

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2014

What is excellent exhibition label writing? Each year we ask accomplished professionals from the field to help us answer that question, and each year they select examples of the best writing from the work submitted for consideration. For this year's competition, we received a record 180 labels from writers and editors representing 59 museums, zoos, aquariums, libraries, and historical sites. We thank each of them for their contributions to the field, for making the pool of entries exciting and diverse, and for striving for excellence.

A panel of four jurors—Benjamin Filene, Beth Kaminsky, Deborah L. Mack, and Jenny-Sayre Ramberg—reviewed the entries and chose to honor eight. In addition to the eight recognized entries, we gave each juror the opportunity to champion a label not lauded by the full jury. As a result, three Juror's Choice labels are also being honored. As the contest grows each year, so does the amount of time and effort required from the jurors. We thank our panel for their dedication and expertise. Without them, this competition would not be possible. We also extend our gratitude to AAM for supporting the competition and to CurCom for sponsoring it in cooperation with EdCom and NAME.

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

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 so not with the dutiful air of "before you look at this object you must understand this information" but with an inviting sense of possibility. A good label answers the immediate questions that a visitor has and also addresses that larger one: "So what?" It finds bigger meaning in small things (this reclining couch reflects 19th-century Americans' fascination with the Far East). Or it uncovers telling details that are hard to spot (cows have a tough pad of skin instead of teeth on top).

Instead of having the last word, the label invites further conversation and opens the door for visitors to consider new ideas. It suggests a way of looking, a way of thinking, a thread of connections. Along the way, it signals what sort of experience lies ahead. The label has a voice—perhaps even a passionate one—but it isn't show-offy. Its tone and rhythm suggest a mood and pace for the exhibition as a whole. The visitor imagines an engaging guide or partner, not a frustrated poet. It embodies the art of restraint.

Representing EdCom

Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Director for Planning and Design
National Aquarium

My favorite labels help me slow down and look more closely (that eel does have gills, why is it a fish!), draw a picture I cannot forget, evoke an emotion, or make me feel (or look) smart.

Great labels work together with objects, animals, plants, space, videos and visitors to tell stories, communicate instructions and convey mood in exhibitions. Labels work best when they're written, designed and placed so you find them without looking and you read them without difficulty. And they're there to communicate a message that was thoughtfully distilled by an exhibit team who wants the visitor to have the same opportunity as they did to fall in love with these objects and stories and experiences.

An excellent label speaks to me as I'm forming my question, gives me just the right nugget of information to engage my 5 year old, reminds my dad why he wanted to come to the exhibition. Each word is there to do a job. There are no hangers-on and no little darlings. There is no self-indulgent, "look at me," cleverness. They can even change the way I experience the world. I'll never forget my father calming down my weeping sister after she drove through a red light coming home from a visit to the aquarium: "It's ok. We're in no rush. We can just drift along like the jellies."

Representing NAME

Deborah L. Mack

Associate Director Community & Constituent Services
National Museum of African American History and Culture

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 possibly 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-interpreted and under-welcomed 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 couched in bigotry, in ignorance or in misinformation.

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 writing labels. For me, finding a balance between the somewhat solitary act of writing and the immensely collaborative work of creating exhibits proves challenging. And incredibly rewarding.

Exhibits—from concept through remediation—require teamwork. Our teams happily and creatively reinvent the wheel for every project, because each one is different. Our complex processes result in three-dimensional, multifaceted, free-choice environments that visitors explore. We connect with them on many levels and labels play a huge role, so we work hard to make them excellent.

Last year, AAM's Excellence in Label Writing Competition recognized a label in Denver A to Z, an exhibit about my hometown. Of course I didn't write it alone—countless people contributed in so many ways. Team members celebrated the recognition together, delighting in the fact that the particular label recognized was "F is for FUDGE (#%-!)"—how very Denver to have an expletive honored. A juror's praise captured the root of our delight: "This label approach sought to build relevance between visitors and Denver, and it succeeds with humor to boot." We love to watch visitors explore the exhibit. We know it works when locals and tourists alike curse the Denver Boot with us.

Writers: **Kathy Talley-Jones, Writer & Interpretive Planner, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County**

Editors: **The Nature Lab Team; Kim Baer Design Associates; Carolyn Wendt, Freelance Copy Editor and Proofreader**

The Nature Lab

Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Los Angeles, CA

Target audience: **General Audience**

Label type: **Introductory**



Praise from the Jurors

I'm hooked from the header "New in Town" and a date. I'm curious and then I'm drawn into the delightful story of Reese and his lizard fascination. Sounds like some kids I know. The writer includes a few vivid details that make Reese real and engaging that he caught a "bazillion lizards" with his bare hands. And the writer is spare with other words only using what s/he needs to deliver the story climax. The short sentences build anticipation to the big reveal. I think this approach is great for an urban nature center and applaud the exhibit team for such a thoughtful approach.

—*Jenny-Sayre Ramberg*

These beautifully crafted and lively labels weave together science, familiar images and places that its local visitors will know. The labels illustrate everyday citizens as both learners and scientists in active, participatory ways. Given the numerous citizen science projects that take place around the globe – including urban wildlife projects in L.A.– visitors see that they both contribute to evidence-based research and have amazing stories.

—*Deborah L. Mack*

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.

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.

Writers: **Amy Schleser, Exhibition Developer**

Editors: **Sarah Crawford, Exhibition Developer;**
Matt Matcuk, Exhibition Development
Director; Bunky Echo-Hawk, Curator;
Alaka Wali, Curator

Bunky Echo-Hawk: Modern Warrior

The Field Museum

Chicago, IL

Target audience: **Middle School and up**

Label type: **Object**



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 Kaminsky*

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 some lose hope.

We need to act."

BUNKY

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

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We need to act."

- Bunky

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

Writer: **Joseph Dresch**

Editor: **Eugene Dillenburg, Assistant Director of Exhibits, University of Michigan Museum of Natural History**

The Secret Life of Birds

University of Michigan Museum of Natural History
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Target audience: **Undergraduate Students; general public**

Label type: **Object**



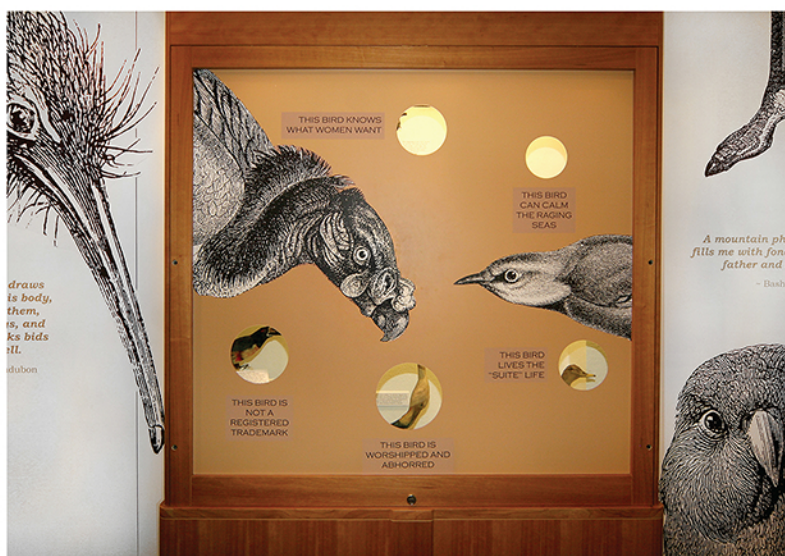
Praise from the Jurors

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 Kaminsky*



THIS BIRD KNOWS WHAT WOMEN WANT

Male **QUAILS** 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 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 “halcyon,” referring to peaceful days.

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.

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.

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.

THIS BIRD 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.

THIS BIRD GETS 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 NOT A BIRD

This is a toad.
But you knew that.

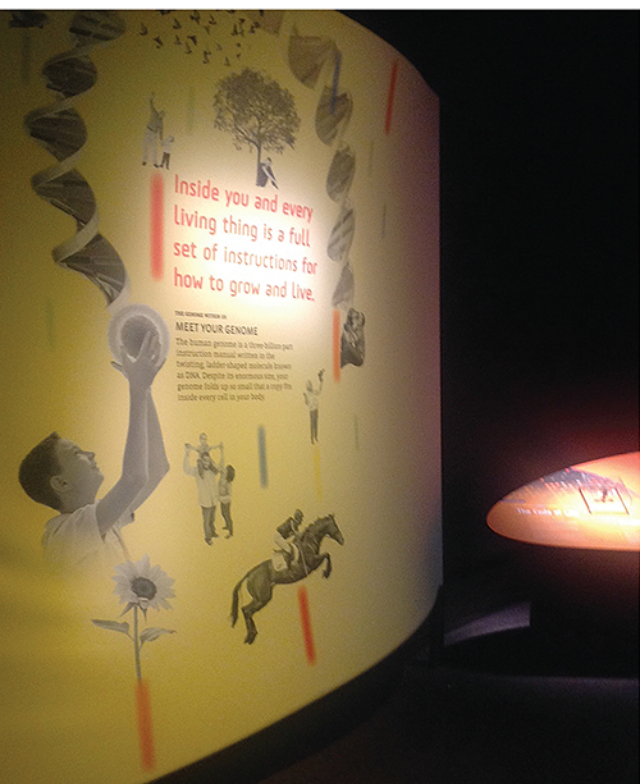
Writer/Editor: **Elizabeth Jones, Exhibit Writer,
National Museum of
Natural History**

Genome: Unlocking Life's Code

National Museum of Natural History
Washington, DC

Target audience: **General audience; tourists to DC;
family groups**

Label type: **Introductory**



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 Filene*

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*



**Inside you and every
living thing is a full
set of instructions for
how to grow and live.**

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.

Writer: **Ben Erickson, Poet**

Editor: **Emma Acker, Assistant Curator of American Art, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Timothy Anglin Burgard, Edna Root Curator-in-Charge of American Art, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Devorah Major, Poets in-the-Galleries Program, de Young Museum**

American Impressionism

de Young Museum
San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **All Ages**

Label type: **Object**



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 in to 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 that 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 Filene*

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*

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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Writer: **Dawn DiPrince, Assistant Director,
El Pueblo History Museum**

Editor: **Dr. William Convery, State Historian;
B. Erin Cole, Assistant State Historian;
Steve Grinstead, Managing Editor**

***Children of Ludlow:
Life in a Battle Zone, 1913-14***

El Pueblo History Museum
Pueblo, CO

Target audience: **Parents and grandparents
with children, grades 7 and up**

Label type: **Concept**



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



April 19, 1914

STORM CLOUDS GATHER ON A DAY OF CELEBRATION

The day before the massacre, families at Ludlow celebrated Greek Easter with feasting, dancing and baseball. Greek miners shared their sacred holiday, as strains of mandolin music and the aroma of roasting lamb swirled among the tents. Children played in patches of lingering snow under a warm spring sun.

Nearby, mounted National Guardsmen taunted the miners:
“You enjoy your roast today; we will have ours tomorrow.”

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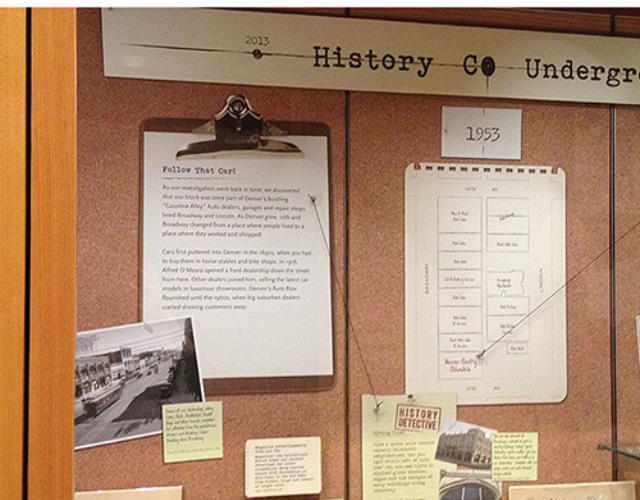
Writer: **B. Erin Cole, Assistant State Historian**
 Editor: **Steve Grinstead, Managing Editor;**
Dr. William Convery, State Historian

History Colorado Underground

History Colorado Center
 Denver, CO

Target audience: **Older adults;**
families with children

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

The label encapsulates a century of U.S. history in a paragraph, as seen in one place. I like the use of specific names—people made this history—and the use of words that give a sense of the pace and sound and smell of the times (“putter”, “Gasoline Alley”).

—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 pattered 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.

Writer/Editor: **Judy Rand, Director,
Rand & Associates LLC**

True Northwest: The Seattle Journey

Museum of History and Industry
Seattle, WA

Target audience: **Young professionals (25-40)
who live/work in Seattle;
parents with school-age kids;
adult visitors**

Label type: **Object**



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*

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

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.

Writers: **Ellen Snyder-Grenier, Principal,
REW & Co; Tukufu Zuberi, Lasry
Family Professor of Race Relations,
and Professor of Sociology and
Africana Studies, University of
Pennsylvania**

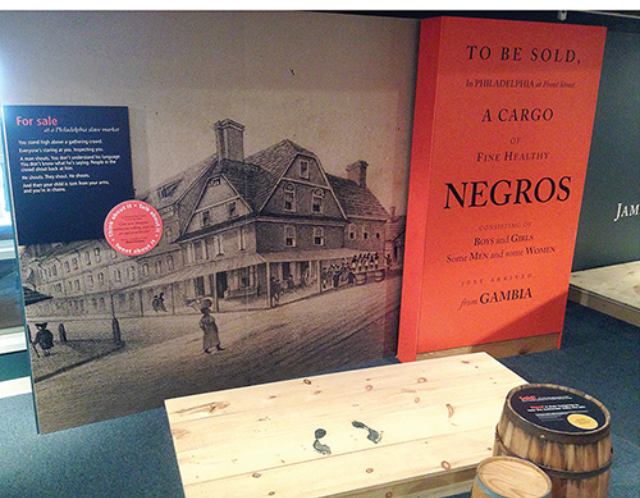
Editors: **Craig Burns, Chief Curator,
Independence Seaport Museum;
Keith Ragone, Exhibition Designer,
Keith Ragone Studio**

Tides of Freedom: African Presence on the Delaware River

Independence Seaport Museum
Philadelphia, PA

Target audience: **General audience and school groups
(middle through high school)**

Label type: **Object**



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.

The label builds empathy in just a few lines. The second-person "you" pushes the reader to personalize. The repetition of "shout" insists we sense the fearsome commotion. The story is easy to read yet wrenching.

— Benjamin Filene

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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Writer/Editor: **Kevin Boyd, Senior Science
Writer, Exploratorium**

Site Notes

Exploratorium
San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **Members of the public who pass
through the non-ticketed outdoor
areas around the Exploratorium.**

Label type: **Object**



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*



It all

Away from it all

Writer/Editor: **Kevin Boyd, Senior Science
Writer, Exploratorium**

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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.

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

**Decorative bollard.
Please do not
moor ship.**

**Decorative bollard.
Please do not
moor ship.**