

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2018

Every year, the Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition brings together the creative minds of writers, editors, and enthusiasts to consider what makes a label great. Our goal is to start conversations about the process, purpose, and improvement of the primary tool we use to communicate with visitors.

A panel of four jurors carefully reviewed hundreds of entries and identified thirteen labels that stood apart from the rest. We would like to thank the jurors for their commitment. Without their energy and expertise, this competition would not be possible. We also extend our thanks to AAM for their continued support, and CurCom for generously sponsoring the competition in cooperation with EdCom and NAME.

Beyond the Marketplace, the competition continues to grow as an online archive of outstanding label writing, fostering connections in the AAM professional network, and providing an ongoing professional development opportunity for students enrolled in the University of Washington's Museology Graduate Program. More than just an award, the competition is a resource for current and future museum professionals.

By the numbers — this year's entrants submitted more than 240 labels from 100 exhibitions. These institutions represent 24 disciplines located in 32 different states/provinces in four countries. Labels were submitted in multiple languages, exhibitions ranged from outdoor to online, and authors included curators, freelance writers, directors, collection managers, students, and more. Thank you to everyone who submitted entries and helped make this year's competition a success!

And of course we thank you, the reader, who thoughtfully regards our written labels to find new knowledge, new perspectives, and new approaches. Enjoy the displays and let us know what you think.

John Russick
Competition Project Director
Vice President for Interpretation and Education
Chicago History Museum

Catherine Wood
Competition Project Manager
Museology Master's Candidate, Class of 2018
University of Washington, Seattle

2018 Juror Biographies & Statements

JENNIFER SCOTT

*Director, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum
University of Illinois at Chicago*

Jennifer Scott has worked with museums and arts organizations for over twenty-five years. As Director of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, she serves as chief curator, leading the exhibitions, community engagement efforts, and overall vision of the museum. Recent Hull-House exhibitions include *Into Body Into Wall* featuring the *96 Acres Project*; Aram Han Sifuentes’ *Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can’t/VOX POP: The Disco Party*; and *Claiming Space: Creative Grounds and Freedom Summer School*. Jennifer serves as faculty in the graduate program of Museum and Exhibition Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and at The New School in New York, where she teaches courses on arts and social engagement, race and ethnic studies, and museology. She serves as a Board Member for the Association of Midwest Museums and is a Mentor Curator for the Chicago Artists Coalition. Jennifer researches, writes, and lectures widely on arts and social change, relevancy, and innovative strategies for museums. Recent publications include “Designing for Outrage: Inviting Disruption and Contested Truth Into Museum Exhibitions” in *Exhibition* (Spring 2017).

The best labels make sharp, cogent observations about the objects and spaces they represent. They point us to details we might otherwise overlook. And they introduce us to fresh ways of seeing and thinking. Labels quickly and crisply conjure up images, spark the imagination, and inspire wonder in just a few words, make an exhibit or object of art come alive. A good label tells just enough of the story—a meaningful glance—then leaves the rest for us to complete. I am particularly enthralled by labels that challenge us—subvert normative narratives, counter what we think we already know, take a bold stand, twist our sense of truth just enough to compel us into conversation or deep thought. Maybe in the end, a good label is like a good seduction; the memorable ones bold and unafraid to flirt with absurdity, humor, and outrage.

MICHAEL RIGSBY

*Interpretive Writer and Content Developer
Plain English*

Michael Rigsby has more than 25 years’ experience working as an interpretive writer, content developer, and web producer. He’s served on staff at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago and the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, as well as serving as a senior exhibit writer and developer for the Hilferty and Associates design firm in Ohio. Since 2007, Michael has worked as an independent contractor serving museums, visitor centers, science centers, history centers, conservation organizations, aquariums, zoos and park associations. His primary areas of focus include history, natural history, and science. A number of Michael’s exhibits have been honored with Excellence Awards from the American Association of Museums, including the introductory label *Dinosaur Hall* for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County which was honored with the Annual Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing award.

Excellent labels are faithful partners to their exhibitions. They enhance and deepen, but never distract.

They greet visitors on familiar ground then lead them to new discoveries. They speak with a clear, true voice and encourage conversation. Each word, chosen and placed with care, must carry its own weight; there’s little room to ramble.

They have a rhythm, a flow, that carries readers along. They are trustworthy guides; they never mislead. They invite you to go deeper.

They paint pictures and stir emotions. They build bridges. They surprise, inspire and enchant. They provoke thought and evoke hidden memories. They can make you laugh, or cry, or dream.

Each conveys one clear message, yet entices the imagination with hints of the immensities shimmering beneath the surface.

Each has a strong heart and a pure soul.

BONNIE WALLACE

Freelance Exhibit Writer/Editor

Bonnie has written for museums for more than twenty years. Following a short, enlightening internship at the Monterey Bay Aquarium in 1995, she moved to the California Science Center. She wrote and edited labels for exhibits on technology, stage magic, air and space, and ecosystems. Bonnie also edited an exhibit book and taught summer campers the art of label writing.

In 2004 she turned freelance and currently lives in Colorado. She has written with teams and solo for many clients, including the Detroit Institute of Arts, The Franklin Institute, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the California Academy of Sciences, and most recently the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial museum in in St. Louis.

She loves to tell stories in chunks of sixty words or less.

A good label says: Let me tell you a story.

Not a long story--we don’t have much time.

The first words stop you as you walk by.

*The next words hold you, lead you somewhere new,
reveal what you didn’t know. You discover a new angle,
an unfamiliar voice, a different way of looking.*

Then, too soon, it ends.

JOANNE HYPPOLITE

*Curator
National Museum of African American History and Culture*

Joanne Hyppolite, Ph.D. has been a Museum Curator with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) since 2014. She specializes in African American and African diaspora material and expressive culture and black immigrant American community life. She is the curator of the *Cultural Expressions* inaugural exhibition and co-curator of *A Century in the Making: Building the National Museum of African American History and Culture for the NMAAHC*. From 2008 to 2014, she was the Chief Curator at HistoryMiami Museum, where she oversaw the exhibitions and collections department. Exhibitions curated at HistoryMiami include *Black Crossroads: The African Diaspora in Miami*, *Haitian Community Arts*, *Necropolis Cristobal Colon: Photographs by Raul Rodriguez and Black Freedom in Florida*. She holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Miami, an M.A. in African American Studies from the UCLA and a B.A. in English and Afro American Studies from the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a published writer of fiction and non-fiction for children and adults.

Like a great book an excellent label is one that I want to finish reading. The start must have a good hook (you got me!), the unfolding middle engross (what? how interesting) and the end leave me with a sense of satisfaction (wow, cool to know!). If only it were so simple to craft them! Inviting museum visitors into written content (to learn!) and keeping them engaged requires the label writer to know their audiences (who are you now? how old are you anyway? and how did you find your way into this exhibition?) and with that knowledge foremost demonstrate their equal familiarity and skill in wielding the emotional power and the information that words shaped into sentences and paragraphs deliver. This is work and art.

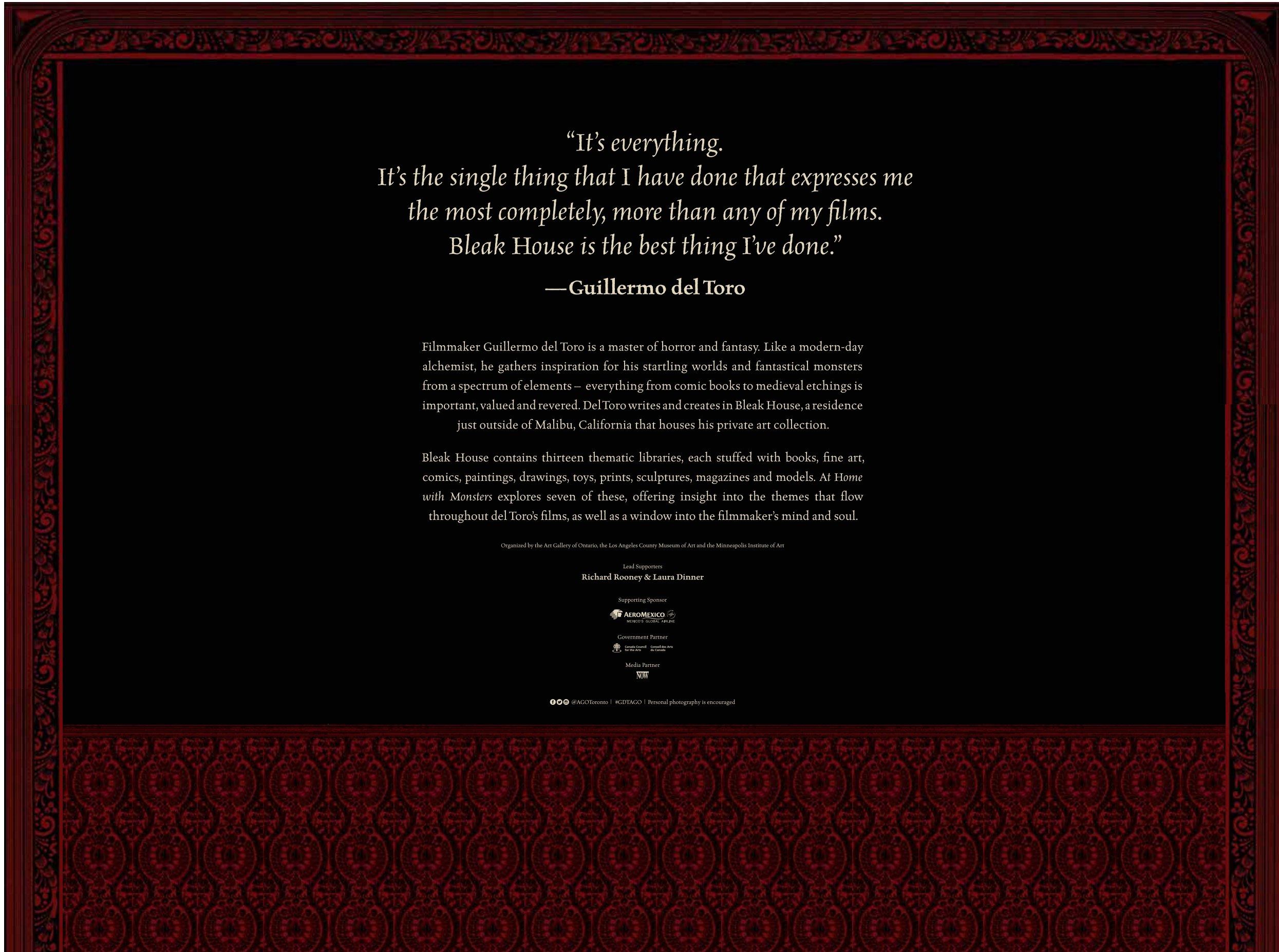
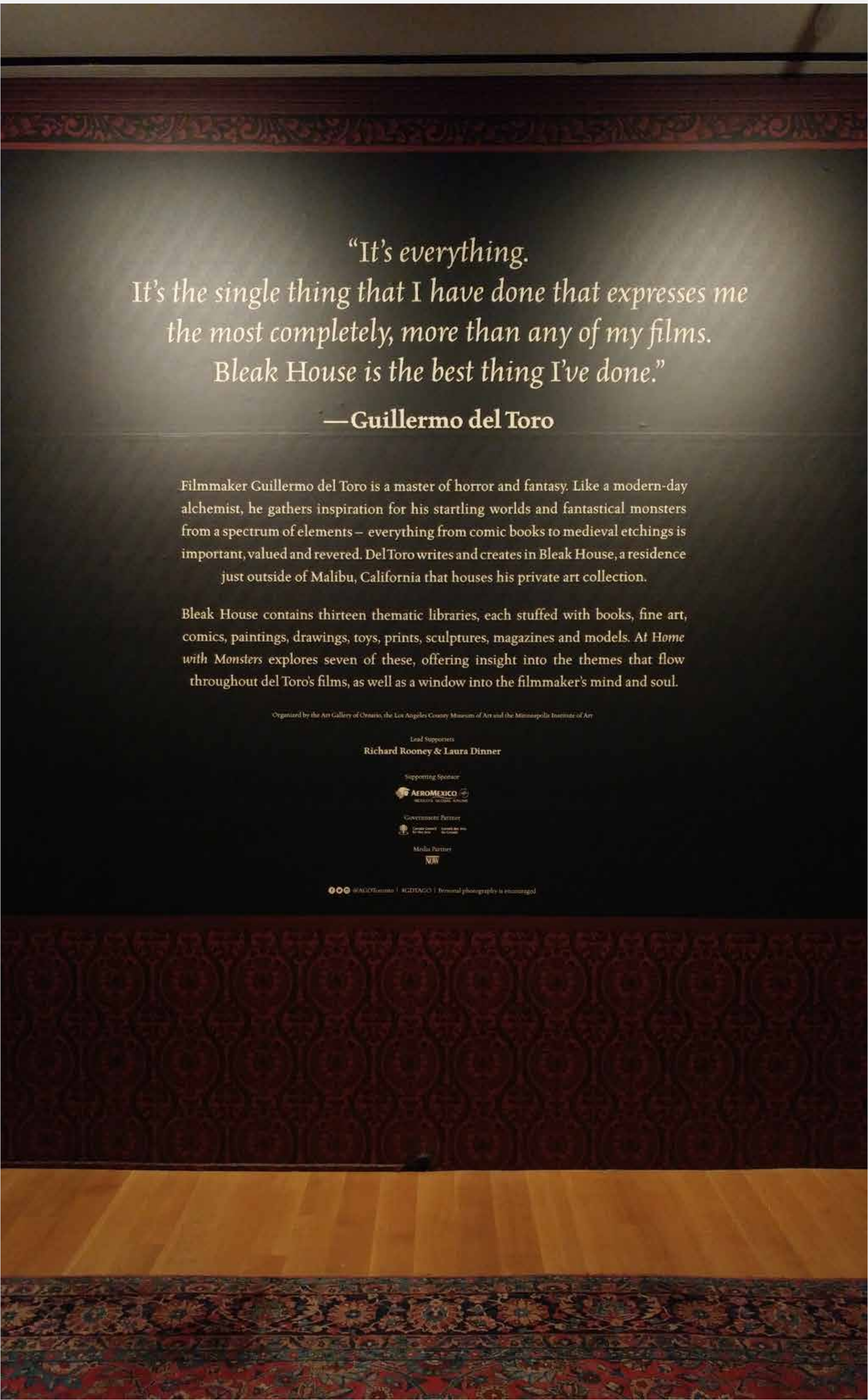
Writers and editor:
Laura Robb, writer
Jim Shedden, writer
Amy Lam, editor

Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters

Art Gallery of Ontario
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Target audience: **General audience**

Label type: **Introductory**



Author Statement

At Home with Monsters presents an art/artifact/memorabilia/ephemera collection that Guillermo del Toro began when he was a child (although the emphasis is on works collected in adulthood). We wanted visitors to feel like del Toro was personally guiding visitors through his collections, so we looked for opportunities to integrate quotes (and tweets) in the label copy.

*“It’s everything.
It’s the single thing that I have done that expresses me
the most completely, more than any of my films.
Bleak House is the best thing I’ve done.”*

– Guillermo del Toro

Filmmaker Guillermo del Toro is a master of horror and fantasy. Like a modern-day alchemist, he gathers inspiration for his startling worlds and fantastical monsters from a spectrum of elements—everything from comic books to medieval etchings is important, valued and revered. Del Toro writes and creates in Bleak House, a residence just outside of Malibu, California that houses his private art collection.

Bleak House contains thirteen thematic libraries, each stuffed with books, fine art, comics, paintings, drawings, toys, prints, sculptures, magazines and models. *At Home with Monsters* explores seven of these, offering insight into the themes that flow throughout del Toro’s films, as well as a window into the filmmaker’s mind and soul

Praise from the Jurors

Every time I read this label, I thought “How cool is this man’s work and his collection.” And I haven’t even seen any of it. The label copy ensures that the fascinating and the fantastical elements embodied by this collection are evoked.

- Joanne Hyppolite

Writer and editor:
Emilie S. Arnold, writer
Pamela Schwartz, editor

Pride, Prejudice & Protest:
GLBT History of Greater Orlando
Orange County Regional History Center
Orlando, FL

Target audience: **General audience; adults; teens;**
LGBTQ community; Orlando community

Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

The label is a simple, short, but moving tribute to horrible events. Well-described, the label serves as a testament to the human spirit

- *Jennifer Scott*

A Rainbow of Love

At the June 13, 2016 vigil at the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center, thousands of mourners made paper chains, writing personal messages on each colorful link. Participants reported that when they ran out of tape to make links, they lay flat messages within the growing memorial. There, pierced by pinwheels, singed by burning candles, and saturated with melted wax, Florida's summer rains bled their colors into a rainbow. These 72 messages are a fraction of hundreds retrieved from the PAC, and many did not survive the conditions.



Recovered strips at the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center memorial on June 29, 2016.

Author Statement

These labels in particular addressed the first LGBTQ-related thing on most of our Orlando visitors' minds: the Pulse Nightclub massacre of June 12, four months earlier. Through this event, and the outpouring of objects at memorials around Orlando, one terrible moment of LGBTQ history was now part of all of us. I wrote labels to explain our own good museum practice as sanctioned custodians of those objects. Having myself gathered these objects for weeks during our brutal summer, I used evocative language to help readers imagine what these artifacts had been through and understand their conditions.

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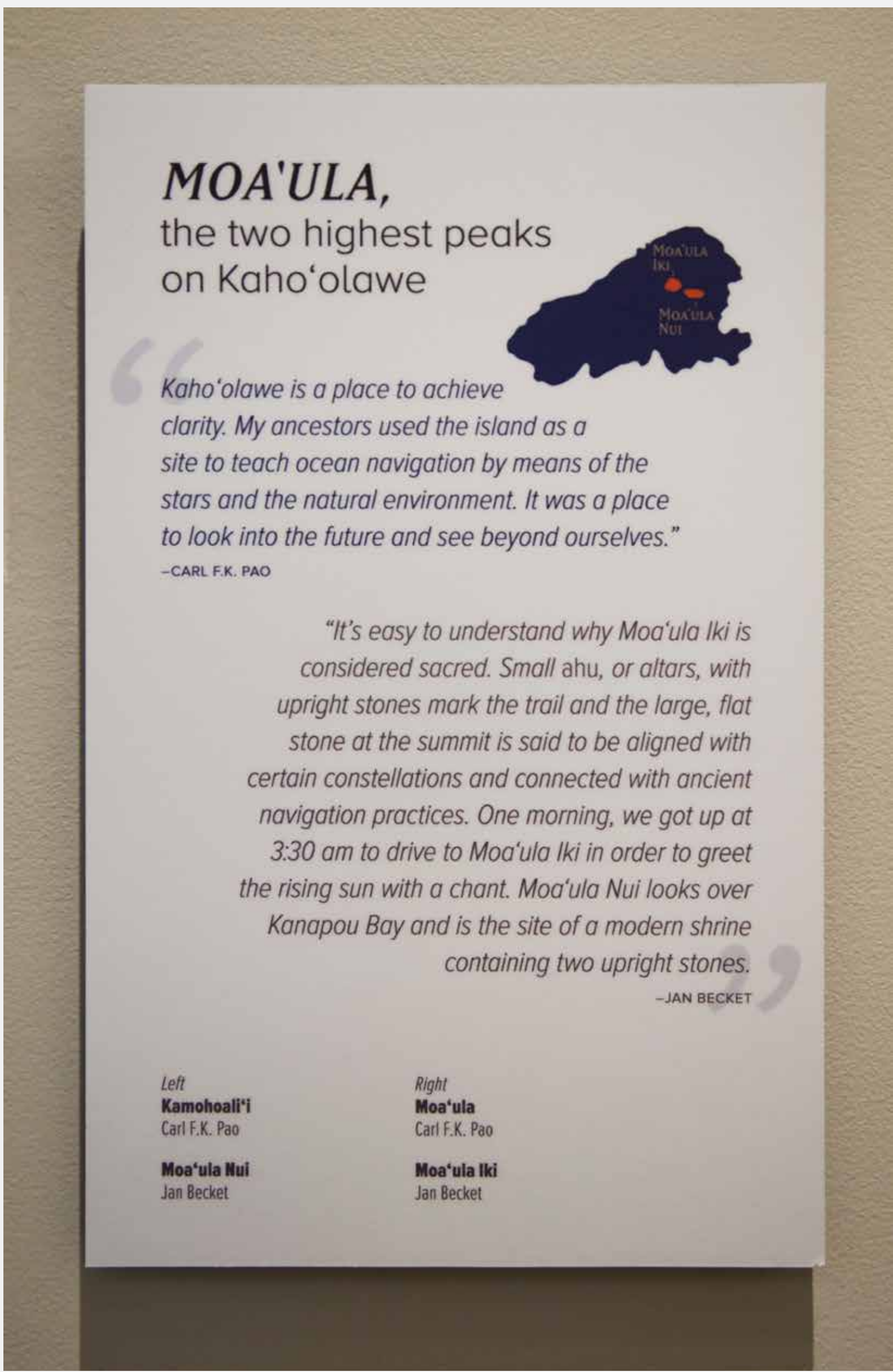
Writers and editors:
Marata Tamaira, writer
Holly Barker, writer
Carl Pao, writer
Jan Becket, writer
Kate Fernandez, editor
Isabelle Hayward, editor

Kanu Kaho’olawe: Replanting, Rebirth

Burke Museum
Seattle, WA

Target audience: **Puget Sound residents, K-20 students, visitors and Indigenous communities of the Pacific Rim**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

The label privileges local voices which effectively accomplishes the goals of the exhibition and writing – to communicate the reclamation of Native land. The approach to shared authority, self-representation and decolonizing the museum comes through the brief label and is full of beautiful imagery.

- Jennifer Scott



MOA’ULA,
the two highest peaks
on Kaho’olawe

“Kaho’olawe is a place to achieve clarity. My ancestors used the island as a site to teach ocean navigation by means of the stars and the natural environment. It was a place to look into the future and see beyond ourselves.” –Carl F.K. Pao

“It’s easy to understand why Moa’ula Iki is considered sacred. Small ahu, or altars, with upright stones mark the trail and the large, flat stone at the summit is said to be aligned with certain constellations and connected with ancient navigation practices. One morning, we got up at 3:30 am to drive to Moa’ula Iki in order to greet the rising sun with a chant. Moa’ula Nui looks over Kanapou Bay and is the site of a modern shrine containing two upright stones” –Jan Becket

Left
Kamohoali’i
Carl F.K. Pao

Moa’ula Nui
Jan Becket

Right
Moa’ula Iki
Carl F.K. Pao

Moa’ula Iki
Jan Becket

Author Statement

Each label for this exhibit, except the introductory panel, exclusively featured direct quotes from artists. Centering the artist’s voice throughout the exhibit narrative, positioned them as both subject authority and authorities of their own experiences. This sharing of authority and elevation of self-representation is part of our work to decolonize museum interpretation. We hold ourselves accountable to challenge traditional univocal approaches to museum label writing and to prioritize indigenous voices that are suppressed in dominant narratives. The interpretive and exhibition strategy is a conversation curated by Drs. Tamaira and Barker, who have come together to create a dialogue about our shared stake, albeit different from positioning, in addressing urgent environmental issues.

Writers and editors:

Allyse Freeman
Jason Scorich
Gary Kaunonen
Mary Erickson

***Blue-Collar Battleground:
The Iron Range Labor Story***

Minnesota Discovery Center
Chisholm, MN

Target audience: **General Audience**

Label type: **Concept**

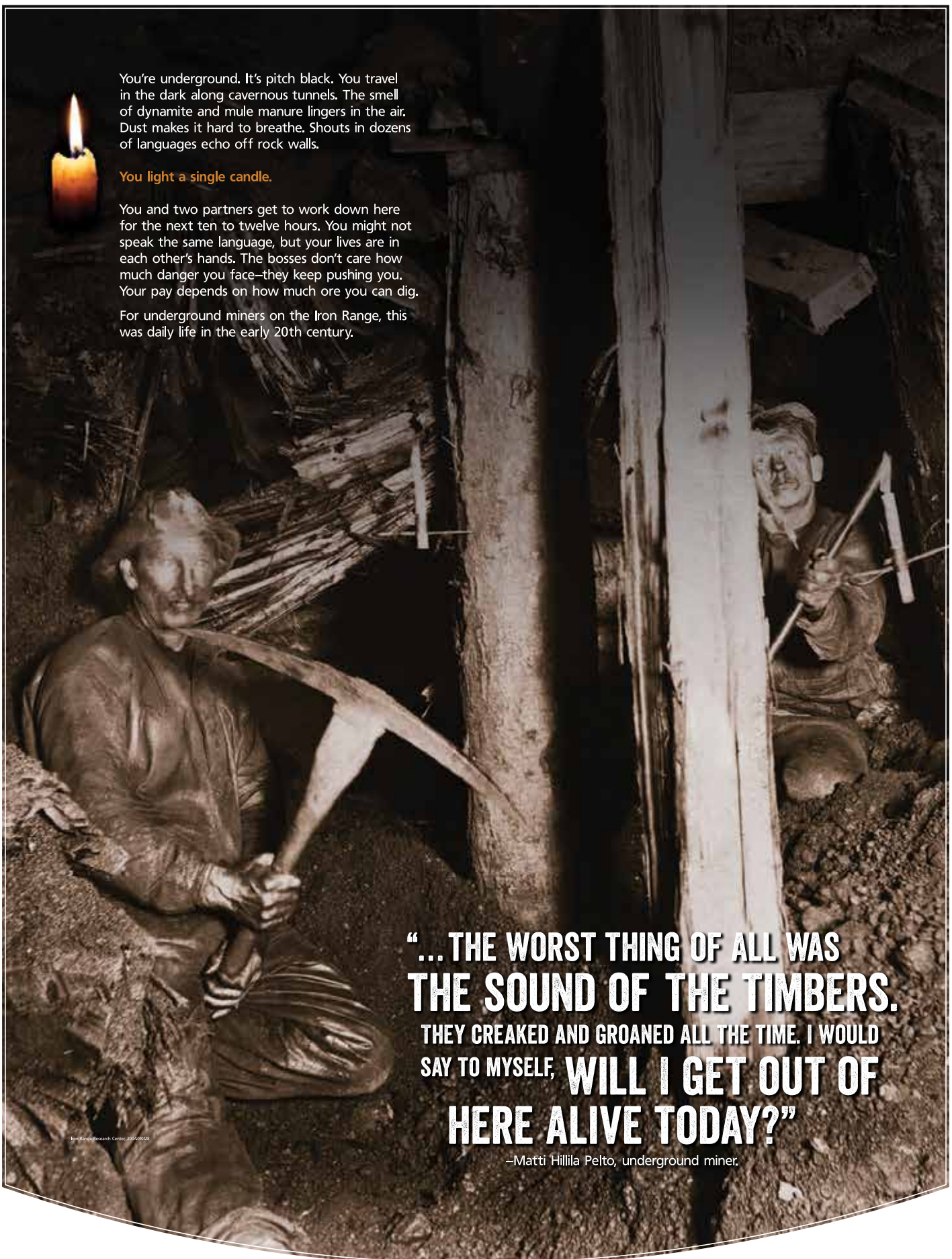


Praise from the Jurors

Darkness, shouts, dust, the smell of dynamite and mule manure—this label engages nearly every sense. It’s immersive and makes clear the perils of the mine.

- *Bonnie Wallace*

DOWN IN THE MINE



DOWN IN THE MINE

You’re underground. It’s pitch black. You travel in the dark along cavernous tunnels. The smell of dynamite and mule manure lingers in the air. Dust makes it hard to breathe. Shouts in dozens of languages echo off rock walls.

You light a single candle.

You and two partners get to work down here for the next ten to twelve hours. You might not speak the same language, but your lives are in each other’s hands. The bosses don’t care how much danger you face--they keep pushing you. Your pay depends on how much ore you can dig.

For underground miners on the Iron Range, this was daily life in the early 20th century.

“...the worst thing of all was
the sound of the timbers.
They creaked and groaned all the time. I would
say to myself, will I get out of
here alive today?”

– Matti Hillila Pelto, underground miner.

**Author
Statement**

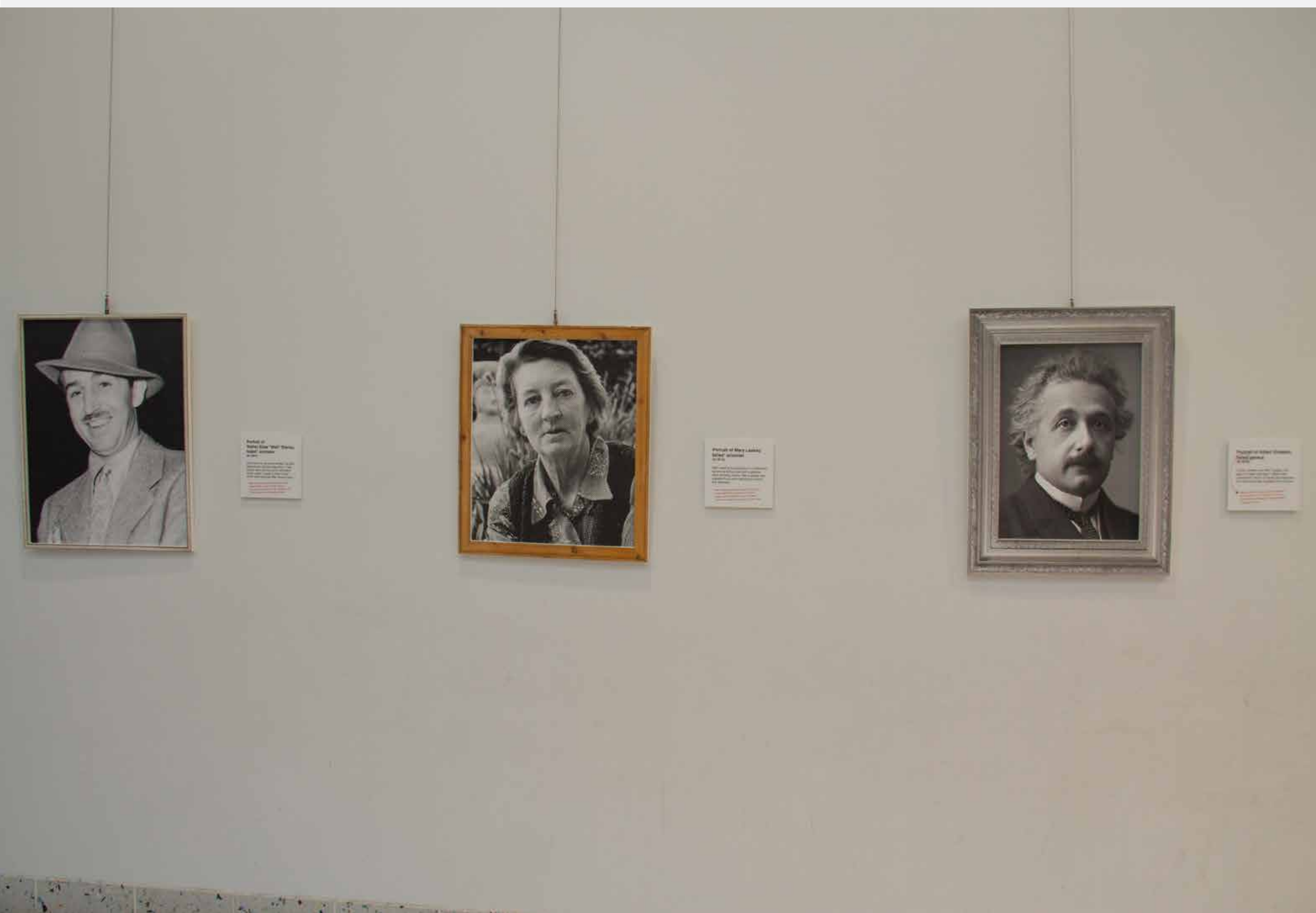
Our approach was focused on the constant struggles that the labor movement faces in our country, specifically in our region. Chisholm remains a primarily working-class community tied to the mining industry and our goal for the labels was to clearly demonstrate that the battle for economic equality is far from over. This clash was emphasized in every single label.

This approach worked because it was relatable to our visitors. Many of the topics we covered are faced by our visitors every day. Rather than taking a top-down, academic approach, we wanted to connect directly to our visitors through our labels.

Writers and editors:
Felicia Maffia, writer
Rowe Redick, writer
Diana Johns, editor
Beth Gibson, editor

Failure Wall
Pacific Science Center
Seattle, WA

Target audience: **Adults, families, school groups**
Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

The labels are stealing the scenes in this exhibition! Seriously, this label cleverly delivers the exhibition’s educational goals and provides a story that’s utterly relatable to the identified teen audience and it does so with economy too.

- *Joanne Hyppolite*

Portrait of Mary Leakey, failed* scientist (b.1913)

After causing an explosion in a chemistry lab at one school and with a general habit of failing exams, Mary Leakey was expelled from every secondary school she attended.

**Mary Leakey uncovered evidence that gave us groundbreaking insights into human origins and is considered one of the most important paleoanthropologists of our time.*

Author Statement

We created a unique way for guests to rethink the importance of failure in life by sharing surprising information about some of society’s most famous role models. For the joke to work, we committed to a formal, portrait gallery-style presentation. Each label titled the subject as a failure along with a description of why. The labels were then “corrected” with information about their eventual and remarkable success. The result was an engaging and social exhibition. Guests were routinely observed reading and discussing the labels with friends. One local teacher was even inspired to create her own failure wall with students.

Portrait of Mary Leakey, failed* scientist (b.1913)

After causing an explosion in a chemistry lab at one school and with a general habit of failing exams, Mary Leakey was expelled from every secondary school she attended.

*Mary Leakey uncovered evidence that gave us groundbreaking insights into human origins and is considered one of the most important paleoanthropologists of our time.

Writers and editors:

Matthew Cox
Bob Ingrassia
Nicole Polifka
Kirstin Nielsen
Barbara Hahn

Super Awesome Adventures

Minnesota Children’s Museum
Saint Paul, MN

Target audience: **Children and their caregivers**

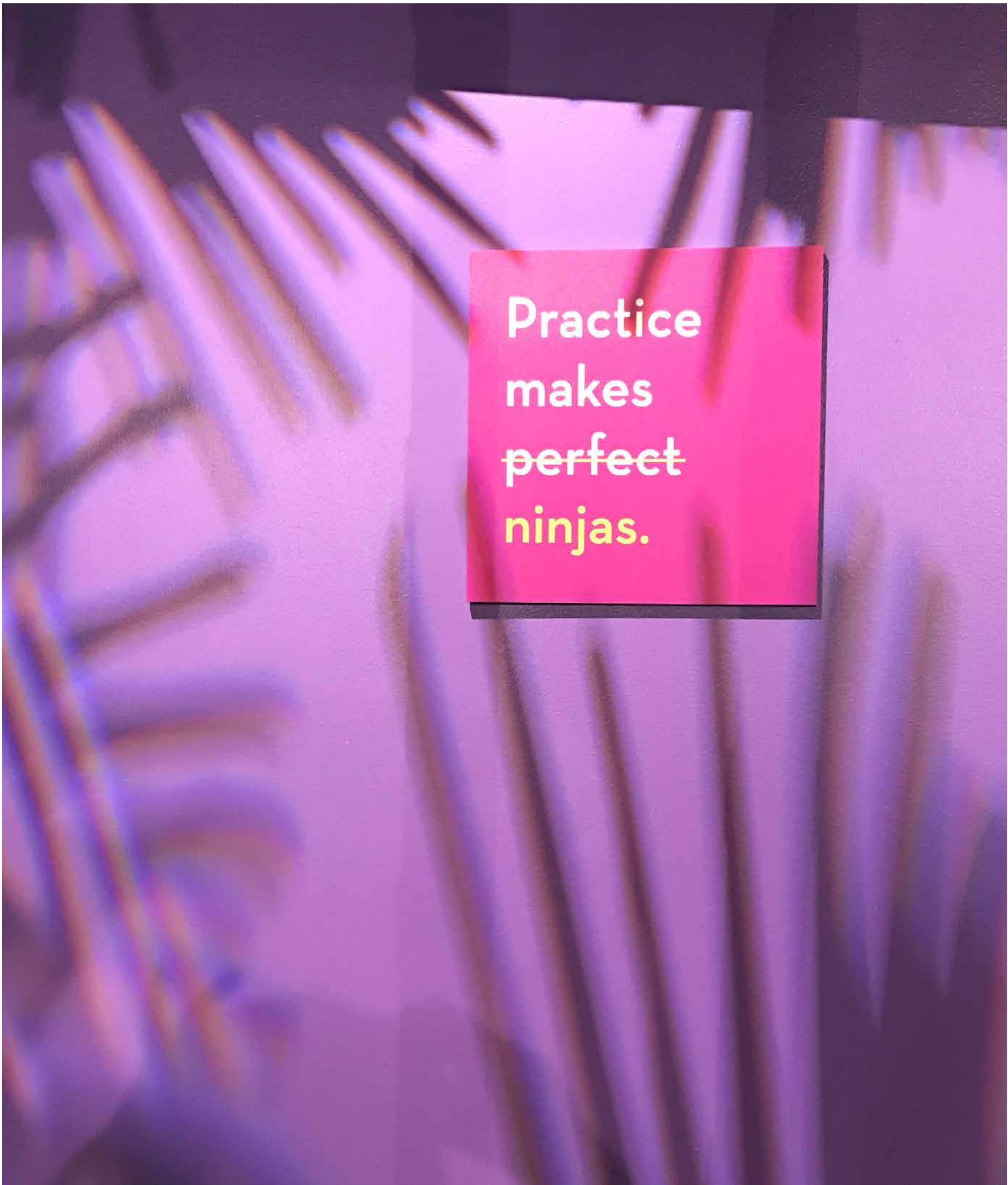
Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

In just ~~four~~ three words and a bit of typography this label flips a worn adage (at which we might roll our eyes) into an exciting new possibility.

- Michael Rigsby



Author Statement

We wanted to both prompt visitors’ use of the “practice” laser maze activity while waiting for their turn inside the real laser maze, and delight them with a little word play.

Practice makes ~~perfect~~ ninjas.

Writers and editors:

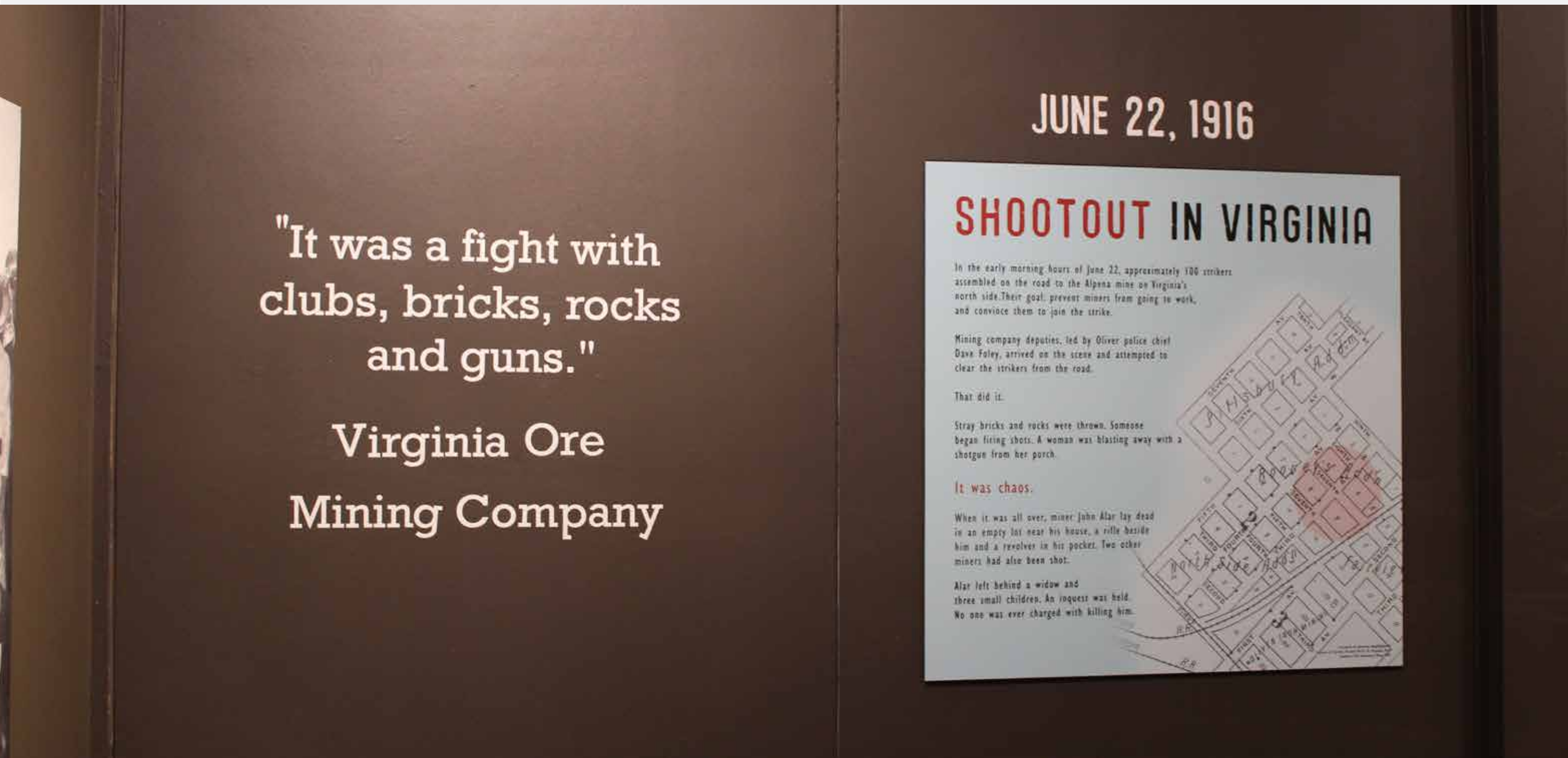
Allyse Freeman
Jason Scorich
Mary Erickson

“Enough!” The 1916 Mesabi Range Strike

Minnesota Discovery Center
Chisholm, MN

Target audience: **General audience**

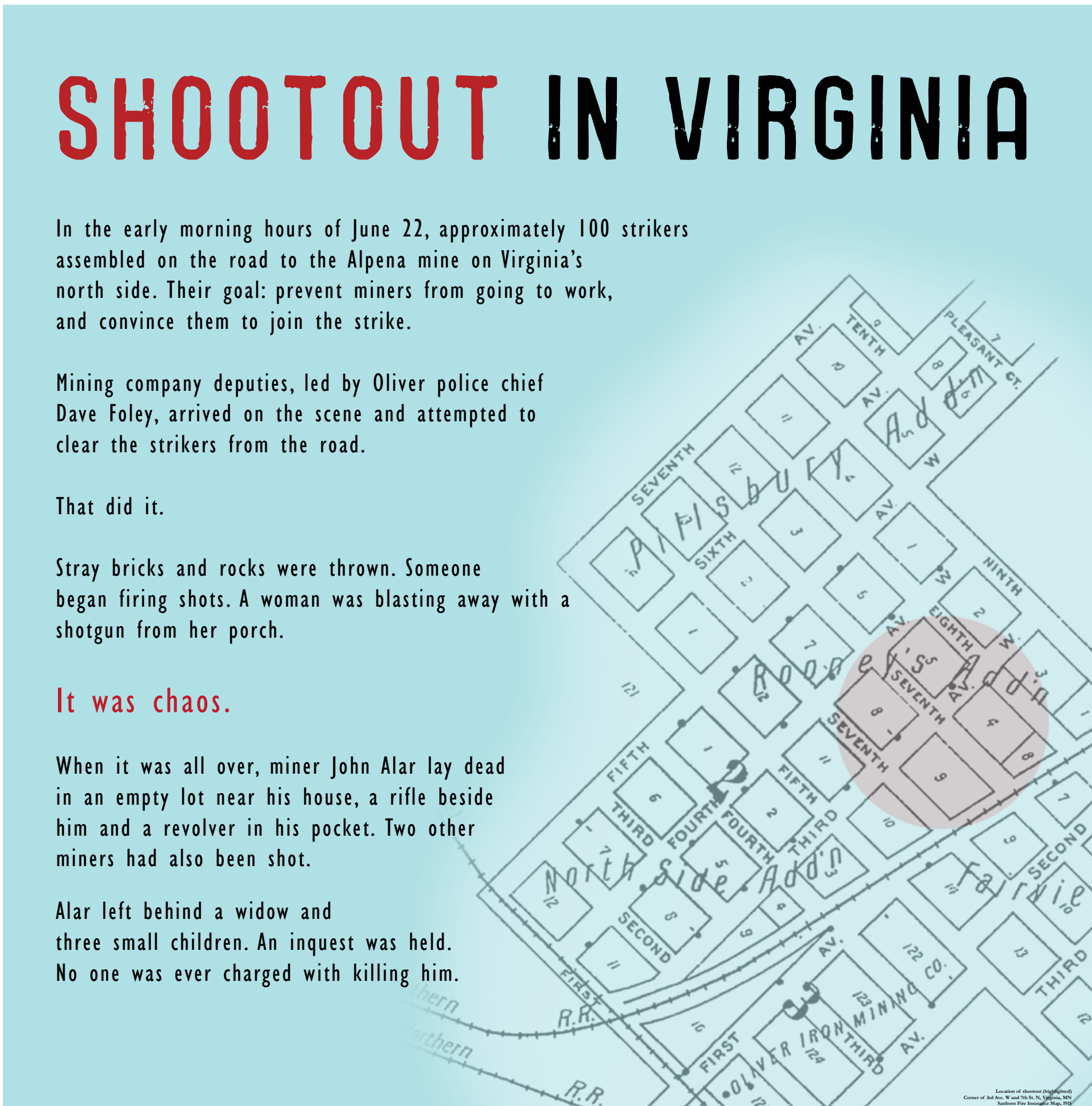
Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

For me, this label evokes the feel of a Bob Dylan story song. The flow of the label carries us through the event from time the miners began to gather to the sudden eruption of violence with bricks flying and a woman blasting away with her shotgun to the stark calm of miner—his killer never brought to justice—lying dead in an empty lot. While the label’s on the long side, the writer skillfully broke it up into smaller pieces (like the verses of a song) with the two 3-word sentences that act as subheads.

- *Michael Rigsbay*



Author Statement

Our exhibit team took a bottom-up approach. Labor and working-class history is often told from a singular, top-down perspective. Rather than repeating this, we instead focused on the working-class immigrants and the stories they have to tell.

It was in this way that our labels were a success and sparked a conversation between Iron Rangers of the past and their relatives today. Our labels helped demonstrate historical relevance to our community and why critically examining the past is necessary.

A summative evaluation was conducted and 100% of visitors thought the exhibit was relatable and 90% thought it was accessible.

SHOOTOUT IN VIRGINIA

In the early morning hours of June 22, approximately 100 strikers assembled on the road to the Alpena mine on Virginia’s north side. Their goal: prevent miners from going to work, and convince them to join the strike.

Mining company deputies, led by Oliver police chief Dave Foley, arrived on the scene and attempted to clear the strikers from the road.

That did it.

Stray bricks and rocks were thrown. Someone began firing shots. A woman was blasting away with a shotgun from her porch.

It was chaos.

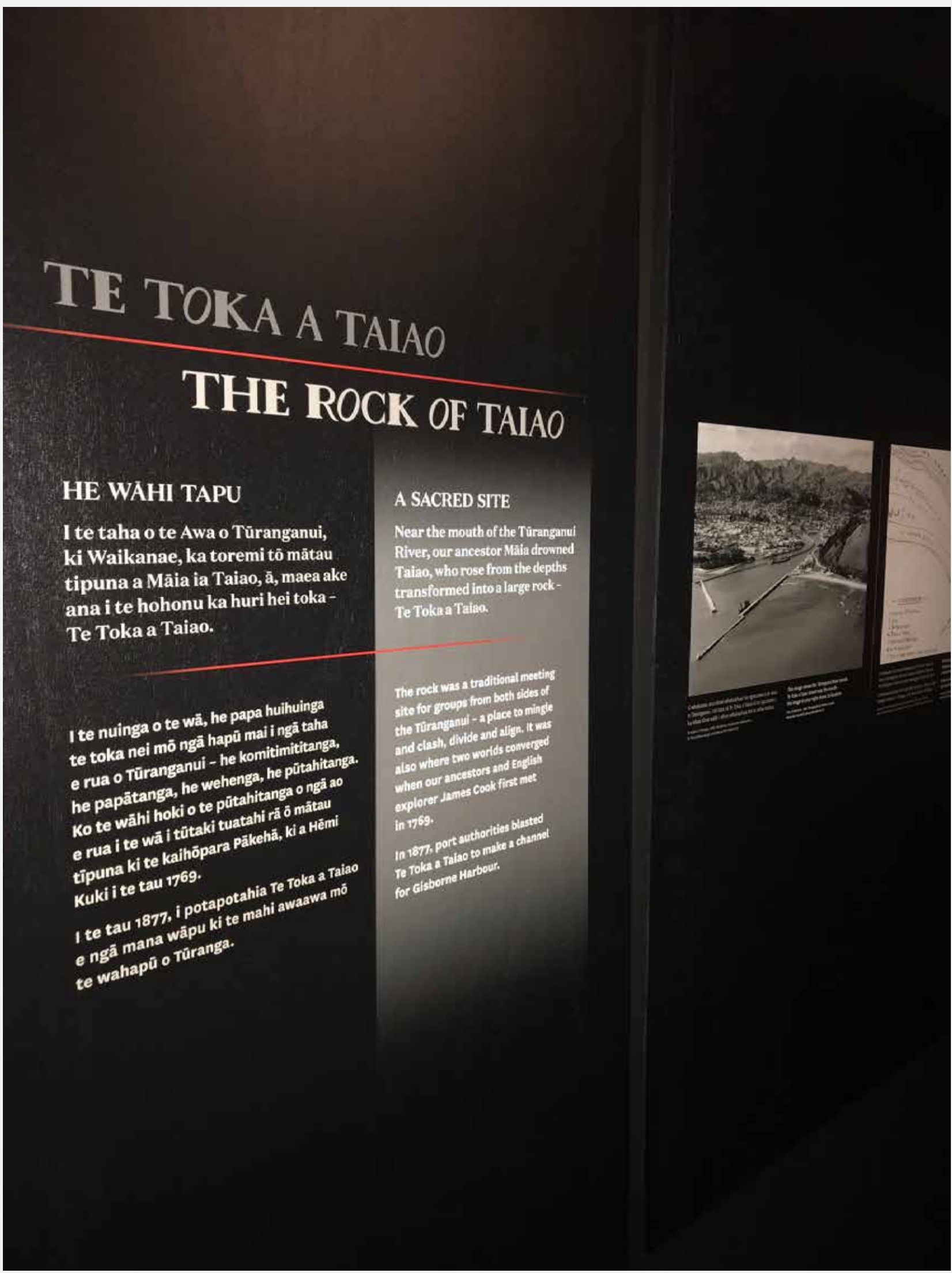
When it was all over, miner John Alar lay dead in an empty lot near his house, a rifle beside him and a revolver in his pocket. Two other miners had also been shot.

Alar left behind a widow and three small children. An inquest was held. No one was ever charged with killing him.

Writers and editors:
Michael Keith
David Brechin-Smith
Frances Samuel
Victoria Cleal
Ranea Aperahama

Ko Rongowhakaata: The Story of Light and Shadow
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Wellington, New Zealand

Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

The writer knows exactly when to stop. This label invites us in to see the sacred rock where our ancestors would “mingle and clash,” the sound of each word evoking the action. It ends with a slap—leaving us to imagine and feel what the Rongowhakaata iwi felt.

- *Bonnie Wallace*

I enjoyed the perspective shift that this label effectively deploys from prioritizing this iwi community’s native language on the label to the use of a storytelling approach to the actual historical events being shared. It’s made clear in this decentering narrative that the story of this rock begins before James Cook and continues long after.

- *Joanne Hyppolite*

TE TOKA A TAI AO	
THE ROCK OF TAI AO	
HE WĀHI TAPU	A SACRED SITE
I te taha o te Awa o Tūranganui, ki Waikanae, ka toremi tō mātau tipuna a Māia ia Taiao, ā, maea ake ana i te hohonu ka huri hei toka – Te Toka a Taiao.	Near the mouth of the Tūranganui River, our ancestor Māia drowned Taiao, who rose from the depths transformed into a large rock – Te Toka a Taiao.
I te nuinga o te wā, he papa huihuinga te toka nei mō ngā hapū mai i ngā taha e rua o Tūranganui – he komitimititanga, he papātanga, he wehenga, he pūtahitanga. Ko te wāhi hoki o te pūtahitanga o ngā ao e rua i te wā i tūtaki tuatahi rā ō mātau tipuna ki te kaihōpara Pākehā, ki a Hēmi Kuki i te tau 1769.	The rock was a traditional meeting site for groups from both sides of the Tūranganui – a place to mingle and clash, divide and align. It was also where two worlds converged when our ancestors and English explorer James Cook first met in 1769.
I te tau 1877, i potapotahia Te Toka a Taiao e ngā mana wāpu ki te mahi awaawa mō te wahapū o Tūranga.	In 1877, port authorities blasted Te Toka a Taiao to make a channel for Gisborne Harbour.

TE TOKA A TAI AO
THE ROCK OF TAI AO

He wāhi tapu
I te taha o te Awa o Tūranganui, ki Waikanae, ka toremi tō mātau tipuna a Māia ia Taiao, ā, maea ake ana i te hohonu ka huri hei toka – Te Toka a Taiao.

I te nuinga o te wā, he papa huihuinga te toka nei mō ngā hapū mai i ngā taha e rua o Tūranganui – he komitimititanga, he papātanga, he wehenga, he pūtahitanga. Ko te wāhi hoki o te pūtahitanga o ngā ao e rua i te wā i tūtaki tuatahi rā ō mātau tipuna ki te kaihōpara Pākehā, ki a Hēmi Kuki i te tau 1769.

I te tau 1877, i potapotahia Te Toka a Taiao e ngā mana wāpu ki te mahi awaawa mō te wahapū o Tūranga.

A sacred site
Near the mouth of the Tūranganui River, our ancestor Māia drowned Taiao, who rose from the depths transformed into a large rock – Te Toka a Taiao.

The rock was a traditional meeting site for groups from both sides of the Tūranganui – a place to mingle and clash, divide and align. It was also where two worlds converged when our ancestors and English explorer James Cook first met in 1769.

In 1877, port authorities blasted Te Toka a Taiao to make a channel for Gisborne Harbour.

Author Statement

We collaborated closely with the Rongowhakaata iwi to tell its story. Naturally, stories in the exhibition are told from the iwi’s perspective—which is often different from a Pākehā perspective.

The label we’ve submitted challenges us to see historic events through the iwi’s eyes: the destruction of a large rock is no longer about progress, but about Pākehā officials destroying indigenous culture.

The label surprises, even shocks, and you’re perhaps left with an altered view of history.

Writers and editors:

Alison Jean
Natsu Oyobe
Katherine Kasdorf
Swarupa Anila
Lisa Bessette

Stillness and Movement: Art from Japan

Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, MI

Target audience: **General public**

Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

This label has a quiet elegance and slight formality that flows gracefully with the feeling of its unassuming subject (the tea scoop) and the art of tea. It could have just left us with the facts, but it goes further to delight us with a little surprise—a warm winter day.

- *Michael Riggsby*

A very short, sweet description that conveys tea, comfort and quiet. Conveys a sense of stillness as the writers intended.

- *Jennifer Scott*

<p>Tea Scoop, 1600s–1700s Bamboo</p>	<p>Small and unassuming, tea scoops are considered the most valuable of all tea utensils because they connect us directly with the masters who carved them by hand from bamboo.</p>
<p>Sugiki Fusai Japanese, 1628–1708</p> <p><small>Museum Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund DIA no. 2013.44</small></p>	<p>Sugiki Fusai, the famous tea master who made this scoop, painted a poem on the container to commemorate a memorable tea gathering. It expresses how enjoyable it was to drink tea by candlelight after an unexpectedly warm winter day.</p>

Author Statement

At the DIA, we consider labels a key interpretive strategy in helping visitors have personally meaningful experiences with art—the DIA’s mission. Labels are developed collaboratively by interpreters and curators, who begin by assigning a purpose to each label in the gallery. From there, labels are drafted and reviewed several times; additionally, approximately 20% are tested with visitors. For this project, the labels aim to serve a dual purpose of bringing the gallery’s theme of stillness and movement to life as well as supporting visitors to think beyond their stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations of Japanese art and culture.

Tea Scoop, 1600s–1700s
Bamboo

Sugiki Fusai
Japanese, 1628–1708

Museum Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund
DIA no. 2013.44

Small and unassuming, tea scoops are considered the most valuable of all tea utensils because they connect us directly with the masters who carved them by hand from bamboo.

Sugiki Fusai, the famous tea master who made this scoop, painted a poem on the container to commemorate a memorable tea gathering. It expresses how enjoyable it was to drink tea by candlelight after an unexpectedly warm winter day.

Writer and editor:
Ryder Diaz, writer
Tamara Schwarz, editor

Rainforests of the World
California Academy of Sciences
San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **Adults and families with children**
Label type: **Introductory**



Praise from the Jurors

Beautifully written. Reads like a poem. Yet, it is clear, succinct and helps the reader connect nature to one’s own personal experience.

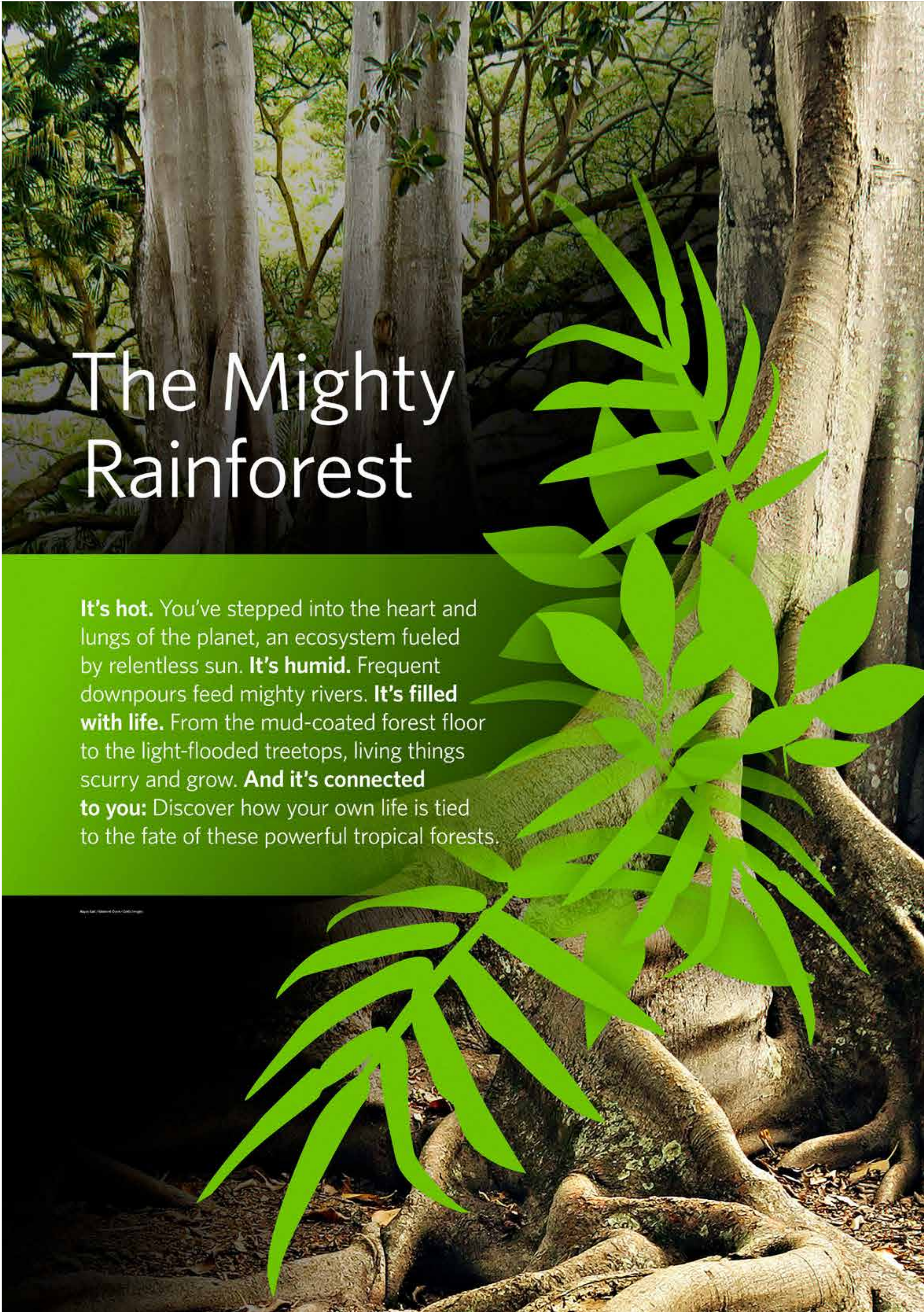
- *Joanne Hyppolite*

The language of this label beats, like a heart beats, like a rainforest beats, every bolded sentence thump-thumps. The sentences in-between are where it breathes. It transports us under the steamy forest canopy—any closer and we’d be sweating.

- *Bonnie Wallace*

In this label, short, relatable and compelling adjectives set the scene and transport the reader there. I really do feel like I stepped into that rainforest.

- *Jennifer Scott*



The Mighty Rainforest

It’s hot. You’ve stepped into the heart and lungs of the planet, an ecosystem fueled by relentless sun. **It’s humid.** Frequent downpours feed mighty rivers. **It’s filled with life.** From the mud-coated forest floor to the light-flooded treetops, living things scurry and grow. **And it’s connected to you:** Discover how your own life is tied to the fate of these powerful tropical forests.

Author Statement

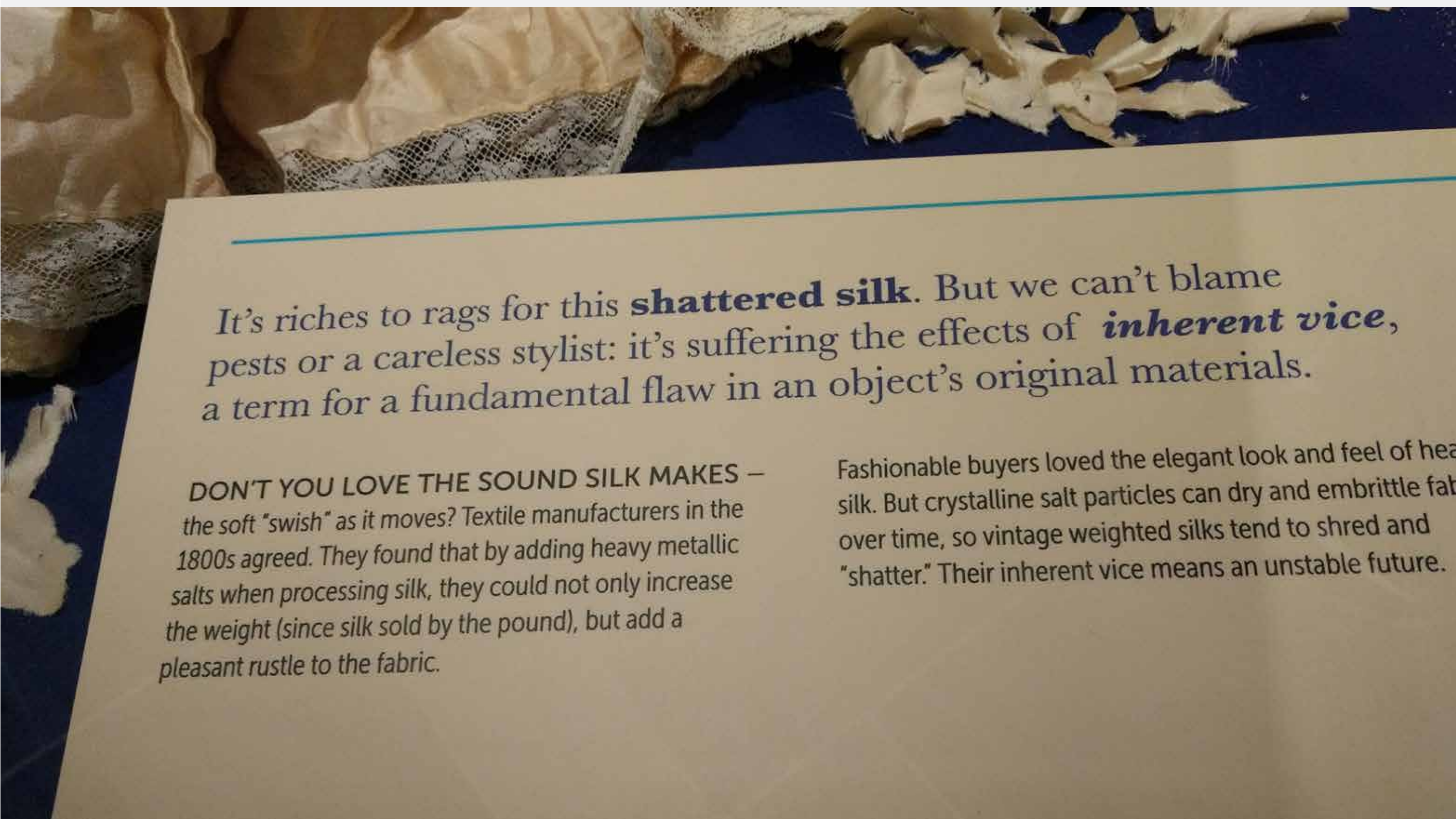
Rainforests of the World transports visitors to a lush, humid rainforest environment, where they are surrounded by sprawling plant life, fluttering butterflies, and diving fish. The exhibit invokes awe, wonder, and appreciation for this unique ecosystem, helping visitors become more receptive to sustainability messages. Labels were written in a conversational style and with a reverent tone that engages visitors on an emotional level and prompts them to consider new perspectives and information. Labels highlight the connections between the lives and choices of our visitors and the fate of these inspiring habitats—crafting a holistic experience that is truly personal and immersive.

Writer and editor:
Elizabeth Berry Drago

Things Fall Apart
Science History Institute
Philadelphia, PA

Target audience: **Adults and teens**

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.

I could never have imagined that the topic of decay could be both so fascinating. The writer’s sharp use of sensory details (shattered silk, metallic salts, swishes and rustles) captivated while the use of one second person question effectively brought me, as reader, into a conversation I didn’t know I needed to have with this object.

- *Joanne Hyppolite*



Author Statement

Our hope with this exhibition was to a.) share some of the chemistry and science behind materials decay, but also b.) to invite more poetic reflections on decay as a theme. Wanted to emphasize sensory experience, texture and tactility, as well as personal memories. Remind visitors of their own precious belongings, and inform them about how to identify change + decay (and what can be done to prevent or slow it). Contemplative blending of science and senses.

It’s riches to rags for this **shattered silk**. But we can’t blame pests or a careless stylist: it’s suffering the effects of ***inherent vice***, a term for a fundamental flaw in an object’s original materials.

DON’T YOU LOVE THE SOUND SILK MAKES — the soft “swish” as it moves? Textile manufacturers in the 1800s agreed. They found that by adding heavy metallic salts when processing silk, they could not only increase the weight (since silk sold by the pound), but add a pleasant rustle to the fabric.

Fashionable buyers loved the elegant look and feel of heavy silk. But crystalline salt particles can dry and embrittle fabric over time, so vintage weighted silks tend to shred and “shatter.” Their inherent vice means an unstable future.

Writers and editors:

Adam Tessier
Caroline Cole

Seeking Stillness

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Boston, MA

Target audience: **General audience**

Label type: **Object**

Shell paint container

Maya (Guatemala, Mexico, or Belize),
late Classic period, 550–850 AD
Carved conch shell



This vessel mirrors the hand of the artist who held it more than a thousand years ago. Carved from a shell, it once contained the slip used by a Maya painter. Imagine him cradling the shallow bowl in his palm, its tapered end resting on the wrist as, again and again, he dipped his brush into the pool of liquid within. Traces of that ancient pigment remain.

Elizabeth M. and John F. Paramino Fund in memory of John F. Paramino, Boston Sculptor, John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund, Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, William Francis Warden Fund, Seth K. Sweetser Fund, Helen B. Sweeney Fund, and Harriet Otis Cruft Fund, 2017 2017.849

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.

This label accompanies the exhibition “Seeking Stillness.” And even while reading it in my office, far removed from the exhibit, it brought me to a welcome place of quiet meditation. In just four sentences, it transports us back more than a thousand years into the presence of a Maya painter patiently practicing his art. The “again and again” adds action and a hypnotic sense of timelessness, as if the artist might have only just finished his work moments ago. Look, the label shows us, traces of his pigment remain, linking past with present.

- *Michael Rigsby*

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Author Statement

Each gallery of the exhibition is devoted to a different theme: place, process, nature, and so on. We sought to write clear, focused texts that would help visitors see these works in new and compelling ways, in light of the exhibit’s themes.

Shell paint container

Maya (Guatemala, Mexico, or Belize), late Classic period, 550–850
Carved conch shell

This vessel mirrors the hand of the artist who held it more than a thousand years ago. Carved from a shell, it once contained the slip used by a Maya painter. Imagine him cradling the shallow bowl in his palm, its tapered end resting on the wrist as, again and again, he dipped his brush into the pool of liquid within. Traces of that ancient pigment remain.

Writer and editors:
Tristan Poehlmann, writer
Julie Govert, editor
Juliet Burba, editor

Mary and Her Monster: Mary Shelley and the World that Created Frankenstein

The Bakken Museum
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: **Teens and “tweens” in families and in school groups**

Label type: **Interactive label**

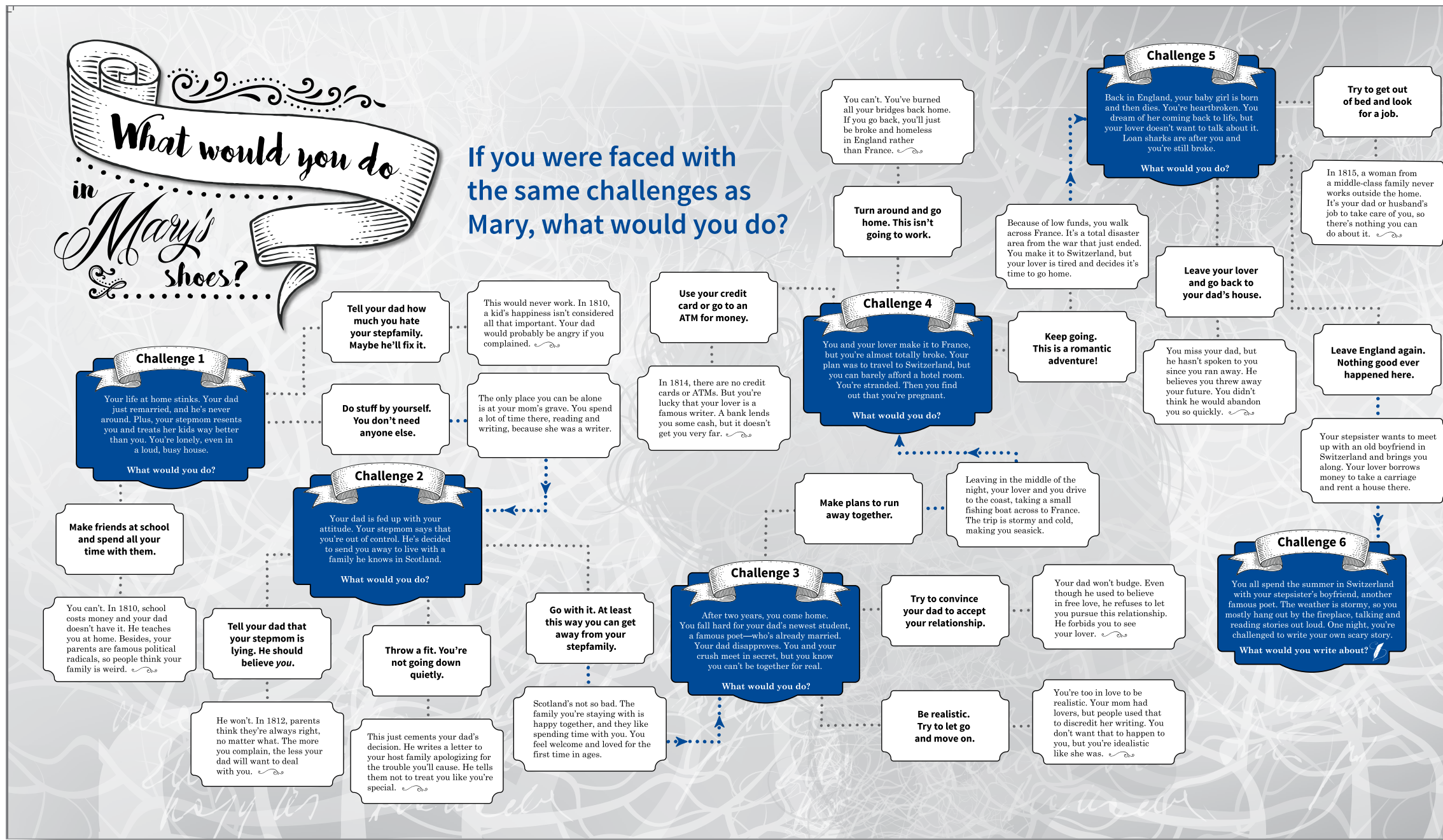


Juror’s Choice

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

I love how the format of this label appeals to tweens, teens, and former teens. We see Mary Shelley—lonely, desperate, in pain and in debt—as we navigate her teen years in a choose-your-own adventure story. The contemporary language strips the years between Mary and us, and points out where our modern assumptions fail.

- *Bonnie Wallace*



What would you do in Mary’s shoes?

If you were faced with the same challenges as Mary, what would you do?

Challenge 1

Your life at home stinks. Your dad just remarried, and he’s never around. Plus, your stepmom resents you and treats her kids way better than you. You’re lonely, even in a loud, busy house.

What would you do?

[A]

Make friends at school and spend all your time with them.

You can’t. In 1810, school costs money and your dad doesn’t have it. He teaches you at home. Besides, your parents are famous political radicals, so people think your family is weird.

[B]

Do stuff by yourself. You don’t need anyone else.

The only place you can be alone is at your mom’s grave. You spend a lot of time there, reading and writing, because she was a writer.

[C]

Tell your dad how much you hate your stepfamily. Maybe he’ll fix it.

This would never work. In 1810, a kid’s happiness isn’t considered all that important.

Your dad would probably be angry if you complained.

Challenge 2

Your dad is fed up with your attitude. Your stepmom says that you’re out of control. He’s decided to send you away to live with a family he knows in Scotland.

What would you do?

[A]

Tell your dad that your stepmom is lying. He should believe you.

He won’t. In 1812, parents think they’re always right, no matter what. The more you complain, the less your dad will want to deal with you.

[B]

Throw a fit. You’re not going down quietly.

This just cements your dad’s decision. He writes a letter to your host family apologizing for the trouble you’ll cause. He tells them not to treat you like you’re special.

[C]

Go with it. At least this way you can get away from your stepfamily.

Scotland’s not so bad. The family you’re staying with is happy together, and they like spending time with you. You feel welcome and loved for the first time in ages.

Challenge 3

After two years, you come home. You fall hard for your dad’s newest student, a famous poet—who’s already married. Your dad disapproves. You and your crush meet in secret, but you know you can’t be together for real.

What would you do?

[A]

Be realistic. Try to let go and move on.

You’re too in love to be realistic. Your mom had lovers, but people used that to discredit her writing. You don’t want that to happen to you, but you’re idealistic like she was.

[B]

Make plans to run away together.

Leaving in the middle of the night, your lover and you drive to the coast, taking a small fishing boat across to France. The trip is stormy and cold, making you seasick.

[C]

Try to convince your dad to accept your relationship.

Your dad won’t budge. Even though he used to believe in free love, he refuses to let you pursue this relationship. He forbids you to see your lover.

Author Statement

We began with the goals to connect with our visitors both emotionally and intellectually. With teens/tweens as our primary target audience, the decision to use colloquial language was made early on. We also wanted to include non-digital interactivity, which led to the idea of a “decision tree” to explore Shelley’s life. The initial version was written by author who specializes in non-fiction for young readers. Early versions of Mary’s Shoes were tested with 8th grade students who attend an all-girls STEM-focused middle school, and high school interns contributed to crafting the final language in the introductory panel.

Challenge 4

You and your lover make it to France, but you’re almost totally broke. Your plan was to travel to Switzerland, but you can barely afford a hotel room. You’re stranded. Then you find out that you’re pregnant.

What would you do?

[A]

Keep going. This is a romantic adventure!

Because of low funds, you walk across France. It’s a total disaster area from the war that just ended. You make it to Switzerland, but your lover is tired and decides it’s time to go home.

[B]

Use your credit card or go to an ATM for money.

In 1814, there are no credit cards or ATMs. But you’re lucky that your lover is a famous writer. A bank lends you some cash, but it doesn’t get you very far.

[C]

Turn around and go home. This isn’t going to work.

You can’t. You’ve burned all your bridges back home. If you go back, you’ll just be broke and homeless in England rather than France.

Challenge 5

Back in England, your baby girl is born and then dies. You’re heartbroken. You dream of her coming back to life, but your lover doesn’t want to talk about it. Loan sharks are after you and you’re still broke.

What would you do?

[A]

Try to get out of bed and look for a job.

In 1815, a woman from a middle-class family never works outside the home. It’s your dad or husband’s job to take care of you, so there’s nothing you can do about it.

[B]

Leave your lover and go back to your dad’s house.

You miss your dad, but he hasn’t spoken to you since you ran away. He believes you threw away your future. You didn’t think he would abandon you so quickly.

[C]

Leave England again. Nothing good ever happened here.

Your stepister wants to meet up with an old boyfriend in Switzerland and brings you along. Your lover borrows money to take a carriage and rent a house there.

Challenge 6

You all spend the summer in Switzerland with your stepsister’s boyfriend, another famous poet. The weather is stormy, so you mostly hang out by the fireplace, talking and reading stories out loud. One night, you’re challenged to write your own scary story.

What would you write about?