

BULLETIN

Issue 5

AN INFORMATION SOURCE FOR ALASKA'S MUSEUM COMMUNITY

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EXHIBIT LABELS: SOME BASIC GUIDELINES FOR SMALL MUSEUMS

By
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Label production requires a variety of skills: writing, editing, interpretation, graphic arts and production techniques. For a small museum, this may seem a challenge. However, once the components are understood, it is really not so difficult to produce quality labeling.

Types of labels

- **Title or headline labels.** These are large-letter (4" or more) signs that simply give the title of an exhibit. They are used at the entrance to an exhibit or a gallery, often high up on a wall.
- **Primary or introductory labels.** These provide an overview or introduction to the exhibit. They are the largest in size and in typeface. There may be one label introducing an exhibit, or there may be

several such labels for a large exhibit.

- **Secondary or text labels** provide an intermediate level of information between an introductory label and the more specific object labels. These can provide historical background, for example, or text related to groups of objects. They often serve to organize the exhibit.

- **Object labels** provide information on a particular object, such as description or title, date or age, artist or user, material composition, and sometimes a brief text. Also included here is the

museum's catalog number or loan source, which provides a quick link to additional information if anyone should inquire. Different levels of information are usually placed on separate lines.

For example:

Man's winter hat

Moose hide and rabbit fur

Used in the Klondike in 1898 by Dan McGrew.

ASM III-O-659

For design purposes object labels are sometimes combined with text labels.

- **Key labels** are another form of object label. Instead of a separate label adjacent to each object, a key label combines a group of object labels onto one label, identifying them, usually by number, with a corresponding number placed next to the object. Another type uses a drawing of the exhibit object as a key. These labels are used when individual labels would be too intrusive, as with a group of small objects in a case or when the objects are at a distance from the viewer. Key labels should be used only when necessary.

Every object in an exhibit should have some identification, otherwise the object becomes no different than a prop. If it is important enough to show the public, it's important enough to have a label. If you don't know anything about the object, you should at least be able to name it and provide the catalog number.

Label content

You probably know from your own experience that you don't read all the labels in an exhibit, or always finish reading the labels you start. Nonetheless, labels do get read by someone. In fact, many visitors will actually spend more time reading well-written labels than looking at objects, which may only require a few seconds. Visitors do not always proceed through an exhibit in the order intended. Thus, labels should be able to stand alone as much as possible. They should be



Exhibit showing title (top), secondary label (center), object label with text (bottom) and key label (left).

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EXHIBIT LABELS

written to give the most important information first, with subsequent information presented in descending order of importance, much the way newspapers do. Some introductory and text labels put the first paragraph in a larger type face. Sub-headings over paragraphs are also useful to lead viewers quickly to the information they want.

Labels need to be understandable to a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds. Various formulas have been developed to relate sentence length and number of syllables to an average target age or educational level. Using these formulas can be helpful but may also prove time consuming for a small museum. One should, however, strive to keep sentences simple and direct. Avoid too many multi-syllable words and use direct action verbs. Avoid trying to squeeze in extra information. Label writing should also be a group effort. Labels need to be proof read, often a number of times and by more than one person.

Label and type size

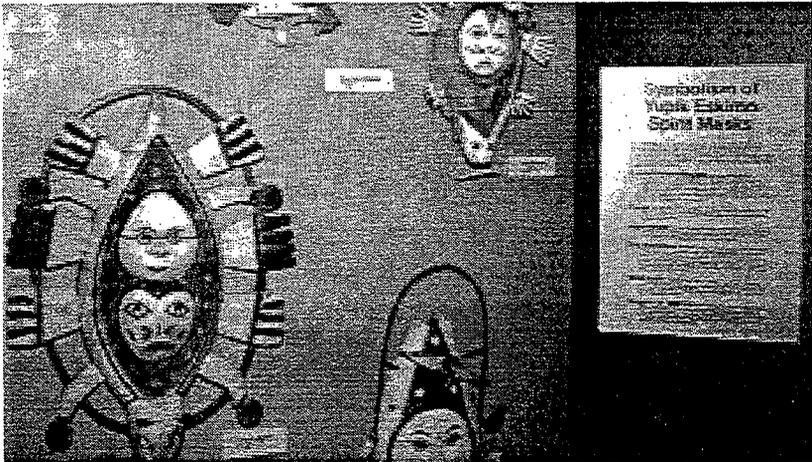


Exhibit showing object labels and secondary text label.

The size of labels depends on three things: the size of the type, the number of words, and design considerations. Type size should be large enough so that even people with poor vision can read a label. This means at least an 18 point typeface for object labels. Secondary text or introductory labels should be at least 24 points for body text, with titles or headlines even larger, at 48 to 72 points. (Points is a term for measuring the height of letters). This means that a typewriter is not a good tool for making labels. A common word processor and a laser printer can generally produce completely satisfactory

labels. Combined with a good photocopy machine, labels up to 11 by 17 inches can be made.

The number of words may become a balance between the size of the type and the overall dimensions of the label. Thus, labels need to be succinct and straightforward. The recommended word count for secondary labels is usually no more than 150 words. Some sources recommend no more than 75 words, but you will be surprised at how difficult this limit can sometimes be.

Typefaces

Different typefaces will use space differently, even if they are the same point size. Choose typefaces that are easy to read. Common styles such as Times, Times New Roman, Garamond or Helvetica are frequently used for labels. Be consistent. Use the same typeface(s) throughout an exhibit. Don't use all uppercase letters except for occasional headings. They take a lot more space and are hard to read. Museums often will have a style template for labels, so that they have consistent typefaces, italics, boldface, punctuation and organization. When labels are added to an exhibit area piecemeal over time, the result can be a variety of different typescripts that create a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty about the content.

Label placement

Labels should be arranged at a height close to, or a little lower than, eye level. Average eye height is about 58 to 60 inches. If possible, avoid placing labels above eye level. Arrange labels uniformly so that text labels appear at appropriate points in the exhibit and object labels maintain a consistent relationship with objects. For instance, in a grouping of pictures on a wall you may want to have all the labels to the right of the artwork, below center and at a consistent height above the ground, so that all the labels are the same height even when the paintings are different sizes. Labels for a children's exhibit, and even in other exhibits, should be low enough for children to read. Likewise, keep in mind the needs of visitors in wheelchairs. If labels can't be low enough

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to be read by someone in a wheelchair, you may want to make a booklet or handout with label copy that can be picked up and read.

One purpose of labels is to integrate the exhibit. Avoid label clutter. This can happen when objects and labels are added to an exhibit over time and without an overall plan. Labels should not detract from the

visual appearance of the exhibit. One way to coordinate them is to use colored or transparent backgrounds for labels, being sure to provide plenty of contrast between the background and the type.

Next issue: techniques for making and mounting labels.

GRANTS/OPPORTUNITIES

Winedale Museum Seminar on Administration and Interpretation
Nov. 8-19, 1998, at Winedale Historical Center, University of Texas.

\$500 covers room/board/ materials. Annual 10-day residential training program. Participants selected through application process. Deadline Sept. 22. Contact Kit Neumann, Seminar Coordinator, Texas Historical Commission, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, TX 78711; 512/422-4612.

Introduction to the Management of Museum Collections
Sept. 14-18, 1998

Application deadline: June 15.

Five-day workshop at Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Emphasis is on collection staff or volunteers from small, rural or culturally specific museums. \$325 tuition fee covers materials and group lunch. Contact Bettie Lee, Center for Museum Studies, MRC 427, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. FAX: 202/357-3346. E-mail: leeb@cms.si.edu.

American Indian Museum Studies presents two up-coming workshops: Starting a Tribal Museum, in August, dates and site to be determined; and Conservation of American Indian Cultural Objects, Oct. 27-30, 1998, in Marksville, Louisiana. Participants are selected from applicants and stipends are provided. Contact American Indian Museum Studies, Center for Museum Studies, MRC 427, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. Phone 202/633-8991. E-mail:kcooper@cms.si.edu.

The National Heritage Preservation Program

The National Heritage Preservation Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities responds to the problems facing institutions holding significant collections of archaeological and ethnographic objects, decorative art, textiles, and historical artifacts. Grants are made to stabilize material culture collections through the purchase of storage furniture and rehousing of objects, the improvement of environmental conditions (including climate control), and the installation of security, lighting, and fire-prevention systems.

Renovation costs and expenditures that are incurred for the temporary storage of collections during the implementation of these activities are also eligible for support.

Funding may also be requested to catalog and provide enhanced descriptions of material culture collections held by museums, historical organizations, and other institutions.

NEH's share of the total cost of the project will not exceed 50 percent.

Deadline for applying for NHP grants is July 1. E-mail: preservation@neh.gov or see address below.

NEH Public Programs grants may fund museum exhibits. The deadline for planning grants is Nov. 2, 1998, and for implementation grants, Feb. 1, 1999. For information contact:

National Endowment for the Humanities
Public Information Office, Room 402
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20506
or e-mail your request to: info@neh.gov

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GRANTS/
OPPORTUNITIES

Continuing Education Opportunities at the University of Victoria (British Columbia): The Cultural Resource Management Program of the Division of Continuing Studies at the University of Victoria is offering the following courses of interest to museum workers:

Distance Learning Courses
(Correspondence):

- Introduction to Museum Studies, Sept. 1998–April 1999
- Heritage Conservation: Principles and Practices, Sept. 1998–April 1999
- Museum Information Management, Jan. 18–April 23, 1999
- Human Resource Management in Cultural Heritage Organizations, Oct. 5 1998 - Jan. 22, 1999
- Collections Management, Jan. 12–April 23, 1999

Short-term immersion courses
(on-campus):

- Museums at the Crossroads, Instructor: Stephen Weil, Sept. 14–19, 1998

- Planning for Community Cultural Stewardship, Oct. 19–24, 1998
- Financial Management in Cultural Organizations, Oct. 28–November 6, 1998
- Cultural Diversity: The Inclusive Museum, Feb. 15–20, 1999
- Curatorship, March 1–6, 1999
- Museums in Historic Buildings, March 22–27, 1999
- Approaches to Repatriation, April 12–17, 1999
- Managing Archaeological Resources, April 19–24, 1999

For further information about any of these courses, contact:

Cultural Resource Management Program
Division of Continuing Studies
University of Victoria
PO Box 3030 STN CSC
Victoria, BC V8W 3N6 Canada
Phone: (250) 721-8462
E-mail: bweatherston@uvcs.uvic.ca
Or see their web-page at: <http://www.uvcs.uvic.ca/crmp>

CONFERENCES

Get Ready for the WMA Conference

Make plans to attend the Western Museums Association Conference Sept 25-28 in Anchorage!

Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes is the theme for the annual gathering of museum professionals from the western states. It is being held in Alaska for the first time. The Museums Alaska Conference will not be held this year, so people can attend WMA, but annual Museums Alaska business will be conducted at WMA. Numerous training and discussion sessions are being scheduled and of course there is an exhibit hall for vendors as well as activities and tours. For further information contact: WMA, P.O. Box 13314 #578, Oakland, CA 94611 510/428-1380 or Fax 510/655-2015.

Also in Anchorage, the National Association for Interpretation will have its National Interpreters Conference and Workshop Oct. 20-24, 1998. The theme is on interpretation and tourism. A wide variety of topics and presentations are scheduled. For more information contact the NAI at P.O. Box 2246, Fort Collins, CO 80522-2246. Phone toll free: 888/900-8283. <http://www.interpnet.org>

American Association for State and Local History Annual Meeting

Sept. 9-12, 1998, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Sacramento, CA. Contact: AASLH, 530 Church Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37219-2325. Or: <http://www.aaslh.org>

NEWS

Alaska Positive 1998

Forty-four photographs were selected for inclusion in this year's Alaska Positive, the biennial exhibition of Alaska photographic art organized by the Alaska State Museum.

This year, juror Arthur Ollman, director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, chose from 203 entries submitted by 63 photographers. In addition, he selected six for special recognition.

The Juror's Choice Award went to George Provost of Anchorage; Hall Anderson of Ketchikan and Karen Roush of Anchorage received Recognition Awards; and Chris Arend of Anchorage, Stephen Gray of Anchorage and Barry McWayne of Fairbanks

received Honorable Mentions. The awards are sponsored by the Friends of the Alaska State Museum. Images of the award winning entries can be seen on our web site.

Alaska Positive 1998 was shown at the Museum during March and April. It is now traveling throughout the state.

Ollman has been director of the Museum of Photographic Arts since the museum opened in 1983. Best known for his luminous photographs shot at night using long exposures, Ollman has exhibited his work in solo and group shows around the world. His images are held in collections of many major museums, libraries and universities.

Traveling Exhibit

Alaska Positive 1998 is now traveling to other museums in the state. It is only available for one year. Contact Mark Daughhetee at 907/465-4819 for further

details, as well as information on other traveling exhibits available from the State Museum.

New Web Page Address

The location of the Alaska State Museums' Home Page on the Internet has changed. The new address is: <http://www.educ.state.ak.us/lam/museum/home.html>. This will take you to both the

Alaska State Museum in Juneau and the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka. You can also find links here to numerous other museums in Alaska, as well as state and national grant sources.

Kayak Catalog to be Reprinted

Kayaks of Alaska and Siberia, the often-requested catalog for a kayak exhibition organized by the Alaska State Museum in the mid-1980s, will be reprinted by the University of Alaska Press. Written by David

Zimmerly, the catalog has become an essential research document for those with an interest in traditional Eskimo and Aleut kayaks. A date for publication has not yet been set.

CONSERVATION

Collections Caretaker Newsletter

A new publication is available providing information about the care of museum collections. Collections Caretaker is an eight-page newsletter published quarterly by the Northern States Conservation Center, 1477 Chelmsford Street, St. Paul, MN 55108. Telephone is (612) 659-9420. Subscriptions are \$15 a year (4 issues). The newsletter will focus on up-to-date collection care and conservation information for smaller

museums. Among topics to be included are: security, emergency preparedness, exhibit materials, housekeeping and maintenance, storage upgrades, fundraising and staff training opportunities. The first issue has already been printed and a second is due out soon. The Northern States Conservation Center in St. Paul is a new, private business begun by former State Museum conservator Helen Alten. It offers a variety of conservation, consulting and information services.

OVER THE INTERNET

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), in Washington, D.C., offers educational brochures over the Internet. Titles include:

- Basic Guidelines for the Care of Special Collections
- Caring for Architecture
- Caring for Your Paintings
- Caring for Your Photographic Materials
- Caring for Works of Art on Paper
- Caring for Textiles
- Caring for Your Home Video Tape
- Matting and Framing Works of Art on Paper
- Caring for Your Treasures: Books to Help You
- Guidelines for Selecting a Conservator

These can be printed from its web page at: <http://www.palimpsest.stanford.edu/aic/> for your own use, or if you don't have Internet access, you may request them from Ken DeRoux at the Alaska State Museum, 907/465-2396.

The American Association for State and Local History has already filled its On-line Workshop on Interpretation, to be held in June. But it will be scheduling another one in the near future if you want to get on the mailing list. This is a distance-education workshop conducted over the Internet, on the basics of interpretive planning. It includes printed materials, interactive group chats and Listserv. Learn at your own pace. \$50 registration fee. Members or staff of member institutions only.

Contact: AASLH, 530 Church Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37219-2325. Or: <http://www.aaslh.org>

Alaska State Museums

Alaska State Museum
395 Whittier Street, Juneau AK 99801
Phone (907) 465-2901
Fax (907) 465-2976

Sheldon Jackson Museum
104 College Drive, Sitka AK 99835
Phone (907) 747-8981
Fax (907) 747-3004

Email bkato@educ.state.ak.us
All staff have email—first initial, last name
(up to 8 letters) @educ.state.ak.us

<http://www.edu.state.ak.us/lam/museum/home.html>

Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums
Alaska State Department of Education

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