

Labels for Everyone:

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

Sydney Kasper



Framing

Background/Problem:

Art museums often prioritize aesthetic displays over interpretive labels, potentially alienating some visitors who may feel disconnected or unwelcome due to a lack of context or relevance to their own experiences. Many museums have shifted from a traditional museological approach, which emphasizes the importance of collections, to a new museology approach, which values visitor engagement and dialogue. In order for art museums to remain relevant and accessible to diverse audiences, it is necessary to understand why it is important that labels foster a sense of belonging and how to craft such labels so that visitors feel as though they belong within the institution.

Significance:

Art museums have the opportunity to learn how labels can be crafted to foster a sense of belonging and engage visitors more deeply and inclusively. The significance of this lies in the potential for labels to transform the museum experience from one that can be exclusive or intimidating to one that is welcoming and meaningful to a broader audience.

Context:

- **The Current State of Belonging in Art Museums**
 - Art museums are not widely taking advantage of the opportunity to impact their visitors' sense of belonging. Rather, art museums are frequent perpetrators of short, less informative museum labels (Chambers, 2006).
- **The Importance of Labels & Their Relationship to Belonging In Art Museums**
 - Everyone reads labels, with varying levels of engagement based on interest and background (Reitstätter, Galter, & Bakondi, 2022).
 - Visitors recognize that labels can impact their feelings of inclusion/exclusion and take their personal motivations and backgrounds into consideration as part of this understanding.
 - The common practice of gearing art museum labels towards experts rather than novices is 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.

Process & Deliverable

This toolkit fills a gap in the field about how specifically to write labels that can achieve this sense of belonging and engagement. It provides:

- A review of literature on belonging and the role of labels in art museums
- Guidelines for drafting labels that enhance a sense of belonging based on this review
- An evaluation of the effectiveness of these guidelines through a practical application in the Seattle Art Museum
 - Sixty people surveyed, using a modified version of Price & Applebaum's (2021) Cultural Institution Belonging Instrument (CIBI)
 - Comparison of impacts of existing label and prototype label to understand how the respective labels impact belonging



Minidoka Series #2: Exodus
1978
Roger Y. Shimomura

Purpose & Impact

The purpose of the toolkit is to offer an overview of the significance of cultivating a sense of belonging among art museum visitors for the future sustainability and relevance of art museums. It focuses on guiding museum professionals, particularly curators, directors, and educators, on the best practices and strategic approaches to writing labels that foster this sense of belonging. By doing so, the toolkit aims to enhance visitor engagement and inclusivity through the content presented beside artworks.

References

- Chambers, M. (2006). The Bride Stripped Bare: Art Museums And The Power Of Placement. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 49(4), 398–409.
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- Price, C. A. & Applebaum, L. (2021). Measuring welcoming and a sense of belonging in museums. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 65(1). doi: 10.1111/cura.12454
- Reitstätter, L., Galter, K., & Bakondi, F. (2022). Looking to Read: How Visitors Use Exhibit Labels in the Art Museum. *Visitor Studies*, 25(2), 127–150.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2021.2018251>

Reflections

More research is needed to be able to draw firm conclusions around 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.

Existing Label (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.”

Prototype Label (Created Using this Toolkit)

“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?”