Museum labels
Rethinking the narrative
Changes in attitudes are prompting many museums to reconsider tone, format and role. By Caroline Parry

The exhibition label is changing. Traditionally, they have featured relevant information about objects and artworks, and interpretation, grounding an object into the overall narrative of an exhibition or gallery. But significant shifts in society's thinking and attitudes on a variety of issues are causing some institutions to reconsider the format of labels, the language used and the role they play in broader interpretation.

Across the sector, there is a greater focus on the social impact that museums can make through the Museums Association's (MA) Museums Change Lives campaign, coupled with increasing awareness of democratic and participatory practices, such as co-production, non-traditional voices and accessibility. Visitors are also demanding more immersive and experience-led exhibitions, as technology plays an ever-increasing role in our lives. Meanwhile, the climate crisis, decolonisation, and movements such as #MeToo are changing our beliefs, actions and expectations.

“There is much more recognition that museums are not as neutral as was once claimed,” says Olivia Douglas, the assistant curator at the University of Reading's Museum of English Rural Life (Merli), which overhauled its galleries and interpretation in 2015.

The Wellcome Collection in London aims for all of its interpretation to be intellectually and physically accessible, relatable and “human”.

Shamina Shriman Raja, the curator of temporary exhibitions at the Wellcome Collection, says: “We want to offer enough information to empower the visitor to make their own interpretation.”

Captions are limited to 50-60 words, feature tombstone details (the basic information about an object) and address one or two key topics, avoiding any jargon.

They use a minimum font size of 3.5mm equivalent to 16-point Arial type and are positioned at a height of 150cm to 170cm above the ground, with wheelchair users in mind.

This year, Wellcome will add braille, British Sign Language content and audio interpretation to its Being Human permanent gallery. “It has to be all about variety,” says Kate Forde, the head of exhibitions at Wellcome. “We are giving content for people of different levels, abilities and interests, and offering different ways of consuming text. It is about properly living up to our ambitions.”

Multiple voices
Using labels to bring new and multiple voices to exhibitions (instead of, or in addition to, a curator) is becoming more prevalent, as museums seek to become more inclusive, accessible and democratic.

Museums are also using this approach with problematic histories, where interpretation may include language that is no longer appropriate or is derogatory and hurtful.

Forde says: “We are a medical museum and we have a history of presenting objects through a medical lens, and a history of presenting disabled people in inappropriate ways. “We have tried to interrogate that (for the Being Human exhibition) and be aware, so we did not reproduce it in the new...
Lived experience
In summer 2016, Leicester’s New Walk Museum and Art Gallery worked with refugees from its local community on a relabelling takeover of its permanent collection.

Each person picked an object from the museum and wrote a new label, which was used without being edited.

Angela Stienne, a museum researcher from the University of Leicester, who led the takeover, says: “It highlighted the importance and benefits of community engagement. It also showed that it is possible to change the conversation and disrupt the narrative with limited resources and budget.”

Lived experience also plays a vital role in Being Human. Wellcome worked with a text consultant and several groups, including creative company and charity Heart n Soul, which is led by people with autism or learning disabilities, to shape the text.

Cardiff Museum, which opened in 2018, was produced in collaboration with the local community. Museum manager Victoria Rogers, who was the recipient of the MA’s Museums Change Lives Radical Changemaker award in 2019, says the consultation led to a remit of telling the story of ordinary people in the Welsh capital.

Stories are told through labels in the form of flipbooks and touchscreens, which aim to use different types of evidence to build up a picture of the object.

To do this, the museum works with local newspapers, other museums and libraries, and the Glamorgan Archives. “We are assigning multiple people's stories to an object, not just the story of the donor,” says Rogers.

There is inherently more flexibility in temporary exhibitions and displays to be innovative in the approach to labels and interpretation; it is more challenging to design progressive labels with longevity in permanent galleries and exhibitions.

“Permanent gallery labels should last 10 to 25 years, but we are already noticing things that are missing through shifts in the narrative,” says Mr. Douglass.

“Tension between designers that want a certain type of label, but they are not flexible. Cheaper solutions that are flexible tend not to be so sleek in design.”

Mr. Douglas has recently been awarded money towards furthering its work around decolonisation and the British empire, in collaboration with a range of groups.

The finished work will be available online.

Changing narratives
There has been a dynamic shift in narratives over the past 10 years, says the Vagina Museum’s curator, Sarah Creed.

“It is a constant cycle,” she says. “At least everyone is in the cycle, and there isn’t opposition. There is an understanding that labelling and wider interpretation has moved on. It is a huge undertaking, however, like digitisation. At least it has begun.”

Museums Association one-day conference
Future of Museums: Curation
25 March, Wellcome Collection, London
Join us to explore how curation is changing, and to discuss what tomorrow’s museum curators might look like or do.
Speakers will explore curating the climate crisis, challenging traditional perspectives and participatory practice.

Caroline Purss is a freelance journalist. Read the full Museum Practice on labels online at museumassociation.org/museum-practice/labs