

★ DISPLAYING YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND COLLECTION AT VGCA SHOWS DOES NOT HAVE TO BE HARD

By Marc Gorelick and Rob Becker

One of the features that sets VGCA shows apart from commercial shows in Virginia and elsewhere are its educational displays by members. Through the years VGCA shows have hosted numerous award winning displays, many of which have also won prizes at other, larger shows. The latest show in November was no exception with a number of outstanding displays.

Putting a display together need not be a daunting task. The VGCA is first and foremost a club for gun collectors. The displays put on by our members greatly enhance the mission and prestige of our organization, foster interest in gun collecting and educating the public, and solidify your reputation as a knowledgeable collector and expert. They are also examples of your passion for our hobby and can be a vehicle for meeting others who share your collecting interests.



This small three-gun display won second place at the March 2019 VGCA show and won Best of Show (1st place) at the July 2019 Forks of the Delaware show. Note the use of photographs and drawings to show how the firearm's unusual mechanism works. Note that the images, literature and accessories support and give historical context to the display without overpowering the guns. Photo by Jack Looney.

Outstanding displays do not have to contain dozens of guns and accessories in elaborate and expensive presentations that took many hours (or in some cases years) to put together. Many of us do not have the time or resources to build professional displays. Displays can be about one unique firearm or a small group of related firearms and, if well presented, still be able to compete with large multi-gun displays. A single gun or small group of guns, if attractively presented with related material and properly labelled, can

do well. For instance, if the display is about a unique firearm, you can showcase what sets it apart from other firearms, whether it is its place in history, who used it, the inventor or gunmaker, the technology and/or unique features, such as engraving. A display comprising a small group of guns might feature their similarities, their use or place in history (including interesting historical facts), the manufacturer or designer, design evolution and/or technology. You don't have to have an armory's worth of expensive guns to present an outstanding display. Sometimes less is better.



A single-gun display at the May Ohio Gun Collectors Association (OGCA) show that featured a Thompson submachine gun that was purchased by the Baldwin Locomotive Company. Note that the signage supports the gun in the display, giving the historical context as well as the history of this particular gun. It is supported by clearly labelled accessories and enlarged photographs of details. The model locomotive and tracks emphasizes the unique story of this particular firearm. Photo by Marc Gorelick

There are many benefits to putting on a display at a VGCA show and the club has taken measures to encourage and help displayers, especially first time displayers. For instance, displayers are awarded cash prizes for first, second and third place, and judges' choice. Other benefits of displaying at VGCA shows are: the first two display tables are free for VGCA members in good standing. Subsequent tables must be paid for. Also, displayers are permitted to enter the show early on Friday afternoon to set up their displays. Displaying often helps improve and expand your collection by showing others what you are interested in. It helps you meet others who are interested in the same type guns. Displays by two people are permitted and are eligible for awards but displays by three or more people are not eligible. In addition, the VGCA provides a one-time subsidy of \$100 to first-time displayers to help them offset the cost of constructing their display.

The single most important element of a display is the subject. The subject should stand out/be clearly visible, relatively narrow and focused, able to be represented in the space allocated to the display, and adequately covered by the displayed items and signage. Display topics are limited only by your imagination – they can cover a specific model of firearm, a specific time period, a country, an inventor, or a combination of these.

Putting on a successful display is often a learning process. You may not win first prize the first time but you will get better the more times you do it. There are many ideas for display designs that you can pick up just by looking at other people's displays. You can get great ideas by looking at other VGCA displays or at displays at gun shows that are known for their excellent displays. These include the Maryland Arms Collectors show in Baltimore or one of the Ohio Gun Collectors Association shows. Museums are another place where you can get ideas for displays. They are in the display business full time and know more about making a display than most people. There are plenty of different gun racks and stands available for sale and they can easily be incorporated into your design. However building your own racks or backboard does not have to be hard. Probably the most common material is pegboard, frequently covered in burlap. And once you build a rack or backboard you can use it for other displays. Display cases can be purchased at gun shows or on the internet. They are useful to protect your guns and accessories from unnecessary handling and moisture, and come in various sizes and materials.



This focused but comprehensive one-gun display won 1st place at the November 2020 VGCA show. The single gun is the center piece of the display, but it is supported by the title, photographs, write-ups, a book, and accessories, all adequately labeled and arranged in a relatively clean presentation. Note that the ammunition loaded in the belt consists of dummy rounds. Dummy rounds in the display should be easily identifiable as such (for example, holes drilled in the sides of the cases or primer pockets empty). Any live rounds displayed should be locked in a case and inaccessible to the public. Photo by Jack Looney.



There are also little “tricks” that you can use to make your display stand out. For instance, you can incorporate a mirror behind a gun to show its features from both sides. Having photographs of the gun being used in a historical setting brings life and imagination to what otherwise would be a static display. Diagrams showing the mechanism or a short write-up about the gun’s background or history give context to the display. Accessories and accoutrements also add to the display. Lighting can be important if you want to brighten the entire display or if you want to highlight certain aspects. A good resource for ideas is other VGCA members who have done displays - they are always ready to give advice if asked.

The photo above shows the central part of a display at the VGCA March 2018 show that won 2nd place. Note that the guns reflect the title and theme and are presented using a free-standing rack. The back board is used to mount illustrations which add excitement and historical context to the presentation. Photo by Jack Looney.

Make sure that nothing detracts from or draws attention away from the focus of the display. For example, as a safety measure, all cartridge firearms displayed outside of a locked cabinet/case are usually required to be made inoperative, generally through the use of zip ties (although some shows require the removal of firing pins). When using zip ties, make sure the excess material of the zip tie is clipped off so it does not distract the viewer. Continuing on this theme, at the February 2018 Baltimore Antique Arms show, there was a display of nicked and blued pocket pistols. In this case, the collector used white zip ties on the nicked examples and black zip ties on blued pistols, thereby making a required safety measure as unobtrusive as possible.

Similarly, signage should be “short and sweet”, in large enough font to be easy to read, and support the theme of the display. Do not just print copies of pages from a reference book – the typical viewer will pass over it without reading a word. White paper can be too stark. Following the theme of not being distracting, off white or cream-colored heavy stock paper (such as that used for resumes) will compliment a display and is less likely to detract from it.

Handouts or flyers are an option for your display and should follow the same rules as the signage – i.e. “short and sweet.” They should summarize the key points of the display. They can be as simple as a single printed page in black and white, or as involved as a professional printed multi-page pamphlet in color. This is an area receiving increased attention at larger display shows. Display judging at the NRA Annual Meetings is considering adding a separate award category to acknowledge the effort that goes into a quality handout.



Part of a display of engraved Colts at the May OGCA show. The use of mirrors can enhance the display. These mirror-topped stands have small battery-powered motors inside and revolve, showing the ornate engraving from several angles. According to the displayer, he purchased the stands on e-Bay. Also note the signage – Colt blue with white font, which blends in to the blue background and does not detract from pistols. Photo by Marc Gorelick.

Displays at VGCA shows are judged based on a number of factors with 10 points assigned to each factor. Different clubs use slightly different factor and point systems. VGCA display judging factors are:

- The title should be clear, simple and descriptive with the theme being evident.
- The displayed firearm(s) and related items should support the title/theme.
- Completeness of the presentation. Is the full scope of the subject presented?
- All the displayed items, whether firearms, accessories or accoutrements are adequately labeled and described.
- The text of the labeling should be clear, concise and readable.
- The historical importance and/or collector interest in the firearm(s) and/or items.
- Is the significance adequately presented in the display and/or handouts?
- The condition of the items – their quality and/or originality.
- The rarity of the displayed items. What is their availability? This does not necessarily translate into their cost or value.
- General appearance of the display. This includes neatness, creativity in design, workmanship, and supplementary text and signage that is well balanced to the display. Security safeguards that do not obstruct the view also contribute to the general appearance of the display.



This display on Colt Civil War revolvers won a Judges Choice award at the November 2016 VGCA show. Note that a rack or stand is not used. The guns and accessories are presented in a display case that is flanked by supporting photos and literature. Photo by Jack Looney.

The VGCA uses a judging process that is, we believe, fair. Judging is not done by a small closed group, but rather by the displayers themselves. Each displayer judges every other display, but not his or her own. This is also an excellent way for displayers to closely examine other displays and pick up ways to improve their design the next time they display.



This superb display of Colt Sporting Rifles and Shotguns 1878-1906 was from the November 2016 VGCA show. Note that the displayer ingeniously built his rack out of a headboard and that the firearms are displayed vertically to improve their “viewability.” The signage, photos, diagrams, books and catalogues all support the guns without overpowering them. Photo by Jack Looney.



Photo left: An elaborate display of Mannlicher pistols at the May 2021 OGCA show. The guns are mounted on a printed background that combines text and photographs of the guns from different sides and enlargements of certain features. The display is well lit by spot lights that are mounted on the sides of the wings of the backboard. Photo by Marc Gorelick

So think about putting on a display at the next show in March or at future VGCA shows. It is never too early to start planning. If interested, contact Rick Nahas, Show Manager, about reserving a table(s). Putting together an educational display can be a very rewarding experience, as well as fun.