‘YOUR LABELS MAKE ME FEEL STUPID’

In an effort to connect with visitors who feel bored, overwhelmed, or confused, museums are using focus groups, comment boards, and even full-time evaluators to help rethink and rewrite texts in the galleries

BY GAIL GREGG

JUST A FEW years ago, a visitor curious about Frank Lobdell's *15 April 1962*, in the Oakland Museum of California, could have scanned its wall label to read this description of the painting: "A tightly coiled form struggles against the confines of the canvas. Thick paint, hot colors, hard lines, and a gouged surface reinforce the sense of uneasiness. They express the artist's view of the human condition as a struggle for meaning and dignity."

But in the four years since that text was written, curators at the Oakland Museum and countless other art institutions have initiated a quiet revolution in the way they engage and converse with visitors about the treasures in their care. These institutions are working hard to move away from what Graham W. J. Beal, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, calls "the priestly voice of absolute authority." Their aim now is to provide information and context about the works—and then encourage people to respond to them in their own way.

The Lobdell label was one of many given a makeover in conjunction with the reopening of the Oakland Museum. It now reads: "The horrors of Frank Lobdell's firsthand experiences of World War II affected him deeply. With roughly coiled lines, intense colors, and a scabrous surface, Lobdell seems to be expressing the struggle of humankind, as raw paint strokes metamorphose into gnashing teeth in headless jaws."

Gone are the formal language about painting and the pronouncement about Lobdell's intentions. Instead, the new label places the making of the work into the context of Lobdell's own experience and that of his times. Even the word "seems" in the final sentence cues the viewer that other interpretations of the painting are possible.

As art museums have become destinations for more socially and culturally diverse audiences, they have been working hard not only to attract visitors but also to keep them engaged once

LEFT Frank Lobdell's *15 April 1962* in the Oakland Museum of California was recently given a label makeover. ABOVE At the Detroit Institute of Arts, visitors watch a life-size video of an African ritual. Both museums are working to make galleries more welcoming and artworks more comprehensible.

LEFT: M. LEE FATHERREE/GIFT OF THE ART GUILD OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA; RIGHT AND OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS (2)

they are inside. They have come to realize that visitors who feel bored, overwhelmed, confused, or stupid are unlikely to return. "Interpretation should be the biggest priority," says Sara Bodinson, director of interpretation and research at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Using both staff members and outside experts, these institutions are running focus groups and observing people strolling through the galleries. They have clocked how much time viewers spend in front of an object and how much time they spend reading a label, and noted whether they look back at an object after reading about it.

They know how many words visitors can tolerate in object labels (about 50), room labels (no more than 150), or longer introductory texts (300 is the maximum). They know that most visitors spend ten seconds in front of an object—seven to read the label, three to examine the thing itself. They know that for most people museum fatigue sets in after about 45 minutes. And they have learned that the issues and questions on the minds of visitors are often the most basic:

- I don't know where to start.
- I don't know what to look at first.
- Have I looked at this long enough?
- What does circa mean?
- Your labels make me feel stupid.
- How did the artist make this?
- Why would a museum put this on display?
- Is this really art?

"We cannot make assumptions today about what people know," says Geri Thomas, founder of the art consulting and staffing firm Thomas & Associates.

The Detroit Institute of Arts determined in 2000 that it needed to reexamine its own assumptions about visitors—and wound up giving the museum a complete makeover. Curators, educators, community members, security guards, and marketing experts were assigned to cross-departmental teams to generate ideas about how each gallery might be made more comprehensible and welcoming. Outside consultants helped with strategy and research.

Staff members succeeded in developing a range of interpretive strategies, including a spectacular high-tech projection designed to draw people into the undervisited decorative-arts wing. At that installation, visitors sit around a virtual dining table and "participate" in an 18th-century French feast, with courses served on the same porcelain plates they see in the display cases lining the room.

In other communities, museums such as the Oakland Museum or Houston's Museum of Fine Arts are convening local panels to help write and vet labels.

The museums also want to introduce the voices of artists into the viewing experience. "One of the things people tell us is that they want to connect with the artist," says Nancy J. Blomberg, curator of native arts at the Denver Art Museum. With master teacher Heather Nielsen, Blomberg is reinstalling the collection to focus on the artists behind the objects. A large touch-screen version of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's 2004 painting *Trade Canoe for Don Quixote*, for example, will allow visitors to zoom in on specific sections and hear the artist talk about them.

A pioneer of the new interpretive methods is the Newark Museum, which hoped to make its collection of 12,000 objects more relevant to its increasingly blue-collar community. In 1992, when the museum began restoring the Ballantine House, an 1885 mansion that anchors one side of its campus, a team was created to rethink how to guide visitors through the grand

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LEFT Visitors to the Detroit Institute's decorative-arts wing can sit around a virtual dining table and "participate" in an 18th-century French feast served on the same porcelain plates they can see in display cases lining the room.

rooms full of such esoteric treasures as a peacock chair from the Philippines and silver-gilt gas sconces. Decorative arts curator Ulysses Grant Dietz and his team reoriented the traditional focus of the exhibition from "house" to "home," hoping to touch on the ways in which all people construct comfort and shelter for themselves and their families.

Rather than identifying each object with the classic "tombstone" label (artist-date-medium), the team came up with three ways to convey information. The first is a fictional narrative about a housemaid displayed in a storybook, with a new page opening in each room. The maid's daily chores, such as laying coal fires or polishing silver, cumulatively create a sense of the activity in a grand home in the 19th century. Wall quotations in each room also draw attention to themes such as "Are we doing the 'right' thing?" which introduces information about the etiquette of the period and invites visitors to think about how manners have changed. Finally, traditional information is presented in each room in a laminated flip chart that challenges visitors to take up a kind of treasure hunt: "Can you guess what no. 3 is?"

Even at the more conservative Metropolitan Museum of Art, director Thomas Campbell stresses that "it is incumbent on us as an institution to be much more sensitive to the diverse audiences that come here." He and his staff are reviewing a visitor-experience study that addresses everything from banners to maps to the signage that directs people around the museum. "The second component of the study is a new look at the way we deliver the didactic information," Campbell says. "We want to be engaging our audience. Even a small anecdote can make a difference."

CONTEMPORARY-ART museums have generally lagged in adopting new interpretation practices, even though visitors frequently complain that the work stumps them, that they don't know where—or why—to look. "For visitors who aren't familiar with contemporary art, there's a feeling that they're being tricked," acknowledges Whitney Museum education director Kathryn Potts. "Our job is to strike a balance between the artist's wishes and our responsibility as an institution to make the work accessible to the public." That balance, she adds, "isn't so easy to get right." Roni Horn's recent retrospective, for example, was given the spare installation the artist wanted. Labels were clustered at the entrance to each gallery, rather than displayed next to individual works. An introductory wall panel, video interviews with the artist, and a take-home brochure were also available.

Situated at the far end of the interpretation spectrum is Houston's Menil Collection, which has no education department and no docents. Its founders, John and Dominique de Menil, believed that art objects had an inherent spiritual life of their own. "Perhaps only silence and love do justice to a great work of art," Dominique once said. The museum upholds this founding philosophy: labels are minimal and works are hung relatively low so that they "address the viewer's body in a direct way," according to associate curator Kristina Van Dyke. "And we hang work minimally, so you can have a one-on-one experience with a work of art."

Other contemporary institutions, such as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, have come to see language as critical to their mission. The Walker now assigns "audience engagement" teams, composed of designers, marketers, editors, and curators, to come up with interpretation plans for each exhibition. "And we're very sensitive about the language we use," says chief curator Darsie Alexander. "We're not talking to each other. We're talking to a person who could be entering the space for the first time, or a person who's got a very sophisticated frame of reference."

At the Art Institute of Chicago, whose contemporary-art collection recently expanded into a spacious new wing, curators have begun using the security staff, museum educators, and

LEFT: COURTESY DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS; RIGHT: COURTESY NEWARK MUSEUM

visitor-services employees to provide interpretive help to viewers encountering such challenging works as Robert Gober's 800-square-foot installation *Untitled* (1989–96). As part of the expansion, new interpretive labels of up to 150 words have been created for every object on view. "We strive very much to include as much specific information about a work as we can. And we try to include the artist's voice as much as possible," says Lisa Dorin, assistant curator of contemporary art.

Other institutions tackle the "I'll never understand this" response to contemporary art by quoting artists in their labels, by featuring a response from a community member, or by asking a viewer for his or her own thoughts about a work. In Oakland, for instance, poet Jaime Cortez was hired to write "personal perspective" labels for pieces in the collection; they not only convey his experience looking at a work, but suggest a way of looking for other viewers. "This is a hard working sculpture," Cortez wrote about Ruth Asawa's woven copper wire sculpture *Untitled* (1959). "It is defining an inside space without enclosing that space. It is turning its own shadow into art. It is showing you many faces as you circle it. It is taking the delicate art of crocheting and making it lift weights. Most of all, it is using one plain piece of wire to map a winding path of transformation."

But retrofitting centuries of museum practices with new interpretation strategies requires time, money, precious gallery space, the support of the entire institution, and firm direction from the top. "This kind of wholesale change—which is putting the visitor at the center of our thinking—is an attitudinal change," says Kelly McKinley, director of education and public programming at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

At the Oakland Museum, executive director Lori Fogarty acknowledges that team-based interpretive practices "put the curator more in the role of a kind of moderator rather than a sole author. Curators are experts in their fields, and in an art museum the curator typically develops an entire project. That's a lot of authority and control to let go of."

Teamwork demands time to study visitor needs before an exhibition, as well as follow-up evaluations to determine what has succeeded and what has failed. Some museums, such as the Detroit Institute, have even hired full-time evaluators to ensure that new interpretation strategies live up to their promise. And, increasingly, institutions such as Oakland are using visitors to test-drive new galleries, where signage can be tweaked even after they open.

The wall-label revolution does have its detractors. Some worry that scholarship will suffer and that writing will be "dumbed down" for the widest public. In a 2009 exhibition review, for example, *New York Times* critic Ken Johnson disparaged the Newark Museum's irksome "curatorial commentary." Educated visitors who liked their local institutions just the way they were complain that valuable treasures have been consigned to storage so that signs can be bigger and exhibitions more interactive. Still others long for the exalted hush that hung over the galleries—a hush that increasingly is being replaced by conversation and activity.

But the majority of visitors are telling museums that they can't relate to endless corridors of objects that appear to have been born with their labels. Audiences now want to touch the art, to have conversations in the galleries, to make their own work in response to what they see, to peer into the inner workings of a museum, to converse with artists and challenge curators.

And museums are listening. Visitors should keep their eyes on those little labels—and the new touch screens, videos, and activity stations that supplement them—as they increasingly are invited into what museum consultant Douglas Worts has called "a new form of partnership" that activates "the muses within all of us." ■

DENVER ART MUSEUM, WILLIAM SR. AND DOROTHY HARMSEN COLLECTION, BY EXCHANGE

OPPOSITE, LEFT Visitors of all ages are encouraged to write their comments about the artworks at a table in a Detroit Institute gallery. OPPOSITE, RIGHT A stained-glass window in the Newark Museum's Ballantine House, an 1885 mansion. Visitors can follow a fictional narrative about a housemaid and her daily chores from room to room. The museum has pioneered new interpretive methods.

ABOVE The Denver Art Museum's new installation of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's *Trade Canoe for Don Quixote*, 2004, will include a touch-screen version of the painting that will allow visitors to zoom in on specific sections and hear the artist talk about them.