

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2019

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 eleven 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.

As a result of this annual program, 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 98 exhibitions. These institutions represent 10 types of organizations located in 30 different states/provinces in five 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

Rachel Regelein

Competition Project Manager

Museology Master's Candidate, Class of 2019

University of Washington, Seattle

2019 Juror Biographies & Statements

SWARUPA ANILA

Director of Interpretive Engagement at the Detroit Institute of Arts

Swarupa Anila is director of interpretive engagement at the Detroit Institute of Arts. She leads a team of interpretive specialists in the development of overall interpretive plans, texts, hands-on and multimedia components designed to help visitors have memorable, challenging, and meaningful experiences with art. Swarupa has worked in the field of interpretation for nearly twenty years and has developed award-winning labels, digital interpretation, and exhibitions. Swarupa is pleased to serve on the editorial advisory board for Exhibition, journal for the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) and is a founding board member of the Association for Art Museum Interpretation (AAMI).

Most labels inform.

A good label draws you in.

A great label provokes new thinking and wonder.

A brilliant label sweeps you into a bodily experience. Eyes widen. Breath stops. Skin rises to goose bumps.

Heartbeat quickens. You look around and feel you’re seeing a world that never existed before that moment.

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’s 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.

What sets excellent labels apart from those that are merely good or competent?

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 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.

EMILIE S. ARNOLD

Freelance Exhibition and Interpretive Content Developer

With 12 years in the history museum field, Emilie Arnold served for seven years as the assistant curator of exhibitions at the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando, FL. There, she directed all aspects of exhibition narrative development and interpretation. Her work interpreting the 2016 Pulse Nightclub Massacre through exhibition contributed to a Leadership in History award and the prestigious History in Progress award, both from the American Association for State and Local History, as well as Excellence in Exhibition awards from the American Alliance of Museums and the Southeastern Museums Conference, and also drew direct recognition in the AAM Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing award. Emilie now works as a freelance exhibition and interpretive content developer in north Georgia.

The best label-writers live and delight in their content. They know what makes it fresh and clever and joyous and heart-rending. They shed excesses, boiling the essence of the story’s value into perfect, potent words.

They read the hearts of their audiences and persuade them to care.

Artifacts and lighting and interactives and design may draw a visitor through an exhibition, but when curiosity flashes and you need to know more, the best labels don’t simply carry the narrative forward: they slip past your defenses and stir you at your core.

Writers and editor:
Jessica Williams, writer
Alex Wellerstein, writer
Adrienne Johnson, editor

*A View from the Deep:
The Submarine Growler & The Cold War*
Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum
New York, NY

Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Object**

Praise from the Jurors

Emilie: This label shows a story deeper than the artifact: a stench beneath the surface. You can *feel* how disgusting conditions were when working for months in a remote underwater capsule. The rhyming title is a lovely and playful introduction quickly belied by the reality described below.

Swarupa: I wanted to see those dungarees for myself by the end of the label. Descriptive language wove together interesting facts. The label gives readers a way to appreciate the experiences of people who have kept patrols on subs by tapping into something fundamentally common in the human experience—filth and cleanliness.

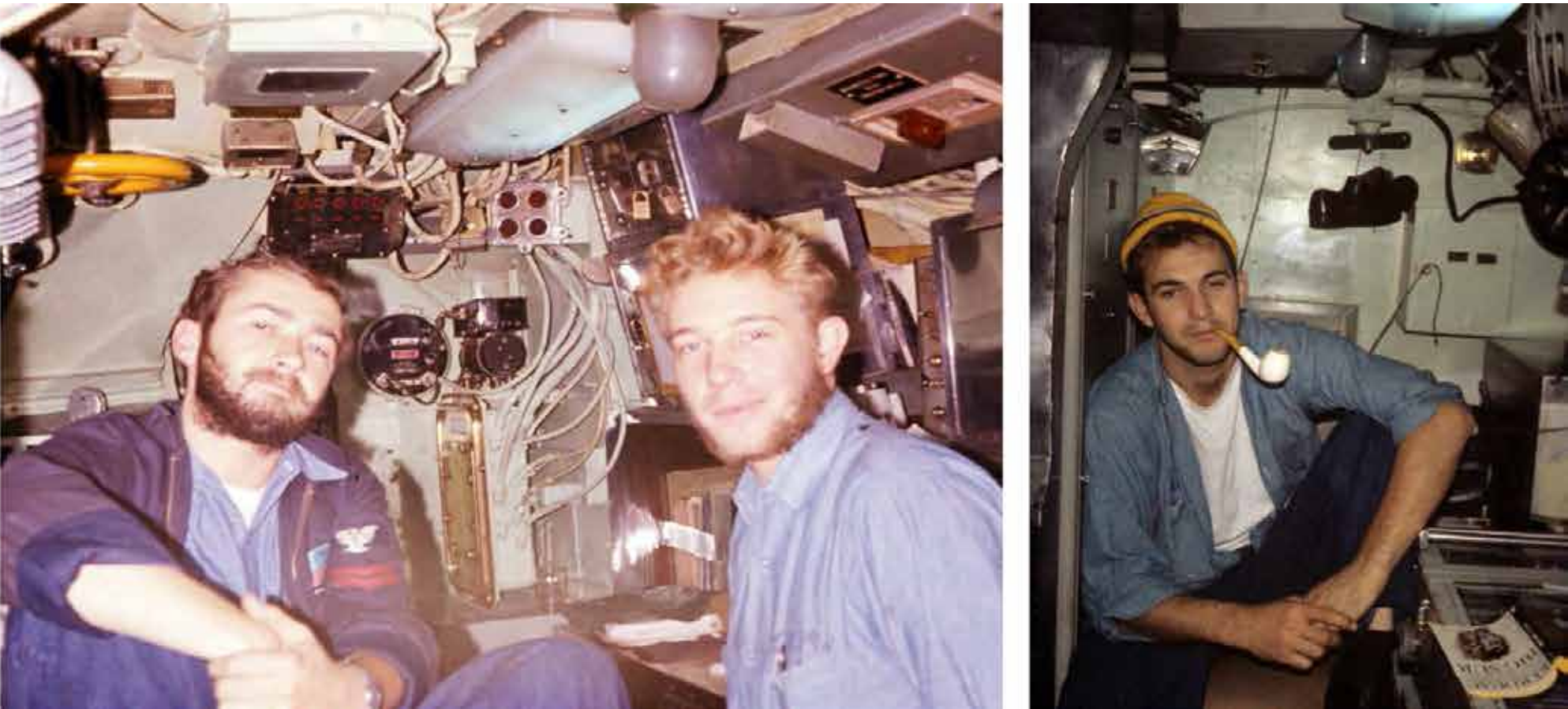
Bonnie: The rough consonance of “g” inside “ragged dungarees and shaggy beards” contrasts with sharper and more tidy sounds, with what is ordinarily “crisp” and “neat.” The writing engages our sense of smell almost involuntarily—how badly did it reek?

Keeping Clean on a Diesel Submarine

Growler’s crew largely ignored strict naval grooming standards while on patrol. Ragged dungarees and shaggy beards replaced crisp uniforms and neat haircuts. Typically, submarines were less formal than surface ships, but *Growler’s* limited facilities made cleanliness a particular challenge. Crew members were lucky to shower once a month, and *Growler* lacked a laundry. After a patrol, most sailors dropped their filthy, reeking uniforms directly in the trash.

Navy dungarees, c. 1960s
Collection of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. Gift of the William Aubrey Harvison family.

Growler crew members on board the submarine, 1961–1963
Collection of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. Gift of Al Odette. P2016.71.166, P2016.71.168



Author Statement

One goal of “A View from the Deep” was to help our visitors better understand the submarine *Growler’s* role in the Cold War. Formative research revealed that visitors had very little knowledge about the Cold War, but they were fascinated by the idea of living and working on board a submarine. Throughout the exhibition, we highlight the experiences of people—military officials, crew members, family members, the general public at the time—as a way of helping our visitors relate to this period in history, as well as to the technology of the submarine.

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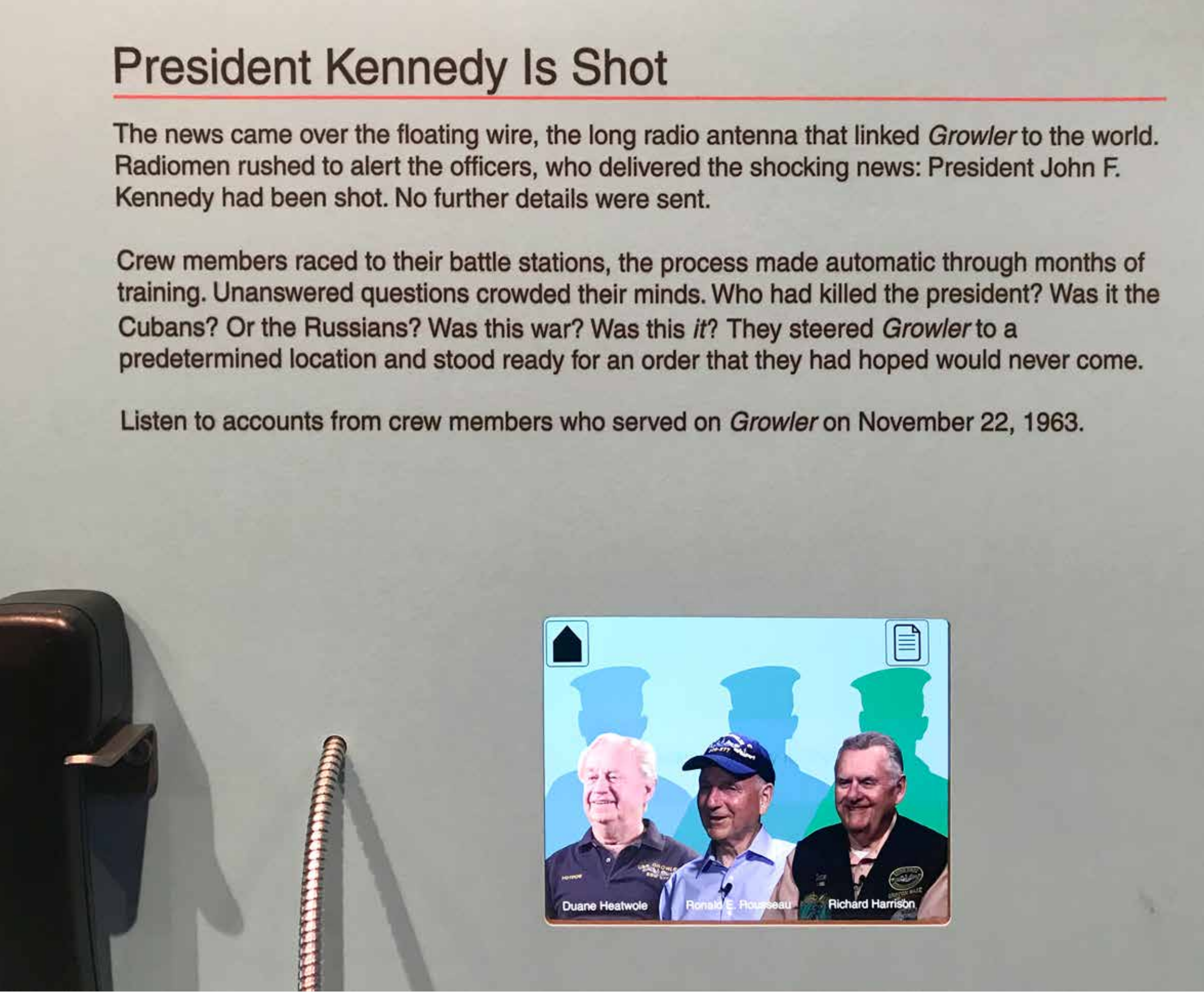
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Writers and editor:
Jessica Williams, writer
Alex Wellerstein, writer
Adrienne Johnson, editor

***A View from the Deep:
The Submarine Growler & The Cold War***
Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum
New York, NY

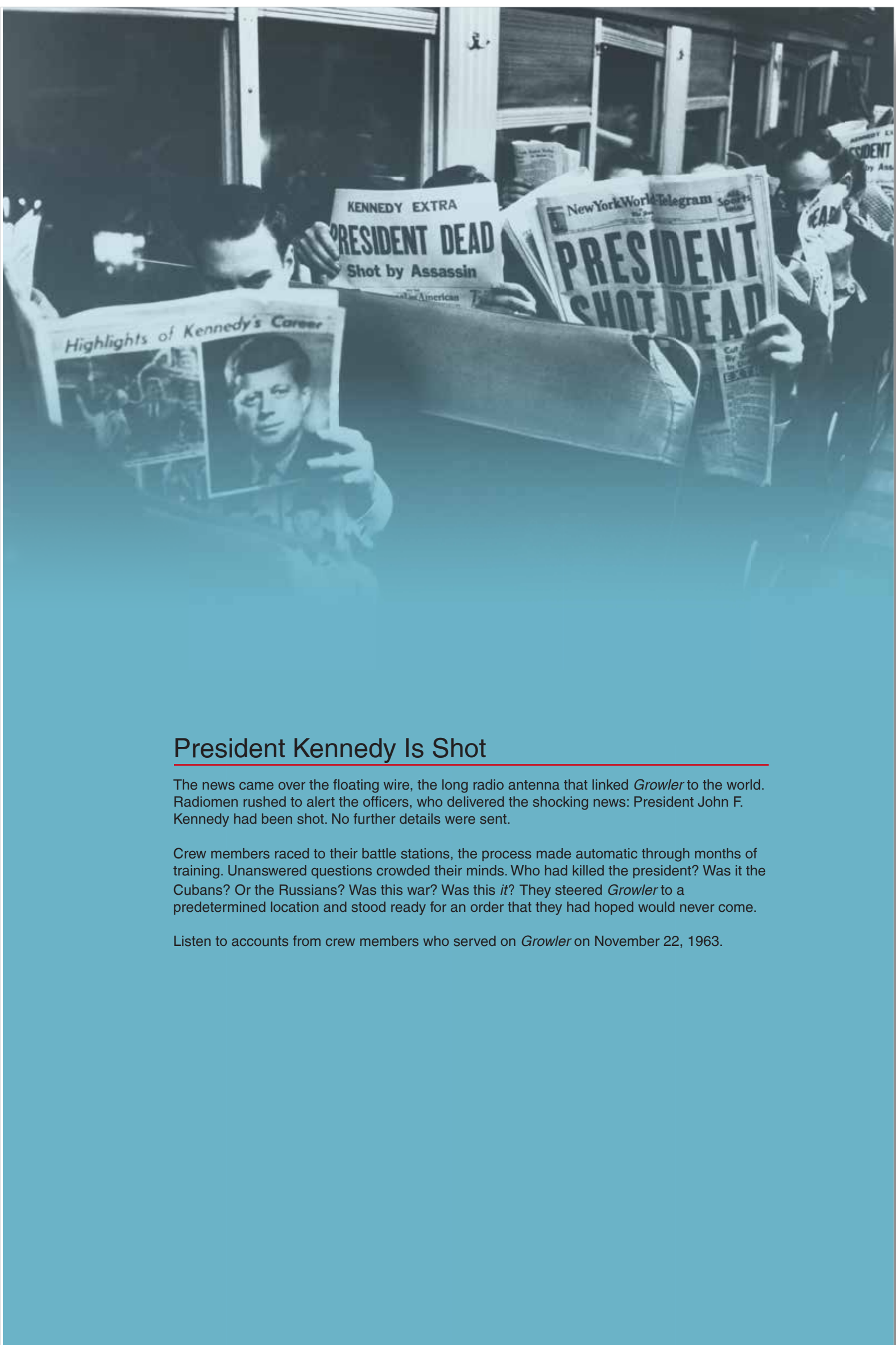
Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

Michael: For me, this label captures the feel of the isolation of a submarine crew connected to the world by a long, ethereal, floating wire that delivers a terse, disturbing message that could mean war. In the second paragraph, they rush to their stations. There in ocean darkness they then must wait, ready but unsure.

Bonnie: This label sets the stage on the submarine. It starts with an incoming message. Short sentences reflect the buzz of uncertainty as the crew braces for Cold War to flash hot. It ends with messages from the sub, and we’re now primed to understand how they felt on that day.



Author Statement

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President Kennedy is Shot

The news came over the floating wire, the long radio antenna that linked *Growler* to the world. Radiomen rushed to alert the officers, who delivered the shocking news: President John F. Kennedy had been shot. No further details were sent.

Crew members raced to their battle stations, the process made automatic through months of training. Unanswered questions crowded their minds. Who had killed the president? Was it the Cubans? Or the Russians? Was this war? Was this *it*? They steered *Growler* to a predetermined location and stood ready for an order that they had hoped would never come.

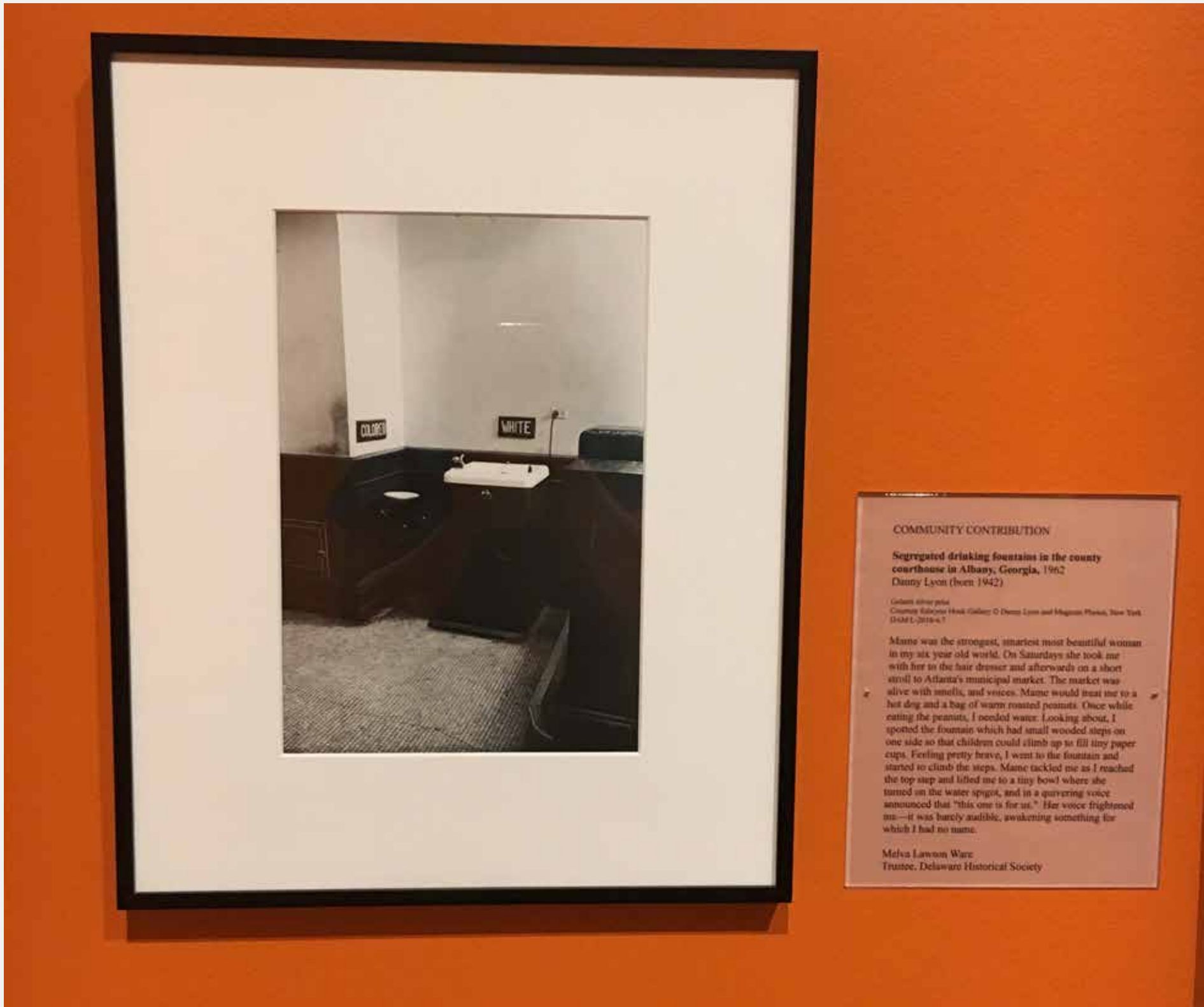
Listen to accounts from crew members who served on *Growler* on November 22, 1963.

Writers and editors:
Ashley SK Davis, writer
TAHIRA, writer
Melva Ware, writer
Amelia Wiggins, editor
Heather Campbell Coyle, editor

Danny Lyon: Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement

Delaware Art Museum
Wilmington, DE

Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: The personal narrative approach requires skillful structuring and editing to captivate visitors and also retain the spirit of the individual’s story. This label takes us to another time and place and into the mind of the writer’s 6-year-old self. We experience the world with a child’s wonder but move to awareness, informed by very adult fear. When people share their personal experiences with museums, they give us something of themselves to hold and present with as much care as we afford objects. This label does that.

Bonnie: The label invites us to take this photograph personally. Through a first-person narrative, we sense the steam from the roasted peanuts, and the girl’s thirst. When she tries to drink from a fountain like this one, her world fills with unseen dangers that even strong women fear.

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION

Segregated drinking fountains in the county courthouse in Albany, Georgia, 1962
Danny Lyon (born 1942)

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery © Danny Lyon and Magnum Photos, New York
DAM L-2018-4.7

Mame was the strongest, smartest most beautiful woman in my six year old world. On Saturdays she took me with her to the hair dresser and afterwards on a short stroll to Atlanta's municipal market. The market was alive with smells, and voices. Mame would treat me to a hot dog and a bag of warm roasted peanuts. Once while eating the peanuts, I needed water. Looking about, I spotted the fountain which had small wooded steps on one side so that children could climb up to fill tiny paper cups. Feeling pretty brave, I went to the fountain and started to climb the steps. Mame tackled me as I reached the top step and lifted me to a tiny bowl where she turned on the water spigot, and in a quivering voice announced that “this one is for us.” Her voice frightened me—it was barely audible, awakening something for which I had no name.

Melva Lawson Ware
Trustee, Delaware Historical Society

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Segregated drinking fountains in the county courthouse in Albany, Georgia, 1962
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Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery © Danny Lyon and Magnum Photos,
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Melva Lawson Ware
Trustee, Delaware Historical Society

Author Statement

Summer exhibition goals included helping visitors learn about Civil Rights history. To encourage visitors’ connections with the material and integrate multiple perspectives, we included local, personal stories and memories in our presentation. We reached out to a dozen African American community leaders and invited them to write personal responses to Lyon’s photographs.

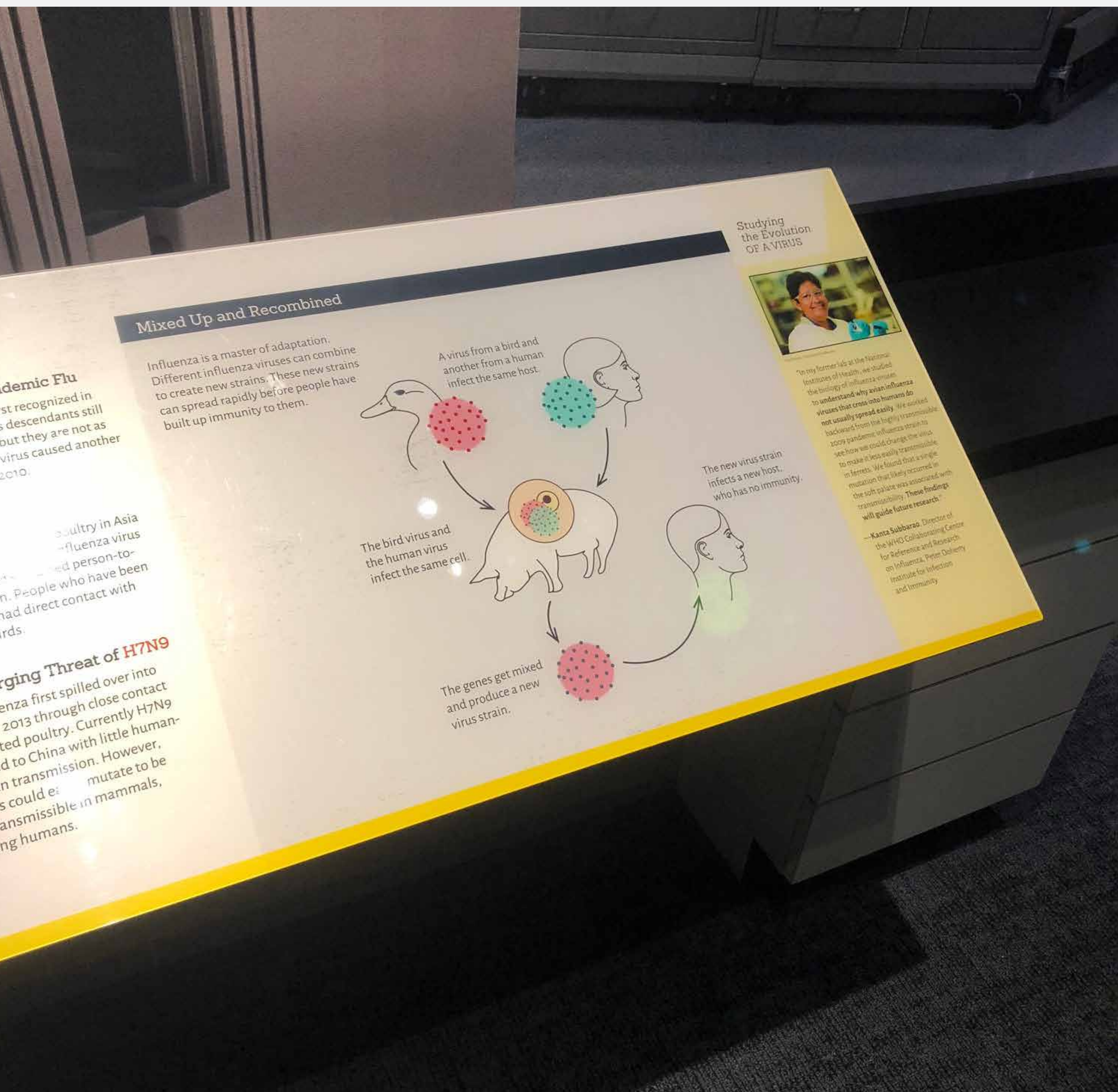
Exit surveys showed that 77% of visitors read “Community Contribution” labels; 29% stated the labels changed how they saw the photograph. Surveys show DAM museum visitors increasingly value opportunities to learn from fellow community members. Community created content has become an interpretive strategy we now regularly integrate..

Writer and editor:
Angela Roberts, writer
Laura Donnelly-Smith, editor

Outbreak: Epidemics in a Connected World
National Museum of Natural History
Washington, DC

Target audience: **Intergenerational family groups; middle school and high school students and teachers**

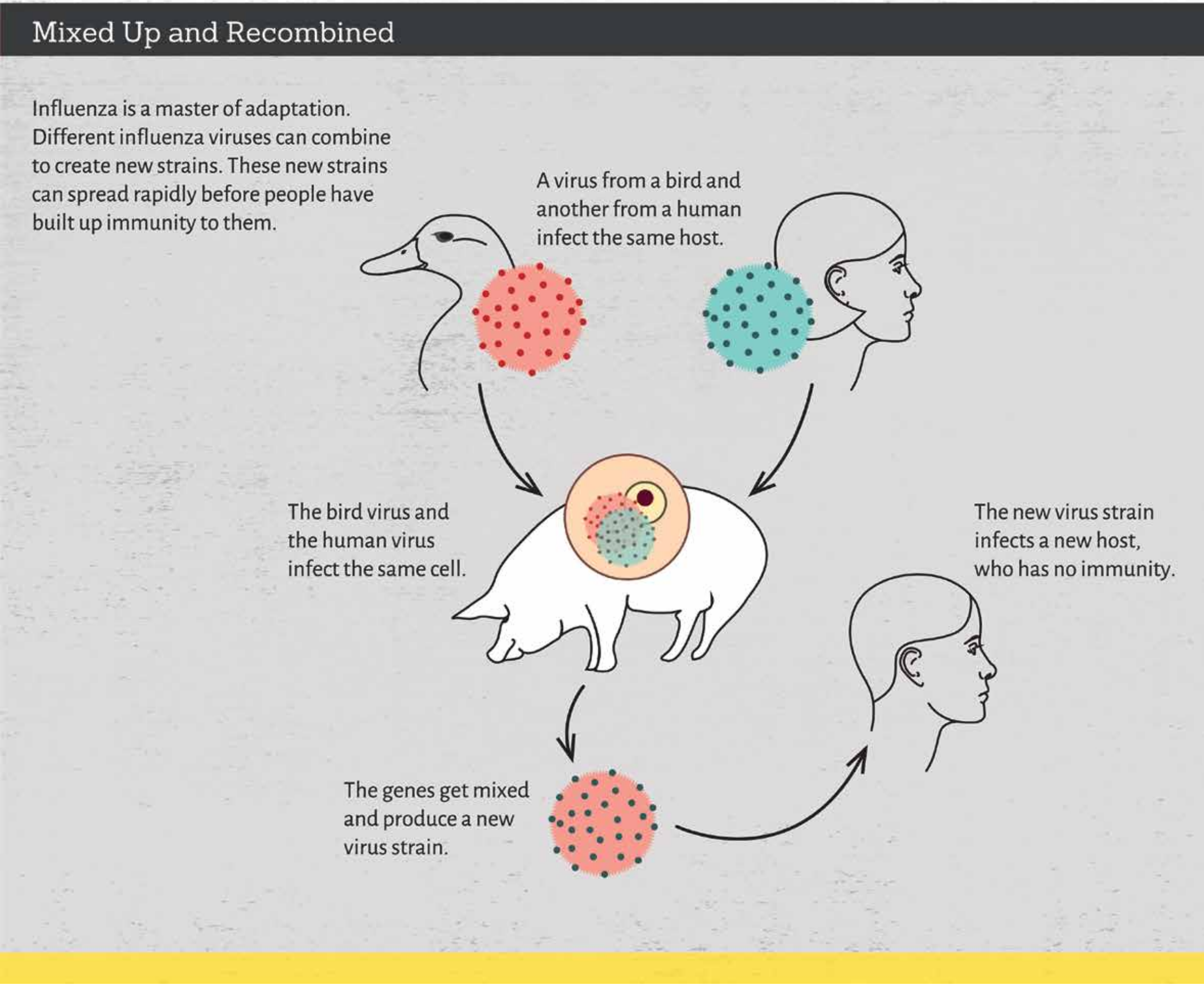
Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

Michael: This label explains a complex topic clearly and concisely.

Emilie: This label is artful, effectively plain, poetic, and bleak. The reader has learned how the virus works: this is the way of things. But even armed with this understanding, the reader can't help but empathize with the hapless new host.



Author Statement

Outbreak is an exhibition about life and hope, not death and fear. We wanted to provide visitors with clear, accessible, and engaging information about the science of infectious diseases, combined with the societal and humanitarian impacts. Throughout the exhibit, we highlight the faces and voices of 42 people behind and beyond the science—those who work to identify pathogens, respond to outbreaks, treat patients, and research cures—as well as those who have survived infection. We also wanted to inspire youth visitors about career opportunities in the fight against infectious diseases.

MIXED UP AND RECOMBINED

Influenza is a master of adaptation. Different influenza viruses can combine to create new strains. These new strains can spread rapidly before people have built up immunity to them.

A virus from a bird and another from a human infect the same host.

The bird virus and the human virus infect the same cell.

The genes get mixed and produce a new virus strain.

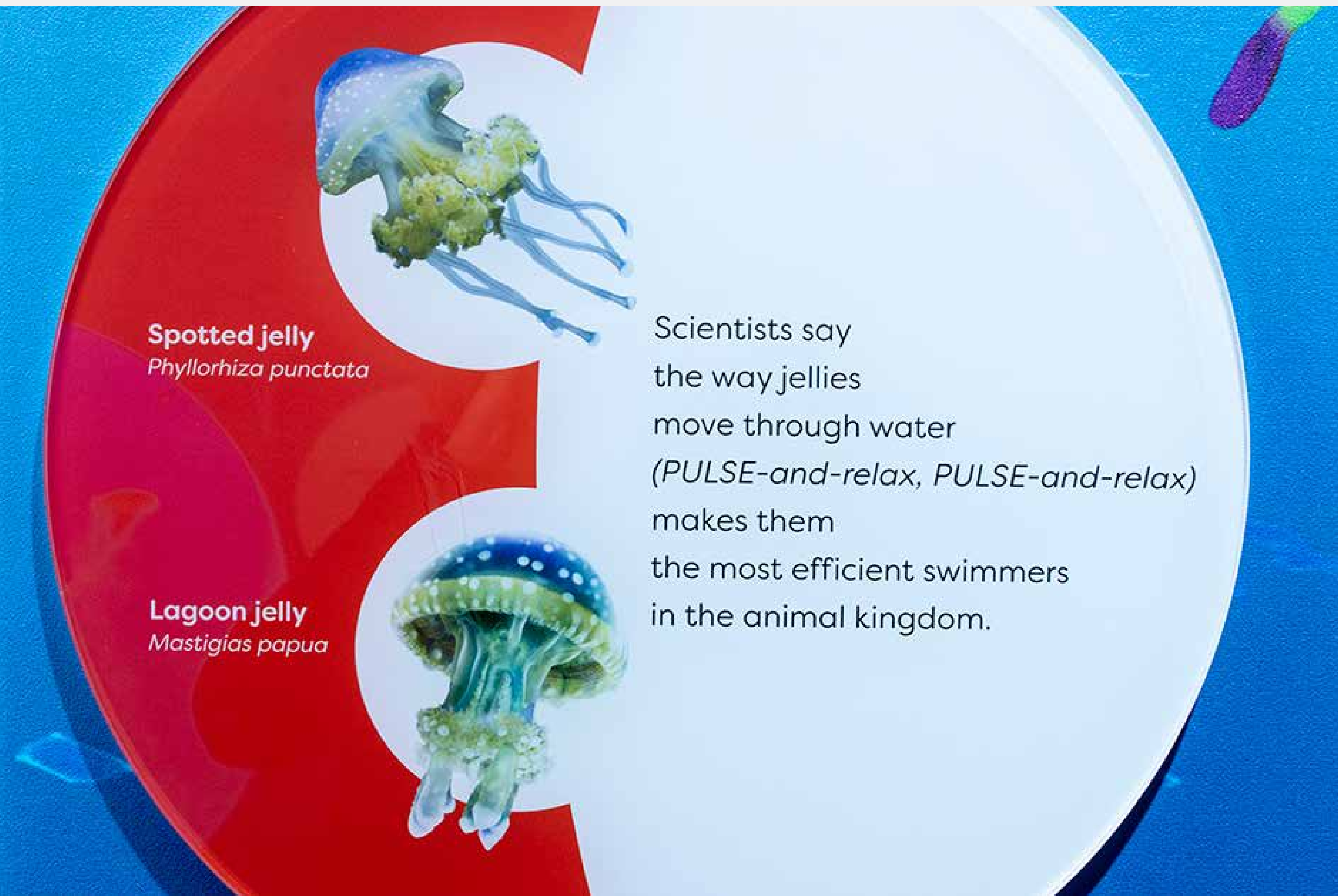
The new virus strain infects a new host, who has no immunity.

Writers and editor:
Ashleigh Braggs, Shedd Exhibit Developer,
writer
Nancy Goodman, independent museum
professional, writer
Judy Rand, independent museum professional,
editor/writer

Underwater Beauty
John G. Shedd Aquarium
Chicago, IL

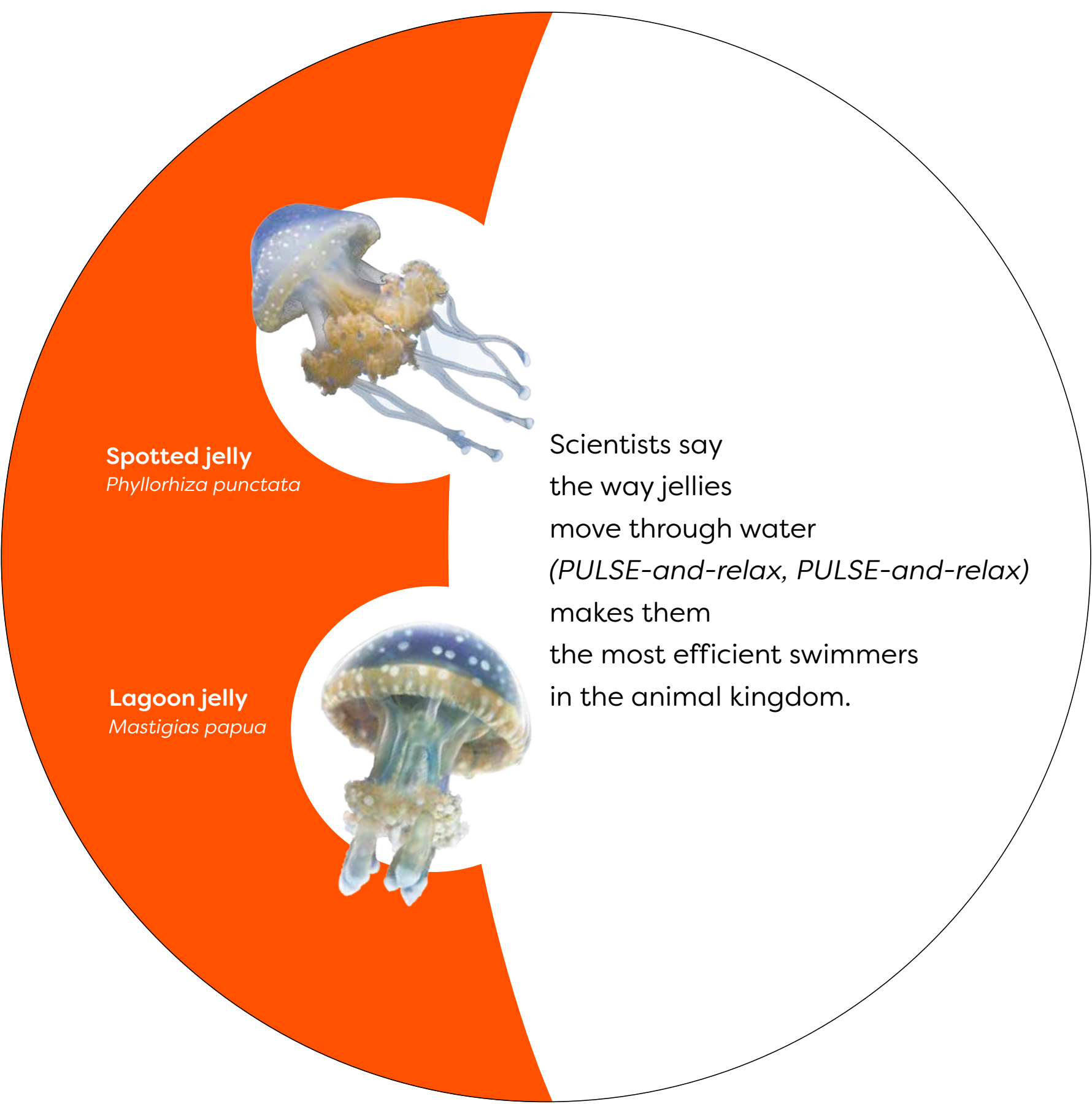
Target audience: **Our two primary audience
segments: women 25-54 with kids under 13,
and adult-only groups 18-34**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

Emilie: The format of the label itself puts the reader in a swimming jellyfish’s state: read-and- relax, read-and-relax. This poetry arrests me: now that I’ve reached the label’s end, I’m compelled to pause and admire these efficient swimmers.



Author Statement

We wanted ‘Underwater Beauty’ to feel beautiful in every way.

Thinking deeply about voice, tone and style, we imagined an ‘ideal companion’: a nature poet, roaming the aquarium. As a poet, she’s concise: every word works. A keen observer, she’s deeply appreciative. And because she’s writing at Shedd, she isn’t cryptic: she’s crystal-clear.

Writing in this style meant taking great care with rhythm, meter and flow. To our usual six goals, we added a seventh:

—Write in rhythm, so that everyone who reads out loud can hear the music of the text: the compelling cadence that holds their attention.

Scientists say
the way jellies
move through water
(*PULSE-and-relax, PULSE-and-relax*)
makes them
the most efficient swimmers
in the animal kingdom.

Spotted jelly
Phyllorhiza punctata

Lagoon jelly
Mastigias papua

Writers and editor:
Liz Yohlin Baill, writer
3rd grade students at Friends Select School, writers
5th grade students at Masterman Elementary School, writers
Amy Hewitt, editor

“Modern Times: American Art 1910-1950,” in conjunction with “Art Splash: Bright Lights, Little City”
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Philadelphia, PA

Target audience: **These labels were a family component within the Modern Times exhibition, targeting a general public**
Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: These kids’ perspectives mirror conversations we hear in art museums among people of all ages. It’s important that museums champion different ways of seeing, experiencing, and interpreting the world. It’s even more important to model respectful exchanges of ideas. This label does so delightfully.


Why did the artist paint her this way?

This is March, the artist’s 12-year-old daughter. Her dad decided to leave her face blank.

Kid’s Take

Did he do it by accident?
Can he just not draw faces?
—Gianna

I think he did that to show that she does not need a pretty face to be amazing.
—Pelham



Author Statement

The “Kid’s Take” labels within Modern Times were developed in collaboration with children, highlighting their interpretations. Featuring the public’s voices built towards a larger goal of inclusion, celebrating multiple perspectives and the insightfulness of our youngest visitors, while modeling an open-ended way of looking for the general public. To generate responses, kids were shown artworks with little prompting, inviting them simply to respond, observe, and question. The prompts on the labels followed the kids’ commentary as a framing device to capture the attention of visitors. Surveys assessing the general public’s response conveyed delight, intrigue, and appreciation of seeing children’s perspectives.

Why did the artist paint her this way?

This is March, the artist’s 12-year-old daughter. Her dad decided to leave her face blank.

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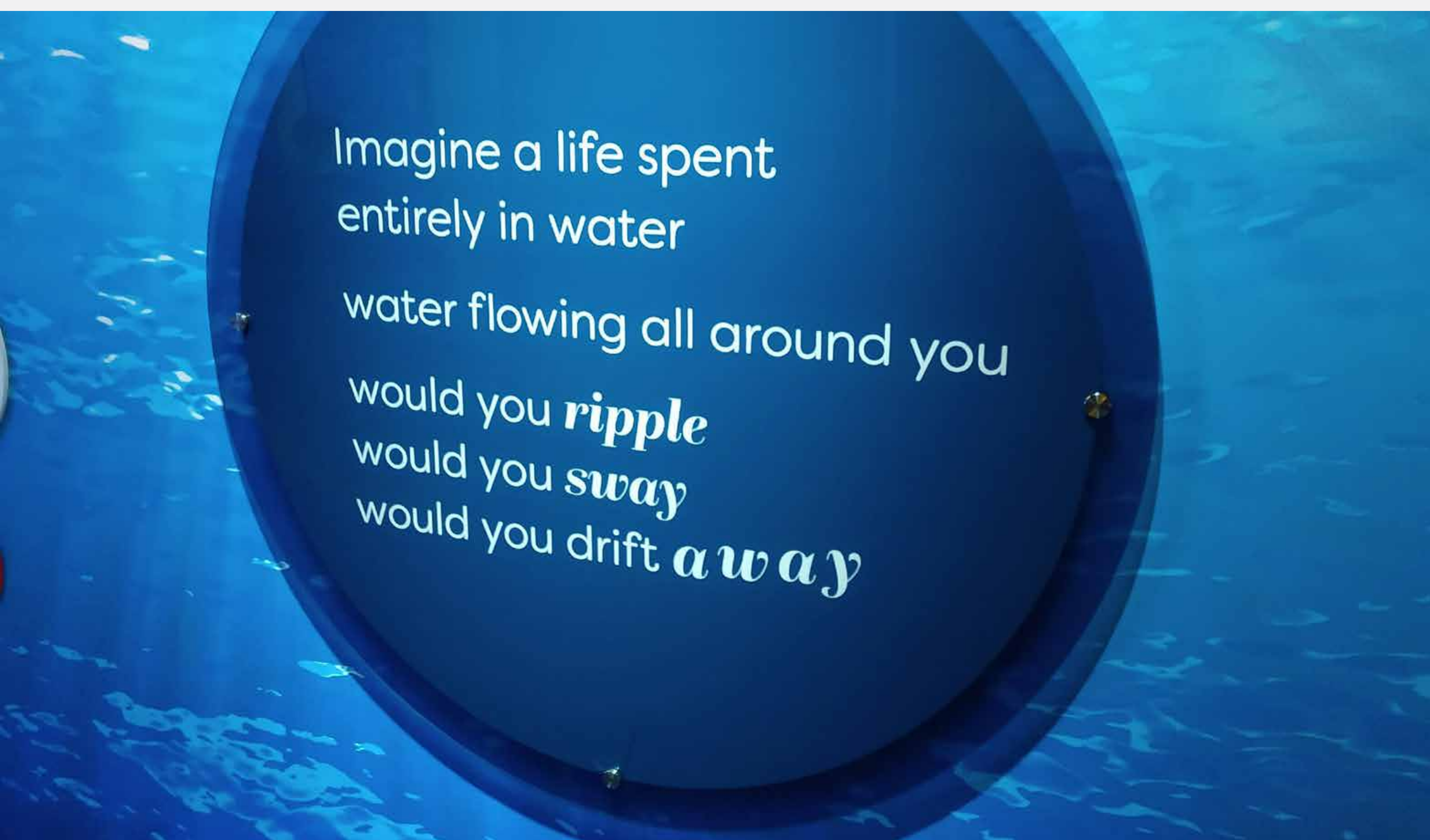
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Writers and editor:
Ashleigh Braggs, Shedd Exhibit Developer,
writer
Nancy Goodman, independent museum
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Judy Rand, independent museum professional,
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Underwater Beauty
John G. Shedd Aquarium
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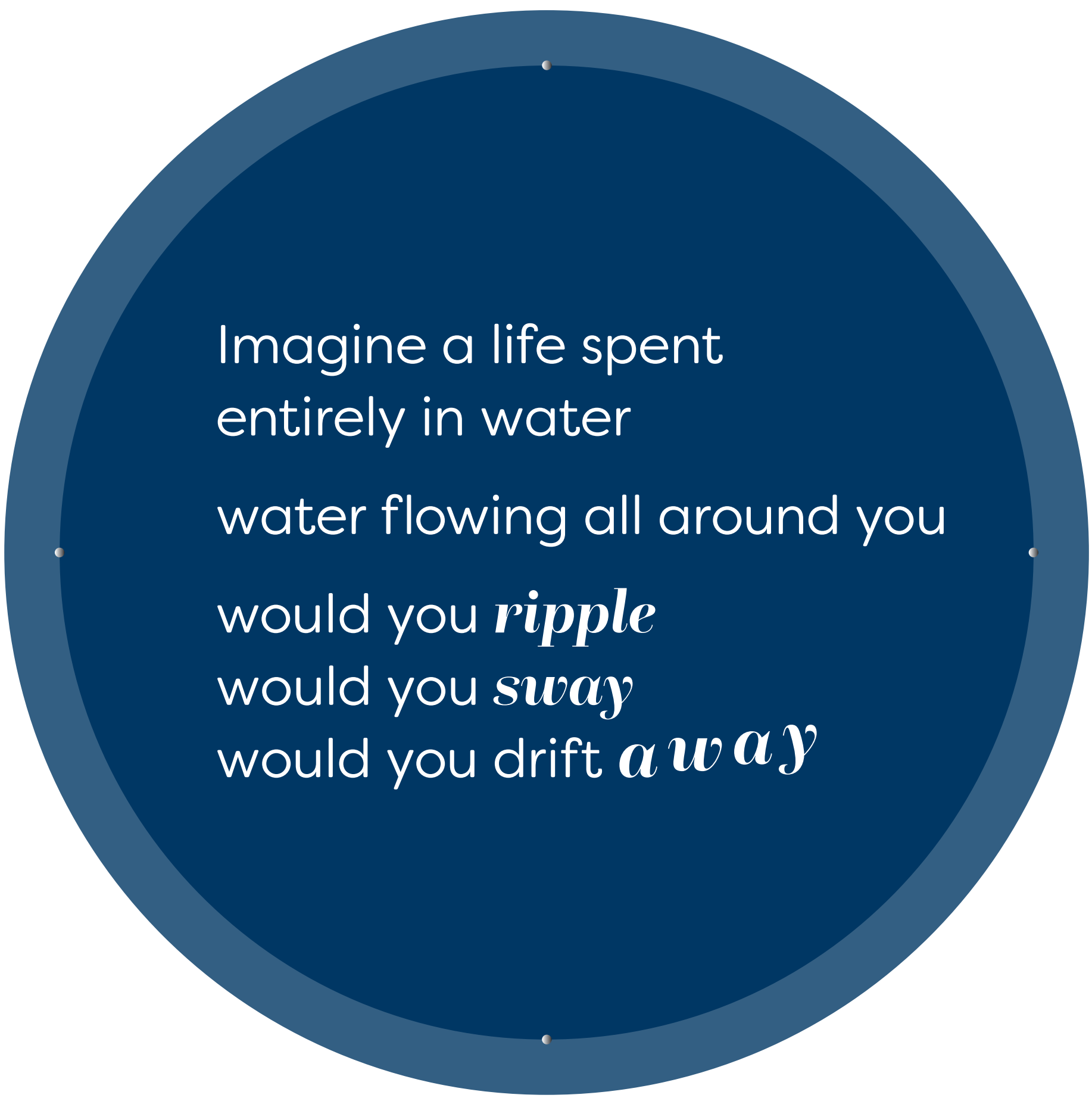
Target audience: **Our two primary audience
segments: women 25-54 with kids under 13, and
adult-only groups 18-34**

Label type: **Introductory**



Praise from the Jurors

Bonnie: It’s easy to imagine kids having this read to them, holding their arms out, and drifting around. The words on this short label break structure to mirror what we’re being asked to imagine. Letters float free from commas or periods or even each other.



Author Statement

We wanted ‘Underwater Beauty’ to feel beautiful in every way.

Thinking deeply about voice, tone and style, we imagined an ‘ideal companion’: a nature poet, roaming the aquarium. As a poet, she’s concise: every word works. A keen observer, she’s deeply appreciative. And because she’s writing at Shedd, she isn’t cryptic: she’s crystal-clear.

Writing in this style meant taking great care with rhythm, meter and flow. To our usual six goals, we added a seventh:

- Write in rhythm, so that everyone who reads out loud can hear the music of the text: the compelling cadence that holds their attention.

Imagine a life spent
entirely in water

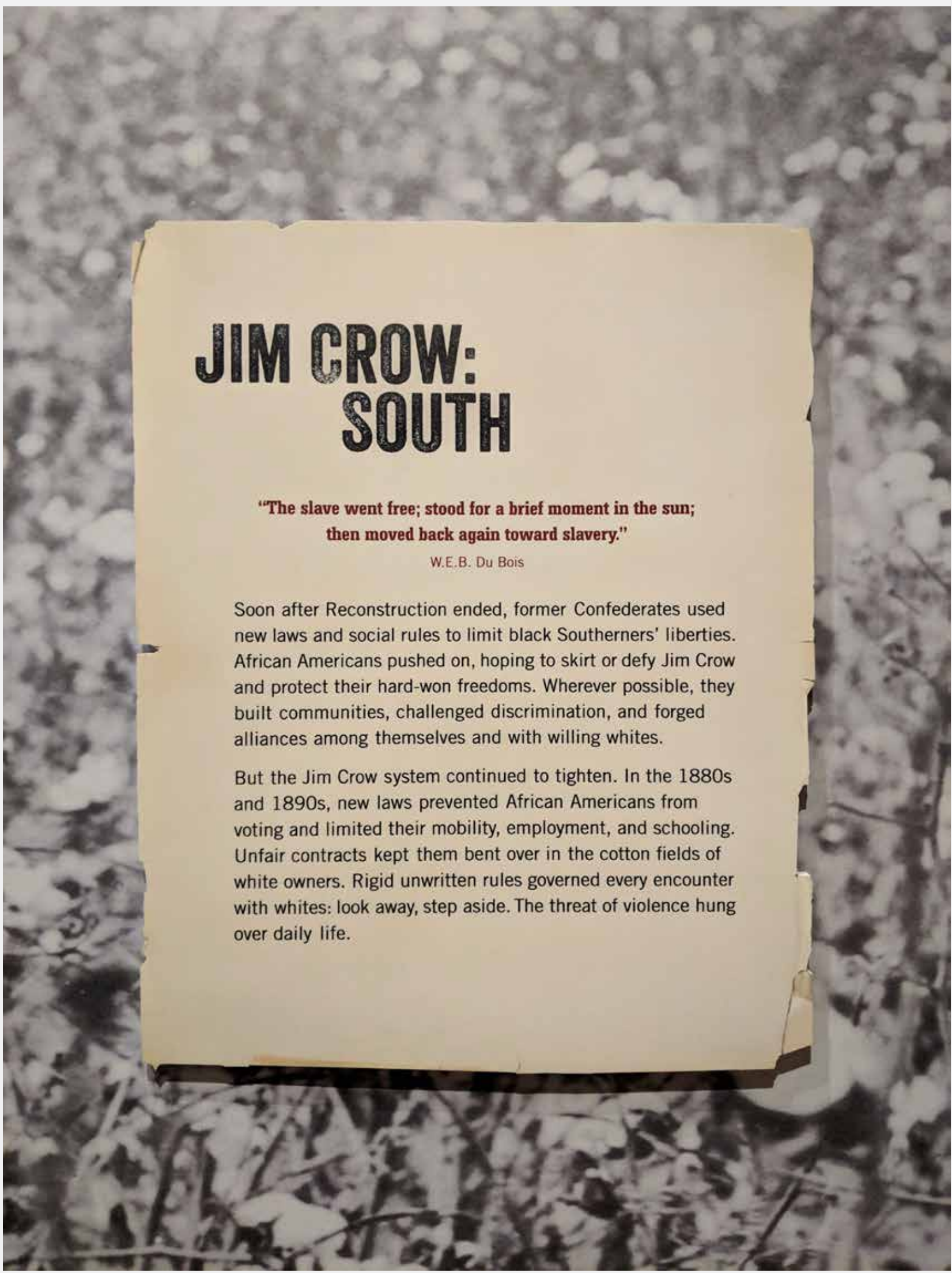
water flowing all around you

would you *ripple*
would you *sway*
would you drift *a w a y*

Writer and editor:
Marjorie Waters, writer
Marci Reaven, editor

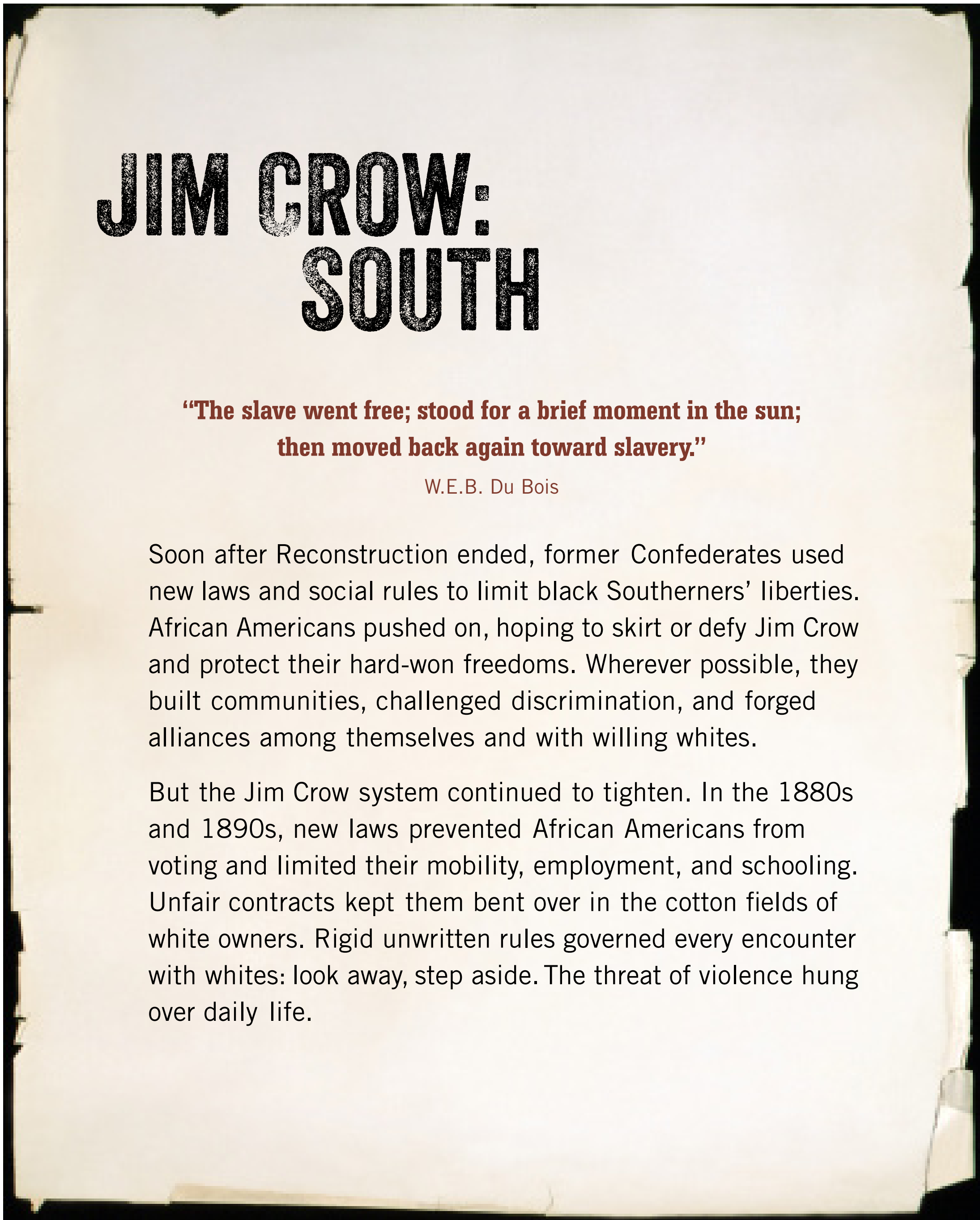
Black Citizenship in the Age of Jim Crow
New-York Historical Society
New York, NY

Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Introductory**



Praise from the Jurors

Bonnie: The last paragraph shows how Jim Crow resembled slavery as sharecroppers remain “bent over” in cotton fields. Verbs at the end borrow language from a lynching —the system “tightens” and the threat of violence “hangs” as African Americans must watch every step around whites. The sense of danger is real.



Author Statement

We aimed to make the label text accessible and approachable to audiences of all ages. We worked closely with our education staff to ensure that the text was readable for middle school and high school students. We found that adult audiences also benefit from this kind of concise and clear text, using shorter sentences and common vocabulary.

JIM CROW: SOUTH

“The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun;
then moved back again toward slavery.”
—W.E.B. Du Bois

Soon after Reconstruction ended, former Confederates used new laws and social rules to limit black Southerners’ liberties. African Americans pushed on, hoping to skirt or defy Jim Crow and protect their hard-won freedoms. Wherever possible, they built communities, challenged discrimination, and forged alliances among themselves and with willing whites.

But the Jim Crow system continued to tighten. In the 1880s and 1890s, new laws prevented African Americans from voting and limited their mobility, employment, and schooling. Unfair contracts kept them bent over in the cotton fields of white owners. Rigid unwritten rules governed every encounter with whites: look away, step aside. The threat of violence hung over daily life.

Writers and editors:
Ashley SK Davis, writer
TAHIRA, writer
Melva Ware, writer
Amelia Wiggins, editor
Heather Campbell Coyle, editor

Danny Lyon: Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement
Delaware Art Museum
Wilmington, DE

Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

Bonnie: This story flips white expectations that living near a police station means safety. The speaker, a small child in the 1960s, carried a grown-up responsibility to keep their family safe. Those of us who did not (who do not) bear that burden feel its weight here.

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION

Atlanta, police car window, 1963
Danny Lyon (born 1942)

Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery © Danny Lyon and Magnum Photos, New York
DAM L-2018-4.31

My home from birth to age 22 was directly across the street from a police station. As small child in 1960s, I remember hearing calls come out over the police car radio, “Seeking male, black 18 to 25, wearing dungarees and white tee shirt.” It was description that fit every young man in our neighborhood, including my two big brothers. It was a call that meant the police would be *rounding up* our men indiscriminately and, in many cases, physically assaulting them for all the neighborhood to see. So, when I would hear that radio call, I did what my parents trained me to do, holla down the street, “Stephen and Gerald get in the house!”

TAHIRA
Storyteller and Musician

Author Statement

Summer exhibition goals included helping visitors learn about Civil Rights history. To encourage visitors’ connections with the material and integrate multiple perspectives, we included local, personal stories and memories in our presentation. We reached out to a dozen African American community leaders and invited them to write personal responses to Lyon’s photographs.

Exit surveys showed that 77% of visitors read “Community Contribution” labels; 29% stated the labels changed how they saw the photograph. Surveys show DAM museum visitors increasingly value opportunities to learn from fellow community members. Community created content has become an interpretive strategy we now regularly integrate.

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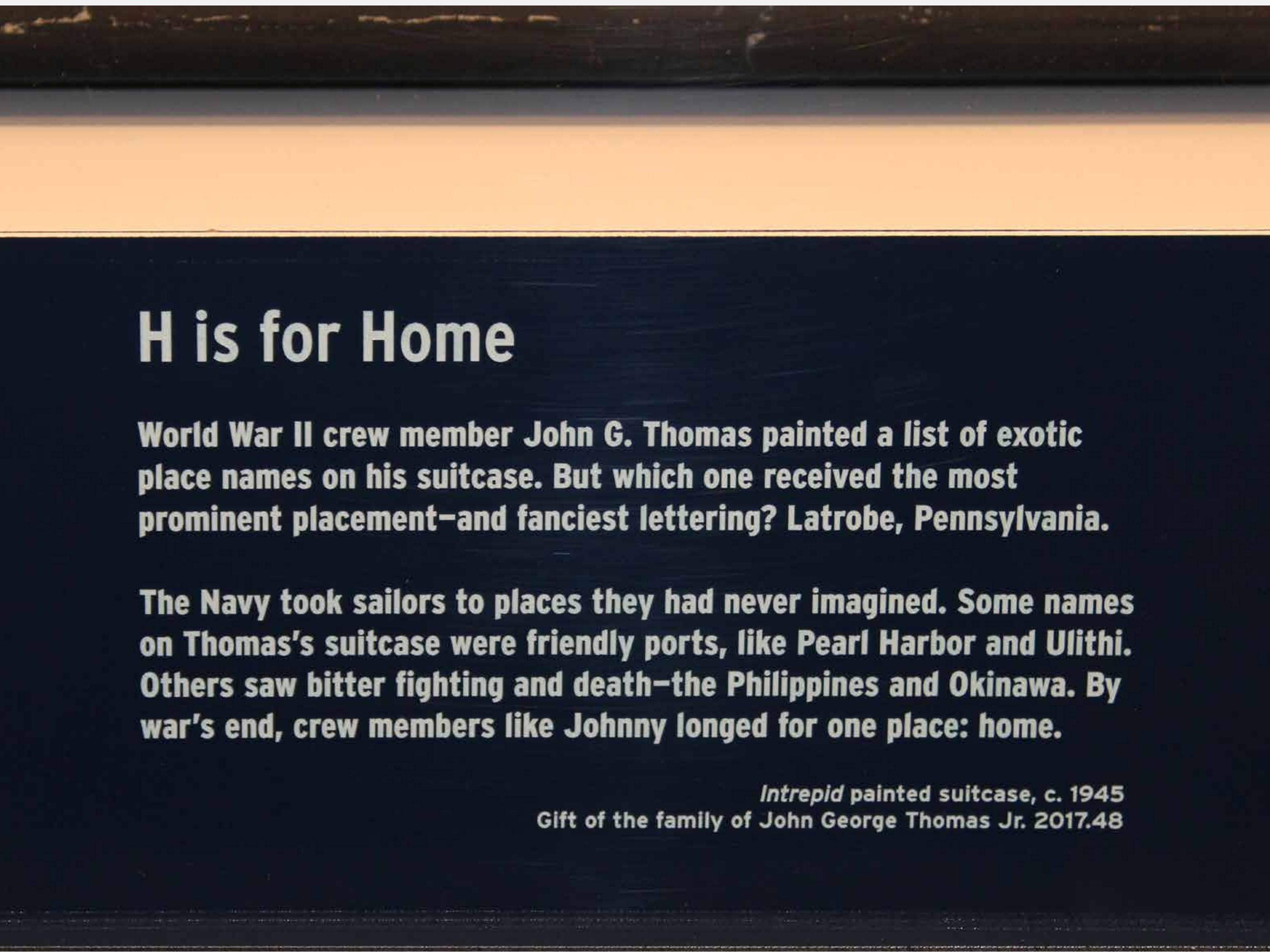
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TAHIRA
Storyteller and Musician

Writer and editor:
Jessica Williams, writer
Adrienne Johnson, editor

Intrepid A to Z
Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum
New York, NY

Target audience: **General audience**
Label type: **Object**



H is for Home

World War II crew member John G. Thomas painted a list of exotic place names on his suitcase. But which one received the most prominent placement—and fanciest lettering? Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

The Navy took sailors to places they had never imagined. Some names on Thomas’s suitcase were friendly ports, like Pearl Harbor and Ulithi. Others saw bitter fighting and death—the Philippines and Okinawa. By war’s end, crew members like Johnny longed for one place: home.

Intrepid painted suitcase, c. 1945
Gift of the family of John George Thomas Jr. 2017.48

Praise from the Jurors

Michael: The Navy has long had the mystique of offering a way to “leave home and see the world.” This label presents the ups and downs of a sailor’s adventure and his longing to return home at the end of his travels. I’d love to see this label with the suitcase it invites us to look at.

H is for Home

World War II crew member John G. Thomas painted a list of exotic place names on his suitcase. But which one received the most prominent placement—and fanciest lettering? Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

The Navy took sailors to places they had never imagined. Some names on Thomas’s suitcase were friendly ports, like Pearl Harbor and Ulithi. Others saw bitter fighting and death—the Philippines and Okinawa. By war’s end, crew members like Johnny longed for one place: home.

Intrepid painted suitcase, c. 1945
Gift of the family of John George Thomas Jr. 2017.48

Author Statement

Intrepid A to Z celebrates the aircraft carrier Intrepid’s 75th anniversary. The alphabet offered a playful format for visitors to explore highlights from our collection of over 18,000 artifacts, archives, photos, films and oral histories. We aimed for a friendly, casual writing style in order to make the sailors’ experiences relatable to our visitors, most of whom have not served in the military. Former crew members and other veterans selected some of the objects, and their comments appear on some labels. Their memories, in their own words, give visitors personal accounts of military service.

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Writers and editor:

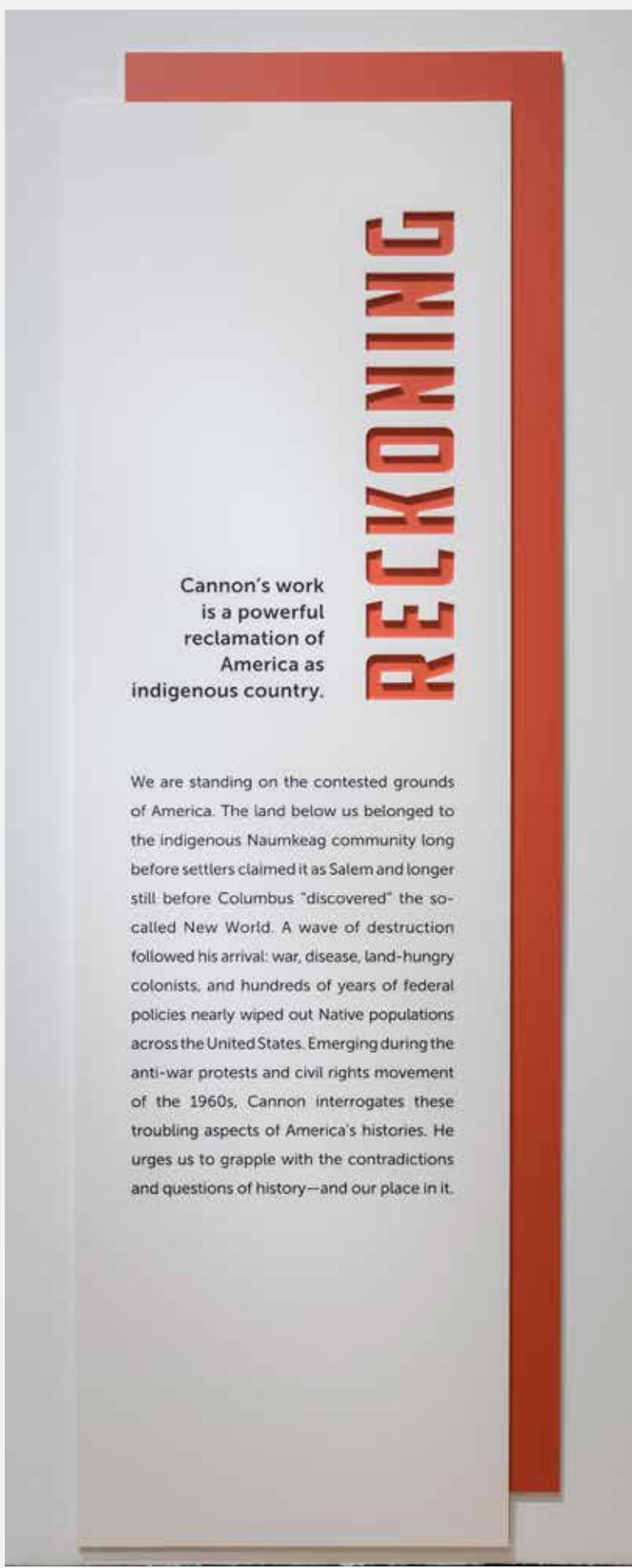
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Rachel Allen, Curatorial Mellon Fellow, writer
Bridget Devlin, Evaluation and Interpretation Planner, writer
Rebecca Bednarz, Editor for Exhibition Research and Publishing, editor

T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem, MA

Target audience: **Intergenerational groups/families**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

Emilie: This label beautifully and efficiently lays out its exhibition context, disrupting long-held American myths with hard truths. It forces the readers themselves to reconsider their places in this country—figuratively, from its powerful first sentence, and literally, at its last.

Swarupa: Between the lines, I can recognize how carefully each word in this label was considered. The writer created an inclusive “we” with the opening land acknowledgment and carried it through the label in a way that does not make assumptions about who visitors are. Visitors have just enough historical and political context to carry along with a question that puts them at the center of work to confront shared and contested histories of this country.

Author Statement

The T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America exhibition narrative was driven by dynamic, dramatic, and enveloping media experiences, and the words of Cannon’s poetry and song lyrics, and the bold colors and patterns of his paintings. Exhibition copy for panels and labels provided a framework for the arc of the exhibition with the aim of 1) presenting Cannon’s visions of a complicated America, and 2) initiating dialogue with our audience. Interpretive texts also provided historical and contemporary contexts for the paintings as well details from Cannon’s lived experience. We used straightforward language and an engaging tone throughout.

RECKONING

Cannon’s work is a powerful reclamation of America as indigenous country.

We are standing on the contested grounds of America. The land below us belonged to the indigenous Naumkeag community long before settlers claimed it as Salem and longer still before Columbus “discovered” the so-called New World. A wave of destruction followed his arrival: war, disease, land-hungry colonists, and hundreds of years of federal policies nearly wiped out Native populations across the United States. Emerging during the anti-war protests and civil rights movement of the 1960s, Cannon interrogates these troubling aspects of America’s histories. He urges us to grapple with the contradictions and questions of history—and our place in it.

