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Displaying Science: The Exhibits Revolution in Science and Natural History Museums, 1900-1990

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Once defined primarily by their collections, by the end of the twentieth century, American natural history and science museums had become institutions defined largely by their displays. This talk will use life science and physics exhibits to illustrate how and why this transformation occurred. Efforts to modernize displays shaped and were themselves shaped by new institutional roles and identities for museums in twentieth-century science education and in American culture. Drawing on a forthcoming co-authored book (“Life on Display,” U. Chicago, 2014) this talk will reveal the controversies that accompanied exhibition building, chronicling how and why curators, designers, and educators worked with and against one another to build displays intended to communicate new ideas about topics like evolution, animal behavior, and radiation to the American public. It explains that scientists were extraordinarily invested in the success of museums’ displays and saw display as an integral element of their own public outreach work and research agendas. In turn, rapidly professionalizing exhibit designers were periodic participants in the research process, supplementing and sometimes prompting research projects through the displays they built.

¹Presenting work that is co-authored by Rader and Victoria E.M. Cain (Northeastern University)