

Excellence in Exhibition

Label Writing Competition 2012

As museum professionals, we constantly seek new approaches and techniques to create more accessible and successful exhibition experiences for our visitors. Still, for most of us, labels remain the primary vehicle for communicating invitations, ideas, and information. Writers and editors passionate about this medium continue to experiment with their words and achieve wonderful results. This competition honors their efforts and aims to inspire others to explore the potential of label copy.

Writers and editors from around the world submitted 83 labels to the 2012 competition. We thank them for their efforts to advance label writing practices. A panel of four jurors—representing decades of experience writing, editing, and evaluating museum labels—reviewed the entries and chose 11 to honor at the AAM annual meeting in Minneapolis. We gratefully acknowledge the jurors’ contributions, recognizing that this initiative would not be possible without their expertise. And, we extend our sincere appreciation to CurCom for sponsoring the competition in cooperation with EdCom and NAME.

Thanks for attending the Marketplace of Ideas. We look forward to receiving your entries for the 2013 competition. Submission details will be available in August at www.curcom.org.

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| John Russick <i>Director of Curatorial Affairs</i> <i>Chicago History Museum</i> | Emily H. Nordstrom <i>Editor</i> <i>Chicago History Museum</i> |
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The Jurors

Representing CurCom
Jeanine Head Miller
Curator of Domestic Life
The Henry Ford

What makes an exhibition label excellent?

An excellent label is one that connects with its audience—and leaves them with something meaningful and memorable. Imagine the people who will be reading the label—then “talk” to them. Think of the words as a conversation with visitors.

Reading the label should be effortless. Don’t make visitors work hard to understand or stay focused on the message. Every word should contribute to the experience—or not be included. Intertwine ideas and words to make the label text flow seamlessly. Vary the pacing.

Begin with what the audience knows, then take them to new places. Present a fresh idea, offer reflection, paint a picture, communicate an emotion, or make connections. Make the unfamiliar accessible or explain a complex idea simply and clearly.

Exhibit labels are not about serving up lots of facts—they are about sparking contemplation and learning. Always leave ‘em wanting more.

Representing EdCom
Cathleen Donnelly
Senior Exhibit Developer
The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis

I look for labels that grab my attention and make me want to know more. Maybe the copy offers a little nugget of information that’s new to me or suggests I look at an object in a different way. I prefer a conversation, not a lecture. Good labels are inviting, direct, and simply stated. Extra points awarded to a label that tells a story, evokes a feeling or makes me smile.

But to be an exceptional label, it has to pass another test. It must be crafted so carefully that every single word is just the *right* word. That kind of writing looks easy, but is so hard to do.

Representing NAME
Eugene Dillenburg
Assistant Director for Exhibits
University of Michigan Museum of Natural History

Everything I know about exhibit label writing, I’ve stolen from Susan Curran, Judy Rand, or Beverly Serrell. The definition of good labels I give my students is an amalgam of their advice, though I believe the format is Judy’s.

A good label is both readable and relevant.

Relevance consists of being clear (the label relates to the content of the exhibit); consistent (it relates to the exhibition medium); and connected (it relates to the object and to the audience).

Readability consists of being easy to read (short, focused, organized and with no jargon) and fun to read (active voice, active verbs, vivid, conversational and possessing some personality).

Labels convey information, of course. But more importantly, we want that conveyance to be so engaging and enjoyable that the visitor will be inspired to think about, even learn about, the subject after their visit ends. (Yeah, singular “their.” Deal with it.)

Representing the 2011 awardees
Toni Wynn
Writer and Museum Consultant

People often express delight and mild astonishment when they learn that an “actual person” writes the words on the walls/panels/little white cards in museum exhibits.

As writers and editors, our personalities alter the alchemy of the mix. The best labels make the souls of all involved transparent: the text glimmers because of the connection to the object, site, or subject matter. The energy of the exhibit team inhabits the phrasing and speaks to the design.

Exhibit text is a scrim, or great sunglasses, or a sensuous windowsill. Reading a label is a small act of attention that can anchor a visitor’s experience in some way. In order to earn the visitors’ trust, the writer must ditch guile and pretention and open fully to this moment, this thing: watershed, walrus, lamp, vignette, lyric, battlefield, life. Open just enough for the visitor to engage, then to wander, wonder.

Writer/editor: **Shasta Bray**

Night Hunters
Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden
Cincinnati, Ohio

Target audience: Families; general Zoo visitors

Label type: Object



Praise from the Jurors

(A haiku)
The label writer
Can't stop smiling at the poem.
Wish I'd written that!

—*Eugene Dillenburg*

Unlike just any simple, catchy rhyme, this little poem packs a science lesson in its unassuming six lines. Looks are deceiving here; I'd bet this label took a while to craft. First I "see" the cat. The fishing cat's payoff for "wishing" (and I know how long wishing can be) is "dinner at last." I feel time passing along with the waiting cat.

—*Toni Wynn*

With live animals splashing behind the glass, I bet it's hard to get visitors to read labels. But I'd read this one, probably out loud, to savor each carefully chosen word.

—*Cathleen Donnelly*


The writer lets us feel the fishing cat's l-o--n--g wait while scanning the water intently for a sign of his next meal. We learn his prey is a minnow—spotted in an instant and caught lightening quick! These four short lines of engaging poetry deliver. And everything contributes.

—*Jeanine Head Miller*



FISHING CAT

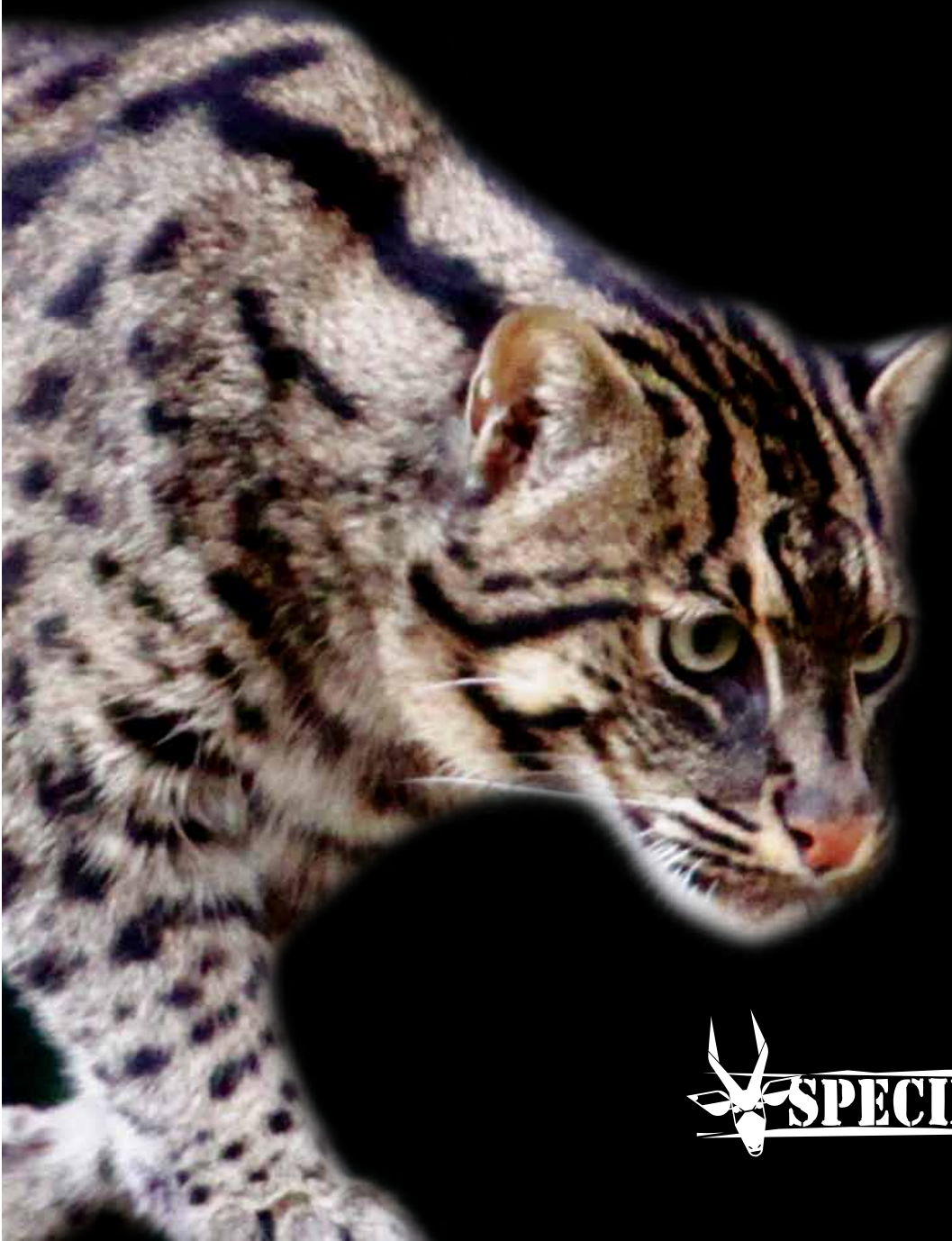
Prionailurus viverrinus

See the fishing cat
Wishing that
A minnow would swim past.
Silver flash!
Water splash!
Dinner at last.



Range: Southeastern Asia
Weight: 12 to 17.5 lbs
Length: 1.8 to 2.8 ft
Lifespan: Up to 10 yrs in captivity
Habitat: Wetland, grassland, and forest
Prey: Fish and other small animals

 SPECIES@RISK IUCN-Endangered 



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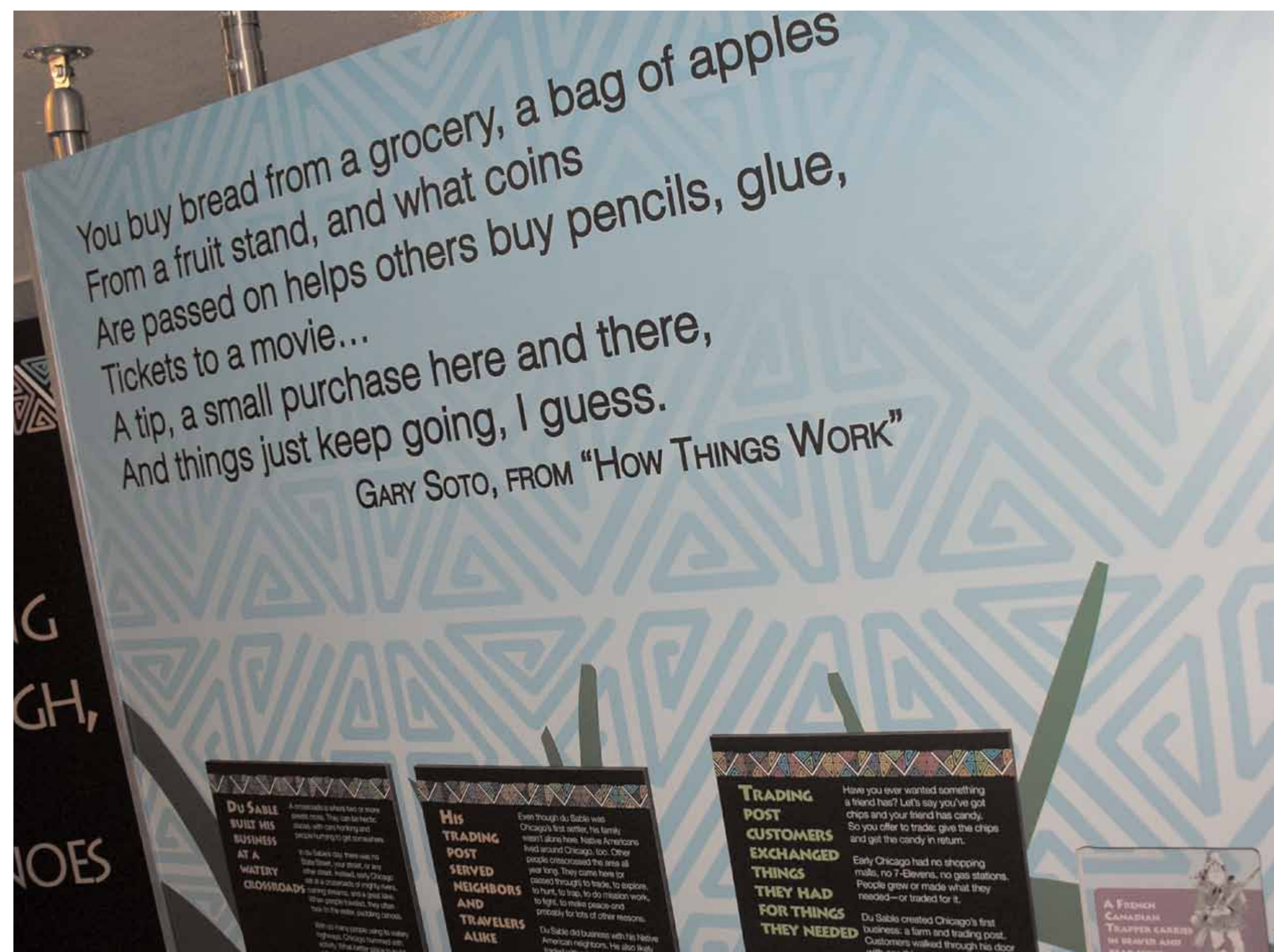
Species@Risk IUCN—Endangered

Writer/editor: **Susan Curran**
Museum Explorer, Inc.

The DuSable Museum Story Bus
The DuSable Museum of African American History
Chicago

Target audience: **Children with adult caregivers**

Label type: **Concept (section)**



Praise from the Jurors

This label very effectively takes readers from the familiar to the unfamiliar, making a graceful segue from the teeming vehicular traffic of modern times to the teeming river and lake traffic of Chicago’s beginnings. Time effortlessly falls away to reveal a memorable, accessible image of the who, what, and why of Chicago’s founding. Using second-person pronouns—and telling the story by talking about people—draws in its young audience. Will this exhibition’s visitors ever be able to look at Chicago’s waterways in quite the same way again?

—*Jeanine Head Miller*

This label paints a lively picture, connecting the distant past to the modern day. It really connects and makes the content accessible for its audience.

—*Eugene Dillenburg*

I like the casual, familiar voice of this label. It’s a read-aloud story perfect for family visitors. And there’s plenty of action to hold my attention—honking, hurrying, paddling, rushing. All that commotion really conveys the busyness of a crossroads.

—*Cathleen Donnelly*



Du Sable built his business at a watery crossroads

A crossroads is where two or more streets cross. They can be hectic places, with cars honking and people hurrying to get somewhere.

In du Sable’s day, there was no State Street, your street, or any other street. Instead, early Chicago sat at a crossroads of mighty rivers, rushing streams, and a great lake. When people traveled, they often took to the water, paddling canoes.

With so many people using its watery highways, Chicago hummed with activity. What better place to build a farm and trading post than at the crossroads of the river and the lake?

Fun fact!
The canoes used around Chicago in du Sable’s time were light and portable, easy to drag out of the water and onto a riverbank.

Writers: **Mason Klein** and **Rebecca Shaykin**

Editor: **Eve Sinaiko**

***The Radical Camera:
New York’s Photo League, 1936–1951***

The Jewish Museum
New York

Target audience: Older, well-educated Jewish adults; those interested in Jewish culture. We also aim to attract younger art lovers, the digital generation, and viewers without ties to traditional Jewish culture.

Label type: Object

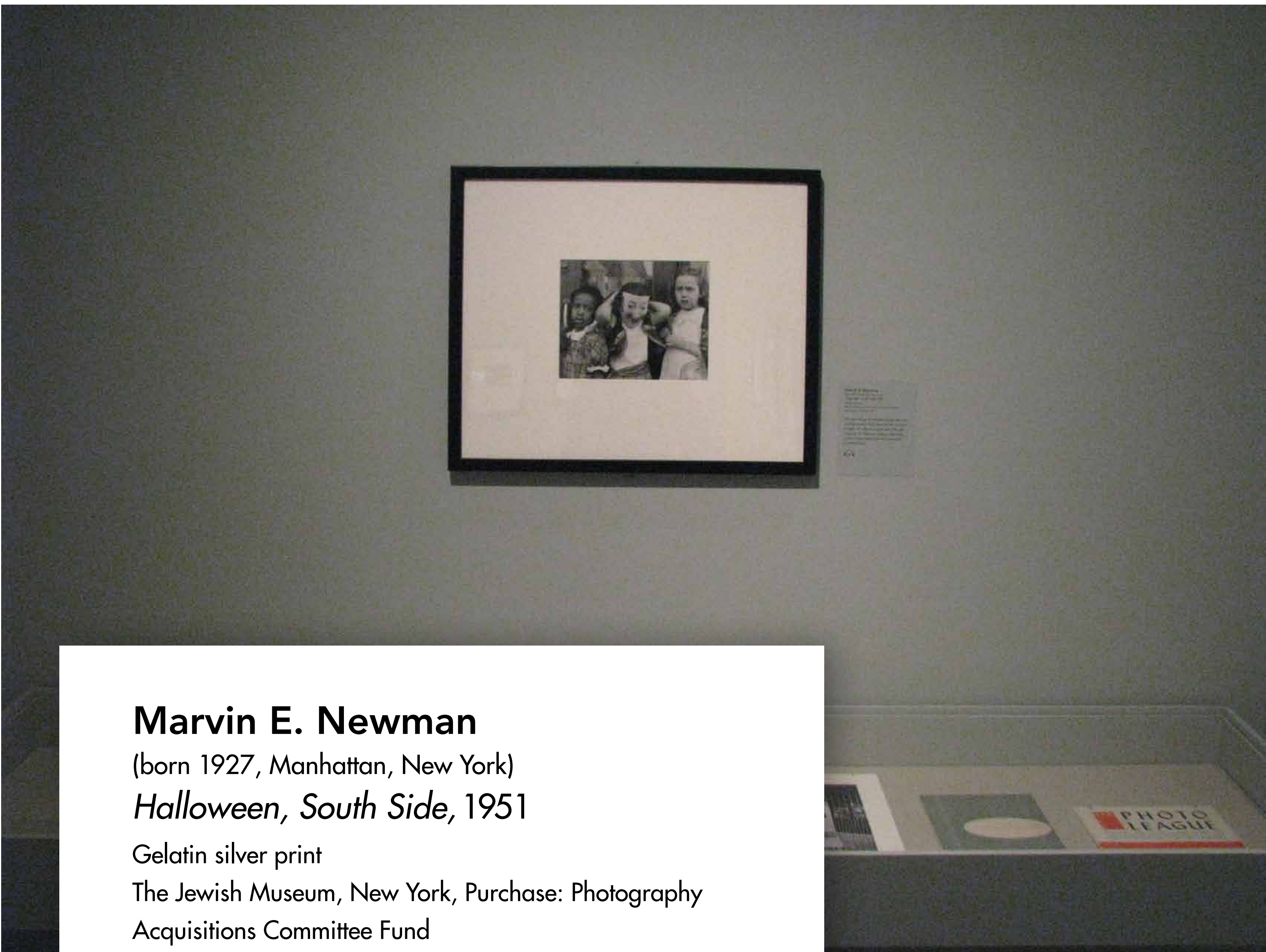
Praise from the Jurors

This label does double duty by showing me how to “read” a photograph while describing the image. The tension in the text is sustained by the word choice (“eerie,” “tensions,” “anxious,” “masked,” “struggle”) and by placing Halloween and the civil rights struggle—suggesting shadow—in the same sentence. Using “hints at” guides me to speculate, but still allows me to draw my own conclusions. I find this label remarkable. Every word is essential.

—*Toni Wynn*

Tense. Unsettling. What should be a moment of innocent childhood fun instead deeply haunts us. The well-chosen words in this label effectively convey these emotions—and help us understand why we feel that way. The label shows us how to read the image—explaining how elements like tight cropping and juxtaposition can help communicate realities lying just below the surface.

—*Jeanine Head Miller*



Marvin E. Newman

(born 1927, Manhattan, New York)

Halloween, South Side, 1951

Gelatin silver print

The Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Photography
Acquisitions Committee Fund

This eerie image of children on Halloween hints at racial tensions at the dawn of the civil-rights struggle. The effect is heightened by the tight cropping, the children’s anxious expressions, and the close juxtaposition of masked and unmasked faces.



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Writer: **Kris Nesbitt**

Editors: **Judy Rand** and **Eileen Campbell**

Jellies
John G. Shedd Aquarium
Chicago

Target audience: Families with children under 13;
adults

Label type: Concept/object

Praise from the Jurors

The clear, direct, visual language in this label makes its complicated information understandable. Subtle alliteration evokes a feeling of gently rolling waves.

—*Eugene Dillenburg*

It’s only 40 words, but chock-full of fascinating facts. It anticipates and answers a question (why are these jellies upside-down?) and points out a particular feature (algae). Next, it defines the term “symbiosis” simply and concretely for the family audience. Every word works in this wonderfully crafted label.

—*Cathleen Donnelly*



Upside-down jellies
grow a garden of algae

These jellies shelter
algae inside their cells

On the shallow sea floor, upside-down jellies face the sun, exposing their algae to plenty of light. The algae use the light to produce food, which the jellies eat. When different species cooperate like this, it’s called symbiosis (sim-be-OH-sis).

Writers: **Michael Lesperance** and **Ned Reddrop**
The Design Minds, Inc.

Editors: **Megan Fluker** and **Nicole Kempton**

Laogai Research Foundation Museum
Laogai Research Foundation
Washington, DC

Target audience: Visitors of Chinese ancestry; locals and tourists in search of an “off the beaten path” museum experience in a city renowned for its big museums. Due to the difficult content, this is not a museum for small children.

Label type: Other (introduces stories that put a face on the atrocities of the Laogai)

Praise from the Jurors

I am immediately caught up in Lin Zhao’s story as I read the list of facts above the narrative; it’s a great setup for her story. It would be a disservice to make this history easy, saddle it with adjectives, or project blame. The drama builds and builds, but the writing is straightforward without being journalistic.

—Toni Wynn

This powerful label is an example of “show, don’t tell.” Instead of listing the kinds of atrocities experienced by inmates in China’s forced labor prison camps, it shows us through one woman’s story. The text makes crystal clear—through very brief narrative—the utter brutality against which any struggle ultimately proved fruitless. The moral courage and persistence of the woman takes one’s breath away. The goal of this label-writing approach was to take on disturbing content and communicate it through “emotional and impactful” text but “not [be] so shocking as to turn visitors off.” It succeeds.

—Jeanine Head Miller



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|  | |
| 林昭 LIN ZHAO | |
| 她曾是一个狂热的共产主义信徒，由于公开支持一个右派同学而于1957年被送劳教。此后，她撰写文章批评毛泽东的经济政策，又被逮捕并被判刑20年。林拒绝停止写作。当狱警没收了她的纸笔后，她使用自己的鲜血写作。1968年她被处决后，当地官员曾到其家索取枪杀她的5分钱的子弹费。 | |
| Once an ardent Communist, Lin’s public support for a Rightist classmate landed her in the Laojiao in 1957. Later, she wrote articles criticizing Mao’s economic policies. Rearrested and sentenced to twenty years, Lin refused to stop writing. After guards took away her pen, she wrote hundreds of thousands more words—in her own blood. After she was executed in 1968, an official visited her family demanding five cents for the bullet used to kill her. | |
| DATE(S) OF ARREST, 逮捕日期 | 1960, 1962 |
| PRISON TERMS 刑期 | 20 YEARS, EXECUTED, 20年；死刑 |
| CHARGES 控罪 | COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY 反革命 |
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Writer: **Melissa Snyder**

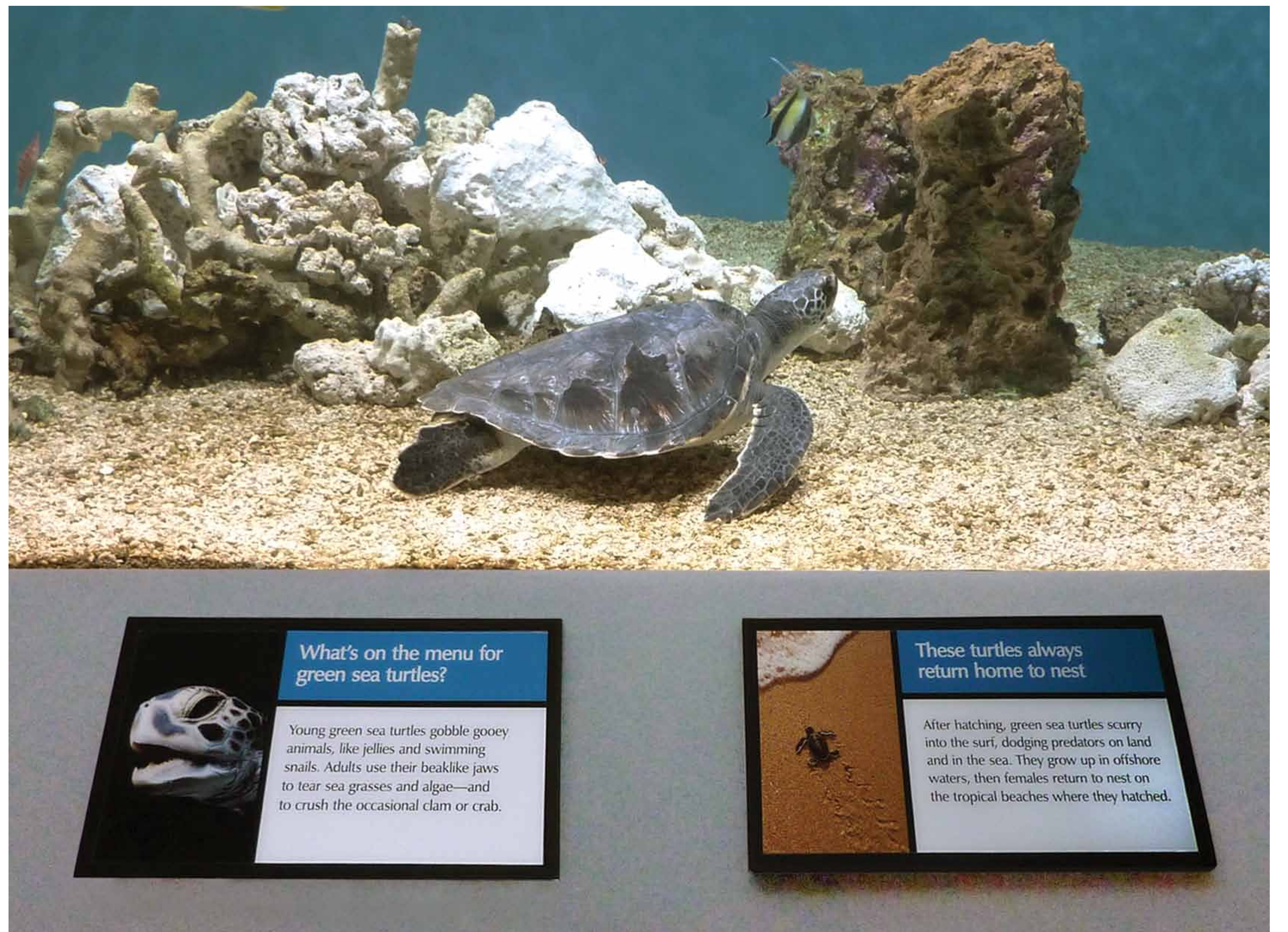
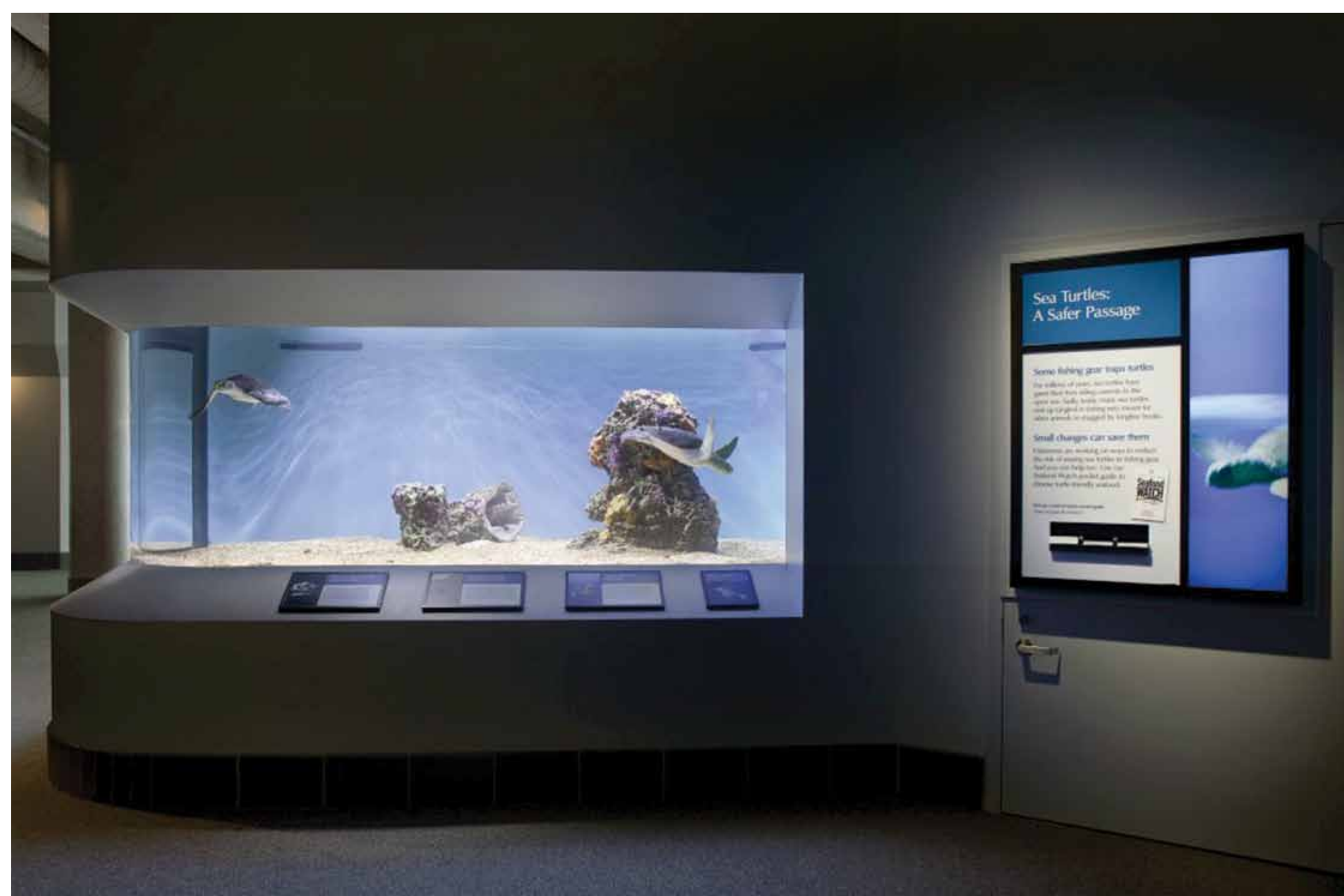
Editors: **Elizabeth Labor** and
Jaci Tomulonis

The Open Sea

Monterey Bay Aquarium
Monterey, California

Target audience: **General**

Label type: **Object**



What's on the menu for green sea turtles?

Young green sea turtles gobble gooey animals, like jellies and swimming snails. Adults use their beaklike jaws to tear sea grasses and algae—and to crush the occasional clam or crab.

Praise from the Jurors

Just beautiful. Precise, informative, and engagingly active—I can see these turtles munching! And the cadence and alliteration make it flow off the tongue. Delightful, a joy to read.

—**Eugene Dillenburg**

This lyrical label summons an undersea soundscape in my head. I can almost hear those turtles gobbling “gooey animals” and crushing “the occasional clam.” Making good use of alliteration—even sonicky words—the writer crafted a label that’s genuinely fun to read. It’s a wonderful example of Monterey Bay Aquarium’s “signature” style and a model for aspiring writers.

—**Cathleen Donnelly**

This label just begs to be read aloud. It’s beautifully crafted, and its infectious fun transfers to my feelings about the sea turtles it describes.

—**Toni Wynn**

Principal writer: **Michael Rigsby**

Additional writers and editors: **Dr. Luis Chiappe, Natasha Fraley, Kathy Talley-Jones, Jennifer Morgan, Karen Wise, and Dr. Jane Pisano**

Dinosaur Hall
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Los Angeles

Target audience: **Visitors of all ages with special emphasis on middle school–aged children individually, in groups, and with their families**

Label type: **Other (introduces the main theme of a large exhibit platform)**



Praise from the Jurors

This label makes dinosaurs so wonderfully relatable, by presenting their activities through the lens of emotion and motivation—things we humans, whether kids or adults, understand. And it communicates these ideas clearly and meaningfully. Who knew? Dinosaurs were a lot like us.

—**Jeanine Head Miller**

This label does a good job of bringing the past to life. There is some subtle alliteration, but I was most engaged by the parallel construction of the last four sentences, which tied the label together and made it fun to read.

—**Eugene Dillenburg**

If I wandered into a hall filled with fossils, I'm the kind of visitor who'd ask, "What does all this have to do with me?" This well-written, evocative label answers my question nicely. I can imagine the "old bones and bits of skin" as living animals, facing familiar challenges. A skillful use of active voice and repetition makes this label an enjoyable read.

—**Cathleen Donnelly**

We know them as skeletons, but dinosaurs were once living, breathing animals much like us.

What were they like?

Today we know dinosaurs only from fossils. But these old bones and bits of skin once belonged to living, breathing animals. They hunted for food and fled from danger. They sought mates and cared for their young. They suffered diseases and injuries. They faced life's challenges just as we do today.

Writers: **Shiralee Hudson Hill, Stephen Inglis,** and **Haema Sivanesan**

Editor: **Dan Naccarato**

Maharaja: The Splendour of India’s Royal Courts
Art Gallery of Ontario
Toronto

Target audience: **General adult audience, 14+**

Label type: **Object**



Juror’s Choice

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

Such a great headline! I couldn’t wait to find out. There’s a lighthearted feel to the writing, yet the information is factual and usable. This label could have used a final edit to tighten the second sentence, but the list is great and easy to study. Ready-set-go, I feel like a maharaja-spotting pro already!

—*Toni Wynn*

HOW TO SPOT
A MAHARAJA

Portrait painting played an important role in recording the identity, power and activities of Indian rulers. In many of the paintings you will see throughout this exhibition, you can identify the king by looking for one or more of the following devices that artists used to emphasize a king’s royal status:

- 1. A halo of light (or nimbus) surrounds his head.
- 2. He is wearing more jewels than everyone else.
- 3. He is larger in size than everyone else.
- 4. He is the focus of attention for the other figures in the painting.
- 5. He appears more than once in the same painting.



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COMMENT REPÉRER UN MAHARADJA

Les portraits jouaient un rôle important pour la documentation de l'identité, du pouvoir et des activités des dirigeants indiens. Dans plusieurs peintures de cette exposition, vous pourrez identifier le roi en repérant un ou quelques-uns des dispositifs suivants utilisés par les artistes pour souligner le statut royal du roi :

- 1. Un halo de lumière (ou nimbe) entoure sa tête.
- 2. Il porte plus de bijoux que toutes les autres figures de la peinture.
- 3. Il est de plus grande taille que les autres figures.
- 4. Il mobilise l'attention des autres figures.
- 5. Il est représenté plus d'une fois dans la même peinture.

1. Procession of Raja Ram Singh II of Kota (India), around 1920. © Victoria and Albert Museum. 2. Maharaja Akbar Shah III of Hyderabad with his ministers (India), around 1920. © Victoria and Albert Museum. 3. Procession of Krishnadeva Varma II through Mysore (India), around 1820-1830. © Victoria and Albert Museum. 4. A Rajput Ruler in Dhoti, around 1950. © Victoria and Albert Museum. 5. Jantar Mantar of Jaipur (India), around 1720. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Writer: **Shiralee Hudson Hill**

Editor: **Dan Naccarato**

***SHIFT: Highlights of Modernism
from the AGO Collection***

Art Gallery of Ontario
Toronto

Target audience: Children aged 7 and up,
general audience

Label type: Object



Juror’s Choice

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

This label seems quite simple—it is deceptively simple. “Making sense” of modern art can be intimidating, even for the children who are the prime audience for this label. (What is this supposed to be? Am I stupid if I don’t know what to make of this?) This interactive label quickly and clearly makes this abstract work of art accessible, providing guidance for understanding Franz Kline’s artistic expression while inviting the viewer’s opinion—and assuring them that there is no one right answer.

—*Jeanine Head Miller*



Painters like Franz Kline believed that colour, shapes and lines could communicate **emotions**. Look at the lines, shapes and colours in this painting. What feelings do **you** think the artist was trying to express here?

.....

Des peintres comme Franz Kline croyaient que la couleur, les formes et les lignes pouvaient communiquer des **émotions**. Observez les lignes, les formes et les couleurs dans cette peinture. Quels sentiments croyez-**VOUS** que l’artiste tentait ici d’exprimer ?

[Franz Kline, *Cupola*, 1958–1960]

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Writer: **Brian H. Peterson**

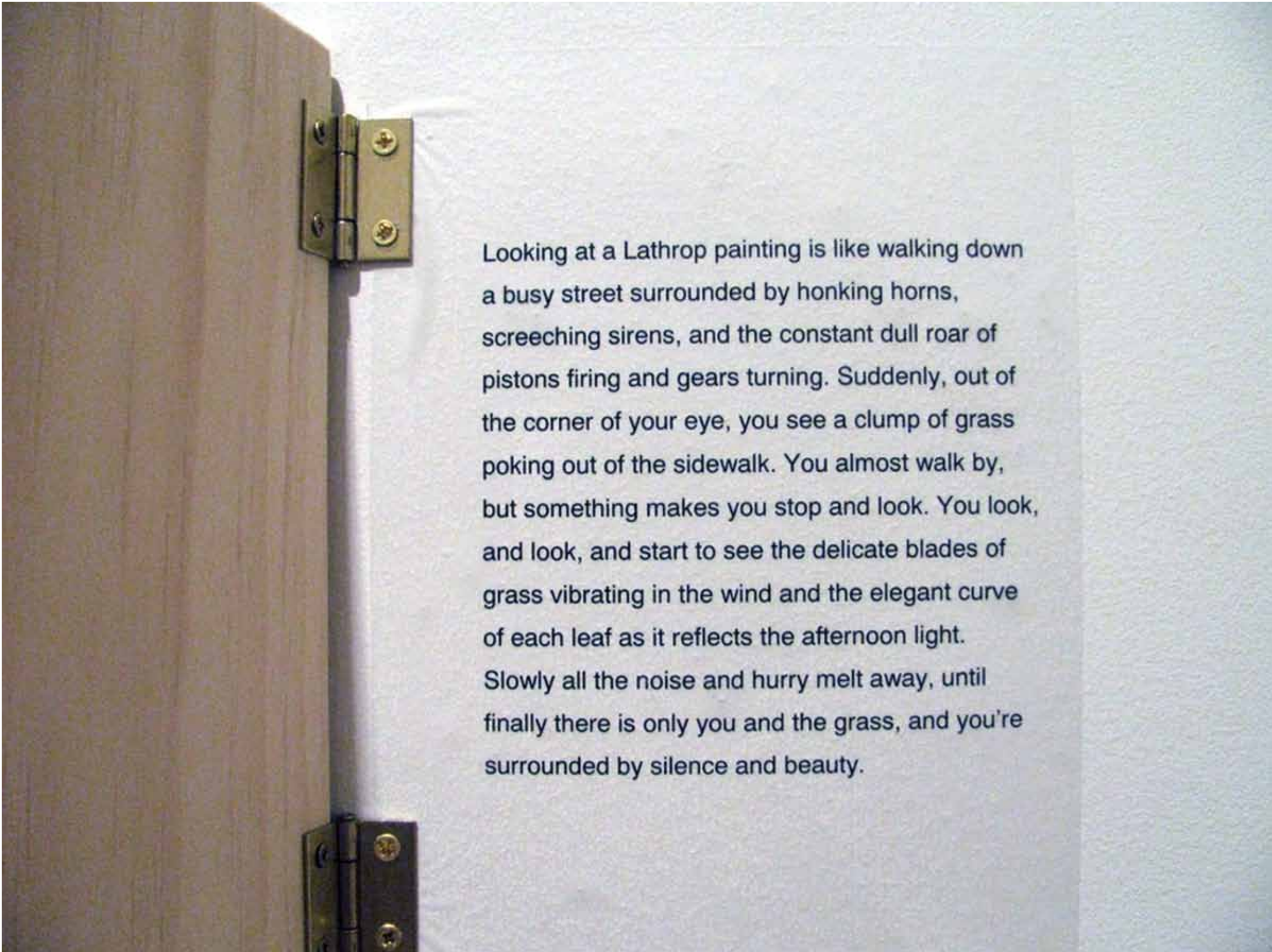
Editor: **Paula Brisco**

***The Painterly Voice: Bucks County’s
Fertile Ground***

James A. Michener Art Museum
Doylestown, Pennsylvania

Target audience: **General museum visitors**

Label type: **Object**



Juror’s Choice

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

I don’t know what the painting looks like, but I can anticipate the kind of feeling it might evoke, just from reading this beautifully written, very personal reflection. The writer’s skillful use of metaphor caught my attention, then the graceful flow and rhythm of the words carried me along until I was right there, gazing intently, “surrounded by silence and beauty.” Bravo!

—**Cathleen Donnelly**

[*Early March* by William L. Lathrop (1859–1938)]

Looking at a Lathrop painting is like walking down a busy street surrounded by honking horns, screeching sirens, and the constant dull roar of pistons firing and gears turning. Suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see a clump of grass poking out of the sidewalk. You almost walk by, but something makes you stop and look. You look, and look, and start to see the delicate blades of grass vibrating in the wind and the elegant curve of each leaf as it reflects the afternoon light. Slowly all the noise and hurry melt away, until finally there is only you and the grass, and you’re surrounded by silence and beauty.

Writer/editor: **James Seidler**

Nature Boardwalk
Lincoln Park Zoo
Chicago

Target audience: Zoo visitors, primarily families with children

Label type: Concept

Juror’s Choice

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

This entry isn’t one label, but six labels that happen to be printed on the same panel. I was prepared to dismiss it for that reason, but it is just so wonderfully written I had to put it on the list. It presents a vivid description of life at the pond, directing visitors to look at specific details. It ties that concrete info to its abstract theme and does it all in a conversational, accessible style. This label makes me want to see that pond!

—*Eugene Dillenburg*

Pond Seasons

LIKE ALL LIVING ECOSYSTEMS, Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo changes with the seasons. Spring blooms and summer richness give way to fall migration and winter ice, with the pond’s depths providing shelter during the coldest season.

Springing to Life

As the weather warms and the pond begins to thaw, signs of life sprout around Nature Boardwalk. Water lilies and little bluestems send up shoots. Male red-winged blackbirds and American toads arrive early to set up breeding territories.

Summer Abundance

The pond ecosystem is in full bloom. American lotuses unveil their flowers on the water’s surface as green darner dragonflies buzz in search of insects to eat. Wood ducklings paddle behind their mother on the pond. Tadpoles develop, ring-billed gulls scavenge and fireflies light the night.

Field Guide

DRAGONFLY
These predatory insects feed on mosquitoes, flies and other small bugs. They are often found near lakes, streams and wetlands, laying their eggs in or near the water. Dragonfly offspring (nymphs) mature underwater before growing wings and taking to the air.

Fall Transition

Shorter days and colder weather begin to rein in the life on display. Shagbark hickory trees lose their leaves even as chipmunks gather their nuts for winter meals. Black-crowned night herons and monarch butterflies migrate to warmer climates.

Winter Rest

As the pond ices over, painted turtles burrow into the bottom to wait out winter. Largemouth bass and bluegill reduce activity and retreat to deeper water. Eastern cottontail rabbits subsist on twigs and bark, and northern cardinals eat the seeds that remain.

