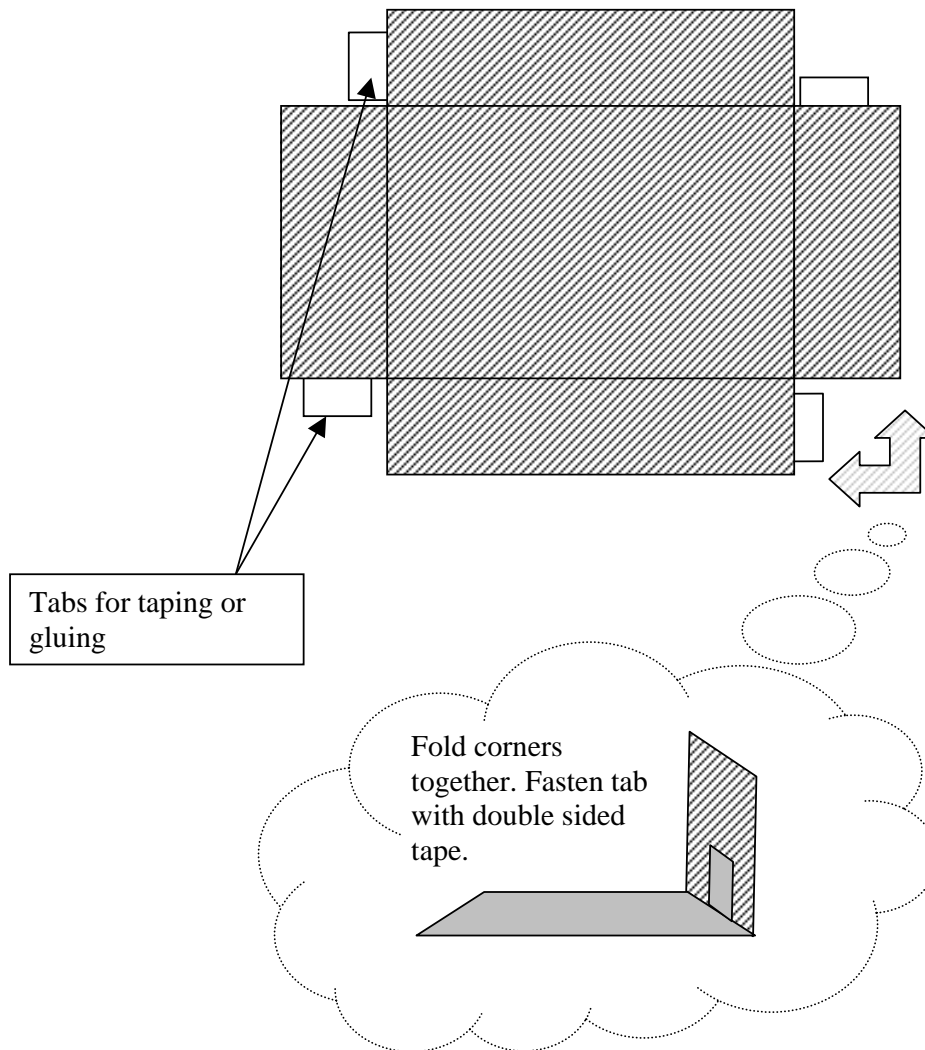
Templates and or diagrams for mounts
and stands

Props (Essentially all are props to
storytelling!)

Hardware

Picture hooks
D rings
Hanging wire
Velcro
Fishing line
Methylated spirits
White spirits
Eucalyptus oil
Windex
Screwdrivers
Hammer
Tape measure
Pliers
Large soft acrylic paintbrush
(for sweeping dust, cuttings and eraser
rubbings)

The basic box construction



tips.

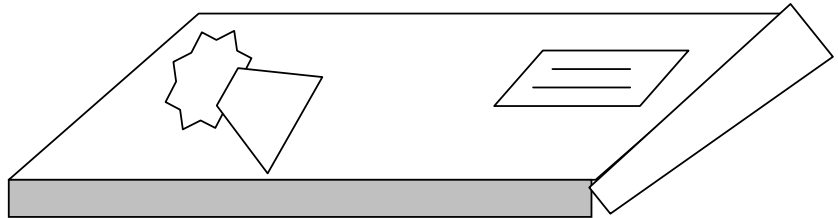
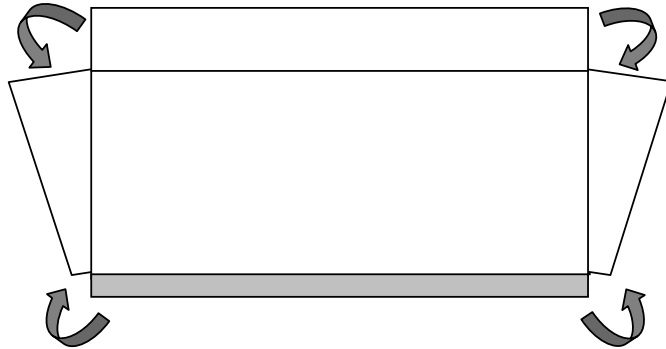
Try measuring to your own requirements
or
use a manufactured box as your guide to measurements.

Use acid free card or corrugated 'blue board', which is available through archival suppliers.

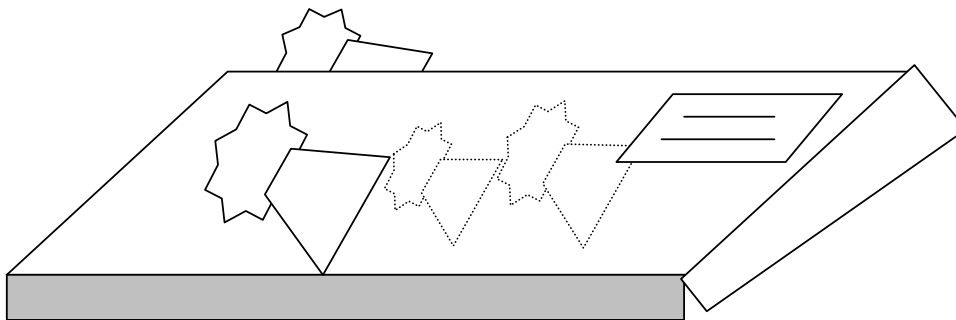
Score folds by holding a steel ruler along the fold line and without too much pressure run the dull edge of a dinner knife along the ruler's edge.

making variations to the sides of the box

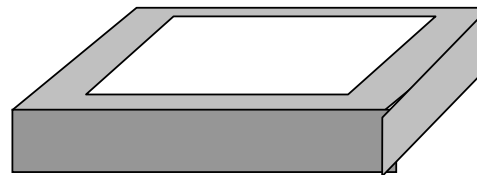
this shape becomes a shallow angled box which can be placed into a cabinet to hide and display objects.



Selecting a small number from a group of similar objects and hide the others underneath. This display conserves and stores items all at once.

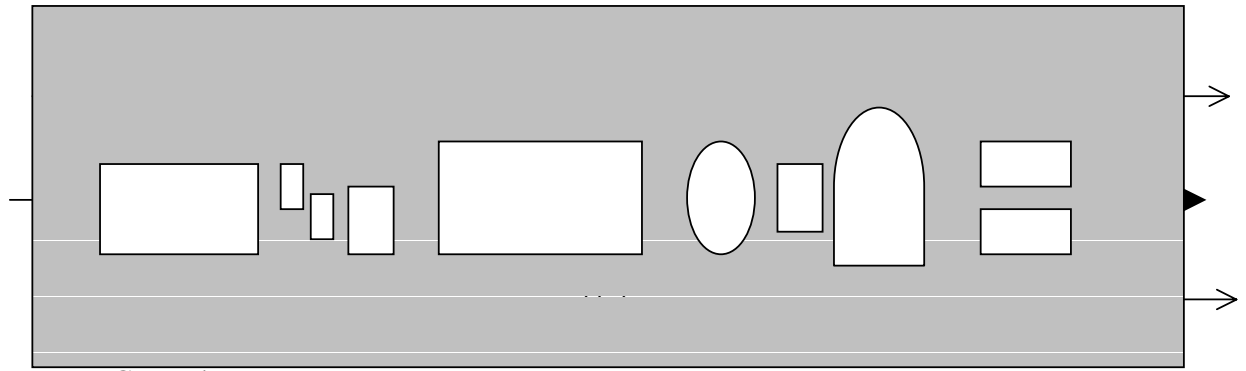


A box with a window made of acetate or mylar can become a display box and a storage box when not on display.

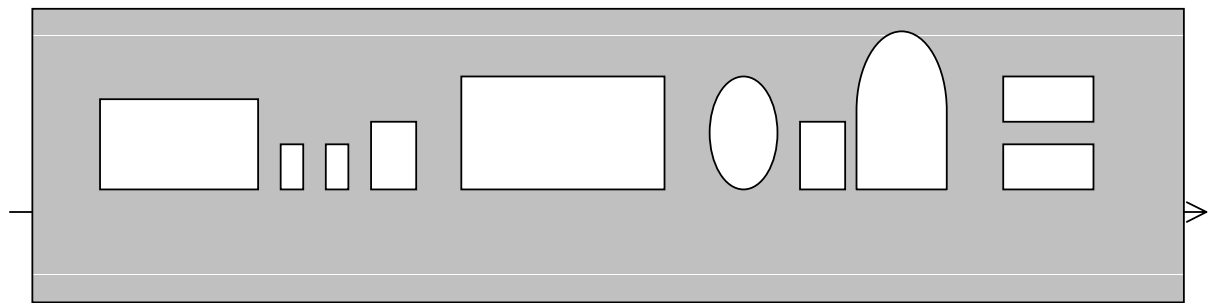


This is a strategy that can be used to cut down on handling items.

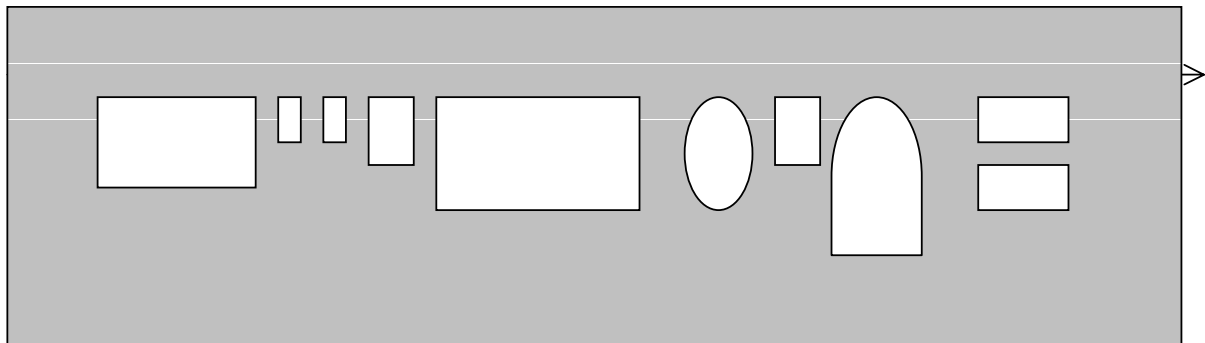
Suggestions for rationalizing a wall of pictures



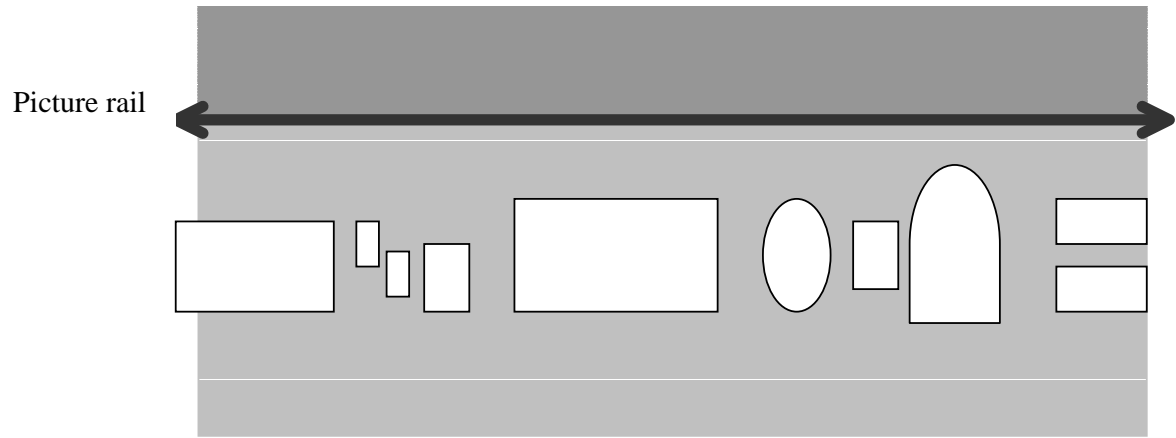
Centred



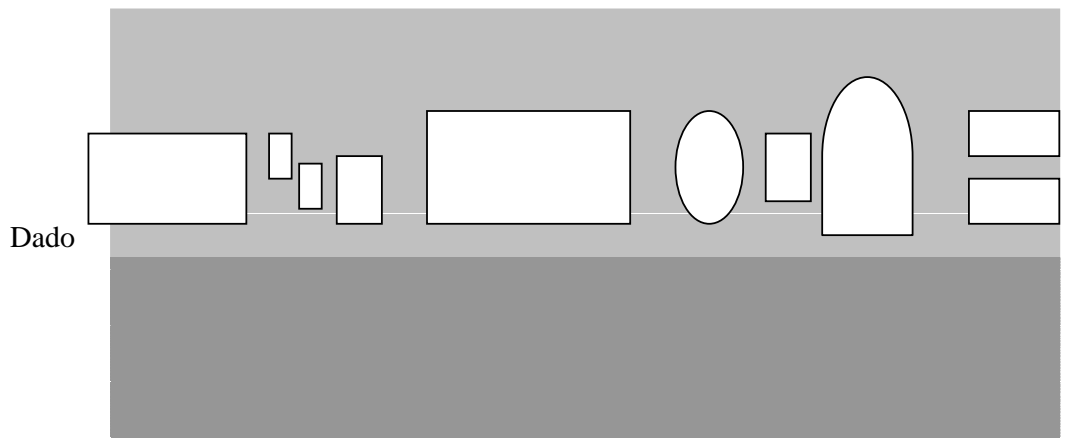
Anchored to the bottom



Pictures dangling from the top not really optimal



Centred drop from picture rail



Centred but anchored to the dado