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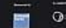

Object-Focused Text at the British Museum

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fig. 1.

The Great Court of the British Museum, London. Most of the museum's 6.4 million annual visits start here.

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The British Museum was founded in 1753 as the first national public museum in the world. From the beginning, it granted free admission to all "studious and curious persons." Visitor numbers have grown from roughly 5,000 a year in the 18th century to nearly 5.5 million today.

Debates about who the museum's audience is—and how to help visitors make sense of its vast collection—are as old as the institution itself. The use of the written word as an interpretive tool (and public criticism over its effectiveness) is part of this long history. A Parliamentary inquiry of 1835, for example, called on the British Museum to improve the quality of the guidebooks it printed and sold to visitors.[1] In 1898, the eminent archaeologist, ethnologist, and collector Colonel Pitt Rivers (1827–1900) denounced the museum's ethnography galleries for their perfunctory labeling, which he regarded as "simply bewildering" to the nonspecialist.[2] While the role of text in the visitor experience has evolved significantly since then, it continues to attract regular comment from visitors.

The creation of the "Interpretation Team" in 2005 marks the most significant innovation in text production at the museum in recent years. This change reflected a desire at directorate level to improve the quality of the museum's special exhibitions and to rethink the way displays are produced.[3] The British Museum is an object-rich institution; a fundamental principle is that our interpretation should help deepen visitors' engagement with the collection by helping them to look more closely at the real artifact and to think more deeply about it. This article offers a synthesis of what the team has learned over the last decade about producing effective "object-centered text."[4] This summary focuses primarily on what has been learned internally through practical experience and in-house visitor research and evaluation.[5]

The British Museum's displays fall broadly into two categories: a large number of permanent galleries for which admission is free, and two main special temporary exhibitions in dedicated spaces which have an admission charge. The Interpretation Team's internal visitor research has identified that the permanent galleries and admission-charging exhibitions attract significantly different audiences.[6] Research also suggests that visitors to admission-charging exhibitions have different motivations than those who visit the permanent galleries.[7] The differences in motivation are reflected in how people behave and how many objects they engage with.[8]

The permanent collection is displayed across six floors in over 80 rooms (fig. 1). Most of the galleries are relatively old, reflecting the thinking of previous decades rather than the current approach favored by the Interpretation Team. The diversity of the galleries makes it difficult to generalize, but each contains hundreds, sometimes thousands, of artifacts. Of the many thousands of artifacts on view, a small number attract far more attention than the rest. The Rosetta Stone is the single most popular object, followed by ancient Egyptian mummies and the Parthenon sculptures. Other artifacts,

1 D. Wilson, *The British Museum: A History* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002): 86.
2 Colonel Pitt Rivers, "Typological museums, as exemplified by the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford, and his provincial museum at Farnham," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 40 (1891): 115-122.
3 For a fuller discussion see David Francis, "An Arena Where Meaning and Identity Are Debated and Contested on A Global Scale: Narrative Discourses in British Museum Exhibitions, 1972-2013." *Curator* 58, no. 1 (2015): 41-58.
4 Our approach has been heavily influenced by the work of others, especially Beverly Serrell. See Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels. An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
5 Our holistic view of the entire visitor experience has been influenced by the work of John Falk and Lynn Dierking. See John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2011).
6 Steve Slack, David Francis, and Claire Edwards, "An Evaluation of Object-Centered Approaches to Interpretation at the British Museum," in *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*, edited by Juliette Fritsch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 153-164.
7 See the "Visitor Research" section of the British Museum website for more information: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/visitor_research.aspx.
8 The museum's approach to audience segmentation and visitor motivation has been heavily influenced by the work of John Falk. See John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2009).

such as the Lewis chessmen or the statue of Hoa Hakananai'a from Easter Island, attract fewer visitors but also have "star object" status.

The museum's free-admission displays can be viewed as an immense encyclopaedia of human civilization, from deep history to the present day. These displays attract many first-time visitors, the vast majority from overseas.[9] Most want to see as much of the collection as they can—as many star objects as possible—in what is, on average, a two-hour-fifteen-minute visit.[10] Consequently, the average dwell time in any individual permanent gallery is low, around three or four minutes, with browsing visitors stopping at around four to six objects from the hundreds displayed in any given room.

By contrast, special exhibitions, like the recent *Celts: Art & Identity* show in the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery, attract many repeat visitors, mainly from London, the southeast of England, and the rest of the United Kingdom. Special exhibitions like this occupy a space of around 11,000 square feet (1,000m^2), and usually feature around 150 objects, which include important international loans. They are research driven, offering the public new insights and current thinking. Exhibition visitors tend to stop at most of the objects, read a large proportion of the texts, and follow the intended sequence closely. Consequently, we have to manage word count carefully to try to ensure that the exhibition doesn't become too tiring or demanding. We aim for an average dwell time for a special exhibition of between 60–90 minutes. This also helps ensure that visitor capacity for the space is not exceeded, and that daily attendance targets are met. Our formative and summative exhibition evaluation indicates that visitors expect and welcome a strong coherent narrative, something more akin to a novel, and an object-based exhibition that is aesthetically, intellectually, and emotionally satisfying.

9 The museum segments its audience into seven categories; six are based on visitor motivation (using a system developed in collaboration with Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, a British-based audience research agency): Art Lovers, Self-Developers, Families, Sightseers, Repeat Social Visitors, and Experts. Schools are the non-motivation based segment.

10 Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, "Sustaining success: British Museum annual visitor report 2014/15" (unpublished report, 2015).

In the rest of the article, we focus briefly on the interpretive planning process, and then the different text strategies that are deployed for special exhibitions and permanent galleries. We then outline some of the key principles that we feel underpin the development of effective text for object-based displays.

Creating Structure: Interpretive Planning

The process of developing text for a special exhibition or new permanent gallery begins with the development of the intellectual rationale for a display—the interpretive plan (or scope paper).[11] Typically, a curator proposes the idea for an exhibition. Once the initial idea has been approved, the heads of our interpretation and exhibitions departments, along with the curatorial team, work collaboratively to produce the interpretive plan. This document defines the project objectives, around six key messages that we wish to communicate to visitors, and a similar number of outcomes that we hope to engender. We write the key messages in the type of relaxed language visitors might use if asked to summarize a display's big ideas post-visit. The document also encapsulates the big idea for the exhibition in a sentence or two, ideally an appealing proposition that can be communicated easily. The interpretive plan also outlines the narrative and proposed structure, and defines the audiences for the show.

Developing the interpretive plan is critical to fixing the big ideas and arguments, and ensures that all key stakeholders are in agreement before mapping concepts onto the physical space begins. Once the interpretive plan is agreed upon, an interpretation officer is assigned to the project, and detailed work starts. The interpretation officer's role is significantly broader than that of earlier museum editors. Instead of a limited role as wordsmiths, they work with the curatorial and design teams on detailed planning. They establish an information hierarchy for the display, refine its structure and narrative, and edit all written material, using our text guidelines.

11 Interpretive planning is, of course, a well-established discipline. The museum has adapted established best practice, incorporating ideas advocated by the National Association for Interpretation, to create its own template.

fig. 2. The introductory section of the *Life and Death: Pompeii and Herculaneum* exhibition.

As exhibition or gallery development progresses, the interpretation officer develops detailed section plans. This much more detailed interpretive framework directs the work of the curators and the design team. It enables them to add, remove, or group objects, while ensuring the narrative remains cohesive, focused, and consistent with the interpretive plan. The section plan identifies the fundamental points that each object is contributing to the overall narrative. It also captures the requirements for all text and interpretation, including section texts, object labels, wall quotes, contextual images, and any digital or other interpretive media.

Special exhibitions: crafting a linear narrative Each special exhibition is different and poses its own unique challenges. However, our formative and summative evaluation reveals that creating a linear narrative is a particularly effective way of shaping visitors' intellectual and emotional journey through an exhibition. We use a linear narrative frequently in our special exhibitions to create a visitor experience with a carefully paced emotional arc.

The structure for the 2013 special exhibition *Life and Death: Pompeii and Herculaneum* mirrored the three-act structure commonly used in theatre and cinema.[12] The first section was akin to the first act, introducing the exhibition's main theme. The juxtaposition of three objects, followed by a short film in a cinema space, summarized the exhibition's focus on everyday domestic life in typical Roman cities (fig. 2). The second act expanded on domestic life by taking visitors on a tour of a typical home, room by room. Very occasionally, individual objects were used to heighten tension, reminding visitors of the presence of Vesuvius and the impending danger for the cities' inhabitants. In the final section, the third act, the exhibition focused on the end of the two cities, displaying casts of bodies from Pompeii and objects that were found with people who unsuccessfully attempted to flee. Rather than end on destruction and death, a final *denouement* examined the legacy of Pompeii and Herculaneum; the buried cities allow us to glean vivid insights into the real lives of individuals through the objects, buildings and graffiti that they left behind.

Permanent galleries: using a "gateway object" approach Tracking visitors' movements through the permanent galleries has established that because of the nature of the displays and visitors' motivations, the majority of people behave very differently than they do in special exhibitions. Most browse: they walk through a gallery, pausing briefly to look at a small number of objects that have caught their eye, apparently at random. These visitors are not following a sequential narrative, as they do in special exhibitions. Instead, they begin their exploration with an individual object, looking first for the closest written information—usually its label. If the label is not close by, the visitor quickly stops looking. Our older galleries have not been designed to accommodate visitors' actual behavior. Most visitors ignore panel or wall texts completely, and yet traditionally these are the

12 For more information, see The British Museum, Past Exhibitions, *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, March 28–September 29, 2013. Accessed January 4, 2016, http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2013/pompeii_and_herculaneum.aspx.

We now design galleries around a manageable number of key objects carefully chosen to helpfully focus visitors' attention, and to act as gateways to the messages we wish to communicate.

interpretive vehicles that carry the information that we regard as essential.

These observations have been used to completely rethink the museum's approach to planning permanent galleries. Now that we understand visitors' behavior, our galleries are designed to accommodate it, rather than relying on assumptions. We now design galleries around a manageable number of key objects carefully chosen to helpfully focus visitors' attention, and to act as gateways to the messages we wish to communicate. Visitors can encounter and access them in any order, and the objects build on one another to reinforce an open, nonlinear narrative. We choose gateway objects to illustrate key themes, but also because they are eye-catching, and among the most important objects in the collection. We write the text for gateway objects by starting with what the visitor can see; we then expand the text to introduce a bigger theme, usually illustrated by a supporting cast of objects displayed in the same exhibit case. Evaluation of six redisplays of permanent galleries that utilize gateway objects indicates that the approach is effective at focusing browsing behavior and deepening engagement.

"Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300–1100" (Room 41), which opened in 2014, is the most recent permanent gallery at the museum to use gateway objects. At the center of the cruciform-shaped gallery is a large, freestanding case that contains finds from an Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo (in East England) dating from the early 600s A.D. (fig. 3). This display is intended to be a gateway into the bigger subject of early medieval Europe. Our intention was to try to ensure that visitors who pass through this gallery stop at this particular display and the iconic Sutton Hoo helmet, if nothing else. The interpretation for the Sutton Hoo display delivers the main key messages for the gallery as a whole in microcosm.

The objects in the ship burial reveal widespread connections between Sutton Hoo and continental Europe. The central case provides visitors with an introduction to early medieval Europe through gold coins from France, Celtic bowls from the west of Britain or Ireland, and silver from the eastern Mediterranean. These objects offer starting points that allow more engaged visitors to more deeply explore the history of early medieval Europe through related displays around the gallery's perimeter. Each of these perimeter subject displays is structured around its own gateway objects.

The gateway objects in Room 41 structure visitors' browsing behavior into a more directed way, ensuring

fig. 3. The central Sutton Hoo case in "Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300–1100" (Room 41).

The first library to contain all knowledge

fig. 4. The current display of Ashurbanipal's library in "Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC" (Room 55).

they see star pieces in the gallery, and that they absorb some of the main messages about the period. Summative evaluation has demonstrated that this new approach is much more effective than the display it replaced. The average dwell time and the median number of stops made by visitors have both increased significantly.

Writing Text

Once the section planning stage of exhibit development is finished, we turn to writing and editing text. Here, as in crafting the structure, we retain an object-based and visitor-centered focus. Regardless of whether the text is for a special exhibition or a permanent gallery, our aim is to encourage the visitor to look more closely at the objects on display and to reveal something meaningful.

Browsing visitors are led primarily by their gaze, and we respond to this ocular-centric behavior by writing labels and titles that start with what the visitor sees. Visitors who have been attracted to an object and feel curious enough to read the label should then find within the text additional information to deepen their initial interest, perhaps by pointing out specific details, and by making connections to the gallery's narrative. Labels that begin and end with visual details prompt visitors to look back more closely at an object, deepening their engagement with it.

The museum's traditional privileging of sight means that visitors typically only get to see the objects on display. Although some exhibitions feature handling objects, soundscapes, or smells, text is still the most common means to convey an object's material qualities to visitors. To help visitors imagine an object's original use, we regularly include sensory details in labels: we describe the sounds an object makes, or whether it has a distinctive smell, or how it feels to hold or touch. Such an appeal to a visitor's senses can make text more lively, and transports the reader to the place and time from which the object came. Explaining that an ornate drinking cup once smelled of cherry brandy, for example, can help bring it to life.

Using objects to tell stories At the heart of our interpretive philosophy is a desire to unlock the stories objects can tell, and to find a point of connection with the public. Understanding what interests visitors, what motivates them, and how they behave in a given display is where evaluation becomes key. In early 2014, we completed a tracking and observation study for the "Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC" permanent gallery (Room 55) to inform a refurbishment. The evaluation revealed that a traditional display of cuneiform tablets was failing to attract many visitors' interest. There was little to indicate to browsing visitors that this collection of clay cuneiform tablets belonged to the world's first library, assembled by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, nor that it was one of the most significant assemblages in the whole museum.

We took a new approach in how we designed for, wrote about, and displayed the objects. First, we capitalized on the idea that this assemblage was the world's first library; the project team felt that this powerful hook could be used to engage the public. The new display sought to communicate the idea of the library much more strongly by replicating the ancient shelving system used by Ashurbanipal. We categorized the tablets within these shelves to tell a coherent story of the library from assembly to destruction. In this case, the team decided to abandon the previous approach of conventional labels for each tablet; this presented an intimidating amount of rather academic text to read, akin to a catalogue entry. Instead, we identified a short quotation from each tablet and added them to the shelf, both to give a flavor of the library's contents and to give a voice to a broad range of people from ancient Mesopotamian society. We also utilized strong colors to increase the attracting power of the case, and used images of Assyrians, taken from contemporary sculpture, to help visitors make emotional connections to the stories revealed by the tablets.

Rather than rely of a plethora of individual labels, the new approach transformed the whole case into a single gateway object telling a more cohesive, coherent, and relevant story (fig. 4). The recently completed tracking and observation study of the refreshed display has revealed that this reconfigured display is now attracting a higher proportion of visitors to Room 55.

Incorporating other voices and perspectives

All exhibitions and displays represent a selective and partial view of the subject they present. In most special exhibitions, the majority of text reflects the institutional voice of the museum, written by the curator, edited by the interpretation officer, and signed off at the directorate level. Most of our exhibitions, however, also use quotes to include voices from the past, add personal points of connection, and acknowledge other views. Community consultation is an integral part of developing some exhibitions, and quotes create an essential space within the interpretive framework for communities to speak for themselves about their own culture. Again, summative evaluation indicates that visitors value this interpretive approach.[13]

In summer 2015, the British Museum staged *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, the first major UK exhibition about the history of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.[14] The exhibition drew heavily on the museum's own collection, and was part of a long-term research project—an ongoing dialogue between the museum and the people in Australia whose artifacts it holds. British Museum curator Gaye Sculthorpe and keeper Lissant Bolton, together with National Museum of Australia staff, consulted closely with Indigenous communities over the interpretation and display of these objects. Contemporary Indigenous artists were invited to respond to artifacts in the British Museum, and we incorporated their works and words in the exhibition and its catalogue (fig. 5).

Some of the objects exhibited in *Indigenous Australia* were acquired during the traumatic and often extremely violent colonization of Australia by Great Britain, and there are continuing calls from some Indigenous communities for their repatriation. The exhibition addressed these issues directly in its text, digital media,

13 For example, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, "Curating conversations: a summative report. Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation at the British Museum" (unpublished report, 2015).

14 For more information, see The British Museum, Past Exhibitions, *Indigenous Australia*, April 23–August 2, 2015. Accessed January 4, 2016, www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2015/indigenous_australia.aspx.

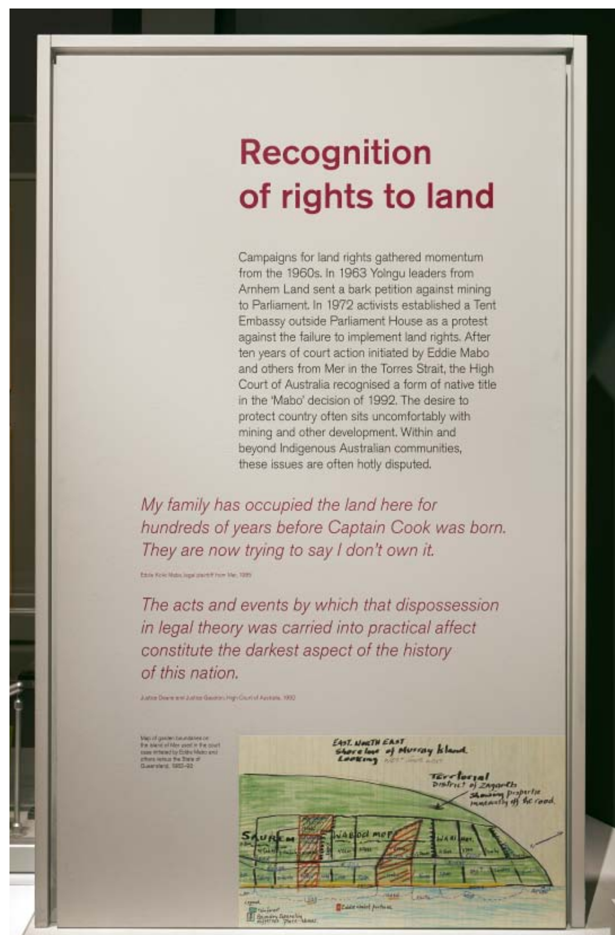
fig. 5. The *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition (Room 35).

and by exhibiting artists' work. The words of the people for whom these objects were and are part of a living culture were prominently featured on walls, panels, labels, and in the digital media and audio guide. This exhibition and these voices opened a dialogue that will be an ongoing one for the museum (fig. 6).[15]

Conclusion: What Is the Future of Text at the British Museum?

The museum has learned a great deal over the last decade, and our evaluation indicates that we have become more effective at deepening visitors' engagement with our object-based displays in special exhibitions and permanent galleries. The summative evaluation of each project leads to iterative improvements in the next (for example, we have recently begun to experiment with writing labels and texts that are specifically for families). However, the next ten years are likely to witness a

fig. 6. An example of a subject panel text from the *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition. Quotes from Indigenous Australians were an integral part of each text panel.



15 For a more detailed discussion, see Gaye Sculthorpe, "Engaging with Colonial Pasts and Indigenous Presence: 'Indigenous Australia' at the British Museum." *MUSE* (September/ October 2015): 16-27.

fundamental shift in how we interpret the museum's collection for its global audience.

The recent creation of our "Digital Media & Publishing" team and the implementation of a digital strategy reflects the importance the museum places on this area. The idea that a future visitor to the British Museum might access all of the information and interpretation that they need on their own device now seems less remarkable and ambitious than it once did. Digital technology is evolving rapidly, audience expectations are changing, and without doubt digital media will transform the way visitors make sense of the museum. It is no longer fanciful to envision a British Museum exhibition or permanent gallery without conventional object labels or interpretive panels. Other museums have, after all, already partially implemented systems that utilize digital labels or near field communication, allowing visitors, for example, to access information about artworks by tapping their own mobile device on a symbol.

The museum is currently developing plans for new "Islamic World" galleries that will open late in 2018. Digital media will be an important part of the interpretive frameworks for these new galleries and, although plans are still at a formative stage, visitors' own mobile devices will be an essential part of the visitor experience. A member of the Digital Media & Publishing team is an integral member of the project team, along with an interpretation officer. Adopting digital labeling, which would let us provide text in different languages, or create alternative texts for audiences with different needs (for example, families), is one of a number of possible initiatives currently being given careful consideration. However, although digital media will undoubtedly change interpretation of displays in the longer term, our existing approach to exhibition text, particularly in permanent galleries—an approach that has evolved over 250 years—is unlikely to become redundant imminently for various reasons, not least the scale of the museum. We will continue, for now, with an ongoing process of refurbishing and refreshing existing displays. With careful interpretive planning, rigorous evaluation, a gateway object approach, and object-focused text, we know that we can significantly improve engagement levels for our many visitors from around the world. ∎

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