

# Taking Risks: A Common Theme for the Winners of the 23rd Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition

by Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt

**Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt** is Assistant Director for Traveling Exhibits and Special Projects at The Franklin Institute. She may be contacted at [rmhoffstadt@fi.edu](mailto:rmhoffstadt@fi.edu).

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The Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition is AAM's premier venue for honoring achievement in one of the major functions of our field—the creation of exhibitions. The competition recognizes exhibitions for overall excellence as well as for innovation. This year's winners all embraced and managed an element of risk in the process of creating their exhibitions. While taking chances is an element of exhibition development many aspire to, risk can be challenging to implement. The AAM awards session at the annual conference in Houston, TX in May focused on the topic of risk taking as it applied to each of the winning exhibitions; this article will attempt to summarize these conversations.

## **Special Achievement: Innovative Design**

*Wild: Amazing Animals in a Changing World*, a permanent exhibition at Museum Victoria in Australia, was awarded a special achievement in innovative design. The unconventional design was an institutional risk because the exhibition is not a typical natural history display. Some 750 animal species are displayed as breathtaking works of art. The white background forms a striking foil for a wide variety of animal furs, hides, and feathers; lighting illuminates each individual animal and creates interesting shadows; and the exhibition makes effective use of both its horizontal and vertical space. Finally the exhibition uses Worldwide Navigator touch screens in lieu of traditional labels. At the AAM session Erin Narloch asked J. Patrick Greene, CEO of Museum Victoria, what factors contributed to such an unexpected exhibition concept and execution. The first, according to Greene, was the museum's desire to get out in the

open animal specimens that had spent the last 100 years in storage. The museum wanted to use objects from the past to tell the stories of climate change, biodiversity, and loss of habitat. Next the team had to deal with the challenge of a very tall space, 14m x 23ft high. They wanted to group the objects into tiered biogeographic zones, but labeling them became an issue, particularly for specimens placed well above the visitors' heads. So the museum produced panoramic navigators that visitors could scan across the gallery to locate each object in the exhibition. By touching the objects on screen visitors can retrieve more information about each of the specimens in text or films. The intuitive social experience allows visitors to access information without cluttering up the space with physical labels.

The non-traditional use of technology was a large risk; the technology might not have worked or been utilized by visitors. But by doing nothing new, the museum was running the much greater risk of a poor reputation, not being relevant, and suffering from declining attendance. *Wild* was part of an institutional redesign and repositioning. Now the museum is looking at its collections as a starting point for addressing contemporary issues in Australian society.

## **Special Achievement: Clarity of Message**

A special achievement award for clarity of message was given to *Age of Mammals*, a permanent exhibition at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. The exhibition message, "Continents move; climates change; mammals evolve," effectively captures a very big idea and translates it into a set of manageable concepts. The exhibition takes on the risk



Arranged in biogeographic regions Wild's layered object display is supported by a large video projection presenting the displayed animals in their environments and the pressures they are facing. Courtesy of Museum Victoria.

of interpreting two controversial topics—climate change and evolution—in a visitor friendly way. The museum interprets the topics clearly and consistently throughout the gallery, but does not shy away from stating the certainty of the science behind the narrative, or downplay the science to appease climate change naysayers or evolution deniers.

Judge Daryl Fischer spoke with Karen Wise, V.P. of Education and Exhibits at NHMLAC about the process that led to such message clarity. According to Wise, the goal for *Age of Mammals* was to showcase the evidence the museum held with respect to evolution, mass extinction, and climate change. While these topics are relevant in today's world, the public did not view the natural history museum as a place that was connected to these discussions. If the museum did not find its relevance, it risked losing the people of Los Angeles. By creating an exhibition that addresses these topics the museum hoped to shift its public image from an old dusty and musty place to a relevant and timely institution.

The museum took a risk by creating a more audience friendly team process that included a wider range of staff than was involved in the past. The process

had to manage the tension between being accurate on the one hand, and of being visitor friendly on the other. A curator crafted an intellectual framework to be reviewed by other scientists, the marketing department, museum administrators, and educators. The framework was revised by other scientists to pull out the core exhibition idea—plate tectonics create changes in climate that then drive evolution. The interdisciplinary team worked together to distil this science into a message that would resonate with the public. Throughout the process, the team viewed the project as the place where “research and collections meet visitor experience.” This focus allowed the team to manage the goal that the end product be *both* accurate and engaging. *Age of Mammal* successes have raised expectations at the museum about future exhibitions planning.

### **Special Achievement: Reframing Collections**

The North Carolina Museum of History was given a special achievement award for its temporary exhibition *Behind the Veneer: Thomas Day, Master Cabinetmaker*. The exhibition was recognized for its risk in reframing a collection to include interpretation of

Now the museum is looking at its collections as a starting point for addressing contemporary issues in Australian society.



The overarching theme of *Age of Mammals* is “Continents Move, Climates Change. Mammals Evolve.” The exhibition doesn’t impose a chronologic or systematic sequence but instead uses assemblages of mammals to explore aspects of environment and behavior. Courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

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*Age of Mammals* takes on the risk of interpreting two controversial topics—climate change and evolution—in a visitor friendly way.

broader social issues of the time. *Behind the Veneer* told a story about a furniture collection and wove a complex narrative about Thomas Day, the antebellum owner of the furniture factory. Day was a free person of color who lived in North Carolina in the pre-Civil War era. His patrons were white, and he owned slaves. The exhibition painted a picture of social history in a slave society that was more multi-layered than many would have thought.

During the session Jackson Marshall, Associate Director of the North Carolina Museum of History, spoke with judge Redmond Barnett about the exhibition. He discussed the challenges Patricia Phillips Marshall, his late wife and exhibition curator, faced when working on the project. Marshall’s research on Day and his furniture shattered many misconceptions. First, she discovered that many individuals had furniture they thought was Thomas Day; she had to tell them not it was not. Second and more importantly, she discovered that Day, who was commonly referred to as African American, had a more complex and mixed ancestry: white, African, and Native

American. He was born free and did not earn his freedom as many had thought. He owned slaves, and many groups were concerned about this revelation. They asked Marshall to censor this information, but she could not. These groups were communities that the museum wanted very much to engage with, and Marshall’s research risked severing these connections.

During this process the museum learned how important it was to talk with stakeholder groups from the very beginning of a project. Establishing dialog early created buy-in from the community, but also helped guide the museum through the process. The museum learned to communicate that it was not its intention to pass judgment, or explain Day’s motivations; it was only interested in introducing visitors to the true story of Thomas Day. The North Carolina Museum of History now utilizes advisory groups and formative evaluation with its audience to uncover visitor interests and understandings. Based on the response, the museum is now interested in telling personal stories of North Carolinians regardless of time period or collection, and has become more sensitive to the

*Behind the Veneer* was recognized for its risk in reframing a collection to include interpretation of broader social issues of the time.

story lines it presents. It now engages individuals from the community to read narratives and label copy.

### Overall Excellence

*Science Storms*, a permanent exhibition at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago was recognized for overall excellence by this year's judges. The exhibition invites visitors to wonder, observe, speculate, investigate, and

and futuristic environment.

The exhibition team took many physical, financial, and intellectual risks when developing this project. Judge Willard Whitson talked with Kurt Haunfelner, MSI's Vice President of Exhibits and Collections, and Jack Pascaros, Partner at Evidence Design, about the core belief that drove *Science Storms*. MSI needed to put science back into the heart of the



*Thomas Day, a free man of color and master cabinetmaker, created fine furniture and architectural interiors. He left a legacy that reveals a unique glimpse into the complex world of antebellum North Carolina. Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

discover at both a grand and intimate scale. In addition the use of light, color, and space transformed the hundred-year-old wing into an immersive, dynamic,

institution. While science was scattered throughout the museum, there were no iconic exhibit experiences that spoke to the power of science. The concept for the

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*The Excellence in Exhibition competition is sponsored by four of AAM's standing professional committees: for research and evaluation, curation, education, and exhibition development. For the last two years the author has served as the competition's rotating coordinator. She would like to thank this year's judges: Redmond Barnett, Head of Exhibits at Washington State Historical Society (CurCom); Daryl Fischer, Principle at Musynergy (CARE); Erin Narloch, an independent museum professional (EdCom); and Willard Whitson, VP of Exhibits and Programs at the National Children's Museum (NAME). Without their comments and insights, this article could not have been written. In addition, their enthusiasm and camaraderie has made this competition a pleasure to coordinate!*



*Science Storms is a five-story 26,000 sf exhibition in which visitors do real science as they collect data, make observations, and interpret information to understand scientific principles. Courtesy of the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.*

exhibition was that science is about forces in nature that affect our lives and create the world we live in. Haunfelner felt the exhibition needed to be large in scale and scope. He convinced the museum to take a chance, and place the new exhibition in the wing of the museum dedicated to large touring exhibitions.

The developers wanted to create an experience with tremendous scale that also allowed for an intimate visitor interface. Both Haunfelner and Pascarosa admitted it was challenging finding external groups who could create these large-scale manipulable phenomena. Pascarosa looked beyond traditional museum design and fabrication firms to the theme park and entertainment world to find companies capable of engineering these large-scale interactives. The risks the museum undertook to create *Science Storms* paid off. In the process, the museum showed the Board that they could take on a very large project and do it well. Now the museum has turned its eye to how *Science Storms* and other forms of informal science can serve as key forces in

engaging kids in science education in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of our session the winners offered advice on managing risk in developing exhibitions. Here are few takeaways they offered to our field:

*Clarity of vision is necessary. Be able to summarize the key message in 10-15 words and then just focus in on fulfilling the narrative.* Kurt Haunfelner

*If you can't get it right [the vision] on the front end, don't be afraid to change direction to get it right.* Karen Wise

*Don't be afraid to take the risk; if you get complacent and formulaic, your audience will lose interest in what you are doing and quit coming.* Jackson Marshall

*Realize what the strengths are that your institution already has. Make your strengths emerge in the exhibition.*

Patrick Greene ✨