

CURATOR FOR AN HOUR

CHALLENGE: To plan an exhibition featuring five items from the Samuel Butler Collection. This could be a 'live' exhibition (real objects in cases, in a physical building), or a 'virtual' exhibition (digital images of real objects, displayed on a website).

TIME LIMIT: One hour.

TASKS: View the **30** potential exhibits on display in the exhibition cases.
Choose **5** you think are interesting and could be put together to tell a 'story'.
Give your exhibition a **title** that indicates its story or theme.
Create a **label** to accompany each exhibit.

TASK ONE: View the potential exhibits

Walk around the exhibition cases and look at the objects. Each has a number and a title or very brief description. It's up to you to decide what you're seeing. Look for clues on the object, and ask yourself these questions:

- What *medium* is this (book, photograph, manuscript, painting, artefact...)?
- What is it *of* or *about* (a picture *of* a person/place/thing, a book *about* a topic...)?
- What *facts* can I get just from looking (dates, titles, references to people/places...)?
- What are its *features*, that are interesting to look at or that can tell me something?

To help you remember, write a very brief note – just a few words – about each of the exhibits. The first one shows an example:

1 *Book – map – New Zealand – 1863*

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TASK TWO: Select your exhibits

If there's anything you immediately liked, put it in your exhibition! Then look at your notes:

- Can you see any recurring words or 'themes' (places, people, topics or ideas)?
- Do some items have obvious connections or features in common?
- What impression have you formed of Samuel Butler, and which objects would best communicate this to somebody else?

Think about whether you'd like to show a variety of media (i.e. a mixture of books, photographs, artefacts and documents), or focus on one type of object (e.g. photographs).

There are infinite ways to organise artefacts in exhibitions, and no right or wrong answers. Just decide what you'd like to give your audience the opportunity to see or to learn about.

Exhibit one:

Exhibit two:

Exhibit three:

Exhibit four:

Exhibit five:

TASK THREE: Name your exhibition

The title should identify your theme (e.g. *'Samuel Butler in New Zealand'*, or *'Photographs by Samuel Butler'*) or hint at the 'story' you're telling (e.g. *'The Forgotten Artist'*).

Title:

TASK FOUR: Label your exhibits

The job of an exhibition label is to help the audience understand what they are seeing. You should point out interesting features they may not have noticed by themselves, and provide information that helps explain the context or 'meaning' of the exhibit. Here's an example label, which includes the exhibit title, the medium and date, and the 'story':

'Self-Portrait', by Samuel Butler

Oil on canvas, c. 1873

Samuel Butler's major aspiration was to become a professional painter. This is Butler's first self-portrait, painted in 1873, when he was 38 years old. The naïve style he adopted in his painting was not typical at the time, and proved unpopular with the artistic establishment. Later in his life, having failed to break onto the professional scene, Butler moved away from painting in favour of the newer art of photography.

You can include any information you think will be interesting and helpful to your audience. The medium is especially important if your exhibition is online, as the viewers won't be able to see the texture and materials for themselves. The 'story' should be historically accurate!

Exhibit title:

Medium, date:

Story:

Exhibit title:

Medium, date:

Story:

Exhibit title:

Medium, date:

Story:

Exhibit title:

Medium, date:

Story:

Exhibit title:

Medium, date:

Story:

Once your labels are finished, all the elements of your exhibition are in place. If you've got anywhere near to completing the task – in just one hour – **you've done an amazing job!**

In reality, a curator would spend weeks, months or even years planning an exhibition, depending on its scale. Deciding what to include, what to leave out, and what story an exhibition should tell can be a huge challenge. Without curators, objects from the past might never get the chance to tell their stories, and lots of historical evidence would be lost.

There are thousands of museums, libraries and archives in the UK that put on public exhibitions, and many of these are FREE to visit. Next time you visit an exhibition you'll be able to imagine how it was put together, and how much planning and research went into it.

For information about exhibitions at St John's College Library, visit the website <http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/outreach-and-exhibitions>