

Exhibition Portfolio Selections

∞ Designs by David L. Newell ∞

This presentation consists of 44 slides

I have always drawn. As a child I loved making up stories and illustrating them. In school I found an outlet for my imagination in the theatre. My undergraduate degree is in art and theatre. My first advanced degree is a Master's of Fine Arts in theatrical design. This was later joined by a Master's of Art degree in museum studies. I have worked in the museum profession for twenty years. It allows me to combine the best of my interests and skills.

These two drawing are scenic designs I created while a graduate student at Southern Methodist University. The watercolor painting on the left is for Act I of *Three Sisters* – a Russian country house in the late 19th century. On the right is a graphite and colored pencil drawing for Act I of *Private Lives* – a hotel terrace on the French Riviera in the 1930s.



I loved the variety of themes and stories that the theatre provided and the opportunity to create beautiful and exotic things. I later found a similar opportunity in the world of museum exhibitions. These are watercolor costume designs for *I Am A Camera* and *Follies* also done in graduate school. *I Am A Camera* was the basis for the musical *Cabaret*.





My love of rich color, eye-catching details and sculpted forms comes through in these watercolor costume designs for *Another Part of the Forest* and *Madame Butterfly*.

I came to the museum profession in 1988. My first full-time museum job was with the Texas Fashion Collection at the University of North Texas. In addition to organizing and managing the collection I was also responsible for exhibition design. In 1995 I designed the exhibition gallery for *Suiting the Modern Woman* – a survey of 20th century women's suits. This silhouette grouping covers 1920 through the mid 1940s. A history and style timeline was displayed along the security rails. I presented the mannequins without their support rods, opting for less conspicuous anchor wires, to not distract from the clothing and accessories.



I initially joined the Colorado Historical Society in 1998 as the assistant curator of decorative and fine arts. I later became the director of design and production. One of my earliest exhibition designs at the Colorado History Museum was *Colorado Kilns*, a survey exhibition covering 100 years of art pottery production across the state.

The installation was tiny – taking in only 800 sq. ft.– and it was produced on a very small budget, however I chose to create as dramatic and visually stunning a space as possible. To this end I selected a saturated red wall treatment to serve as a unifying backdrop and to highlight the wide variety of shapes and textures in the space. The ceramics shown like jewels against the rich red walls and the entire gallery actually seemed to glow. As an added detail the ceiling of the gallery was filled with Japanese paper lanterns that mirrored the shapes of the ceramic vessels.





Quiltspeak: Stories in the Stitches was an encyclopedic survey of 60 historic and contemporary quilts created by Colorado quilters. The exhibition was staged in a gallery suite taking in 3,000 sq. ft. and utilized a combination of open platforms, built-in casework, and open vignettes. The gallery layout utilized numerous integrated interactive stations to provide visitors the tactile experiences the various quilts inspired.

Vance Kirkland: A Colorado Painter's Life was a partnership between the Vance Kirkland Museum and the Colorado History Museum. Kirkland was a noted regional artist who developed a very distinctive style over a 50-year career. Kirkland was also a proponent of cutting-edge decorative arts and the work of his fellow Colorado artists. He collected and used the very best of current designs throughout his career. The resulting collection enabled me to fully accessorize each decade and period of his career with the appropriate corresponding decorative arts materials.

My primary desire in this exhibit was to provide each object with equal importance. Visitors to the Vance Kirkland Museum were often overwhelmed by the massing and concentration of decorative and fine arts objects. I separated pieces and allowed plenty of viewing space to maximize appreciation. As a result several staff members from the Kirkland remarked on “seeing” pieces in their collection for the first time.



A major set piece in the Kirkland exhibition was a 1950s moderne room vignette. I conceived a long undulating platform to represent a period dining room and living room set for a cocktail party, reminiscent of the salons that Kirkland and his wife once held. My key goal in the room vignette was placing artwork by Kirkland, and that of other artists he collected, in context within a period room setting.

The galleries layout also included smaller vignettes such as this display case featuring equipment Kirkland utilized in his studio including his paint palette, crucibles, brushes, pigments, wooden dowels, and a jar of jellybeans.



Late in his career Kirkland developed two distinct styles which he titled Hard Edge Abstraction and the Dot Style. The Dot Style was dominated by large canvases of exploding galaxies composed of individual dots of color applied with the ends of wooden dowels.

I repeated the energy portrayed in the exploding galaxy paintings through the use of a vibrant red in this gallery. Gallery furniture, ceramics and decorative arts accessories in abstract and minimalist styles were also selected specifically to harmonize with the artworks.





One interesting project completed for the Colorado Historical Society was a vignette representing a child's world in the early 1900s. The display was created in conjunction with the release of a new book focused on childhood in early Colorado. The display featured materials relating to Irma Bartels, a Denver girl who died from complications of pneumonia shortly following her 12th birthday. Her grieving parents saved everything they could relating to their daughter, and that collection provided a unique time capsule of her young life. The display included photographs of Irma and her family and the wool dress she had worn in a studio portrait shortly before her death.

While I was with the Colorado Historical Society I had the opportunity to participate in establishing a new facility for the El Pueblo History Museum, one of the ten regional museums that the Society maintained. This new facility included a 4,000 sq. ft. permanent gallery and a 4,000 sq. ft. temporary gallery. The permanent gallery told the history of Pueblo, Colorado, over an eight hundred year period.



A severe downturn in the state's economy, which in turn impacted funding sources, forced an extensive budget revision on this project. What I had anticipated as a \$300K budget was reduced to a lean \$40K.



To compensate for the shift in funding levels, rather than creating the extensive built environments that I had planned I instead utilized a series of standardized L-walls, platforms, recycled casework and wall color changes to create the gallery spaces. All of the original themes and storylines were maintained but they were presented in greatly simplified formats. As the majority of visitors in the gallery would be taking self-guided tours and the museum was maintained by a small staff, with no gallery security presence, I opted to place all artifacts behind barriers or suspended out of reach.





The financial restrictions of the project forced me to be both creative and practical. I was still able to maintain the look and feel that was intended, but in a simplified format. We even created “outdoor” environments within the space utilizing fumigated natural materials and rustic finishes.



Soldiers on Skis was a complicated exhibit told in a very compact space. The exhibition told the story of the 10th Mountain Division troops who trained in Colorado during World War II. The U.S. Army established Camp Hale near present day Vail as a training center for special troops trained to fight on skis and operate in alpine locales.

The 10th Mountain Division Collection is held jointly by the Denver Public Library and the Colorado Historical Society. The exhibit was a collaboration between the two institutions. I was able to access the original spec drawings for Camp Hale in order to replicate the architecture, finishes and colors in the gallery installation. I also had a wealth of artifacts to draw from to tell the story.

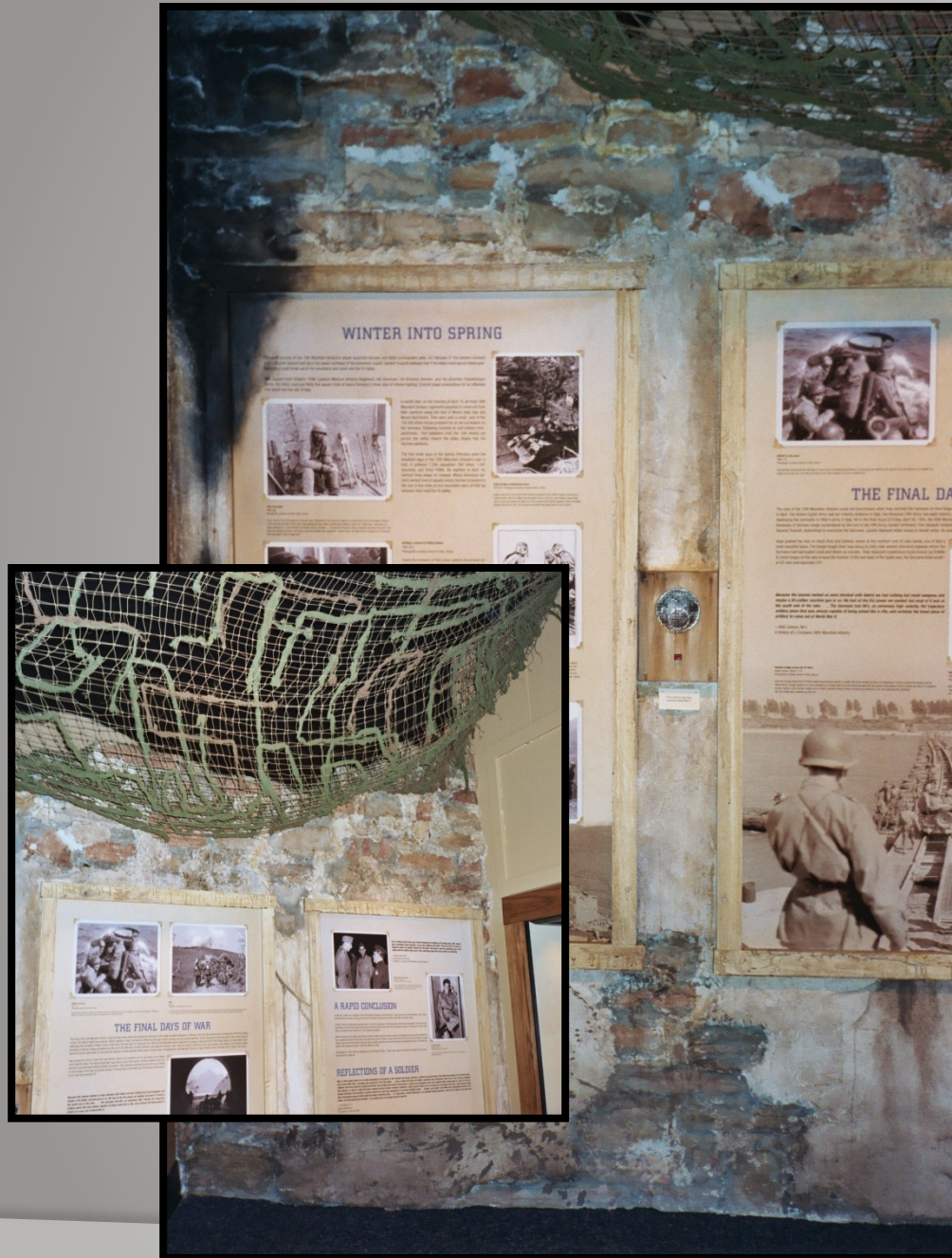


The 10th Mountain Division's early failed Aleutian Islands campaign was documented at the entrance to the exhibition. I designed the wall unit containing the artifact display and the interpretive panels to resemble the structures at Camp Hale. As the main anchor element in the Camp Hale section of the gallery, I utilized an interactive video kiosk that doubled as an office interior. The office featured a touch-screen AV station, with a program created specifically for the installation where visitors could access stories told by surviving members of the 10th. The office also included a writing area where visitors could deposit comment sheets and war remembrance in a wire letter bin. Select comments were posted on a corkboard above the desk.





Despite the small physical footprint of the *Soldiers on Skis* gallery it contained a wide variety of interactive and learning stations. In addition to the touch-screen video program. I also included several listening stations, period music, interactive scrapbooks, a battlefield map station, and a replica of a foxhole. A wide variety of artifacts relating to the 10th Mountain Division's training and war experience were also included.



The members of the 10th Mountain Division saw battle in Italy near the close of the war. Ironically they used none of their specialized ski training, but they were able to utilize their training in mountain climbing. The 10th was instrumental in breaking Germany's hold on Mount Belvedere in the Italian Alps.

The Italian portion of *Soldiers on Skis* was told in the shell of a bombed-out Italian farmhouse. I designed the faux stone and plaster structure to represent traditional farm buildings in the battle zone. I included camouflage netting, flashing strobe lights, and a battle soundtrack of explosions and gunfire to add a sense of place. A field radio listening station also provided brief stories of the battle experience.



Icons and Oddities: 150 Years of Collecting Colorado served as an anniversary event for the Society. I was both curator and designer for this exhibition. The exhibition's concept allowed me to utilize a wide variety of artifacts drawn from the Society's vast collection. The artifacts were grouped in distinctive vignettes which often featured off-beat objects that would not normally be shown. The all-electric kitchen from the 1930s was an evocation of grandma's kitchen, right down to the ingredients for apple pie on the work table. A mixed assemblage of materials relating to former First Lady, Mamie Eisenhower – an early Denver resident – was grouped beside the period kitchen.

Budget restrictions for *Icons and Oddities* necessitated my reusing all of the platforms, casework, and gallery colors from the Vance Kirkland installation. The undulating platform that had housed the 50s moderne cocktail party evolved into a display of 19th century decorative arts materials.

The new installation included a late 19th century, Aesthetic-style, concert gown. It was the first significant artifact I encountered when joining the Society. It was part of the collection held by the museum's volunteers and utilized for period fashion shows. The gown had been altered at some point and was misdated by 20 years. For almost five years I lobbied to have this rare example transferred from the docents' use collection into the Society's historic fashion collection. Once that was accomplished I returned the gown to its original silhouette and updated its catalog record to reflect its true lineage.





The artifact selection for *Icons and Oddities* allowed for some very spirited combinations of materials. Here I was able to range from the sublime to the common place in the same subject area.

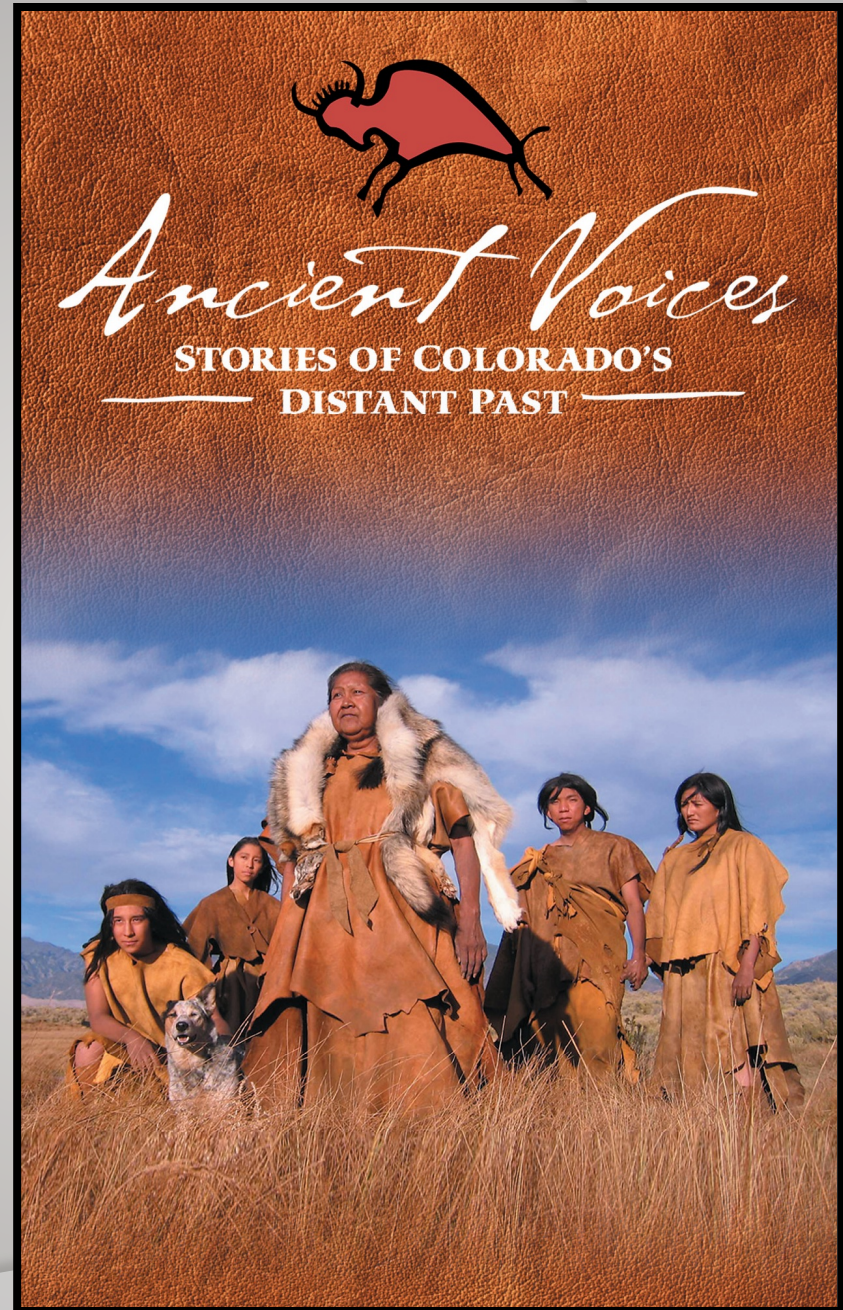


The Colorado History Museum frequently utilized temporary traveling shows from a variety of sources. The shows often involved collection of two-dimensional works and the main challenge was creating interesting arrangements and presentations. *Home of the Free* was centered around a collection of photographs by a former White House photographer. *Will Rogers: A Reel Retrospective* utilized movie posters from the career of popular humorist-broadcaster-actor Will Rogers.

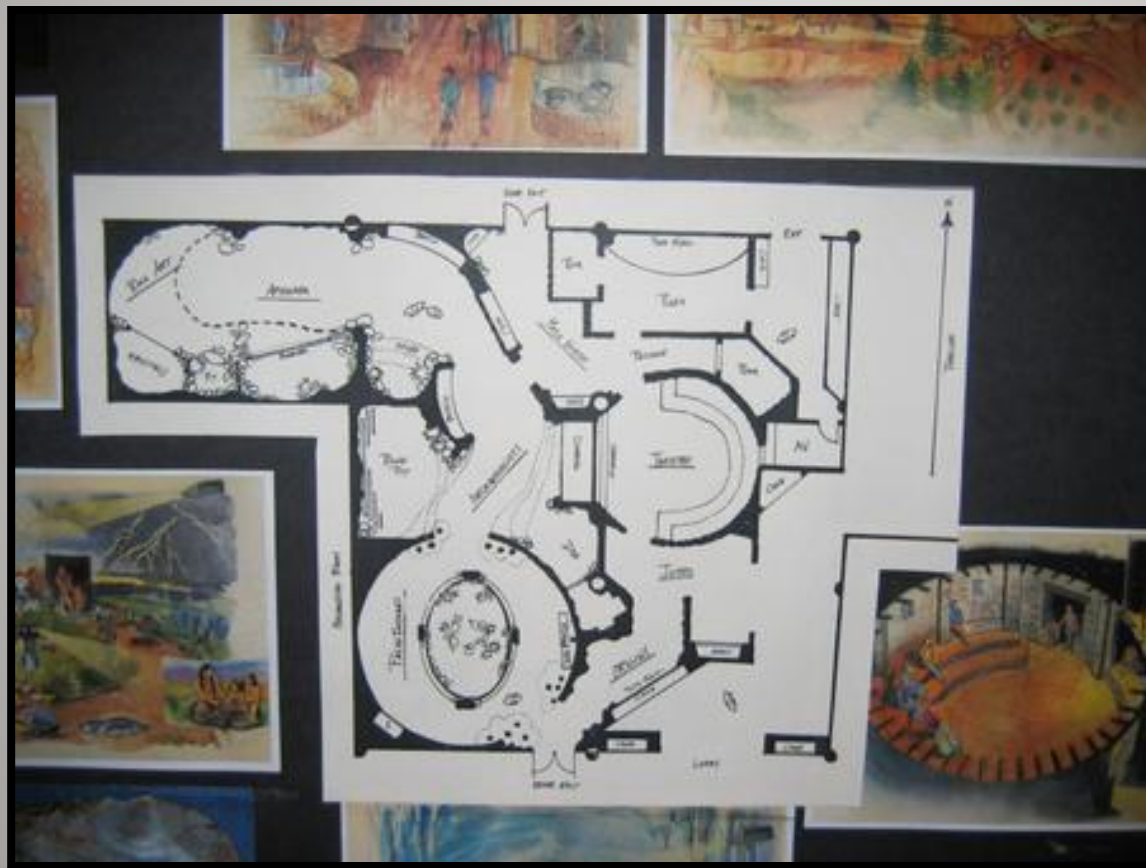
In 2003–2004 the Colorado Historical Society undertook an extensive permanent exhibition documenting the American Indian residents of the region. The exhibition was developed in two distinct sections. The first dealt with the pre-contact cultures prior to 1500. The second half focused on the early contact period through the present.

The sweep of the exhibition was on a grand scale. The first half alone covered a 20,000 year period.

I served as the exhibition designer and as a principle member of the exhibition team for *Ancient Voices*. It was the most complex and involved exhibition undertaken during my time with the Society. A large part of the exhibition was fabricated in-house by my staff, but I also worked in collaboration with Denver Center Media to create the audio-visual elements and with numerous skilled craftspeople, contractors and consultants to create the exhibition's many special effects and details.



The exhibit team for *Ancient Voices* met regularly throughout 2004 discussing research, themes, and interpretive concepts. As these discussions progressed the gallery layout began to take shape. My floor plan evolved over a six-month period and went through seven distinct refinements. The final installation closely mirrored version #7 shown here. There were a few minor adjustments, but the main distribution of interpretive areas and the overall concept designs remained the same. In addition to the introduction and orientation area the three main interpretive areas were the Paleoindian gallery, the Apishapa cut bank, and the Mesa Verde puebloan complex. Sub-sections included food ways and the archaeological process.



I felt it was important once the gallery space was defined to introduce the members of the exhibitions team to the space. They had helped conceive the layout of the gallery in a two-dimensional form. Now it was important for them to understand it as a three-dimensional space. The scale had changed dramatically. Throughout the installation process the team and I continued to meet regularly and share ideas and updates.



The outline that we created to identify the interpretive themes was easily expanded to form the basis of the interpretation. We settled on the idea of using an informal archaeologist's field notebook to tell the story. My design incorporated the placement of large-scale notebooks throughout the gallery containing pertinent notes, diagrams, and references to the materials being interpreted.



It was decided early in the exhibition development process that film elements would be critical to telling the *Ancient Voices* story. The nomadic nature of the early inhabitants of the region and the ephemeral nature of their world left few traces or artifacts. By utilizing film we could recreate visually what we lacked tangibly. Denver Center Media – the film wing of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts – became our technology partner in this process. It was amazing how freeing their input was to our story development. Often the technological options they offered helped direct the look and feel of the exhibition.

In mid October 2004 we undertook a week-long film shoot in the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado. Our selected site was on a Nature Conservancy property that had its own bison and elk herds. Our “set” was a stretch of grasslands along a meandering spring-fed stream near the Great Sand Dunes at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The site was near actual archaeological sites relating to the Paleoindians. This really was their world.

Our permanent base camp was about five miles from the film site. The film crew actually lived onsite with the cameras, which were set in fixed positions. The biggest challenge was that our “set” was also a favorite wallow site for the bison herd and they liked to rub against the camera installations.



Our “cast” consisted of five Ute performers and Hank the Wonder Dog. Together they acted as a nomadic family group with a matriarchal lead. For one week we put the actors through their paces in the environment and filmed them performing a variety of activities. We had an archaeologist from the Smithsonian Institution with us as an onsite consultant. She had conducted numerous excavations in the region and was an expert on the Paleoindians of the Southwest. The senior curator and I were also onsite as story consultants.

The shooting schedule and filmed activities had all been carefully scripted in advance. The captured film footage would serve a variety of functions. Of special interest was a series of twelve close-up labor activities that were filmed in 3D technology for use in the “totem” interactive stations.



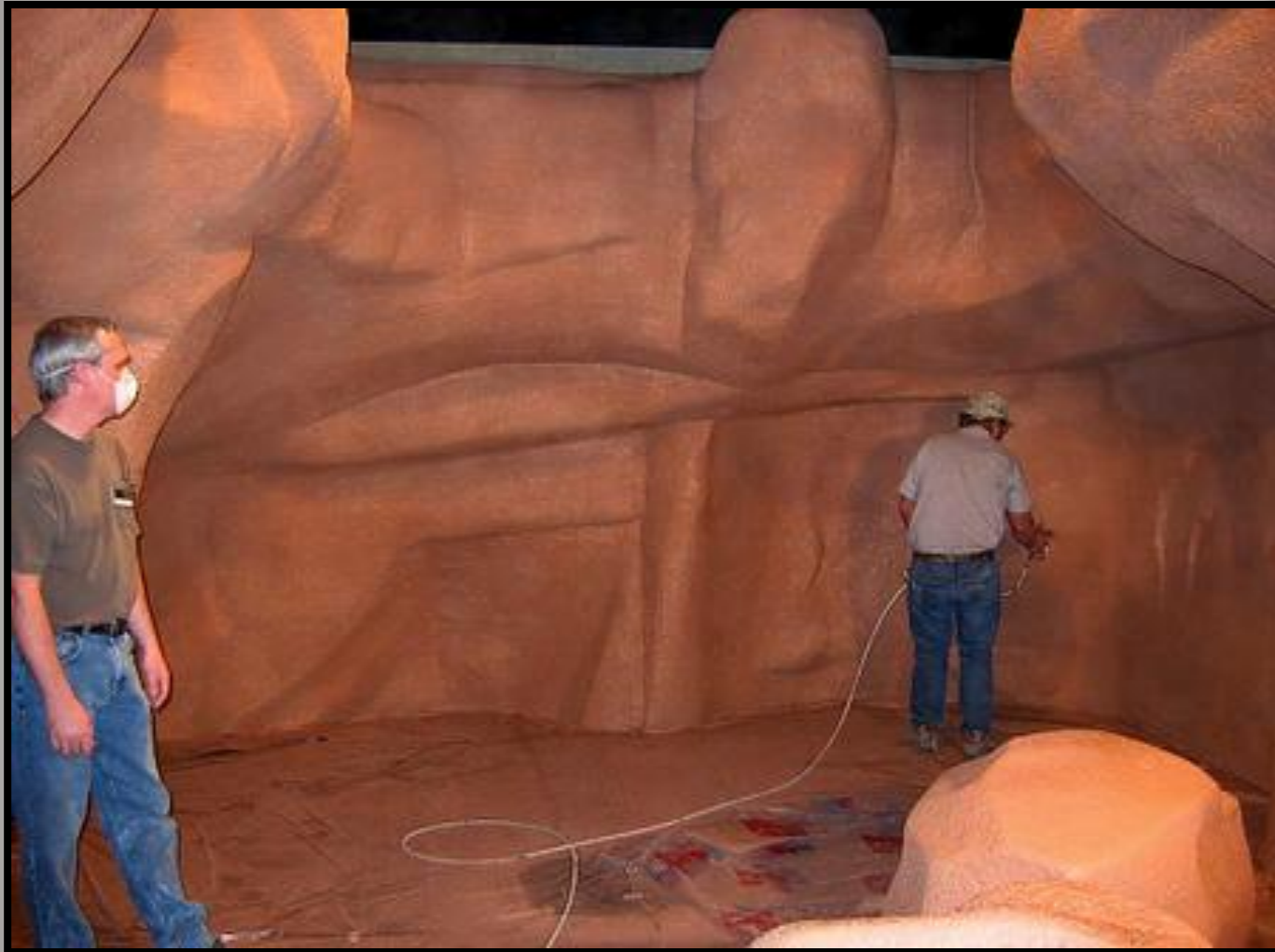
One of the three major interpretive themes identified by the exhibition team focused on the Apishapa culture of southeastern Colorado. The Apishapa were semi-nomadic people who lived along the gullies and cut banks of the waterways fanning across the southeastern prairie landscape, especially along the rivers now known as the Arkansas and the Purgatory. My design incorporated a cut bank to serve as the backdrop for their story. Creating the cut bank environment required a major carving effort. A scale model of clay was created based upon a composite of site photographs and a drawing by the team archaeologist.



- The model was sectioned to correspond with 4' x 4' x 9' blocks of Styrofoam. These became the building blocks of the cut bank environment. The blocks were dense enough to allow support for a catwalk atop the structure for access to lighting and AV projectors.

Here the Styrofoam blocks are going into place and the preliminary carving to create the undercut cliff landscape is taking shape. Each block was connected to the exterior wall structure with a series of rods and anchored bars. The end anchor plates are visible in the photo.





Once the carving was complete, my crew then sealed with structure with a coat of textured concrete. A basecoat was then applied and the color variations of the rock surfaces were achieved with the application of several subsequent glazes of colors and spattering.

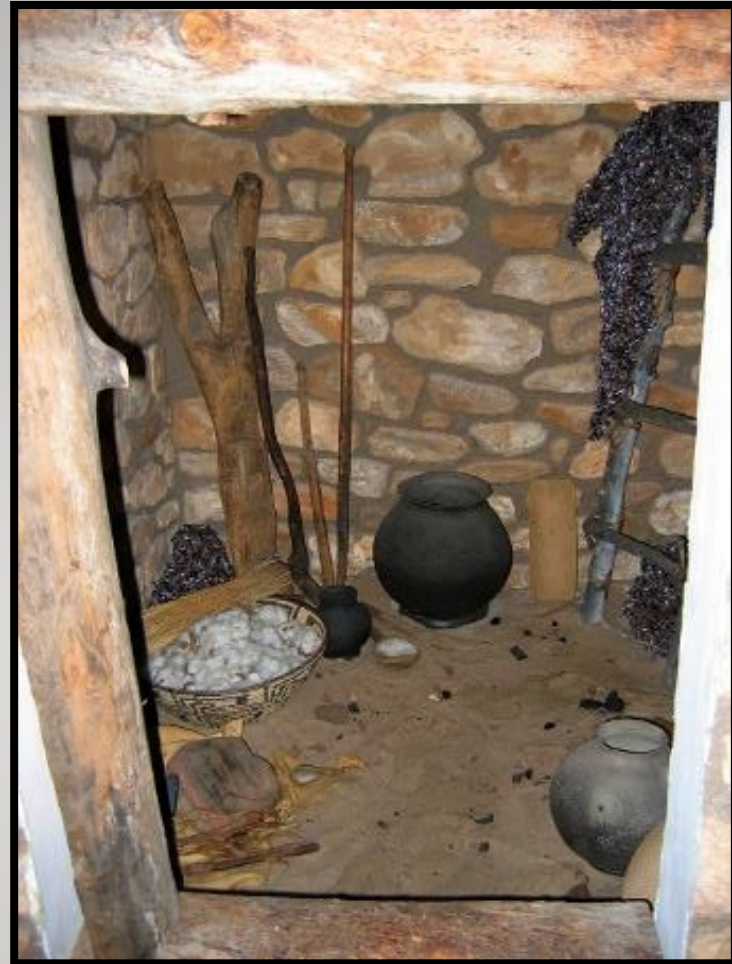
As we neared completion more and more finished elements began to take their places. I outsourced several of the larger interactive components to an exhibit design firm in Fort Collins. One was designed to look like a stretched elk hide, and in fact was backed with a real (fumigated) elk hide. Panels with elk horn handles opened to reveal information on native grasses and plants that were food sources.

My design for the plaza area of the Mesa Verde pueblo complex was centered around a large backlit photographic transparency. The four-part photograph was captured by a member of the Society's staff and represented the view from an existing cliff house structure at Mesa Verde. The large snow-capped mountain at the center is a sacred site to the Southern Ute.





The finished elk hide interactive station was divided into four season sections. The informational text behind the doors contained information about the food sources available at various times of the years. Some of the sources were medicinal in nature, and others nutritional. An archaeologist on the exhibition team sampled each grass and plant to accurately describe their flavor and texture to a modern audience.



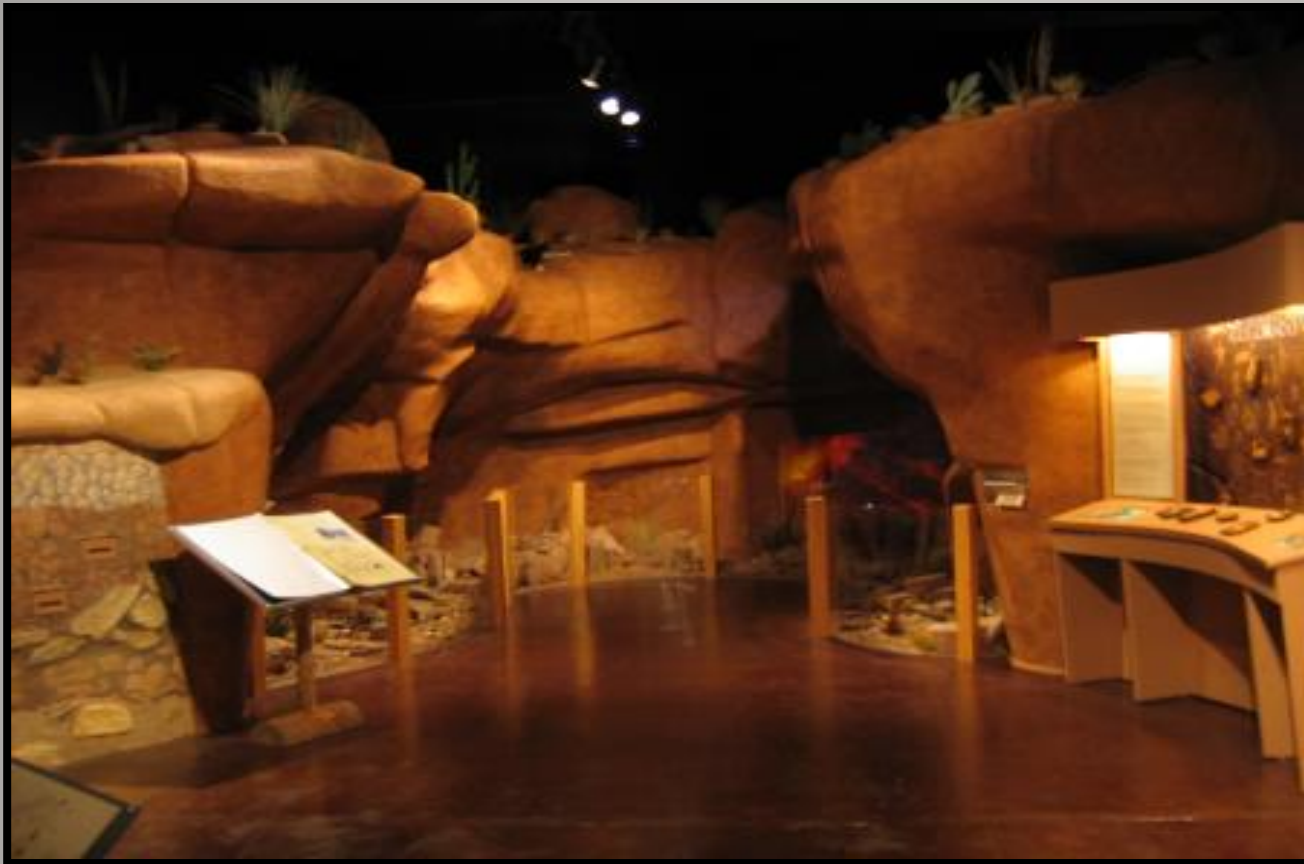
I spent a great deal of time refining with the details in the installation. One key story that the exhibition team wished to feature was the destructive nature of vandalism on ancient sites. I incorporated modern graffiti, discarded beer cans, and the remains of a camp fire as part of the cut bank setting. I also carefully recreated a storeroom in a pueblo dwelling to appear as it would when first discovered by a contemporary archaeologist. The contents of the room included authentic artifacts and reproductions. The space was viewed both through a low Plexiglas-covered doorway and through a narrow slit window.

The “spirits” of the Apishapa people were represented in the cut bank through the use of projected silhouettes of two men chipping a petroglyph composition. The director of our San Luis Valley film shoot, clad in a loin cloth and wig, stood in as one of the Apishapa artisans.

The silhouettes were accented with flickering fire light – as from an ancient fire. I utilized the distinct clink of chipping stone in the space along with the crackle of flames.

On the right is a view of the finished cut bank environment under work lights. I designed an undulating Plexiglas barrier to allow gallery visitors to move through the depth of the cut bank and take in its various details. An activity station interpreting petroglyphs and pictographs through a puzzle interactive is to the far right. One of the archaeologist’s field notebooks stands at the entrance to the area.





The finished Apishapa cut bank under gallery lighting. The stratigraphy interactive station is on the left leading into the space. The glow of the carving scene projection is just right of center back, in the shadows. The modern vandalism elements are near the petroglyph puzzle station.

In the fall of 2005 I joined the Gilcrease Museum. I inherited a very full exhibition calendar with major shows rotating every three months. I worked with a staff of four gifted artisan craftsmen. The majority of the installations revolved around the museum's fine art collection, however they did occasionally include three-dimensional anthropological objects and materials from the archives collection.

As the project coordinator for *The Many Faces of Edward Sherriff Curtis* I combined collection materials from the Gilcrease holdings with a loaned photography collection. I chose to display the artifacts with a very minimalist approach to not detract from the riveting photographic portraits.





In 2006 I acted as coordinator and the installation designer for *Rendezvous*, the major fundraising event sponsored by the Gilcrease Museum. The exhibition and sale featured the works of many noted American representational artists. I was responsible for all communications with, and arrangements for the 53 participating artists in addition to designing and overseeing the placement of the 150 artworks within the 7,000 sq. ft. gallery.

In early 2007 I had the opportunity to both curate and design *Manuel: The Star-Spangled Thank You Tour* at the Gilcrease Museum. The exhibition was about Manuel Cuevas – the last of the cowboy couture designers. This project allowed me to return to my earlier training in costume design and combine it with my passion for museum exhibitions. The exhibit featured fifty embellished bolero jackets that Manuel has created as a tribute to the United States. Each jacket represents a state in the Union. I presented the jackets ordered from west coast to east coast– some on rotating turntables – to show their elaborate details and the effect of the rich materials in motion.



In early 2009 I was responsible for organizing and hanging *Transcending Vision: American Impressionism, 1870 – 1940* at the Gilcrease Museum. The show includes loaned works from the Bank of America's corporate art collection, and twenty-one additional works from the museum's permanent collection.

For the 7,000 sq. ft. installation I selected works by John Singer Sargent, George Innes, Joseph Henry Sharp, Guy Carleton Wiggins, Ernest Blumenschein, Oscar Berninghaus and William R. Leigh.





In the spring of 2009 I oversaw the layout and installation of *Rendezvous 2009*. The installation was spread through a combination of open gallery and corridor spaces encompassing about 3,500 sq. ft. The show included 93 works by 28 prominent western artists. The gallery spaces were conceived to accommodate both general public traffic and larger numbers of invited guests at formal receptions and a sales event.



In the spring of 2012, as the Curator of Art for the State of Wyoming, I organized the exhibition *A Horse, Of Course* at the Wyoming State Museum. The installation included artworks from the museum's permanent art collection, reproduction images from the Wyoming State Archives and objects from the museum's history collection. The exhibit documented the contributions of horses to the state's early history.



Two of my major functions at the Wyoming State Museum are to manage the Governor's Capitol Art Collection and to organize the annual *Governor's Capitol Art Exhibition and Sale*. The annual juried show generates the artworks that make up the Governor's Capitol Art Collection – a dedicated holding of contemporary art by Wyoming regional artists displayed in state offices. The 2013 version of the show received 289 entries. The gallery installation included 59 of those works. The artwork was displayed against galvanized tin sheeting, recycled barn wood and corrugated steel roofing panels.

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