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The museum label: A secret password into the world of art

Utilizing technical communication principles in the creation of accessible and effective museum labels

The museum label provides a world of information to the visitor, granting them access to the mysterious world of art. Successful museum labels provide context, promote accessibility, and encourage curiosity in individuals visiting museums, but how are these decisions made regarding what to include, what not to include, and what the label will look like—and how can they be made better? Technical communication principles have the capabilities to enhance the effectiveness of museum labels through elements of content and design/formatting, along with an emphasis on accessibility. With the knowledge and experience of museum professionals as well the research performed and data gathered through this study, the possibility of understanding how museum professionals evaluate and react to a museum label created using technical communication can occur.

Keywords: museum labels, audience analysis, technical communication, content, design, accessibility

Introduction

In an art museum, gathering information immediately about a specific piece of artwork is most effectively accomplished through the museum label. Even in 1911, the Brooklyn Museum knew this and noted that no wall text, brochure, or “bulletin will suffice” (p. 82). For any object in a museum, the visual aid of a textual explanation consistently supports visitors in reaching conclusions. A visitor strolls through the well-lit halls to gain information, have their questions answered, and most certainly, be inspired or entertained by what they see; museum labels contribute to all of those needs. Labels prompt conversations between visitors and their companions; they provide context for the piece at hand and give clarity to the uncertainties visitors expect to be proved certain. In order for a museum label to accomplish all these tasks, it must be written and designed in an intentional way to ensure optimal accessibility, comprehension, and intrigue. Integrating technical communication principles into the writing and design process of a museum label could aid in producing an even more effective label.

To begin, I will define the museum label and its connection to technical communication, as well as share research that went into creating the new label. Next, I will outline the methods of the study in two parts, the first part further explaining my creation of an original label and the second part discussing the interviews with museum professionals regarding the original label. The process of data collection, the coding process, and an analysis of consistent themes will be provided. I will discuss the results of the data and its impact on the topic of accessible and successful museum labels. Finally, I will share my limitations and reflections upon the study.

Literature Review

If museum labels are to be read, they need to be written. The Brooklyn Museum (1911) defined the goal of a label-writer as one who “[sets] forth the important facts about an object clearly, concisely and smoothly, [says] what there is to be said in an interesting way, [and makes] a label long enough to give needed

information and not so long as to deter the average visitor from reading it;” they say this is “no easy matter” (p. 81). Present the facts, but do not make it boring. Make it succinct but not rushed. Make it interesting but accurate. Make it long but not too long. A celebration of paradox on a small piece of cardstock. The field of technical communication is no stranger to these complicated requests put upon documents of all kinds. Many of the principles valued by technical communicators satisfy the needs of a museum label. Efficiency is one of the most important principles in technical communication, and can be accomplished through informative design, “the practice of presenting information in a way that fosters an efficient and effective understanding of the information” (Locke, 2020). Through informative design, readability needs to be clear and the language needs to be simple. In choosing what content to include on a museum label, one must also choose what not to include and consider how to direct focus of the museum visitor. Museum visitors—and most humans in general—are “living under conditions overloaded with information of every kind” (p. 273), explains Brinch (2020). Composing text on an easy-to-read museum label can provide “guidance in orientating [visitors’] attention and focus” (p. 273), especially in a setting where extensive signage and labelling is abundant (Brinch, 2020).

Content included on labels must be chosen intentionally and with great respect to the artwork, the artist, and the context of the artwork. Without those considerations, labels can do more harm than good. Patricia Davison (2012) discovered, in her study of South African rock art, that with “minimal labelling” and no referential considerations offered to the environmental “context” of where the rock art was produced, or sufficient and unbiased research regarding who created [it], “viewers were able to admire [the] rock art but misunderstand it at the same time” (p. 30). Visitors are going to interact with labels just as much as the object or artwork; therefore, in all situations, it is vital to consider who is composing them (Hohenstein & Uyen, 2007). Museum labels are predominantly “contingent on the knowledge and perspective of curators” (Davison, 2012, p. 31). To create the most informative and engaging label, curators must look not only to scholars, but also visitors—and maybe technical communicators as well.

Labels & technical communication

The relationship between curators and visitors is in fact critical because most enter a museum not possessing a wealth of art history knowledge, and labels are what can answer questions and provide clarity. Museum labels do not always present their answers in the most accessible ways. “Technical language or jargon is frequently used without explanation,” explains Hall (1988), “putting at a disadvantage those viewers unfamiliar with the lexicon of art and art history” (p. 13). It can feel as if labels were written by curators, for curators. Although a dense museum label does not take away from the wonder of the artwork it is linked to, a more readable one could enhance that wonder even more.

And what better way to boost connection with the audience than to use technical communication principles? The goals of these principles remain consistent: make content and design/formatting choices with the audience in mind, thereby bettering audiences’ comprehension and understanding. One of the most important tools of awareness derived from technical communication is accessibility of language. Including technical or art-focused jargon on a museum label without further explanation contributes to language inaccessibility.

Audience members, and in this case, museum visitors, are much more valuable than their knowledge of the content or their ability to understand the content. To truly analyze an audience means striving to understand them on a level more personal than just knowledge. This is where audience analysis can play an integral role. Without thoughtful audience analysis, the relationship between a museum and its visitors is prone to a disconnect. Derek G. Ross (2013) agrees, stating that “effective audience analysis allows individuals and organizations to more effectively communicate with their audience” (p. 94). Defining an audience can be challenging, as can making decisions that align best with said audience. It must be acknowledged that museum visitors who make up the audience all come from unique communities—those visitors are also members of the community existing with the museum. Engaging in a community through any form of communication is to “understand the conditions of one’s own participation—the concepts,

values, traditions, and style which permit identification with the community and determine the success or failure of communication” (Miller, 1979, p. 617). Museums must be aware of their audience of visitors in order to facilitate effective communication.

For this awareness to be fruitful, the design/formatting and content of a museum label can provide clarity to the audience, as well as a safe space for curiosity. Rather than trying to decipher a complex sentence or determine the meaning of an uncommon vocabulary word, museum visitors are given the opportunity to learn something new, and at the same time, consider their own thoughts and feelings toward the artwork on display. Technical communication principles can aid in allowing a visitor’s experience with museum labels to be intellectually stimulating rather than confusing, leading them to leave with more answers than questions.

Creating the label: Previous interviews

I conducted interviews previously with museum professionals regarding museum labels. These interviews resulted in best practices for museum labels in general, with specific regards to content and formatting. Museum professionals, Diane Gately, Jodi McCoy, and Jackson Williams (2020), recommended providing context for the artwork, identifying the work, and using accessible language for written context (personal communication, Nov. 2020). Additional themes resulting from the interviews called for legible and readable text, large font size, and simple typeface (Gately et al., personal communication, Nov. 2020). The interviews suggested these content choices would contribute to a successful museum label. In creating the revised label, I considered all of the above elements, with major focus on technical communication principles. Content and design details from these interviews are incorporated in the Methods section.

Creating the label: Museum recommendations

To ensure that the label I created would also satisfy the recommendations and requirements of the field of museums studies as well as the expectations of traditional museums, I looked to style guides and other

advice presented in museum-label-focused materials. I sought additional knowledge in order to understand what to include and what not to include on museum labels from the perspectives of museums and other museum professionals.

The Museum and Galleries of NSW (n.d.) advise that to create an effective museum label, the author must “select information that provides contextual significance [...] and include key findings of interest about the artwork to give important story line information.” Along with context, the style by which the information is presented is an important choice. Lourdes Santamaría-Wheeler (2015), Exhibits Coordinator at the George A. Smathers Libraries shares in the *Exhibit Style Guide* that “interpretive labels [...] tell stories, they are narratives, not a list of facts” (p. 2). Labels “should be engaging and accessible to a wide audience without diluting the content,” argues Santamaría-Wheeler (2015), agreeing with the previous interviews with museum professionals, “labels are not written for ourselves or our colleagues” (p. 2). Additional and more technical recommendations from various museums involved avoiding footnotes, quotes, and centering the text, but promoting the use of ragged margins (Santamaría-Wheeler, 2015, p. 30). The design choices made from these recommendations are incorporated in the Methods section.

Methods

In the first part of the study, to contribute to producing a more accessible and effective label, I created an original museum label for the painting, *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati Italy* (1907) by American artist John Singer Sargent. The label was written and designed with three main areas of focus in mind: previous interviews conducted with museum professionals regarding the positives and negatives of the traditional museum label; the advice and recommendations of museums and their label writing departments regarding labels and visitor accessibility; and technical communication principles to promote increased readability and overall appeal.

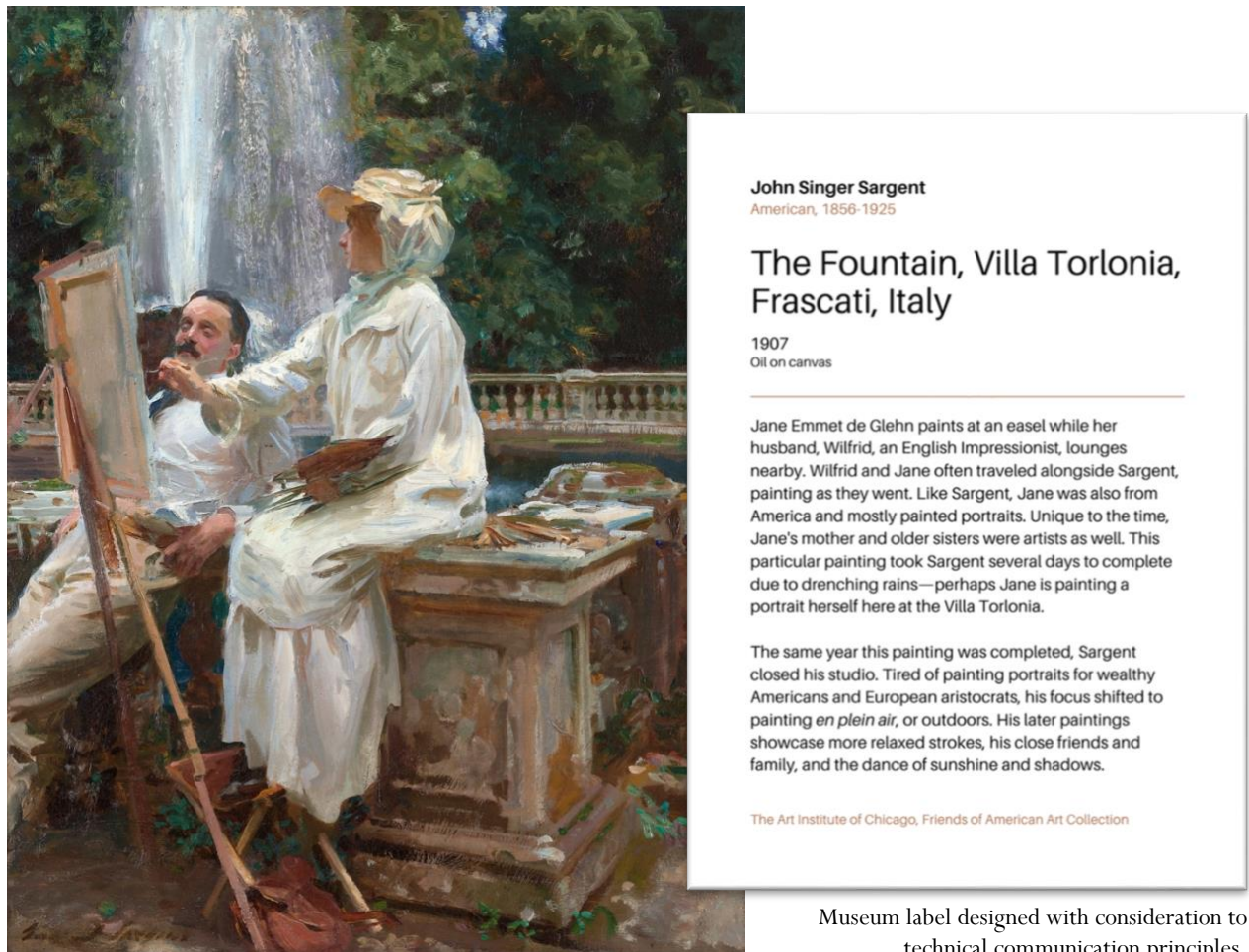
In the second part of this study, I decided to conduct additional interviews with museum professionals from three different concentrations in order to gain insight from various perspectives within the art museum field about the label I created. More details about their experiences in art museums with specific concentrations and locations can be found in Table I, on page 17.

Part 1: Creation of an original label

In order to test the effectiveness of using technical communication principles in a museum label, I created my own using those principles. In creating this new label, I also considered research from previous interviews with museum professionals, museum recommendations, and visitor accessibility needs.

Artwork with corresponding label

The artwork below, *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati Italy* (1907) was painted by American artist John Singer Sargent. I designed the museum label beside it according to technical communication principles, previous research, traditional label standards from museums, and accessibility recommendations.



John Singer Sargent. *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy*, 1907.
The Art Institute of Chicago.

Museum label designed with consideration to technical communication principles.

Copyright acknowledgement

The museum label I created provides information on the painting, *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy* (1907) by John Singer Sargent, which is on display at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). It is important to note that the AIC and the CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Designation allow the painting to be used freely without consideration to copyright law. The AIC (n.d.) provides “free, unrestricted use of over

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50,000 images of works in the collection believed to be in the public domain or to which the museum otherwise waives any copyright it might have.” The AIC (n.d.) requires a specific caption when the artwork is used for any purpose, which I have included beneath the painting. The image is able to be used “for any purpose, including commercial and noncommercial uses, free of charge and without additional permission from the museum” (AIC, n.d.). The public domain works from the AIC are made accessible under the Creative Commons Zero CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Designation. The Creative Commons Zero Designation (n.d) determines that “[t]he person who associated a work with this deed has dedicated the work to the public domain by waiving all of his or her [or their] rights to the work worldwide under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights.” Under the Creative Commons Zero Designation (n.d.), anyone is able to edit, copy, and distribute the work without permission, “even for commercial purposes.”

Application of design principles

Graphic design contributes to successful technical communication by allowing for the content presented to be easy to read and aesthetically pleasing to the viewer. The Interaction Design Foundation (n.d.) defines graphic design as a “craft where professionals create visual content to communicate messages. By applying visual hierarchy and page layout technique, designers use typography and pictures to meet users’ specific needs and focus on the logic of displaying elements in interactive designs, to optimize user experience.” In creating the new museum label, the message I communicated tells the visitor who the artist is, how long they lived, where they were from, the title of the painting, which medium was used, where the painting is on display, when the artwork was painted, as well as interesting information seen within the painting and the context beyond the frame.

In regard to visual hierarchy decisions, I made the title of the painting the largest font. In viewing the new museum label, a museum visitor would see the title first, then their eye would be led to the power zone of the document, which showcases the artist’s name. Then their eyes would travel to see the date and

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zig zag down to read the caption. I chose to place the name of the museum where the work is displayed at the bottom of the label in the smallest font because it is not vital information, and the visitor would already know the museum they were visiting. As for the typography choice on the museum label, I chose it due to its simplicity and clarity. The sanserif font used is very similar to *Arial*, which is the font many museums use on their own labels. I made choices considering a museum visitor's expectation as to what a museum label should look like; therefore, I followed the basic format of a museum label, just with some alterations to try to elicit a better and more enjoyable experience.

The goal of accessibility in regard to this museum label was to write and design it in a way that would allow the label to be a helpful and interesting resource for as many visitors as possible. The Institute for Human Centered Design (n.d.) describes this as “human-centered design (of everything) with everyone in mind” (pg. 1). Although it is not possible for every design to work for every human, the decisions made in regard to accessibility for this museum label strived to satisfy the needs of the average museum visitor. The museum label lacked accessibility in the areas of non-English speakers as well as museum visitors who use braille or other ways to read. This topic will be discussed later in the Limitations section. Without accessibility, visitors cannot be reached, and the label would produce more confusion than knowledge. Beth Ziebarth, Director of the Smithsonian Accessibility Program (n.d.) recommends avoiding “the use of colloquial and complex English, jargon, and technical language in text panels unless such language is explained” (p. 21). Ziebarth (n.d.) also recommended each line of text to have, on average, less than 55 characters (p. 21). To promote as much accessibility as possible within the museum label I created, as agreed upon by the research within this study, I did not include terminology which would be unfamiliar to the average visitor; on average, the characters per line of my label also corresponded with Ziebarth's (n.d.) recommendations as well. Both Santamaría-Wheeler (2015) and Ziebarth (n.d.) agree that text should be aligned to the left margin, with the margins on the right being ragged (p. 28). I felt that these recommendations would be helpful and applied them to the museum label I created. I did not include any of

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the elements discouraged by Santamaría-Wheeler (2015), and I aligned all text to the left-margin and used ragged margins as well. Elements of typefaces that prompt issues in accessibility involved crowded letters and words, distracting variations in the stroke of a letter, and lightly colored typefaces (Ziebarth, n.d., p. 25). I avoided all of these elements and instead used a typeface that prevented crowding, was consistent in stroke, and was a darker color. Another notable recommendation by Ziebarth (n.d.) highlighted the need for contrast between written content and the background of the label, especially for visitors with low vision. “Research shows that dark on light works marginally better than light on dark for headlines,” argues Ziebarth (n.d.). To satisfy this need, I used a light background which contrasted greatly with the dark typeface used.

Edward Tufte was a notable scholar in the world of design and valued the field of technical communication. “[Tufte] praises the ways the best designers draw the viewer into what he calls the wonder of data, either by narrative power, immense detail, or by elegant presentations,” explains Brinch (2020), “Neither of these imply decorations or ornamentation of any kind” (p. 263). In an interview with Tufte, Mark Zachary and Charlotte Thralls (2004) expand upon his design principles, sharing that they are “predicated on the idea that excellence in visual design is largely realized through the creation of graphics that correspond with the mental tasks they are meant to support” (p. 447). Every decision I made while creating the museum label sought to support the mental task of getting to know the basic elements of the artwork, as well as learning something new about it that the average museum visitor would not know. In accordance with recommendation by Tufte, I attempted to not include any additional visual content that could be viewed as decoration or ornamentation. The only extra “visual” element I added was the horizontal line providing separation between the basic facts of the artwork and the more detailed explanation of what the work represented. Another visual choice I made involved the tan color for the typeface in order to contribute non-distracting interest to the museum label; in the previous interviews I conducted with

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museum professionals, some even stated that small amounts of color can be a good addition to museum labels.

In regard to Gestalt principles and proximity, I grouped together the artist's name, where he was from, when he was born and when he died to show relationship to the artist in that they were all basic details about him. I made the title of the artwork, the date it was created, and the medium used to be in close proximity as well to represent the relationship between all information relating to the painting, which differ from the details above—showing two different relationships. I made the first and second paragraphs of the caption close in proximity to show they are related, and in this relation, both refer back to the artwork in some way.

White space is yet another valuable technical communication principle in regard to visual design. It allows the user to see more clearly with the use of contrast; it also enhances user experience. White space is an exceptionally valuable tool in communicating to the user a certain tone or mood, all the while allowing increased legibility and comprehension. It is not wasted space, for it is an intentional choice that presents relationships between objects, enhances contrast, and enables clarity for the user. White space provides a fresh aesthetic that viewers deem credible. It allows a message or tone to be communicated without the use of text, all the while having aesthetics of simplicity and elegance. Gestalt principles are also important to consider with white space in that they aid in presenting objects to have relationships if they are in close proximity to each other. White space is also an exceptionally valuable tool when chunking. Users are able to memorize content more easily if they are in chunks, and by facilitating the use of white space, the information distributed in chunks becomes more meaningful than if it were one long paragraph. "When distractions that don't serve a purpose are taken out, the users are able to focus on the main goal of the content" (Babich, 2016). All information included on the label I created relates directly to the painting and needs to be included in order for the visitor to have a complete understanding of the artwork; additionally, there is no doubting what the main goal of the label is. White space also improves comprehension for the user because it enhances legibility and readability due to the space between the elements that help to define the page content itself (Babich, 2016). The text I included on the museum label does not run off the page, and there is

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breathing room around the sections of relationships and around the border of the label as well. A museum visitor would not think that the Art Institute of Chicago text at the bottom of the label belongs to the caption paragraphs due to the white space separating the two texts, as well as the color contrast between the texts. I chose the mood of the museum label to be one of simplicity and clarity, mirroring the visual expectations of a visitor and the traditional setting of a museum—usually simple with the only ornamental objects being the art exhibited on the walls.

Color contrasts and variations in coloring and lettering style to attract and hold viewers' attention was additional advice from the previous interviews that was taken into consideration. I used a tan color in some of the content to instill that contrast, as well as altered the lettering style by having Sargent's name be bolded compared to the other written content. I decided to promote contrast between the top third of the label showcasing the basic information of the artwork, and the bottom two-thirds of the label providing narrative explanation.

Application of technical communication principles

As for written content, technical communication—and communicating through a museum label—is most successful when the information communicated is clear, concise, and of interest to the user. Technical communicators create content for various fields and multiple audiences—something that requires both creativity and flexibility. Technical writing can be both informative and expressive, and technical writers must be creative in determining at what spectrum they can operate when working. For the written content on the museum label, I combined the informative details of the artwork along with interesting narrative regarding the backstory of the painting. I presented the facts clearly and also left space for intrigue and interest. In creating the museum label, I knew the caption had to be accessible to as many museum visitors as possible, without visitors feeling as if the language was oversimplified.

I also gained knowledge from the previous interviews as to what not to include on museum labels such as complex terminology, lengthy paragraphs with no breaks, jargon used without explanation, and language choice that underestimates the audience. As stated above, I chose to refrain from using vocabulary

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that would only be familiar to an art scholar or curator. I also separated the caption paragraphs into two sections, the first section discussing what was happening in the painting and the second section giving more context to the artist.

When creating the museum label, the context I included shared who was in the painting as well as their connection to the artist, John Singer Sargent. Additional context was added, stating that the painting was completed the same year as Sargent closed his studio, which resulted in a different style of painting both in action and result. To provide contextual significance as previous recommended by The Museum and Galleries of NSW (n.d.), I chose to speak about the rain interrupting the painting, Jane's art experience, and how Jane and her husband Wilfrid related to Sargent. Including the sentence, "The same year this painting was completed, Sargent closed his studio," contributed to information regarding the storyline of the painting and the artist. This timeframe, highlighting when the painting was completed, enhances context by placing the painting on a timeline for visitors—either the timeline of Sargent's complete works, the timeline of art movements in relation to the painting, or the timeline of art in general. To identify the work correctly, I included the artist's name and where he was from, his birth and death date, the title of the painting, year the painting was completed, medium by which the painting was completed, and the museum and collection where the piece is currently on display. Taking into consideration accessible language, I ensured the written content did not include any complex art jargon or idioms. Although the French phrase, *en plein air* is used, I also added that it translates to *outdoors*. The choice of including the French phrase is due to Sargent's active presence in the French Impressionist art movement.

Presenting knowledge in narrative form is another form of technical communication, a very intentional one. Content written narratively is "read faster...processed more effectively...and remembered better" (Barton & Barton, 1988, p. 43). The way humans learn and communicate is through storytelling. When writing the caption paragraphs, I felt that it was important to write in a way that told a story to the visitor, rather than feeling like it was a book report or just a list of facts. Narrative leaves room for

interpretation by the visitor, rather than telling them how to feel or what to see or notice about the artwork; it also aids in allowing for interesting details about the painting to be shared easily. Instead of explaining to the museum visitor what they are seeing in the painting, I felt that it was important to give them narrative and context as to what was going on in the piece and allowing them to freely come to those conclusions on their own. Museum visitors are also more apt to remember what they read when content is presented in a narrative form, which can encourage discussion between other museum goers, or just additional inward wondering or thinking.

Other recommendations I gleaned from the previous interviews with museum professionals involved encouraging individual interpretation in written content and inviting the visitor to explore the work on a deeper level. This occurred in the label via the line “This particular painting took Sargent several days to complete due to drenching rains—perhaps Jane is painting a portrait herself [...]” This sentence causes the reader to inquire what Jane could be painting, as depicted in the artwork.

Part 2: Interviews with museum professionals

To gather feedback on the label I created, I interviewed museum professionals in order to determine their thoughts on the technical communication focused content and design choices

Participants

Museum professionals of varying backgrounds consented to participate in the study. To determine potential interviewees, I facilitated the use of my relationships in the art community of Springfield, Missouri, and beyond. I reached out to individuals who I knew were professionally and passionately active in the art community, with specific regards to museum studies.

Each participant was sent eight interview questions formatted in Google Forms relating to their thoughts on the museum label I wrote and designed for the painting, *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy* (1907) by John Singer Sargent. The three participants involved in this study included a curatorial/sales intern and gallery assistant, a museum gallery guide, and a professor of museum studies who also manages

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three art galleries. The participants—whose names have been changed—and their credentials are as follows:

Jane

For the past decade, Jane has served as an architectural and gallery guide at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, located in Bentonville, AR. Currently, she is unable to work as a museum guide due to COVID-19 restrictions, but maintains her position and continues to participate in video training conferences held by Crystal Bridges.

Sarah

Sarah currently serves as the director of art and design exhibitions at a Missouri university. She curates, designs, markets, and interprets three separate exhibition locations. Sarah received an MA in museum studies from the University of Oklahoma and worked as a gallery assistant/communications coordinator and interim gallery director in Indiana prior to her current position. Sarah also teaches collegiate courses in museum studies.

Paul

Not only has Paul has served as the curatorial intern at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, but also as the art fair coordinator at the Gasconian Gallery and as a sales intern and gallery assistant at the David Zwirner Gallery—both located in New York City. Previously, Paul received an MFA in art history from the University of Arkansas.

Table 1 Museum experience of participants

Participant	Art museum or gallery	Location	Area of concentration	Position
Jane	Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art	Bentonville, AR	American art	Architectural & gallery guide
Sarah	Brick City Gallery	Springfield, MO	Contemporary art, community engagement	Director of exhibitions
	Student Exhibition Center	Springfield, MO	Student work	Director of exhibitions
Paul	Virginia Museum of Fine Arts	Richmond, VA	Fine art	Curatorial intern
	Gasgonian Gallery	New York, NY	Contemporary art	Intern & art fair coordinator
	David Zwimer Gallery	New York, NY	American contemporary art	Sales intern & gallery assistant

Data Collection

To begin this study, I first received approval from the Missouri State Institutional Review Board (IRB) confirming that my proposed research methods were ethical. Beginning the data collection, an introductory email was sent to the participants presenting the study and what it would entail. After a participant confirmed they were interested, I would email them a consent form. After receiving and documenting their consent forms, I emailed the Google Form link containing the interview questions to the participants. A photo of the painting and the corresponding museum label I created were sent as attachments along with the Google Form link. The email also included information noting that the painting, *The Fountain, Villa Torlonia, Frascati, Italy* (1907) by John Singer Sargent, is public domain according to the Creative Commons legal code (CC0 1.0 Universal) and the Terms and Conditions of the AIC. Unfortunately, the museum label could not be presented as it would traditionally appear in a museum due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The data was collected via interview with the participants. The interview was emailed as a Google Form, and all the data gathered was qualitative. Email was used as the main form of communication due to the inability to meet face-to-face because of COVID-19 safety precautions. The interviews provided a

humanistic outlook to understanding the impact technical communication principles had on the success of a museum label from the perspective of museum professionals, as well as how it could perform in a setting where the label is observed by the average museum visitor.

The questions presented in the interview focused on a few topics. Some questions focused on written content such as length of content, adding or subtracting content, and interest level of content. Other questions involved accessibility of the content as well as attitudes toward the entire label in general, specifically in regard to the average museum visitor. Additional questions delved into the design/formatting choices used on the museum label. Most of the questions related to elements that contributed to the success of the museum label as well as the level of cohesiveness between the museum label and the corresponding painting.

Responses from museum professionals

Q1: What makes this label successful?

Jane: “Concise and yet informative describing the subjects and their relationship to the artist, the significance of the work and its place in the artist’s career in subject and technique. Expressing conjecture/asking question[s] regarding as to what Jane may be painting, pulls the viewer into looking more deeply at the work of art. Reference to Jane, her sisters and mother as artists give recognition of women artists historically. Increases engagement and understanding of the work and the artist.”

Sarah: “The typeface and size are legible, the ID information is clearly displayed and organized, the content of the paragraphs is interesting and informative but also not filled with unapproachable art jargon. The label, as whole, is balanced and sectioned off in a visually appealing and informative manner.”

Paul: “This label does a great job with the historical analysis of the painting (history of the subject, artwork situated in the artist’s oeuvre)”

Q2: Is there anything that makes this label unsuccessful?

Jane: “Not in my opinion.”

Sarah: “No, in general, this is a very successful label that is visually and intellectually approachable while still sparking the interest of a viewer with more than average knowledge about art and Sargent.”

Paul: “In my opinion, the label is rather unsuccessful in its contextual analysis. As a viewer, I like to know ‘what about the year 1907 encouraged the artist to reconsider his relationship with wealthy patrons?’ etc.”

Q3: Is there any content you would add to this label, or remove?

Jane: "No."

Sarah: "I wouldn't mind a note about when this specific painting fell within Sargent's larger artistic career. The second paragraph is wonderfully approachable in describing how Sargent transitioned his artistic practice later in his career, it might be intellectually stimulating to orient this information in terms of when it fell in relation to one of his famous works, such as Madame X."

Paul: "I would significantly shorten the profile of Jane, understanding that her role as a woman artist was being highlighted but rather reductively as something 'notable' (there were many women artists at the time, but few who have been properly remembered, this label creates a bit of false equivalency here). Rather, if I were the curator I would focus on the significance of this work as a signifier of the end of the Gilded Age, the era which Sargent is more closely affiliated."

Q4: How do you feel about the design/formatting choices?

Jane: "The design and format chosen are very readable, easily discernable regarding the information presented. I like the bold letters used for the title since it helps the viewer relate to and understand the painting."

Sarah: "The design/format is clean and easy to visually and intellectually digest. As a viewer, I can easily choose how much or how little of the label I want to read without becoming distracted by the other sections."

Paul: "I think the label is fine, I prefer a more simple format with viewer variations in font/size/color."

Q5: How do you think the average visitor would feel about the label? In regard to both content and design/formatting?

Jane: "In reference to the format and design of the label and the content within the label, I think the viewer will have a more meaningful experience in viewing this work and will appreciate the label as an important contributing factor in this."

Sarah: "I believe the average visitor would find this label approachable and appropriately informative. There is no overt art jargon, or when there is it is politely defined leading itself to a nice learning moment for the viewer. The formatting of the label allows the viewer to choose what information, if any, they would like to consume. The paragraphs are accessible yet intellectually stimulating with gentle prompts for further thought, should the viewer want to continue contemplate[ing] what is happening in the painting."

Paul: "I think the viewer would probably resonate quite well with a general audience. It would teach them something about the painting they are looking at."

Q6: Is the content accessible to the average visitor?

Jane: "Yes, as presented for English speaking visitors. Is content for non-English speaking guests be considered in some format."

Sarah: "Overall, yes. The title of the painting is slightly disarming only because I can't

- immediately orient Villa Torlonia or Frascati, however, knowing that these locations are in Italy does quell some of that disorientation. The content of the paragraph is a delightful and informative read leading me to further consider this couple, Sargent and how their lives intersected artistically.”
- Paul: “I think the content is certainly accessible. I think it lacks in that it doesn’t push the audience to make a connection. The content they read is, really, only applicable to the specific work.”
- Q7: Do you consider the two caption paragraphs to be interesting?**
- Jane: “Yes. It helps the viewer to delineate the information and not be overwhelmed by one longer paragraph. The viewer is more likely to read the content when divided as in the design presented.”
- Sarah: “Yes, the information about Jane, her husband, and their connection to Sargent is interesting. The speculation about what Jane might be painting is also a nice note to provoke further thought about what might have been going on while Sargent painted this scene. The information about Sargent and his abandonment of working on portraits of wealthy aristocrats in favor of his close friends and family is a nice juxtaposition with the painterly composition of the work.”
- Paul: “I think the first paragraph is quite pedantic and not at all engaging the audience with the work in context. It reads more like a fun anecdote that might resonate when mentioned by a tour guide than like a label encouraging the audience to engage deeply with the works they are viewing.”
- Q8: Does the overall appearance of this label pair nicely with the artwork?**
- Jane: “Yes it does.”
- Sarah: “Yes, the typeface is in no way distracting or competing with the artwork. The variation of color in three minimal sections visually divides the labels nicely while also balancing with the tones of the artwork. As a whole, the label feels balanced and approachable.”
- Paul: “I think in overall appearance, yes. I think the label is an appropriate length, although I might use the space differently.”

Coding Process

To begin the coding process, I first divided the interview responses, grouping similar and different responses together and grouping the remaining responses as well. Not all remaining responses disagreed with the majority; rather, they provided responses unique to the participant that were separate from the majority. The following organization was completed for both similar and dissimilar responses. The similar and dissimilar responses were then separated into four categories:

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1. Thoughts on the label as a whole; what was successful/unsuccessful?
2. Content; what should be added/removed; was it interesting?
3. Design/formatting; general thoughts; appearance of label in conjunction with artwork?
4. Audience; average visitor's feelings on content design/formatting; is it accessible?

Depending on the information within the four categories, the categorical responses would be organized further into subcategories as needed to aid with coding; these subcategories usually existed as similar-dissimilar-other and/or positive-negative-other. The interview responses within the similar category showcased trends—resulting when all participants provided comparable responses or a majority (two of the three participants) provided comparable responses. The responses within the dissimilar category showcased responses unique to a single participant and/or a response that did not directly align with said trends.

Analysis of consistent themes

It became clear that participants' interview responses agreed on certain elements of content, how accessible the museum label would be to visitors, as well as elements of design and formatting. All participants answered that the historical information included on the museum label was successful in regard to content. All participants answered that the label would be accessible to the average visitor, and that the label would resonate well because it was approachable yet informative. Finally, all participants agreed that the appearance of the label paired nicely with the artwork, and that it satisfied its job as a label—especially in regard to design/formatting. There were also quite a few instances where two of the three participants agreed on certain elements in their interview responses involving content, content recommendations, accessibility, and overall success of the label. Two of the three participants agreed on these four elements:

1. The content on the label (two paragraph caption) was interesting.
2. They wanted more details regarding where the painting existed on the timeline of the Sargent's career.
3. The label was very easy to read and was organized in a way that prevented distractions or confusion—specifically in regard to design/formatting.

4. Nothing made the label unsuccessful with reason being that it was visually and intellectually approachable.

The overarching themes of the interview responses determined that in this study, the museum label designed in accordance with technical communication principles would be accessible to the average museum visitor and paired nicely with the artwork it was explaining due to its design/formatting and proper presentation of historical information.

Results

Upon review of the interview responses, there were four main categories of feedback, focusing on the label as a whole, the written content on the label, the design/formatting of the label, and the predicted audience (average museum visitor) response.

Entire label

All participants felt that content within the descriptive paragraphs properly shared the historical information of the painting. Two of the three participants felt that the content was interesting as well as informative. Other elements contributing to the success of the label, yet not cited by each participant stated that the label was concise, approachable, considerate in regard to word choice and jargon, legible in typeface and size, organized properly, and visually appealing. Two of the three participants felt that there was nothing that made the label unsuccessful, with reason being that it was visually and intellectually approachable, not only to the average viewer, but also to a viewer with higher-than-average knowledge about art and the artist. One participant felt that the label was unsuccessful in its contextual analysis and wanted to know more about the significance of 1907, as to why the artist changed their primary subjects.

Content

Two of the three participants desired for more information regarding where this specific painting existed on the timeline of the artist's career. One participant felt that the label was satisfactory and did not need

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anything added or removed. Another participant felt that the details about Jane were presented incorrectly and wanted Jane's profile to be shortened. Two of the three participants considered the two caption paragraphs to be interesting. One participant felt that the first paragraph was dull and would not engage the audience. That same participant felt that the second paragraph read as a "fun anecdote" rather than a "label encouraging the audience to engage deeply with the work." One participant felt that the paragraphs helped the viewer understand the information. The same participant felt that it was a good choice to present the information in two paragraphs rather than one long one because "the viewer [would be] more likely to read the content when divided." One participant felt that the information about Jane, her husband, and their connections to the artist were interesting and liked the speculation as to what Jane was painting. The same participant felt that the information about Sargent shifting artistic interests was a "nice juxtaposition with the painterly composition of the work."

Design/formatting

All participants felt it satisfied its job as a label. Two of the three participants felt that the label was very easy to read and organized in a way that prevented distraction or confusion. One participant preferred a simpler format for museum labels. All participants agreed that the overall appearance of the label paired nicely with the artwork. One participant said that they might have used the space differently. Another participant cited that the typeface was not distracting and felt that the variation of colors did a good job at organizing the label while also balancing the tones of the artwork. One participant also felt that the label was appropriate in length.

Audience

All participants felt that the label would resonate well with the average visitor because it was approachable, informative, and accessible. All participants felt that the content would be accessible to the average visitor. One participant questioned whether there would be additional content for non-English speaking guests; this question will be discussed further in Limitations. One participant felt that the content did not push the

audience enough to make a connection and believed that the content was only applicable to this specific work. One participant felt that the title of the painting was a bit confusing because the average visitor is probably not familiar with those locations. One participant felt that the museum label would be stimulating to the average visitor and would promote further thought and conversation due to the prompt regarding what Jane could have been painting.

Discussion

Within the interviews, four main types of data were found in relation to instilling technical communication principles into the writing and designing of a museum label including reactions to the museum label as a whole, level of accessibility to museum visitors, reactions to content, and reactions to design/formatting—themes emerged within these types. An initial takeaway from the data is that the museum label I created by focusing on technical communication principles satisfied its job as a label. Themes arising from the level of accessibility of the museum label to visitors include that the label would be rather accessible to the average visitor due to its approachable and informative content. Themes also arose when considering the content, format, and design of the museum label; these can be described as a positive response regarding the historical content that was shared in a narrative form and the attractive pairing between the label and the artwork it was defining.

Museum label as a whole

All participants agreed that the museum label I created satisfied its job as a label, specifically in regard to its design/formatting. A majority of the participants also agreed that there was nothing about the museum label that made it unsuccessful—the reason being that it was visually and intellectually approachable.

Accessibility to visitors

All participants agreed that the label would be accessible to the average museum visitor because it was approachable and informative. They all agreed that the success in accessibility was a result of the choice in language of the written content.

Content

A consistent theme throughout the interview responses stated that the historical information of the museum label was shared in an effective way, consequently due to its narrative format. A majority of the participants agreed that the content on the label—specifically the two paragraph captions—were interesting. A recommendation of explaining where the painting existed on the timeline of Sargent’s career was advised by a majority of participants as well.

Design/formatting

The data showed that all participants were pleased with the overall appearance of the museum label in how it paired with the painting it described. A majority of participants felt that the label was very easy to read and was organized in a way that prevented distractions or confusion due to its design/formatting.

Differences to note

Although much of the data aligned, some interview questions were not answered unanimously. Some of the responses that differed disagreed with other responses, while other responses just presented additional concepts.

Other elements contributing to the success of the label, yet not cited by every participant, stated that the label was concise, considerate in regard to word choice, legible in typeface and size, and refrained from using complex art jargon. One participant felt that the label was unsuccessful in its contextual analysis and wanted to know more about the significance of the year 1907 as to why Sargent changed his primary subjects.

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As for adding and removing content, one participant felt that the label was satisfactory and did not need anything to be added or removed, while a different participant felt that the details about Jane were presented incorrectly and wanted Jane's profile to be shortened. In regard to the interest of the content, one participant felt that the first paragraph was dull and would not engage the audience. That same participant felt that the second paragraph read as a "fun anecdote" rather than a "label encouraging the audience to engage deeply with the work." Another participant felt that the two caption paragraphs helped the viewer understand the information, and that it was a good choice to present the information in two paragraphs rather than one because "the viewer [would be] more likely to read the content when divided." Another participant felt the information about Jane, her husband, and their connections to Sargent were interesting and appreciated the speculation as to what Jane was painting. That same participant felt that the information about Sargent shifting artistic interests was a "nice juxtaposition with the painterly composition of the work."

Shifting focus to the design/formatting of the museum label, one participant preferred a simpler format. Another participant commented that the typeface was not distracting and felt that the variation of colors used did a good job at organizing the label while also balancing the tones of the artwork. Another participant felt that the label was appropriate in length.

As for the accessibility of the museum label, one participant felt that the content did not push the audience enough to make a connection and believed that the content was only applicable to this specific work, while a different participant felt that the museum label would be stimulating to the average visitor and would promote further thought and conversation due to the prompt querying what Jane could have been painting. One participant questioned whether there would be additional content for non-English speaking guests; which will be discussed in Limitations.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study is that I received the data from a very small pool of museum professionals. Although they had experiences in multiple states and in various museums and galleries with varying specificities, in no way do they represent the consensus of museum professionals as a whole, or the average museum visitor. The results are limited by the experiences of my participants, as well as limited by the museums and galleries they come from. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, museums currently operate differently. The lack of physical museum access and the new influx of online exhibits have influence upon the limitations as well. The visual accessibility of the museum label I created was not possible in its full form due to the COVID-19 restrictions on in-person viewing; therefore, the size of the label could not be fully viewed and tested. So, accurate legibility and readability was difficult to determine. Another very significant limitation is the lack of translation for non-English speakers or for museum visitors who read braille, etc. Many visitors from different walks of life visit museums, bringing with them varying levels of knowledge, varying reading levels, and varying accessibility requirements. The fact that these concerns were not present throughout all data in regard to language presentation limits the study to relate only to English speakers and to those with the ability to read at the level presented upon the museum label.

Conclusion

This study highlights how museum professionals view a museum label created in accordance with technical communication principles. From their insight regarding the accessibility, content, format/design, and overall success of the museum label, it is possible to predict how to craft an effective museum label when making content and design choices considering technical communication elements. Overall there was a positive response to the museum label I created, especially surrounding the historical content included, the accessibility-focused language choices, and the cohesiveness between the painting and the label. Because each decision when creating the museum label was made through the lens of technical communication, it

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could be assumed that technical communication principles contribute to a more successful and effective museum label in the eyes of the museum professionals consulted.

Museums and the curators who traditionally write museum labels should be aware of the implications that can result from content and design/formatting choices concerning labels. By being aware of the influence technical communication principles may have on the viewing of a museum label, new labels can be made and/or editing can be done on older labels taking the principles into consideration—in both cases, with positive results. A museum label intentionally designed with the museum visitor in mind and with the help of technical communication principles encourages visitors to further their knowledge and foster their curiosity when viewing artwork.

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