

Paul Orsell is President and Chief Instigator at POW! Paul Orsell Workshop. He may be contacted at paul@orselli.net.

If you would like to comment on this article or others in this issue, please go to the NAME page on Facebook or send us a tweet @NAMExhibitions.

Welcome to another wide-ranging edition of Exhibits Newsline. This time we've received reports from different parts of the United States and a report from Poland as well, so let's get started!

Up first, correspondent Carol Bossert tells us a little bit about a visit to one of the lesser-known museums in New Orleans:

This summer my husband and I spent ten days in New Orleans. The great thing about spending so much time in one city is the chance to look beyond the well-known tourist experiences. While we visited the World War II Museum and the Louisiana State Museum, my fondest museum memories come from visiting a few lesser-known museums, including the New Orleans Pharmacy Museum, Musée Conti Wax Museum, and the Backstreet Cultural Museum.



Fig. 1. The Backstreet Cultural Museum showcases Mardi Gras Indian costumes. Photo by Carol Bossert

Located in the historic Tremé neighborhood, the Backstreet Cultural Museum houses an awesome collection of hand-sewn costumes of the Mardi Gras Indians. The museum is housed in the former Blandin Funeral Home and boasts the largest collection of Mardi Gras Indian costumes in the world (figs. 1 & 2). In fact, later on in our trip we saw two Indian costumes from the museum on loan to the Louisiana State Museum for their exhibition on Mardi Gras traditions.

In addition to Mardi Gras Indians, the museum is actively collecting objects, videos, and oral histories from New Orleans' African American community. We saw costumes and memorabilia from the social aid and pleasure clubs and watched videos of

Jazz funerals and Indian events, which I learned occur throughout the year, not just on Mardi Gras. The best part of the experience was the personalized tour provided by the museum's docent, who is also chief in one of the Indian tribes and who shyly pointed out the costumes he has made over the years. He showed us how costumes are constructed—it takes a year to make a single costume and no two are alike—and explained the origins of the various tribes and their relationships. He was the best guide I have ever had: enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and sincere. As we left he invited us to come back to the museum next Mardi Gras to be part of the second-line parade that starts at the museum and winds its way through the Tremé. I'm already planning my costume.



Fig. 2. The museum proudly posts its vision, mission, and goals statements for all to see. Photo by Carol Bossert



Fig. 3. An interesting approach to artifact display at the Warsaw Rising Museum. Photo by Nina Simon



Fig. 4. "That Warsaw no longer exists..." label. Photo by Nina Simon

Next, Nina Simon shares her experience of visiting a museum on her recent trip to Poland:

I was in Poland in June 2015. We were enraptured by the Warsaw Rising Museum. It was powerful on the level of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum—while telling a story of a small, short rebellion in a place I knew nothing about.

The museum tells the story of a two-month (failed) attempt by Warsawians to repel the Nazis from their city. It could have felt dislocating or overly nationalistic for a foreign visitor like me, but instead it drew me into the epic human story of people fighting for their freedom against all odds (fig. 3).

The design was immersive and arresting, but the thing that

interested me most were the labels. Many objects had brief, evocative labels—some of which were only a few words long. I will always remember a simple vitrine with a phonebook in it. The label read, "That Warsaw no longer exists..." (fig. 4).

Here's another label: "A can opener found in the ruins of a tenement house at 16 Freta St., where the Warsaw Staff of the People's Army is quartered and where they all die."

I love how this label takes you from a simple personal object to an impersonal, officious entity—and then slams you with the human element again at the end. And this is in translation! I can only imagine how good the labels must be in the original Polish.



Fig. 5. Entrance to the *Water* exhibition at The Leonardo, Salt Lake City, Utah.
 Photo by Eugene Dillenburg

And lastly, Eugene Dillenburg shares his experiences from *Water*, an exhibition on display at The Leonardo in Salt Lake City:

If you go to Salt Lake City to check out the new Natural History Museum of Utah, be sure to make the time for a side trip to The Leonardo. This modest-sized art/science center in the old public library building features a strong emphasis on STEAM programming, large-scale installations, and witty, inventive exhibits.

My favorite among these was titled simply *Water*. Utah being a desert state, water is a major issue. But water is also a difficult topic for an exhibit: what, exactly are you going to display? The Leonardo solves this with their customary creativity.

One enters the exhibit by weaving through a hallway filled with large floor-to-ceiling banners. Each contains a brief fact or a quote about water from an artist or scientist. The room is animated by dappled light, suggesting the surface of a pond. This sets the stage for what follows: an exploration

of water from scientific, artistic, and social perspectives (fig. 5).

The second room examines the properties of water through a video and a series of vitrine cases. The vitrines hold the show's "objects"—vessels full of water, demonstrating surface tension, diffraction, capillary action, etc. The next room takes an aesthetic perspective, presenting large black and white photographs by Australian artist Paul Blackmore of water use in ritual, in recreation, in industry, and in its absence.

These are mixed with a discussion of "Water Issues"—much of it text-based, but illustrated through installations. The average American's daily water use is represented physically by a sea of plastic milk jugs each filled with water. A five-gallon water cooler reservoir, representing all the Earth's water, is contrasted with containers measuring two cups and one teaspoon, representing fresh water and accessible fresh water, respectively (fig. 6).

The final room consists of a series of hands-on activities, as well as displays on water purification and water research conducted at local universities.

Aside from a couple of large video screens, the show is decidedly low-tech. And therein lies its charm: you don't need an enormous budget to create an effective, engaging experience.

The exhibit is not without its flaws. When it states that each of us "needs" three gallons a day for drinking, cooking and sanitation



Fig. 6. A wall graphic brought to life with physical objects. Photo by Eugene Dillenburg

(fig. 7), it neglects to mention that we also rely on water in agriculture, manufacturing, and myriad other uses. And an installation of water balloons suspended in mid-air doesn't seem to make any actual point. But then, maybe it doesn't have to. *Water*, like much of *The Leonardo*, communicates through aesthetics, and in that regard serves as an inspiration and a reminder to us all of the power of environment and design.

More information about the exhibition is available via *The Leonardo's* website: <http://www.theleonardo.org/exhibits/discover/water-exhibit/>.

And that's all for this edition of Exhibits Newsline! Thanks again to Carol, Nina, and Gene for sharing their exhibition experiences.

Have you seen an exhibition or installation that you'd like to share with colleagues in future Exhibits Newsline columns? Email me at paul@orselli.net with your ideas! ✨

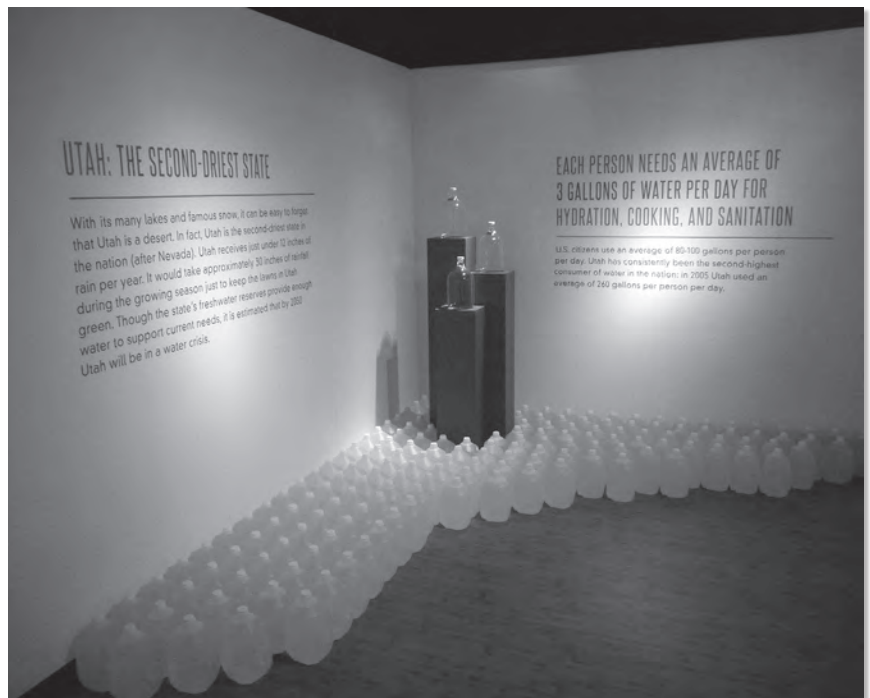


Fig. 7. Jugs of water create a 3D illustration of water use. Photo by Eugene Dillenburg