WRITING MUSEUM LABELS & NARRATIVES

Tamara Barnes, curator
Sindecuse Museum of Dentistry
• Museums are about teaching and learning in different ways.

• People learn at museums through what they see, touch, hear, smell, and read.

• Reading is one way museums connect with visitors and tell stories of what links everything in the space together.

• Labels in museums are not essays or articles cut up and pasted on walls. Labels are important pieces of the museum experience because they provide interpretations, atmosphere, mood, tone, design, and visual appeal.

• Labels should be conversational, as if the reader is listening to a friend.

• Beverly Serrell, museum studies/education professional, says, “The overall goals for a visitor-friendly label style are to appeal to a broad audience, to be used by the majority of visitors, and to create positive experiences for them”
Museum Labels & Narratives

◦ Identifying key interpretive takeaways

◦ Optimizing artifacts and images

◦ Meeting your audience needs

◦ Providing additional information for those that want it
Identifying key interpretive takeaway(s)

- Realistically, how many takeaways can there be?
- How big is your exhibit space and how long will the average person spend there?
Identifying key interpretive takeaway(s)

**EXAMPLE: “TEETH” exhibit**

- Original theme was the importance of teeth worldwide throughout time
- Teeth in and out
- Animals and Humans
Identifying key interpretive takeaway(s)

- Artifacts on the wish list could not be secured
- Topic was narrowed to modifications
- STILL, narrative was over 100 pages long
- Any one of the modifications could have filled the space with content
- Unclear what the key takeaway was meant to be?
Key Takeaway(s)?
Key Takeaway (s)

- People throughout time and in every part of the world have modified their teeth for reasons other than health and function.

- How much importance do I place on the importance of my own teeth?

- Why or why not?
Optimizing artifacts and images

- If we have to be brief and concise, we must be able to listen to our artifacts…

- What can they communicate WITHOUT labels?
Optimizing artifacts

EXAMPLE:

Computer-aided Restoration artifacts

Do the labels add information for audiences to lead them to your takeaway?

Or, draw them into the space?
Dental veneers cover the front surface of teeth. The appearance of the teeth is improved by changing the color, shape, and size.

Dr. Charles Pincus designed the first modern veneers by adhering acrylic material onto the teeth of Hollywood actors in the 1920s. Dentists struggled for decades to find an adhesive that would make the improvement permanent.

In the late 1950s, Dr. Michael Bunocore found that light tooth etching using a mildly acidic solution created the secure adhesive bond that was needed.

Today, porcelain veneers have been refined to provide a perfect smile, or be so natural looking that they cannot be detected.
In the mid-1980s, Dr. Werner H. Mörmann and electrical engineer, Dr. Marco Brandestini designed an intraoral scanner for taking optical impressions, a milling unit for the computer-aided fabrication of restorations, and a software, known as CEREC (CEramic REConstrucion).

The invention marked the beginning of digitization in dentistry.

CEREC machine, manual, and instructional video from 1992
Optimizing images

A picture is worth a thousand words
Optimizing images

A picture is worth a thousand words
If you traveled to Tajikstan in the 1990s, virtually every adult that you encountered would have a mouth full of gold teeth. What had once signified status during ancient times became a national obsession during the Soviet era. Even perfectly healthy teeth were replaced with gold ones. The region had plentiful deposits of gold, and the USSR offered free dental care to everyone.

Within a decade of achieving independence in 1991, the popularity of gold teeth faded quickly in the country. Exposure to Western culture and media left the next generation with new ideas about beauty and personal values. Professional people who traveled outside of Tajik on business soon felt self-conscious of their gold teeth.

"It was so embarrassing, there were hundreds of people there and I was the only one with gold teeth. They kept looking at me." - Matluba Mamadjanova, after attending a teachers' conference in Athens in 1997

Today, 60 percent of the Tajiks live in poverty, and gold teeth not only represent former ties to Russia but also an overindulgence that is in sharp contrast to Muslim beliefs that dominate the region today. For these reasons, in 2007, President Emomli Rakhmonov actually banned gold teeth.
50-100 word challenge

- Theme is...
- Early North American Trade
- Economic class in Western Society
- Fashion through the Years
- The Industrial Revolution
Meeting your audience needs

- Is your key takeaway something that is relevant to audience?
- Writing for different audiences
Sindecuse
Audience

- Multinational, 18-24
- Number one dental program in the United States = intelligent BUT focused
- Lower income clinic visitors
- Faculty & staff
- Ann Arbor museum goers – higher than average education
Meeting your audience needs
Meeting your audience needs

- Neuro diverse

Museums have always been a venue for non-traditional learners.

- Physically diverse

- Multilingual
Meeting your audience needs

- Meeting expectations of today’s audiences

- True for all disciplines but especially history museums

- Less about celebrating history and more about telling many perspectives
When the Artist Is a Sexual Predator

For museums afraid of alienating billionaire trustees and collectors who donated the artist’s work

Chuck Close
American, born 1940 Monroe, Ohio

*Portrait of President Bill Clinton*, 1992
oil on canvas
National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

Chuck Close is one of the most important artists of his generation, and the creator of a new kind of portraiture consisting of patterns of color.

For museums conflicted about disclosing an artist’s abuse next to his art

Chuck Close
American, born 1940 Monroe, Ohio

*Portrait of President Bill Clinton*, 1992
oil on canvas
National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

Chuck Close is one of the most important artists of his generation, and the creator of a new kind of portraiture consisting of patterns of color. Like many artists, he has had a few disgruntled employees.

For museums who need help from the Guerrilla Girls

Chuck Close
American, born 1940 Monroe, Ohio

*Portrait of President Bill Clinton*, 1992
oil on canvas
National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

Chuck Close has had a huge career with prices to match. He has been accused of sexually abusing models, and students he picked up at fancy art schools. How fitting and ironic that he painted the official portrait of Bill Clinton. The art world tolerates abuse because it believes art is above it all, and rules don’t apply to “genius” white male artists. WRONG!
As a student at the University of Michigan, he traveled to the Philippines to collect zoological specimens. Worcester established himself as an expert on the Philippines by lecturing and writing books about the region, and in 1900, he was appointed Secretary of Interior for the Insular Government of the Philippines.

Worcester’s legacy is complicated and controversial. Although he helped establish key industries in the Philippines (including coconut farming and cattle ranching), he was criticized for depicting indigenous people as savages in some of the 15,000 photographs he commissioned and using this impression to further justify American involvement in the region.
Providing additional information **beyond the labels** for those that want it

- QR code links – with targeted tours
  - Kids’
  - Multilingual
  - For history lovers

- Audio tours

- Laminated guides - visitors pick up and leave after visit

- Guided tours