



# Sitting in Judgment: Notes from the 24th Annual Excellence in Exhibitions Session at AAM

by Willard Whitson

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Are there absolutes when it comes to critiquing artistic or interpretive activities and projects such as museum exhibitions?

Judgment is difficult. It is especially difficult to sit in judgment of your peers. Some years ago an architect friend and I drove by a museum that had recently had a new modernist addition grafted onto its neo-classical façade. I asked his opinion of the new addition. After a thoughtful pause he said disapprovingly, “you know sometimes there are absolutes in aesthetics.” And that’s the issue, isn’t it? Are there absolutes when it comes to critiquing artistic or interpretive activities and projects such as museum exhibitions?

A professor of mine, Edmund Burke Feldman, wrote a text entitled, “Art as Image and Idea.” In it he described a process for evaluating artworks that would enable anyone, regardless of education or knowledge of art history, to develop a valid interpretation for a work of art. He outlined a set of steps that included: inventory, analysis and finally, interpretation. This process of evaluation ultimately yielded meaning (or lack thereof) for the viewer. Judgment, he believed, was best left to history. There was obvious utility in this system, as indeed it did somehow bridge the gap between erudition and innocence. The viewer developed his own meaningful interpretation, the validity of which depended on a thorough accumulation of descriptive data and a reasoned analysis of structural and symbolic data. The system clearly didn’t enable one to fully appreciate the social or historical context of artworks, but it certainly opened a window of accessibility for all. And that’s a good thing, right? More people appreciating art can’t be bad, can it?

So, all of this brings me to the matter at hand. Are there objective criteria by

which one can confidently evaluate and ultimately judge an exhibition? To me the answer is yes...and no. Indeed one can evaluate an exhibition according to a variety of objective criteria, such as accessibility, care of collections, clarity of writing, etc. But when it comes to qualities such as beauty, innovation, and even humor, the evaluation of these elements becomes more subjective and even less certain.

So with uncertainties, “unknowables,” and subjective assessments equipping us to pass judgment, my colleagues Beverly Serrell, representing the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE); Stacy Swigart, representing the Curators Committee (CurCom); Erin Narloch, representing the Education Committee (EdCom); Elizabeth Kunz Kollman as Committee Chair; and I, representing the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), met early in the year to determine the recipients of the 2012 awards for the 24th Excellence in Exhibition Competition. The competition is sponsored by the American Association of Museums and culminates in a session at AAM’s annual conference, held this year in May in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN.

Last year the judges found a theme among the award recipients: risk taking. And while there were certainly daring achievements among this year’s winners, we did not discern such a unifying theme for 2012. However, we did feel that each of the winners excelled in quite specific ways. Below I highlight the key reasons for each award and recount some of the most striking comments from conversations between the judges and the representatives of the winning exhibitions during the conference session.

## 2012 Awards

### Overall Excellence: Detroit Institute of Arts, *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to the Present*

This temporary exhibition examined works of art created over 500 years that serve as a visual record of diverse, evolving relationships between Africans and Westerners. The core intent of the show was to present Africans' perspectives on a range of topics, including pre-existing beliefs about whiteness, trade and settlement, slavery and colonization, assimilation and resistance, and contemporary economic, political, and cultural globalization. The Excellence in Exhibitions Competition chose this exhibition as its overall winner because of the project's excellent integration of visitor research and evaluation, inventive design, and clear presentation of challenging content.

In her conversation with Dr. Nii Quarcoopome, DIA Curator of African Art and Head of the Department of Africa, and Swarupa Anila, DIA Head of Interpretation at the Institute, Stacey Swigart asked about how the exhibition was framed. Ms. Anila said she had asked Dr. Quarcoopome for an African quotation to introduce the exhibition. Translated, it says that "if you speak of the beauty of the horizon, it's only from your side of the earth." Dr. Quarcoopome said that traditional scholarship of African art and history has been "portraying African and European relationships through a very narrow lens." In this exhibition they "needed to bring in multiple perspectives."



*In Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to the Present, a life-sized, projected video features the curator, Ghanaian-born Dr. Nii Quarcoopome, presenting the main message: that the 500-year history of African/Western relations is known mainly through Western sources. ©2010 Detroit Institute of Arts.*

The exhibition encompassed 23 years of scholarly research by Dr. Quarcoopome, telling a complex story that might have been unfamiliar to most of the exhibition's visitors. Ms. Anila credited the museum's Evaluation Department with conducting many studies at various stages in the process. The evaluation kept the narrative on task and connected it to visitors. For example, the museum knew that visitors had difficulty understanding African art, so they connected pieces of art with African people. The individuals humanized and contextualized the art for visitors unfamiliar with how to interpret the pieces. The exhibition effectively used multiple voices throughout the gallery both to underscore the multiple perspectives on the topic and to engage the visitors in the experience.

### Special Distinction for Eloquent Presentation of Topic: Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center, *Across the Wire: Voices from Heart Mountain*

This permanent exhibition explores the stories of World War II internment camps in the United States. Exhibits and displays reveal how rights were denied to Japanese

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Americans during WWII. Visitors are prompted to think about the relevance of the Heart Mountain experience to current events and the debate about the balance between freedom and national security. The Excellence in Exhibitions Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of its sensitive and eloquent presentation of a difficult topic.

In the interview with Erin Narloch at the awards session, Heart Mountain Board Member Eric Mueller said that their status as a private not-for-profit organization

Rock Studios (the firm responsible for designing and fabricating the exhibition) spoke about how they created a feeling of confinement and claustrophobia at the entrance to the exhibition, which in some way might enable visitors to approximate the sensory experience of first time internees arriving at the camp.

On a very powerful and unexpected note, the museum extended these themes beyond the exhibition and into their restrooms. One stall in each of the men's and ladies' rooms contained a set of mirrors. In the mirrored stall, a person would be accompanied by an endless row of images of himself or herself in each direction. The stall had warning signs to alert visitors, allowing them to opt out of the experience. The mirrors created a simple but very effective dramatization of the loss of privacy and human dignity.

**Special Distinction for Innovative Reframing of Collections: Natural History Museum, Los Angeles County, Dinosaur Hall**

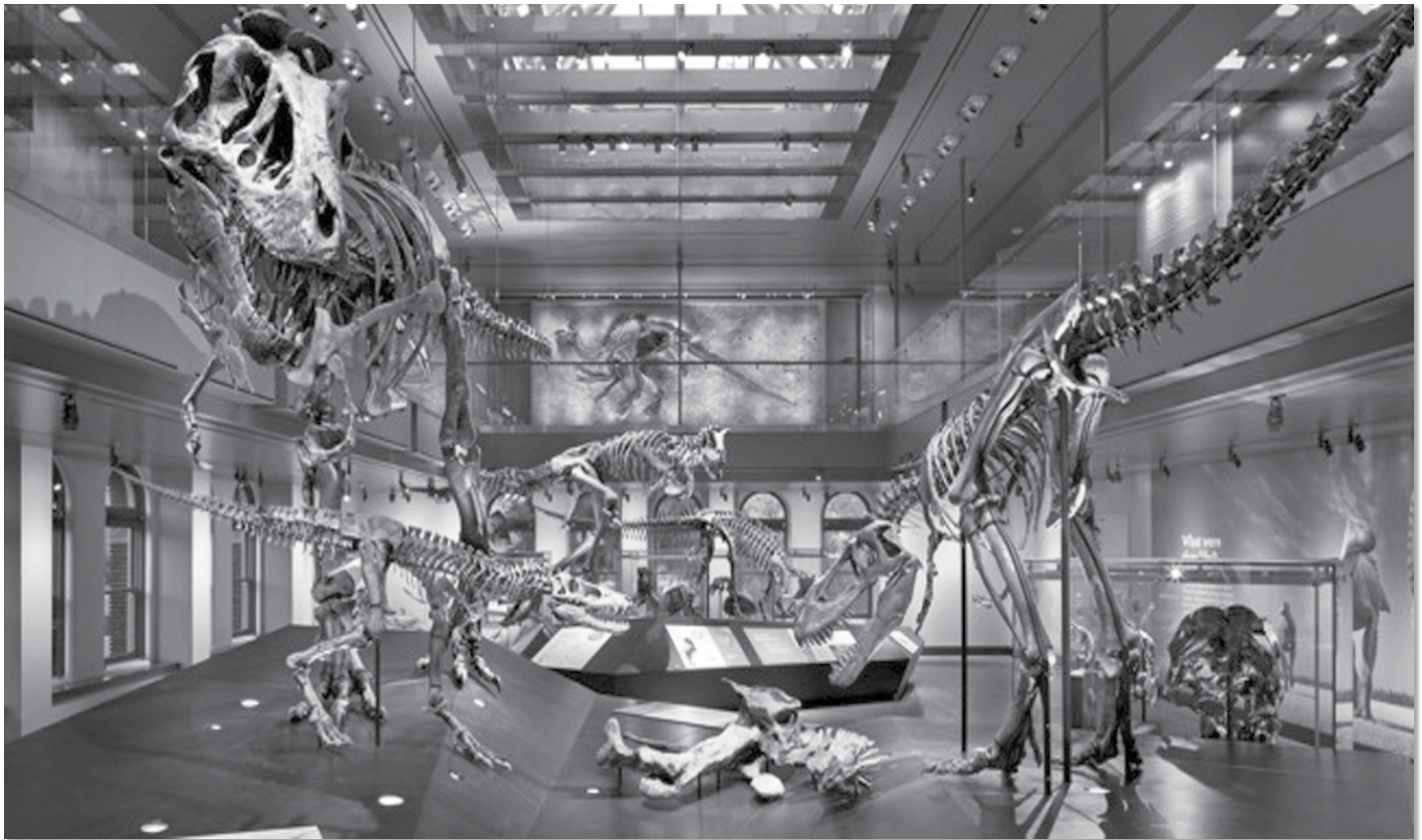
This permanent exhibition brings science to life in ways that are relevant and interesting to audiences and highlights the latest research and the process of scientific discovery about dinosaurs. The exhibition is organized around the major questions that drive scientific research on dinosaurs today such as: "What are dinosaurs?" "What was their world like?" "What were they like as living animals?" and "What happened to them?" The Excellence in Exhibitions Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of its inventive and inspired framing of an often-told museum topic.



*The barracks—a 16 x 20 ft room intended to house up to four adults—is the heart of Across the Wire: Voices from Heart Mountain. Artifacts such as furniture made by internees from scrap lumber and discarded fruit crates and props—like a chamber pot—help bring the space to life. Photo by Kevin J. Miyazaki.*

gave them the opportunity to take a clear interpretive stance; that what happened historically at the center was a "mass deprivation of constitutional and human rights." And Sarah Bartlett of Split





In Dinosaur Hall three *T. Rex* mounts are posed over the remains of their prey and suggest ways these animals may have interacted. The sweepingly trapezoidal platforms are designed to suggest a rugged landscape and highlight the dynamic poses of the specimens. Courtesy of Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

In my interview with Dr. Karen Wise, Vice President of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, among other topics, we discussed the process of combining curator scholarship with a visitor focus. At the museum curators develop a content framework that is then developed into a user-friendly exhibit statement. This helped the museum arrive at the broad organizer—*what are the questions that drive dinosaur paleontology?* This question engaged both 7-year-olds as well as paleontologists; it also served as a filter for what the exhibition was not about.

In addition to marrying complex science with an engaging storyline, the exhibition has a strong design aesthetic. Dr. Wise wanted to “elevate Natural History Museums to the world of great design.”

**Special Distinction for Exemplary Inclusion of Community Voices: Oakland Museum of California, Coming to California**

This permanent exhibition provides a history of California’s people from pre-contact Native cultures to today. The overall goal of the exhibition is to provide a new type of public space within the museum—an inclusive place of inquiry, reflection, and public conversation about the history of California, with room for ongoing contributions by the museum’s communities over time. The Excellence in Exhibitions Competition chose this exhibition for an award of special distinction because of its strong commitment to addressing community needs and including community voices.

In her interview with Beverly Serrell, Louise Pubols, Chief Curator of History, talked about the many opportunities created within the exhibition for visitors to include their own stories and comments. The key was to move away from a big visitor feedback book at the end of the exhibition and integrate visitor comments throughout the space. From low tech Post-it notes, to pins on maps,



Upon entering the Coming to California gallery, visitors are asked, "Where did you and your family come from? Put a dot on the map." The exhibit was planned as an elaborate digital interactive element, and this was the simple prototype. After watching visitors engage with this simple prototype, and observing their animated intergenerational conversations, staff decided to retain the prototype version. Courtesy OMCA.

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to computer interactives, visitors could thus introduce "their own lives into the realm of history." At the entry to the exhibition visitors were encouraged to put a dot on the map, indicating where they were from originally. This often started conversations between family members as they recounted their own stories. Another area dealt with the Great Depression: visitors could read quotes and perspectives from individuals during this time period and then respond with their own thoughts and insights. These types of experiences allowed visitors to make meaningful comments on a wide range of California experiences.

**Honorable Mention: The New York Public Library, *Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam***

This temporary exhibition aimed to highlight the New York Public Library's collection of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic materials with the goal of sharing information about the histories, connections, and differences between the three Abrahamic religions; foster appreciation for the creation of

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these materials; and engage diverse audiences. The Excellence in Exhibitions Competition chose this exhibition for an honorable mention award because of its topical significance, beautiful design, and inclusion of an interactive exhibit space.

So there you have it—five exhibitions of which we in the field can be justifiably proud. These exhibitions moved us, amused us, involved their communities as well as others, addressed broad themes of interest to us all, and presented their topics in ways unique to the medium. In short, they achieved a standard of excellence that warrants distinction. There may never be a set of objective criteria by which one can evaluate excellence. But thoroughness, consummate professionalism, understanding (the needs of) visitors, and imagination will continue to inspire. We all benefit from those who strive to lead the way.

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