Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2014

The Jurors

Representing CurCom
Benjamin Filene
Director of Public History
University of North Carolina Greensboro

I see a good label as a launching point. It sets the stage for a visitor’s experience. It does not so much as define the object itself, but rather it sets the stage for the object. It is a way of exploring the object, of thinking about the object, of understanding the object. It is a way of connecting with the object.

Representing EdCom
Jenny-Sayre Ramberg
Director for Planning and Design
National Aquarium

My favorite label helps me slow down and look more closely at the objects. It gives me a sense of the stories behind the objects. It tells me the story of the objects. It helps me understand the objects.

Representing the 2013 Awardees
Beth Kaminsky
Manager of Exhibit Development
History Colorado Center

As the Manager of Exhibit Development at History Colorado, I get to work with enthusiastic staff, seasoned consultants, and visitors in the areas of audience research, exhibit development, design, and production. I enjoy almost every aspect of my job. My favorite part is creating labels. I make sure that the stories and objects are told in the most effective way possible.

2014 marks the second year of the collaboration between AAM’s Curators Committee and the Museology Graduate Program at the University of Washington. The partnership makes the competition not only an outlet to celebrate excellent writing but an opportunity for the next generation of museum professionals to gain experience in professional communication, management, and leadership.

Finally, thank you for attending the Marketplace of Ideas. We hope you are inspired by what you read here today. Please consider submitting entries to the 2015 competition. Beginning this September, you will find details at www.curcom.org.

John Russick
Competition Project Director
Director of Curatorial Affairs
Chicago History Museum

Kevin Bicknell
Competition Project Manager
Museology Graduate Student
University of Washington, Seattle

An excellent exhibit label visually grabs my attention, invites me to stop and slow down, and then draws me in. I am a “native” reader, and so the written word is a preferred sensibility that grabs my attention and in which I feel at home. But many of our visitors encounter exhibit labels in a place or space that may not be familiar, that can be perceived as physically hostile, that may unintentionally speak down to them in exhibit label vocabulary or tone.

And one still can find, with depressing regularity, the flat, uninspired “curatorial voice” from on high (that speaks AT you) from my early audience-centered, team-driven interpretive work within my own home community. I continue to grapple with engaging audiences that are under-represented, under-rectangle and under-rewarded in museum experiences. And I have discovered that many visitors use engaging, well written labels as an accessible learning platform to both develop and strengthen conceptual tools and practical vocabulary — everyday life tools that can be employed to counter situations touched to bigotry, in ignorance or in misinformation.

Deborah L. Mack
Associate Director Community & Constituent Services
National Museum of African American History and Culture
NEW IN TOWN

8:30 p.m., August 14. REESE, who’s 9, searches for lizards in his Chatsworth neighborhood. He’s an experienced reptile stalker and has already caught a “bazillion lizards” with his bare hands. The lizard he catches this evening is one for the record books.

REESE KNOWS RIGHT AWAY IT’S SOMETHING DIFFERENT. HE SUBMITS A PHOTO TO THE MUSEUM AND LEARNS THAT THIS IS THE FIRST MEDITERRANEAN HOUSE GECKO DOCUMENTED IN L.A.

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Reese knows right away it’s something different. He submits a photo to the museum and learns that this is the first Mediterranean House Gecko documented in L.A.
THE SUICIDE RATE for Native youths is three to seven times higher than the national average.

“I used my daughter as a model for this painting—those are her feet and her shoes. It was very emotional for me to even imagine her in this state. But more and more of our kids are committing suicide.

Our traumatic past isn’t ancient history. It was 100 years ago and it’s still affecting us. Our kids are born into generational poverty and lose hope. We need to act.”

— Bunky

Wardrobe
Acrylic on canvas
Bunky Echo-Hawk
2013
On loan from Bunky Echo-Hawk

Praise from the Jurors

I like this label for a number of reasons. I applaud the exhibit organizers and writer for recognizing the powerful nature of what they had in the interviews with Bunky Echo-Hawk. His words embody the horror and urgency of the challenges facing Native youths in a way a description could never communicate. The juxtaposition of the simple, terrible fact and his reflection on the issue of suicides in Native youths, including how it is reflected in the vivid details of his work and life (her feet and shoes), makes a riveting and memorable call to action.

— Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

I’m allowed to experience and think about art—and the reality of the world in which it exists—in ways I never have before. The artist forces consideration of the past, present, and future. Because it’s personal, the larger call to action in this label (and probably in the painting it describes) hits hard and hits home.

— Beth Kaninsky
Praise from the Jurors

This irreverent, fun label delighted me and was a pleasure to read. I can imagine strolling by the case starting to read and calling to the rest of my group to come over and see. Laughing together and then settling in curious about kingfishers, teasing about pink flamingos and surprised about the short-lived bluebirds. And then it gave a reward for reading all the labels—a joke. This label doesn’t take itself too seriously. It’s a lovely cup of hot chocolate on a chilly day—delightful and restorative.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

I didn’t care much about birds before, and stuffed museum specimen birds even less. It’s like I dared exhibit developers and writers to interest me, and instead they totally blew me away. I’d read every single word of this exhibit start to finish, I’d peer through each peep hole. And I bet I’m not the only one. I imagine other visitors to the exhibit, strangers—they’d hear me laugh out loud at the last line. Good, I want to share the joke. Yes, the labels break down barriers between museum and audience.

—Beth Kaminshy

THIS BIRD KNOWS WHAT WOMEN WANT

Male QUALS attract their mates by quickly offering up bits of food. Called “tidbitting,” the ritual is something of a race, with the fastest male often winning the female.

THIS BIRD LIVES THE “SUITE” LIFE

The Peabody Hotel in Memphis houses five trained MALLARDS in a $200,000 rooftop penthouse. Twice a day, they take the elevator down to the lobby, waddle down a red carpet, and swim in the hotel fountain. I’m not kidding.

THESE BIRDS CAN CALM THE RAGING SEAS

In Greek myth, a sailor and his wife were turned into KINGFISHERS by the gods, who calmed the seas for 14 days so they could nest. The wife’s name, Alcyon, is the source of the word “alcyon,” referring to peaceful days.

THESE BIRDS WILL LIVE FAST AND DIE YOUNG

BLUEBIRDS lead a rough life. Some 70% won’t live past their first year, and the rest don’t make it much longer. Doesn’t sound very happy. The oldest bluebird? An eastern bluebird who lived to the ripe old age of 10 years, 5 months.

IF THIS BIRD IS NOT A REGISTERED TRADEMARK

TOUCANS are a popular choice for advertising, most notably for a certain fruit-flavored breakfast cereal. This mascot bird is so recognizable that when the Mayan Archaeology Initiative used it in their logo, Kellogg threatened to sue. The case was soon dropped, perhaps because it was just too silly.

THESE BIRDS GET NO RESPECT

The DODO was no dummy. It had the good sense to live on a tropical island with lots of food and no predators, where it evolved into the largest member of the pigeon family. Not too shabby. But humans hunted the dodo to extinction, and this bird took its secrets to the grave.

THIS BIRD IS WORSHIPPED AND ABHORRED

How the mighty have fallen. In ancient Egypt the FLAMINGO was seen as a living incarnation of the Sun god, Ra. In modern America, the ubiquitous plastic flamingo is banned by homeowners associations for decreasing property values.

THESE BIRDS WILL Live THE “SUITE” Life

This is a toad. But you knew that.
Inside you and every living thing is a full set of instructions for how to grow and live.

Praise from the Jurors

Elegant and compact, the label’s language matches the subject it describes. It guides the reader from a universal statement down to a single cell inside us.

—Benjamin Fliene

This set of three labels deconstructs one of the most important, complex, confusing, globally significant, bigger-than-life scientific research issues of the past 2 centuries and proceeds to define it in two beautifully worded, straightforward sentences. But the very first label speaks directly to the visitor, placing the visitor as the subject and center of the exhibit, and explains succinctly what this means in terms of being human. Nuff said.

—Deborah L. Mack

THE GENOME WITHIN US

Meet Your Genome

The human genome is a three-billion-part instruction manual written in the twisting, ladder-shaped molecule known as DNA. Despite its enormous size, your genome folds up so small that a copy fits inside every cell in your body.
George Wesley Bellows (1882–1925)

Waldo Peirce, 1920

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase, gift of the Charles E. Merrill Trust with matching funds from the M. H. de Young Museum Society
67.23.1

Betraying No Emotion
by Ben Erickson, fourth grade, Ohlone Elementary School

Paint me sitting on a wooden bench holding a cane
Paint me with a dull brown overcoat and a turquoise sweater
Paint me with a yellow hand resting on a wine red hat
Paint me betraying
No emotion

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Praise from the Jurors

A beautiful poem by an observant fourth-grader encourages us to see a painting in a new way. We can hear the student searching for a way into a seemingly inscrutable picture. He or she is drawn to the rich colors that suggest a vitality not revealed in the sitter's face.

The first-person approach emphasizes how we understand art depends on perspective: individual, emotional responses can be helpful. And kids are great at reminding us to pay attention to our own gut feelings.

— Benjamin Fliene

The label/poem made me want to see the painting, to be there when the fourth-grade writer experienced the artwork—seeing the details, the face. Would I see emotion in the expression? Speaking as the subject to the artist after the fact is brilliant, effortless, intriguing.

— Beth Kaminsky
Praise from the Jurors

The label is powerful and dramatic while historically informative. Details set the scene but also tell us a lot about the culture of the miners in quick sketch (Greek Easter, baseball, mandolin, lamb, children). The text humanizes the families as it sets the stage; it abruptly cuts the scene short with a threatening taunt.

— Benjamin Filene
Follow That Car!

As our investigation went back in time, we discovered that our block was once part of Denver's bustling "Gasoline Alley." Auto dealers, garages and repair shops lined Broadway and Lincoln. As Denver grew, 12th and Broadway changed from a place where people lived to a place where they worked and shopped.

Cars first puttered into Denver in the 1890s, when you had to buy them in horse stables and bike shops. In 1916, Alfred O’Meara opened a Ford dealership down the street from here. Other dealers joined him, selling the latest car models in luxurious showrooms. Denver's Auto Row flourished until the 1960s, when big suburban dealers started drawing customers away.
Target audience: Young professionals (25-40) who live/work in Seattle; parents with school-age kids; adult visitors

Label type: Object

Clean-delivery kit

A bar of soap. A clean plastic sheet to slip under the mother’s hips. A razor to cut the cord. String to tie it. And a 10-step diagram to guide the midwife. In rural Nepal, where 90% of deliveries take place at home, this box saves lives.

Loan from PATH

Praise from the Jurors

Clear, direct, unvarnished and riveting. I’m looking into the box, making an inventory of a few, seemingly unimportant household items and suddenly I see them differently. The label was a refreshing splash of cold water on my brain. The writer doesn’t tell me how I should feel or describe things I should see. The writer puts me in front of the box and the facts about rural Nepal and the challenges women face—to make up my own mind about what it means to me, and to the world.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg
For sale
at a Philadelphia slave market

You stand high above a gathering crowd.
Everyone’s staring at you. Inspecting you.
A man shouts. You don’t understand his language.
You don’t know what he’s saying. People in the crowd shout back at him.
He shouts. They shout. He shouts.
And then your child is torn from your arms, and you’re in chains.

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Juror’s Choice

During the judging process, three labels inspired the enthusiasm of a single juror. These entries are included here as Juror's Choice Labels.

Clever. Simple. Yet, this little label made me think. Is it true, as I stand there, do I agree that the arrows point to “it all” and “away from it all?” And where is my “it all” and my “away from it all”? I wonder. Capturing the attention and imaginations of passersby with brief, whimsical tidbits not only offers free amusement, it probably gets more people in the door. Taking exhibit labels outside museum buildings seems a natural, obvious thing to do—let’s all do it more!

— Beth Kaminsky
Juror’s Choice

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Decorative Bollard. Pick me up off the floor. I LOVE these labels and how they made me laugh. I'd want to take photos of them if I was there and send them to my friends. I'd want to find more. I wish I wrote these.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg