

# Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2015

Each year, the Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition gathers together writers, editors, and enthusiasts to discuss the characteristics of excellent label copy at the Marketplace of Ideas. The goal of this display of skillful and insightful label writing is to inspire conversations about the process and purpose of the primary tool we use to communicate with visitors.

Jurors representing CurCom, EdCom, NAME, and the previous year’s honorees help facilitate this dialogue by committing to a thorough and thoughtful review of all competition entries and the selection of the best examples of excellent label writing from among the submissions. As the competition grows each year, so too does the amount of time and energy required from our jurors. Without their expertise and commitment, the competition would not be possible.

Beyond the Marketplace, the competition continues to grow an online archive of outstanding label writing, foster partnerships between AAM professional network committees, and provide an ongoing professional development opportunity for students enrolled in the Museology Graduate Program at the University of Washington. More than just an award, the competition is a valuable resource and learning experience for current and future museum professionals.

**By the numbers:** this year’s entrants submitted a record 193 labels from 71 exhibitions and 57 institutions. These institutions represent 20 disciplines in 33 states/provinces, six countries and two continents. Labels were submitted in three languages, exhibitions ranged from outdoor to online and authors included curators, freelance writers, directors, collections managers, doctoral students and more. Thank you to everyone who submitted entries and for making this year’s competition a success.

Enjoy!

**John Russick**

*Director of Curatorial Affairs  
Chicago History Museum*

**Elizabeth Rudrud**

*Student Project Manager  
Museology Graduate Program, University of Washington*

## Meet The Jurors

Representing EdCom

**Eileen Campbell**

*Senior Science Writer  
Exploratorium*

A useful question to ask, when working on an exhibit, is “What world are we creating?” My mentor, Judy Rand, taught me to think of exhibits as coherent places, each with its own character and internal logic. Labels are an element within an exhibit's world that both contain the world and express it. An excellent label sits like a nesting doll within its exhibit, and holds the exhibit's ideas within its form. But the little nesting doll can also stand on its own—and a label, because of the unstructured way people experience exhibits, must do the same.

Within its 60+ words, a good label focuses on the real object at hand—be it a vase, a fish, a photo, or an electric spark—and also relates it to larger themes. It considers the reader's interests, answering likely questions—and also piques a desire for new information. It tells a satisfying story—and also leaves room for afterflight. In its small, unimposing form, a label has the potential to sneak in almost unnoticed and move the reader to a new place of knowledge or understanding.

Representing NAME

**Deborah 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: the written word is my preferred sensibility. But many visitors encounter exhibit labels in a place or space that may not be familiar, that at times can be perceived as hostile, or that speaks down to visitors in tone and selected vocabulary. (And one still finds the flat, uninspired curatorial voice that “talks at” you.) African American museum visitors are still among those who are under-represented, under-interpreted and under-welcomed in museums. I find that many visitors are drawn to engaging, well written labels. Great labels are often accessible tools - a “training ground” – to try out both conceptual tools and vocabulary that one can use in everyday life to address difficult situations couched in bigotry, in ignorance or in misinformation.

Representing CurCom

**Benjamin Filene**

*Director of Public History  
University of North Carolina at 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 the 2014 Honorees

**Amy Schleser**

*Visual Storyteller  
Mystery Science*

When I walk through an exhibition, I’m there to see the objects—an ancient board game, a swinging lemur, a recreated cave. I don’t want to read a book in the midst of these authentic treasures. I can barely peel my eyes away. When I do pause for a label, it should be short, informal, and dramatic. It should remind me that there’s so much more to an object than its surface—the story behind the object is powerful and worth stopping for.

A good label engages what I am seeing and hearing around me. It starts with my observations and expands outwards. There’s a problem, a solution, a passion, a record, or a hidden purpose. I want my top questions answered and common misconceptions straightened out. But I also want to leave with something unexpected, something I would have never even thought to ask.

When working on an exhibition, I always document how I first react to a topic or object. I’ll become a mini-expert on the subject eventually, but when I write, I want to leverage the curiosity of an everyday person. When I see a visitor pause to read, say “whoa,” and pull over a family member or friend to share what they found out... that is success.



Writers and Editors:  
**Cameron Hu, 2014 Education Fellow  
and Michal Christiano, Director of Education  
and Interpretation, Smart Museum of Art**

***Carved, Cast, Crumpled: Sculpture All Ways***  
Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago  
Chicago, IL

Target audience: **General audiences**

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.

This label may not be “written,” strictly speaking, but it points up a writer’s important role in deciding what goes into a written piece and what stays out; what to emphasize to make a point; what might break through to grab a reader’s attention. Sometimes the job is about selecting and arranging content as much as actual writing.

Here, a quotation from the artist is juxtaposed with a standard museum warning sign that completely contradicts the artist’s point. It actually made my jaw drop. And then it made me think about museums and how they operate, about their relationship with the artists whose work they display, about inspiration and conservation. It’s not often a label makes me think that deeply. I’m happy the museum was willing not only to expose itself to that line of inquiry, but to provoke it. And in such a sly way!

— *Eileen Campbell*

**BARBARA HEPWORTH**  
British, 1903–1975

***Landscape Figure***  
1959

Carved alabaster  
The Joel Starrels, Jr.  
Memorial Collection  
1974.143

**Hepworth:** I think every sculpture must be touched.

**Interviewer:** Why is that?

**Hepworth:** Well it’s part of the way you make it. And it’s our first, really, our first sensibility— the sense of feeling. The very first one we have when we’re born. I think everyone looking at a sculpture should use his own body. You can’t look at sculpture if you’re going to stand stiff as a ramrod and stare at it. With a sculpture you must walk around it, bend towards it, touch it, walk away from it.

**DO NOT TOUCH THE ARTWORK**

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Writers and Editors:  
**Adam Tessier, Head of Interpretation;**  
**Christine Kondoleon, Senior Curator**  
**of Greek and Roman Art; Phoebe Segal,**  
**Assistant Curator of Greek and Roman Art**

***Wine, Poets, and Performers***  
***in Ancient Greece***

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Boston, MA

Target audience: **General museum-goer**

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.

*DRAMA!* This lush and evocative storytelling label transformed the exhibit into theater - via a single object. As I read this label I smelled dust and saw blood. The characters are described so richly they feel alive. I found myself reading the label again – and again – to move even deeper into the epic storyline narrative. *Bravo!*

—*Deborah Mack*

**Mixing bowl (calyx krater)**  
**with the killing of Agamemnon**  
Greek (Athens)  
Classical period, about 460 BC  
Painted by the Dokimasia Painter  
Ceramic; red-figure technique

While Mycenaean king Agamemnon fought the Trojans, his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover Aigisthos plotted his murder: revenge for Agamemnon’s sacrifice of daughter Iphigeneia en route to Troy. Here the killers ensnare the king in a net as he emerges from his bath. Stabbed once, he falls back. Aigisthos leans over him; Klytaimnestra, with an axe, stands ready. Agamemnon’s death provided rich material for Greek artists and playwrights to interpret. In Aeschylus’s play *Agamemnon*, the killing takes place offstage, reported after the fact by a triumphant Klytaimnestra. This vase, made just before the play was first performed, lifts the curtain on the brutal act—its only appearance in Athenian vase-painting.

William Francis Warden Fund, 1963 63.1246

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Writers and Editors:  
**Shaun Tan, author; Melanite Cariss, editor; Will Loeng, graphic designer, Helen Whitty, creative director**

***The Opsatoreum: A Fiction  
by Shaun Tan & Friends***

Museum of Applied Arts and Science  
(Powerhouse Museum)  
Sydney, Australia

Target audience: **Suitable for Anyone Who Has Ever Made A Mistake, best for adults with children over 8 yrs**

Label type: **Object**



**Juror’s Choice**

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It’s hard enough to structure a story when you have all the facts, but to spin something entirely new? It’s a long label, but every sentence builds the hilarity. As a visitor, I would drag all my friends over to read it. In fact, I’ve already started sharing—my fiancé and I now joke about mouse slippers. For something that previously didn’t exist, it’s now unforgettable. I desperately want to see this show. Will someone cover my plane fare please?

—Amy Schleser

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**Mouse slippers, 1938**

*‘to cure his wife’s mice phobia’*



There was only one thing that Maude Mintox feared more than her husband’s interminable lectures about his latest invention, and that was mice. Determined to cure his wife’s phobia, Henry Mintox came up with his most regrettable invention of all: mouse slippers. He believed that fear could be neutralised by a simple association with an object of desire. Knowing that his wife loved few things more than a pair of beautiful shoes, he collaborated with the acclaimed designer Tokio Kumagai to create the ‘perfect cure’.

‘No other innovation has brought me closer to divorce proceedings’, he wrote, shortly after Maude had been rescued from a nearby lake. She had fallen into it after running two miles from their home, backwards all the way, desperately trying to escape her own feet. ‘While I thought the element of surprise was critical, some warning may have been appropriate. Perhaps I should have attached the slippers less securely, and waited until Maude had finished her afternoon nap.’

Other therapeutic devices such as the ‘tarantula necktie’ and the ‘rattlesnake hot-water bottle’ never reached the trial stage. They were accidentally lost by family members in a backyard bonfire.

SHAUN TAN

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Writers and Editors:  
**Adam Tessier, Head of Interpretation;**  
**Stephanie Stepanek, Curator;**  
**Frederick Ilchman, Curator**

***Goya: Order and Disorder***  
Museum of Fine Arts Boston  
Boston, MA

Target audience: **General museum-goer**

Label type: **Object**



## Praise from the Jurors

I love the way this label puts me into the scene—and puts Goya there, too, as an observer who will later capture it in an etching. The label lets me see what he saw that was worth capturing. “Goya takes his own pleasure” is a masterful connector of the scene, the artist, and the artwork. And then, at the end, is a sentence that unbalances you a bit...ah, that’s right, the theme of this gallery is Balance.

—*Eileen Campbell*

### *A Bad Night (Mala noche.)*

Plate 36 from the series *Caprichos*, 1797–99  
Etching and aquatint with burnishing (first edition)

A bad night for business: nature kicks up a storm, interrupting the commerce of women plying their trade. While customers stay home, Goya takes his own pleasure in the way the wind becomes an active force, gusting through the trees and lifting shawls and skirts, exposing shapely bare legs. With such an unsturdy pose, she may topple.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Miss Katherine Eliot Bullard, 1914 M25688

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Writers:  
**Alex Bortolot, Content Strategist**

Editors:  
**Tom Gihring, Brand Narrator**

***Material Journeys: African Art in Motion***

Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: **Minnesota residents, especially Twin Cities’ large Somali, Ethiopian, Nigerian, & Liberian communities**

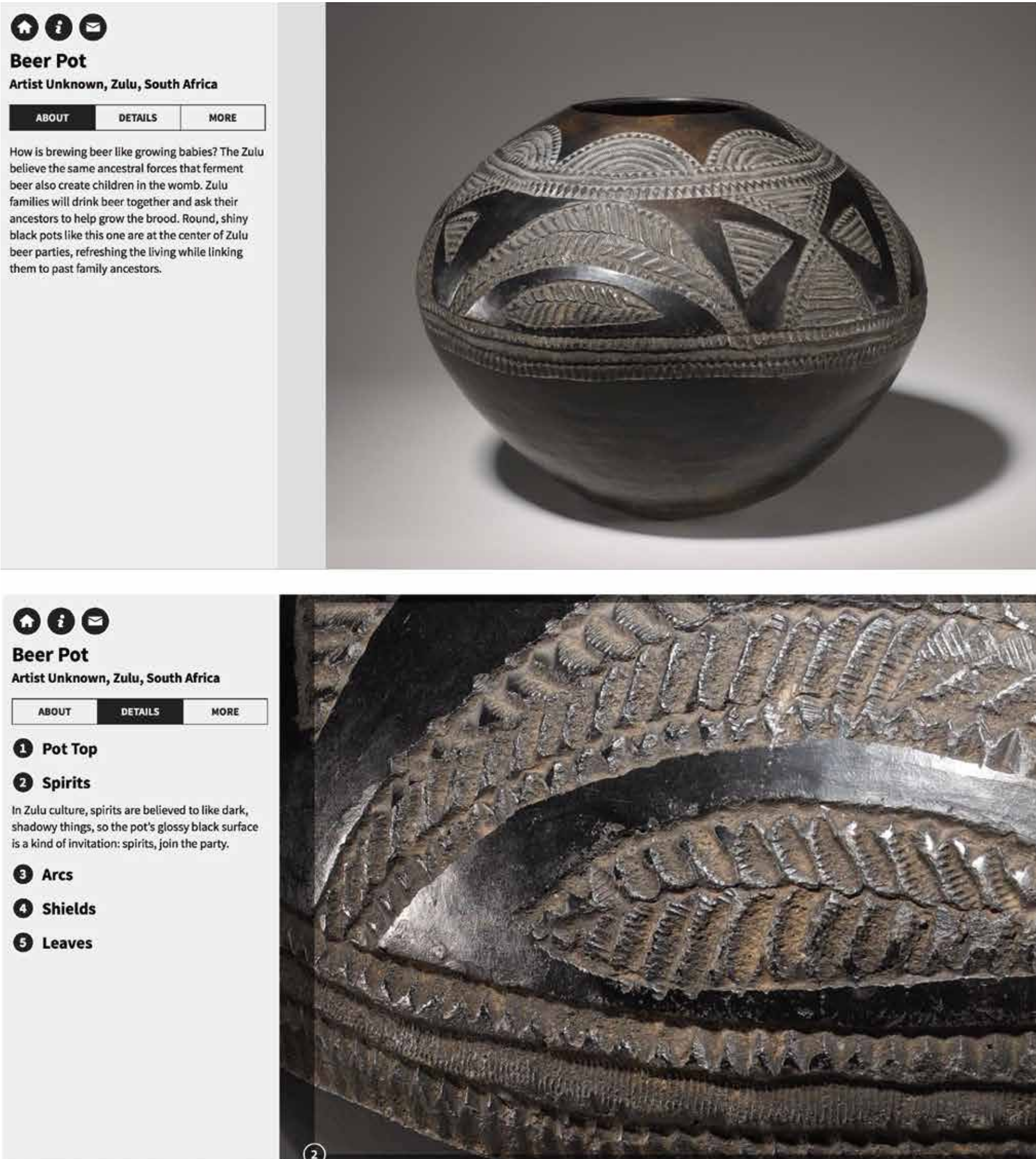
Label type: **Object**



**Praise from the Jurors**

I can imagine that this is a pretty forgettable pot (jurors don't see photos), but what an unexpected story. For such weighty, complex concepts, it feels simple and clear—effortless to read, enjoyable, and linked to concrete parts of the object. As a visitor I might not need all the details, but I feel encouraged to pick and choose what interests me.

—*Amy Schleser*



<http://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/12111>

**Beer Pot**

**Artist Unknown, Zulu, South Africa**

20th century  
Clay  
14 x 16 in. (35.56 x 40.64 cm)  
Anonymous gift of funds  
99.115.1

How is brewing beer like growing babies? The Zulu believe the same ancestral forces that ferment beer also create children in the womb. Zulu families will drink beer together and ask their ancestors to help grow the brood. Round, shiny black pots like this one are at the center of Zulu beer parties, refreshing the living while linking them to past family ancestors.

**Pot Top**

There’s a good reason the pot’s patterns are concentrated near the top. During beer parties, the pot sits on the ground, forging a connection between the drinkers and the ancestors who reside in the earth.

**Spirits**

In Zulu culture, spirits are believed to like dark, shadowy things, so the pot’s glossy black surface is a kind of invitation: spirits, join the party.

**Arcs**

Arcs are associated with women and the moon. As the moon waxes and wanes, so, too, do women’s bodies as they become pregnant and give birth to healthy children.

**Shields**

These hourglass shapes likely refer to the shields that young Zulu men carry when they are old enough to marry. The shields are actually oval, but are often carried with a spear and a knobbed stick crossed behind them, creating an hourglass form.

**Leaves**

These leaf-like shapes may represent certain medicinal herbs believed by the Zulu to ensure pregnancy. The roots of the Gopo Berry (*Phytolacca dodecandra*) are used to treat infertility.



Writers and Editors:  
**Elizabeth Labor, Raul Nava,  
Melissa Snyder, Jaci Tomulonis**

***Tentacles: The Astounding Lives of  
Octopuses, Squid and Cuttlefishes***

Monterey Bay Aquarium  
Monterey, CA

Target audience: **General audience**

Label type: **Object**



**Praise from the Jurors**

The BigFin Squid label successfully marries the intent of the writers with intentional visitor learning goals in artful AND accessible language. These remarkably short labels direct visitors to look – and look again – at specific species characteristics, and happily embrace science learning with approachability. These labels attain this same stylistic/learning goal in English-Spanish bilingual form. The writing in both languages maintains lyrical and approachable readability for visitors. This is an achievement that many multilingual exhibits increasingly struggle to attain.

—*Deborah Mack*

Word pairings elegantly contain tensions—“alien ballet,” “graceful ghosts”—that reinforce the theme of cephalopod shiftiness. As the squid skims over sea grass, the sentence itself seems to accelerate.

—*Benjamin Filene*



**Bigfin reef squid  
Calamar de arrecife aletón  
Sepioteuthis lessoniana**

**Watch an alien ballet**

Propelled by jets of water and waving long, translucent fins, the bigfin reef squid joins an otherworldly dance. Schools of these large squid glide like graceful ghosts—skimming over sea grass beds, coral reefs and sandy seafloors.

**Range:** Indo-Pacific

**Observe una danza extraterrestre**

Impulsado por chorros de agua y el ondular de largas aletas translúcidas, los calamares de arrecife aletón se reúnen en un baile fuera de este mundo. Los cardúmenes de este gran calamar planean como elegantes fantasmas—a ras de lechos de pasto marino, arrecifes de coral y fondos arenosos.

**Distribución:** Indo-Pacífico



Writers:  
**Kathrinne Duffy, Lily Benedict and Rebecca Soules, Brown University Graduate Students; Steven Lubar, Brown University Professor of American Studies**

Editors:  
**Jessica Palinski, Elizabeth Crawford, Sophia LaCava-Bohanan, and Jamie Topper, Brown University Graduate Students; Raina Belleau, Rhode Island School of Design Graduate Student; Layla Ehsan and Kristen Orr, Rhode Island School of Design Undergraduate Students; Mark Dion, Artist**

***The Lost Museum***

Brown University's Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World  
Providence, RI

Target audience: **Adults, university students, academics and members of Providence community**

Label type: **Introductory**



**Praise from the Jurors**

Rich language gives a period feel and reinforces the theme that everything—including knowledge itself—shifts over time. One era’s treasure is another’s “dust,” headed for the landfill.

—*Benjamin Filene*

I almost feel bad voting for this label. The exhibit concept is so wonderfully strange, it gives the label permission to go over the top and be equally compelling. Sometimes it’s hard to separate creative writing from creative exhibit development. Still, this label rises to the occasion. It appropriates the writing style of Dr. Jenks’ time, with its flowery language, extended explanations, and religious references. It reverses the long accumulation of Jenks’ collection, giving detail upon detail of its slow decline. I’m always happy to read a label that’s so well intertwined with its exhibit.

—*Eileen Campbell*

# DEATH

FRIENDS, CAST YOUR EYES ON THESE SHATTERED remnants and know that all things return to dust.

With the death of its champion, the JENKS MUSEUM declined. Biology professors rifled through the collection for creatures to dissect. When they needed space for modern laboratories, they packed artifacts in crates. Jenks’ hard-won specimens gathered cobwebs in attics and basements.

Brown offered the collection to other institutions. Providence’s Museum of Natural History took bird eggs and other material in the 1940s and 50s. The Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology accepted a number of ethnographic artifacts in the 1960s. A few objects remained at Brown, preserved through neglect.

But most did not survive. In 1945 the university hauled ninety-two truckloads of specimens to its dump along the Seekonk River.

Here, the Jenks Society for Lost Museums re-collects a forgotten dream.

*SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI*

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Writers and Editors:  
**Kat Talley-Jones, Kim Baer,  
Jennifer Morgan, Jenny Miyasaki**

***Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits***  
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County  
Los Angeles, CA

Target audience: **Intergenerational family groups**

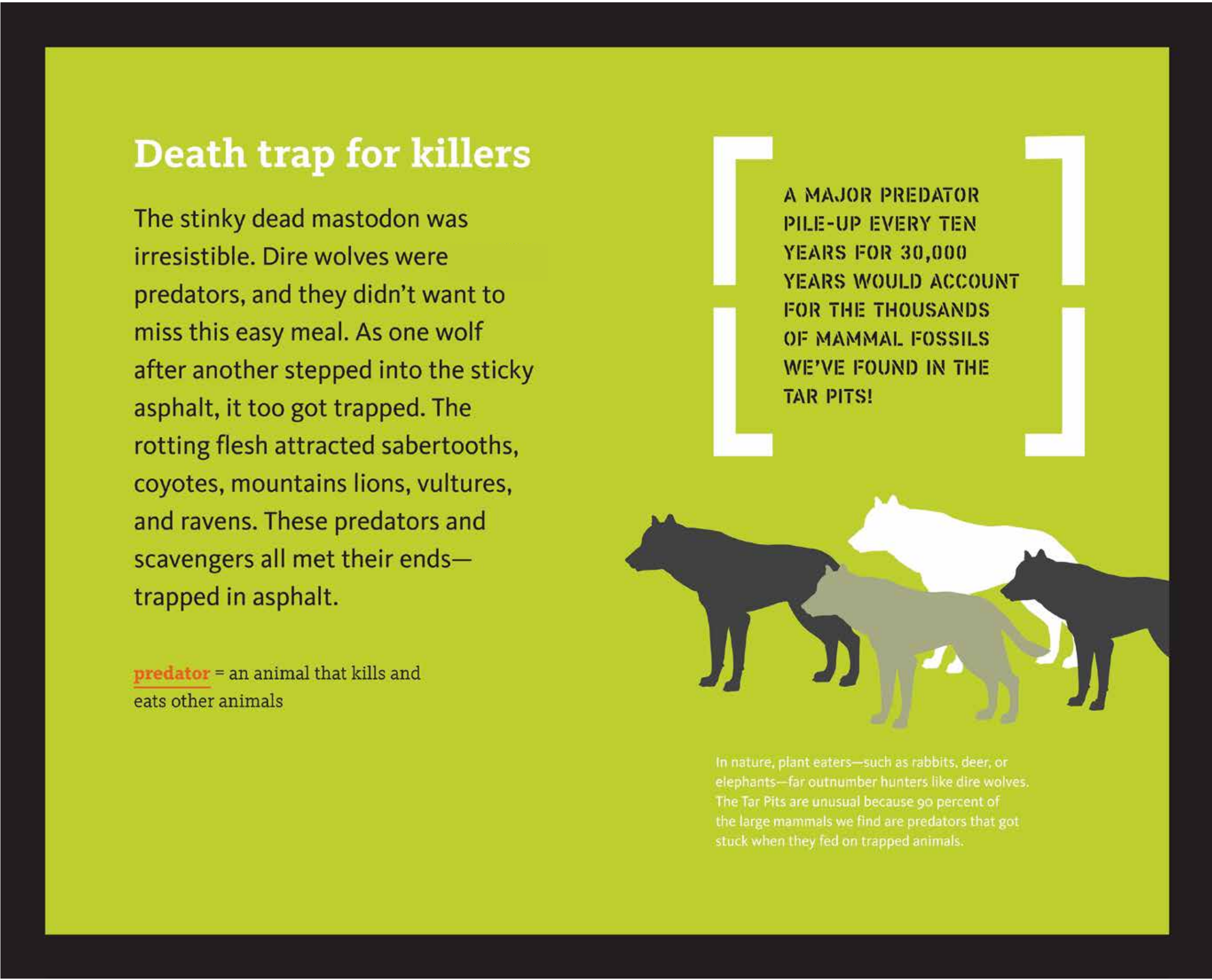
Label type: **Concept**



## Praise from the Jurors

This action-oriented outdoor label series is a wonderful example of writing that motivates visitors to look at “museum” surroundings in new ways, to imagine the remote past, to actively visualize how living creatures were trapped in the pits. These labels also encourage visitors to consider scientific inquiry as active, ongoing and creative investigation of what is –quite literally - right in front of them. This writing is a strong illustration of writing excellence that motivates visitors to link imagination with the sensory, the visual and active learning.

—*Deborah Mack*



## Death Trap for Killers

The stinky dead mastodon was irresistible. Dire wolves were predators, and they didn’t want to miss this easy meal. As one wolf after another stepped into the sticky asphalt, it too got trapped. The rotting flesh attracted sabertooths, coyotes, mountains lions, vultures, and ravens. These predators and scavengers all met their ends—trapped in asphalt.

[definition]  
**Predator** = an animal that kills and eats other animals

[factoid]  
A major predator  
pile-up every ten  
years for 30,000  
years would account  
for the thousands  
of mammal fossils  
we’ve found in the tar pits!

[Caption]  
In nature, plant eaters—such as rabbits, deer, or elephants—far outnumber hunters like dire wolves. The Tar Pits are unusual because 90 percent of the large mammals we find are predators that got stuck when they fed on trapped animals.



Writers and Editors:  
**Josh Perelman, Chief Curator & Director of Exhibitions and Collections; Ivy Weingram, Associate Curator; Jane Leavy, Advisor; Paul Rosenthal, Scriptwriter; John Thorn, Lead Consultant and Official Historian of MLB**

***Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American***

National Museum of American Jewish History  
Philadelphia, PA

Target audience: **Adults and youth (especially families), sports fans, history and culture seekers of any background**

Label type: **Introductory**



**Praise from the Jurors**

By juxtaposing the everyday (putting on a jacket) with the sweeping (justice and equal opportunity), the label shows their interconnectedness and reminds visitors that when Robinson came to bat, the stakes were high. Imagery subtly resonates with the civil rights movement (bend toward justice, level playing field).

— *Benjamin Filene*

Take a lesson from the opening line: here is how to give meaning and power to an object. Reading it, I imagine Jackie Robinson putting on this jacket like Superman donning his cape, ready to fight for justice in America. The writer allies Robinson with Martin Luther King in an artfully referenced quotation. (“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”) If you don’t know the quotation, the sentence still makes sense, but if you do, the reference adds depth to the label. At the end, with the “level playing field,” the writer takes what has become a tired phrase and reclaims it by reminding us of its original context.

— *Eileen Campbell*

**Jackie Robinson’s jacket**

Courtesy of Rachel Robinson

A man puts on a jacket and makes history.  
Jackie Robinson bore the twin burdens of hope and hatred with legendary dignity and strength.  
A man of rare character and talent, Robinson bent the nation toward justice by excelling on the field.  
Proud of his race, his community, and his family, he asked nothing more of government than he asked of baseball: neither sympathy nor entitlement, but equal opportunity and a level playing field.

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Writers:  
**Forrest McGill, Wattis Senior Curator  
of South and Southeast Asian Art**

Editors:  
**Daniel King, Copy Editor; Tom Christensen,  
Head of Publications**

*Gorgeous*  
Asian Art Museum  
San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **Art lovers**

Label type: **Object**



## Praise from the Jurors

“Mythical bird-man” manages to use first-person voice in an engaging, not self-indulgent, way. The personal perspective encourages us to take a look and see for ourselves.  
“Full disclosure” pulls us in and reminds us that curators have a personal involvement in their work (whether we admit it or not).

— *Benjamin Filene*

**Mythical bird-man**, approx. 1775–1850  
Central Thailand  
Wood with remnants of lacquer, gilding,  
and mirrored glass inlay  
*Asian Art Museum, Gift from Doris Duke Charitable  
Foundation’s Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.24*

Full disclosure: this sculpture is included here because it’s a favorite of mine. We humans always seem to have been fascinated by composite creatures, whether frightening ones like minotaurs or beguiling ones like mermaids. Often we fall in ill-fated love with the beguiling ones, as in *Swan Lake*, Southeast Asian tales of romance between mortal men and bird-women, or nearly any science fiction movie.

Among bird-men, this has got to be the handsomest. Look at the elegant plumage rising along the legs and the superb whiplashing tail feathers. Then the posture: how carefully the sculptor has leaned the torso forward to counterbalance the tail, and shown how strongly the creature pulls his shoulders back and stomach in to hold his upper body vertical. Finally there’s his tender, intelligent face. For me, this work, more than any other in the exhibition, suggests the dreamed-for ideal of universal sympathy.

FMcG

## Mythical bird-man, approx. 1775–1850

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Foundation’s Southeast Asian Art Collection, 2006.27.24*

Full disclosure: this sculpture is included here because it’s a favorite of mine. We humans always seem to have been fascinated by composite creatures, whether frightening ones like minotaurs or beguiling ones like mermaids. Often we fall in ill-fated love with the beguiling ones, as in *Swan Lake*, Southeast Asian tales of romance between mortal men and bird-women, or nearly any science fiction movie.

Among bird-men, this has got to be the handsomest. Look at the elegant plumage rising along the legs and the superb whiplashing tail feathers. Then the posture: how carefully the sculptor has leaned the torso forward to counterbalance the tail, and shown how strongly the creature pulls his shoulders back and stomach in to hold his upper body vertical. Finally there’s his tender, intelligent face. For me, this work, more than any other in the exhibition, suggests the dreamed-for ideal of universal sympathy.

FMcG



Writers and Editors:  
**Kaisa Ryding, Writer, Developer, Graphic Designer; Eugene Dillenburg, Editor, Project Manager, Director of Exhibits**

***A Shadow Over the Earth: The Life and Death of the Passenger Pigeon***  
University of Michigan Museum of Natural History  
Ann Arbor, MI

Target audience: **Adults**

Label type: **Introductory**



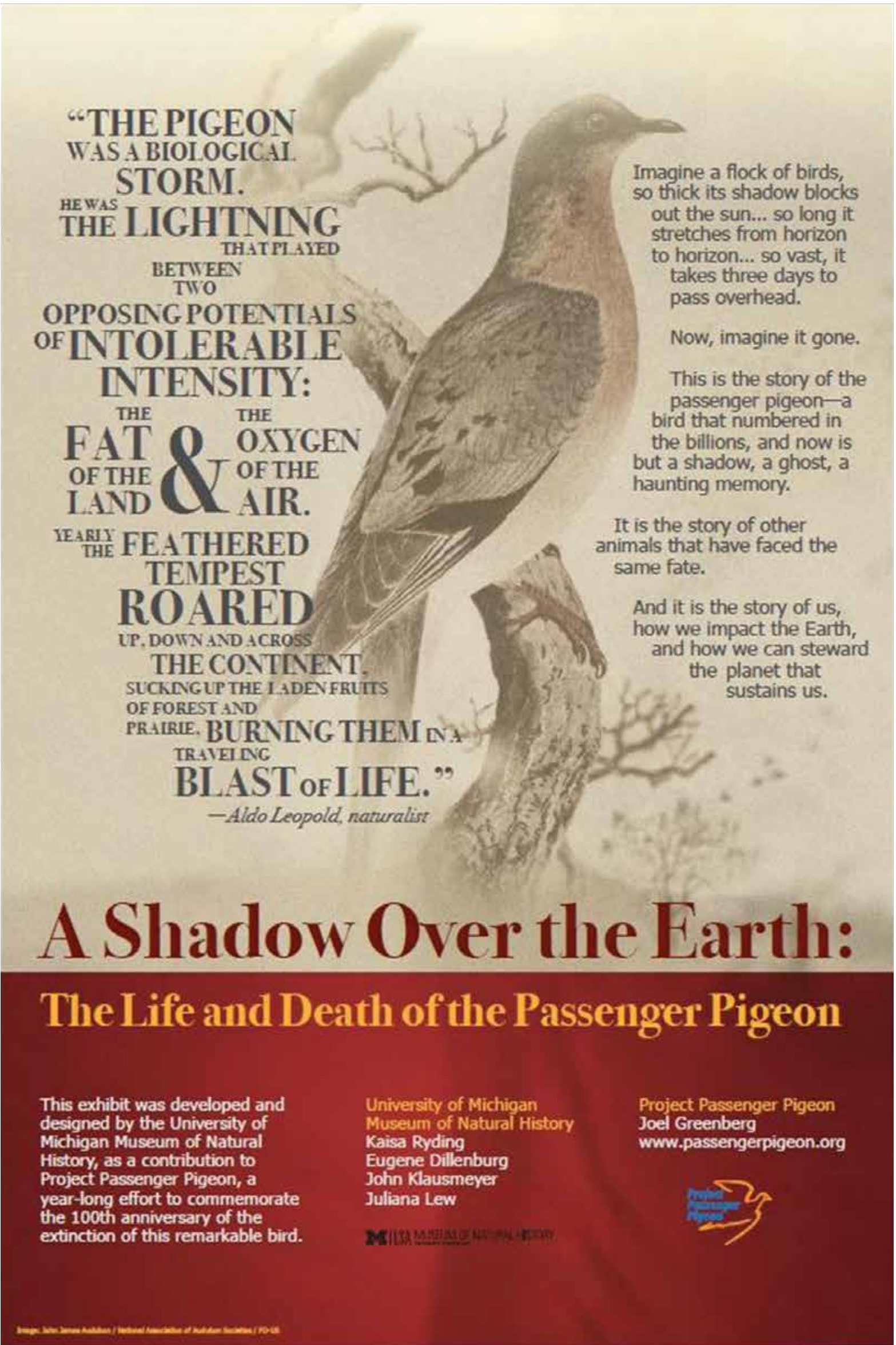
## Praise from the Jurors

A reader’s imagination is a powerful tool, and this label makes full use of it by painting a vivid picture of a near-endless flock of passenger pigeons. Then, in a single, isolated sentence, it makes my imagination do what feels unimaginable: extinguish the birds.

It works. I feel the shock of the loss. The extinction of the passenger pigeon is no longer a tired cliché—I want to know how this could have happened. This introductory label does the important job of making me want more, of making me care. It has opened my emotional senses.

The label continues, doing the rest of its job of telling me what’s to come, summarizing the exhibit, giving the rationale and the sponsors, but it doesn’t really matter—it had me at “now imagine it gone.”

— *Eileen Campbell*



## A Shadow Over the Earth: The Life and Death of the Passenger Pigeon

“THE PIGEON WAS A BIOLOGICAL  
STORM. HE WAS THE LIGHTNING  
THAT PLAYED BETWEEN TWO  
OPPOSING POTENTIALS OF  
INTOLERABLE INTENSITY:  
THE FAT OF THE LAND & THE  
OXYGEN OF THE AIR. YEARLY  
THE FEATHERED TEMPEST  
ROARED UP, DOWN AND ACROSS  
THE CONTINENT, SUCKING UP  
THE LADEN FRUITS OF FOREST  
AND PRAIRIE, BURNING THEM  
IN A TRAVELING BLAST OF LIFE.”

— Aldo Leopold, naturalist

Imagine a flock of birds,  
so thick its shadow blocks  
out the sun... so long it  
stretches from horizon  
to horizon... so vast, it  
takes three days to  
pass overhead.

Now, imagine it gone.

This is the story of the  
passenger pigeon—a  
bird that numbered in  
the billions, and now is  
but a shadow, a ghost, a  
haunting memory.

It is the story of other  
animals that have faced the  
same fate.

And it is the story of us,  
how we impact the Earth,  
and how we can steward  
the planet that  
sustains us.



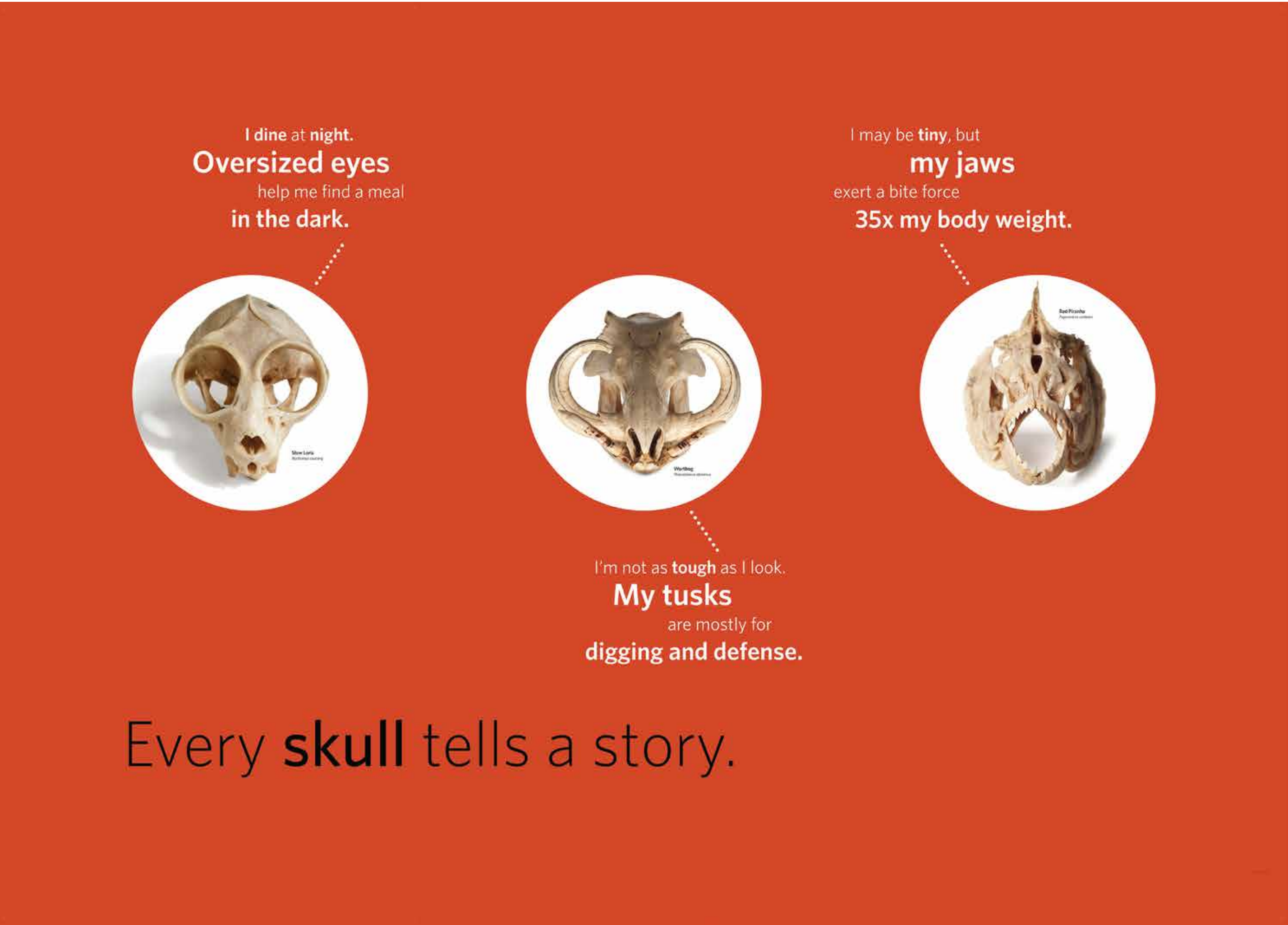
Writers:  
**Cheryl Downes McCoy,**  
**Independent Exhibit Developer & Writer**

Editors:  
**Tamara Schwarz, Associate Director,**  
**Exhibit Content Development**

***Skulls***  
California Academy of Sciences  
San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **Adults and families with children**

Label type: **Introductory**



**I dine at night.**  
**Oversized eyes**  
help me find a meal  
**in the dark.**

Slow Loris  
*Nycticebus coucang*

I'm not as **tough** as I look.  
**My tusks**  
are mostly for  
**digging and defense.**

Warthog  
*Phacochoerus africanus*

I may be **tiny**, but  
**my jaws**  
exert a bite force  
**35x my body weight.**

Red Piranha  
*Pygocentrus nattereri*

Every **skull** tells a story.

# Praise from the Jurors

In a few short phrases, the label helps visitors see differently, illustrating the exhibit's big idea. The last sentence becomes a congratulatory "Now you know this!" instead of just a vague statement of theme.

—*Benjamin Filene*



Writers and Editors:  
**James Brown, English Writer; Rupert Alchin, English Writer; Kerry Jimson, English Writer; Frith Williams, Head of Writing and Editing; Paora Tibble, Māori Writer; Lynette Townsend, Curator Communities and Diversity**

***Aztecs: Conquest and Glory***  
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa  
Wellington, New Zealand

Target audience: **Cross-generational, non-expert (with an emphasis on family visitors), local and international**

Label type: **Object**



## Praise from the Jurors

The vantage point effectively shifts between “you”—an Aztec “stunned” by new battle techniques—and a third-person look at what made the Aztecs vulnerable. The title emphasizes the elemental aspects of the clash—wood vs. steel—while the text shows how that divide had historical roots and human consequences.

—*Benjamin Filene*

Now I know how the Spanish conquered the Aztecs. The information isn't new to me, but now I’ve been there with this object, and I was horrified. I’ve successfully become an Aztec, and in a way I’m not likely to forget.

—*Amy Schleser*

### Wood versus steel

Place yourself on the battlefield for a moment. You are holding one of these wooden weapons while a Spanish soldier hurtles at you on horseback, waving his steel sword. You are still stunned by this new style of fighting: killing rather than capturing. Now that your local enemies have joined forces with the invaders, the fact is you don’t stand a chance.

In battle, the Aztecs used weapons with obsidian blades, spears, clubs, and bow

and arrows. When wielded by skilled warriors trained from youth, these weapons had been highly effective in subduing rival groups. But Spanish armour and swords, backed up by cannons that could destroy from a distance, changed the rules of engagement. Nothing could have prepared the Aztecs.

**Replica weapons**  
based on Aztec originals from 1250–1521  
wood, obsidian, fibre

Commissioned from Atlatl Mexico, 2013

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