

BULLETIN

Issue 9

AN INFORMATION SOURCE FOR ALASKA'S MUSEUM COMMUNITY

Summer 1999

Twelve Alaska museums recently received grant awards through the Alaska State Museum's Grant-in-Aid program. Also receiving a grant was Museums Alaska, the statewide professional museum association. Thirty-four organizations applied for grants, for projects totaling \$239,061, almost three times the available funds. Most of the awards this year went to projects that would directly upgrade collection care and management.

Following is a list of grants awarded:

GRANT- IN-AID AWARDS

Alutiq Museum and Archaeological Repository	Kodiak	Develop and expand web site	\$1,912.
Anchorage Museum of History & Art	Anchorage	Purchase low-temperature chest freezer	\$5,607.
Baranov Museum	Kodiak	Purchase new storage cabinets for collection	\$5,000.
Carrie McLain Memorial Museum	Nome	Photographic preservation project	\$9,808.
Clausen Memorial Museum	Petersburg	Inventory and update collection records	\$6,273.
Kenai Bicentennial Visitors Center	Kenai	Purchase and install track lighting	\$5,708.
Museum of the Aleutians	Unalaska	CAP Survey	\$2,000.
Museums Alaska	Anchorage	Statewide conference support and Board retreat	\$9,565.
Pratt Museum	Homer	Slide digitization and Argus upgrade	\$9,670.
Sheldon Museum	Haines	Purchase compact storage units	\$10,000.
Skagway Trail of 98 Museum	Skagway	Purchase of steel storage cabinets	\$2,500.
Museum of History of Orthodox Church in Alaska / St. Herman's Theological Seminary	Kodiak	Conservation assessment for textiles and icons	\$12,017.
St. Nicholas Orthodox Church	Juneau	Conservation assessment of icons and textiles	\$2,328.
TOTAL AWARDED			\$82,388.



Visitors view the exhibition *Agayuliyararput* this summer at the Alaska State Museum. The exhibit finishes a three-year national tour with a symposium in Juneau on September 25 that will bring together many of the show's organizers to discuss its impact.

Exhibit Label Basics, Part 3: Content

By
Kenneth DeRoux
Curator of
Museum Services

This is the third part of a 3-part series on making exhibit labels. Part 1 (Bulletin 5) discussed basic guidelines for label design, including kinds of labels, length, size, and placement. Part 2 (Bulletin 7/8) described techniques for making and mounting labels. Here I will discuss some basic considerations for label content.

Purpose

Labels provide a means for visitors to connect with objects in a museum. They may provide only the most basic identifying information for an object, or they may provide additional levels of interpretation, tying together numerous objects, facts and ideas into a thematic exhibition. (For a discussion of different types of labels, see Bulletin 5). In all cases, labels should be easily visible, readable and enhance the viewing experience. Effective labels go hand-in-hand with clearly conceived ideas about how exhibits are organized and presented. Ideally, they should be an integral part of your exhibit design, rather than added to an exhibit after the fact.

Keep it simple.

Most museum visitors spend relatively little time on any one exhibit. They tend to keep moving, stopping at what interests them. They will sometimes spend more actual time reading labels than looking at objects, since an object can be "seen" in a few seconds. Even so, the label should serve to reinforce the experience of the object.

A strong label will often begin with a concrete reference to the object(s) being discussed, such as "This wall clock stopped at the precise time of the Good Friday Earthquake of 1964." The basic units of information should answer the questions what?, where?, when?, who?, how? and why? Ask yourself "What questions will the visitor ask about this material?" and try to answer them. Keep the label directly related to what the viewer is seeing. Don't forget the why question. Why is this object in the museum? If there is some story connected to it, your visitors will love to hear it.

Reading labels should not be like reading an exhibit catalog. Remember that you are writing for people who are standing up and possibly bending forward. Resist the temptation to provide too much additional or extraneous information. Large blocks of text will turn many viewers away. The rule-of-thumb for comfortable label length is between 75 and 150 words. If the label must be longer, make sure it is broken into paragraphs or blocks of text no more than 100 words in length. Sub-headings above each paragraph will give viewers easier access to the material. (This paragraph is 95 words.)

Tips

Here are some frequently mentioned guidelines for writing effective labels:

- Use simple sentences. Keep them short but vary the length. Don't use sentences more than 25 words long.
- Avoid excessive use of commas.
- Explain unfamiliar words and concepts - you don't want to make your visitor feel uneducated.
- Write so that an eighth-grader can understand the vocabulary, but provide information that will keep an adult interested. Some word processing programs, such as Microsoft Word®, can check for readability as well as spelling, grammar and passive voice.
- Use active verbs. Avoid the passive voice, which is excessive use of the verb "to be", (is, are, was, were). In passive voice, the object acts upon the subject, such as "Gold dust was used by miners to pay debts," instead of "Miners paid debts with gold dust."
- Don't provide more than 6 or 7 key items of information per label.
- Relate dates or unfamiliar concepts or practices to things that the viewer is familiar with.
- Read the label out loud to insure that the words have an easy flow to them.
- Always proofread, then proofread again.

Advanced tips

- Use graphics, photographs, maps or other visuals where possible to involve the viewer more directly in making connections.

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The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is requesting \$12,650,000 in the new federal budget for a revamped National Leadership Grants program for Museums. The program will incorporate four funding categories, Museums Online, Museums Building Community, Professional Practices Awards and Museum/Library Collaborative grants.

- 1) Museums Online will support model projects that demonstrate the educational impact of connecting museums and their communities through technology.
- 2) Museums Building Community will focus on using museum resources to provide enriching after school programs for children. (This category will replace Museum Leadership Initiatives.)
- 3) Professional Practices Awards will focus on addressing many core issues such as strategic planning, professional training, and leadership development. The focus will be on developing programs and materials for small museums, the largest segment of museums in the country. (This category will replace the Professional Services Program.)
- 4) Museum/Library Collaborative grants will support innovative projects that demonstrate how museums and libraries can work together to expand their service to the public. **(See more about this below).**

For more information contact the IMLS at 206-606-8536, or go to its web site at: www.imls.fed.us

IMLS Study Says Library and Museum Partnerships are a Natural

A study by the Institute of Museum and Library Services has found an interesting paradox. Interviews showed that museums and libraries typically do not consider each other as partners, but when they do partner they report a very positive experience. Together they find they can:

- increase access to information in their communities
- enhance education
- attract new audiences
- expand the reach of their programs

Partners report that they have similar missions and audiences and once in a partnership both museum and library partners view their collaborations as a natural fit.

What would help more libraries and museums achieve these benefits? The majority of libraries indicate that the availability of outside funding is a key criterion when considering a new partnership; however, very few are aware of IMLS funding that supports library/museum partnerships.

In 1998, IMLS awarded the first grants for library/museum partnerships under its National Leadership Grants, a re-vamping of some of its earlier grant categories. IMLS performed this study to assess the program's potential and gather insights to help encourage library/museum partnerships. IMLS National Leadership Grant guidelines for FY 2000 will be available in mid-fall, the deadline for application is April 1, 2000.

Typical partnerships vary in scale. Large-scale projects include:

- Opening new exhibit spaces
- Cataloging and digitizing collections
- Creating joint databases
- Creating digitized exhibits and/or collections on the Internet
- Opening a Children's Discovery Center
- Offering computer training
- Developing traveling exhibits

Some small-scale projects include:

- Writing a short column for a museum newsletter
- Displaying artwork and creating exhibit-related bibliographies
- Distributing free museum admission passes

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR MUSEUMS

- Hosting lectures and workshops
- Developing children's summer reading programs

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is an independent Federal grantmaking agency serving the public by strengthening museums and libraries. For more information, including grant guidelines, contact Institute of Museum and Library Services, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20506, 202-606-8536, or www.ims.gov. Contact imlsinfo@imls.gov for the full report.

New Deadlines

MUSEUM ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Beginning this fall, the Museum Assessment Program (MAP), managed by the American Association of Museums with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, will have only two grant deadlines each year. These will be **November 1** and **March 15**. Applications for MAP I, MAP II and MAP III will be accepted on either date. For further information call the AAM at 202-289-9118, or Ken DeRoux at 1-888-913-6873.

WEB SITE DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

for Small Museums

The Center For Museum Studies at the Smithsonian is sponsoring a workshop on web site development for museums with budgets under \$250,000. The workshop is December 6-10 in Washington, DC. Deadline for applications is October 8. 15 participants will be selected from the applicants. There is no fee and funds are available for travel and lodging. Contact Center for Museum Studies, Arts & Industries Bldg. Suite 2235, 900 Jefferson Drive SW, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560-0427. Fax: 202-357-3346, or visit www.si.edu/cms/online.htm.

NAGPRA GRANT APPLICATIONS NOW AVAILABLE

The National Park Service provides grants to assist qualified museums, Indian tribes, Native Hawaiian organizations, and Alaska Native villages and corporations with implementation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NPS is currently mailing out grant applications to all museums, Indian tribes, Native Hawaiian organizations, and Alaska Native villages and corporations currently on our mailing list. Grant application and instructions are also available on-line at: www.cr.nps.gov/aad/nagpra.htm.

Grant applications **MUST** be postmarked by the following dates: **DECEMBER 3, 1999**—Grant applications from Indian tribes, Native Hawaiian organizations, and Alaska Native villages and corporations **DECEMBER 17, 1999**—Grant applications from museums, which includes any institution or state or local government agency (including any institution of higher learning) that has possession of, or control over, Native American human remains or cultural items.

IMPORTANT NOTE: NPS staff will gladly discuss project plans or review and comment on draft applications. This is highly recommended. Deadlines for submitting applications for pre-application review are **NOVEMBER 12, 1999** (tribes) and **DECEMBER 3, 1999** (museums).

QUESTIONS: Contact NAGPRA Consultant Laura Mahoney by phone at (202) 343-1095, by fax at (202) 343-5260, or by e-mail at Laura_Mahoney@nps.gov

- Direct the viewer's attention to specific aspects of the object.
- Occasionally, and where appropriate, ask the viewer open-ended questions about what he/she is seeing.
- Offer up puzzles that might be presented by the material.
- Don't edit out all emotion or controversy from your labels. However, when presenting controversial material, try to be unbiased.
- Strive to be aware of bias (cultural, political, etc.) within your own writing and correct for it if necessary.
- Develop a style manual for labels for your museum. This helps establish consistency in formatting as well as for grammar, punctuation, and usage.

Finally, don't sacrifice clarity for economy. Editing labels down to reduced lengths can sometimes produce unintended inferences. It is better to use a few extra words so that the information is clear.

For further information on writing and producing labels, see the following:

References:

Cohen, Diana F., *Words to Live By*, *Museum News*, May/June 1990.

Loomis, Ross J., *Some Suggestions for Increasing Visitor Use of Museum Labels*, Winedale Museum Seminar, Austin, Texas, 1980.

Neal, Armintha, *Exhibits for the Small Museum*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, Tennessee, 1976.

*Serrell, Beverly, *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, California, 1996.

Wilson, Don W. and Dennis Medina, *Exhibit Labels: a Consideration of Content*, Technical Leaflet No. 60, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, Tennessee, 1972.

Witteborg, Lothar P., *Good Show! A Practical Guide for Temporary Exhibitions*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1981, pp. 83-89.

**especially recommended*

Brook Bowman, Conservator at the Alaska State Museum for the past two and one-half years, has announced her resignation in order to attend to family business in Florida. Her resignation will be effective at the beginning of September. As the state's only full-time professional museum conservator, Brook has visited numerous Alaska museums to assist with collection conservation issues. Museums include Ketchikan, Wrangell, Haines, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kodiak, Sitka, Barrow, Valdez, Homer, Eagle River and Unalaska. Her absence will be widely felt. The State Museum will begin a search for a replacement. We'll miss you, Brook!

MUSEUM
CONSERVATOR
TO LEAVE.

Artists interested in a solo exhibition at the Alaska State Museum have until November 6 to apply. The program is open to all resident Alaska artists who have not had a solo exhibition at the Museum in the past five years. Application forms are available from Mark Daughette at (907) 465-4819, or by visiting the Museum web site.

SOLO
EXHIBITION
Applications

PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION VIDEOS

The Alaska State Museum has 19 videotapes on preventive conservation available for loan to Alaska museums, historical societies or related organizations. Users may request up to three tapes at one time. Loans are for one week and the user is responsible for return postage. The tapes are about ten to fifteen minutes each, and were collaboratively produced by the Centre de conservation du Québec, the Canadian Conservation Institute and the Université du Québec à Montréal.

To borrow any of these videotapes contact Ken DeRoux, Curator of Museum Services, toll-free at 1-888-913-6873.

The titles are:

1. Introduction to Preventive Conservation
2. Light and Lighting
3. Relative Humidity and Temperature
4. Pollutants
5. Integrated Pest Management
6. Packing and Transportation of Museum Objects
7. Storage
8. Protecting Objects on Exhibition
9. Disaster Contingency Planning
10. Closing a Seasonal Museum
11. The Condition Report
12. Handling Museum Objects
13. The Care of Paintings
14. The Care of Works on Paper
15. The Care of Sculptures
16. The Care of Metal Objects
17. The Care of Furniture
18. The Care of Textiles
19. The Care of Museum Objects

Bulletin on the Web

Selected articles from current and back issues of the *Bulletin* are available on our web site.

Point your browser to: www.eed.state.ak.us/lam/museum/bulletin.html

Alaska State Museums
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395 Whittier Street, Juneau AK 99801
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Fax (907) 465-2976

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104 College Drive, Sitka AK 99835
Phone (907) 747-8981
Fax (907) 747-3004

To contact Museum Services toll-free:
1-888-913-MUSE (6873)

Email ken_deroux@eed.state.ak.us

All staff have email—first name, underscore, last
name@eed.state.ak.us

On the World Wide Web:
[www.eed.state.ak.us/lam/museum/
home.html](http://www.eed.state.ak.us/lam/museum/home.html)

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Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums
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