

INTERPRETATION AT
THE MINNEAPOLIS
INSTITUTE OF ARTS

POLICY AND PRACTICE

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THE INTERDIVISIONAL COMMITTEE
ON INTERPRETATION

THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

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PREFACE

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts houses over 80,000 objects from diverse cultural traditions spanning 4,000 years of world history. In preparation for a museum-wide reinstallation of the permanent collection, the Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation was formed, made up of representatives from the Curatorial and Educational divisions. The committee worked for over a year to produce this document, which serves the foundation for planning and interpretation within the museum.

The museum's interpretive program grows directly from an understanding of our visitors' needs and is intended to promote viewers' engagement with works of art. This approach emphasizes creating opportunities for discovery and critical thinking rather than simply imparting facts. We are committed to the view that learning is a process, both for ourselves and for visitors to the museum. All forms of interpretation should provoke, stimulate, inform, and delight our visitors.

POLICY ON
INTERPRETATION

PLURALISM OF AUDIENCES

The museum's interpretive strategies must be varied to serve our diverse audiences. Because individual learning styles differ, multiple approaches to interpretation and a choice of interpretive media are necessary. Certain media may be suited to a particular level of experience or knowledge. The museum must address the needs of both first-time and repeat visitors and also meet the special requirements of visitors with disabilities.

ELEMENTS OF VISITORS' EXPERIENCES

Visitors say they want information. According to educational research, they also want to establish a connection between the work of art and their own lives. Every visitor brings a unique combination of knowledge and experience to each encounter with art objects. Many visitors' initial responses are subjective. In order to derive meaning from works of art, however, people have to know something about them. Our interpretive strategies must acknowledge initial responses and then enable visitors to move beyond those reactions to discover multiple levels of meaning.

Although seldom considered as elements of a museum's educational program, the order of galleries and the arrangement of objects are fundamental to interpretation. The sequence and definition of gallery spaces influence our audience's broad conceptual frameworks. Clear signage establishing chronological and geographical contexts is vital to overall understanding. Some visitors, however, have no framework of information (style, history, technique) in which to place works of art. They are likely to browse through the museum, seldom paying close attention to individual works of art. For such visitors, a thematic interpretive structure is especially useful because it helps focus their attention — the crucial first step in aesthetic experience.

Most museum-goers learn more from contextual or thematic arrangements of art within a chronological or taxonomic groupings. One of our prime objectives is to create installations that give visitors opportunities to compare and categorize works of art and construct frameworks for understanding.

Finally, while ease and comfort are not components of interpretation per se, well-designed signage and plentiful gallery seating will reduce barriers to viewers' enjoyment and comprehension of works of art.

ATTITUDES UNDERLYING INTERPRETATION

We assume that every visitor is an intelligent and curious person capable of learning about art. The museum's interpretive materials should address all audiences without condescending to any. The key question for all of us should be, How can we help visitors develop their understanding of art?

A critical means of support is the tone of our interpretive materials. We understand that tone is created by the writer's conscious and unconscious attitudes. Respect for the intelligence of the public provides the tone appropriate to museum texts.

FOCUS OF INTERPRETATION

Interpretation should begin with recognition of the visitor's viewpoints and needs. Surveys indicate that the topics most helpful to most viewers are

- Subject (imagery, iconography, referents)
- Content (iconology, allegory, symbolism)
- Function (practical, symbolic, changes over time)
- Cultural and historical context
- Why the object is considered art and why it is in the museum
- Artist (own commentaries on work, own philosophy, pertinent biographical information)
- Technique (how produced)
- Economics (patronage, consumption)

Less helpful, although sometimes useful in particular areas of the museum, are

- Unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality, comparative judgments, connoisseurship
- Stylistic development
- Discussions of art theory
- Lengthy artists' biographies
- Provenance (list of owners)

The content should be generated by and germane to the objects. It should be substantive yet not overwhelm our visitors with unnecessary and irrelevant

information. However, oversimplification and failure to answer visitors' most pressing questions are obstacles to effective interpretation. Over simplification, for example, ultimately undercuts the museum's aims because it stifles curiosity and implies a lack of respect for our audience.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

In an effort to avoid ethnocentric approaches that impede understanding of unfamiliar art, we will endeavor to apply consistent methods of interpretation to Western and non-Western cultures. Respect for diverse value systems should inform all our practices. First and foremost, the sequence and allocation of galleries themselves can demonstrate a commitment to a world view in which the European tradition is not the sole point of reference.

Terminology is no less critical. We will maintain a consistent distinction between geographical and cultural identifiers. When identifying objects, ideals, materials, and so on, we will use such terms as "European American" and "Euro-American" and will seek non-Eurocentric terms to replace such labels as "pre-Columbian" and "Oriental." Concrete examples and qualifiers, as well as comparisons ("X was current in Europe, while Y was the case in the Arab world"), will help our visitors construct frameworks in which works of art can be considered purposefully and their meanings apprehended.

INTERPRETIVE DIVERSITY

Whatever the medium of interpretation, the "voice" of most museums, including ours, has consistently been authoritative and "objective." Didactic materials with a presumably neutral tone convey a sense that the single perspective enunciated is indisputably true. At its worst, such a stance asserts the museum's authority and the reader's ignorance; at its best, it may just be boring. In fact, interpretation is fluid and subjective. It changes over time and can offer a variety of valid insights about a given object.

By making use of the diversity of voices inside and outside the museum, we acknowledge the complexity of the interpretive process. For example, new interpretive approaches might include augmenting programming with presenters not affiliated with museums, using multiple labels (for a single object or group of objects) written from different perspectives, and identifying the authors of text panels. Audiences will become aware that there is no one authoritative interpretation on most issues and will

be encouraged to engage in interpretation themselves. Such multi-vocal approaches will acknowledge the personal responses of our visitors and communicate our respect for our public.

INTERPRETATION AND THE PRIMACY OF THE OBJECT

A variety of interpretive means will help the broadest range of visitors experience art objects visually, emotionally, and intellectually. The Interpretive Media Table, included in this book, details the interpretive media to be used and their applications. Because the works of art must always remain paramount in our installations, these interpretive means will be used selectively. The visitor's direct experience of the object is fundamental to the museum's purpose, and the museum staff is unequivocally committed to facilitating that experience.

INTERPRETIVE
MEDIA TABLE

INTRODUCTION

The reinstallation of the Institute's permanent collection over the next five years offers an opportunity to reconsider the use of interpretive media. To promote visitors' engagement with works of art, as outlined in the Policy on Interpretation, the museum must have an installation plan and an interpretation plan for each gallery. These plans will be developed jointly by the appropriate curator and the chairs of the Curatorial and Education divisions and reviewed by the Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation and the director. Each part of the collection requires its own unique mix of interpretive media. To ensure that the quantity of interpretive materials never overwhelms the works of art, the planners must exercise discretion, judgment, and restraint.

INSTALLATION AND INTERPRETATION

Display is the foundation of interpretation. However, the installation of the museum depends on the nature of the collections, and the collections have not all been built on the same historiographic assumptions. Most have been developed according to paradigms of chronology and style. The period rooms represent moments in historical time. Some collections (prints, photographs, textiles) have a strong technical dimension. In our installation we must accept each collection's particular nature, but we will make every attempt to present objects within a cultural framework. If this is not always possible in display, it can usually be achieved in the interpretive materials.

Other forms of installation will serve specific interpretive functions. "A Closer Look" areas, for example, present in-depth challenging examinations of a single work of art or small group of objects, which focus visitors' attention and vary their pace through the museum. These installations can be used to present new research or the results of recent conservation treatments or to examine historical or cultural context in depth. They will include the perspectives of guest curators as well as those of the staff. Because "A Closer Look" areas are designed for individual investigation and reflection and will be extensively interpreted, they will generally not be included on docent tours.

Another type of installation, open storage, presents objects in dense taxonomic formats that encourage visitors to consider stylistic and qualitative issues by

comparing objects of similar media and date. It will allow public access to more of the museum's collection than has previously been on view. We imagine this area to be of greater interest to students, scholars, and seriously motivated amateurs than to the general public. Here, object identification (ID) labels will be the only interpretive component.

ORGANIZATION OF THE TABLE

The table that follows lists current and planned interpretive media and their uses. The table is based on several principles.

- *Variety* — In each area of the collection a variety of information will be presented in several different formats to address different learning styles and provide varying levels of complexity. Some information will be heard, some read or seen, and some accessed through computer programs. We will offer this broad range because visitors have varying interests, educational backgrounds, and needs. They are more likely to feel validated and motivated when they can control significant aspects of their experience. Some people learn by listening and then discussing ideas with others; some like to examine and reflect on authoritative information; some like to be challenged to integrate theory and practice; and others learn best by discovering underlying principles through trial and error. We know that visitors who can choose how and what they learn place greater value on their museum experiences.
- *Proximity and Availability* — The most essential information belongs on object labels, the medium in closest proximity to the art objects. The object label is our primary means of communicating with the general visitor. More complex, detailed, or specialized information can be presented in one or more of the other formats.
- *Accessibility* — Visitors to museums learn differently than students in schools. Learning in schools is structured and linear, whereas learning in museums is self-directed. Museum materials must be organized to accommodate a non-sequential approach and arranged in small, discrete units that can be encountered in any order and still make sense.

The media listed in the table fall into three broad categories: print, audiovisual, and tours. Within each category, the most general and widely used media precede more specialized forms. The list is open-ended, and new media will undoubtedly be added in the

future. Lectures, the Institute's *Bulletin*, *Arts* magazine, and library resources are not listed in this table because they are not used in direct conjunction with works of art.

APPLICATIONS IN THE GALLERIES

Some media will be used more than others. The gallery ID and object ID labels are indispensable and must be ubiquitous. Other media are appropriate to many parts of the collection, but continuous loop video and slide programs may have more limited application.

While any medium can be used in isolation, a combination of two or more may sometimes be appropriate. However, no particular combination should be considered obligatory. In fact, some media are distinctly incompatible. Those that encourage quiet contemplation should not be located in the same area as those that require sound or active use. For example, "A Closer Look" areas should not be linked to interactive multimedia stations. Two active formats, such as docent tours and interactive multimedia, should not be made to compete in the same space. Formats that emit sound, such as interactive media, loop video, and slide shows, might be sound-screened or have speaker-to-listener devices.

PRINT MEDIA

GALLERY ID

Function

Serves as an advance organizer, establishing place, time, or subject.

Application

An identification is *mandatory* for every gallery.

Visitor Profile

Age 12 and up (all who understand historical periods)

Social Unit

All (solo, dyad, family, peer groups, school groups); easily read by large groups

GALLERY OR SECTION PANEL

Function

Articulates an organizing idea for a group of objects in a particular gallery and provides a context in which to consider the works of art. The text should invite critical thinking. For example, panels in chronology-based galleries could present one or two major issues of the period. In galleries organized by medium, the text might explain the mechanics and challenges of the technology. References to familiar historical events or personalities are helpful.

Application

Panels are recommended whenever the majority of works in a gallery suggest common issues or topics. The text should not exceed 150 words, or 100 words if a gallery contains two panels. The panels may include relevant photos, diagrams, or maps.

Visitor Profile

Age 12 and up (all who understand historical periods and can discuss social issues)

Social Unit

All (easily read by small groups)

OBJECT ID LABEL

Function

Identifies the object in a concise, standard form.

Maker and maker's dates

Country/culture

Title or object type and date if known

Purchase fund and accession number

Application

An object ID label is *mandatory* for every object on view. *No object will be installed until a label has been produced for it.*

Visitor Profile

All visitors

Social Unit

One or two people; can be read at close range, silently or aloud to others

EXTENDED OBJECT LABEL

Function

Discusses the most compelling features of a work of art or answers the visitor's most pressing questions.

Application

An extended object label consists of the five-line identifier plus two or three paragraphs. A ratio of one extended object label to every four or six objects in a gallery is recommended. Each extended label should be about 100 to 150 words, broken into paragraphs of approximately 50 words.

Visitor Profile

All visitors

Social Unit

One or two people; can be read at close range, silently or aloud to others

MAP, TIMELINE

Function

Helps visitors place the art in a temporal or geographic context. Visitors need maps and timelines for all cultures, including Euro-American.

Application

Maps should include all sites referred to on labels and panels. For orientation, an inset map can relate a region to contemporary boundaries. Modern towns may be included for the same purpose.

Visitor Profile

Age 12 and up

Social Unit

Individuals, small groups, and large tour groups

SMALL PHOTO, MAP, DIAGRAM

Function

Provides context for one object or a small group of objects.

Application

Photos, maps, and diagrams must be contiguous to the objects they interpret. Their captions should be limited to 30 words.

Visitor Profile

Age 12 and up

Social Unit

Individuals and small groups

SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS I (SRIs)

Function

Complement other formats available in the galleries. Through brief discussions of selected works of art with a common theme (subject, purpose, type, class, significance), SRIs guide the visitor through many areas of the museum. SRIs provide a limited program achievable in a short visit. They can survey subjects (mythology, religion, medium) that embrace objects far removed from one another in time and culture, or they can focus on specific collections (Chinese jades, European porcelain, American silver). Readings may include questions that adults can ask children, provide answers to those questions, and promote critical thinking.

Application

SRIs take the form of brochures, which are distributed from holders in galleries and at the Information Desk. Each section of text should be limited to about 150 words.

Visitor Profile

All visitors

Social Unit

Individuals and small groups

SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS II (SRIIs)

Function

Provide in-depth information not otherwise available in the galleries.

Application

SRIIs can take the form of brochures, laminated cards, portable paddles, and selected books available in reading areas. Because they contain illustrations or diagrams accompanying the text, they are an appropriate way to include related works of art or explain techniques or specialized materials.

Visitor Profile

Adult visitors with some art knowledge

Social Unit

Individuals and small groups

AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA PROGRAM (IMP)

Function

Presents information through sound and motion. IMP is an effective medium for placing works of art in historical and cultural context. Visitors are actively engaged in accessing the information, which might include footage of objects in use and techniques of manufacture, diagramed formal analysis, related documentary maps, discussions of symbolic meaning, and so on.

Application

While presenting broad art historical issues, cultural contexts, or production techniques, IMPs must ultimately focus on objects in the collection. Their primary purpose is to motivate visitors to examine works of art more carefully. Each program should be structured to allow for expansion, but individual segments within a program should be kept short. Three minutes is an optimum length for an individual segment, given production constraints and visitors' attention spans.

IMPs should be located near the works of art featured in the programs. They could also be incorporated into a separate learning center. Problems of residual noise and visual distraction must be addressed when these programs are integrated into the galleries.

Visitor Profile

All ages

Social Unit

Individuals or groups of two or three

AUDIO SYSTEMS

Function

Facilitate guided looking, allowing visitors to explore subtle visual aspects of original works of art while listening to relevant information. For the visually impaired and those who cannot read, audio systems are an important source of information. Programs in foreign languages can also be provided. Audio productions may incorporate dramatic readings of historical documents, contextual sounds, and period music. Some examples are the calls of vendors in a Moroccan marketplace, Gyuoto monks chanting, or a Dakota speaker demonstrating a storytelling tradition.

Application

Access to audio programs should be through speaker-to-ear types of apparatus, which limit the sound to one person. Some devices are portable, and visitors can use them while moving throughout the museum. Others are anchored, for use with nearby artworks. The technology allows visitors to set their own pace, but individual segments within each program should be kept short.

Visitor Profile

All ages

Social Unit

Individuals

SLIDE PROGRAM

Function

Presents visual information in linear form, with or without narration. Slides provide superior optical resolution and can be projected to a large size. Slide programs are well suited to examining the details of artistic technique and conservation procedures. Juxtaposed images can show comparisons, the relationship of parts to a whole, stages of production, and so on.

Application

Timed, automatic slide programming is appropriate for accommodating large numbers of visitors.

Visitor Profile

All ages

Social Unit

Depends on presentation format

CONTINUOUS LOOP VIDEO PROGRAM

Function

Presents visual information in linear form, using motion, with or without narration.

Application

A portable system can be temporarily installed near works of art or in a small viewing room. Continuous loop video programs are appropriate for accommodating large numbers of visitors.

Visitor Profile

All ages

Social Unit

Depends on presentation format

TOURS

Function

Provide information, stressing cultural context, on selected works of art connected by a unifying topic or theme. On tours, visitors can engage in dialogue and ask questions.

Application

Tours are designed to address the specific interests of the group. Regularly scheduled public tours are given daily; group tours can be arranged by appointment. Specialized tours for persons with disabilities are also available by appointment.

Visitor Profile

All ages

Social Unit

Groups of 15 to 20; one-on-one (tours for visually impaired visitors); groups of five or six (tours for visitors with physical disabilities)

LABEL-WRITING GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION

Many art museum visitors do not know enough about art to have a plan for their visit. About 80 percent report that they wander through a museum until something "catches their eye."¹ Their questions are likely to be limited to what things are, how they were used, what the artworks meant to their makers, and why such works are in a museum. Most visitors want their questions answered immediately and will not seek out information, because they consider museum-going a pleasurable leisure-time activity, not a goal-oriented learning experience.² Most have had little or no specialized training in looking at art objects or learning from them. They need help to understand what they see.

The object label is the most common informational format in art museums and is located closest to works of art. Thus it is the principal source of information for most visitors. Labels should therefore address the broadest possible audience.

If object labels are to serve their purpose, visitors must read, understand, and remember them. This section of the book summarizes current research about how people learn in museums and outlines how labels can be written to help them learn. Sample labels illustrate concepts and formats. Although presented as an aid to preparing labels for works of art in the permanent collection, these principles may also be applied to labels for temporary exhibitions.

AUDIENCE

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE

This handbook addresses the needs of visitors with moderate to high interest in art but little or no formal background in art or art history. A profile of these "general visitors" is given in an NEA-funded study by the Denver Art Museum. ³

General visitors commonly expect

- Works of art they find pleasing
- A social experience (most come in groups, often with one person as the reader/interpreter for the others⁴)
- A personal association with the works of art
- Help in understanding the art they are viewing

They are offended or intimidated by

- The implication that their feelings or opinions are wrong
- Incomprehensible jargon and foreign languages
- Inadequate or inappropriate information about artworks

Interpretation is most effective when it focuses on what visitors can see, understand, and respond to based on their own experiences. People learn by relating new ideas, information, or experiences to old ones. At each stage in the learning process they need to feel a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and control before they can proceed. ⁵

QUESTIONS VISITORS OFTEN ASK

The following questions were compiled from evaluations conducted by The Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Denver Art Museum.⁶

What?

What is it?

What is the subject?

What does it mean?

What were the artist's intentions?

What was going on in the world when this was made?

Why?

Why is it in a museum?

Why is it great?

Why does it look like that? (issues of condition, style, function, etc.)

Why was the gallery organized this way?

Who?

Who is/was the artist?

Who was it made for?

Who is represented?

How?

How was it made?

How was it used?

How should I respond to it?

HOW PEOPLE LEARN

MEMORY

Three types of memory are important for learning and recall of written information.⁷

Visual Information Store (VIS)

VIS refers to images stored on the retina of the eye. The amount of information that can enter VIS is large — whatever is in the visual field. Information can be quickly absorbed into and retrieved from VIS. However, it is retained in VIS only one or two seconds; then it is superseded by new information and is lost.

Short-Term Memory (STM)

Information in VIS can be processed into STM. Input and retrieval are fast, but the capacity of STM is small — on average, only seven chunks.

The term *chunk* is used by developmental psychologists who study the learning process. For good readers, the sentence "I went out and danced all night" is seven chunks, since they immediately recognize each word as an entity. But for poor readers, "danced" is six chunks in itself, because they need to recognize each letter in order to comprehend the word. So, although the number of chunks that STM can hold is small, the amount of information in each chunk increases as reading ability improves and knowledge of the subject expands.

Without rehearsal (such as rereading or recapitulation), a single chunk of information is retained in STM for no more than 20 seconds. When memory load is increased to three chunks, average survival time without rehearsal falls to 3 seconds. Thus a single chunk has between 3 and 20 seconds to reach Long-Term Memory (LTM). The ideal label facilitates the transfer of information from STM to LTM by limiting the amount of information and providing opportunities for rehearsal.

Long-Term Memory (LTM)

Entry of information into LTM is slow and requires considerable rehearsal. Once stored, however, the information is normally retained for life within the vast storage capacity of LTM.

Nothing enters LTM from STM unless it can be related, however tangentially, to something already in LTM. Label writers must remember this and try to connect objects and artistic concepts to visitors' experience and knowledge. Knowledgeable museum visitors can process larger new chunks than beginners: they have more chunks already stored in LTM to which the new information can be attached.

Attention

Attention is the mental effort —looking, reading, listening, thinking, understanding, learning, and recalling- — necessary for processing information. If the information is new (as label information is for many museum visitors), then focused attention is required, first to decode the information and then to comprehend it. Too much information diffuses attention and thereby inhibits learning.

Barriers to Learning and Memory

Visitors to museums are faced with a barrage of new information. They must orient themselves within the building, select among a wide choice of exhibits, and read the accompanying didactic information. Much of this information is unfamiliar, so visitors do not know what is important for them to read (artist's name, label text) and what is not (accession number, credit line). When too much unfamiliar information is encountered in too short a time, a bottleneck forms between STM and LTM. The pace at which most visitors move through the museum does not allow adequate rehearsal time for information to be processed into LTM. Since the entry of information into LTM is slow, information backs up in STM, where it decays and is lost after 3 to 20 seconds.

WRITING EFFECTIVE LABELS

Containing the length of labels is like packing for a trip to Europe... we are advised to stack our belongings in three separate piles — (1) the things we would like to take; (2) the things we think we need; and (3) the things we absolutely cannot get along without — and then take only the third group.

— George Weiner, “Why Johnny Can't Read Labels”

STRUCTURING INFORMATION

The ideal label builds on visitors' previous knowledge and answers their most pressing questions about the object. In broader terms, labels sharpen visitors' observational skills and help them make connections between a work of art and its context. The writer's challenge is to determine what information is likely to interest viewers. The label writer may address various aspects of the work of art. However, all aspects cannot be discussed effectively in a single label. Because large amounts of unfamiliar information are impossible to process, labels should be *short* and contain *only one main idea*.

The nature of the object and the context in which it is shown will determine the label's emphasis. Where possible, labels should help visitors make connections among related works.

Recent surveys at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts indicate that visitors' most pressing questions are likely to be about

- Subject (imagery, iconography, referents)
- Content (iconology, allegory, symbolism)
- Function (practical, symbolic, changes over time)
- Cultural and historical context
- Why the object is considered art and why it is in the museum
- Artist (own commentaries on work, own philosophy, pertinent biographical information)
- Technique (how produced)
- Economics (patronage, consumption)

The same surveys indicate that visitors are less interested in

- Unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality, comparative judgments, connoisseurship
- Stylistic development
- Discussions of art theories
- Lengthy artists' biographies
- Provenance (list of owners)

WRITING TO ENCOURAGE LOOKING

Aesthetic experiences usually have one or more of four aspects.⁸

Perceptual (looking)

Emotional (feeling)

Intellectual (thinking)

Communicative (the integration of the other three)

Typically, general visitors have only emotional responses to works of art. By taking emotional responses into account, writers can make labels more effective. When visitors believe that their feelings about an object have been validated, they are more willing to look at and think about art in new ways.⁹

To help general visitors expand their aesthetic experiences, written information should foster a sense of discovery and provide guidance in looking at works of art.¹⁰ Of course we cannot know the background of every visitor, so writers must determine what should be included in labels to benefit the greatest number of visitors.

GOOD WRITERS

First determine

- The audience to be reached
- The concept to be conveyed
- The facts to be communicated

Then create content that

- Assumes little knowledge of the topic
- Relates to common human experience
- Guides looking
- Answers visitors' most pressing questions
- Places the object in a cultural context
- Refers to the object frequently
- Repeats or rephrases key names, words, or ideas

And write using

- Active voice
- Short paragraphs (about 50 words)
- Short sentences (15 to 25 words)
- Short words (four syllables or fewer)
- Few subordinate clauses
- Evocative language
- Figurative language (metaphors and similes)

EXAMPLE OF AN EFFECTIVE LABEL

For general visitors, the most compelling feature of this painting is its symbolism.

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin

French, 1699-1779

The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them, 1766

Oil on canvas

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 52.15

This picture may appear to reproduce the casual clutter of an 18th-century tabletop. Not so: Chardin carefully selected objects to convey specific meanings.

A palette with brushes, placed atop a paint box, symbolizes the art of painting. Building plans, spread beneath drafting and surveying tools, represent architecture. An ornate bronze pitcher alludes to goldsmithing, and the red portfolio symbolizes drawing. The plaster model of J. B. Pigalle's Mercury, an actual work by a friend of Chardin's, stands for sculpture.

The cross on a ribbon is the Order of St. Michael, the highest honor an artist could then receive. Pigalle was the first sculptor to win it. So this painting sends multiple messages: it presents emblems of the arts and of artists' glory and honors a specific artist, Pigalle.

A still life (or painting of objects), which is composed from scratch by its creator, can be used to convey complex meanings.

150 words



EXAMPLE OF AN INEFFECTIVE LABEL

This label fails to address general visitors, for whom the most compelling issue is the painting's symbolism. However, this in-depth, specialized information would be appropriate in a different format, such as an audio program.

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin
French, 1699-1779

The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them, 1766
Oil on canvas

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 52.15

J. B. S. Chardin, born in Paris, had his first art instruction from his father, a master cabinetmaker. In 1713, he began his academic training, and achieved his first recognition in 1726. He was elected a member of the Académie Royale in 1728 and thereafter exhibited at the Paris Salons. He specialized in still life and genre and was championed by the encyclopedist Diderot.

There are several extant versions of this subject, which features a plaster model of Pigalle's famous work. The Hermitage painting is closely related to Minneapolis's and has a provenance reaching back to Catherine II. It may well be the original Salon of 1769 work, though both pictures are signed and dated 1766. Neither should be confused with the Moscow canvas entitled *Attributs des arts avec une tête de Mercure en plâtre*, which shows a bust of Mercury, since this is not Pigalle's Mercury but, instead, a cast of a famous antique portrayal of the messenger of the gods. Recent studies suggest that Minneapolis's painting may in fact be a replica Chardin executed as a gift for Pigalle himself.

182 words

MORE EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE LABELS



This label focuses on the cultural context of an Asian object.

Chinese

Bowl, 18th century
Nephrite

The John R. Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Thomas Barlow Walker Foundation
92.103.12

The form of this modest bowl is based on a *kuei*, a type of bronze ceremonial food vessel used in ancient China. It had great appeal for 18th-century scholars, who were deeply interested in studying antiquity and collecting old objects. Probably used as a water container for a writing table, the bowl was meant to signify its owner's awareness of China's past.

The subtle color, called "mutton fat" in Chinese, was highly esteemed by scholars, who preferred it to the brilliant green and white hues of jadeite.*

88 words

*Nephrite and jadeite are defined in a group label.



This label focuses on the iconography of a decorative arts object.

Attributed to the Methyse Painter

Greek (Attic)

Volute krater, 455-450 B.C.

Slip-glazed earthenware

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Dayton 83.80

The scenes depicted on ancient Greek vessels often relate to the vessels' functions. This volute krater was used for mixing wine and water, so the scenes painted on it relate to Dionysos, the Greek god of wine and merrymaking.

On one side, Dionysos dances between several goatlike creatures (satyrs) and female worshipers (maenads) in a ritual procession. The large wine cup Dionysos carries is a common attribute of this festive god. The revelry continues on the other side of the krater, where two lively satyrs pursue a maenad.

88 words



This label focuses on the function of an African object.

Zaire, Kongo people

Nail figure (nkisi- nkondi), 20th century

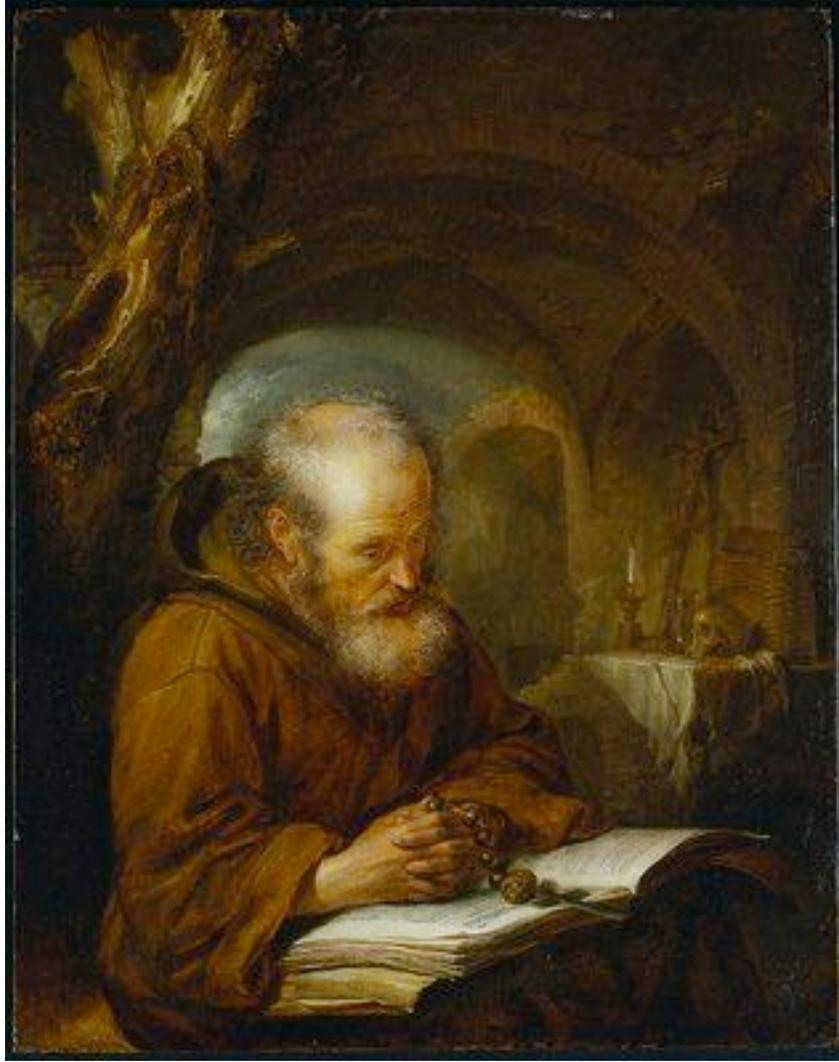
Wood fibers, nails

The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund 71.3

Kongo people traditionally used *nkisi nkondi* figures to settle legal disputes, seal agreements, and heal the sick. The powerful spirit residing in an *nkisi* figure could be called upon by the religious specialist, usually a prominent man, who was responsible for the spiritual and physical well-being of his village.

When necessary, the figure was brought outside in public view and its spirit activated by driving in blades or nails. The materials, facial expression, and pose of *nkisi* figures convey their strength and power, and each blade or nail represents an oath, an agreement, or an episode in village history. Only a few Kongo villages still follow this practice today.

110 words



This label focuses on the technique of a western painting.

Gerrit Dou

Dutch, 1613-75

A Hermit Praying, 1670

Oil on panel

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 87.11

Dou developed a style of painting noted for an almost microscopic rendering of detail. Known as “fine painting,” his technique was widely imitated in Holland, but his own skill remained unsurpassed. Dou’s reputation was so great that clients paid enormous sums for his pictures.

Dou used a variety of small brushes and worked with magnifying glasses to paint details with extraordinary exactitude. In *A Hermit Praying* he showed individual hairs in the hermit’s beard and every wrinkle on his face. He even represented dirt under the hermit’s fingernails.

Dou used light for supernatural effect in his religious and moralizing subjects. The strong light on the hermit’s head and the Holy Scriptures suggests that salvation can be sought through pious devotion. The shaded areas enveloping the hermit contain many symbols of earthly decay that contrast with the intense illumination of divine truth.

141 words



This label focuses on the significance of a textile.

Egyptian (Coptic)

Hanging with a Latin cross, 5th-7th century

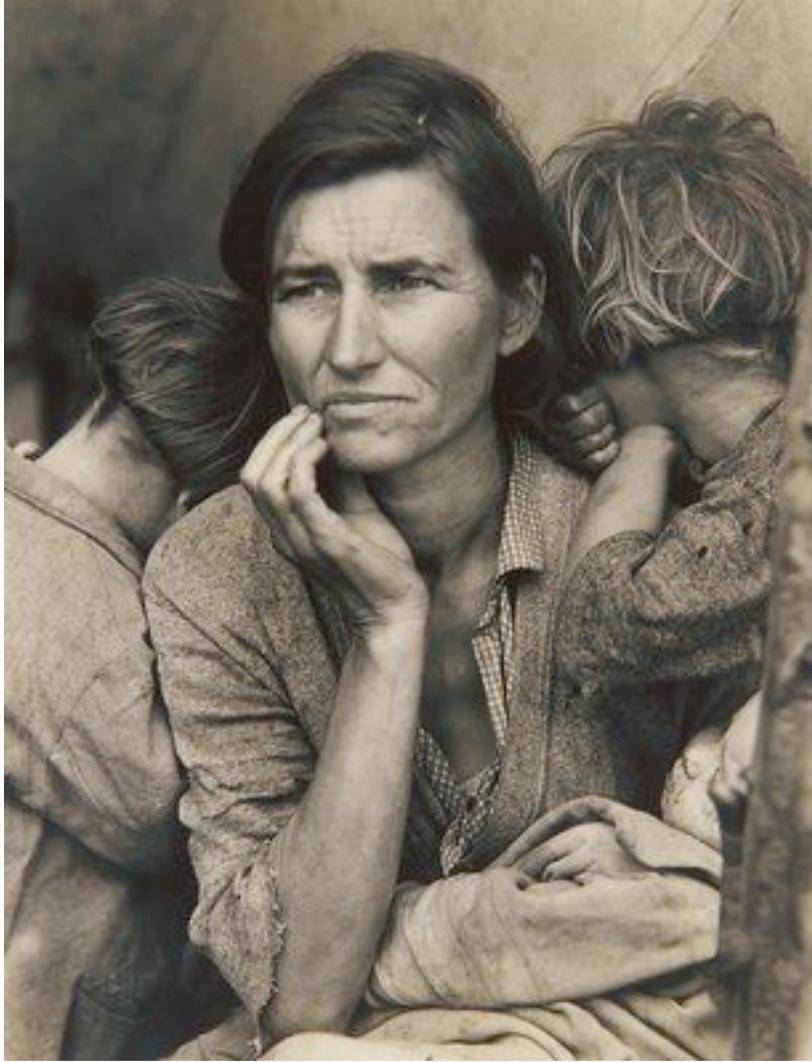
Linen and wool

Gift of the Aimee Mott Butler Charitable Trust, Mr. and Mrs. John F. Donovan, the estate of Margaret D. Hawks, and Eleanor Weld Reid 83.126

This textile was made by Copts (Egyptian Christians). Few major Coptic textiles have survived to our time, and those that still exist seldom contain Christian images. This hanging, however, contains many Christian symbols. The cross refers to Jesus Christ's crucifixion. The wreath is a Greco-Roman emblem of victory; combined with the cross, it symbolizes Christ's triumph over death. The fruit and flowers surrounding the cross signify the renewed life that Christians expect in heaven.

The design of the cross is also rare. When crosses appear in Coptic textiles, usually all four arms are the same length (a Greek cross). Only a few Coptic textiles show the Latin cross, with three short arms and one long one.

117 words



This label focuses on a photographer's vision.

This label focuses on a photographer's vision.

Dorothea Lange

American, 1895-1965

Migrant Mother, 1936

Gelatin silver print

Alfred and Ingrid Lenz Harrison Fund 92.136

Dorothea Lange made this photograph in February 1936 while employed by the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. She labeled it as follows:

Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother age 32. Father is native Californian. Destitute in pea-pickers' camp Nipomo, California, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tires in order to buy food. Of the 2500 people in the camp most of them were destitute.

The photograph accomplished the goal of the agency's documentary photography program at the time, which was to promote action on behalf of the poor. The agency's position was that such poverty was a temporary aberration that action, compassion, and Democratic policies, such as the New Deal, would correct.

126 words



This label focuses on the expressive use of medium in a print.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

German, 1880-1938

Portrait of Ludwig Schames, 1918

Woodcut

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 1965 P.13,425

The subject of this print is the artist's dealer, Ludwig Schames (1852-1922), who had established a gallery in Frankfurt in 1895. Four major exhibitions of Kirchner's paintings, sculptures, drawings, watercolors and prints, organized by Schames between 1916 and 1922, secured Kirchner's reputation in Germany and worldwide.

Woodcut is a relief process in which the artist draws the design on a wooden block. Areas meant to remain white are carved away with a knife and gouge, leaving the lines to be printed standing in relief. The block is inked, paper is placed upon it, and then it is run through a printing press.

In the first decade of the 20th century, Kirchner and his fellow German Expressionists exploited the directness of this medium. Kirchner's dynamic white lines and brooding passages of black tone evoke the sensitive personality of Schames, who could appreciate Kirchner's "bohemian" temperament and foster his genius.

148 words



This label explains how a piece of furniture was made.

John Scott Bradstreet

American, 1845-1914

Table, about 1906

Cypress wood

Gift of Wheaton Wood 82.43.11

This table was made in John Bradstreet's Minneapolis Craftshouse, which opened in 1904. There Bradstreet sold furniture of his own design and also imported items, especially objects from Japan, which were his particular passion.

The technique used here is Bradstreet's adaptation of *jin-di-sugi*, a Japanese wood treatment for artificially aging cypress. Bradstreet's method called for first charring the wood to remove the soft outer fibers and then scrubbing the inner layers with a brush to reveal the grain. The treated wood was carved, often with motifs from Japanese art, such as the lotus leaf seen here. Then it was stained either brown or green, and the carving was often highlighted with paint or gold leaf.

117 words



This label challenges visitors to look beyond the obvious.

Chuck Close

American, born 1940

Frank, 1969

Acrylic on canvas

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 69.137

Chuck Close first takes a photograph of his subject. Copying the small image meticulously in paint onto a very large canvas, he retains the cool, objective feel of photography.

A picture of such large scale (typical of American painting after 1950) is unsettling when it features only a huge head. “The large scale,” Close explains, “forces the viewer to read the surface of the painting differently... look at it piece by piece.” The details can then be perceived either as pores, hairs, and pimples or as an abstract pattern.

Close also reproduces the way the camera, like the human eye, focuses on only one area at a time, leaving other areas blurred. In these ways, he directs our attention to some intriguing aspects of visual perception.

126 words

OUTLINES

Many writers find that using an outline helps them define their goals and stick to them as they write. The label-writing worksheet shown here can help determine the purpose of a particular label and the ideas and facts to be conveyed.

<p>What is the main goal? To explain why a Coptic textile is considered significant</p>
<p>Who is the audience? What is the setting? General visitors Temporary installation</p>
<p>What is the information? Textile has many Christian symbols, which is unusual Copts are Egyptian Christians Design is a Greek cross, not the more typical Latin cross Only a few major textiles survive</p>
<p>Rank the information</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Copts are Egyptian Christians2. Only a few major textiles survive3. Textile has many Christian symbols, which is unusual4. Design is a Greek cross, not the more typical Latin cross

LABEL-WRITING POLICY

Any label produced by The Minneapolis Institute of Arts should adhere to these guidelines. They are consistent with those in the Interpretive Media Table, which covers all informational systems.

FORMAT AND LENGTH

Gallery Identification

Function: Establishes place, time, or subject

Length: About 10 words

Gallery or Section Panel

Function: Articulates an organizing idea for a group of objects and provides a context in which to consider works of art

Length: 150 words; 100 words if there are two panels in a gallery

Group Label

Function: Draws attention to characteristics shared by all objects in a group

Length: 100 to 150 words

Object Identification

Function: Identifies maker and maker's date, country or culture, title or object type, date, medium, purchase fund, and accession number

Length: No text

Extended Object Label

Function: Discusses the most compelling features of a work of art or answers the visitor's most pressing questions

Length: 100 to 150 words

Caption

Function: Accompanies photos, maps, diagrams, and so forth

Length: About 30 words

USE OF LANGUAGE

Unfamiliar vocabulary and complex grammatical structure can be barriers to learning in museums. Every attempt should be made to eliminate technical and subjective language and unnecessary foreign terminology. Interpretive materials should be gender-fair and free of cultural bias.

Technical Language

Art history has specialized terminology that museum professionals use fluently and unconsciously. General visitors do not understand these terms. Such language makes labels difficult to comprehend and wastes time better spent looking at objects.

Define art historical terms, or avoid them and use nontechnical language. Describe media in language that general visitors will likely be familiar with.

painted in several colors rather than *polychromed*

Describe materials without reference to process unless omitting the process will confuse viewers.

carved wood should be shortened to *wood*

silver-plated brass remains *silver-plated brass*, because calling it brass when it looks like silver would confuse viewers

If the process is the most important information about a particular object, provide an explanation in the label text.

Jin-di-sugi is a technique John Bradstreet used to age cypress wood artificially. The wood is burned to remove the soft fibers and then scrubbed with wire brushes to highlight the remaining hard grain. The resulting three-dimensional pattern appears very old.

Subjective Language

Subjective language should be supported by objective reasons. General visitors want to know why objects in a museum are good, not simply that they are good.¹¹ For example, discuss the artist's technical accomplishments, the rarity of the object, the object's conceptual importance, or how the object satisfies the aesthetic criteria of the culture it represents.

Foreign Titles and Terminology

Foreign words often confuse or intimidate general visitors. Because they require translation, they also make a label longer, triggering a drop in readership.¹² If the English title is given first, readers can jump to the label text without struggling over foreign words. For titles given by the artist or conventionally used, give the English translation followed by the original-language title in parentheses. For generic descriptions such as landscape or still life, only English is necessary. If a translation would not adequately convey the meaning of the title (e.g., Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*), explain the foreign title in the label text.

Some terms from other languages (bodhisat~va, krater, majolica) have no equivalents in English. These can remain in the original language with an English translation in parentheses or an explanation in the text.

Gender

Eliminate generic use of masculine-gender language whenever possible.

- Use plural subjects
- Use *she* and *he* only with reference to actual people. Avoid *he* or *she* and *him* or *her*.
- Rewrite so that a pronoun is not necessary
- Find substitutes for frequently used masculine words (*person* and *people* for *man* and *men*, *humankind* or *humanity* for *mankind*, *solo exhibition* for *one-man show*).

Cultures

The terminology and approach used in describing and discussing cultures must be neutral. Writers need to be sensitive to changes in the terms preferred by cultural communities. We use the following, knowing that they may be supplanted by others in the future.

African American, Asian American, Native American or American Indian, European American (noun), Euro-American (adjective)

COLLABORATION

The following procedure allows curators, educators, editors, and general visitors opportunities to check the style, content, and accessibility of labels. Before beginning the procedure, curators must determine the interpretive focus of the label, bearing in mind what visitors can see in the object and the questions that they frequently ask. The focus must relate to the overall interpretive plan for the gallery in which the object is installed, as developed by curators, along with the chairs of the Curatorial and Education divisions, and reviewed by the Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation and the director.

1. Curator or educational materials writer prepares first draft, depending on the curator's preference.
2. Curator and writer work together to ensure that the label is effective for visitors.
3. Writer rewrites and curator reviews as necessary.
4. Curator approves text.
5. Editor edits text.
6. Curator and writer approve edited text.
7. Designer designs label.
8. Label is produced.
9. Label is installed.

Staff will periodically evaluate labels to ensure that they meet the expectations and needs of the museum and its visitors. A variety of evaluation techniques will be used before, during, and after labels are written. For example, before writing a label staff might assess visitors' knowledge to uncover any misconceptions that need to be addressed, or staff might ask visitors to comment on a completed label to determine if it has communicated the intended message.¹³

DESIGN

DESIGN SPECIFICATIONS

An ideal object label design should conform to the following standards.¹⁴

- Type size of 18 to 24 points
- Line length of 8 to 12 words
- At least 70 percent contrast between label color and type color

Type size and contrast should be increased if the label will be difficult to see when installed (placed behind glass, seen in low light, on a low pedestal).

Every attempt should be made to adhere to the museum's standard type specifications for each label format.

INFORMATION MAPPING

Learning and memory are aided by visible structure in written materials and by graphic presentation of complex information.

Visible Structure

The reader should be able to see the structure of the text instantly. *When appropriate*, the writer can use bullets, headings, and bold type.

- *Bullets* attract the eye and help break information into manageable parts.
- *Headings* provide a visible outline and multiple points of access to the information, giving different types of readers with different purposes rapid access to the level of detail they want or need.
- *Bold type* can quickly draw the reader's eye to important words, phrases, or paragraphs. It should be used sparingly and is more appropriate in didactic panels or information structured as lists than in standard extended object labels.

GRAPHICS

Use graphics (maps, photos, diagrams) if they communicate an idea more powerfully or succinctly than words.

Notes

Institute staff can obtain most of these references from the Education Division. Those marked with a bullet (•) are especially recommended.

1. Melora McDermott-Lewis, "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," in *The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project* (Denver Art Museum, 1990), p. 12
2. Marilyn G. Hood, "Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums," *Museum News* 61, no. 4 (1983): 51.
3. See McDermott-Lewis, "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs."
4. Paulette M. McManus, "Oh, Yes, They Do: How Museum Visitors Read Labels and Interact with Exhibit Texts," *Curator* 32, no. 3 (1989): 175.
5. Douglas Worts, "In Search of Meaning: 'Reflexive Practice' and Museums," 1991 *Program Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1991), p. 328; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985), pp.44, 191-96.
6. "An Evaluation of Existing MIA Object Labels in Preparation for Reinstallation and Relabeling" (Report prepared by the Education Division of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1992); focus group interviews conducted by the Denver Art Museum, 1986.
7. All the information on memory, attention, and barriers to learning is contained on pages 7-26 of S. Jay Samuels, "Some Essential Label-Writing Considerations for Museum Professionals: A Review of How People Learn and Remember, and What Kinds of Texts Are Most Effective" (Paper commissioned by The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1~88).
8. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Malibu, Calif.: The J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1990), pp. 27-71.
9. McDermott-Lewis, "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," pp. 12-13; Melora McDermott, "Through Their Eyes: What Novices Value in Art Experiences,"

1988 *Program Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1988), p. 9; Douglas Worts, "Art Museums and Their Visitors: An Assessment of the Role of Self-Identity in the Visitor Experience" (Paper presented at the Museum Studies Colloquium, University of Toronto, 1990), pp. 2, 6

10. Marlene Chambers, "To Create Discovery," *Museum News* 68, no. 3 (1989): 41-44.

11. McDermott-Lewis, "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," pp. 23-24.

12. Stephen Bitgood et al., *Effects of Label Characteristics on Visitor Behavior in Museums*, Psychology Institute, Jacksonville State University); Technical Report no. 86-55 (Jacksonville, Ala., 1986), p. 7.

13. For a comprehensive overview of evaluation techniques and their uses, see C. G. Screven, "Uses of Evaluation before, during, and after Exhibit Design," *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior* 1, no. 2 [Spring 1990]: 36-66.

14. See Beverly Serrell, *Making Exhibit Labels: A Step-by-Step Guide* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), pp. 64-65; idem, "Formative Evaluation of Signs" (Paper presented at the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums Regional Proceedings, 1989); Jeffrey K. Smith and Lisa F. Wolf, "Labeling Study Summary" (Office of Education Research and Evaluation, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1991), pp. 7-9; "A Multidisciplinary Assessment of the State of the Art of Signage for Blind and Low Vision Persons" (Report prepared for the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, Washington, D.C., 1985), p. 16.

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