

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2016

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.

A panel of four jurors representing CurCom, EdCom, NAME, and a writer from one of last year’s selected labels reviewed the entries and identified ten labels they thought stood out from the rest. We would like to thank the jurors for their commitment and expertise. Without them this competition would not be possible. We also extend our thanks to AAM for their continued support, and CurCom for sponsoring the competition with the cooperation of EdCom, and NAME.

Beyond the Marketplace, the competition continues to grow as an online archive of outstanding label writing, fostering 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 over 150 labels from 55 exhibitions. These institutions represent 18 disciplines in 18 states/provinces, 3 countries and two continents. 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 for making this year’s competition a success.

We also want to thank you for attending the Marketplace of Ideas. We hope that you enjoy the labels that are displayed here and gain some knowledge and inspiration from them.

John Russick

Competition Project Director

Vice President for Interpretation and Education

Chicago History Museum

Peter Kleinpass

Competition Project Manager

Museology Graduate Student

University of Washington, Seattle

Meet The Jurors

Representing CurCom

Joy Bivins

Director of Curatorial Affairs

Chicago History Museum

Labels that are excellent, in my view, invite you in and create a space where you are curious enough to continue reading. Not only do they provide necessary information (using the right amount of words) but they create images and use language that bridges gaps and creates understanding. Finally, excellent labels are accessible to a broad range of readers and help to evoke the emotion that the exhibition developers desire. They can make you feel deeply, connect you to another time and space, or even make you laugh.

Representing NAME

Adam Tessier

Head of Interpretation

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

My favorite label analogy comes from a mentor of mine: a museum label should be like the host at a cocktail party; it should introduce you to someone you haven’t met before, start the conversation, and then slip away.

I’ve always liked that description. With museums as with parties, what matters most are the people we meet and the conversations we have. Good labels, like good hosts, should be real and unselfconscious; they should spark stimulating, fascinating discussions, ones that we’re still thinking about on the way home. They should help bring us eye-to-eye with the objects and ideas we’re conversing with, so close that we can’t get them out of our minds for a long time. The best labels frame engaging, dynamic kinds of conversation, ones that leave room for us to bring our own views to bear—though in fact they might upend those views, not confirm them. In museums today, I think it’s more important than ever for us (and our labels) to facilitate these kinds of honest, direct conversations—so that our visitors can make lasting, meaningful connections, and make sense of the world around them.

Representing EdCom

Eileen Campbell

Senior Science Writer

Exploratorium

Twin themes of nature and narrative run through Eileen’s work. Growing up, she spent much of her time outside, but also read voraciously. She studied zoology and marine biology, then attended the Science Communication program at UC Santa Cruz. As a science writer, she has worked extensively with museums, connecting people to the world around them via exhibits and other media. On staff for 10 years at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, her projects included the world’s first major jellyfish exhibit (*Planet of the Jellies*) and the aquarium’s new wing. Since then she has developed ways for people to engage with animals (*Lemur Forest* at the San Francisco Zoo), explore wine country geography (a book, *Carneros: Travels along the Napa-Sonoma edge*), and understand evolution via story (NSF-funded exhibit *Charlie and Kiwi: an Evolutionary Adventure and resultant* book), among many other projects. She joined the Exploratorium before its 2013 move to Piers 15/17 to work on outdoors installations with the Studio for Public Spaces.

Representing the 2015 Honorees

Kat Talley-Jones

Writer & Interpretive Planner

The rhythms, images, color, and melodies of the labels I selected cheered, intrigued—and haunted—me for days after I read them. Moving, amusing, and helping me understand in new ways even without experiencing the exhibits. A designer once said, “oh, this is where we’ll put the boring words,” which may say more about my writing than the designer’s attitude toward text. These labels were a pleasure to read and far from boring.

Writer:
John Gordon

Editor:
Liza Pryor

SPACE
The Science Museum of Minnesota
Saint Paul, MN

Target audience: Adults and families with children

Label type: Digital “flip book”



Praise from the Jurors

We all want to know how they do it, right? The texts about poop in this flipbook show the true heroism of the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo astronauts.

—Kat Talley-Jones



Going to the bathroom in space

True pioneers

Early spacecraft didn’t have toilets. Instead, astronauts stuck “fecal containment bags” to their behinds and then stored the filled bags for the duration of the mission.

Keeping it clean

Astronauts on Apollo flights would often strip naked before using fecal containment bags. The awkward process could take an hour to complete, but clean clothes and a tidy bag of poop were reward enough.

Rich history

A transcript from Apollo 10 reveals some of the history of going to the bathroom in space. It’s never been easy, but it has apparently always been funny.

Thank goodness for atmosphere

A canister beneath the toilet seat stores poop on the International Space Station. Astronauts jettison full canisters in used supply vehicles. The vehicles—and their contents—burn up in our atmosphere.

A bathroom deadeye

Pooping into a space toilet requires careful aim. Astronauts use this training toilet on Earth to practice lining up their parts with its parts.

The circle of life

Equipment on the Space Station recycles astronauts’ urine, turning it back into astronauts’ drinking water.

For bathroom emergencies

There are no bathroom breaks during spacewalks, so astronauts wear “Maximum Absorption Garments.” But how does the saying go? “A diaper by any other name . . .”

Cross your legs and float

In 2009, plumbing problems on the Space Station left a crew of 13 (the largest ever) with only two toilets—one on the Station and one on the visiting Shuttle.

We’ll “go” everywhere

Wherever our journey to space takes us—whether another moon, planet, or asteroid—we’ll have to figure out how to make our bathrooms work.

Writer:
Ryder Diaz

Editor:
Tamara Schwarz

Color of Life
California Academy of Sciences
San Francisco, CA

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

Label type: **Introductory**



Praise from the Jurors

I loved the way color was personified here and the way the writer played with synesthesia. And it invites the reader to play too.

—*Kat Talley-Jones*



We identified the tonal attributes and function of each label type at the outset of our writing process. We aimed for lively, conversational, and approachable writing throughout *Color of Life* to express the concept of color as language. With insight into this language, visitors begin to take on the perspective of another organism and appreciate the living world from these new perspectives. We used vivid, catchy headlines to draw visitors in, shared stories that illustrate dynamic pairings of color with behavior, and conveyed the idea that many organisms evolved their colors to communicate within or between species.

Color Speaks Volumes

If color could talk, it might beckon,
“Come closer.” Or it might growl a threat,
“Back off!” Many living things communicate
with color: Flamboyant flowers attract
pollinators with their colorful petals, while
the vivid hue of a poison dart frog’s skin
warns predators to stay away. What else
can color say?

BACKGROUND IMAGE Anole lizards
regularly advertise their ownership
of their territories. They bob their
heads and extend a colorful flap of
skin called a dewlap, just in case
another male is watching.

Writer:
Sandy Tanck

Pine Walk
Minnesota Landscape Arboretum
Chaska, MN

Target audience: Families; home gardeners;
tree enthusiasts

Label type: Object



Praise from the Jurors

This label is what I’d want from a walk in the park: a charming add-on to my relaxed outdoors experience. It encourages me to revel in the sensory realm, hearing the pine needles sing and inhaling the scents, and with a light touch it makes me aware of the differences between the pines I’m walking along.

—Eileen Campbell



This collection began in 1950’s to test species from similar climates worldwide. Pre “Pine Walk” some visitors wandered among the trees, but it was not well used in 1200+ acres of choices. The goal was to increase visibility with an inviting, accessible route that encouraged visitors to engage with trees along it. A team of curator, arborist, and educator gathered information, including typical visitor questions, to plan concepts and sites for three levels of interpretation. The educator prepared text and images, led design, production and installation. No formal evaluation was done, but favorable comment cards and increased traffic have resulted.

LISTEN & BREATHE HERE

Do You Hear Music in the Pines?

Since each kind of pine differs in the length and thickness of its needles, breezes can play across them like a vibrating wind harp. Some claim each pine “sings” in its own whispering tone. Listen also for the soft hoots and chirps of local musicians on the wing, like the great horned owl chick born here.

Breathe in Sweet Resins

You could steam-distill pine needles, twigs and cones to extract sweet pine resins for aromatherapy— or just step into a pine grove and breathe deeply. Researchers are testing whether pine extract lowers blood pressure and helps liver function. Regardless, the vanilla scent of ponderosa pine bark is a true delight!

Writers:
Elizabeth Jones
Juliana Olsson

Editor:
Angela Roberts

*The Last American Dinosaurs:
Discovering a Lost World*
National Museum of Natural History
Washington, DC

Target audience:
General audience; tourists to DC;
family groups; middle/high school groups

Label type: Instructional



Praise from the Jurors

Short, literally engaging, syntactically lovely, simple but not simple-minded, this label answers a question I didn’t know I wanted to ask, and it does so in a way that is instantly understandable.

—Adam Tessier

HOW LONG AGO IS
66 MILLION YEARS?

It’s hard to imagine such
a mind-boggling amount
of time.

So try this: open and close your
hands quickly. Each time you do
it represents a year. Now picture
doing this 24/7 for two years.
That’s how long you’d have to
“flash” your hands to represent
66 million years.

Elizabeth was tasked with striking a fun, conversational tone in this exhibit, because we knew families with children would be our biggest audience. That meant she needed to convey complicated concepts, like deep time, in short, engaging ways. Originally, we’d intended to include “sticky note” labels throughout the hall featuring the dialogue between curators, designers, artists, and educators. This idea evolved into the “Science meets Art/Art meets Science” labels that Juliana wrote for each of the exhibit’s murals.

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66 million years.

Writers:
Liz Clevenger
Laura Callen
Barbara Berglund
Heather Sharp
Aimee Phan
Anh Đào Kolbe
Lana Mae Noone

***Operation Babylift:
Perspectives and Legacies***

Presidio Trust and Adoption Museum Project
San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **General audience; people with connections to Operation Babylift**

Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

Several of the labels submitted this year make use of guest writers, and this is the most effective. The museum’s object ID is joined by four personal commentaries on the travel bag. Together, the writings expand my understanding of Operation Babylift, the significance of the object, and the experience of those involved. Allowing in the voices of these people gives the bag, and presumably the entire exhibit, emotional power that’s rare in a museum exhibit.

—**Eileen Campbell**

AIR VIETNAM BAG
Courtesy of Heather Sharp [IL2015.02]

Heather Sharp arrived at the Presidio during Operation Babylift just before her 11th birthday. She came with her two younger siblings. She carried this bag with her on the flight from Vietnam. Air Vietnam was a commercial carrier that operated domestic and international flights from 1951 until the end of the Vietnam War.

As the North Vietnamese army plowed south, we were given limited amount of time to evacuate the security of home. This bag held few treasures of my young life. Where did it come from? Did Dad travel? Certainly we did not as a family. Unfortunately those treasures are no longer with me.

Heather Sharp
Operation Babylift Pre-teen Adoptee

How do you fit your life inside a bag? For all your favorite books, toys, family members, friends, history and memories? When your life is unpacked, how will they fit in your new home? Where can you hide the things you no longer wish to see, yet cannot let go?

Aimee Phan
Vietnamese American Author

Tattooed across my leathered skin, the name of a motherland I cannot claim because I was removed without my permission. While I was born Vietnamese and will die Vietnamese, I will never be seen as completely Vietnamese being labeled as an adoptee and will be forever a piece of misplaced baggage.

Anh Đào Kolbe
Pre-Operation Babylift Vietnamese Adoptee

I'm deeply moved by Heather's Air Vietnam bag. My daughter, who died weeks after arriving from Vietnam via Babylift, shares her name. I'm happy Heather has this extraordinary remembrance – sad for the loss shared by adoptees, birth families.

Lana Mae Noone
Mom, Author, Speaker, www.Vietnambabylift.org

The labels highlight diverse perspectives about Operation Babylift through personal reflection on objects related to the event. For each object, a curatorial text sets the stage for 3-4 reflections, each written by a different community contributor. Curators chose writers based on their connection to Operation Babylift, so that different connections to Operation Babylift would be featured next to each other. Community contributors were given object photographs and writing prompts. Curators encouraged a diversity of formats; positive and critical reactions; respect; personal and authentic writing; and a visitor-centered approach. Contributions were copyedited, but otherwise honored the integrity of the author’s words.

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Lana Mae Noone
Mom, Author, Speaker, www.Vietnambabylift.org

Writers:
Amy Hill
Steve Boyd-Smith

***Ohiopyle State Park:
Explore, Discover, Conserve***

Ohiopyle State Park Office/Laurel Highlands Falls
Area Visitor Center
Ohiopyle, PA

Target audience: **Visitors to Ohiopyle State Park**

Label type: **Instructional**



Praise from the Jurors

This label does just what a visitor center should: introduces you to the environment outside and gives you some tools to experience it. Each line is tied to something real you can see—here at the diorama, but also potentially outside in the park. It mimics the experience of being on the trail and wondering “What’s that?” giving you a pocketful of things to look and listen for.

—*Eileen Campbell*



All good labels should be based on the project’s and specific exhibit’s goals, in the context of the environment around them. In this case, the goal of encouraging visitors to explore nature affected everything from content selection (keep it simple) to voice (keep it friendly). The labels are also integral to the diorama environment they surround, encouraging visitors to practice with the setting. The labels would make no sense without the diorama, and the diorama would be empty of meaning without labels. This interrelationship is what makes this work as an exhibit rather than a book or a video.

LOOK CLOSELY

Pay attention to the little things when you explore. Slow down.
Look. Listen. Be curious. Go ahead, practice here.

CAN YOU SPOT THESE DETAILS?

Be a detective. Search out these clues to investigate what stories they tell.

Abnormal growths on these leaves are called galls. Inside, little insects grow.

These holes reveal that a woodpecker has been here.

Camouflage protects an insect.

Inside this chrysalis, a pupa
is becoming a butterfly.

Everyone poops. By the look of this scat, a black bear has been around.

These milkweed pods will burst, scattering their puffy seeds. More native milkweed
will support more monarch butterflies.

SOUNDS CARRY

Often, you can hear more than you can see. When you’re outside, listen.
You might be amazed by the sounds of life all around you.

The call of a green frog sounds like a banjo string being plucked.

The creaking of trees in the wind.

The drumming of a red-bellied woodpecker.

The flute-like song of a wood thrush, carrying through the trees.

The snort of a deer raises the alarm.

Up in the trees, squirrels chatter.

A barred owl: can you hear its “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?”

The haunting buzz of a katydid.

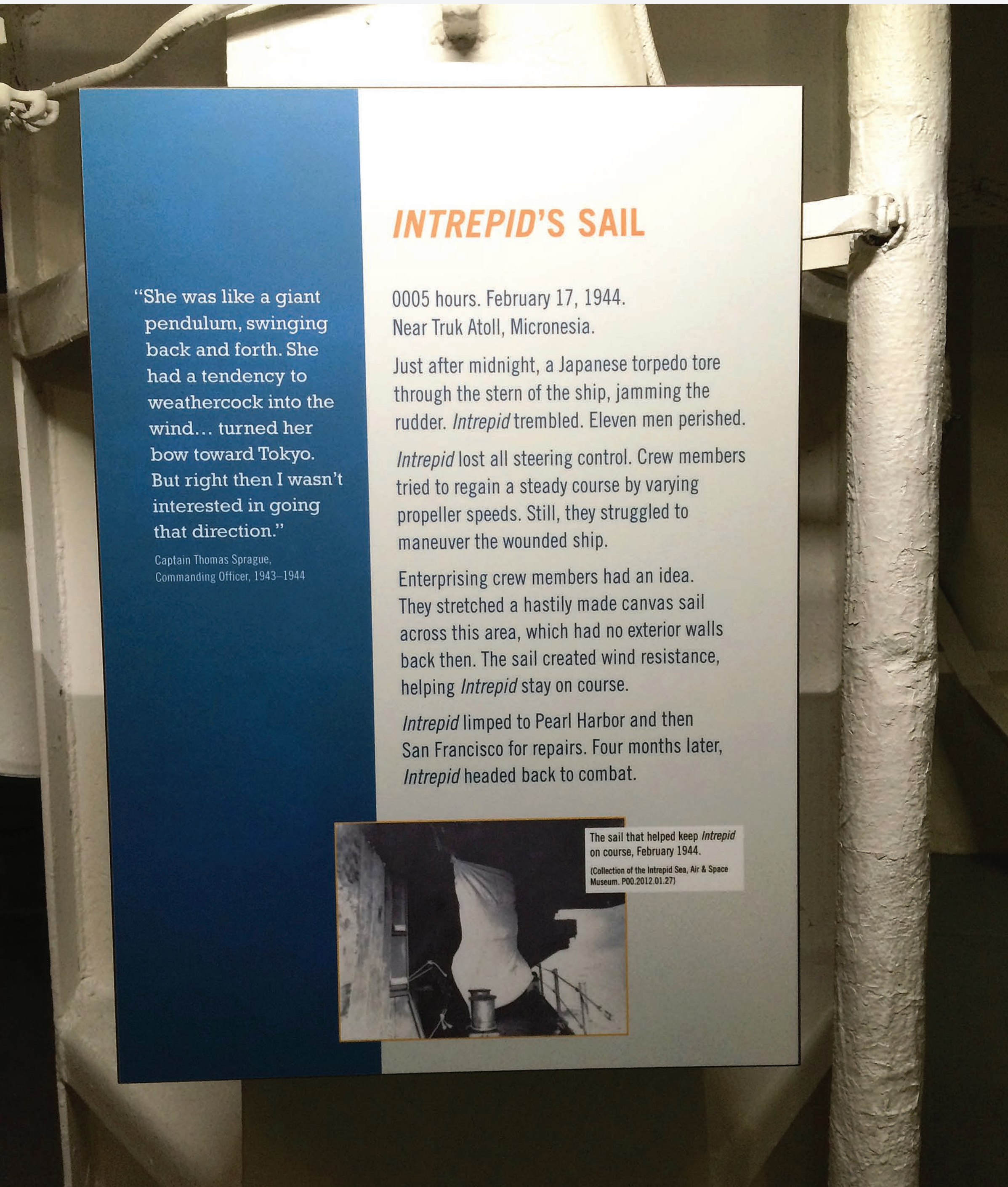
Writer:
Jessica Williams

Editor:
Adrienne Johnson

City at Sea: USS Intrepid
Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum
New York, NY

Target audience: General audience

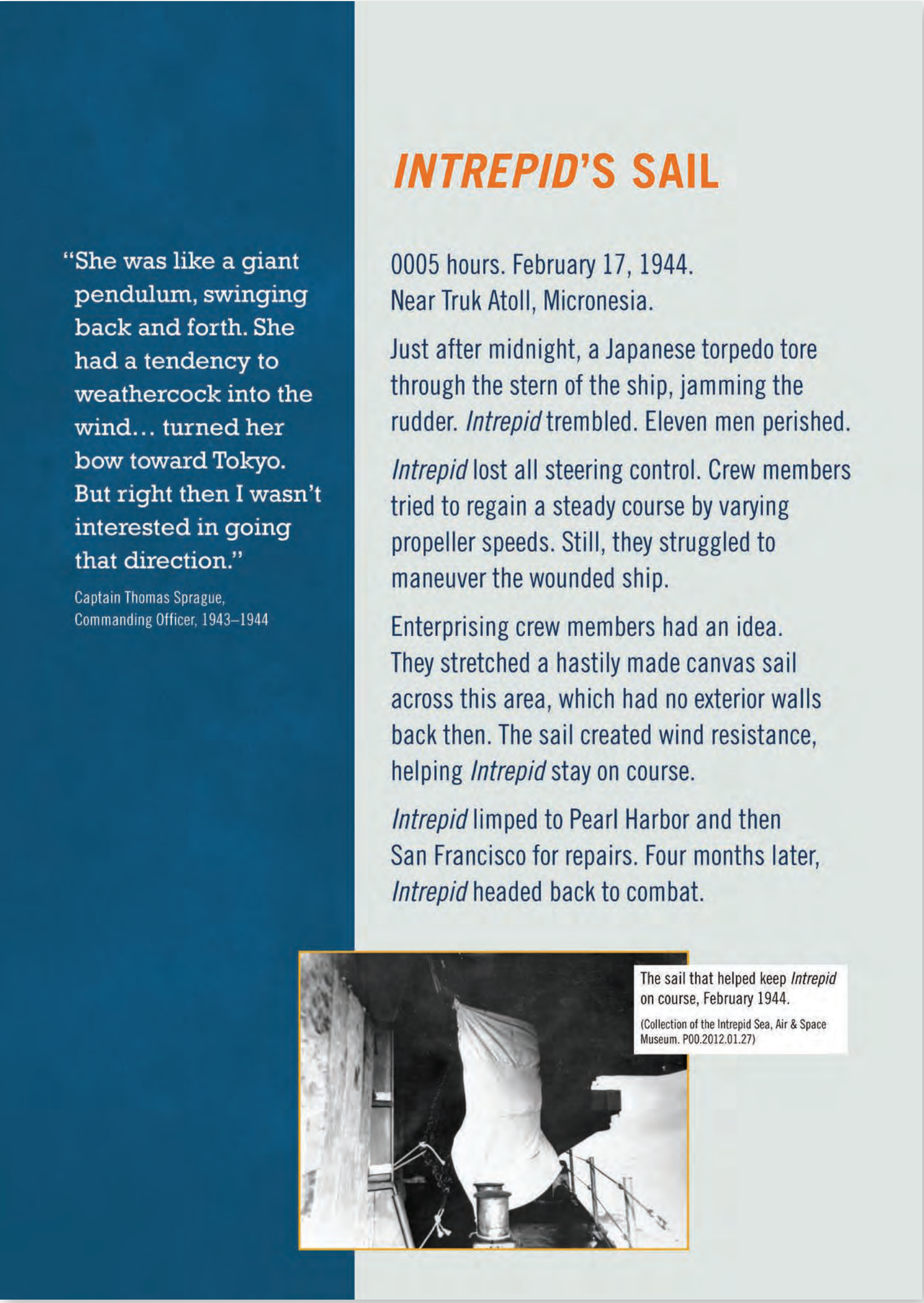
Label type: Concept



Praise from the Jurors

This label tells a story in a dramatic and succinct manner. I was taken by the way the authors turned the ship into something relatable by using language that spoke to her physical “injuries”. It could have been just a series of chronological events but the label created a sense of empathy for the plight of the ship and the crew.

—Joy Bivins



The goal of City at Sea was to connect people to place. The writing puts the crew at the center, using active language to capture what the men did, experienced, thought, or felt within the ship’s historic spaces. During the writing process, we drew heavily on oral histories to ground the writing in lived experiences, and we included storytelling elements to engage our general audience. We used a sprinkling of naval terminology as appropriate: enough to give a flavor of shipboard life, but not so much that we confuse our visitors.

INTREPID’S SAIL

0005 hours. February 17, 1944.
Near Truk Atoll, Micronesia.

Just after midnight, a Japanese torpedo tore through the stern of the ship, jamming the rudder. *Intrepid* trembled. Eleven men perished. *Intrepid* lost all steering control. Crew members tried to regain a steady course by varying propeller speeds. Still, they struggled to maneuver the wounded ship.

Enterprising crew members had an idea. They stretched a hastily-made canvas sail across this area, which had no exterior walls back then. The sail created wind resistance, helping *Intrepid* stay on course.

Intrepid limped to Pearl Harbor and then San Francisco for repairs. Four months later, *Intrepid* headed back to combat.

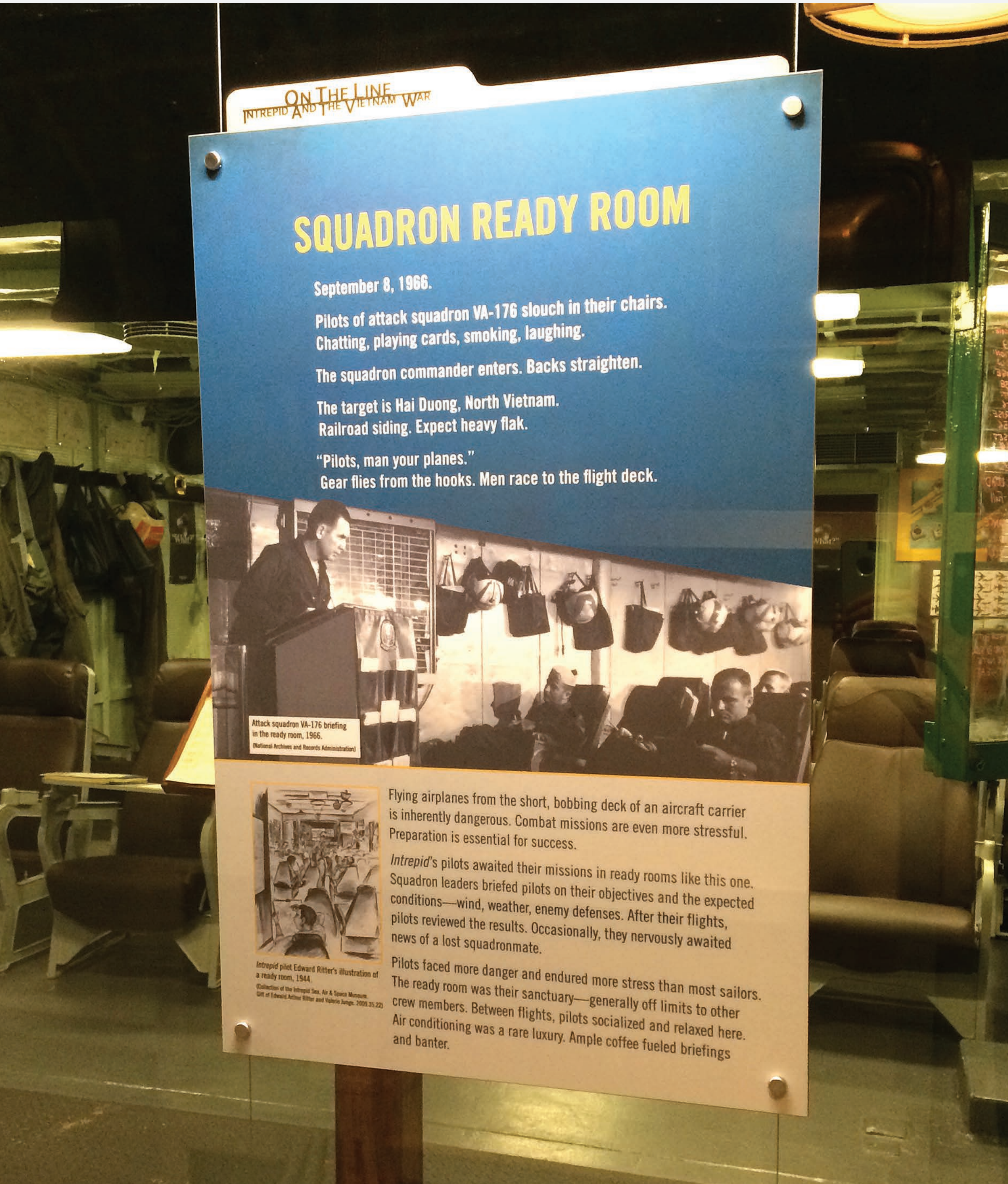
Writer:
Jessica Williams

Editor:
Adrienne Johnson

City at Sea: USS Intrepid
Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum
New York, NY

Target audience: General audience

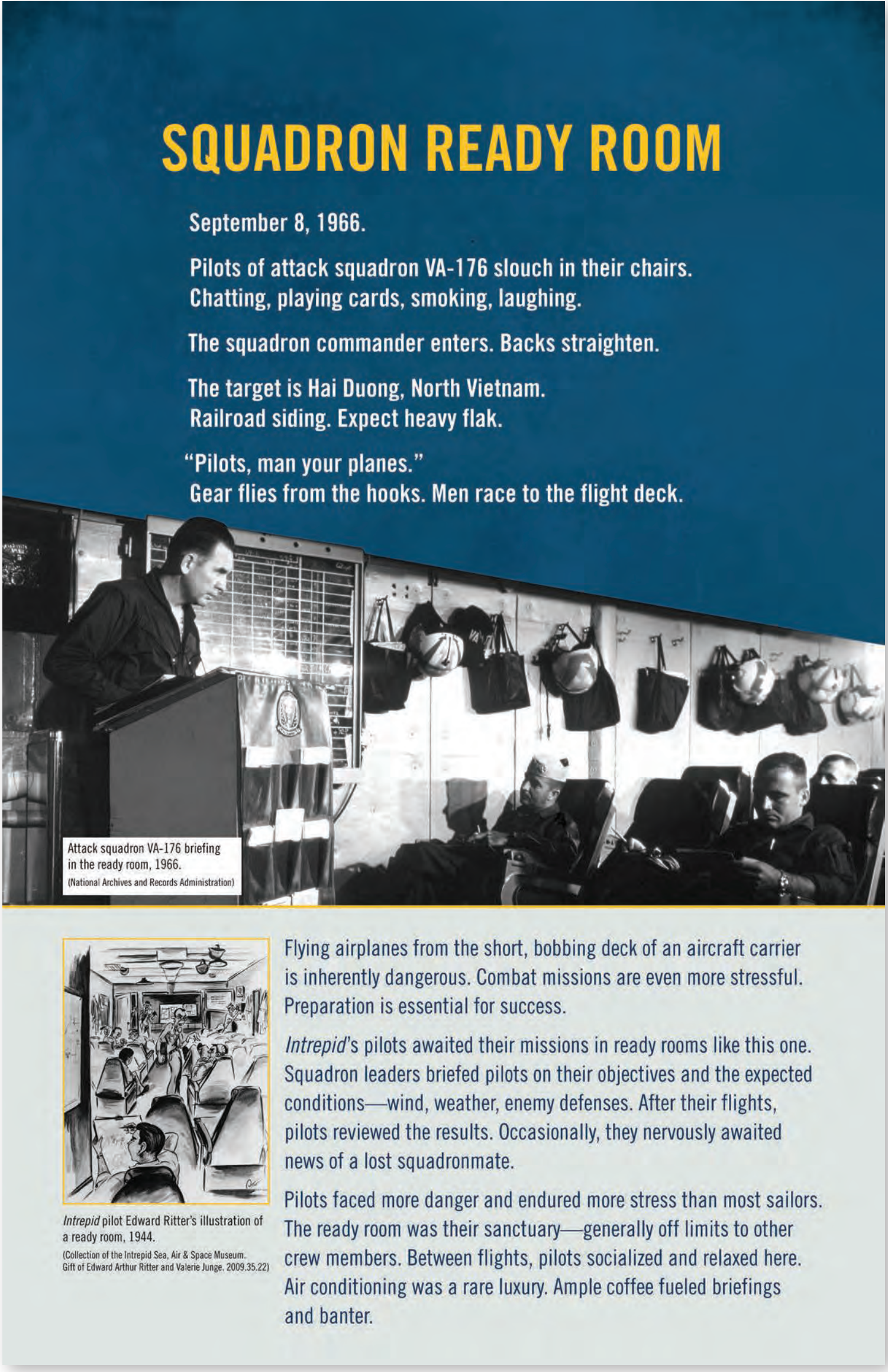
Label type: Concept



Praise from the Jurors

This label feels very immediate. The clipped language is both appropriate to the topic and easy to follow. The writing tells a story, bringing you into the soldiers’ experience of this room—the long hours of bored waiting, the harried moments of action, and then more waiting. The historic space, now blank and unused, comes alive in my imagination. I see the men and understand what this room was to them, thanks to the vivid picture the writer paints.

—Eileen Campbell



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SQUADRON READY ROOM

September 8, 1966.

Pilots of attack squadron VA-176 slouch in their chairs. Chatting, playing cards, smoking, laughing.

The squadron commander enters. Backs straighten.

The target is Hai Duong, North Vietnam. Railroad siding. Expect heavy flak.

“Pilots, man your planes.”

Gear flies from the hooks. Men race to the flight deck.

Flying airplanes from the short, bobbing deck of an aircraft carrier is inherently dangerous. Combat missions are even more stressful. Preparation is essential for success.

Intrepid’s pilots awaited their missions in ready rooms like this one. Squadron leaders briefed pilots on their objectives and the expected conditions—wind, weather, enemy defenses. After their flights, pilots reviewed the results. Occasionally, they nervously awaited news of a lost squadronmate.

Pilots faced more danger and endured more stress than most sailors. The ready room was their sanctuary—generally off limits to other crew members. Between flights, pilots socialized and relaxed here. Air conditioning was a rare luxury. Ample coffee fueled briefings and banter.

Writers:
Erica Kelly
Beth Redmond-Jones
Lena Jones

Coast to Cactus in Southern California

San Diego Natural History Museum
San Diego, CA

Target audience: **Families with children preschool and up; school groups; visitors to SoCal; local nature lovers**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

This label accomplishes a fundamental task of interpretation: bridging from concrete objects and experiences to more abstract ideas. Each sentence does this with admirable economy, starting with something you can observe in the diorama (no tall shrubs, burnt plants, fire poppies) and then telling what it means for this fire-ravaged ecology (new plants have room to grow, nutrients have been added to the soil, some plants come back quickly). The language is simple and the sentence structure straightforward, as befits the young family audience.

—Eileen Campbell



We know that many of our core audience attend in family groups with children. We also know that many are Spanish-speakers with various levels of English proficiency. (All of our exhibit text is bilingual.) When writing, therefore, exhibit developers kept some key questions in mind: How can I help caregivers to feel smart by empowering them to easily answer their child’s questions? And how can I help English-language learners to feel smart by easily comprehending the content? We wrote to a fifth-grade reading level (including text review by a fifth-grader), and aimed for vivid imagery, clarity, and brevity.

Wildfire in the chaparral—Chapter 3

Chapter 3: After the burn
Capítulo 3: Después del fuego

The blackened ground lies exposed to sun and scavengers.
La tierra ennegrecida yace expuesta al sol y los carroñeros.

With no tall shrubs to block the sun, the ground is open for new plants to grow.
Sin arbustos altos que bloqueen el sol, la tierra queda despejada para el crecimiento de nuevas plantas.

Sin arbustos altos que bloqueen el sol, la tierra queda despejada para el crecimiento de nuevas plantas.

A Mule Deer grazes on tender new yucca leaves.
Un venado bura se alimenta de nuevas y tiernas hojas de lechuguilla.

A hawk scans the landscape for prey.
Un halcón otea el paisaje en busca de presa.

A coyote hunts small animals that survived the fire.
Un coyote caza pequeños animales que sobrevivieron el fuego.

A fox looks and listens for her next meal.
Una zorra observa y escucha en busca de su próxima comida.

Rodents emerge from hiding to forage for food.
Los roedores emergen de sus escondrijos para buscar alimento.

Lizards look for a place to hide.
Las lagartijas buscan un lugar para esconderse.

The soil is rich with nutrients from burnt plants.
El suelo está enriquecido de nutrientes provenientes de las plantas quemadas.

Fire Poppies bloom, some of the first plants to flower after a fire.
Las amapolas del fuego florecen, unas de las primeras plantas en dar flor después de un incendio.

Writer:
Shiralee Hudson Hill

Editor:
Claire Crichton

Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time

Art Gallery of Ontario
Toronto, Ontario

Target audience: **General Audience; specifically visitors under 30 years old**

Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

The labels for this exhibition were intended to engage a younger audience, and the NWA lyrics were certainly chosen to do this, but they don't feel gratuitous; the words echo the painting's topic. The label strays from the painting itself, but continues to show what motivated Basquiat to paint it. It returns to the art piece at the end, teaching the reader something about an art technique and also suggesting why the artist might have used it.

—*Eileen Campbell*

Irony of a Negro Policeman

1981
acrylic and crayon on canvas
Private Collection

“But don’t let it be a black and a white one
'Cause they’ll slam ya down to the street top
Black police showin’ out for the white cop.”
— N.W.A, hip hop group

This work is one of Basquiat’s most direct statements about race, as it boldly confronts the way racism has been institutionalized through police brutality. The “irony” to which Basquiat refers is the idea of a black police officer acting as an agent of an unjust system that ultimately continues his oppression.

In 1980s New York, the threat police officers posed to young black and Latino men was very real: two years after this painting was completed, a close friend of the artist’s, Michael Stewart, was brutally beaten to death by transit police for tagging the wall of a subway station. Here, Basquiat has applied paint in layers and then scratched it away, a technique called “pentimento.” The bits of blood-red paint visible under the whitewash suggest another story beneath the surface.

Contemporary relevance and engagement were this exhibition’s key planning principles and infused the team’s work on its texts. Our goal was to connect audiences in the here and now (i.e. Torontonians in 2015) with the works of this 1980s American artist. We brought a multiple voices approach to the forefront by layering quotations by the artist with voices of African-American artists, critics, writers and musicians and contemporary perspectives by Torontonians, to underscore the significance of the Basquiat’s painterly explorations and pointed critiques of the world in which he lived.

Irony of a Negro Policeman

1981 acrylic and crayon on canvas
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