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Journal of Museum Studies

Vol. 2/2 - 2025



Objects on the Move.
Unpacking the Narratives of Circulating Exhibitions 1900 -1953
Edited by: Paola Cordera

museum materials discussions

Journal of Museum Studies

Vol 2/2- 2025

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Exhibition *Made in Italy. Destinazione America 1945–1954* (Lucca, Fondazione Ragghianti, 2025). Detail of the section *Viaggio in Italia (The Italian Journey)*. Foto Alcide.

ISSN 3034-9699

<https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/v2-n2-2025>

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MMD - Museum Materials and Discussions is published biannually.

All issues are available online at mmdjournal.unibo.it

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Circulating Knowledge. Reassessing the Narratives of Traveling Exhibitions

Paola Cordera

Keywords:

20th-Century Traveling Exhibitions; Display Format; Cultural Transfer; Exhibition Strategies; Networks of Circulation

ABSTRACT:

This article examines debates on the genesis and evolution of traveling exhibitions, tracing how they came to be legitimized as an exhibition format starting in the mid-20th century. Long considered peripheral, these shows acquired significance both formally – through modular and standardized design solutions – and curatorially, as arenas for testing new modes of interpretation and communication. Publications and discussions of the 1950s framed them as experimental models, while acknowledging their practical limitations and outlining best practices. As these analyses evolved, the focus gradually shifted from questions of design, curatorial choices, and the safeguarding of objects toward a broader concern with the exhibitions' social role and their accountability to audiences. Given the challenges and limitations of fragmented documentation and scholarship focused on case studies, the article argues for the potential of transdisciplinary approaches to reposition traveling exhibitions within the broader history of exhibition practices and museology.

L'articolo ricostruisce il dibattito sulle esposizioni itineranti, mostrando come esse siano state riconosciute quale formato espositivo a metà del XX secolo. A lungo considerate marginali, queste mostre acquisirono rilievo tanto sul piano formale – attraverso soluzioni modulari e standardizzate – quanto su quello curatoriale, come luoghi di sperimentazione di modalità interpretative e comunicative. Le pubblicazioni e i dibattiti degli anni Cinquanta inquadrarono tali rassegne come modelli sperimentali, pur rilevandone criticità e proponendo pratiche per superarle. Con l'avanzare del dibattito, l'attenzione si spostò dalle questioni di allestimento, dalle scelte curatoriali e dalla tutela degli oggetti verso una più ampia riflessione sul ruolo sociale delle mostre e sulla responsabilità che esse assumevano nei confronti di pubblici. Alla luce delle criticità di una documentazione frammentaria e una storiografia per lo più limitata a studi di caso, l'articolo evidenzia le possibilità offerte da approcci transdisciplinari per inquadrare le mostre itineranti nel novero di una più ampia storia delle esposizioni e della museologia.

Opening Picture:

Exhibition *Made in Italy. Destinazione America 1945–1954* (Lucca, Fondazione Ragghianti, 2025). Detail of the section *Viaggio in Italia (The Italian Journey)*.
Foto Alcide

Paola Cordera

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<https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.3034-9699/22951>

Although traveling exhibitions hold considerable historical and cultural importance in the dissemination of visual culture, they have received relatively little scholarly attention within museum studies and within the field of *expographie* as defined by French museologist André Desvallées.¹ Their ephemeral nature, consistent with the impermanence of exhibition practices, does not fully explain their omission from studies of what Tony Bennett – writing at the intersection of cultural sociology and museum studies – has termed the “exhibitionary complex”.² Rather, this absence points to deeper structural biases in museological discourse, particularly in the ways forms of display are categorized and valued.

For the purposes of this essay, the term “traveling exhibitions” refers to exhibitions conceived from the outset to circulate between venues – initiated by larger institutions or agencies with an explicit agenda of cultural dissemination, diplomacy, or education – and designed for presentation in smaller or geographically dispersed locations.

Certain logistical and design traits of traveling exhibitions have likely contributed to their marginal status within prevailing narratives. These traits include their itinerant nature, demountable and repeatable formats, and the frequent use of hybrid materials – replicas, models, and visual reproductions in place of “originals”.³ Such qualities were often perceived as undermining the aura of authority associated with permanent or site-bound exhibitions, replacing the singularity of a one-time occasion with the predictability of a format designed for

repetition. These very features may have reinforced perceptions of such exhibitions as capitulations to mass culture: their “popular” dimension, ephemeral character, and reproducible formats seemed incompatible with the scholarly rigor and aesthetic discernment expected of the field, rendering them difficult to classify and easy to dismiss.

Furthermore, the dispersal of documentation – scattered among different institutions, and even across national boundaries – has compounded this invisibility. Because archival records are invariably fragmentary, the surviving material offers only partial glimpses. Yet it still holds ample potential to uncover unpublished sources and open new avenues of research. In many cases, photographic documentation is either extremely limited or absent; where it survives, it frequently depicts only the installation: a static arrangement of objects in an empty gallery (fig. 1), like a stage set awaiting its actors, giving little sense of the dynamic interplay between displays and audiences that animated the event. Such images can be invaluable, yet they are also incomplete, leaving researchers to imagine the “performance” without its participants. What substitutes for this gap is often equally problematic: traveling exhibitions were chiefly recorded in contemporary press accounts, which frequently reproduced material supplied by press offices with minimal alteration. This coverage rarely addressed local particularities and often omitted images, perhaps assuming that written narratives could stand in for visual representation. These constraints pose considerable challenges for scholars, who must rely on critical



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interpretation and unconventional research strategies. Beyond exhibition catalogs, which primarily list objects on view, academic engagement with these programs has remained sparse. It has typically been confined to isolated case studies that focus on objects on display, rather than broader analyses of traveling exhibitions as a distinct format.

Despite limited scholarly attention, traveling exhibitions have played a vital role in museum practice: reaching larger and smaller cities and towns, they have facilitated the circulation of taste and knowledge, bridged cultural divides, fostered forms of cultural exchange and understanding, and brought audiences beyond the traditional confines of museums – offering modes of access and visibility that conventional displays could not consistently achieve. They also offered opportunities for curatorial research and publication that would otherwise have been impossible within the funding climates of their time, and contributed to the gradual de-hierarchization of ex-

hibition genres, opening space for displays that moved beyond strictly art-historical paradigms and incorporated materials and approaches from a broader cultural field.

Today, as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) reaffirms the museum's responsibility to address broader social mandates, these initiatives warrant renewed attention as experimental arenas. Reconsidered from this vantage point, traveling exhibitions emerge as key sites for disseminating culture and spaces where the museum's social role is tested and reimagined. Examining them clarifies how and why artefacts, people, and ideas were displaced from their original contexts, the networks that supported these events, the routes through which items traveled, and the shifting meanings they acquired along the way. They also show how traveling exhibitions influenced collecting practices, shaped museum acquisitions, and stimulated interest among private collectors well beyond the time and spaces occupied

Fig. 01:
Exhibition *Knife/
Fork/Spoon*,
Walker Art
Center, Minneap-
olis (Minnesota),
1949–1951.
Lohse, R. P., *Neue
Ausstellungsgestaltung: 75
Beispiele neuer
Ausstellungsform*,
Zurich: Verlag
für Architektur,
[1953].

by their itineraries. Equally important is to consider where the funding for traveling exhibitions came from, since financial backing often shaped their content and priorities, aligning curatorial narratives – sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly – with the agendas of sponsoring institutions, governments, or corporations. Recognizing this trajectory is vital to understanding how traveling exhibitions, once seen as marginal to museological discourse, developed as a focus for innovation in exhibition design and continue to shape the cultural dynamics of our present.

From Margins to Model: The Traveling Exhibition Format

In the 1950s, traveling exhibitions became a central concern for museum professionals and designers, who had to rethink the organization, interpretation, and communication of exhibitions amid limited financial resources. Their growing prominence mirrored broader political, societal, and cultural shifts, as institutions recognized the potential of mobile displays to strengthen cultural and political ties, foster economic exchange, and engage new publics through more inclusive and dynamic forms of communication.

Notably, the volumes edited by British architect and designer Misha Black (1951),⁴ American industrial designer George Nelson (1953),⁵ and Swiss painter and graphic artist Richard Paul Lohse (1953)⁶ offered frameworks of best practices that supported designers and architects in addressing these challenges, with a particular emphasis on traveling exhibitions as an emerging exhibition format. These publications

served not only as guides to exhibition design but also as platforms for disseminating visual strategies through the photographs they included – images that still stand as testimony to postwar display solutions (fig. 2). Moreover, they reflected the emergence – and growing acceptance – of a certain degree of standardization, regarded as necessary and perhaps as an inevitable precondition for modern exhibition practices.

At the same time, they captured what Nelson described as “a change in our feelings about space,”⁷ which highlighted a shift in spatial thinking and formal experimentation. Modular structures, flexible layouts, and immersive environments – strategies widely inspired by the visual language of Austrian American designer Herbert Bayer⁸ – responded not only to logistical needs, but also to evolving ideas of perception, experience, and public engagement. Bayer would later reflect on these tendencies, and in 1961, characterized traveling exhibitions as modern displays designed to disseminate information beyond permanent museum spaces. Drawing on his own experience, he stressed that such exhibitions should be on a human scale, straightforward to assemble, and focused on the clarity of the displays rather than the prominence of their supporting structures.⁹

Parallel to design approaches, museum practitioners were working to develop and share practical methods and standards to guide curatorial exhibition planning and implementation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the earliest overviews of the subject came from women

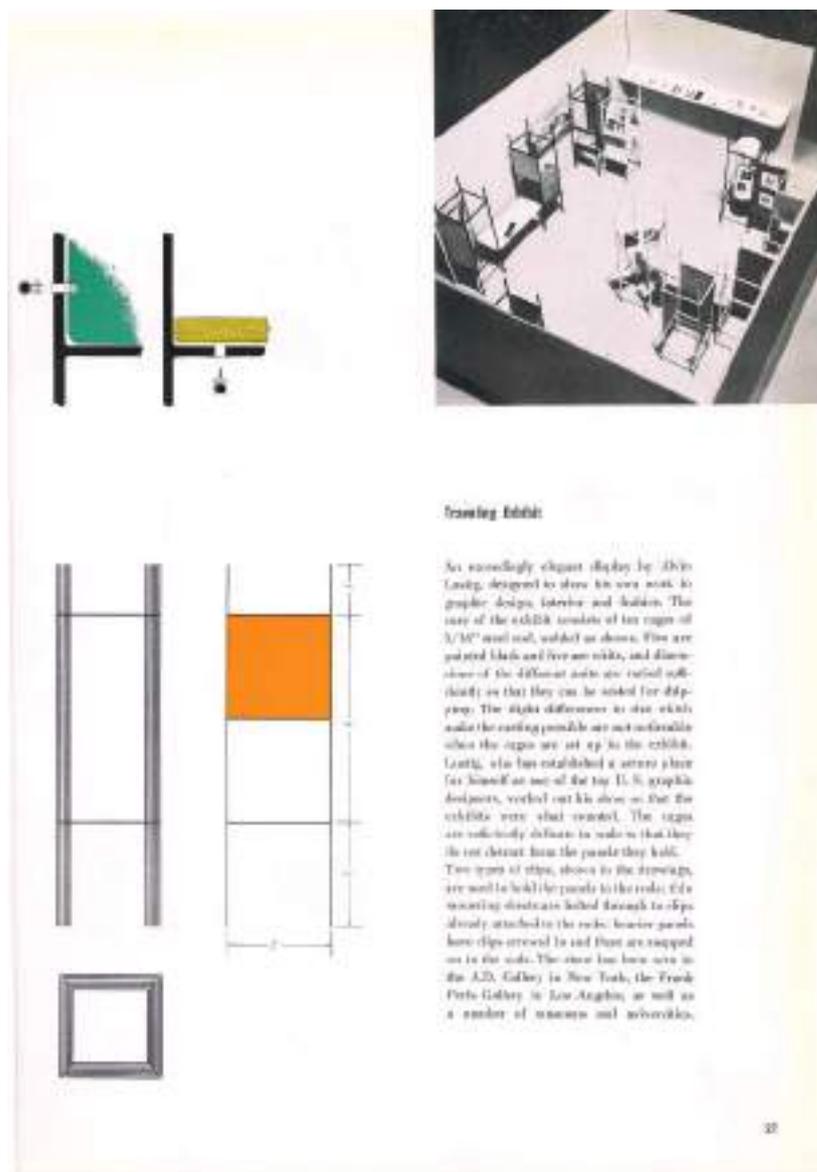


Fig. 02: *Traveling Exhibit*: images and construction details are from an exhibition designed by Alvin Lustig, displayed at the A.D. Gallery in New York, the Frank Perls Gallery in Los Angeles, and other venues. Nelson G., *Display*, New York, Whitney Publications, 1953.

working in the field – indicating a readiness to embrace change and to identify latent possibilities in areas often considered peripheral within the broader hierarchy of museological concerns.¹⁰ Their contributions were analytical and strategic, producing case-based frameworks that could serve as adaptable models across diverse contexts.¹¹

These matters were given comprehensive treatment in the 1950 issue of the ICOM journal *Museum* (then *Museum International*), that brought together accounts from leading figures in various countries to offer a

systematic account of the state of circulating exhibitions at mid-century. These authors presented a range of examples – drawing on Polish,¹² Italian,¹³ Mexican,¹⁴ English,¹⁵ and Scottish¹⁶ experiences – accompanied by technical data, practical recommendations, and reflections on challenges encountered locally but relevant to the broader international community.

Grace L. McCann Morley, director of the San Francisco Museum of Art,¹⁷ contributed the keynote article, setting the tone for the volume by situating her discussion within the broader history of museum lending services.¹⁸ She described these as a relatively recent practice in many parts of the world, highlighting the century-old lending program of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) as a key early precedent.¹⁹ In examining the international development of these services, she observed how they spread progressively from Britain²⁰ to the United States,²¹ and in Canada, where a dedicated service was created in the 1920s, followed by South Africa and Australia during the 1930s. She also considered recent undertakings in Poland, Mexico, Australia, Israel, and Pakistan, and explored *exhibitions in trailers* at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and the Polish National Museum's *museobus*. Absent from her survey – perhaps owing to the Cold War climate – were Soviet-era examples such as the agit-prop trains and ships of the October Revolution, whose outreach pursued more overtly political and markedly different aims than their Western counterparts.²²

Furthermore, Morley noted significant variation in the adoption of

circulating exhibitions across disciplinary domains. She found them most developed in the visual arts – painting, graphic arts, popular and industrial arts, and architectural illustration – whereas domains such as science, technology, natural history, archaeology, and ethnology had only recently begun to experiment with temporary and traveling formats, often on a smaller scale (fig. 3).²³ She attributed this slower uptake to the later introduction of temporary exhibition practices in these fields and the absence of specialized circulation agencies comparable to those in the art world.²⁴ In Latin America, this issue came into sharper focus after UNESCO's 1958 Regional Seminar on the Educational Role of Museums in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where museologist Georges-Henri Rivière, Director-General of ICOM, stressed itinerancy as a means of extending access to remote regions – underscoring both the promise and the logistical challenges of circulating scientific and technical collections.

Such logistical challenges had been central to Morley's analysis as well, particularly the safeguarding of artworks. While traveling exhibitions had the advantage of placing minimal demands on host-museum staff, they posed significant technical and operational challenges – from secure packing and reliable transport to adaptable installations. For unique and valuable works, particularly in the fine and decorative arts, rigorous planning and expert handling were essential to minimizing potential damage.²⁵

Similar concerns were also voiced at an institutional level. Questions about its vulnerabilities gained

prominence as the traveling exhibition format became more clearly defined and associated with specific features. They were openly debated in UNESCO's programs for 1950 and 1951, leading to a recommendation to reduce the number of circulating art exhibitions, while also underscoring the need for sound, experienced methods to ensure safe circulation.

Within three years, however, the response shifted from transnational debates, with their interplay of common ground and contention, to a distinctly national orientation: in 1953, Elodie Courter Osborn – a former director of circulating exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York²⁶ – based her UNESCO *Manual of Travelling Exhibitions* primarily on US methods and, above all, on MoMA practice, regarded as exemplary in its inclusion of a wide range of media, from painting and sculpture to the graphic and industrial arts, as well as architectural models (fig. 4).²⁷ Framed as a manual for international use – covering packing, transport, and insurance – the handbook presented the American approach as the standard for all. This was no neutral choice: it dovetailed with the era's ideological contests, with UNESCO functioning as a platform for advancing Western cultural priorities. Agencies such as the United States Information Agency (USIA) actively promoted the supposed superiority of the American system, making traveling exhibitions one of their preferred instruments of influence abroad.²⁸

The vibrant postwar and Cold War context in which traveling exhibitions were conceived and circulated

Fig. 03: Exhibition *Stories in Hair and Fur*, Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bloomfield Hills (Michigan), 1950. Osborn Courter E., *Manual of Travelling Exhibitions*, Paris, UNESCO, 1953.

Fig. 04: Exhibition *You and Your Neighbourhood*: a school exhibition by the Educational Programme of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, comprising charts, photo panels, labels, and a modular model packed in a fitted case that also served as its display unit. Osborn Courter E., *Manual of Travelling Exhibitions*, Paris, UNESCO, 1953.

– and in which the format became firmly established – goes a long way toward explaining why this period has remained such a fertile ground for recent scholarship and curatorial practice. It was a moment when artistic experimentation, exhibition design, and political agendas were deeply intertwined, creating a field as complex as it was dynamic. This richness continues to attract attention in different ways: doctoral research²⁹ and academic publications³⁰ have re-examined the diplomatic, ideological, and artistic stakes of mid-century programs. Research projects³¹ and scholarly forums³² have investigated the institutional networks and strategies behind them; and museums and research centers – drawing on these studies – have staged reconstructions and reinterpretations of landmark displays.³³ Exhibitions such as *Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy* (United States, 2012-2014),³⁴ *A Designed Life: Contemporary American Textiles, Wallpapers and Containers & Packaging, 1951-54* (United States, 2018-2021),³⁵ and *Made in Italy. Destinazione America 1945-1954* (Lucca, 2025)³⁶ (fig. 5) are not merely undertakings of historical recovery, but efforts that revisit pivotal moments in cultural history as living legacies that continue to shape our present. Conceived with the aim of engaging a non-specialized audience, these exhibitions articulate the enduring relevance of such episodes, framing the forms of consolidation achieved not as definitive endpoints, but as foundations for the new cultural trajectories that unfolded within the shifting geopolitical landscape of the following decades.

New Directions in a Changing World

In the early 1960s, the wave of decolonization across Africa and Asia prompted UNESCO and ICOM to reconsider the role of museums in newly sovereign states, positioning them within broader agendas of nation-building and international cultural diplomacy.³⁷ It was in this climate of institutional redefinition that *Temporary and Travelling Exhibitions* appeared in 1963.³⁸

The volume addressed both temporary exhibitions – with essays on science museums (Lothar P. Witteborg, American Museum of Natural History), art museums (H.L.C. Jaffé, University of Amsterdam), and museums in so-called “technically underdeveloped countries” (Hiroshi Daifuku, UNESCO) – and the organization of traveling exhibitions. It underscored how both formats were tied to the period’s political, economic, and cultural agendas, where exhibitions functioned as instruments of diplomacy, development, and national self-representation. The growing prominence of such topics reflected several converging factors: innovations in materials, exhibition design, and curatorial practice, together with the need for museums – often reliant on public support – to demonstrate their value by reaching larger and more diverse audiences. Temporary displays provided fresh content that encouraged repeat visits and renewed engagement with permanent collections.³⁹ Traveling exhibitions – produced by museums, agencies, or governments – broadened this role beyond individual institutions, serving as cultural exchange instruments and vehicles for projecting institutional



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Fig. 05: Exhibition *Made in Italy. Destinazione America 1945–1954*, Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca (Italy) 2025. Detail of the section *Viaggio in Italia (The Italian Journey)*, with the Garden Vase for the Società Ceramica by Angelo Biancini. In the background, a detail of a photograph shows its display in the *Italy at Work* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1950. Foto Alcide.

and national ambitions.

The section on traveling exhibitions was a revised version of Osborn's 1953 *Manual of Travelling Exhibitions*, a reference work that quickly went out of print. The new edition was prepared under the supervision of Grace McCann Morley, who had also contributed the foreword to the first edition, thereby bridging the two publications. The update maintained the manual's original focus on standardizing the practical aspects of circulation, while also enriching it with additional case studies and new materials, display techniques, and professional practices that had emerged since the mid-1950s. Although it drew on examples beyond the United States, the American model remained the underlying reference point.

This drive toward procedural uniformity marked an intensification of earlier efforts to systematize museum and exhibition practices – finding its design counterpart in James H. Carmel's volume⁴⁰ – while at the same time exposing its limits: standardized criteria often overlooked geographical, economic, and social differences, as well as the varied missions and capacities of host institutions. Normalization thus embodied both the ambition of professional consolidation at the expense of local specificities and interpretive diversity.

The resulting tension between efficiency and local responsiveness shaped subsequent discussions. From the early 1970s, attention shifted from purely technical concerns toward the relationship between

exhibitions and their audiences, increasingly framed by questions of cultural identity. In 1973, zoologist Kjell Engström – director of the Swedish Museum of Natural History – argued that temporary and traveling exhibitions could play a key role in public education on urgent environmental issues, such as pollution and nature conservation.⁴¹ Drawing on Swedish examples, he demonstrated how these formats could combine scientific accuracy with accessible presentation, using clear communication and striking visuals to engage diverse audiences.

Such concerns echoed the broader museological debates of the period, which emphasized the “new” museum’s embeddedness in society and its accountability to communities. In 1979, French museologist Hugues de Varine situated exhibitions within this renovated conception: no longer neutral displays of objects, they became tools of communication through which researchers – naturalists, archaeologists, curators, and ethnologists – could share their findings with local communities, fostering awareness of cultural heritage and environment.⁴² In line with Rivière’s notion of the museum as “a mirror in which the local population views itself to discover its image,”⁴³ De Varine advanced a model of traveling exhibitions in collaboration with host communities and rooted in their specific histories, resources, and needs.

This audience-centered turn is further exemplified by the work of Canadian scholars D.I. Greenglass (Research Department, Ministry of Labour, Government of Ontario) and D.S. Abbey (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), whose re-

search on the traveling exhibition *Steuben: Seventy Years of American Glassmaking* (Toronto, 1976) shifted the focus to the ways people engaged with the objects on view.⁴⁴ Their study examined how factors such as prior knowledge, cultural background, and object interpretation influenced visitors’ experiences, underscoring the value of integrating audience research into exhibition planning. This emphasis on the visitor would remain central to some subsequent studies,⁴⁵ and persist in academic studies – mainly associated with science and natural history – where the museum’s communicative and educational roles were foregrounded.⁴⁶

Object on the Move

In the first half of the 20th century, traveling exhibitions occupied an open space of remarkable possibility – experimental in form, diverse in purpose, and unbound by the institutional orthodoxies that, from the 1950s, would come to codify the field, crystallizing in Osborn’s 1953 manual. They could function simultaneously as platforms for artistic exchange, diplomatic tools, pedagogical vehicles, and instruments of ideological persuasion. Recent scholarship has increasingly approached this period through case studies that span a wide spectrum: from modern movements (Impressionism⁴⁷ in 1907-1908), the avant-garde (Futurism⁴⁸ of 1912; *Entartete Kunst*⁴⁹ in 1938-41), and monographic shows devoted to individual artists (Ivan Meštrović⁵⁰ in 1924-1926 and the Raphael centenary exhibition in 1930),⁵¹ to architecture and design (the Bauhaus⁵² in 1929-1930, Giuseppe Pagano⁵³ in

1938-1939 and *The Beautiful Town*⁵⁴ in 1940-1942), along with other initiatives – notably the Virginia Museum’s program⁵⁵ – that contributed to defining key chapters in the history of art.

While these studies have shed valuable light on specific episodes, they also reveal how traveling exhibitions, whether conceived to affirm avant-garde networks, consolidate canon formation, or mobilise heritage for educational and commemorative purposes, can only be fully understood when considered in relation to the broader currents of circulation and exchange that shaped them.

It is against this backdrop – of early experimentation and growing scholarly attention – that the contributions gathered in the present issue map this relatively underexamined terrain, reconstructing the circuits of art exhibitions as they circulated across cities, nations, and empires. In doing so, they bring European and North American perspectives into dialogue, highlighting the historical, political, and institutional forces that shaped exhibitionary practices. Set in motion under different political regimes and institutional contexts, these case studies reveal traveling exhibitions as dynamic agents of cultural circulation: conduits for transmitting knowledge, arenas for political negotiation, laboratories for curatorial experimentation, and catalysts for forging connections between institutions, audiences, and practitioners. Placed in dialogue, they form a network of relations akin to a Warburgian atlas: connections emerge through juxtaposition, as affinities and dissonances surface across ge-

ographies and decades, linking institutions, publics, and individual actors in shifting constellations.

The issue opens with an article by Ulrike Müller, who addresses the circulation of modern art, eschewing the conventional narrative that privileges the hegemonic role of the Museum of Modern Art. Her analysis traces the emergence, between 1900 and 1929, of a dynamic network of American museums engaged in organizing traveling exhibitions of modern art – a development propelled principally by smaller, recently founded institutions such as the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Detroit Museum of Art, and the City Art Museum of Saint Louis. Centering her inquiry on the Albright Art Gallery under the directorship of Cornelia B. Sage (1876-1936), Müller draws upon extensive archival holdings to elucidate the strategic deployment of traveling exhibitions as a means of advancing institutional professionalization and aligning museum practice with modern exhibitionary paradigms. Through a nuanced examination of Sage’s activities, objectives, and professional networks, she demonstrates the formative role of these early initiatives in shaping the operational and curatorial identities of American art museums, thereby establishing the infrastructural and conceptual foundations upon which MoMA would subsequently construct its influential exhibition strategies.

Shifting from the United States to Central Europe, Samuel D. Albert examines Hungarian traveling art exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s, framing them as instruments of cultural diplomacy in the turbulent dec-

ades following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under the Horthy regime, the newly created Hungarian National Fine Arts Council organized Hungarian Representative Exhibitions, first shown in Budapest and then circulated to European capitals. Early iterations (1920-1925) were accompanied by catalogues advancing an explicit revisionist agenda in response to the Treaty of Trianon. By the late 1920s, rhetoric softened, exhibitions were integrated into larger international events, and modernist and abstract works gained prominence. In the 1930s, the circuit expanded to the United States, notably with the *Contemporary Hungarian Art* exhibition at the Smithsonian. Albert argues that this evolution from overt propaganda to more nuanced cultural engagement reflected the refinement of Hungarian foreign policy and the emergence of a distinct national modernism.

Extending the focus on politically inflected exhibition practices, Priscilla Manfredi turns to a case in which the propagandistic function was neither incidental nor moderated over time: *La Somalia pittoresca* by Giorgio Grazia (1934-1940). Emerging within the broader fascist campaign to instill a “colonial consciousness” among Italians – in the wake of military ventures in East Africa – Grazia’s extensive pictorial corpus was swiftly appropriated for political ends. Over several years, the exhibition toured fifteen Italian cities, functioning as a pedagogical tool to familiarise local audiences with the empire’s overseas territories and reinforce the regime’s expansionist ideology. Drawing on materials from several archives, Manfredi reconstructs the exhibition’s itinerary,

reception, and visual strategies. Her analysis situates *La Somalia pittoresca* within a dense network of institutional actors – including the Fascist Colonial Institute and the Fascist Institute of Culture – whose coordinated efforts bridged centre and periphery, elite discourse and mass mobilisation, revealing how traveling exhibitions could merge artistic production with the rhetorical imperatives of imperial propaganda.

Moving from the nationalist frames explored by Albert and Manfredi, Christine E. Brennan turns to a socially progressive, community-oriented model of exhibition outreach. In *A Museum on the March: Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions at The Met, Their Evolution, Reception, and Influence*, she reconstructs the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s pioneering program (1933-1942) that brought original works into schools, settlement houses, libraries, and civic buildings across New York’s poorest districts. Drawing on rich archival evidence, Brennan situates the initiative within the Depression-era drive to democratize cultural access, while tracing its operational structures, thematic range, and strategies for embedding displays within the fabric of neighborhood life. Her analysis foregrounds Richard F. Bach’s role in shaping the program as a *museum without walls*, one that reached more than two million viewers and redefined the museum’s civic mandate. By examining contemporary reception and post-war legacies, including later adaptations and eventual decline, Brennan illuminates how the Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions served as a model for socially responsive museum practice, expanding the bounda-

ries of what a metropolitan art institution could be.

From Brennan's account of community-based engagement in Depression-era New York, Laura Elliott turns to the collaborative, transatlantic circuits that paralleled and informed such initiatives. Her essay recovers the Victoria and Albert Museum's role in three major US loan exhibitions staged between 1945 and 1947 – *English Domestic Needlework, Masterpieces of English Painting: Hogarth, Constable and Turner*, and MoMA's Henry Moore retrospective – each positioned at the intersection of curatorial innovation and Anglo-American cultural diplomacy in the early Cold War. Drawing on extensive primary sources, Elliott challenges the view of the V&A as insular, recasting these ventures as testing grounds for postwar display strategies, gallery reorganization, and the projection of British cultural identity abroad. Under Leigh Ashton's directorship, the museum leveraged curatorial expertise, strategic object selection, and institutional prestige to shape the reception of British art in the United States, while absorbing elements of American modernist display. Situating these collaborations within broader histories of transnational museum exchange, she traces continuities from the South Kensington model to mid-century soft power, illuminating the asymmetries of an Anglo-American partnership that was mutually advantageous yet structured within US-led frameworks of cultural authority. As with the other contributions, this analysis is deeply rooted in archival and documentary sources.

Tracing Paths, Opening Routes

A comprehensive account of traveling exhibitions in the first half of the 20th century has yet to be written. What exists is largely pieced together from fragments dispersed across archives, disciplines, and geographies – traces unevenly preserved by the contingencies of archival survival and the shifting attentions of scholarship.

By setting fragments recovered from disparate contexts into dialogue, the contributions gathered in this issue open up a reconsideration of the historiographical image of the field, foregrounding the entanglement of circulation, political agency, and curatorial experimentation.

Their analytical acuity is grounded in their sustained engagement with primary sources and archival holdings – ranging from institutional correspondence and exhibition catalogues to press coverage and visual documentation. This documentary substratum anchors the reconstructions in the material contingencies of curatorial practice and brings back into view actors, negotiations, and tactical manoeuvres often effaced from authorized accounts. In this respect, the articles demonstrate how archival inquiry can elucidate the operational logics of circulation, situate it within broader political and cultural currents, and furnish a critical apparatus for rethinking both the historiography and the prospective trajectories of museum and exhibition practices.

Writing from different angles of their scholarly and professional trajectories, and from vantage points inside and outside museums, the issue's contributors bring a plurality of perspectives that combine embed-

ded expertise with critical distance. Placed in dialogue, these studies generate a dynamic network of associations across geographies and decades, linking institutions, actors, and audiences in constellations of meaning that resist a single, linear account. On the strength of their archival grounding, they open fertile terrain for interrogating the entanglements of exhibitionary form, political agency, and social transformation, underscoring the necessity of transdisciplinary methodologies attentive to multiple viewpoints, capable of apprehending both the material infrastructures that enable the movement of objects and the delicate strands through which ideas, narratives, and cultural exchanges circulate.

They also point to the need to look beyond museums, acknowledging the roles of other actors – politicians, diplomats, collectors, architects, designers, businesspeople, critics, and journalists – whose contributions shaped the planning and reception of these events. As Gabriela Świtek observed, the geography of art exhibitions entails not only the physical movement of objects across national borders but also the negotiation of interpretive borders, where phenomena may appear politically proximate yet are embedded in cultural and historical contexts that differ markedly from those of their point of origin.⁵⁶ These crossings shape how exhibitions are framed, received, and repurposed in each locality, revealing circulation as a process in which meaning is constantly refracted rather than transferred.

The traces of these differing receptions are often preserved in disparate sources held across various

archives. Research drawing on archives from different institutional, national, or scholarly fields could open up new perspectives, providing a broader and more nuanced understanding of traveling exhibitions and the networks that generated and sustained them. Looking ahead, network analysis offers a promising way to map connections, recover strategies and documents at their core, and reveal the layered benefits perceived by different actors – opening new paths for understanding not only how and why exhibitions traveled, but also how and why they shaped, and were shaped by the worlds they moved through.

Endnotes:

- 1 In 1993, Desvallées introduced the term *expographie* in order to “designate the *mise en exposition* and all that concerns not only the spatial arrangement, but everything that revolves around the exhibitions [...]. It aims at developing a language and a mode of expression that faithfully translate the scientific program of an exhibition” [translated from the French by the author. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s]. Desvallées 1998, p. 221.
- 2 Bennett 1995, p. 333.
- 3 In 1950, museologist Grace L. McCann Morley noted: “Interesting examples of the use of reproduction in traveling exhibitions: Canada has long used reproductions for small exhibitions; in France, though circulating exhibitions are not much used, les Amis de l’Art have sent sets of reproductions of art to small centres in the provinces and North Africa, and the Musée des beaux-arts at Rheims has organized exhibitions of reproductions for schools of the region; in Pakistan the North-west Frontier Province Museum of Peshawar sends replicas of its archeological exhibits to towns in the provinces: the Tel Aviv Museum in Israel has in use 70 exhibitions of reproductions on various subjects and periods of art history which travel, often accompanied by a lecturer, to the villages, settlements, schools, army camps and military hospitals where they are always in demand. As described in the articles here, Italy’s new educational service and the National Museum of Mexico’s circulating exhibitions to museums outside the capital both employ reproductions to supplement the originals used”. McCann Morley 1950, p. 266, footnote 1.
- 4 British painter and designer James Sylvester Holland (1905-1996) authored the chapter on traveling exhibitions included in Black’s book. Black 1951, pp. 82-91; pp. 122-125.
- 5 *Conceived by Nelson as an introduction to modern exhibition and interior design strategies for an American audience, the volume featured photographs from the archives of Interiors magazine, which sponsored its publication.* Nelson 1953, pp. 27-28.
- 6 Lohse 1953.
- 7 Nelson 1953, p. 9.
- 8 Bayer 1939-1940.
- 9 Bayer noted how traveling exhibitions – shaped by De Stijl and constructivist ideas – employed lightweight, demountable, and flexible structural systems, citing early milestones such as architect Frederick Kiesler’s Austrian Pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris (1925) and the prefabricated tubular frameworks used in Milan’s Triennale (1934 and 1951). According to him, postwar designs – like the Container Corporation of America’s wooden structures of 1945 – further advanced portability and adaptability, yet despite the proliferation of connector systems, most remained too cumbersome to assemble and dismantle. Bayer 1961, pp. 281-283.
- 10 See, for instance, McCann Morley 1950 and Osborn Courter 1953.
- 11 For further discussion of this topic, see Hill 2016 and Temkin, Silver-Kohn 2024.
- 12 In 1950, Polish contributions to *Museum International* included essays by Kazimierz Michałowski (1901-1981), a classical archaeologist and assistant director of the National Museum in Warsaw, celebrated for his excavations in Egypt and work on Greco-Roman portraiture, and Stanisław Lorentz (1899-1991), an art historian and the museum’s long-time director, known for his leadership in conservation and scholarship on classical and baroque Polish art. For their contributions, see Michałowski 1950; Lorentz 1950. Recent studies have examined specific instances of traveling exhibitions within their political and aesthetic contexts. For example, architect and designer Stanisław Zamecznik’s communist-era projects – which blended modernist spatial strategies with state cultural policy, balancing aesthetic innovation with ideological demands – have been discussed in

detail by Mamo, Wrobron 2018. For an overview on traveling exhibitions in the context of relations between Indian and Polish cultures in the 1970s, see Świtek 2024.

13 Italian art historian and former director of the Galleria Estense in Modena, Giulio Carlo Argan (1909–1992) promoted educational and traveling exhibitions in the 1950s, notably through the newly established Centre for the Educational Function of Museums in Rome. See Argan 1950.

14 Mexican anthropologist Daniel Ferdinando Rubin de la Borbolla (1903–1990), founder of the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia and Director of the National Museum of Anthropology from 1946, outlined in *Museum International* (1950) described the museum's new two-fold program of temporary exhibitions and loans of collections. Rubin de la Borbolla 1950.

15 Peter Castle Floud (1911–1960), Keeper of the Department of Circulation at the Victoria and Albert Museum, reported on its traveling loan service. See Floud 1950. Matthew B. Hodge, Director of the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, outlined his museum's approach to temporary exhibitions in the same issue. See Hodge 1950.

16 Douglas A. Allan (1896–1967), a geologist and former lecturer at the Universities of Edinburgh and Durham, served as Director of Liverpool City Museums (1929–1944), President of the Museums Association (1942–1946), and Director of the Royal Scottish Museum from 1945. In *Museum International*, he discussed the organization of circulating exhibitions in Scottish museums. Allan 1950.

17 Grace L. McCann Morley (1900–1985) was a pioneering advocate for modern art and broad public access. Following her founding directorship in San Francisco (1935–1958), she held senior posts at the Cincinnati Art Museum (1930–1933), the Guggenheim Museum, and UNESCO, and later directed the National Museum in New Delhi, where she contributed to India's postcolonial cultural development. Through her work with international museum organizations – including the American Association of Museums, the Association of Art Museum Directors, and the American Federation of Arts, and ICOM – she advanced professional standards and advised museums across developing nations. For a biographical profile in the context of art museums, see Kirk 2009 and Potter 2015.

18 McCann Morley 1950.

19 Wainwright, Gere 2002, p. 19. On the significance of traveling exhibitions within the museological discourse of the United Kingdom, see also Wakefield 1971. Wakefield was Keeper of the Department of Circulation at the V&A between 1960 and 1975.

20 In the United Kingdom, the Art Exhibitions Bureau (1919), the Empire Art Loan Exhibitions Society (1931), and the Arts Council of Great Britain (1946) became key organizers of circulating exhibitions, promoting the work of living British artists at home and abroad, introducing contemporary art from other countries, and supporting regional museums and galleries.

21 In the United States, the American Federation of Arts (AFA, 1909) emerged as the first and most influential agency for circulating exhibitions. From 1913 to 1927, it also coordinated United States participation in international expositions held in Rome, Buenos Aires, Paris, London, and Amsterdam. The Western Association of Art Museum Directors (1916) also played a significant role in organizing exhibition exchanges. During the 1920s, the College Art Association (CAA, 1911) launched a program of traveling exhibitions for colleges, universities, and smaller museums, advancing its mission to promote excellence in scholarship and to teach the history and criticism of the visual arts. By the 1930s, demand for traveling art exhibitions exceeded what the AFA and CAA could supply. In response, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) inaugurated its own cost-effective and widely popular program in 1933, offering exhibitions of “modern art” to schools and small museums. This trajectory culminated in 1952 with the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) whose international activity focused primarily on importing foreign exhibitions for domestic circulation. On the MoMA program, see *Circulating Exhibitions...* 1954; on the service's role in bringing Smithsonian exhibitions to communities across the United States, see Burnham 1961.

22 “‘Agit-prop’ (agitation-propaganda) trains and ‘agit-prop ships’ traveled to the farthest corners of the country and to the front lines of the Civil War, bringing art to places where people had never seen it or where heavy battles had recently been fought. The walls of these trains and the decks of these ships displayed monumental posters, designed to serve many functions: to create a festive atmosphere, to provide information, and to give the first lessons in art appreciation. People walking alongside the trains reacted with delight, laughing and talking animatedly. Both narrative and allegorical forms of expression were used, and whether the pictures were detailed or stylised, the overall effect was never lost. Notable examples include the ‘Red Cossack’ train. Such agit-prop trains and ships were also used for meetings with government officials and lecturers, earning the nickname ‘All-Union Central Executive Committees on wheels.’” Guerman 1979, p. 22. A related topic – the development of Ukrainian mobile museums – was examined by Ševčuk in 1966, in a special issue of *Museum International* devoted to museums in Ukraine. See Ševčuk 1966.

23 Morley cited examples ranging from the Cranbrook Institute of Science, the Tekniska Museet in Stockholm, and the Palais de la Découverte in Paris – institutions that used temporary exhibitions, some later circulated nationally or internationally. She mentioned the American Laboratory of Anthropology at Santa Fé and the ethnographic museums in Neuchâtel and Geneva, which cooperated on traveling displays. She also noted wartime topical exhibitions in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, whose popularity encouraged museums to increase the number of temporary shows in their annual programs. McCann Morley 1950, p. 265. For a broad historical overview of science and traveling exhibitions, see Rocha, Marandino 2017, pp. 2-8.

24 Robert T. Hatt (1902–1989) – American zoologist and Director of the Cranbrook Institute of Science (Bloomfield Hills, MI) – was noted for his research on mammals and his development of didactic, serially arranged museum displays, an approach he examined in an article in the 1950 issue of *Museum International*, underscoring the potential of traveling natural science exhibitions to allow more museums to present a wider variety of temporary displays at low cost and with minimal effort. See Hatt 1950, p. 316. From 1944 to 1948, Harriet Dyer Adams (1910–2005) served as the first female curator of the Cranbrook Art Museum, where she organized numerous traveling exhibitions. In 1983, UNESCO published *Mobile Science Exhibition*, forwarded by Morley, documenting several experiences and emphasizing the importance of traveling exhibitions in popularizing science and fostering social and economic development in remote communities. See Bose 1983.

25 According to Morley, reproductions proved especially effective for settings such as schools, clubs, small exhibition centers, and workers’ meeting rooms, where the display of large or fragile objects would have been impracticable. McCann Morley 1950, p. 265.

26 Elodie Courter Osborn (1911-1994) joined the staff of the MoMA in 1933, serving first as Secretary of Traveling Exhibitions and later as Director of the Traveling Exhibitions Service (1939-1947). Beyond her museum activities, Osborn played an active role in educational and cultural initiatives: she served as Secretary of the School Building Committee for Salisbury Central School (1950-1954), founded and presided over the Salisbury Film Society (1951), was vice-president of the American Federation of Film Societies (1957-1958), and vice-president of the Salisbury Health Center (1961-1962). For her professional role within the MoMA context, see Tobias 2018 and Silver-Kohn 2024.

27 Osborn Courter 1953. For a critical discussion of Osborn groundbreaking volume, see Mueller, Werbick, Kahny 2018.

28 On this, see Eisenbrand 2018. For an historical overview of US Cultural Exhibition out of the United States, see Wulf 2015, pp. 1-49.

29 Pane 2016, Weddell 2018.

30 Castillo 2005, Eisenbrand 2018, Winton 2018, Kühne 2019, Berrin 2021, Quarantini, Damiani 2021, Bassi 2021, Dubé-Sénécal 2022, Koskinen 2022, Zeller 2023, Gamble 2024, Bohnenblust 2025, Cordera, Turrini 2025.

31 Among the projects that may be cited are *Voices of Objects. The Italian Design from Museum to Home* (Politecnico di Milano, 2021-2023), directed by P. Cordera, which examined the *Italy at Work (1950-1953)* exhibition and how Italian production was promoted in the United States during the 1950s, and J. Kühne's ongoing project *Promoting the West: The Expositions of the US Exhibition Section in Germany, 1945-1960* (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), which investigates how American exhibitions in postwar Germany fostered a capitalist consumer society and integrated the Federal Republic into the transatlantic West, with case studies including the American Information Centers (1947-1949), the Marshall Plan shows (1950-1952), and Berlin displays such as *ATOM* (1954), *Kleider machen Leute* (1955), and *Unbegrenzter Raum* (1956).

32 See, for instance, the international conference *Italy at Work: The Italian Lifestyle on Display* (Politecnico di Milano, 2022) on the eponymous exhibition and discussed in Cordera, Faggella 2023; or the College Art Association panel *The Global Rise of Traveling Exhibitions at Mid-Century* (Chicago, 2022), illustrating the multiplicity of narratives and approaches to mid-century traveling exhibitions.

33 Among exhibitions relating to the prewar period, one may quote *Art for the Community: The Met's Circulating Textile Exhibitions, 1933-42* (New York, 2020-2021). On this, see Christine Brennan's contribution in this issue.

34 *Art Interrupted* revisited *Advancing American Art*, the 1946 State Department exhibition of contemporary painting intended for an international tour. While initially well received abroad, the project was cancelled after conservative backlash in the US, and in 1948 the works were sold off as government surplus. On this exhibition, see *Art Interrupted* [2012].

35 On this see interview by Federico Maria Giorgi in this issue.

36 On this, see the interview by Alessandro Paolo Lena in this issue.

37 The significance of exhibitions as instruments for disseminating knowledge of foreign cultures received formal international recognition in 1975, when the 18th General Conference of UNESCO adopted the *Recommendation on the International Exchange of Cultural Property*, which urged member states and museums to promote such exchanges in a responsible and mutually beneficial manner.

38 *Temporary and Travelling...* 1963.

39 For early voices championing the enduring centrality of the museum as against the transient over the transient allure of temporary exhibitions, see Gombrich 1968 and Longhi 1969.

40 James H. Carmel (1919-2016) was an American exhibition designer who began his career creating dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History and the Cranbrook Institute of Science. After serving in World War II, he earned an M.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Nebraska and spent two years in London on a Fulbright scholarship. In 1957, he joined Bernard Rudofsky's team for the American Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. See Carmel 1963.

41 Engström 1973. For the Swedish experiences in a contemporary perspective, see Oloffson 1986, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002, Arnell 2007 and Bergdahl, Houltz 2016.

42 De Varine 1979.

43 Rivière 1985, p. 183.

44 Greenglass, Abbey 1981.

45 Candito 2001 and Raguet-Candito 2001.

46 Xavier 2012, Zwang 2013, Harker, Badger 2015, Patroclo 2020.

47 Hendren 2019.

48 zu Eltz 1991.

49 Conceived by the Nazi regime to denounce modern art as corrupt and degenerate, the *Entartete Kunst* (or Degeberate Art) exhibition became one of the most visited exhibitions of its time, attracting millions of visitors. Its sensational presentation and concentration of avant-garde works inadvertently increased public exposure to these movements, ultimately reinforcing the significance of the very art it aimed to discredit. This unintended visibility contributed to the later recognition and canonization of many of the artists it sought to suppress. Zuschlag 1991.

50 Cilia 2016.

51 Carletti, Giometti 2016.

52 The traveling exhibition *10 Years of the Bauhaus* (1929-30) was conceived as a means to promote the Bauhaus to the public, attract new students, and establish contacts with companies and industry. Touring for approximately a year, the exhibition was shown in Basel, Zurich, Dessau, Essen, Breslau, and Mannheim. For different aspects of this show, see Kiese 2015, Zuschlag 2013, Efrussi 2018.

53 Bassi 2020.

54 The traveling exhibition *The Beautiful Town-Entschandelung and Design* (1938-1942) promoted the “cleansing” of urban façades (*Entschandelung*) and the dissemination of design principles, aligning itself with Nazi cultural policy. Touring across the Reich and into the “German East,” it functioned as an architectural counterpart to *Entartete Kunst*, intertwining aesthetic reform, monument protection, and Himmler’s *Volks-tumspolitik*. Wiese 2021.

55 Mott 1993.

56 Świtek 2024, p. 56.

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