EXHIBITION LABELS:
THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY
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The importance of the interpretive and educational functions of museums has grown exponentially in the past few decades. Generating strong interpretive exhibition labels for collections and special exhibitions is a key strategy in furthering the educational missions of museums. Current standards of practice encourage museum professionals to craft labels that cater to the visitors’ desired museum experience, generating text that delivers a personal and memorable experience, involves the visitors, and presents a clear and compelling narrative.

Bibliography


  This website is a concise and practical guide for writing exhibit labels. It provides the results from behavioral research conducted at the Australian Museum, and gives a helpful reference list.


  A highly analytical approach to the subject of including text in exhibitions, this collection of essays by various Canadian museum professionals provides insight into the process by which visitors absorb meaning from the combination of interpretive labels and objects on display. Chapters one through three focus on theoretical approaches, while chapters four through six focus on the more practical considerations of writing, displaying, formatting, editing, and evaluating exhibition texts.


  Part of an issue devoted to the renovation of the Detroit Institute of Arts, completed in 2007, Marlene Chambers’ article argues that the interpretive labels at the Institute are “overkill,” intimidating visitors into skipping over them entirely. She analyzes several wall texts and discusses their successes and failings.


  Seb Chan describes the exhibition “The Odditoreum,” held at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia. Launched in 2009, the exhibition revolved around visitors generating their own interpretive labels for select objects from the museum’s collections. Created through collaboration between museum staff and Shaun Tan, author of children’s literature, this exhibition is a case study in the ultimate form of visitor participation and involvement through the medium of exhibition labels.


  These three documents include all of the winning exhibition label texts from each competition, comments by the jurors, and introductory essays outlining the standards by which each competition...
was judged. Winning entries are from a range of institutions including art museums, botanical gardens, aquariums, zoos, children’s museums, and science museums.

  
  Fragomeni provides a history of the evolution of exhibit labels in North America from the 1970s to the present and discusses two exhibition case studies: “Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey” at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art and “Gord Peteran: Furniture Meets its Maker” at the University of Toronto Art Centre. She discusses the unique difficulties of creating exhibition labels for contemporary art.

  
  A brief article summarizes some of the issues encountered when generating exhibition labels in multiple languages. Johnson discusses the ethical decisions he faced during the project, the questions raised by museum professionals and the general community, the results of the implementation of bilingual labels, and future directions for the museum.

  
  A large collection of essays by leading museum professionals, this text seeks to discuss a broad range of issues surrounding the future of museums in the digital age. Part Four (pg. 225-290) focuses on issues of interpretation. Essays by Ross Parry, Peter Walsh, Olivia C. Frost, Maria Roussou, and Ben Gammon discuss issues of including digital interpretive material in exhibitions, the vast array of unmonitored information available to visitors on the web, and the interactive and collaborative possibilities opened up to museum visitors through digital media.

  
  Pekarik discusses the unique difficulties in creating interpretive text faced by art museums, who deal with the problem of balancing visitors’ time between reading wall text and viewing the art itself. He compares and contrasts the inclusion of much interpretive text in the exhibition “The Circle of Bliss” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the near absence of labels at “Gyroscope” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

  
  A brief guide to writing exhibit labels from the perspective of a museum professional at the Minnesota Historical Society.

  
  A seminal book on best practices for writing exhibit labels. Beverly Serrell provides personal stories, case studies, and research analysis in a practical guide to writing exhibition labels. She provides both good and bad examples, and attempts to give both a broad overview for all cultural institutions and specific considerations for museums of art, science, and history, as well as zoos and children’s museums.