Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2013

What makes an exhibition label excellent? As museum professionals, we know there are no simple answers to this question. In fact, this competition was designed to demonstrate, rather than define, label writing excellence.

2013 also marks a new era for the competition, which is now a collaboration between AAM's Curators' Committee and the Museology Graduate Program at the University of Washington. The goal is to keep the competition fresh and ensure that the next generation of museum professionals is exposed to the best work in the field.

This year, we received a record 155 labels from writers and editors around the world. Submissions came from small and large museums, freelancers, and exhibition development companies. We thank each of them for their work and applaud their efforts in advancing label writing practices.

A panel of four jurors reviewed the entries and chose 12 to honor. We gratefully acknowledge the jurors' time, contributions, and expertise, without which this initiative would not be possible. We also extend our gratitude to AAM for supporting the competition and to CurCom for sponsoring it in cooperation with EdCom and NAME.

Finally, thank *you* for attending the Marketplace of Ideas. We hope you are inspired by what you see and the conversations you have. Please consider submitting entries to the 2014 competition at www.curcom.org this fall.

John Russick
Competition Organizer;
Director of Curatorial Affairs,
Chicago History Museum

Andrea Michelbach
Competition Project Manager;
Museology Graduate Student,
University of Washington

The Jurors

REPRESENTING CURCOM

Jeanine Head Miller

Curator of Domestic Life,
The Henry Ford Museum

An excellent label is one that connects with its audience and leaves them with something meaningful and memorable.

Imagine the people who will be reading the label then "talk" to them—think of the words as a conversation with visitors.

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

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

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

REPRESENTING EDCOM

Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Director for Planning and Design,
National Aquarium

An excellent label speaks to me as I'm forming my question, gives me just the right nugget of information to engage my 4-year-old and reminds my dad why he wanted to come to the exhibition. Each word is there to do a job.

My favorite labels help me slow down and look more closely, draw a picture I cannot forget, evoke an emotion, start a conversation, or build a bridge to a new way of thinking about the topic.

REPRESENTING NAME

Eugene Dillenburg

Assistant Director for Exhibits, University of Michigan Museum of Natural History

Paul Martin, VP of Science Learning at the Science Museum of Minnesota, likes to say that exhibits are great places to learn, but lousy places to teach. The formal qualities inherent in the medium—its physicality, non-linearity, social context, free-choice nature, etc.—mitigate against the transfer of specific information.

The exhibit, therefore, should strive to not only engage the visitor on an intellectual level but, more importantly, on a physical and emotional level as well. The visitor should walk away knowing something, but also feeling something—wonder, excitement, concern, surprise, anger, joy, or simply an appreciation of the coolness and the realness of the world revealed to their senses.

Some of these labels are like the silence of flooded houses. That's all I have to say.

RESPRESENTING THE 2012 AWARDEES

Shasta Bray

Interpretive Media Manager,
Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden

To read, or not to read: that is the question visitors ask themselves when they encounter an exhibit label. An excellent exhibit label must first strike a visual balance that grabs the visitors' attention and entices them to read it. Too much text, boring title, uninspired design—and they won't read it.

An excellent label should be easy to read; the words are familiar, the concepts are clear, and the sentences flow naturally from one to the next. It appeals to both the heart and the mind. More than just providing basic information, the label appeals to visitors' emotions. It relates to their personal experiences. It provokes them to think about the object or topic in a new way. Visitors leave with a greater appreciation and understanding of the exhibit after reading an excellent label.

The 2013 Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition is dedicated to the memory of Janet Kamien, a great friend and mentor.

Writer: **Jennifer Chapman**

Editor: **Paul Dusenberry**

Discover Tech

National Center for Interactive Learning at the Space Science Institute
Boulder, CO

Target audience: **Elementary school children and their families**

Label type: **Introductory**

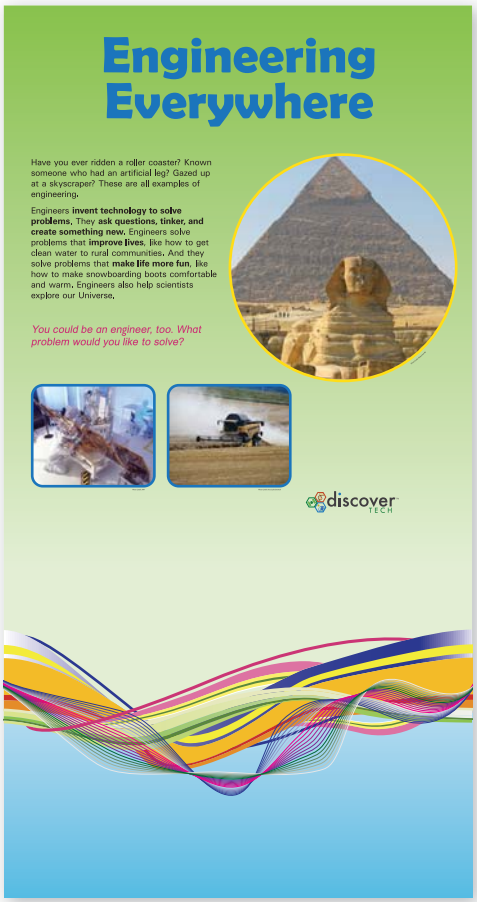
Praise from the Jurors

Do you think engineering is boring? You won't after reading this label. Stereotypes are shattered—as the writer intended—through an effortless read that is conversational and accessible. Engineers are "wizards" of innovation—they invent things that make a difference in every aspect of our lives! Aimed at a kid audience, the label starts with something fun and familiar (roller coasters), and then takes them beyond (providing clean water). The label also invites its young readers to join in the creativity of engineering, engaging kids on a personal level by asking what problem they would like to solve.

—Jeanine Head Miller

This label engaged me in conversation immediately and tapped into my memories and questions about how things work. The engaging questions, active voice, and clear, vivid examples grabbed and held my attention. The voice and tone of the label also communicated what kind of experience to expect in the exhibition.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg



Engineering Everywhere

Have you ever ridden a roller coaster? Known someone who had an artificial leg? Gazed up at a skyscraper? These are all examples of engineering.

Engineers **invent technology to solve problems.** They **ask questions, tinker, and create something new.** Engineers solve problems that **improve lives,** like how to get clean water to rural communities. And they solve problems that **make life more fun,** like how to make snowboarding boots comfortable and warm. Engineers also help scientists explore our Universe.

You could be an engineer, too. What problem would you like to solve?

Writer: **Sarah Bartlett**

Editor: **Amber Alvarez**

A Place Called Poarch

Poarch Band of Creek Indians Museum
Atmore, AL

Target audience: **Tribal members and their families, many of whom possess lower levels of literacy**

Label type: **Introductory**

Praise from the Jurors

Evocative and conversational, this label does a nice job of conjuring up physical sensations and tying them to the feeling and meaning of "home." I'd re-arrange the paragraphs, though.

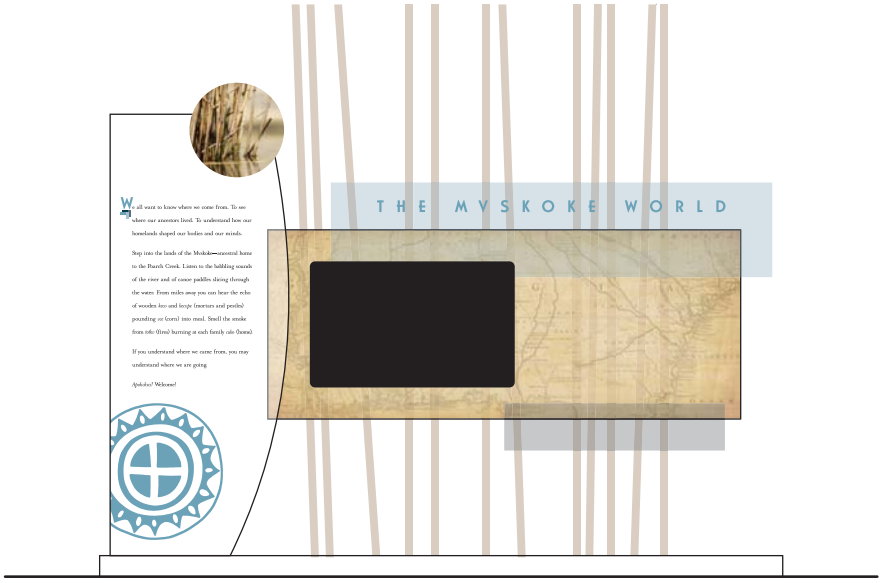
—Eugene Dillenburg

The label immediately draws me in. I do want to know where I come from. To see where my ancestors lived. To understand how our homelands shaped our bodies and minds. It introduces me to this past world, places me in the scene. The use of native language strengthens that connection. From this introductory label, I know what to expect from the rest of the exhibit.

—Shasta Bray

This label very effectively draws its readers in. Evocative and conversational, it offers tantalizing glimpses of ancestral lands and the native people who inhabited them. A story is about to unfold. And we understand why making this "journey" matters.

—Jeanine Head Miller



THE MVSKOKE WORLD

We all want to know where we come from. To see where our ancestors lived. To understand how our homelands shaped our bodies and our minds.

Step into the lands of the Mvskoke—ancestral home to the Poarch Creek. Listen to the babbling sounds of the river and of canoe paddles slicing through the water. From miles away you can hear the echo of wooden *keco* and *kecvpe* (mortars and pestles) pounding *vce* (corn) into meal. Smell the smoke from *totkv* (fires) burning at each family *cuko* (home).

If you understand where we came from, you may understand where we are going.

Apokvksci! Welcome!

Writer: **Brian H. Peterson**

Editor: **Paula Brisco**

Making Magic: Beauty in Word and Image

James A Michener Art Museum
Doylestown, PA

Target audience: **Any adult or child who has thought about beauty, or, anyone who hasn't.**

Label type: **Object**

Praise from the Jurors

I want to see this photograph and follow the writer's journey into the scene, soaking up the "ordinary everyday beauty of watermelons, frying pans." The poetic form was a lovely surprise and welcome shift in voice that invited me to explore what I saw in the photograph as the writer explored.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Powerfully physical, profoundly personal. A bit self-conscious, perhaps, but then, that is its strength. These are the real words of a real person, not some anonymous institution. It's even signed—own it!

—Eugene Dillenburg

This label beckons the viewer to experience every poetic detail of the ordinary and everyday—and feel the beauty and life within these familiar objects as they are caressed by a soft light. The writer, in gracefully personal language, helps us to savor the visceral exploration of the image before us.

—Jeanine Head Miller

Andrea Baldeck (b. 1950)
Cumberland Island, Georgia
2000

Two watermelons. An old frying pan. Four lemons. Sink, with a fixture that looks like my high school chemistry lab. Cupboards full of glasses, plates, bowls, neatly arranged. A barely seen window, but from that window the light comes in, not harsh sunlight, but a soft interior light that works its way into every surface. All these things are alive, as if they could breathe and metabolize and try desperately to find the necessary words that praise the ordinary everyday beauty of watermelons, frying pans, and neatly stacked saucers. In the end, it's all about the light. The end, and the beginning. Light. —BHP

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Writers: **Rose May** and **Stephanie Knappe**

Editors: **Brittany Lockard** and **Emily Black Fry**

Run Wild! American Imagination on Paper

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Kansas City, MO

Target audience: **Casual museum-goers, lovers of American Art, lovers of art on paper, children, and technophiles**

Label type: **Object**

Charles Ephraim Burchfield
American, 1893–1967
Song of the Cicada: A Study of Summer Heat and Insect Rhythms, undated
Charcoal and India ink on paper

Imagine August. Feel the press of the hot, humid air against your skin. A sluggish breeze carries the scent of browning grass, and everywhere the swelling crescendo of cicada song rises and falls, rises and falls. How does Charles Ephraim Burchfield visually convey this experience? How does he evoke such physical sensations as summer heat and the sound of insects through the simple means of charcoal, ink and paper?

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. C. Humbert Tinsman Jr. and Mr. and Mrs. James E. C. Tinsman in memory of C. Humbert and Julia Tinsman, 2002.12.1

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Praise from the Jurors

This label took me into the swelter of August through vivid and evocative description. It invited me to notice and talk about how the art evoked those same feelings and memories. The rhythm of sentence structure "the sweltering crescendo of cicadas, rises and falls, rise and falls" and the specific vivid descriptors "sluggish breeze carries the scent of browning grass" call on all of my senses.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

I've been there. I have lived that August. And I have heard the sibilance of the cicada, so neatly echoed in these lines. I only hope the object does this label justice.

—Eugene Dillenburg

This evocative label immerses us in the multi-sensory experience of late summer. Then it invites us to look at the image before us more deeply. How did the artist—using only charcoal and ink on paper—represent visually things only heard and felt? No jargon here—just a little guidance to encourage active looking.

—Jeanine Head Miller

Writer/Editor: **Judy Tasse**

The Inside Story

National Zoological Park
Washington, DC

Target audience: **General audience, especially families with children**

Label type: **Object**

Praise from the Jurors

I can see that mole. I can feel the power in his forearms, the claustrophobia of his tunnel, the frenetic energy necessary to constantly dig! Dig! DIG! I can even respect him, for a moment, as I reach for my shovel.

—Eugene Dillenburg

I like how this label creates an image with simple and straightforward language that sticks to a clear theme. Beyond that, it gives the reader some great information about the mole's adaptations. And it's fun!

—Shasta Bray

DIG!

Stout bones and strong claws come in handy for life underground. They give the mole's forepaws power and leverage. Tunneling through the ground, a mole pokes its snout forward as its forepaws dig and push soil to the sides in a "breaststroke".

Writer: **Kimberly Nelson**

Over the Mountain to Independence

Overmountain Victory National Historic
Trail Visitor Center
Abingdon, VA

Target audience: **General population, Revolutionary War enthusiasts**

Label type: **Introductory**

Praise from the Jurors

YEAH, baby! TELL it like it IS!

—Eugene Dillenburg

The seventeen words in this label speak volumes. They offer facts yet communicate emotion. Not by describing the fear and uncertainty faced by these backcountry women, but by allowing us to generate these emotions from within ourselves. It's much more powerful and personal. This spare—yet immersive—label makes you wonder how you would handle these mounting challenges to protect your family.

—Jeanine Head Miller

I will use a greater number of words describing the merits of this label than the label does itself. In fact, I did so in just that first sentence. The words are those of a backcountry woman who lives a harsh life with a precarious future. She has no time, no energy, for extra words. I understand in an instant just how dire her situation is, and I feel for her. I wonder what will happen to her.

—Shasta Bray

BACKCOUNTRY WOMEN

MOUTHS TO **FEED.**
MEN OFF TO **FIGHT.**
INDIANS ARE NEAR.
COLD IS SETTING IN.
BABY IS SICK.

Writers: **Sarah Winski** and **Daniel Okrent**

Editors: **Erin McLeary** and **Mary Jane Taylor**

American Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition

National Constitution Center
Philadelphia, PA

Target audience: **Students in grades 6–12 and general family and adult visitors**

Label type: **Concept**

Praise from the Jurors

Reading these labels made me want to visit the exhibition. The surprise of the Abraham Lincoln quote grabbed me immediately. And then the Franklin story about "a list of 228 synonyms for 'drunk'" cleverly communicated the severity of the problem in a way stating it never would. The details of daily life painted a vivid picture of a different way of understanding life in the 1800s and what laid the groundwork for prohibition.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Through a few choice, vivid examples (Ben Franklin's list, the ubiquitous hard cider barrel, grog time, and drunken dinner party guests) we sure do get the point: alcohol really was everywhere! Readers will likely be surprised to learn that Americans once drank so much and will be curious to find out just how severely this "national binge" played itself out.

—Jeanine Head Miller

The past is a foreign country, and the precise details, presented without elaboration, express just how foreign—and yet also familiar—it is.

—Eugene Dillenburg

"[I]ntoxicating liquor [was] used by everybody, repudiated by nobody. It commonly entered into the first draught of an infant, and the last thought of the dying man."

—Abraham Lincoln, 1842

ALCOHOL was EVERYWHERE to a *devastating effect*

How much did early Americans drink? One hint: as far back as 1737, Benjamin Franklin was able to compile a list of 228 synonyms for "drunk."

By the early 1800s, the country was swimming—and nearly drowning—in liquor. A barrel of hard cider sat by the door of thousands of farmhouses, available to everyone in the family. In many cities, the tolling of a bell at 11 a.m. and again at 4 p.m. marked "grog time," when workers were granted an alcohol-soaked break. And the wealthy might drink their evenings away in hotel dining rooms or at lavish dinner parties.

The consequences of this national binge would be severe.

Writer/Editor: **Lisa Roberts**

The Art of Nature

Openlands Lakeshore Preserve
Chicago, IL

Target audience: **General**

Label type: **Object and Concept**

Praise from the Jurors

Such sensitive attention to meter: short, choppy, lines, holding back the flood, then an elegant profusion of dactyls and trochees. Such amazing echoes of assonance and consonance. Even the form, imitative of a meandering stream, carries meaning. I want to see this sculpture!

—Eugene Dillenburg

This surprising and provocative approach engaged my attention and I read the label over and over. I even looked up the art. The writer successfully gave voice to the art and communicated the urgency and insistence of water and provided the intended "aesthetic, affective 'message' about nature." This is a great example of deliberately developing a specific interpretive approach that will further the overall goal of the exhibition making every piece of the experience support the intended visitor experience of connection to nature.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

ERODE

VIVIAN VISSER
wood and steel
2011

Storm of raindrops
flowing water
SEEKING, SEARCHING
absorbent ground
sewer's mouth
somewhere to go
instead: ebbing and flowing
across a concrete blockade
hard and unyielding
UNTIL
making a break for lower ground
a way is found
insistent
powerful
reviving a stream that no longer exists
cutting a course that should not be
finding the lake it seeks to join.

Writer/Editor: **Lisa Roberts**

The Art of Nature

Openlands Lakeshore Preserve
Chicago, IL

Target audience: **General**

Label type: **Object and Concept**

Praise from the Jurors

This graceful label provides observations of the natural world that surrounds us. Eloquent words, with nothing extraneous. Gently poetic, yet profound. And memorable—I'll never look at the color green in quite the same way again.

—Jeanine Head Miller

This label was a pleasure to read. It took me back to Costa Rica where I was struck by just how many different shades of green colored the rainforest. The last phrase "an ancient adaptation" provokes the reader to think about why we can distinguish so many shades of green, giving it greater significance.

—Shasta Bray

LEAF PRISM

OLIVIA PETRIDES
aluminum and paint
2011

It has been said
the color *GREEN*
appears in nature
in thousands of distinct hues
and furthermore
that humans can distinguish
more shades of green
than any other color

SURELY
an ancient adaptation.

Writer: **Beth Kaminsky**

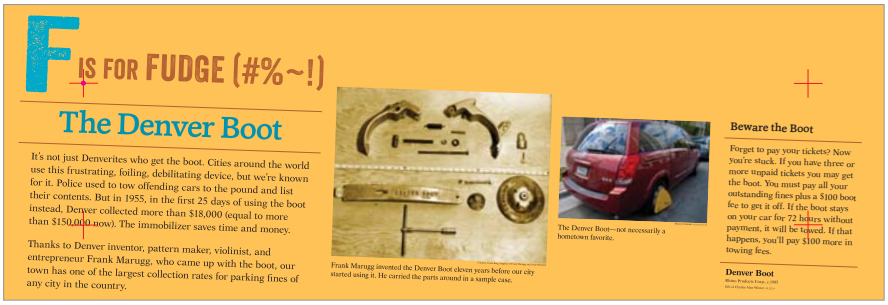
Editor: **Steve Grinstead**

Denver A to Z

History Colorado Center
Denver, CO

Target audience: **Families with children and Denver metro-area residents**

Label type: **Concept**



Praise from the Jurors

If it weren't for the "(#%~!)" in the title, I would expect the topic of this label to be fudge, literally. Instead, it piques my curiosity. That it goes on to highlight the boot was totally unexpected. Even more impressive is how the label gives character to a universally despised inanimate object through its humorous tone and tongue-in-cheek pride. It even gives the boot a fun nickname, the "immobilizer."

—Shasta Bray

The writer clearly had a good time writing this label taking the reader from their negative association of the boot to the story of Denver-grown innovation. Who knew that the boot made such a difference for cities all over? And clearly, don't get parking tickets in Denver. This label approach sought to build relevance between visitors and Denver, and it succeeds with humor to boot.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Ha! The twist in the title delights. And the story, enlivened by alliteration, gives life and history to a mundane object which you may have never thought had either.

—Eugene Dillenburg

F IS FOR FUDGE (#%~!)

The Denver Boot

It's not just Denverites who get the boot. Cities around the world use this frustrating, foiling, debilitating device, but we're known for it. Police used to tow offending cars to the pound and list their contents. But in 1955, in the first 25 days of using the boot instead, Denver collected more than $18,000 (equal to more than $150,000 now). The immobilizer saves time and money.

Thanks to Denver inventor, pattern maker, violinist, and entrepreneur Frank Marugg, who came up with the boot, our town has one of the largest collection rates for parking fines of any city in the country.

Writer: **Raúl Nava**

Editors: **Elizabeth Labor, Melissa Snyder, Eileen Campbell** and **Farallon Media**

The Jellies Experience

Monterey Bay Aquarium
Monterey, CA

Target audience: **General aquarium audience: teens, adults, and families**

Label type: **Object**

Praise from the Jurors

This gently engaging label provides a sensory exploration of jellies through a few well-chosen word pictures. We can sense the jelly's contentment as it lies upside down, feels the gentle roll of tropical seawaters, and basks in the filtered sun. Many labels might explore a creature's activities, but not all manage to seamlessly capture the subtleties of its personal sensory experience too.

—Jeanine Head Miller

This playful label invites the reader to laugh and look closely at the jelly—what animals have "lacy underparts"? Why yes these do! At the same time the writer clearly conveys why this animal lives upside down and slips in a little of the 60s theme—"lets the sun shine in." What a fun read.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Upside-down jelly
Medusa invertida
Cassiopea sp.

Upside down, this jelly shows off its radiant nature

Down is up for this jelly—it rests its bell on the seafloor and waves its lacy underparts up toward the sun.

The ruffled parts carry tiny algae that help nourish the jelly. By living topsy-turvy, the jelly lets the sun shine in to feed its algae.

Range: worldwide in tropical waters

Writers: **Therese Littleton** and **Judy Rand**

Editor: **Judy Rand**

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Visitor Center
Seattle, WA

Target audience: **Tourists and families, children ages 10 and up**

Label type: **Concept**

A clean, safe bathroom!
Aren't you relieved?

A toilet that flushes into a working sewer is nothing to take for granted.

Especially when you hear that more than 2.5 billion people worldwide don't have toilets or latrines. They "go to the bathroom" outdoors, which can contaminate their fields, water, and food.

People need toilets—and a safe way to dispose of sewage—to live healthy lives.

Praise from the Jurors

I love that this label shares a joke with the reader right off the bat—connecting with one of the most frequent and common experiences at any museum or public facility. Then the writer gently brings the reader along, "Especially when you hear" to share simple and dramatic facts about plumbing and toilets and the impact on health. The reader is left feeling appreciative that a clean toilet is available and curious about how they might make a difference for people who don't have that. The discipline of brevity, precise choice of words, and consistent focus on accessibility show admirable commitment to reaching the audience with the subject matter in a way that engages them to consider their values.

—Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

We all love potty humor, and this label uses it to diffuse the stark reality that millions of people do not have "a safe way to dispose of sewage." The clear message is a call to action. After reading the label, I want to learn more about the issue and what can be done to alleviate it.

—Shasta Bray