

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2017

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

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

By the numbers — this year's entrants submitted more than 220 labels from 88 exhibitions. Spread across four continents, these institutions represent 20 disciplines, located in 42 different states/provinces in 7 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

Elizabeth Wessells

Competition Project Manager
Museology Master's Candidate, Class of 2017
University of Washington, Seattle

2017 Juror Biographies & Statements

JOY BIVINS

Director of Curatorial Affairs, Chicago History Museum

Joy L. Bivins is Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Chicago History Museum where she has collaborated on diverse exhibitions such as *Teen Chicago*; the Chicago installation of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*; and *Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair*. She is co-editor of the *Inspiring Beauty* catalog and has been a contributor to the *Journal of American History*, *Chicago History*, and *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*. A native Chicagoan, Ms. Bivins earned a Bachelor's degree in Afroamerican Studies and History from the University of Michigan and a Master's degree in Africana Studies from Cornell University.

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.

ADAM TESSIER

Head of Interpretation, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Adam Tessier has served as Head of Interpretation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, since 2011. In that role, he oversees the development and implementation of a wide range of in-gallery interpretive approaches for the general visitor, working closely with curators, educators, designers, and other colleagues to create a comprehensive interpretive program for the MFA. Recent projects include retrospective exhibitions on Goya and Hokusai; touch-screen explorations of Greek vases and ancient coins; and text and interactive experiences for Chinese Song- and Yuan-dynasty masterpieces. Trained as a poet (as well as in art history), he is particularly interested in the crafting of object labels and exploring innovative ways to create engaging experiences through something as “old school” as exhibition text.

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.

TAMARA SCHWARZ

Honoree of the 2016 Competition

Associate Director of Exhibit Content Development

California Academy of Sciences

Tamara has 18 years of experience developing museum exhibitions and multimedia projects. In her current role, she leads exhibit development for the California Academy of Sciences' 100,000 square feet of natural history and aquarium exhibit space, which serves 1.4 million annual visitors. Recently completed exhibits include *Gems & Minerals Unearthed*, featuring 400 dazzling specimens from the Academy's mineral collection, and *Twilight Zone: Deep Reefs Revealed*, which highlights a new frontier in ocean exploration that may hold secrets for the survival of the world's coral reefs. Other recent exhibits include *Skulls* and *Color of Life*, which were honored in the 2015 and 2016 Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing competitions.

What makes excellent label writing?

Exhibit labels. Dismissed as much as they are toiled over. We've all heard, "No one reads most of them anyway." But with care, creativity, and discipline, we can make exhibit labels that make a big impact. Exhibit labels that spark questions, start discussions, prompt someone to say, "Huh!" or take a second, longer look.

Excellent exhibit writing takes discipline. To convey subtlety and complexity in 50-60 words, each word matters and must do its job. Disciplined labels are clear and concise.

Excellent label writing takes care. Carefully considered choices make for labels that are relevant to their readers, that enhance their experience of an exhibit's objects and inter-actives. Carefully considered labels answer the question, "So what?"

Excellent label writing takes creativity. In those few words, we can evoke a feeling, conjure an image, make a memorable comparison. Creative labels support visitors' aesthetic experience and engage the emotions.

JENNIFER SCOTT

Director, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

University of Illinois at Chicago

Jennifer Scott has worked with museums and arts organizations for over twenty-five years. As Director of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, she serves as chief curator, leading the exhibitions, community engagement efforts, and overall vision of the museum. Recent exhibitions include *Into Body Into Wall*; Aram Han Sifuentes' *Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can't*; and *VOX POP: The Disco Party*. Jennifer serves as faculty in the graduate program of Museum and Exhibition Studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and teaches courses on arts and social engagement, race and ethnic studies, and museology at The New School, Parsons School of Design, and Pratt Institute in New York. Jennifer researches, writes, and lectures widely on arts and social change, social relevancy, and innovative strategies for museums.

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

Writer and editor:

Pearl Tesler, writer

Donna Linden, editor

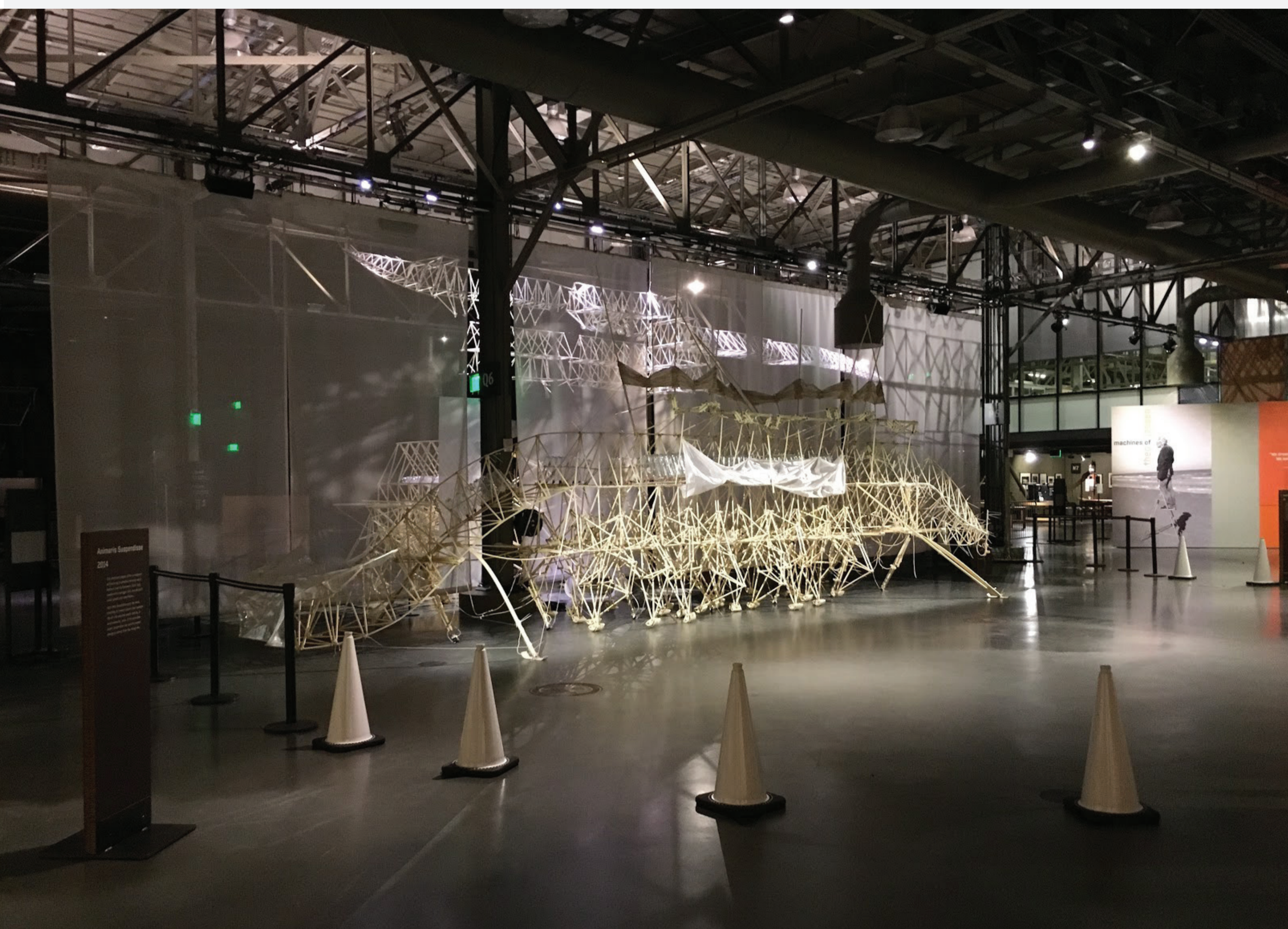
Strandbeest: The Dream Machines of Theo Jansen

Exploratorium

San Francisco, CA

Target audience: **General audience, with a focus on arts-oriented visitors and the maker community**

Label type: **Object**



Praise from the Jurors

Seeing *strandbeests* at rest in a museum gallery is a far cry from seeing them in motion on a beach. But this label conjures images of the *beest* moving across the sand. The language helps turn a static object into a creature, and sections of PVC pipe into bones. The label writing in this exhibit also conveys the singular focus (madness?) of the artist's relationship with his *beests*.

-Tamara Schwarz

Animaris Adulari

2012

Drowning is a real danger for *strandbeests*, living as they do by the seashore.

Wagging its nose here and there, *Adulari* samples its surroundings in an effort to detect incoming surface. If nerves in its nose detect water, *Adulari* reverses direction, heading for higher—and safer—ground.

Sand, too, can cause problems for *strandbeests*—it jams into their joints and they grind to a halt. *Adulari* is the first *beest* to evolve sweat glands, which exude water under pressure to flush sand from sensitive spots.

Statement from the Authors

For artist Theo Jansen, *strandbeests* are not mere machines but life forms engaged in a desperate struggle for survival. I carried this spirit into the labels, discussing *strandbeest* evolution, adaptations, and survival tactics as if they actually were (or had been) alive, using the tone and language typical of displays of biological specimens in a traditional natural history museum. With personification and vivid action verbs, I sought to solicit in visitors the same sympathetic joy and sorrow that their creator feels for these vulnerable creatures as they confront the drama—and often, the tragedy—of life on the beach.

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Writers and editors:

Toni Wynn, writer and editor

Joanne Hyppolite, writer

Elaine Nichols, writer

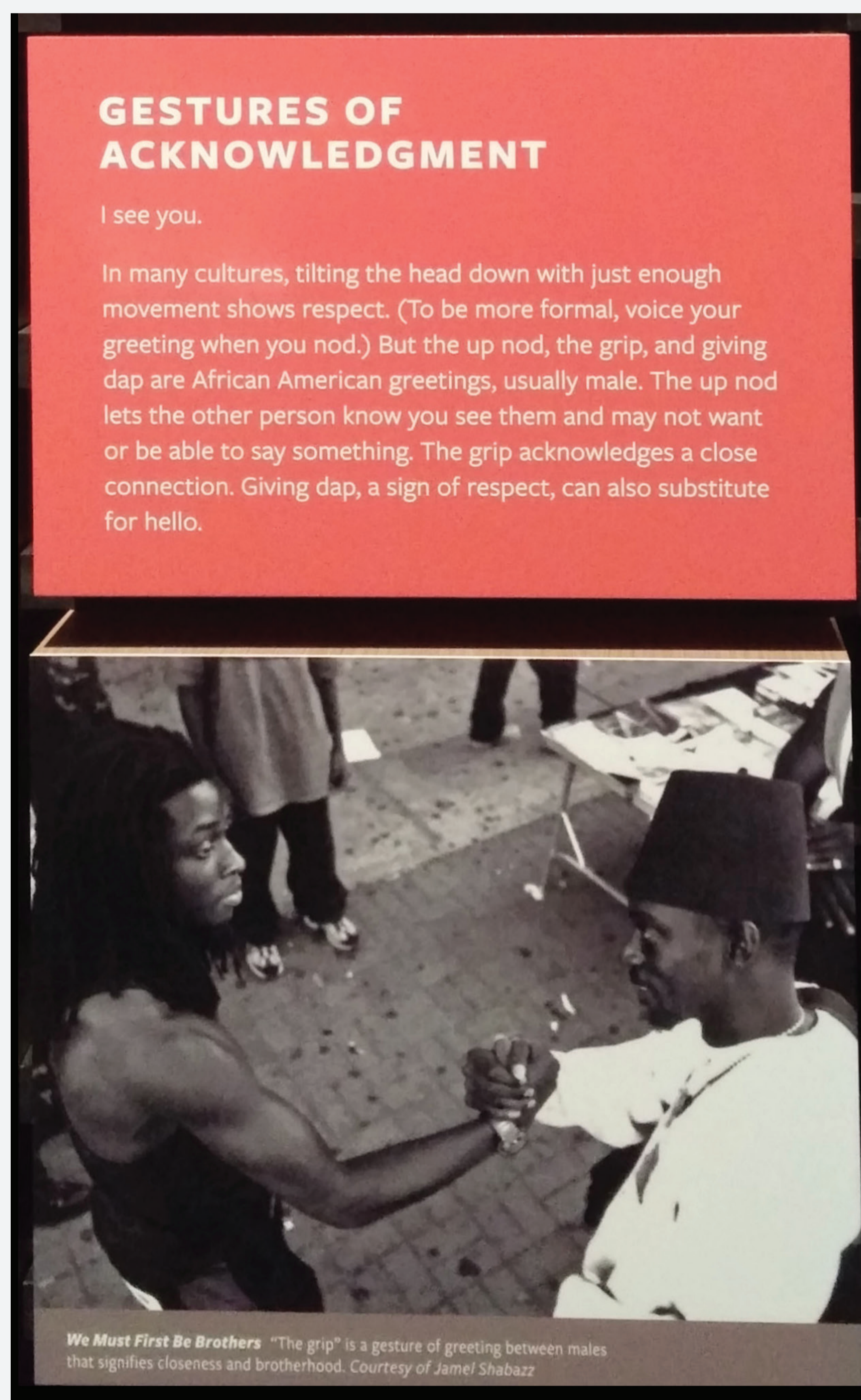
Robert Selim, editor

Cultural Expressions

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
Washington, D.C.

Target audience: **General audience, age 12 and up**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

I thought the language was accessible and aptly described a cultural gesture without being too heavy handed. It described a practice succinctly and with a bit of flair. I could hear someone saying the title: I see you.

-Joy Bivins

GESTURES OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I see you.

In many cultures, tilting the head down with just enough movement shows respect. (To be more formal, voice your greeting when you nod.) But the up nod, the grip, and giving dap are African American greetings, usually male. The up nod lets the other person know you see them and may not want or be able to say something. The grip acknowledges a close connection. Giving dap, a sign of respect, can also substitute for hello.

Statement from the Authors

A primary goal was to make the language and terms used widely accessible to an English-speaking audience, while capturing some of the idiomatic expressions that are part of black cultures and often known only by members of those cultures. We strove to showcase the "everyday-ness" of the culture and spent quite a bit of time discussing among each other what that meant and most of all listening to where insider and outsider voices and perspectives sometimes clashed. We believe we achieved these goals.

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Writers and editors:

Roxane Buck-Ezurra, writer

Raúl Nava, exhibit developer/editor

Melissa Snyder, editor

¡Viva Baja! Life on the Edge

Monterey Bay Aquarium

Monterey, CA

Target audience: **General audience, English and Spanish speakers**

Label type: **Object**



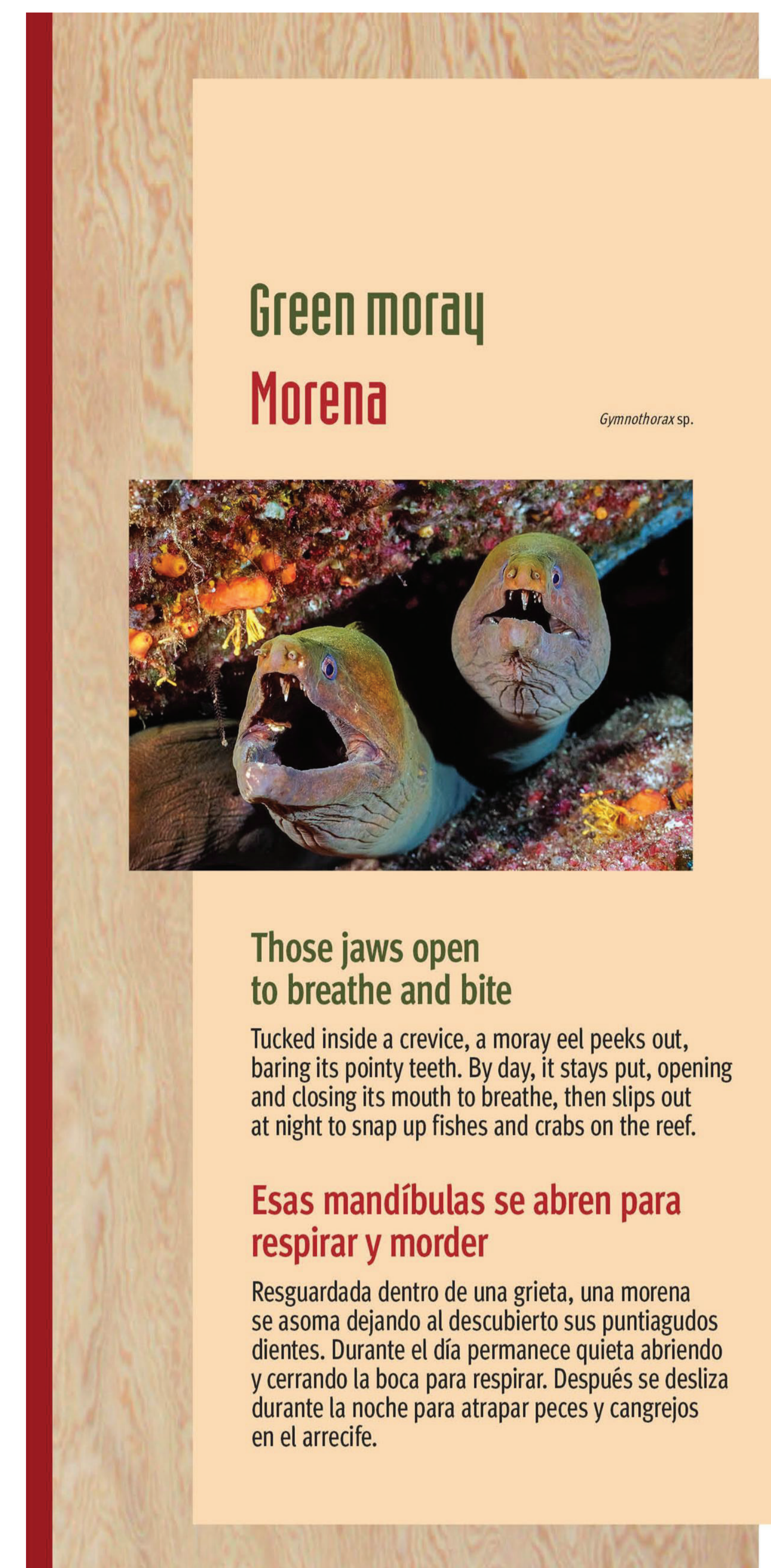
Praise from the Jurors

Brevity with vivid details and action: a masterful animal ID.

-Tamara Schwarz

First of all, we usually say, a label should be clear and concise, and it should tell a good story. Once you've mastered those tasks, as this writer has, you can sweat other details. Here the beauty and energy of the language itself struck me. Read the second sentence aloud: a deeply satisfying experience.

-Adam Tessier



Statement from the Authors

We adopted a conversational tone to convey natural history content and complex conservation information for our general audience. As with all Aquarium exhibitions, we wanted our labels to be accessible to Spanish-speaking visitors, especially our local Latino community. Our exhibition topic made that goal even more pressing. To accommodate full Spanish translation, we wrote brief labels—most just three or four lines at 50 characters for each language. Writing to these tight specs called for concise bites and snappy verbs. We mined lists of words, phrases and images generated in brainstorming to depict the wonder and fragility of Baja's unique ecosystems.

Green moray Morena

Gymnothorax sp.

Those jaws open to breathe and bite

Tucked inside a crevice, a moray eel peeks out, baring its pointy teeth. By day, it stays put, opening and closing its mouth to breathe, then slips out at night to snap up fishes and crabs on the reef.

Esas mandíbulas se abren para respirar y morder

Resguardada dentro de una grieta, una morena se asoma dejando al descubierto sus puntiagudos dientes. Durante el día permanece quieta abriendo y cerrando la boca para respirar. Después se desliza durante la noche para atrapar peces y cangrejos en el arrecife.

Writers and editors:

John Gordon, writer

Liza Pryor, editor

Carolina Valencia, Spanish translation

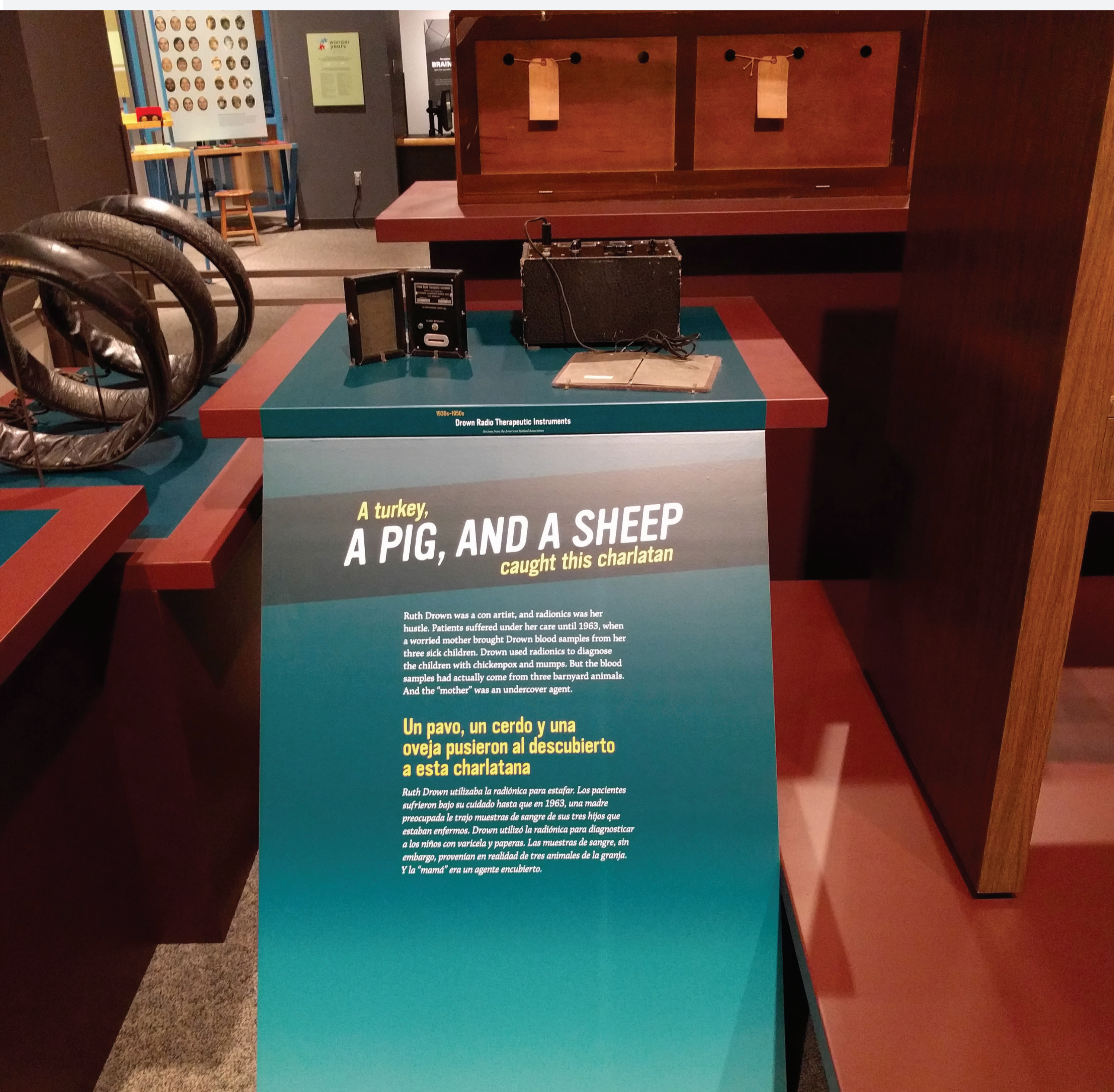
Weighing the Evidence

The Science Museum of Minnesota

Saint Paul, MN

Target audience: **Families, with a special focus on teens and seniors.**

Label type: **Object/concept**



Praise from the Jurors

In 60 words, this label tells a great story, full of drama and intrigue. It draws a through-line of deceptive medical treatments past and present and prompts the reader to think critically about such claims.

-Tamara Schwarz



Statement from the Authors

In *Weighing the Evidence*, we aimed to present the serious topic of making evidence-based healthcare decisions in a fun, approachable way. Many of the older objects in the show are, to modern sensibilities, a little silly, and we wanted the copy to fit with that—some of it is pretty tongue-in-cheek—while still presenting evidence in a straightforward way and maintaining sensitivity to the fact that healthcare decisions are very personal choices. Adding to that a fairly hard word-count limit to accommodate Spanish translations on the labels, *Weighing the Evidence* was a challenging (but very fun) exhibit to write.

A turkey, a pig, and a sheep caught this charlatan

Ruth Drown was a con artist, and radionics was her hustle. Patients suffered under her care until 1963, when a worried mother brought Drown blood samples from her three sick children. Drown used radionics to diagnose the children with chickenpox and mumps. But the blood samples had actually come from three barnyard animals. And the “mother” was an undercover agent.

Un pavo, un cerdo y una oveja pusieron al descubierto a esta charlatana

Ruth Drown utilizaba la radiónica para estafar. Los pacientes sufrieron bajo su cuidado hasta que en 1963, una madre preocupada le trajo muestras de sangre de sus tres hijos que estaban enfermos. Drown utilizó la radiónica para diagnosticar a los niños con varicela y paperas. Las muestras de sangre, sin embargo, provenían en realidad de tres animales de la granja. Y la “mamá” era un agente encubierto.

Writers and editors:

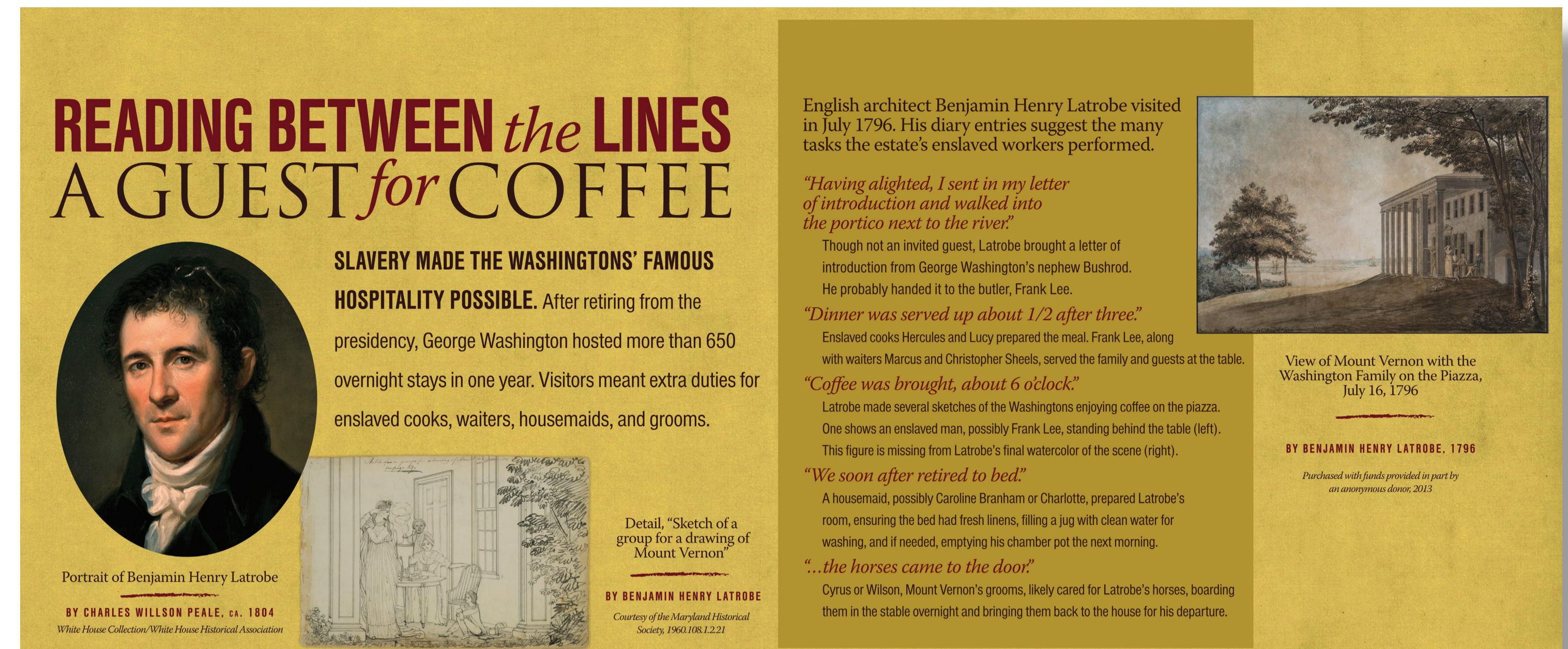
Jessie MacLeod, writer
Susan Schoelwer, editor
Carol Cadou, editor
Hannah Freece, editor

Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon

George Washington's Mount Vernon
Mount Vernon, VA

Target audience: **Adults, families, school groups**

Label type: **Concept**



Statement from the Authors

Our label-writing approach was rooted in careful and creative analysis of documentary evidence and historical artifacts. We aimed for sensitivity and honesty, taking great care to use language that elevated the humanity of the enslaved, while also presenting the stark reality of bondage. The process was collaborative: focus groups with descendants, educators, and supporters of a local black history museum proved invaluable.

READING BETWEEN *the* LINES A GUEST *for* COFFEE

SLAVERY MADE THE WASHINGTONS' FAMOUS HOSPITALITY POSSIBLE. After retiring from the presidency, George Washington hosted more than 650 overnight stays in one year. Visitors meant extra duties for enslaved cooks, waiters, housemaids, and grooms.

English architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe visited in July 1796. His diary entries suggest the many tasks the estate's enslaved workers performed.

"Having alighted, I sent in my letter of introduction and walked into the portico next to the river."

Though not an invited guest, Latrobe brought a letter of introduction from George Washington's nephew Bushrod. He probably handed it to the butler, Frank Lee.

"Dinner was served up about 1/2 after three."

Enslaved cooks Hercules and Lucy prepared the meal. Frank Lee, along with waiters Marcus and Christopher Sheels, served the family and guests at the table.

"Coffee was brought, about 6 o'clock."

Latrobe made several sketches of the Washingtons enjoying coffee on the piazza. One shows an enslaved man, possibly Frank Lee, standing behind the table (left). This figure is missing from Latrobe's final watercolor of the scene (right).

"We soon after retired to bed."

A housemaid, possibly Caroline Branham or Charlotte, prepared Latrobe's room, ensuring the bed had fresh linens, filling a jug with clean water for washing, and if needed, emptying his chamber pot the next morning.

"...the horses came to the door."

Cyrus or Wilson, Mount Vernon's grooms, likely cared for Latrobe's horses, boarding them in the stable overnight and bringing them back to the house for his departure.



Praise from the Jurors

There is a lot of information in this label. I appreciated the use of the primary source and the attempt to name the enslaved people who might have served this guest. It does a good job of using the source material to elaborate on this man's experience at Mount Vernon and accomplishes the goal of humanizing the enslaved.

- Joy Bivins

Writers and editors:

Paola Bucciol, writer
Steve Sullivan, writer
Alvaro Ramos, editor
Molly Woloszyn, editor
Jim Angel, editor
Claire Howick, editor

Weather to Climate: Our Changing World

Chicago Academy of Sciences/
Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum
Chicago, IL

Target audience: **Children and young families**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

Simply brilliant, and brilliantly simple, to explain the difference between weather and climate in terms of clothing!

-Tamara Schwarz

WHAT ARE YOU WEARING TODAY?



Statement from the Authors

One key goal was to make sure visitors understood the difference between weather and climate. Researching the topics, collaborating with team members, testing scripts with our visitors were all part of our process, as well as creating outlines and revising when needed. It was important for the exhibit to be accessible to a wide range of audiences.

WHAT ARE YOU WEARING TODAY?

Your outfit reflects the ***weather at the moment.***

Your wardrobe reflects the ***climate where you live.***

Writers and editors:

Swarupa Anila, writer

Melanie Parker, writer

Dr. Yao-Fen You, writer

Judith Ruskin, editor

Bitter|Sweet: Coffee, Tea and Chocolate

Detroit Institute of Arts

Detroit, MI

Target audience: **General audience, particularly intergenerational groups who are seeking a social experience**

Label type: **Concluding**



Statement from the Authors

In *Bitter|Sweet: Coffee, Tea and Chocolate*, we invited visitors to explore decorative objects related to these drinks through the duality of the “bitter” and “sweet” histories that surround them. The goal was for visitors to look more closely at the artworks, and connect them with their own experiences with coffee, tea, and chocolate.

We wrote the exhibition text to transition from moments of contemplation to moments that are more lighthearted. Because the exhibition invited social interaction through hands-on and multisensory experiences, we wanted the labels to have a conversational tone and be easy to read and discuss aloud.

Praise from the Jurors

This short, brilliant text makes space for us to reflect. But it gives us the freedom to shape that reflection ourselves, on our own terms, by proposing themes of enduring relevance: adaptation, transformation, power, subjugation, identity, geography. In the hands of a lesser writer, the effect here would be pedantry. Instead, piles of broad, heavy-hitting statements accrue force—until, at the last moment, we’re brought back to size with that most human of words: “perhaps.” Perhaps there isn’t anything simple about coffee, etc. And certainly, despite appearances, there’s nothing simple about this text at all. The World in a Cup gives us the world in a label.

-Adam Tessier

Beautifully executed label that offers a real glimpse into the ideas/themes that comprised the exhibition. Succinct and to the point.

- Joy Bivins

THE WORLD IN A CUP

Every cup of coffee, tea, and chocolate tells a story.

A global story...both *bitter* and *sweet*,
of vessels adapted and transformed,
of economic systems built on power and subjugation,
of identity, both self-defined and imposed,
of traditions shared across time and place.

Perhaps there has never been anything simple
about a cup of coffee, tea, or chocolate.

#SiptheStory

Writers and editors:

Michael Lesperance

Michael Lenahan

The Fight Over Freedom!

The Design Minds, Inc. writing for

Fort Scott National Historic Site

Fort Scott, KS

Target audience: **General audience, ranging from families and tourists to dedicated Civil War historians and experts**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

There is a level of humanity in this label that I connect to. There is good balance struck between the quote and the interpretive text—creating a good visual. The impact statement at the end adds weight to the subject matter.

- Joy Bivins

THE GENEROSITY OF STRANGERS

The number of refugees pouring into Kansas overwhelmed government supplies of food, medicine, and clothing. Fort Scott's residents responded to appeals for help by holding charity dances, donating food and clothing, providing odd jobs, and even taking in abandoned babies.



“The wagons were loaded with a motley crew of refugees of every grade, sex, and condition and suffering from almost every imaginable disease. We hope and expect that they will receive every attention from a generous public.”

—Fort Scott Bulletin, August 22, 1864

What would you donate to help people in need?

At a time when most people owned few articles of clothing, giving away anything would be a major sacrifice.

Statement from the Authors

The label writing process followed the understanding that nobody—least of all, the label writers—could express the story as well as those who witnessed, lived, and debated it. Interpretive writing supports voices from primary sources and, when necessary due to a lack of source material, composite characters express individual perspectives and motivations of a divided country. Rigorous research and vetting—including a historian's roundtable organized for the project—ensured accuracy in all label copy in telling a story that remains tumultuous even today.

The ongoing refugee crises in the Middle East and Africa make the included exhibit section especially relevant to today's visitors.

THE GENEROSITY OF STRANGERS

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—Fort Scott Bulletin, August 22, 1864

What would you donate to help people in need?

At a time when most people owned few articles of clothing, giving away anything would be a major sacrifice.

Writer and editor:
Annie Holdren

Local

Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History
Pacific Grove, CA

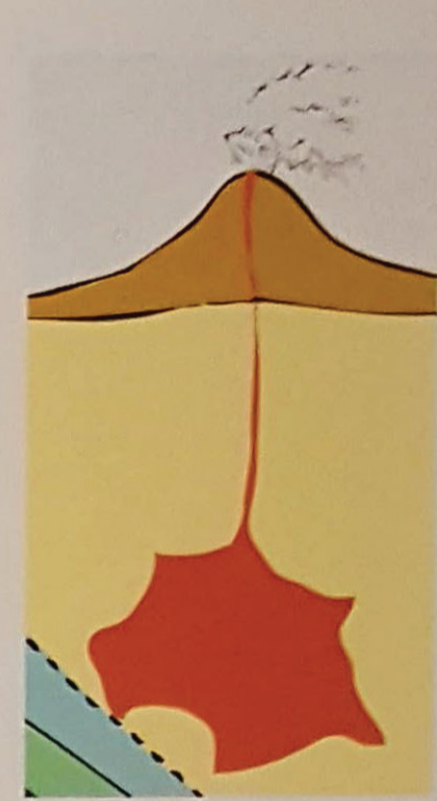
Target audience: **Adult and teen tourists and locals;
school groups**

Label type: **Concept**

**Two Blocks Down from Here
Granitic rocks form the shoreline of Pacific Grove**

Local granitic rocks were born deep below the Earth's surface. Melted by subduction, they cooled slowly in magma chambers.

The San Andreas fault transported them here from the southern end of the Sierras. As the volcanic mountains above them eroded away, the granitic rocks were uplifted to the surface.



Where waves can reach them, the granitic rocks are pounded and eroded. They break into pieces.
Boulders break down into cobbles.
Washed ashore again and again, cobbles break down into gravel.
Waves break apart and separate minerals.
Sand grains, they roll back and forth.
Soft feldspars and mica wash away.
Quartz remains.

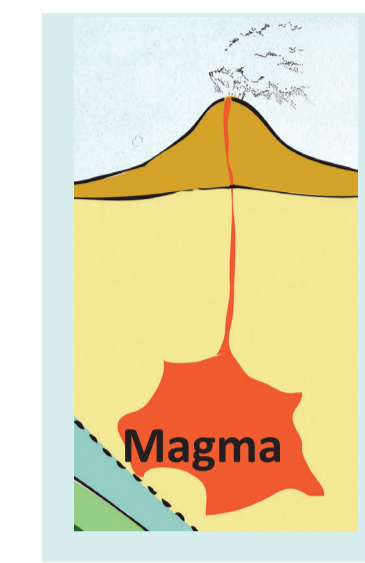
Praise from the Jurors

I wasn't expecting much of a label titled "Granitic Rock," but suddenly I was caught up in a poetic rendition of the slow yet immense drama of the rock cycle.

-Tamara Schwarz

**Two Blocks Down from Here
Granitic rocks form the shoreline of Pacific Grove.**

These rocks were born in magma chambers, deep below the Earth's surface. They cooled from rock melted during the Farallon Plate subduction.



The San Andreas fault transported them here from the south end of the Sierras. As the volcanic mountains above them eroded away, the granitic rocks were uplifted to the surface.

Where waves can reach them, the granitic rocks are pounded and eroded. They break into pieces.
Boulders break down into cobbles.
Washed ashore again and again, cobbles break down into gravels.
Waves break apart and separate minerals.
Sand grains. The waves roll them back and forth.
Soft feldspars and biotite wash away.
Quartz remains.

Statement from the Authors

Labels in the geology exhibition had to address complicated geological processes while quickly letting visitors know that the information would be relevant to their explorations along the coast. Both concept and object labels direct readers to locations where they might find in place the specimens described and displayed (e.g, the Franciscan Formation, Big Sur jade, garnet sands). For these, museum docents particularly appreciate having an exhibition that addresses the questions they frequently had been asked. Labels accompanying hands-on interactions refer to the most basic concepts, and prompt questions that might engage a user with the rest of the exhibition.

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