

Labels for Everyone:

A Toolkit for Art Museum Professionals to Draft Labels that Enhance Visitor Belonging

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Toolkit Overview

Exhibit labels may seem like a minor piece of what makes a museum whole, but in reality, these words carry enormous weight. As has been well-documented, the presence of interpretive text is directly related to increased visitor engagement (Reitstätter, Galter, & Bakondi, 2022). This increased engagement is, in part, because **the labels used in a museum don't just describe objects—they set the tone for the museum experience, evoke deep thoughts and learning within visitors, and effectively indicate who is welcome within the museum.**

The following document serves as a guide for writing labels that foster a sense of belonging in visitors. By doing so, it aims to motivate art museums to align more closely with new museology principles of inclusion, thereby expanding their potential audiences to reach individuals who traditionally do not feel a sense of belonging in art museums.

Sections

Understanding the Toolkit

Art Museums, Belonging, and
the Value of Labels

How To Write Labels For
Belonging

Label Evaluation

Closing Thoughts

References

Section 1: Understanding the Toolkit

1.1 Goals & Audience

The main goal of this toolkit is to provide an overview of why fostering a sense of belonging in art museum visitors is essential for the future of art museums, as well as best practices and strategies for writing labels that foster the feeling of belongingness in visitors to art museums. The intended audience for this toolkit includes:

- Curators;
- Directors; and,
- Educators.

This toolkit can be used by curators and educators to inform their writing of exhibit labels. Additionally, while the aim of the toolkit is to serve as a resource for writing labels that foster a sense of belonging, the literature review ([Section 2](#)) and evaluative conclusions ([Section 4](#)) could have the secondary benefit of potentially demonstrating the need for this type of writing, which may be useful to museum directors as well.

1.2 Creation Process

The process for creating this toolkit began with a review of relevant field-based literature to inform an understanding of the current state of belonging in art museums, why this is important, and how one can go about creating labels that foster a sense of belonging. Those findings were utilized to create guidelines and a checklist for writing such labels (see [Section 3](#)). Prototype labels were developed and evaluated to understand whether and how the labels

enhanced a sense of belonging in visitors to the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) using Price & Applebaum's (2021) Cultural Institution Belonging Instrument (CIBI; See [Section 4](#)).

1.3 Defining Belonging

Whether or not someone feels a sense of belonging, from a philosophical standpoint, is subjective. Further, how one defines belonging on a personal level is relatively unique to the individual, and may impact whether they feel as though they belong. With this in mind, this toolkit does not necessarily rely on one agreed-upon definition of belonging. Rather, the construct of belonging has been obtained via a general consensus of museum visitors who have answered the question: “What does belonging mean to you?” (see [Section 4.3.2](#)). As depicted in [Figure 5](#), belonging can be broadly defined as the feeling of being part of a community, space, or group and the sense of comfort that results from this relationship. Additionally, given that this toolkit centers around the concept of belonging as a measurable construct, belonging is operationally defined using Price & Applebaum’s (2021) Who/Where/What model of belonging. This model of belonging asks: Who are the people in the experience? Where is the space in which the experience is occurring? And what is the context for it?

This model breaks “Belonging” into three categories: People Fit/Inclusion, Place, and Context.

“**People Fit**” consists of feeling connected, welcomed, empowered, valued, and needed. “**Place**” can consist of the physical environment within which one is present, as well as the social environment and its associated history. It can also include the temporal or design aspects of a museum, such as the choice architecture which influences visitors to stop and view an object on display. “**Context**” refers to the communal/collective and personal identities of the visitors, which work to create the context for visitation. Essentially, this aspect consists of one's

motivations for visiting based on their individual backgrounds and how that motivation interacts with their own identities. Respecting and valuing these identities creates a sense of belonging within visitors. Each of these three concepts is interrelated, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

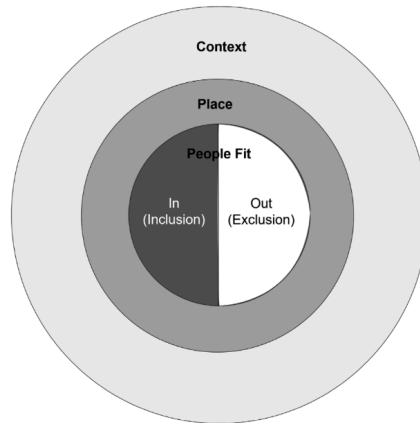


Figure 1. Price & Applebaum's (2021) model of belonging at cultural institutions.

Section 2: Art Museums, Belonging, and the Power of Labels

2.0 Introduction

This section of the toolkit consists of a review of relevant literature that establishes the current impact of labels on belonging in art museums and the value of writing labels that foster a sense of belonging. This section essentially informs the rationale behind this toolkit's existence and importance.

2.1 The Current State of Belonging in Art Museums

As mentioned in [Section 1.3](#), one's personal motivations, environment, and sense of feeling welcomed in a space can all uniquely impact whether or not individuals feel as though they belong at a museum. Labels are just one piece of the puzzle; however, they have significant potential for directly evoking these factors of belonging if they are written with this intention. Currently, art museums are not widely taking advantage of this opportunity to impact their visitors' sense of belonging. Despite the significant potential impact labels can have on visitors, art museums are frequent perpetrators of short, less informative museum labels. Often prioritizing aesthetics over interpretation, many art museums display objects with terse labels and minimal additional context to avoid detracting from the visual presentation (Chambers, 2006). **Consequently, many people view art museums as elitist and cold. As such, it's possible that the typical practice for labels in art museums is alienating those who wish to learn from the museum but do not have the necessary credentials to do so.**

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) critiques of the internal perceptions of art museums suggest one reason why art museums may not currently have a strong positive impact on belonging. She asserts that, compared to other types of museums, art museum professionals view art museums as special places appreciated by cultured and sophisticated people—and the "mythical museum," or the traditional museological archetype of a grand space that holds the greatest cultural objects throughout time, is the enduring standard to which they aspire. She explains how these values were effectively developed in a vacuum—art museums attracted specific people who revered the "mythical museum," and together, they perpetuated this conceptualization of museums in isolation from other cultural institutions and visitors.

Some museums recognize the weight of their words in creating a relationship with visitors and have shifted from being traditional authoritarian voices to becoming more approachable. This shift is often characterized as the field-wide transition from “traditional museology” principles, in which museums prioritized their collections over visitors and served as cultural authorities, to “new museology,” which consists of valuing ideas over objects and creating space for dialogue rather than solely lecture (Europa, 2015). In the context of labels, a new museology approach might consist of asking visitors open-ended, interpretive questions about objects for visitors to discuss, while a traditional museology approach would be that of simple didactic labels that provide additional information on the object in a definitive manner of expression. While the latter type of labels is certainly necessary for making it clear to visitors what exactly they are looking at, they do not inspire or provoke additional thought and are, consequently, falling out of favor to more interactive or multimodal styles of interpretation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). However, art museums have been slow to adapt to the dynamics

imposed by “new museology” and consequently have the potential to negatively impact visitors’ feelings of belonging within the institution.

The main sticking point of these views that both curators and visitors struggle to grapple with is the balance between context and content (Chambers, 2006). Many art museum curators have long been of the mind that art should be removed from "all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'" and must be "isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself" (O'Doherty, 1976, p.14). Essentially, this means that any additional background or accoutrement to the presentation of an artwork hurts the viewers' abilities to draw their own conclusions around the works' meanings. The common viewing setting known as the "white cube" resulted, in part, from this belief (O'Doherty, 1976)—the art is removed almost entirely from any contextualization, and thus, visitors can focus on the art without distractions. In other words, many art curators are stuck in the ways of "traditional museology" through their privileging of the objects in a collection over the needs of the visitors to the museum. Essentially, art museums commonly prioritize their collections over the necessary context to understand them due to outdated beliefs based on expert ways of viewing (Chambers, 2006; Screven, 1992; Kesner, 2006). This practice runs entirely counter to the factors that play into one's feelings of belonging, as one's contextual background informs their relationship to the space and their feelings of inclusion/exclusion within it. As such, removing the art from its context and/or prioritizing the aesthetics of the presentation ultimately minimizes the museum's power to impact people's feelings of belonging.

2.2 The Importance of Labels & Their Relationship to Belonging in Art Museums

Although most art museums are not currently writing their labels with belonging in mind, the labels impact visitors' feelings of belonging regardless of whether they are written with that intention. For instance, Linton & Young (1992) found that of visitors to four different heritage sites, those who visited art museums had the highest percentage of negative comments (22%). These negative comments were, in part, influenced by the visitors' reactions to the labels they encountered. Visitors critiqued labels for being "unnecessarily long, too technical, unrelated directly to exhibit objects, or too general" (Linton & Young, 1992, p. 255), and many visitors made comments about the level of education required to be able to understand the labels. These findings suggest that visitors take labels and education level into consideration when selecting which museums to visit and with whom. Regardless of whether the comments were positive or negative, visitors at all four sites indicated that the "clarity, placement, and relevance" of interpretive labels are important (p. 255). In this sense, visitors recognize to some degree that labels can impact their feelings of inclusion/exclusion and take their personal motivations and backgrounds into consideration as part of this understanding. In other words, people do pay attention to and care about labels, as well as think about their contextual relationship to the labels such that the labels impact their sense of belonging.

2.2.1 Everyone Reads Labels—Especially Non-Experts

Another reason that it is important to take belonging into consideration when drafting labels is that contrary to popular belief, extant literature has documented that **everyone reads labels**; however, what varies amongst visitors is the time spent with them. Reitstätter et al. (2022) found that two-thirds of visitors can be considered to be "willing readers," and the

remaining third take in pieces of information, even as low-affinity readers. Further, they found that the visitors with the lowest "art interest" were more likely to be high-affinity readers—suggesting that non-experts use labels to orient themselves and provide necessary context that they have not acquired beforehand. Therefore, labels that create a sense of belonging in visitors must include the basic information that is necessary for understanding the piece in question so as to account for the inclusion and context dimensions of belonging.

This notion is confirmed by Gestsson and Iervolino (2011), who found that when interpreting artworks, participants draw on their backgrounds, cultural capital, and previous experiences of art-related activities. Those who had previous relevant experience were demonstrably confident in their interpretations of the work and tended to engage with the artworks from a critical perspective, whereas those without previous experiences were much less confident in their interpretations. However, the research demonstrated that they were still able to critically engage with the work's message even without prior experience. Further, participants emphasized their connections, or lack thereof, to the art world and utilized this to justify their interpretations. As such, the findings demonstrated that individuals use their cultural contexts in conjunction with their sense of inclusion/exclusion within the museum space in order to determine whether they belong in the museum. **The common practice of gearing art museum labels towards experts rather than novices (as described in Section 2.1) is clearly misguided, as those who do self-identify as being more literate in visual interpretation are less likely to spend time with labels than those who feel disconnected from the art world.** Consequently, labels that are written for experts are potentially exacerbating the low

confidence of non-experts in interpreting artworks, which could lead individuals to feel a sense of exclusion rather than belonging.

2.2.2 Attracting New Audiences

Another benefit of writing labels that enhance one's sense of belonging is the potential for attracting new audiences to the museum. For instance, the age group that museums often struggle to attract is young adults. The young adult audience is crucial to ensure museums do not fall victim to obsolescence in our society. Unfortunately, many young adults find that museums are not welcoming, relevant, or engaging enough for their demographic (Huges & Moscardo, 2019). In a study whose aim was to understand how young and older adults make sense of contemporary art, Querol (2018) found that young people, in particular, felt that labels were incredibly important for aiding in their understanding and liking of the artworks—and without labels, they felt confused. Further, Querol asserts that the combination of the museum setting and the labels creates a supportive setting for visitors, which allows them to feel free of anxiety and able to confront the task of interacting with the artwork in a manner within their capacities (Querol, 2018). Overall, these findings suggest that labels have the potential to impact whether individuals feel comfortable approaching art, a feeling that is particularly important to the younger adult audience's sense of belonging that museums strive to reach.

Due to increasing competition, museums now more than ever are in need of attracting cultural tourists to their institutions (Gurel & Nielsen, 2018). As such, museums must cater to individuals with a variety of backgrounds and interests while still serving their purpose as a museum. Given that people's perceptions of a museum's environment have been demonstrated to impact visitor affect, overall visit satisfaction, and revisit intention (Forrest, 2013), and due to

the potential impact one's sense of belonging can have on their perceptions of a museum, knowing which aspects of a museum have the greatest impact on visitors' feelings towards a museum would be highly valuable to museums looking to create positive relationships with its visitors by fostering belonging.

2.3 Conclusion

Due to the importance of labels for visitor engagement and their potential to impact visitors' sense of belonging, art museums would benefit from knowing how to write labels that enhance belonging in visitors. Understanding the specific impact of labels on visitors' feelings of belonging at the institutions and having the guidance of this toolkit for drafting such labels is an important step towards art museums becoming accessible to people of all backgrounds.

Section 3: How to Write Labels for Belonging

3.0 Introduction

This section of the toolkit contains strategies for writing labels that enhance a sense of belonging, including best practices, guidelines, a checklist, and examples in practice. While there is no real “right way” to write a label, there are a number of industry standards that most museums follow when it comes to writing their labels. These best practices cover nearly everything from broad areas of focus (e.g., establish label goals and objectives prior to writing (McLean, 1993)) to specific (e.g., “A minimum of a 20-point font is strongly recommended” (Serrell, 1996, p. 37); however, this toolkit is the first and only set of guidelines around writing labels that enhance visitor belonging. Further, though many of the industry standards are useful for informing how to write labels for belonging, some of these standards are outdated. This toolkit utilizes the information in Section 2 to determine which standards are relevant to fostering a sense of belonging.

3.1 Best Practices in Label Writing

As aforementioned, the best practices for label writing are useful for understanding the general practice of writing labels. Keep in mind, however, that these best practices are not necessarily directly applicable for writing labels that enhance belonging; rather, the guidelines for writing labels that enhance belonging can be found in Section 3.2 and consist of suggestions

developed by layering the literature on belonging in museums (from Section 2) over these best practices in label writing. With this in mind, the best practices are broadly summarized below.

According to best practices, when writing an interpretive label, it is important to:

- Consider what information the label should contain as determined by set objectives for the exhibit as a whole (McLean, 1993; Serrell, 1996)
- Write using as few words as possible while still conveying the intended message due to varying visitor attention spans and fatigue (McLean, 1993; Serrell, 1996)
- Keep sentences relatively short so as to ensure readers can quickly identify the information they desire to read (Screven, 1992; Bitgood, 2000)
- Employ vocabulary that is appropriate for a broad range of ages (Serrell, 1996; Bitgood, 2000) so as to ensure the content can be interpreted effectively by most visitors
- Use active verbs and a conversational tone of voice to keep readers engaged (Rand, 1990; Screven, 1992; Bitgood, 2000)
- Increase cognitive-emotional arousal by asking questions, confronting and correcting misconceptions, challenging the reader, utilizing mental imagery, and creating opportunities for social interaction (Rand, 1990; Screven, 1992; Bitgood, 2000).

Many additional best practices exist for the visual presentation of the labels, such as the font types and the physical location of labels relative to the artwork; however, these do not necessarily relate to the label-writing process and are therefore not included in this toolkit.

However, below is a list of select resources for additional reading with specifics to this end and further best practices for label writing:

- Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (1996)

- [Excellence In Exhibition Label Writing Competition](#) (2021)
- Ingrid Schaffner, [“Wall Text,” What Makes a Great Exhibition?](#) (2003)
- Kevin McLean, “Labels: The Exhibition Storytellers,” in *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*, (1993)
- Stephen Bitgood, “The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels,” in *Visitor Behavior, Open Exhibits*, (2000)
- Judy Rand, [“Less is More. And More is Less.”](#) in *Exhibition*, (2016)

3.2 Guidelines for Labels that Enhance Belonging

This section takes the best practices outlined in Section 3.1 and considers them in conjunction with the literature on belonging in museums from Section 2 to determine guidelines for writing labels that foster a sense of belonging in art museum visitors. While these are just guidelines for consideration, it is important to keep them in mind when writing labels and consider which best practices to employ. Moving forward, the guidelines reference Price and Applebaum’s (2021) model of belonging with three dimensions, and expand upon the foundational pieces of the best practices outlined in the previous section by emphasizing the specific dimension of belonging to which the suggestion pertains.

3.2.1 People Fit/Inclusion

As a reminder, the first dimension of Price & Applebaum’s (2021) model of belonging is people fit/inclusion, which asks, “Who are the people in the experience?” and emphasizes feeling connected, welcomed, empowered, valued, and needed. A label that considers People Fit would promote a sense of inclusion within those who read it—as though the label was written for the viewer’s benefit. Labels written with People Fit in mind also actively work against

factors that can potentially exclude visitors, such as being difficult to understand, gatekeeping information that the average person would not know, or telling people who they are/what they think.

To write a label that incorporates People Fit, consider:

- **Maintain a sixth- to eighth-grade reading level**
 - Labels that are written at a sixth- to eighth-grade reading level are ideal for reading comprehension that is not overly complex, such that the average visitor will not understand them, but also not so simplified that the reader feels talked down to. The reading level is, in part, determined by the museum's target audience. Museums whose audiences consist of families with children may want to lean more towards a sixth-grade reading level, as this level is accessible to most children while still not feeling too easy for adults. Museums whose audiences consist primarily of adult visitors may choose to lean towards the eighth-grade reading level, as this level is a bit more advanced while still relatively approachable. There are a number of tools to assess a label's reading level. One such tool is [Hemmingway Editor](#), which is the program used to assess reading levels throughout this toolkit.
- **Remove or define jargon/industry terms**
 - In order to attract and maintain diverse audiences to museums, it is critical that the information presented in labels does not make assumptions about what the reader knows or does not know (Gregg, 2010). Furthermore, labels that foster a sense of belonging should aim to either define industry terms outright or move

away from relying on visitors having prior knowledge of the industry, as doing so is paradoxical to the fact that museum curators spend years acquiring such knowledge (McLean, 2007).

- **Thoroughly explain relevant concepts**

- In order for visitors to feel as though they are included in the museum space, they need to be equipped with the proper information to comprehend the work of art. As such, it is critical that any concept that is not common knowledge be explained. Given that what is or is not common knowledge is subjective, it would be useful to get either visitor feedback on the concepts that need greater expansion or request the opinion of a colleague.

- **Length: Not too short, not too long. Aim for around 150 words.**

- As mentioned in Section 3.1, though it is common practice to keep interpretive labels to as few as twenty and at most 150 words (Serrell, 1996), this practice does not necessarily allow for incorporating the factors of belonging as effectively as it could. As aforementioned, visitors will spend as much time with the labels as they feel comfortable with the content, so the importance of providing proper context to enhance potential feelings of belonging in visitors outweighs the need for labels to be especially short. While they should not be so long that they are overwhelming with information, it is imperative that the labels include the information necessary to support the visitors who need greater context while being short enough that low-affinity readers still see value in the

labels. In other words, **keep the labels as short as possible without diminishing their usefulness.**

- **Employ rhetorical devices in the writing to ensure the reader is part of a dialogic narrative via the labels. This can include:**
 - 2nd person point of view;
 - Conversational tone;
 - Asking the visitor open-ended questions; and,
 - Providing prompts for discussion.

Rhetorical devices such as those listed above are useful ways of ensuring that visitors feel included as participants in the museum. Essentially, these rhetorical devices are incredibly valuable for making certain that the labels are speaking *with* visitors rather than *at* them.

3.2.2 Place

In Price and Applebaum’s (2021) model of belonging, place asks the question, “Where is the space in which the experience is occurring?” It consists of the physical environment within which one is present as well as the social environment and its associated history. It can also include the temporal or design aspects of a museum, such as the choice architecture which influences visitors to stop and view an object on display.

Labels that evoke a sense of place may reference the physical environment within which visitors are present, the social environment and its associated history, or the temporal or design aspects of a museum such that readers have a greater sense of their role within a space. According to Eckersley (2017), a place is considered important “because of the memory

(whether individual or collective) of what happened there” (p. 12), and the memory of what happened may sometimes be even more significant because of the place, emotion, or experience being remembered. Further, Eckersley states that the two significant factors associated with place are the “meanings ascribed to it by people” and “the ways in which these meanings are utilized both in society and in individual understandings and positioning of the self” (p. 14). This understanding of the relationship between place and individuals essentially illuminates the fact that people have such unique and varied associations with place that there is no real right way to go about referencing it when it comes to writing labels. Rather, it is the act of referencing place that evokes the place’s significance for the individual. As such, when writing labels for belonging that are intended to evoke a sense of place, consider the following:

- **Refer to the visitor’s physical location**

- Referring to the visitor’s physical location within the museum will evoke different reactions depending on how a visitor feels about the space in which they are present. Regardless, it gets people thinking about how they may be choosing to interact with the space and their relationship to it.

- **Refer to the museum’s geographic location**

- Referring to the museum's geographic location is likely to be the most effective way of ensuring consistent reactions amongst visitors in regard to their feelings of belonging. The consistency is because the museum's geographic location is fixed, and a relationship to this location is formed just by way of being within the museum, so making note of the significance of the museum's geographic

location in relation to the work being described is more likely to have a similar impact across visitors.

- **Refer to the artwork's physical location and/or geographic origin**
 - While referring to the artwork's origin is a greater challenge for evoking belonging within any particular visitor, it is also possible to have the greatest impact on the visitors who do have a relationship to the piece's origin. Essentially, due to the significant relationship between place and identity, someone who has a strong association with the place that is being referenced would likely imbue their relationship with the museum with similar associations.

3.2.3 Context

Finally, Price and Applebaum's (2021) dimension of context refers to the communal/collective and personal identities of the visitors, which work to create the context for visitation. Essentially, this aspect consists of one's motivations for visiting based on their individual backgrounds and how that motivation interacts with their own identities. Labels that promote the context factor of belonging respect and value visitors' unique identities and even allow for some degree of co-creation or participation. This aspect of belonging is the most person-specific of the three, as it ultimately relies on the visitors' relationship with their own unique identities that they use to influence how they navigate the world. Still, it is also the factor that impacts visitors the most, as exemplified by Figure 1 (See Section 1). As such, the labels do not need to make explicit mentions of visitors' identities to evoke the associated feeling of belonging that arises when people consider their identities. Though it is not wrong to make explicit mention of a particular identity, this is fairly limited in its impact due to its

relatability across individuals with varying backgrounds. Rather, appealing to visitors' identities can be much more subtle and be more in line with the idea that one's personal agency is exercised within the context of their identities. With this in mind, consider the following when writing labels that evoke the Context factor of belonging:

- **Make references to the concept of community**
 - Highlighting specific communities or the general concept of communal experiences and relationships can prompt visitors to think about themselves in relation to the various communities they identify with.
- **Empower visitors to use their identities to inform their understandings**
 - This aspect is, to some degree, part and parcel with labels being approachable and reflective. By ensuring visitors feel equipped to take in the information presented in the label and think critically about it, the visitors can incorporate their newfound empowerment into their existing identities.

Further, research has demonstrated that visitors are more likely to approach exhibit objects and labels if the content is personally meaningful (Screven, 1992).

As such, writing in a way that is more personal or challenging for the reader is likely to motivate them to engage with the materials.
- **Ensure approachability from multiple backgrounds**
 - If the label's content is more specific to one cultural background than another, it is important to write in such a way that individuals of other backgrounds can relate to and understand despite not being part of the featured culture. Not only does this help to foster a sense of empathy amongst visitors, but it also has the

potential to promote inclusion from a cultural context perspective, thus allowing visitors to feel as though they belong tangentially by way of understanding the label's meaning (Yi et al., 2022).

- **Allow visitors to draw their own conclusions**

- Ensuring that visitors have the opportunity to come to their own conclusions about the work's significance is critical to promoting visitors' sense of personal agency. Yi et al. (2022) note that visitor-based social contextual information (VSCI) elements, such as being given the space to comment their own opinions on the works in a museum, are a major component of visitor satisfaction in a museum. Due to these elements being so interrelated to the context factor of belonging, allowing visitors the opportunity to draw their own conclusions and creating an environment within which they feel comfortable sharing them is a significant part of writing labels that enhance belonging.

3.3 Checklist

The following checklist takes into consideration the [three factors of belonging](#) and how they relate to label writing. While not every item on the checklist must be present to create a label that is effective at establishing a sense of belonging, these items serve as general guidelines for increasing the likelihood that the labels are written with that intention.

Item	No	Some-what	Yes	Notes
<u>People Fit/Inclusion</u>				
Is the label easy to understand?				
6-8th grade reading level				
No jargon/industry terms OR industry terms have been defined				
Concepts have been well-explained				

Item	No	Some-what	Yes	Notes
Word count				
Are there clear attempts at inclusion?				
2nd person point of view				
Conversational tone				
Asks the visitor open-ended questions				
Provides prompts for discussion				
Place				
References the visitor's physical location				
References the museum's geographic location				
References the artwork's physical location or geographic origin				
Context				
Does the label appeal to the visitors' identities?				
References community/communities				
Empowers visitors to use their identities to inform their understandings				
Does the label give visitors a sense of personal agency?				
Approachable from multiple backgrounds				
Visitors can draw their own conclusions				

3.4 Examples of How to Use the Checklist

The checklist can be used in two ways. First, it can be used to audit/assess existing labels to determine whether they are successfully working to promote a sense of belonging in visitors. Second, it can be used to revise or draft labels that do meet the criteria for belonging.

3.4.1 Assessing Existing Labels

The following example demonstrates how one can use this toolkit to assess existing labels for the factors of belonging. The sample label used for the example originates from the Seattle Art Museum in reference to the painting *Minidoka Series #2* (1978) by Roger Shimomura (pictured below).



Figure 2. Roger Shimomura. (1972). *Minidoka #2: Exodus*. [acrylic on canvas]. Seattle Art Museum. Seattle, Washington, USA.

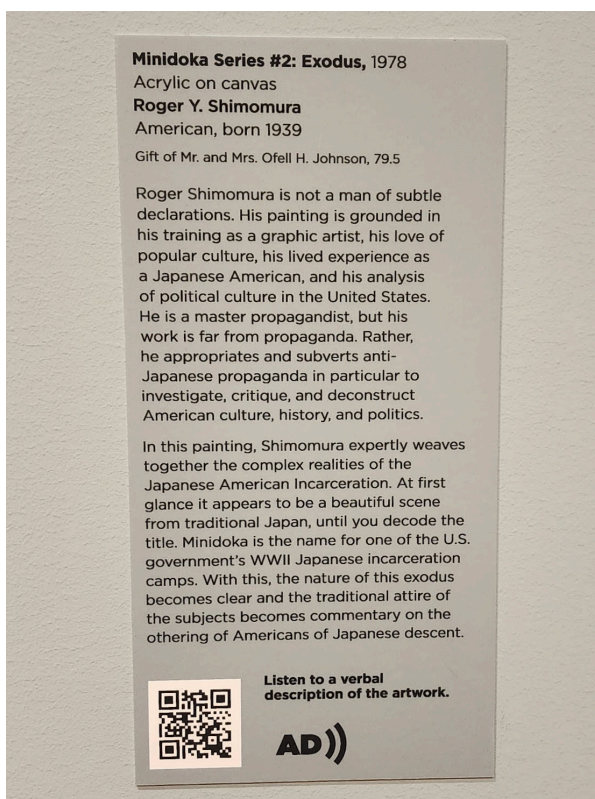


Figure 3. The existing label for *Minidoka Series #2: Exodus* on display at the Seattle Art Museum.

“Roger Shimomura is not a man of subtle declarations. His painting is grounded in his training as a graphic artist, his love of popular culture, his lived experience as a Japanese American, and his analysis of political culture in the United States. He is a master propagandist, but his work is far from propaganda. Rather, he appropriates and subverts anti-Japanese propaganda in particular to investigate, critique, and deconstruct American culture, history, and politics.

In this painting, Shimomura expertly weaves together the complex realities of the Japanese American Incarceration. At first glance it appears to be a beautiful scene from traditional Japan, until you decode the title. Minidoka is the name for one of the US government’s WWII Japanese incarceration camps. With this, the nature of this exodus becomes clear and the traditional attire of the subjects becomes commentary on the othering of Americans of Japanese descent.”

Assessing this label using the checklist has the following results:

Item	No	Some-what	Yes	Notes
People Fit/Inclusion				
Is the label easy to understand?				
6-8th grade reading level	X			Assessed to be Grade 13
No jargon/industry terms <u>OR</u> industry terms have been defined			X	No industry terms
Concepts have been well-explained	X			No explanation of "exodus," "propaganda," or the Japanese American incarceration
Word count			X	146 words
Are there clear attempts at inclusion?				
2nd person point of view		X		One instance of 2nd person POV
Conversational tone		X		
Asks the visitor open-ended questions	X			
Provides prompts for discussion	X			
Place				
References the visitor's physical location	X			
References the museum's geographic location	X			
References the artwork's physical location or geographic origin		X		Not specific, just United States
Context				
Does the label appeal to the visitors' identities?				
References community/communities		X		Alludes to community by referencing the "lived experience as a Japanese American" though this is not an explicit attempt to appeal to visitors' identities
Empowers visitors to use their identities to inform their understandings	X			As mentioned in section 3.2.3, it is difficult to check this box without some degree of approachability, of which there is minimal.
Does the label give visitors a sense of personal agency?				
Approachable from multiple backgrounds		X		
Visitors can draw their own conclusions	X			

The label has been dissected sentence-by-sentence below to explain more in-depth why it received the checklist scoring that it did.

Sentence from the Label	Analysis	Belonging Category
Roger Shimomura is not a man of subtle declarations.	Word choice is unnecessarily complex	People Fit
	Starting off with discussing the artist runs counter to the idea that individuals are looking to contextualize what they are looking at. It's better to start off with an explanation of what the viewer is seeing.	Context
His painting is grounded in his training as a graphic artist, his love of popular culture, his lived experience as a Japanese American, and his analysis of political culture in the United States.	Not knowing what the painting is about at this point makes for a lack of clarity, thus potentially impacting one's feelings of inclusion/exclusion	Context People Fit
He is a master propagandist, but his work is far from propaganda.	Nothing so far has suggested the relevance of propaganda to this artist's description.	Context
Rather, he appropriates and subverts anti-Japanese propaganda in particular to investigate, critique, and deconstruct American culture, history, and politics.	Word choice and sentence construction is unnecessarily complex. Too many ideas in one sentence.	People Fit
In this painting, Shimomura expertly weaves together the complex realities of the Japanese American Incarceration.	Assumes knowledge of the Japanese American Incarceration, a historical event that many individuals are not aware of.	Context
	Here is also an opportunity to reflect on the content of the piece in relation to the physical location of the museum.	Place
At first glance it appears to be a	Employs one instance of 2nd person	People Fit

Sentence from the Label	Analysis	Belonging Category
beautiful scene from traditional Japan, until you decode the title.	perspective.	
Minidoka is the name for one of the US government's WWII Japanese incarceration camps.	Straightforward sentence but not especially interesting phrasing.	N/A
With this, the nature of this exodus becomes clear and the traditional attire of the subjects becomes commentary on the othering of Americans of Japanese descent.	Language/passive voice is potentially alienating to visitors who do not have the clarity referenced by the label.	People Fit

As demonstrated above, this label was not written with the intent to foster a sense of belonging and consequently does not include most of the required devices for doing so. The checklist has served the first of its two uses, assessing a label, and surfacing several possible revisions that might enhance its belonging.

3.4.2 Writing Labels

For this toolkit's second use, writing a label, we can work backward to ensure the label checks off more of the items on the checklist.

To start, bullet out the general ideas of what the label should include in regard to basic facts about the piece. This example includes:

- The painting appears to depict traditional Japan; however, it is actually an American setting.
 - The fact that the piece resembles the Japanese art style that most people are familiar with and associate with Japan is likely the first aspect of the painting visitors would notice. It is the most surface-level observation of the scene.

However, since this piece does not actually depict Japan, it is useful to call out the assumption and surprise viewers with the correction from the start. The original version of this label did this, but not until mid-way through the label, at which point low-affinity readers would likely no longer be engaged, and high-affinity readers looking for additional context would be discouraged by the lack of this up front.

- Minedoka was an incarceration camp in Jerome, Idaho where the artist, Roger Shimomura, lived as a child.
 - Explaining the significance of the location depicted in the painting helps to establish proper context and let visitors know why they should care about it.
- Shimomura uses his love of popular culture and experience as a Japanese American to take anti-Japanese propaganda and turn it on its head.
 - Including information on both the artist and the artwork provides helpful context and makes the label appeal to those who are interested in either or both of these aspects.

From here, these aspects of the label can be consolidated and fleshed out to include specific efforts to imbue the label with appeals to the factors of belonging. The checklist can be used alongside the writing process at this point and should be referenced throughout. As with the original example, it is useful to go sentence by sentence to determine how one might go about writing this label so it employs the relevant factors of belonging.

Sentence	Analysis	Belonging Category
At first glance, this painting may seem like a beautiful scene from traditional Japan.	Takes on the perspective of the viewer with “At first glance”	People Fit
In reality, <i>Minidoka Series #2: Exodus</i> does not depict Japan at all.	Provides important information to clarify what the artwork depicts without being condescending	Context People Fit
It shows Minidoka, an incarceration camp in Jerome, Idaho where the artist, Roger Shimomura, lived as a child.	Explains what the painting is actually depicting and provides information that speaks to both the art and the artist.	Context
	Makes the artwork’s depicted location clear	Place
Through this painting, Shimomura tells the story of the exodus, or forced removal, of Japanese-Americans from their homes and daily lives during World War II.	Defines complex term like “exodus” in a way that is additive to the understanding of concepts that follow.	People Fit
	Gives information on an event many individuals may be unfamiliar with.	Context
As a graphic artist, Shimomura is not afraid to be bold and make a statement.	Introduces an idea but does not tell readers what to think in regard to this idea.	People Fit
He uses his love of popular culture and experience as a Japanese American to take anti-Japanese propaganda and turn it on its head.	Explains the intent of the artist without telling readers that this is the way they should think.	People Fit Context
The scene in this painting happened about 80 years ago, less than 700 miles away from where you are now.	Makes reference to temporal context and physical environment relative to the event depicted in the painting. Provides an opportunity for visitors to reflect on their relationship to the painting by way of their location in time and space.	Place
With this in mind, think about Shimomura’s choice to paint the subjects in traditional clothing.	Prompts reader to consider an aspect of the painting that they may not have recognized as significant.	People Fit Context

Sentence	Analysis	Belonging Category
What do you think he is saying about the sentiments of that time?"	Leaves readers with a question to pique their interests and provoke discussion or reflection as they consider takeaways from what they've learned and seen.	People Fit

Item	No	Some-what	Yes	Notes
People Fit/Inclusion				
Is the label easy to understand?				
6-8th grade reading level			X	Assessed to be Grade 8
No jargon/industry terms <u>OR</u> industry terms have been defined			X	No industry terms
Concepts have been well-explained			X	Explanation of "exodus," "propaganda," and the Japanese American incarceration
Word count			X	155 words
Are there clear attempts at inclusion?				
2nd person point of view			X	Four instances of 2nd person POV
Conversational Tone			X	
Asks the visitor open-ended questions			X	
Provides prompts for discussion			X	
Place				
References the visitor's physical location			X	"Where you are now"
References the museum's geographic location			X	"About 80 years ago, less than 700 miles away"
References the artwork's physical location or geographic origin			X	"It shows Minidoka, an incarceration camp in Jerome, Idaho"
Context				
Does the label appeal to the visitors' identities?				
References community/communities		X		Alludes to community by referencing the "lived experience as a Japanese American," though this is not an explicit attempt to appeal

Item	No	Some-what	Yes	Notes
				to visitors' identities
Empowers visitors to use their identities to inform their understandings		X		
Does the label give visitors a sense of personal agency?				
Approachable from multiple backgrounds		X		
Visitors can draw their own conclusions			X	

Now that each aspect of the label has been analyzed and the checklist has been consulted, here is the final version of the new label, written intentionally to enhance visitors' belonging:

“At first glance, this painting may seem like a beautiful scene from traditional Japan. In reality, Minidoka Series #2: Exodus does not depict Japan at all. It shows Minidoka, an incarceration camp in Jerome, Idaho where the artist, Roger Shimomura, lived as a child. Through this painting, Shimomura tells the story of the exodus, or forced removal, of Japanese-Americans from their homes and daily lives during World War II.

As a graphic artist, Shimomura is not afraid to be bold and make a statement. He uses his love of popular culture and experience as a Japanese American to take anti-Japanese propaganda and turn it on its head.

The scene in this painting happened about 80 years ago, less than 700 miles away from where you are now. With this in mind, think about Shimomura's choice to paint the subjects in traditional clothing. What do you think he is saying about the sentiments of that time?”

Section 4: Label Evaluation

4.0 Introduction

The guidelines offered here for writing labels for belonging were prototyped and tested utilizing a modified version of Price & Applebaum's (2021) Cultural Institution Belonging Instrument (CIBI). The key questions that this evaluation sought to answer included:

1. Does utilizing the guidelines outlined in Section 3 to write a new label for a work of art on display impact visitors' feelings of belonging at the Seattle Art Museum?
2. What aspects of the new prototyped label do visitors feel contribute to or detract from their feelings of belonging at the SAM?

4.1 Measurement

The original CIBI questionnaire consists of a total of 26 agree/disagree statements that use a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). It also includes two open-ended questions used to understand respondents' frames of reference in their answers. For this evaluation, the questionnaire was cut down to 15 statements (for the sake of making the survey shorter), and the statements were rephrased to be about the label in question rather than the museum itself (see Table). For instance, "I had a sense of belonging at the Museum" was revised to read "This label gave me a sense of belonging at the Museum." I kept the question "What does belonging mean to you?" from the original survey as one of the open-ended questions. I also added the questions: "What aspects of this label make you feel like you belong at the

Seattle Art Museum? Why?” and “What aspects of this label make you feel like you *do not* belong at the Seattle Art Museum? Why?” The Likert scale statements were used to answer the first of the key questions mentioned in Section 4.1, and the open-ended questions helped answer the second question. This is expanded upon in Section 4.3.

Table 1. List of modified statements selected from CIBI questionnaire.

#	CIBI Statements
1	This label makes me feel like I am included in the museum.
2	This label would help me to create bonds with other people at the Museum.
3	This label gave me a sense of belonging at the Museum.
4	This label made me feel as though I had a place at the table at the Museum.
5	This label made me feel like an outsider at the Museum.
6	This label made me feel as if people did not care about me at the museum.
7	This label made me feel isolated from everyone else at the Museum.
8	This label made me feel connected to the Museum.
9	I was fond of the Museum after reading the label.
10	I felt like I belonged at the Museum after reading the label.
11	Based on the label, this Museum was designed for me.
12	This label made me feel very comfortable at the Museum as a person of my gender.
13	This label made me feel very comfortable at the Museum as a person of my race and/or ethnicity.
14	I could help others have a better experience at the Museum through reading this label.
15	This label made me feel like my presence here mattered.

Note: The full survey is linked [here](#).

4.2 Process

The process for evaluating the labels and answering the above key questions naturally began with writing a prototype version of a label using the guidelines described in this toolkit. I followed the process outlined in Section 3 to arrive at the two labels I tested. *Minidoka #2: Exodus* was intentionally selected because it belongs to the American art section of the SAM. This section's explicit tie-in with identity and intersecting communities aligned well with my aim of fostering a sense of belonging and my methods for doing so.

I collected data in two rounds, first with 30 visitors who reacted to the label written by SAM and currently on display with *Minidoka #2: Exodus*, and second with 30 different visitors who reacted to the prototyped label for *Minidoka #2: Exodus* that I wrote using the guidelines in the toolkit. Moving forward, the visitors who read the existing label will be referred to as **Group 1**, and the visitors who read the prototyped label will be referred to as **Group 2**.

At the SAM, I approached adult visitors at random in the American Art Gallery, gave a bit of context for the testing, and asked if they were willing to participate. The questionnaire took each visitor an average of 15 minutes to complete. The processes for both rounds of data collection were nearly identical; however, the key difference between the two groups was the fact that Group 1's label was the original and is actually displayed on the wall in the gallery. So, for Group 2, rather than solely approaching visitors who were interested in the painting, I was careful to only ask individuals to participate if they had not yet read the existing wall label (3.4.1). I then instructed those visitors to proceed with the questionnaire as though the revised label (3.4.2) included in the questionnaire were the one presented by the museum, and the actual label (3.4.1) did not exist. I asked that they not read the existing label (3.4.1) until after

they had completed the questionnaire so as to prevent the potential for comparison and to ensure all participants had the same frame of reference.

Once I collected all of my raw data, I analyzed the results of the modified CIBI questionnaire for each group using the CIBI Data Analysis Toolkit. The CIBI toolkit calculates three scores which are representative of the three factors of belonging: General Belonging Score (People Fit/Inclusion), Place Belonging Score (Place), and Cultural Context Belonging Score (Context), so as to understand visitors' sense of belonging at the SAM.

4.2.1 Sampling visitors

Some lessons I learned from the process of sampling visitors in person at the Seattle Art Museum are described below.

First, although I had assumed the survey to be relatively quick given the nature of the ranking system, I found that visitors spent more time with the questionnaire than I had anticipated, suggesting that many of them put a great deal of thought into their responses. As aforementioned, it took visitors an average of 15 - 20 minutes to complete the survey, which ended up being a bit long. As I did not want to overwhelm the gallery space with too many survey-takers, I asked about 2-3 people at a time, maximum. In the end, I spent about a total of 12 hours at the museum collecting data from sixty respondents.

Second, while it was not particularly difficult to find visitors who were willing to participate in the prototype testing, some participants were hesitant to provide their thoughts due to their relative inexperience with the world of art. This was usually remedied by explaining that the survey was doable by anyone, regardless of their knowledge of art history; however, it is an interesting point to note because of what that behavior implies. Essentially, I was able to

observe firsthand the impact of individuals feeling as though they do not belong in the space because they did not feel qualified to share their opinions.

Lastly, buy-in is important when it comes to conducting this survey. While most survey responses were useful, there were the occasional ones that appeared not to consider the possibility that labels *could* have an impact on their sense of belonging. In these instances (of which there were approximately three), people responded with things like "N/A" or "I don't see a connection between this and belonging." However, just because the visitor does not see the connection themselves does not mean that no impact is had. As such, those responses were considered outliers and excluded from the analysis. Perhaps some explanation of the ways that labels can impact feelings of belonging in museums would alleviate this issue; however, it must be done in a way that does not lead the participants toward answering the questions in a particular way in line with observer bias.

4.3 Key Findings and Their Impact on the Toolkit Guidelines

4.3.1 Adults' Feelings of Belonging

As aforementioned, I calculated how well the museum's existing label fosters a sense of belonging using the CIBI Data Analysis Toolkit. The bar chart depicted in Figure 4 shows the results of the Likert scale statements in each of the three belongingness categories for both the existing and revised label groups.

That said, however, the purpose of this data collection is not necessarily to assess how effective the museum is at fostering a sense of belonging in visitors (especially because the existing labels were not written with that intent); rather, it is to test the efficacy of the approach described in this toolkit for writing labels that foster a sense of belonging. Due to the small

sample size, the quantitative differences appear minimal; however, they give a clear indication that writing for belonging using this toolkit *does* impact visitors' feelings of belonging at an institution.

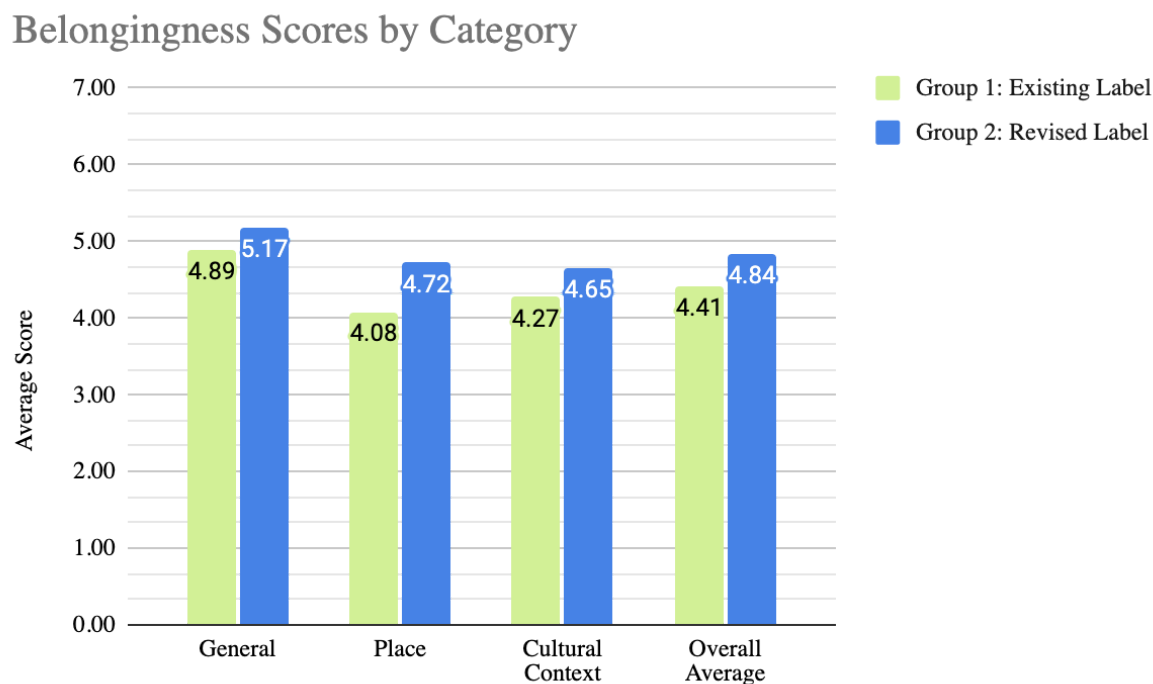


Figure 4. Bar chart depicting belongingness scores for Groups 1 and 2.

The results for Group 1 depicted in Figure 4 suggest that the museum's existing label is not doing anything that makes visitors feel a sense of exclusion; however, it is not necessarily evoking a sense of belonging in visitors either. The highest scoring factor was the General Belongingness Score (4.89), which measures the "People Fit" factor of belonging and, on the scale of 1 to 7, is slightly above average.

The results for Group 2 depicted in Figure 4 demonstrate an increase in belongingness scores from the existing label to the revised label. Though slight, this increase serves the exact purpose of indicating that this toolkit has the potential to impact one's feelings of belonging

through the labels it helps to create. The increase in scores is observed across all three dimensions of belonging, resulting in an overall average score of 4.84. Though this may not seem like much of an increase from Group 1's average score of 4.41, the small sample size would not allow for drawing firm conclusions about these scores regardless of how they ended up. What's significant about these results is that the increase is consistent across the factors of belonging and demonstrates the potential for labels written using this toolkit to evoke a greater sense of belonging in visitors than labels that are not written for that express purpose.

4.3.2 Adults' Reflections on What Contributed to Their Feelings of Belonging

The qualitative data originates from three open-ended questions that asked visitors about their understanding of belonging and how the label they read made them feel like they did or did not belong at the Seattle Art Museum. This information is used to understand *why* the toolkit was effective from the perspective of visitors and contribute to understanding what visitors are looking for when it comes to labels that evoke the feeling of belonging.

Similar Interests, vi) Family or Friends, vii) "Able to Do Activities Intended in Space," and viii) "other" (see Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of responses to "What does the word 'belonging' mean to you?"

Category	Description	Examples	Responses (N=60)
Inclusive/Fitting In	A feeling of being included, accepted, welcomed, connected, together, part of a group, or fitting in	"To feel included," "A part of something"	31.8%
Comfort or Safety	A feeling of comfort, safety, warmth, at ease, being able to be who you are without judgment	"Feeling safe," "Feeling comfortable in a space"	28.4%
Community	Mention the word community	"A sense of community," "A part of a community"	15.9%
Representation/ Similar Interests	Seeing yourself represented in a space or having a common bond or interest with the people around you.	"Being together with a common bond," "Being with like-minded people"	10.2%
Able to Do Activities Intended in Space	Able to enjoy or use a space as it has been intended	"Being able to find and understand the exhibits," "Active participants..."	5.7%
Feeling Present	Feeling present or in the moment	"Feeling as if you are 'in place,'" "Feeling present"	4.5%
Family or Friends	Mention being with family or friends	"Going to the museum with my family," "Friends"	3.4%
Other	Anything that did not fit into the above categories or did not directly respond to the prompt	"Where I am from," "Whatever the dictionary says"	0%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

4.3.2.2 What aspects of this label make you feel like you belong and why?

Participants were also asked the question, **“What aspects of this label make you feel like you belong at the Seattle Art Museum? Why?”** This question was used to understand which specific aspects of the each label impacted visitor’s responses to the scaled belongingness questions as well as provide insight into what visitors may be looking for when it comes to labels creating a sense of belonging.

Group 1: Existing Label

There were no clear themes from Group 1's responses to this question that effectively tie into the dimensions of belonging. Rather, many of the responses were simply evaluations of the label in regards to personal preferences (e.g., "I like the focus on [the] artist's background as a Japanese American and that the piece has implications on WW2 Japanese history in America" or "The inclusion of difficult topics that impact marginalized communities and highlight artistically that historical and present struggle. It's the inclusion of said stories and perspectives that highlight our historical diversity"). While these responses are certainly useful for understanding what visitors like/dislike about the labels, they are missing a level of self-reflectiveness that would be expected from responses to a question such as this. Still, these results are not necessarily unexpected, as the existing label was not written with the aim of fostering belonging in visitors. Group 2's responses, in contrast, were consistent in their self-reflectiveness and connections to belonging, further indicating that writing labels using this toolkit does have some impact on people's feelings of belonging.

Group 2: Revised Label

As aforementioned, Group 2's responses were fairly consistent in their connections to belonging. While there were four responses (10.8% of total) that indicated uncertainty or lack of applicability to the visitor, the rest of the responses had clear relationships to belonging as indicated by their self-reflective nature and ability to map onto the three dimensions of belonging.

Adults' responses were categorized into six emergent themes (relevant belongingness factors also indicated in parentheses; note: these themes are not mutually exclusive), described below.

A. Interactive and Engaging (“People Fit”) — 21.6% of responses

a. Responses that appreciate the interactive aspects of the label, such as asking questions, prompting reflection, or engaging the reader directly.

b. **Examples:**

- i. “Asking me to think about the art gives me a sense of belonging by implying that **my interpretation of the art helps shape society’s perspective on art.**”
- ii. “The label **engaged me directly as a viewer** by asking me a question that prompted reflection and establishing relevance to myself (location)”
- iii. “Writing style - **loud, forces you to think, evaluate** what elements are bold and why Shimomura might have chosen to depict certain things the way he did”
- iv. “I’m **not familiar with labels asking me how I would interpret any subjects in a painting**, so I thought it would **work well for individuals or for groups to answer that themselves and be more interactive.**”

Each of these statements suggests that the label is effective at evoking a sense of belonging through the use of interactive and engaging writing tactics. Feeling as though one's interpretation of an artwork contributes to society's perspective on art, for example, is a strong indicator that one feels as though they belong/fit in their environment. Making a note of the fact that the label prompts reflection is also indicative of "people fit" as it implies understanding the piece to the point of thinking critically about it and feeling comfortable doing so on one's own or with a group.

B. Enhanced Understanding and Appreciation ("People Fit") — 21.6% of responses

a. Responses that indicate the label helped them to understand and appreciate the artwork and/or the artist better.

b. Examples:

i. **"The label helps me to understand and appreciate better what the artist is trying to communicate"**

- A sense of understanding and appreciation of the work can be considered as relating to the "People Fit"/Inclusion factor of belonging due to the respondent recognizing their enhanced ability to comprehend the work after reading the label.

ii. **"The label was interesting and taught me what the painting is really about, I feel like I could talk to people about it and consider what it questions"**

- Awareness of having learned as well as recognizing the ability to talk to others about the work after reading the label is indicative of both "People Fit" and "Cultural Context." By understanding one's own capabilities and relating it to

what can be done as a result of that understanding (such as having a conversation with others), this visitor references a sense of inclusion that can be utilized in the context of their museum visit.

C. Relatability and Inclusivity (Place, “People Fit”) — 16.2% of responses

a. Responses that mention feeling included or welcomed by the label due to its relatability to personal or local history and its representation of diverse experiences.

b. Examples:

i. “Language that **highlighted the artist's experience as a human being** (‘lived as a child,’ ‘forced removal from home/daily life’) and **the actual proximity to me made me feel as though the museum is making an effort to bring the painting to me.**”

- This response makes note of the human experience of the artist, implying relatability, and the reference to proximity of the piece to the event that took place. Further, the respondent explains how these references make them feel as though the museum is "making an effort to bring the painting to [them]," suggesting that a label that evokes these factors is written with the reader's benefit in mind.

ii. “The label references ‘700 miles from where you are now.’ This **makes the connection more tangible and easy to relate to**. The writing style is also very easy to understand and is accessible.”

- The respondent states that the reference to location creates a tangible connection, which results in ease of relatability to the piece. This

demonstrates the impact of Place-focused content on one's feelings of belonging.

D. Relevance to Personal Identity (Cultural Context) — 13.5% of responses

a. Responses that are explicit in their mention of identity or experiences and how the label relates to this identity.

b. Examples:

i. **“As the parent of two mixed race Asian/White children it's important to me that labels in the museum tell the story of America.”**

- This response suggests that the label prompted the visitor to reflect upon their relation to the piece's subject matter and why that is valuable to them. In this way, they are drawing upon the cultural context factor of belonging so they can see the things that are important to them as someone of their identity represented in the museum without their identities being directly mentioned.

ii. **“I think it makes me feel a better sense of understanding for the group that this piece of artwork depicts. I also grew up in Puyallup where a Japanese internment camp existed, and the education was pretty minimal. It makes me feel like museums are meant to increase understanding of other people's struggles and life experiences.”**

- Here, the participant references their past experiences with the subject matter (suggests cultural context factor of belonging) and explains that the label provides a better sense of understanding for the group that this piece of

artwork depicts (suggests people fit factor of belonging). This response is particularly significant because it demonstrates that one does not need to necessarily have a direct ethnic/cultural tie to a piece for the label to evoke the cultural context factor of belonging.

E. Honesty and Truthfulness (“People Fit”) — 10.8% of responses

a. Responses that make note of the label being honest with the visitor about the realities of history.

b. Examples:

- i. “The representation of Japanese Americans and **the honesty of history** rather than hiding the subject matter.”
 - This response highlights the “honesty of history rather than hiding the subject matter,” indicating a level of trust between the visitor and the institution that can result in a sense of belonging through inclusion/“people fit.”
- ii. “It **captures a unique perspective on a historic event** that is important to remember **despite the possibility of it causing discomfort.**”
 - Though it may seem counter to the concept of belonging, the museum being open to the possibility of causing discomfort in visitors surrounding the subject matter of a piece demonstrates a level of trust between the visitor and the institution that is indicative of the “people fit” factor of belonging. As mentioned in the Introduction section of this toolkit, the goal for visitors is not necessarily to ensure that they all feel comfortable at all times but that they

are not being excluded and are invited to participate in the museum's content through accessibility and engagement.

F. Clarity and Accessibility (“People Fit”) — 5.4% of responses

a. Responses that make note of the label's clear and accessible language, making the information easy to understand and relate to.

b. Examples:

i. “Casual writing style, informal, because **a conversational tone feels more inclusive** to me. Also, **it doesn't tell me how to think.**”

ii. “It was **easy to understand and fun to read**, it was very intriguing, especially with the question at the end. It **made me feel like my opinion on the painting was important** and worth thinking about.”

- Each of these participants mentions that the ease of understanding due to the style of writing cultivated a sense of belonging by being intriguing and inclusive. These comments both make note of the fact that the label's accessible language allowed them to feel as though their opinions were valuable and the museum is not forcing its opinion onto them.

These themes can be used to further assess the labels written via this toolkit. They provide deeper insight into the specific aspects of the three factors of belonging that visitors recognize as being important to their feeling as though they belong at the museum.

4.3.2.3 What aspects of this label make you feel like you do not belong and why?

Lastly, participants were asked, “**What aspects of this label make you feel like you do not belong at the Seattle Art Museum? Why?**” This question was asked as a counter to the

previous question in hopes of potential themes emerging that would demonstrate what kinds of writing tactics to avoid when drafting labels that foster a sense of belonging; however, most respondents either viewed their answer to the previous question as sufficient for answering this question or did not answer this question in a way that allows for multiple emergent themes. Many responses were simply "not applicable" or "nothing," though there were a few outliers that are worth making note of. For instance, one participant in Group 2 stated that "the middle paragraph of the label makes me feel like it's getting political, and **rather than promoting my perspective, it seems to try to sway me towards their perspective.**" This is a statement that is contradictory to numerous responses to the previous question that made note of the label inviting their opinions and not "tell[ing] me how to think." Though I personally do not view the middle paragraph to be inherently political or even especially persuasive, it is important to remember that it is possible to interpret any piece of content in a museum in that way. With that in mind, the role of museums is not necessarily to be apolitical and not assert a perspective. Rather, the museum can invite visitors to contribute their own perspectives alongside the museum by employing practices that work to promote belonging through label-writing.

The one theme that could be considered to exist in both groups is that some individuals did not see a direct connection to their own personal identities. However, these responses were typically preempted by a qualifying statement explaining that even with the lack of a direct connection, this does not necessarily negatively impact their feelings of belonging. For example, one visitor stated, "I don't know that it makes me feel like I don't belong at the museum, it more so **makes me acknowledge my privilege as a white cis person living in a very white part of the**

country.” Similarly, another stated that while their identity as a White person made them feel the painting’s subject matter was **not “really about or for me,”** they also noted that **“it wasn’t a negative experience.”** This further provides evidence for the idea that one’s identity does not need to be expressly mentioned to prompt reflection upon one’s role in relation to the museum and its work because people’s cultural context is always present within them.

4.3.3 Conclusions

As demonstrated by these results, labels written using the guidelines offered here have the potential to impact visitors' feelings of belonging at the Seattle Art Museum. In comparison to Group 1, visitors who read the label that was written to intentionally enhance their belonging (Group 2) not only scored higher on the CIBI belongingness scores in all three dimensions but also were more self-reflective of their role as visitors with unique identities in relation to the museum. Ultimately, due to the small sample size, more research is needed to be able to draw firm conclusions about the extent to which labels written using this toolkit's guidelines impact belonging in visitors; however, the results of the evaluation of these labels are promising indicators that one can instill a sense of belonging in visitors through writing labels via this toolkit and provide insight into the specific aspects that resonate with visitors about a label written for belonging.

Section 5: Closing Thoughts

5.1 Closing Thoughts

Overall, this toolkit is intended to be a useful guide to writing labels that enhance visitors' feelings of belonging in art museums. It reviews the literature on belonging as well as best practices in label writing, and it contains detailed guidelines for assessing existing labels for belonging and for writing new labels for belonging. The findings suggest the relationship between how labels are written and one's sense of belonging can be influenced by writing with the dimensions of belonging in mind. This can be done via the strategies and tools in Section 3. The toolkit can be used as many times as needed due to the dual use of the checklist for both drafting and assessing labels for qualities that align with the factors of belonging. Most importantly, this toolkit is a resource that may perhaps bring the art museum field a step closer to ensuring that all visitors who want to learn from museums can feel as though they belong in the space.

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