

ABSTRACT

Museum interpretation is used in various forms to allow visitors to learn and understand museum topics. This research capstone will investigate the effect museum exhibit labels have on visitor engagement. Through an investigation of the literature, this capstone will involve the creation of interpretive exhibit labels and evaluation of their effectiveness on visitor engagement and learning.

KEYWORDS

Interpretation, interpretive strategies, exhibit labels, museum evaluation

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CURRICULUM VITAE- MEGAN K. LALLIER-BARRON

EDUCATION AND AWARDS

- 2012 **Master's candidate Arts & Administration, Museum Studies concentration**
The University of Oregon, Eugene
Museum Studies Certificate
Ina McClung Scholarship in 2010
UO Laurel Award recipient Museum of Natural and Cultural History 2011/2012
- 2007 **BA Archaeological Studies and Art History**
The State University of New York, College at Potsdam
Minors: Museum and Classical Studies
Graduated with Magna Cum Laude with Advanced Honors

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

- Experience with collection management software: Past Perfect, MIMSY
- Object-based research and artifact handling
- Exhibition development: planning and research; label and interpretive text writing; strike/installation
- Adobe CS5: Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign
- Microsoft Office: Word, Powerpoint, Excel (on Mac and PC platforms)
- Exhibit evaluation: proposal writing, data collection, and analysis
- Social media management

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, OR Sept. 2011-May 2012
Guest Curator
Exhibition planning and prep | Curation | Exhibit evaluation

Archival research, exhibition concept development and design, object display preparation, writing of labels and interpretive material, development of evaluation plan and protocols, participated in curatorial panel

Museum of Natural and Cultural History, Eugene, OR Sept. 2011- Present
Exhibition Graduate Fellowship
Exhibit development | Digital media management | Artist coordination

Coordinated with artists on upcoming exhibits, prepared mounts for collections items on exhibition, aided in the strike and installation of exhibits including layout design; patching and painting; hanging artwork; label writing, development of virtual exhibit website, completed research for upcoming exhibits and interactives, exhibit evaluation

Lane County Historical Museum, Eugene, OR Jun. 2011- Oct. 2011
Exhibition Intern
Exhibition planning | High attention to detail and organization | Interpretive writing skills

Completed research for exhibit topics, label and interpretive text writing, interpretive panel and label design, exhibit installation, coordination with outside contributors and museum staff, wrote loan agreements

ChinaVine, Eugene, Oregon & Beijing, China May 2011-Present
Fieldschool archivist/ Interpretation Intern

Media management | Audience development | Interpretive planning

Maintained digital archive of fieldwork material, completed ethnographic fieldwork in and around Beijing, China- photo and video documentation; maintain field notes; worked in a documentation team, produced publications that were published on the field school blog and organization website, produced organizational "white sheet" for future field expeditions in terms of interpretation strategies, continued work with ChinaVine includes identifying key audiences for participation in website and developed a recruitment plan; developed methods to encourage registration and participation on website

Cinema Pacific Film Festival, Eugene, OR Jan. 2010-Apr. 2011
Fringe Festival Coordinator

Artist coordination | Event management | Exhibition planning

Maintained management system for artist submissions, coordination with artists for gallery exhibit, exhibit layout, securing of gallery space, exhibition installation, production and distribution of publicity materials, support staff at festival screenings, event management at opening and closing events

New York State Museum, Albany, New York Jun. 2007- Aug. 2010
Cultural Education Specialist

Collections management | Artifact handling | Management of volunteers and interns

Archaeological excavation, processed archaeological material: cleaning, cataloguing, artifact storage, and researching artifact information for reports, collections accessioning procedures: assigning accession numbers, contacting landowners, coordinating long term storage with collections department, maintained accession database and paperwork, produced material for archaeology lab tours

Wild Center: Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, Tupper Lake, New York 2006
Education Intern

Development of educational programs, research in natural history topics for use in educational materials and activities

Traditional Arts in Upstate New York, Canton, New York Jan. 2006-Jun. 2007
Exhibits Intern

Exhibition development and planning, coordination with partners on traveling exhibition, digital archiving of historical documents

Archaeological Field School: Montpelier, Home of James Madison, VA Jul. 2006

Site surveying, excavation, and artifact analysis, discussing the site and its historical significance with the public

State University of New York, College at Potsdam Archives and Special Collections, Potsdam, New York Aug. 2006-Dec. 2006
Archival Intern

Preliminary surveying, preparing, sorting, and rearranging of historically important material, handled sensitive archival material

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
KEYWORDS.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
CURRICULUM VITAE- MEGAN K. LALLIER-BARRON	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	6
LIST OF FIGURES.....	7
INTRODUCTION	8
Problem Statement and Significance of Study.....	8
Conceptual Framework.....	9
Research Methodology	10
Research Questions	12
Definitions.....	12
Limitations and Delimitations.....	13
Benefits of Capstone	13
LITERATURE REVIEW	14
Developments in Interpretive Labeling	14
How do visitors experience exhibit text?.....	18
Visitor Learning and Engagement in Museum Exhibits	20
TYPES OF LABELS USED IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS	22
Types of Exhibit Labels used in <i>Explore Oregon!</i>	24
Discussion of Exhibit Labels used in <i>Through Her Lens</i>	25
COMPARISON OF LABELING IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF MUSEUMS	27
Evaluation Methods: <i>Explore Oregon</i> Exhibit, Museum of Natural and Cultural History.....	27
Evaluation Methods: <i>Through Her Lens</i> Exhibit, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art	28
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	30
CONCLUSION.....	33
REFERENCES.....	35

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 – Conceptual Framework

Figure 3.1 – Exhibit layout for *Explore Oregon!*

Figure 3.2 – Example of Exhibit Labels used in *Explore Oregon!*

Figure 3.3 – Exhibit layout for *Through Her Lens*

Figure 3.4 – Example of Exhibit Labels used in *Through Her Lens*

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement and Significance of Study

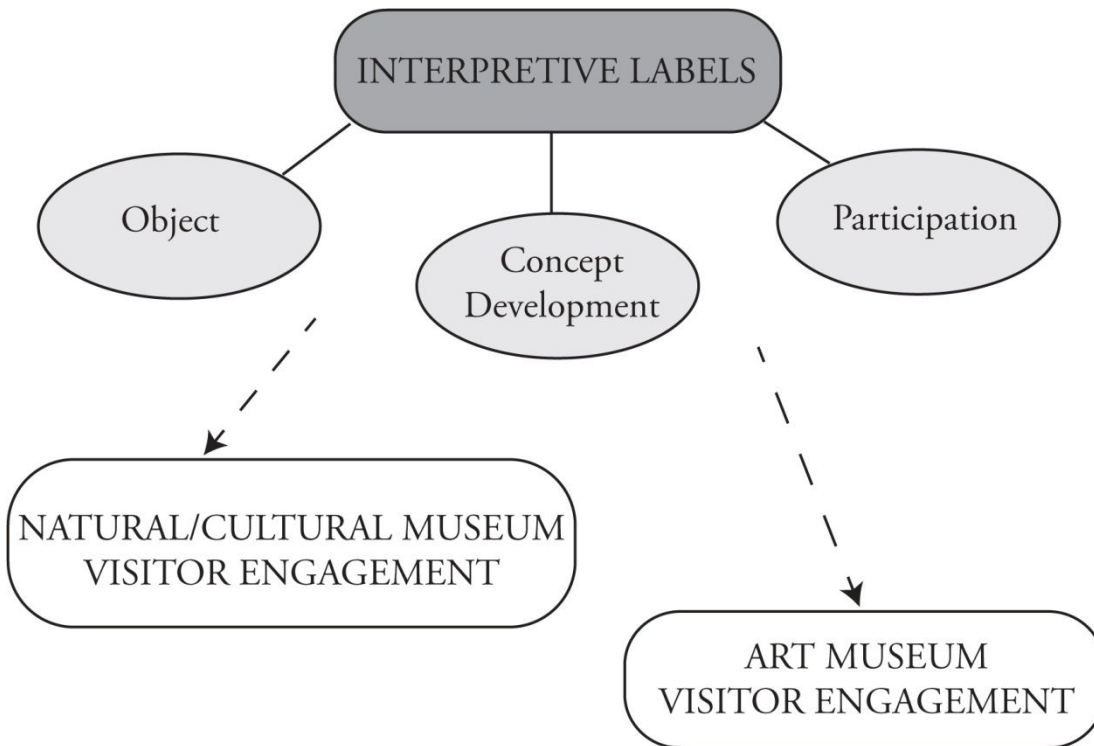
Interpretive strategies have been used in exhibits in various forms. Museum interpretation allows visitors to explore exhibit topics in a way that can be educational and meaningful to their lives. "Good interpretation, like good storytelling, carries the listener along with the sound of the words and the images they create, and lets the listener participate by anticipating where the story is going." (Serrell 1996, p 12) Interpretive exhibit labels in particular educate visitors and can involve them in a dialogue about exhibition messages and themes. While there is a large body of literature about the correlation between a number of interpretive strategies and visitor engagement, there has not been as much research in comparison between different types of museums. For my study, I explored the different types of exhibit labels used in art and cultural museum exhibits and how they affect visitor engagement and learning.

There are a number of benefits to this project, including an improved understanding of visitor interactions with interpretive media. The coding of previously published data allowed for recommendations to be made based on my research findings. These recommendations can be used by other museum professionals in the field to engage with visitors in new ways.

Conceptual Framework

This capstone research critically looks at different interpretive label strategies and their relationship to visitor engagement. In order to do this, a number of types of interpretive exhibit labels were explored, in addition to a comparison of different types of labeling used in art and natural/cultural museums. In order to better conceptualize this research, I developed a visual schematic to help outline the main themes of my research and the posited relationship between them. There is a gap in current literature surrounding my research questions. While there is a large body of literature detailing the correlation between interpretive strategies and visitor engagement, there is a lack of research comparing the interpretive labels used in different types of museums.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

The methodological paradigm I have aligned my research with is a constructivist approach. I feel that it is important to understand how visitors construct their own meaning from exhibits and how interpretive labels can assist in this. As described by Hein, constructivism is

a particular educational theory that not only acknowledges visitor meaning making but uses it as a central component of a definition of education. All discussions of constructivism include meaning making; but meaning making (although often appropriately called 'knowledge construction') does not necessarily imply constructivism. (Hein p 15)

Constructivism applies to museum interpretive strategies in a number of ways.

Understanding how visitors make meaning within an exhibit is useful and can

guide the planning and development of interpretive strategies. I have also approached my research by looking at Falk and Dierking's theory of free-choice learning. Constructivist theories go well with free-choice learning in that free-choice learning takes into consideration that individuals learn from different experiences, "...people learn all the time and much of the learning is casual and unplanned. However, a significant percentage of all free-choice learning is in situations where learning is anticipated." (Falk and Dierking 2000, p 177)

This paradigm influenced my research in a number of ways. The main aspect of constructivism is the belief that individuals construct meaning and learn from experiences. While it is important to identify strategies used in museum interpretation, it is also important to provide a space where individual visitors can learn and make meaning from an exhibit. This is a way to properly evaluate my research questions.

Along with constructivism, I also align my research with the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm believes that reality is socially constructed and is often complex in nature (Glesne 2011, p 16-17). "Many different traditions of interpretivism have developed, but they share the goal of understanding human ideas, actions, and interactions with specific contexts or in terms of the wider culture." (Glesne 2011, p 8) This aligns with my research in that my research seeks to find patterns in the ways interpretive strategies are used and constructed to find out how to improve visitor engagement.

Research Questions

Main Research Question: What kind of interpretive labels improve visitor engagement?

Sub question: How do these labels compare across different types of museums?

To address my research questions, data collection and analysis occurred through my two capstone classes. The initial phase of my research involved document analysis of previously published visitor studies on museum exhibit labels and visitor interaction. Using previously collected data allowed me to examine a sample size that given the time constraints, I would not have been able to collect on my own. Coupled with my topical literature review, I hoped to be able to determine patterns of how interpretive labels have been used previously, and how visitors engage with this material. A portion of this document analysis occurred through my Special Problems course and helped inform the work that I completed during my second capstone course, Exhibition Development Workshop. My literature review looks at how interpretive exhibit labels are used in both art and natural/cultural museums, which is important for later comparison of exhibit labels through my capstone courses.

Definitions

Interpretation: “An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original, first hand experience, and by illustrative

media, rather than simply to communicate factual information." (Tilden 1957, p8)

Exhibit Labels: "Written words used alone or with illustrations in museum exhibitions to provide information for visitors, presented as text on exhibit graphic panels or computer screens. Known to visitors as captions, descriptions, titles, blurbs, explanations, placards, plaques, legends, cards, labels and 'those little words on the wall.'" (Serrell 1996, p239)

Limitations and Delimitations

The goal of this research is to determine the relationship between interpretive labels used in museums and visitor engagement. For this study, I mostly focused on interpretive exhibit labels found in art and natural/cultural museums. While there are a number of elements within a museum exhibit that effect how visitors interact and engage with the subject, this study mainly focused on exhibit labels.

Benefits of Capstone

While initially this research was designed to fit a project-based model, there are a number of benefits which led me to select a capstone research model. My original research design involved developing an experiment that would test exhibit labels in two different types of museums and compare their effectiveness, based on an extensive document analysis of previous exhibit label

studies. Given the time and resources required to complete this research project, I reached the conclusion that it would be difficult to complete to a high standard. I was also presented with an opportunity to learn about museum evaluation, as well as opportunities to be involved with the label writing processes of two different exhibitions. Instead of pursuing a research project, this capstone allowed me to put theory into practice and learn skills that will further my professional career.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Developments in Interpretive Labeling

Interpretation plays a critical role in exhibit planning and implementation. Interpretation is both a program and an activity. The program establishes a set of objectives for things we want our visitors to understand; the activity has to do with the skills and techniques by which that understanding is created. The distinction between the two has not been clearly defined. (Alderson & Low quoted in AAM p2)

Many definitions have been applied to interpretation and its role in museums (Tilden 1957; Lewis 1980; Alderson & Low 1985; Ham 1992). A current trend in museums is to incorporate more interpretation into their programming. "Today in the third age of the evolution of museum displays, interpretation is an audience-driven activity at the heart of museum practice." (Museum Association, UK quoted in AAM p 4).

In her book, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Beverly Serrell discusses interpretive exhibit labels.

The purpose of interpretive labels is to contribute to the overall visitor experience in a positive, enlightening, provocative, and meaningful way. Interpretive labels address visitors' unspoken concerns: What's in it for me? Why should I care? How will knowing this improve my life?...Interpretive labels are part of interpretive exhibitions, which are displays that tell stories, contrast points of view, present challenging issues, or strive to change people's attitudes. (Serrell 1996, p.9)

As outlined by Serrell, interpretive exhibit labels tell short stories and aim to actively engage visitors in meaningful ways. Exhibit labels can be broken up into a number of categories including titles, section labels, and captions (Serrell 1996, p.21). These differ from non-interpretive labels, such as orientation labels and object identification labels that do not provide the detailed, rich story that interpretive labels can give.

Early exhibit labels were written by curators and often contained overly didactic, text heavy labels that were designed for a specialized academic audience instead of an everyday visitor. The relationship between museum and visitor was that of a strong authoritative voice with very little dialogue between the museum and the visitor. Many authors have commented on the shift from these early types of labels to more visitor-centered interpretive labels (Bitgood 1986; Fragomeni 2010; Roberts 1997; Serrell 1996). Unlike older methods of museum communication, interpretive labels help to better educate the visiting public; "interpretation was about communication; and effective communication required bridging the world of the expert and the world of the layperson with language that was intelligible to the latter without being a misrepresentation of the former." (Roberts in Anderson 1997, p217)

In order to do this, museum exhibit developers and educators established standards and criteria for how to better engage visitors through exhibit labels. These included standards for font size and label length, the use of different writing styles, and the inclusion of visual materials. This was all in an effort for visitors to have a better understanding of content presented in an exhibit as well as develop their own experiences in a museum (Roberts 1997; Serrell 1996). Examples of these interpretive label experiments include Judy Rand's work at the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the Denver Art Museums Interpretive Project (DAM 1990; Rand 1990). Both institutions used a variety of methods to assist visitors in shaping their own experience. The main goal for the Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project was to "develop a model or conceptual scheme that can guide practitioners in creating interpretive opportunities for gallery visitors that will enhance their perception and overall experience of art and, ideally, bring many visitors into a closer personal involvement with art." (Loomis in DAM, 1990. p. 133) By focusing on visitor experience, the Denver Art Museum was able to create exhibit labeling that was engaging for a wide range of visitors, which, overall, was met with positive reactions from visitors.

One example for the Denver Art Museum's Interpretive Project developed an "experience-driven paradigm" to combat the former "information-driven paradigm" that was used previously in museums. The "experience-driven paradigm" allows visitors to make their own discoveries about objects found in museums, the artists who produced a particular work,

and themselves. This is opposed to the “information-driven paradigm” which is where the museum acts as an authority to the visitor. Labels created under this paradigm are made to impart knowledge to the visitor - usually what is important to the curator in terms of art history or biographic knowledge of the artist, and is less concerned with what the visitor is able to do with this information.

The work of John Falk has also focused on the development of interpretive labels. In a study conducted at the California Museum of Science and Industry, Falk tested the use of explicit labeling of informational clusters. Two exhibits were tested with and without explicit labeling of concept clusters. The results of this study shed light on how visitors learn through exhibit text. “The findings from this study support the contention that visitors can, and do acquire both factual and conceptual information as a consequence of relatively brief interactions (on the order of 2-5 minutes) with clusters of related science exhibits; and this learning can be facilitated by explicitly and repeatedly displaying the conceptual messages to be communicated.” (Falk, 1997 p.679)

Just as with labeling information clusters in exhibits, asking questions in exhibit labels can help visitors learn and engage with exhibits. Looking at literature in the field, and a study conducted at the Exploratorium, offers a number of key findings about how labels can be constructed to best engage visitors. The case study at the Exploratorium, the *Spindrift* exhibit, involved observational testing and interviews. These suggested that visitors prefer labels

that have a mix of open-ended questions and suggestions. Three versions of a label were written by the Exploratorium for an interactive element; the first gave suggestions for how to interact with the feature, the second asked leading questions, and the third was a mixture of suggestions and questions. It is important to note that these types of labels have also been referred to “discover-based” by Hein and “planned-discovery” by Humphrey and Gutwill.

It is interesting to note the implications of using questions in exhibit labels. Exhibit labels have the ability to provide explanations, frame perceptions, and challenge assumptions. While questions in labels can help with these goals, they can also have a negative effect on the visitor. Asking questions can make visitors feel uncomfortable and intimidated by the lack of knowledge that a visitor may have. If questions are not asked properly in a label it can also inhibit exploration, which was a concern for the Exploratorium, which takes a constructivist approach to learning within their institution. A suggestion from the author to alleviate this problem is to ask questions and then offer suggestions on how to find the answer that question.

How do visitors experience exhibit text?

Visitor experience is an element that is important to look at when discussing exhibit interpretive labeling. The quality of visitor experience has been widely discussed in the fields of museum education and visitor studies. Within visitor studies, there have been attempts to understand how visitors construct meaning

within exhibits. (Falk & Dierking 2000; Houtgraaf & Vitali 2008; Roberts 1997; Newman & McLean 2004). Visitor experience is mediated between entertainment and education. According to Hood, museum attendance is seen as a leisure activity. Leisure activities have common attributes including “being with people, or social interaction, doing something worthwhile, feeling comfortable and at ease in one’s surroundings, having a challenge of new experiences, having an opportunity to learn and participating actively.” (Hood in Anderson 2004 p 151) It can be a difficult task to develop exhibits and programming to cater to individual visitor needs but it is important overall that the visitors shape their own experience. It is important to note that visitors are informed by their own previous experiences, and there are a number of ways that this can be used to facilitate meaning-making. One such approach is using familiarity to encourage learning (Falk & Dierking 2000).

Tapping into people’s personal history, creating personal connections with the institution, and facilitating positive family experiences and interaction are all ways to build positive expectations and enhance motivations for visiting; they are also excellent ways to facilitate learning (Ibid p 181)

Another is using ‘memory narratives’ as outlined by Macdonald (Macdonald 2007)

Macdonald also discusses the three main areas individuals connect with exhibits; media, sociality, and space. How visitors act when presented with different forms of media, and within the different spaces within an exhibit can affect learning. Museum visits are social interaction with potentially unknown

individuals. This can affect how people perceive and interact with exhibits, something on which there has been little research (Macdonald 2007, p 154-156).

Visitor Learning and Engagement in Museum Exhibits

Initially, the push for more interpretation in museum exhibits, especially labeling, came from museum educators (Roberts in Anderson 2004). It is therefore important to look at museum educational theory in order to better understand how visitors learn and engage with interpretive exhibit labels. The constructivist paradigm suggests that visitors shape or construct their own links between ideas and objects found in museums with their everyday lives. This gives visitors a personally vested interest in learning.

Falk & Dierking's 'free-choice learning' theory is also about museum education. "Museums are free-choice learning settings in which learning is an outcome that is often expected both by the people who visit them and the people who design them." (Falk & Dierking 2000, p 177) Free-choice learning is firmly rooted in Falk & Dierking's Contextual Mode of Learning, whose basic principle is "all learning is situated with a series of contexts." (Ibid p 10) There are a number of key factors in the contextual mode of learning which can be grouped into three main categories: personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts (Ibid). Time is also an important context to consider. Exhibit design, marketing, prior knowledge, and experience in a museum setting are some of the many factors that have influence on learning. By carefully constructing

interpretive strategies in exhibits, museums have the potential to give visitors better experiences.

As previously discussed, previous knowledge is an important factor when considering museum attendance and education. In the case of art museums, prior attainment in art education seems to be an important factor in museum attendance (Bourdieu in Smith and Wolf 1996, p 228). Also knowledge of 'museum culture' or perceptions of appropriate behavior can affect how individuals learn (Smith and Wolf 1996). This fits in with Bourdieu's idea of habitus, where individuals are changed by the structure of society and understand this structure through prior experiences.

Interpretive strategies within museum exhibits aim to increase visitor knowledge and engagement. According to Roberts, "Providing interpretation was the single most important thing museums could do to engage visitors with their collections. (Roberts in Anderson 2004, p214). Interpretation allows visitors to make a stronger connection to objects on display, and allows visitors to be self-reflexive. It is no surprise, then, that the study of interpretive exhibit strategies spans many museum disciplines, including exhibition design, museum education, and visitor studies. There are a number of methods used by each discipline to help visitors derive meaning from museum exhibits, interpretive exhibit strategies, and especially exhibit labels can be developed with all of these disciplines in mind in order to aid the visitor.

Media, space, and sociality, as stated by Macdonald, are all factors in how museum visitors learn (Macdonald 2007). All of these elements can affect the visitor experience, and should be taken into account when developing interpretive exhibit strategies. Since museum visits are often seen as a leisure activity, it is important to have a clear, concise message from all aspects of exhibit design and programming. As stated by the literature, interpretive exhibit strategies are unique opportunities for museum professionals to provide better experiences to its visitors.

TYPES OF LABELS USED IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

In order to better understand the relationship between interpretive exhibit labels and visitor engagement, two exhibits were explored and evaluated for this study. The first exhibit, *Explore Oregon! In the Making* at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History is a prototype exhibit that features content on the geologic history of Oregon. This exhibit is the first in a series of three prototype exhibits, designed to elicit visitor feedback, which will be used in the construction of the museum's new natural history hall. The completed exhibit hall will include topics such as Oregon geologic history, early plants and animals, climate change, and environmental stewardship. Oregon's geologic history is displayed in the exhibit through graphics, interactive elements, audio/visual material, and label text. Through my Special Problems course, I was able to participate in the evaluation

of this exhibit, and was able to analyze the different types of labels presented in the exhibit and how visitors engaged with this material.

The second exhibit explored in this study is *Through Her Lens: Gertrude Bass Warner's Vision of Asia* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. This exhibit focuses on the life and collecting practices of Gertrude Bass Warner, whose collection of Asian art and cultural artifacts became the founding collection of the JSMA. Looking at Warner's collection through the lens of silk and silk production, the exhibit examines issues around her collecting practices and representations of Asian cultures within her collection. *Through Her Lens* features items from the JSMA collection as well as material on loan from the University of Oregon's Archives & Special Collections, most notably Warner's collection of lantern slides. This exhibit was the culmination of an experimental course in exhibit development offered through the Arts & Administration program. This year long course exposed project participants to the entire exhibit development process including research, text writing, exhibit design and layout, object preparation, installation, and participation in a curatorial panel. Though this course, I was able to experiment with different types of exhibit labels and evaluate visitor response.

As suggested in my conceptual framework, this study discusses three different types of interpretive labels. Object labels - those that describe objects on display and their significance; concept development labels - those that reinforce exhibition themes and explain concepts shown in graphics or

interactive elements; and labels that elicit participation - these could be labels that ask questions, promote visitor conversation, or has visitors respond in a specific way. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive and some interpretive labels can be a combination of all three categories. While there are many other types of labels used in museum exhibits, I felt that these three categories were appropriate for my research interests, and could be explored through my capstone classes. While the exhibits explored in this study were from two very different types of institutions, and the types of material of display as well as the main messages and exhibition themes were quite different, I felt that they would be good institutions to compare given that they are both university museums and have similar target audiences. Each exhibit attempted to make their material relevant to the everyday lives of visitors, as well as provide them with an enjoyable, informative experience. Each exhibit had varying levels of technology, and modes of interactivity and participation, which will be discussed further in this paper.

Types of Exhibit Labels used in *Explore Oregon!*

The *Explore Oregon! In the Making* exhibit features a variety of exhibit labels that serve different purposes within the exhibition space. The largest number of labels is dedicated to specimens, either to reinforce exhibition concepts, or general informational labels. The first set of specimen labels are related to the Oregon geologic timeline, and includes a map on the label and explains more

about the geologic time period in which the specimens were produced, than about the specimens themselves. The second set of specimen labels are designed for visitor feedback. Each specimen has a long label that was designed to give as much information as possible. After the visitor reads the label, they are invited to share what they would want more information about and what they would share with someone about the specimen.

Another large body of labels found in *Explore Oregon!* are labels for the interactive hands-on elements. The two main interactive elements are the seafloor spreading table and the shake/earthquake table. For each table, there are labels that give instructions to the visitor as to how the interactive element works, as well as giving information about the scientific theory shown in the activity. The seafloor spreading table includes a graphic that illustrates scientist Fred Vine's concept of seafloor spreading and magnetism. The purpose of these labels is to help better illustrate the concepts being shown in the activity, as well as reinforce information that is found in the interpretive panels in the exhibit. For example, a text panel titled "A Tape Recording of Our Geologic Past" describes Vine's magnetic striping theory. A similar graphic can be found on a label on the seafloor spreading table to help reinforce this idea.

Discussion of Exhibit Labels used in *Through Her Lens*

The labels found in the *Through Her Lens* exhibit were written collaboratively between myself and my fellow guest curator June Kohler in conjunction with

AAD 510 Exhibit Development Workshop. Drawing on her personal correspondence, public speeches, and Warner's unpublished manuscript, *When West Meets East*, as well as secondary scholarly sources, the exhibit text highlights the exhibit main messages, using Warner's words as much as possible.

To determine the style and design of exhibit labels in *Through Her Lens*, Kohler and I used a combination of criteria from a number of sources including Bitgood, Rand, and Serrel. We also enlisted the support of Anne Rose Kitagawa, Chief Curator of Collections & Asian Art at the JSMA. While writing each label, we kept under consideration the ability for these labels to attract visitors as well as educate them about exhibition themes.

The main exhibition themes included Gertrude Bass Warner's collecting practices, the emerging technology of lantern slides, and problems associated with the photographic medium of the 19th century as interpreted today. Given that the themes were expressed through the lens of silk and silk production, it was important to display objects that represented those themes, as well as provide appropriate interpretation for this material. For this exhibit, we wrote two main types of exhibit text: object labels, and larger text panels which provided general information for visitors, in addition to being used to reinforce broad exhibition themes. A third type of exhibit labels encouraged participation. At the front of the exhibit there is a Visitor Comment Station that posits the leading statement "When I travel, I like to collect..." allowing the visitor to respond for themselves on the provided sticky notes. Instead of providing a

story for visitors through the label, this station allows visitors to share their own stories.

COMPARISON OF LABELING IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF MUSEUMS

Evaluation Methods: *Explore Oregon Exhibit, Museum of Natural and Cultural History*

In order to determine the effectiveness of the content and strategies used in the *Explore Oregon* prototypes, the museum embarked upon an evaluation process. By developing a prototype, the MNCH is able to use findings from this evaluation to build exhibits in their new natural history hall that will actively engage visitors and allow them to learn more about Oregon's natural history. Like all exhibits at MNCH, fitting into the institutional mission is important.

This evaluation addresses the educational component of MNCH's mission, in that it is looking at how visitors learn within a museum exhibit. The main questions this evaluation seeks to address fall into two related categories: the effectiveness of exhibit labels on learning, and visitor engagement with exhibition topics. By understanding all of these components, the Museum of Natural and Cultural History will be able to address visitor needs in their new natural history hall. Key questions that will be asked during this evaluation include:

- Can visitors identify the take away messages that museum staff wants them to leave with?

- How are visitors engaging with exhibition topics through exhibit texts?
- What role do exhibit labels play in visitor learning?

To properly address the key questions asked in this evaluation, MNCH used a mixed-methods approach for data collection. Using this methodology ensured that all target audiences were adequately represented in this study. These target audiences include families, K-12 students, and the campus community (faculty, staff, and students) which together are the main visiting body of the museum.

Evaluation Methods: *Through Her Lens* Exhibit, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art

To have an accurate comparison of exhibit label use for *Through Her Lens*, evaluation questions and proposed methods are somewhat similar. Given the time and other limitations of my capstone, this evaluation uses a small visitor sample and employs a limited amount of data collection for analysis. The purpose of this evaluation, as for *Explore Oregon*, is to determine the effectiveness of the content and strategies used in the *Through Her Lens* exhibit. Unlike the formative evaluation for *Explore Oregon*, the evaluation for *Through Her Lens* will not inform another iteration of this content, but will instead provide useful data that could be used to inform future exhibitions at the JSMA.

Through having similar evaluation goals, this evaluation will be able to address similar concerns about how visitors engage with exhibit labels in an art

museum, much like *Explore Oregon* evaluation addresses exhibit labels in a natural/cultural museum setting. These key questions include:

- Can visitors identify the take away messages that exhibit developers want them to leave with?
- How are visitors engaging with exhibition topic through exhibit texts?
- What role do exhibit labels play in visitor learning?

The intended audience of the *Through Her Lens* exhibition is the University of Oregon community, JSMA members and supporters, community members, and K-12 students in the Eugene/Springfield area. There is an expectation that audiences will be fluent in English, even if it is not their first language. However, as each audience enters the exhibition with their own set of assumptions and expectations, it is important for this exhibition to address each intended audience in a meaningful way. As proposed by the exhibit developers, all audiences should take away a better understanding of Gertrude Bass Warner's collection practices in Asia, an idea of some of the representation issues present within the collection, and knowledge of her promotion of cross-cultural understanding.

Using a mixed-methods approach to data collection similar to *Explore Oregon* ensured that all target audiences were represented, as well as allowing for data collected through this exhibit to be relatable to *Explore Oregon*. This evaluation used observational testing as well as collecting and analyzing material from the Visitor Comment Area. I developed the evaluation for this

exhibit within the confines of the Exhibition Development Workshop, and data collection was carried out by myself and my other classmates from the Workshop.

Visitors to *Through Her Lens* were subject to observational testing while an evaluator was in the exhibit. The evaluator used the provided layout of the exhibit space, and observed visitor behavior. Noting where visitors stop, how long they stopped for, if they read any exhibit text aloud, or made a comment about the exhibit, provided valuable data for this study.

Material from the Visitor Comment Area was periodically collected and tallied to determine frequency of response and general categories of responses.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through this research process, I have been able to suggest a number of key findings for the construction of interpretive labels. These findings are based off examples found through my literature review, as well as preliminary analysis completed for *Explore Oregon* and *Through Her Lens*. The recommendations made in this study reflect current trends in museum theory and practice.

One of the most significant improvements to interpretive labeling is the idea of keeping the visitor in mind in all stages of the development process. Before the popularity of interpretive exhibit labels, labels were often written by curators for a specific academic audience; now writers of labels focus on how all visitors may perceive and understand content. Basing labels for *Through Her*

Lens off of the work of prominent scholars in the field, Kohler and I tried to experiment with size and placement of labels, and the language used to try to engage and educate the visitor about exhibition topics. Through analysis of observational tracking forms and the qualitative analysis of the sticky notes left in the visitor response area, I was able to get a clearer picture of how visitors were interacting with the exhibit, and in particular exhibit labels. Preliminary analysis of data collected through the observational tracking forms suggests that there are a number of objects that individuals are particularly attracted to, with the light box of lantern slides, Chinese semi-formal coat, and series of gouache paintings being the most visited. A number of individuals stopped at the larger text panels, but overall spent the most time looking at the objects on display, and potentially their associated labels.

The Visitor Comment Area allowed visitors to respond to the statement “When I travel, I like to collect...”. A preliminary survey of these responses showed a wide variety of responses including popular tourist items: postcards and other ephemera, souvenir trinkets such as shot glasses and key chains, and more personal reflections on travel such as inspiration and memories. This station was designed to have visitors actively participate in the exhibit, and allow visitors to make connections between Gertrude Bass Warner and themselves. While there has been active participation in this portion of the exhibit, it is difficult to determine if those visitors made the connections that we intended. Even though this may be the case, we felt it was important to engage with visitors in

different ways through the medium of exhibit text, and this station allowed visitors to participate more actively in *Through Her Lens*.

Another key finding from this research is the benefit of experimentation. Testing exhibit labels can offer new insights to the visiting public of a museum, and how those individuals learn within the museum environment. The *Explore Oregon* prototype exhibit is an excellent example of how experimentation can benefit visitors as well as the museum. Through the course of the exhibition being on display, there have been a number of changes to the way content has been displayed through text. A number of exhibit text panels and labels have been altered, in an attempt to determine the best way to deliver exhibition content to visitors. While it may have been difficult for exhibit developers at MNCH to display an incomplete product to their visitors, going through the process of a prototype exhibit has provided them with valuable insight into who visits their museum, and how they interact with and learn from exhibition material. As noted in my literature review, the Denver Art Museum and other institutions have used experimentation with exhibit labels to improve how they present content to visitors. Using the previous work of scholars, in combination with findings from the evaluation of *Explore Oregon* and *Through Her Lens*, I have determined that experimentation is a useful tool for exhibit developers to use to understand how they can better engage with their visitors. Not only will the museum be able to produce content that is informative and engaging with visitors; depending on how the museum experiments with labels,

visitors may feel more a part of the exhibition process and therefore more invested in and engaged with the project.

Finally, it is important to use evaluation in the assessment of interpretive exhibit labels in museum exhibits. Without formal or semi-formal evaluation, it may be difficult to determine how visitors are engaging with exhibition themes and labels. Formal evaluation methods have been used in museum exhibitions more frequently in recent years, and the findings of these studies have provided exhibit developers with valuable insights into how museum visitors learn and engage with exhibition material. By participating in the evaluation process of *Explore Oregon*, as well as having the opportunity to develop and implement my own evaluation plan for *Through Her Lens*, I was able to see the value and importance of museum evaluation. While anecdotal evidence has been used in informal museum evaluation, in order to determine the effectiveness of exhibit labels, formal museum evaluation is an important step in gaining hard data and providing evidence for the future exploration and construction of interpretive exhibit labels.

CONCLUSION

While there is no one way to engage visitors with museum content, exhibit labels play an integral role in this process. In order to improve visitor engagement, interpretive exhibit labels offer visitors a narrative base approach that can ask questions, elicit participation, and reinforce exhibition themes. Even though

there are no universals to how visitors interact and engage with exhibition material, there are some conclusions that can be drawn from the *Explore Oregon!* and *Through Her Lens* exhibitions that can assist museum professionals in the creation of better labels.

As opposed to “tombstone” labels, interpretive exhibit labels connect visitors and exhibit themes through objects. The types of interpretive labels that improve visitor engagement are ones that build upon exhibition themes, that promote interaction and dialogue, and that use language that tells and engaging story. While different types of museums write very different labels, the recommendations I have made in my research would be useful guidelines for any type of museum that wants to improve visitor engagement. After conducting this research, my conclusion is that each museum should approach the writing of exhibit labels by looking at how they want their visitors to interact and engage with topics and then have the willingness to experiment with different techniques of labeling.

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Figure 3.1 Exhibit Layout, Explore Oregon!

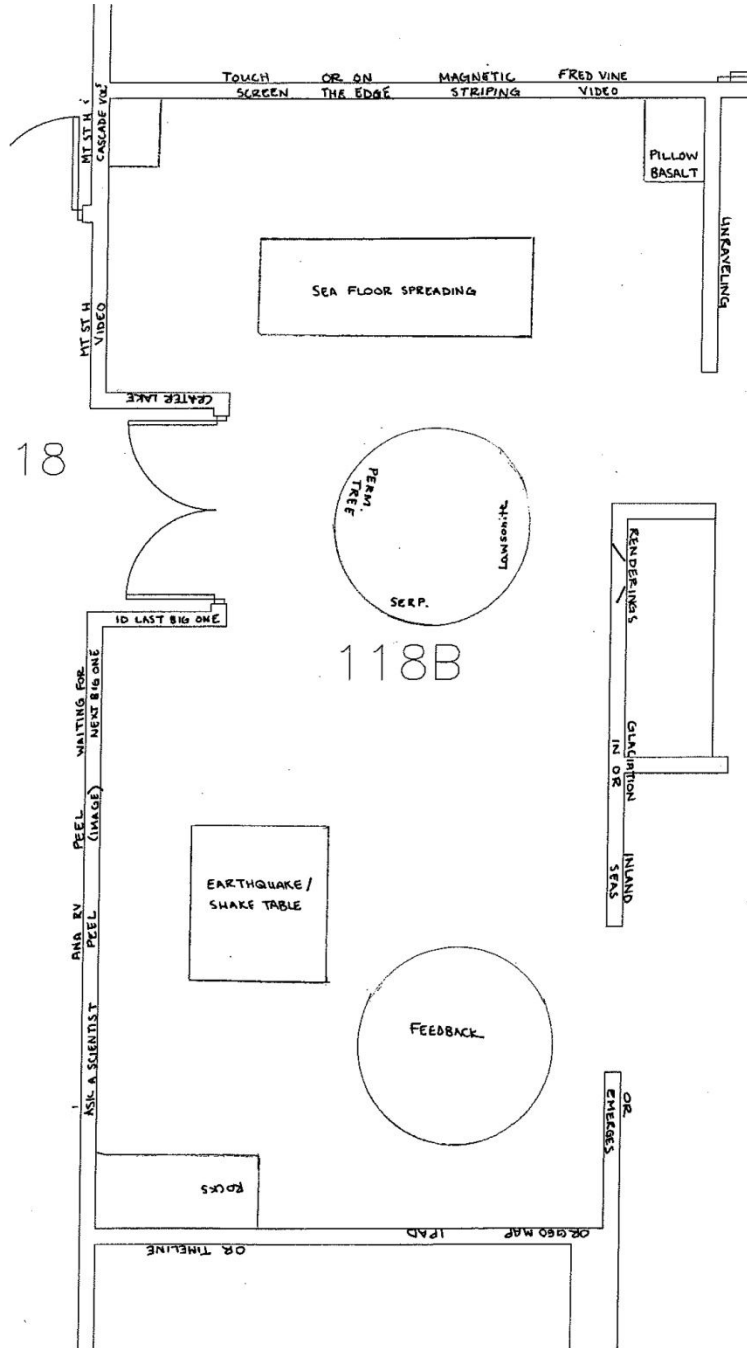
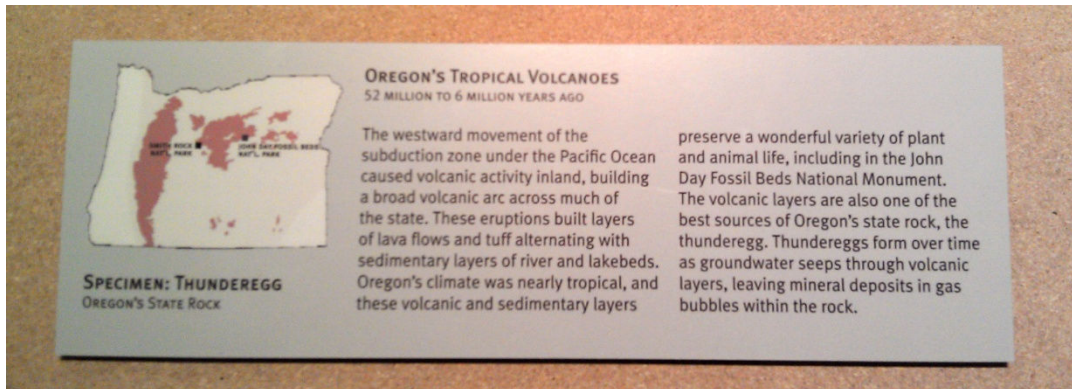
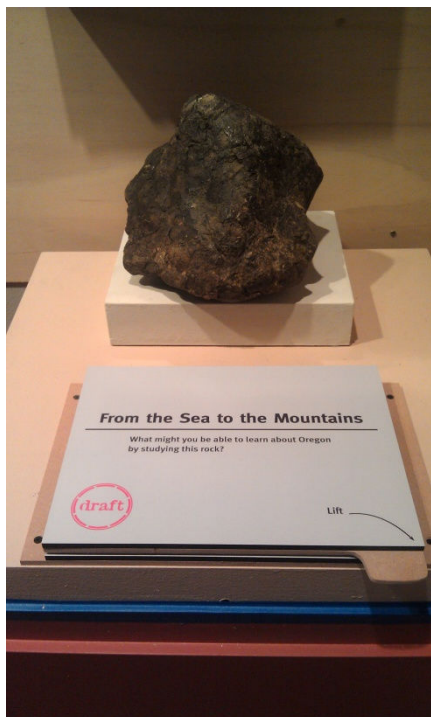


Figure 3.2 Example of Exhibit Labels used in *Explore Oregon!*




This exhibit label used a combination of graphics and text to relate geologic specimens to a larger timeline of Oregon's geologic history. This label gives the time the specimen would have formed, the possible locations you may find the specimen, and what was happening in Oregon during the time of the specimens formation.




The *Explore Oregon!* exhibit also used a flip label which add an additional layer of interaction. The top of the label asks "What might you learn about Oregon by studying this rock?". Visitors can examine the rock and accompanied video footage in front of them, think about their response, flip open the label and receive an answer.


Figure 3.2 Continued

Help us write labels with information that matters to you.

 Tear off a sheet and read the label on the back before continuing.

Now that you've read the long label:

What would you tell a friend about this specimen? 

What else would you like to know about this specimen? 

Lawsonite Blueschist

Blueschist is a metamorphic rock. It forms when basalt and other similar volcanic rocks experience heat and pressure that change it—a process called metamorphism.

The specific metamorphism that creates blueschist is at low pressure and high temperature. Geologists are able to determine that blueschist is created approximately 9 to 13 miles below the Earth's surface at about 390 to 940 degrees Fahrenheit.

Blueschist is common in subduction zones as rocks from deep within the Earth are pushed up to the surface.

Lawsonite is a mineral found in some types of blueschist. You can see the lawsonite in the white flecks in this rock.

This rock was formed during the Jurassic Period, about 200 to 145 million years ago. UO Geologist David Blackwell collected this rock near Bandon, Oregon in 1986.

This example was used on a specimen table. Visitors were asked to read the label on one side of the pad and then answer two questions on the other side. It was the exhibit developers hope that by doing this activity visitors would be able to learn more about each specimen as well as provide essential visitor feedback.

Figure 3.3 Exhibit Layout, *Through Her Lens*

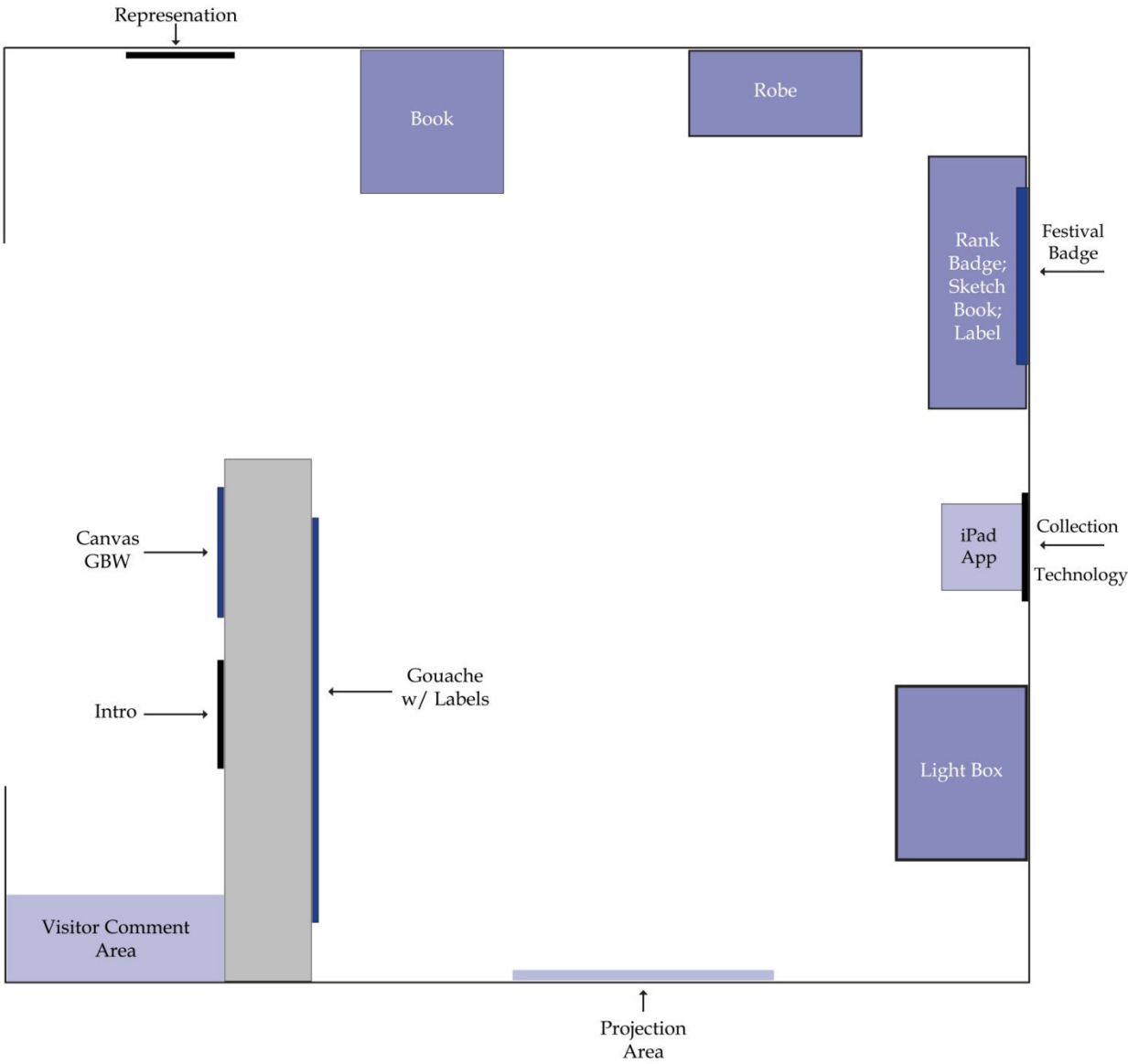


Figure 3.4 Example of Exhibit Labels used in *Through Her Lens*

Back Court Insignia Badge (*Buzi*) for a Civil Official of First Rank

Chinese; Qing dynasty, circa 1850–1900

Dark blue silk satin embroidered with multicolored silk and gold-wrapped thread

Murray Warner Collection of Oriental Art

MWCH46:97

Illustrations from a Sketchbook of Court Costume Protocol for Civil and Military Officials

Chinese; Qing dynasty, 19th century

Tempera on paper

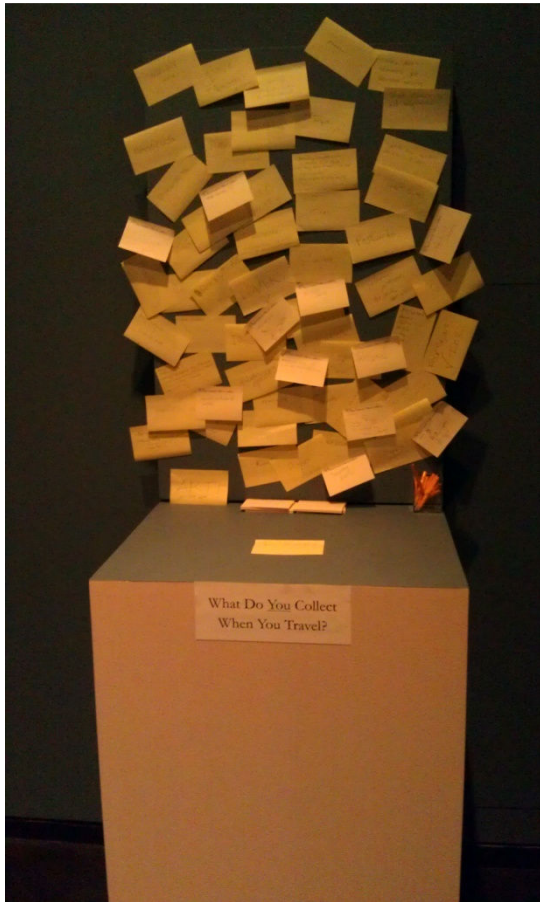
Murray Warner Collection of Oriental Art

MWCH36:2

As opposed to the illustrated libretto published in Paris for a western audience, this sketchbook was produced in China for a Chinese audience. High ranking military officials wore the same hats and robes as civil officials, distinguished only by an animal rather than a bird on the rank badge. As the rank badge in this illustration depicts an auspicious animal, one can conclude that the individual portrayed is a military official. The framed festival badges above would be sewn over regular rank badges for special occasions.

This exhibit label highlighted some of the major exhibition themes and compared two objects on display.

Figure 3.4 Continued



Adding a participatory element to the exhibition, visitors are given the leading statement “When I travel, I like to collect...” and provides sticky notes for visitors to respond. Labels that elicit some form of participation can improve visitor engagement.