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Writing Samples

Inclusive Interpretation Tips

By Seema Rao

How can you expand and diversify museum visitors? Consider what you are offering. Are you inviting them to find something relevant to what you are offering? Are you offering something that feels relevant? The former question characterizes a museum-centered approach. Visitor-centered interpretation, on the other hand, is about developing ideas that feel relevant to diverse audiences.

Diversity and multiplicity should be inherent in how we approach our collections. We need to bring to the surface the plural histories that live within our collections. Each object has a long history with layers of stories, like an onion that we need to help people peel away.

This requires some major shifts in the way we think about objects. Often, curatorial practices preference singular narratives focused on exceptionalism. Flattened interpretation not only excludes visitors but also lets our collections down.

We need to create interpretation that is purposefully focused on inclusion. In doing so, we honor the whole history of our collections, at the same time becoming infinitely more relevant and accessible to our audiences. This pamphlet outlines a concrete method to develop diverse interpretation.

What Do Visitors Want?

In his oft-cited study, John Falk noted that there are five main visitor habits: explorers, facilitators, professional/hobbyist, experience seekers, and rechargers. This seminal work helps museum professionals think systematically about visitors. When considered in the interpretation context, Falk's work highlights the fact that visitors have different goals for accessing interpretation.¹

While visitors attend museums for a variety of reasons, they all access interpretation to meet specific needs. Scanning a label might seem a luxury to someone visiting a museum with a swarm of impatient teens in tow. A tour about a favorite topic might be ideal for a family. In each of the above scenarios, a person is using museum-produced content to meet a specific goal.

At the same time, these visitors are even more savvy and efficient information consumers. Today's visitors live in a content-rich milieu. When our visitors walk into their museums, they will have already consumed a great deal of information quickly. The average American receives information at an average rate of twenty-three words per second. Over the course of a day, people read an average 105,000 words.

Text inundates people daily. Rather than being overwhelmed, many people will access and respond to textual prompts. People are reading more words, even as they are reading fewer books. Longform literary texts might have smaller audiences, but short bites are on the rise.²

Social media has a high diffusion in society. Nearly three-quarters of adult American Internet users employ Facebook and/or Instagram. They are scrolling through text (or text with images) constantly. For example, on another social site, Twitter, users share 18 billion words daily.³

Rather than being on the decline, literacy is shifting. The knowledge rich environment has made visitors savvy at finding information. Social media tools have transformed knowledge-seeking. Knowledge is created faster than ever. People are making assessments in record time.⁴

Culturally, knowledge creation has grown exponentially with a high level of findability. Concomitantly, knowledge seeking has changed. The Internet allows people to find very specific information, as well as specialized knowledge communities. The cultural expectation has shifted from generalized information for all, toward focused information for smaller factions. Visitors not only know what they want from information but also want to access that information efficiently.

The cultural changes in knowledge acquisition have important ramifications for museum interpretation. Museums need to be strategic about ideas and knowledge dissemination. Visitors have myriad options for

knowledge, including their ever-present smartphones. There, it is imperative to spend time producing an interpretation that meets the expectations of the knowledge-savvy audience.

Why Think Holistically about Interpretation?

Always keep in mind that visitor habits differ considerably. These visitors have great expectations about knowledge availability. A holistic look at interpretation, therefore, allows institutions to meet visitors' multiple needs best.

Holistic interpretation is a term that denotes a process to develop information about collections based on an overall plan. This type of process requires developing a flexible yet stable strategic framework. This structure, however, will be unstable if inclusiveness is not thoughtfully considered at the beginning.

Inclusion is the purposeful practice of making everyone feel welcome. Inclusive interpretation, first and foremost, does not use language that turns certain visitors off. Inclusion occurs through considered actions. Language transmits not just the literal meaning but also social norms.

Organizations might be employing exclusionary language inadvertently. Overly academic language turns off those with basic reading skills. Exclusionary content often makes assumptions about the audience. For example, the phrase "When a woman marries a man" assumes the readers are heterosexual.

Inclusive language requires excavating and interrogating cultural issues around terminology. Planning helps prevent museums from making exclusionary interpretive mistakes. Furthermore, a holistic, inclusive interpretation strategy allows museums to connect to a diverse group of people in visitor-centered ways.

Teamwork

Ideally, this is a practice taken up by a team. Each team member will notice different lost elements. The ideal team includes people who connect to the collection through their work but in varied ways, such as collections management, education, and curatorial. You want to combine people invested in the collection in complementary ways.

Cross-disciplinary teams can harness disparate skills and training for a goal. Consider pulling staff at different hierarchical levels as well. Junior staff offer new perspectives; similarly, senior staff often help ground conversations. Be thoughtful to include staff who work directly with visitors. These staff will help ensure the process remains focused on the goal of improving visitor experience.

Before focusing on interpretation, it is useful to share some productive teamwork skills. First and fore-



Percussive Arts Society

Students use the didactics to help them use instruments in the exhibition *Evolving Sounds: Percussion Past and Present*. The interpretation was planned specifically to encourage kinesthetic interactions, an important means of fostering inclusion.

most, know that everyone communicates differently. Consider balancing communication methods. Allow for moments of oral communication. Some people need to hear ideas to spur new ones. However, discussion-based problem solving often excludes introverted individuals. Use post-it notes as a means of soliciting responses, which is a very democratic process.⁵

Finally, set aside hierarchy during your interpretation meetings. It harms a staff's work ethos when people feel inferior. Start each meeting by overtly stating that everyone in the meeting is equal in this project. In other words, inclusive interpretation grows from inclusive work practices.

Developing the Ideal Strategy

A suspension bridge serves as a useful metaphor. The towers and piers, while stable, are constructed with inherent flexibility to bend rather than crack in strong storms. An ideal interpretation strategy develops this elasticity by planning for extremes yet elevating the average. Careful planning can make this type of interpretation strategy an attainable reality.

The ideal suspension bridge has nearly as much

structure below the span as above, with monumental piers reaching far into the earth. Similarly, the ideal interpretive strategy needs to start with a solid foundation. While each institution will have differences, the approach to developing this foundation is fairly similar.

Begin by considering the collection as a whole. Museum collections are usually split into categories. Many institutions have different curators for each collecting category. Visitors are often ignorant of such divisions. Developing overarching interpretation goals for collections is therefore an important step in meeting the visitor's needs.

This process requires getting to the essence of the collection and the collecting culture. While there might be nuance and intricacies in each of the collecting areas, there are also elements that draw those collecting areas together. What ideas overarch the institutions' collection? Think of these questions:

- How does this collection express the mission?
- What are the three most important issues about the collection?
- Where are the boundaries with your collection? What is verboten? What things must not be discussed with the public? What are the prickly issues? These answers are foundational.

deally, consider inviting the team to ponder these questions individually.

Afterwards, bring their answers together to see where similarities lie. Work together to draw one single set of answers to these questions for the whole collection.

Next, think about your visitors. As discussed above, remember that visitors are a complex group of people with varied reasons for accessing content. That said, keeping their “end-use” in mind will ensure their needs are met.

Unlike the collection questions, these visitor questions are best tackled as a team. Most museums silo interacting with visitors into certain departmental purviews. Many people invested in collections and interpretation do not have firsthand knowledge of visitors. Therefore, a team-based approach allows the individuals with the first-hand experience to fuel this process.

Designers often use data to develop generalized user personas. Personas are often started by extrapolating ideas from data, which is an ideal place to start. However, even without formal data, professional knowledge can help develop useful sketches of your visitors. Avoid using actual visitors you know for this process, as preconceived ideas can be detrimental to broad thinking.

There are many ways to develop personas, but here is a simple process to create effective sketches. First, what are the three most common age demographics of visitors? For each demographic, consider the behaviors and attitudes within it. Imagine two people in that demographic who demonstrate disparate behaviors and attitudes. Using two different visitors from each demographic is important, as it allows for complexity in your ideas. As an example, rather than simplifying all seniors as representative of a single retiree with mobility challenges, you might choose an active, working senior and a retired senior in a wheelchair. Complete this process for each of your three key demographics.

Now for your six idealized visitors develop the answers to these prompts about their visit:

- Did they come alone?
- How long did they stay?
- How often do they visit?
- Why did they come?
- What interpretation did they use?
- How much interpretation did they use?

Turn your notes into short descriptions of each of these six visitors. For example, Jane is a senior who still works part-time. She comes to the museum monthly. She rarely reads labels, as she knows most of her favorite objects. However, if she has paid for an exhibition, she reads all the labels.

Now write a goal for each of these visitors. Consider what these idealized visitors want from interpretation. For example, Jane’s goal is to have answers available if she chooses to use them.

With these elements, you have developed the baseline for an inclusive interpretation strategy. You have created guiding ideas about interpretation for the whole collection. You have centered the visitor in your process by developing personas, idealized visitors for whom all the interpretation is created. The interpretation bridge now has a foundation and scaffolding.

Constructing the Bridges from Your Institution to All Visitors

A bridge cannot function without the deck, or road, and the suspension cables. In interpretation, communicating about objects is the conduit by which visitors understand the collection. Inclusive planning develops powerful interpretation. This creates pathways that connect the breadth of your visitors to your collections. In our metaphor, interpretation is like the road, but inclusive planning is like the suspension cables. A bridge can still hold up if a cable snaps, but it is not as sound. Likewise, the interpretation is not as sound as it can be without inclusive planning.

Practically, the process requires finding holes in the stories told by the museum on both the object level and the exhibition/gallery level.

Thinking about Objects Inclusively

Each object is a locus of fractal layers of ideas. (Figure 1) There are so many elements that come together. Step through all those hidden layers from the object’s beginning to now. One could start with the tangible, like its surface texture, but one must also consider the layers that are intangible. Many of these layers might have changed over time, so they are not obvious to visitors. Some of these elements might also be invisible now, such as context. Thoughtful explication of the layers of meaning can transform collections from inert things to relevant objects.

Understanding which layers work best for visitors takes effort. An effective process begins with consideration of a sample set of objects. Here is a simple way to perform an Object Study:

- Begin with a set of three-to-six objects from your collection that are broadly representative of the collection.
- Set aside about one hour per object.
- Spend time with images of the object and the current label.

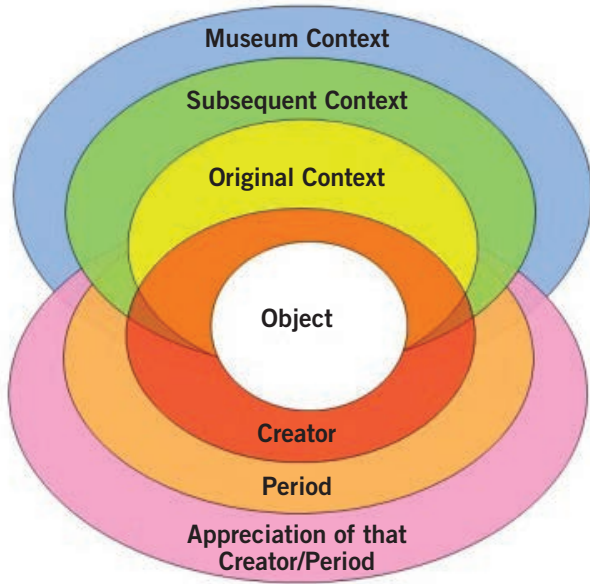


Figure 1

- Use the above diagram (Figure 1) to assess the current state of the interpretation. What layers are you surfacing for your visitors?
- Look for exclusionary language, as discussed above. Does this label make assumptions about the reader?
- Work to find the holes in your interpretation. (Figure 2 offers some suggestions to help jumpstart your thinking.) Consider what the implications are for the layers you are surfacing. For example, you might choose to focus on the male collector of an object, but not the female creator. Inadvertently, you have hidden a layer that might be a point of relevance to many visitors.

- While you can brainstorm aloud, this is a process that benefits from using post-it notes. Each team member writes one missing point of interpretation per post-it note, working individually for about fifteen minutes.
- Place all the notes together on a board or table where the whole team can view the collective notes.
- The group then works together to find hotspots in the team's ideas, the places where ideas connect.
- Once completed, the team discusses the ideas and continues to expand the ideas until time is up. At the end of the meeting, fill out a summary of the object (Figure. 3) Repeat this process for the chosen set of objects.

Once the team completes the set of objects, look at the results across your subset by comparing your summary documents. Are there broad categories of ideas that are missing? For example, is there more focus on provenance than context? Are scientific terms used without definitions? Are there words that might feel exclusionary to the audience?

Inclusive Interpretation Broadly

The object study helps foster an understanding of this problem on a granular level. It's best to tackle this challenge by focusing on both the details, as in the previous section, and the big picture.

To think broadly, pick one or two galleries for this study. Choose spaces that represent the span of the institution. You might also choose at least one space unpopular with visitors.

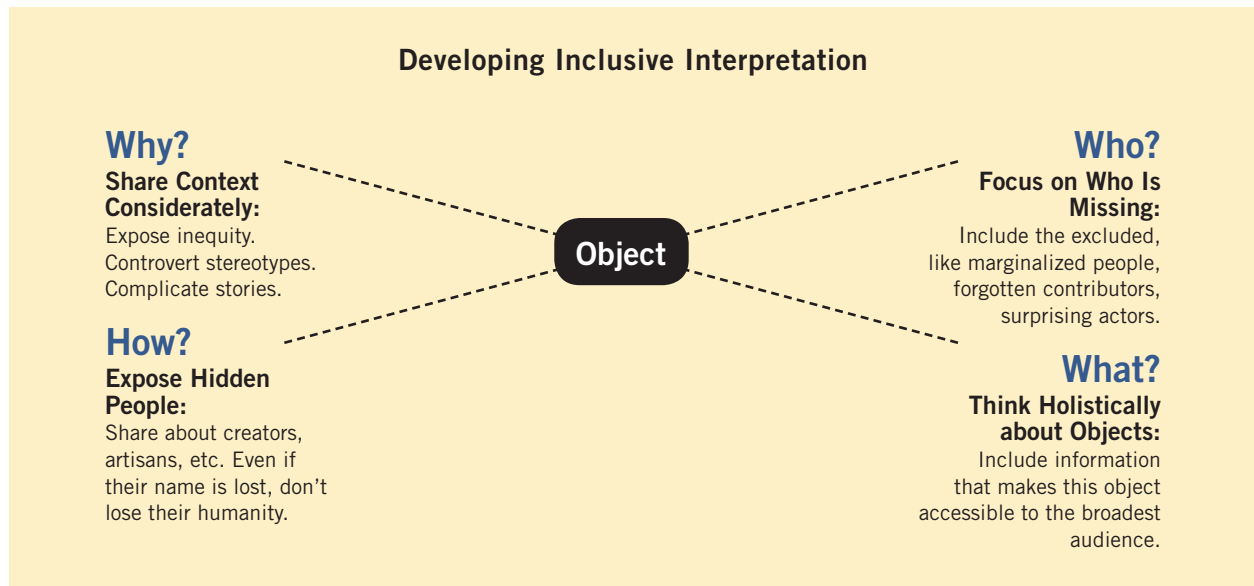


Figure 2



Percussive Arts Society

Students attend the exhibition *Evolving Sounds: Percussion Past and Present*.

Invite each of your team members to spend time in this space alone. Visitor observation can be a useful tool, but observing visitors unobtrusively is a learned skill. For this reason, visitor observation is not a necessary element in this study.

Next, spend time in the galleries with the team. Choose a time when the galleries are closed, or when there are few visitors. Ideally, you want to be able to have a frank discussion, and as such, this is best done from outside the eyes of visitors.

Start with a concrete observation of the space. Are there extended labels only on specimens that are inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair, for example? What about font size; is the text too small? Are extended labels placed throughout the gallery or only in certain zones?

Then, notice where the interpretive weight is placed. What are the common trends? What types of topics does the institution feature? What groups of people are most commonly discussed? Is context only shared on objects related to wealth? Does the exhibit avoid political issues? Are there other issues that seem to be missing? (Figure 4 is a tool to compile these notes.)

Once you are done, compare your results from the two different galleries. In large organizations, interpretive differences between galleries are the norm, as

spaces are often under the purview of different curators. Yet, visitors seek a unified experience.

Spend time discussing results. What generalizations can you make about the institution’s interpretation? Can you see holes in the interpretation? For example, are there stories of women that seem to be missing that could be introduced?

Finally, consider if the galleries further visitor goals. With your team, go back to the visitor sketches and goals outlined in the ideal strategy section. Compare all the materials from both studies. Are you developing an interpretation that bridges your objects and your visitors? Where can you strengthen your interpretation?

Next Steps

Once you complete this process, try to develop a rubric to help improve future work. This rubric can simply be a checklist to prevent interpreters from making the same mistakes. In your rubric, list the possible pitfalls that you noticed in your object and gallery studies. These might be groups of people or specific fields of study. However, they can also be types of words that feel exclusionary.

Inclusive Interpretation Planning Tool

Object Work Sheet	Current Label Text:
	Who is missing?
	What did you miss?
	Is the context inclusive?

Figure 3

At the end of this process, the organization has a solid interpretation plan that, when put in place, will result in more inclusive interpretation. This framework will have collection- and visitor-centered underpinnings. The object and gallery-level rubrics ensure that this document will be practical and useable.

Finally, this practice works best if the planning team brings a variety of perspectives. Many museums do not have the diverse staff that will most easily perceive exclusionary interpretive practices. How do museums with a homogeneous staff accomplish this goal? First, remember diversity means multiplicity in many cultural factors. The staff might have certain aspects of diversity that are not visually apparent. With that said, however, diverse hiring practices are integral to developing an interpretation that draws diverse audiences. Additionally, inclusion is a learned practice. Exercises, such as this one, should be part of a considered effort to develop broader understandings of others. Museum staff members should learn from those with other perspectives. Inclusive interpretation is best produced by those who are educated and excited to include everyone.



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Selected Resources

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Inclusive Interpretation Planning Tool

The form is enclosed in a dashed-line border and contains four rectangular boxes stacked vertically. Each box contains a question:

- Exhibition Theme:
- Who is missing?
- What did you miss?
- Is the context inclusive?

Figure 4

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⁴ Schultz; Mike Laurie, “How Social Media Has Changed Us,” *Mashable*, January 7, 2010.

⁵ Seema Rao, Brad Baer, Patty Edmonson, and Ashley Weinard, “Practical Ontology: Collaborating and Communicating with Concept Maps,” *MW2015: Museums and the Web 2015*, January 31, 2015.



Project Overview

The Akron Art Museum (AAM) seeks support in the amount of \$250,000 for the planning and implementation of a shared-authority interpretation framework project called *Making the Museum Ours*, which offers the opportunity to transform the ways museums and communities work together to connect with art. In this project, AAM will work with community partners to transform how the museum plans and presents interpretation about their modern and contemporary collection, resulting in a systematic rethinking of the methodological frameworks underpinning interpretation and repositioning AAM as a visitor-centered, visitor-empowering community anchor to ultimately increase visitorship and community engagement.

Project Justification

Museums have traditionally maintained a strict line between curatorial production and other interpretation. While the sanctity of scholarship is integral to museums, the current practice of isolating curatorial work from audience engagement is detrimental to the field as well as the communities served. This process is marked by siloed work outputs and little substantive outside feedback that is largely not iterative, resulting in disconnects between visitors and curatorial visions. As the Christian Science Monitor noted about the MOMA rehang of 2019, art can “build bridges of empathy” (Strickland, 2019) (See Supporting Documents: “Bibliography” for full citation). The fundamental disconnection AAM finds between audience and collections offers an ideal place to test how best to build these bridges of empathy, inclusion, and accessibility.

AAM believes interpretation remains at the heart of the access barriers for museums. No matter how inclusive the programming, if the ways museums communicate is fundamentally not in concert with the needs and expectations of visitors, the spaces will remain exclusive. An intersection between community engagement and curatorial practice will transform both practices and address a fundamental challenge in creating accessible museums. In short, AAM seeks to increase accessibility broadly—in essence transforming how equity is expressed in its exhibitions—by transforming interpretation and thereby increasing audiences. The hope is that this increase in accessibility will also increase attendance and reach. Taking a page from technology language, *Making the Museum Ours* is looking at community engagement as an enterprise solution to the museum’s attendance and awareness issues while contributing to the larger conversation surrounding accessibility and interpretation within museums nationally.

This project was formed, in part, from recent observations within AAM. For several years, AAM attendance has trended down. In response, AAM started gathering data from visitors to understand current issues and begin reimagining the interpretation and presentation of information. To begin this process, AAM hired its first Deputy Director & Chief Experience Officer in June 2019 to strategically improve staff and visitor experience. The CXO has developed an audience evaluation plan and started an experience plan, working collaboratively with staff to perform baseline interpretation research before *Making the Museum Ours* begins. For example, a prototype space in the lobby, “Think Tank,” was mounted in 2019 to collect visitor feedback on issues like the tone of labels and desired programming (See supporting documents: “Think Tank Interpretation Strategy Study”).

To date, this preliminary research suggests a lack of comfort and knowledge are at the core of visitor alienation. Observation studies indicate visitors quickly go through the galleries, with the average total visit lasting 40 minutes. These same visitors are reading the labels but often report not finding what they need to make sense of the works. Patrons expressed a lack of knowledge and a feeling of discomfort with interpretation as a key barrier leading to these feelings. Additionally, many non-visitors mentioned a fear of “stupidity” or “being wrong” as reasons for not visiting AAM. This feedback shows likely causes of the decline in attendance. *Making the Museum Ours* will build on the foundation of this audience evaluation and will develop, test, and evaluate

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interpretation techniques to address this feedback, improve the Museum, and increase accessibility for the community (See Supporting Documents: “Engagement Plan and Diagram”).

To begin to garner interest in and community support, several recent community engagement projects have taken place. “Nick Cave: HEARD-Akron,” a collaborative community performance presented in conjunction with Summit County residents, was met with great praise for its participatory and community-responsive elements. Similarly, AAM’s Akron Art Library initiative, which allows anyone with a library card to check out works by local and regional artists for four weeks from the local library, has found great success. However, these projects have not resulted in increases in attendance. In fiscal year 2019 (July 1, 2018-June 30, 2019), when these community engagement programs occurred, AAM had lower attendance than the previous year (approximately 68,000 visitors in FY19 versus 74,000 in FY18). In fiscal year 2020 (July 1, 2019-June 30, 2020), the Museum welcomed 38,762 visitors before closing in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, also a downward trend in comparison to the previous fiscal year at that time. These attempts at visitor-friendly engagement have not impacted the Museum’s gallery practice in the permanent collection galleries, either. It is clear that future growth requires both innovative restructurings as well as substantive change, and, therefore, the Museum has developed this project to discover and address the needs and barriers of visitors to increase their attendance at the Museum.

In addition to the Museum’s own observations and early evaluations, a baseline of scholarship from larger, comprehensive museums and related fields also informs the premise of this study and is the starting point for the project’s initial interpretation and design efforts. There are several examples of current scholarship on the interpretation of art and the areas of improvement this project is working to uncover and improve. According to these studies, traditional forms of representation, iconography, and form are transmuted, transformed, and disregarded in contemporary and modern art. Issues of perceived snobbery and prior knowledge further mitigate visitor’s feelings about collections (Funch, 1997; Kieran, 2010; Bullet & Reber, 2013; Leder et al., 2014, Villeneuve & Erickson, 2015; Belke, et al., 2010). But, despite these challenges, contemporary and modern art has the potential to be some of the most participatory works in museum collections. Modern and contemporary art is often created with explicit purpose of challenging cultural and social norms (Knight, 2015) and often leaves a great deal of room for viewer interpretation. With an understanding of this scholarship, *Making the Museum Ours* aims to help move visitors from confused viewers to engaged participants through interpretation and design of the permanent collection and exhibitions. *Making the Museum Ours* will assess how best to transform visitors into participators in and producers of the Museum’s content.

Other similar projects informing this study include: the Abbe Museum’s work transforming their collection interpretation of native collections by working with Native Americans (Kelly, 2019), Tucson Museum of Art and Block’s Network Connections in which art helped develop community and healing in refugee populations (“Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block,” 2016), and the Nelson-Atkin’s recent community engagement project, “30 Americans Community Advisory Group,” that helped position exhibition thinking (Strickland, 2019). Each of these projects offer useful lessons in terms of repositioning visitors as experts; however, they all stop short of transforming curatorial practice and museum texts. Without critical rethinking of how language is used in museums, interpretation will remain exclusionary. When the means of knowledge production is transformed, the concept of ownership is transmuted. As Marete Sanderhoff states, “By active cultural participation, we mean a situation in which individuals do not limit themselves to absorb passively the cultural stimuli but are motivated to put their skills at [sic] work” (Sanderhoff, 2019). Visitors are most skilled in understanding what they want to know and how they want to learn. Curators are the most knowledgeable about the collection. In this project, together visitors and curators will build bridges by placing museum curators and educators in equal footing with community partners, each sharing the work of changing the standing of the Museum in the community.

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This is a particularly important undertaking for a modern and contemporary art museum of this size. Much of the available work about gallery interpretation to date has been performed at comprehensive museums in large urban centers (Serrell, 2015; “Writing Effective Interpretive Text,” 2006; “Learning & Interpretation: Evaluation at the V&A”). While these studies help inform the field broadly, the nuances of helping general audiences understand collections in a contemporary and modern art museum have not been well documented.

This project has a direct connection with AAM’s most recent strategic plan and transformation plan. Both plans have a strong focus on community engagement, with one of the four goals in the strategic plan emphasizing the need to connect with the community in an inclusive way. The transformational plan includes goals for AAM staff to work internally and externally to develop guiding definitions of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion. Each of those terms can be slippery, and often employed in ways that obfuscate specific cultures. Prior to the grant period, AAM will draft definitions of the terms will be in place to serve as starting points for the work of this grant. The desire to create an accessible, inclusive environment for all is engrained in AAM’s strategic goals. To do this, AAM must understand the barriers of entry and develop strategies to remove them through rigorous research, evaluation, and reflection. This project will address this disconnect between the interpretation currently being offered to visitors and their needs, allowing AAM to engage more with the community and online supporters, ultimately offering a better museum experience to all. The community partnerships outlined in this project also help activate the Museum’s mission and strategic goals by partnering with civic, social, and cultural institutions as well as businesses and individuals to develop mutually beneficial relationships and promote creativity and contemporary art (See Supporting Documents: “Community Partner Planning Strategy”). Museum curators and educators might be experts in their fields, but, in this project, visitors’ expertise, as well as the expertise of our various partners, on the needs and desires of the community will take equal footing.

This project also aligns with three of the Museums for America program goals: promote lifelong learning, build capacity to improve wellbeing of their communities, and increase public access to information, ideas, and networks through libraries and museums. To promote lifelong learning, *Making the Museum Ours* will change the way AAM presents works and the materials associated with the exhibitions and programs, which will make the information more accessible to the public. Increased accessibility will make continuous learning for everyone easier and more enjoyable, including those with diverse backgrounds and needs. Also, increased voices through community partnerships will increase awareness of AAM as a source for lifelong learning in an engaging way, increasing attendance and removing real or perceived barriers. *Making the Museum Ours* will also help build capacity and create easily accessible public resources for the information both at AAM and for other museums across the country. AAM plans to share all findings from this process through various means (see the Work Plan and Results sections for more information). By testing various interpretation methods and sharing the results (both successes and areas of improvement), AAM will identify trends to help organization of similar situations make more informed decisions and adopt best practices. Effective communication is key to this project and will be a vital portion of the work completed throughout the various phases of *Making the Museum Ours*. Ultimately, this process will create trusted spaces for real conversations regarding accessibility of museums and art, building community buy-in, engagement, and trust in AAM. The creation of these trusted spaces will last far beyond this project and will set the groundwork for AAM to have strong community input and support in the future.

This project also aligns perfectly with the Community Anchors and Catalysts category. This project will do exactly as this category suggests: empower AAM to transform its role in its community from community resource to community anchor. This project relies on community engagement contributing to the betterment of the Museum and its community through evaluation of interpretation practices. It will conduct community-focused planning activities, implement audience focused studies and evaluation, apply cross-sector partnership

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development models and programs to define shared visions for community improvement, and work with the community to gather information and measure progress to understand project impact. Through all of these elements, AAM will develop best practices to be a community anchor, which will be shared nationally and help other institutions improve. The results are boundless and beneficial to many institutions nationally.

Project Work Plan

The *Making the Museum Ours* pilot project has four key phases: (1) identify the problem; (2) look for a collective solution; (3) employ that solution iteratively on the museum's current and future textual interpretation; and (4) engage others in the community to create non-textual solutions (performances) in the galleries (See Supporting Documents: "*Making the Museum Ours* Overall Process at a Glance"), which are based on information gathered from the related scholarship listed above. AAM will apply principles from these larger institutions and projects that focused on problem identification and continue their work to develop real-world solutions to interpretation and, ultimately, audience engagement growth. To date, AAM is at an exploratory maturity level for the project, which allows staff to gather community feedback to inform the planning and next steps of the project.

Overall, AAM is perfectly poised to consider interpretation and best practices in a transformational manner. AAM's scale is large enough to accomplish exceptional installations (used to test interpretation methods and garner community feedback) but small enough to involve a large percent of the staff in this cross-functional project (The curatorial, design, experience, visitor services, and education teams comprise 31% of all staff, including part-time and full-time employees.). General operating funding will provide AAM's matching portion of this project; these funds are budgeted through fiscal year 2024 (ending June 30, 2024), and community engagement initiatives will be included in the budget for the extent of the project and beyond.

Seema Rao, Deputy Director & Chief Experience Officer, will lead this project and will work closely with the Curator of Community Engagement, Regina Lynch, and the Community Engagement Specialist (to be hired) to organize community partners and carry out the various interpretation initiatives developed by staff and project partners (For an outline of the partner identification process, See Supporting Documents: "Community Partner Planning Strategy"). Ms. Rao has worked in museums for nearly 20 years at the interstices of education, technology, and visitor experience and Ms. Lynch has extensive experience with audience engagement (see Project Staff attachment for a full list of key employees and their roles).

To begin, AAM will work with community partners to create a collective working group with the Deputy Director & Chief Experience Officer, Curator of Community Engagement, Chief Curator, Curatorial Fellow, Director of Design, Community Engagement Specialist, and ten community advisors, purposefully giving the community more voices than staff. AAM will access a much larger portion of the community through the partners' networks, involving people with diverse perspectives and backgrounds to join. This group will determine how best to help the community connect with the collection through shared authority, rather than with AAM dictating the direction. They will first identify problems with current interpretation and then brainstorm solutions, bridging communication between curators and the public. Once the group identifies their first focus and sets their goals for a collective solution, they will work on two types of deployment: textual and non-textual interpretation.

For the textual interpretation, the team will help improve all the text employed to share collections, from AAM's quarterly magazine to the labels in the galleries. The group will also help AAM explore additional forms of interpretation like community created e-books and podcasts. One way in which the group will test textual interpretation is through the Museum's three-year-long experimental gallery series, *Work in Progress*. *Work in Progress* will consist of six exhibitions, which will rotate twice a year between 2021-2024 (See Supporting

Akron Art Museum
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Documents: “*Work in Progress* Exhibition Topics and Tentative Dates”). The collective working group will use these exhibitions as their laboratory to explore language and the many ways museums use text to share ideas about collections. (See Supporting Documents: “Proposed Iterative Exhibition Process in Comparison to Traditional Processes”). Each exhibition will draw from the collection, specifically including works that the curators know have historically challenged visitors. The lessons will, therefore, be easily translatable to the broad interpretation of the Museum’s collection.

The *Work in Progress* exhibition evaluation process will gather feedback from visitors through observations, surveys, focus groups, and a digital response station. Visitors will employ two digital forms of response through the digital response station, as the current pandemic makes physical response spaces unsafe. Visitors can respond to and remix the text in the galleries using a technology created by Kent State University’s Wick Poetry Center (a partner on this project). Visitors will also be asked to share pictures as a form of non-textual response; AAM will partner with Micah Walter to collect and interpret these responses. The digital response station will be employed in every exhibition to garner quantitative and qualitative feedback from on-site visitors. Also, AAM will use social media as a research tool to help assess interpretive concepts about collections and to evaluate this series for virtual visitors. For each exhibition, a set of content tests will be created for social media (AAM currently has 21,000 Twitter followers, 17,000 Facebook page likes, 18,400 Instagram followers).

Baseline research of AAM’s audience indicates that non-textual resources are also important ways of decreasing access barriers, so the Museum will also host performances in the galleries for additional interpretation, including music, dance, and theater. The collective working group will choose twice-annual performances to be held in the galleries, set parameters for the performance, and issue an RFP. Area organizations will bid, and the group will choose the winning organization. Evaluation data will be gathered to inform the group on the successes and areas of improvement for each performance through on-site feedback, surveys, and more.

In addition to evaluation data collected throughout *Making the Museum Ours*, the same audience engagement study from 2019 will be performed at the end of the project. As with the current study, this evaluation will include surveys, observations, and intercept interviews. The hope is to see a 25% increase in dwell time in the galleries as well as fewer comments about fear of the collection and disconnection with the content.

Results of these various implementations will be measured through community engagement. Growth will occur both by expanding current local audiences and by reaching new communities in the adjacent counties. For current audiences, community engagement efforts will consist of continued connection with local organizations as well as contacts through the K-12 programs, the Akron Art Library, and other previous community engagement efforts. These patrons will be engaged in the content of *Making the Museum Ours* at their sites and then encouraged to see how their feedback impacted the installations in the galleries. For new audiences, AAM has identified specific communities within a thirty-minute drive on easily accessible roads and bus routes. This targeted audience engagement strategy hopes to draw on two important factors: regional size and cultural interest. Akron has only 197,846 residents, but the Northeast Ohio region has 4.5 million residents.

Throughout the project, AAM will practice radical transparency on their challenges and successes through the blog, “Vision,” and podcast, “Arts What?” The quarterly magazine, *VIEW*, (with a current circulation of 5,500) will also have a running feature about the installation and the lessons learned in each test. Additionally, the Museum will regularly schedule informal gallery discussions to share the work surrounding these exhibitions and the lessons learned, including potential stumbling blocks, to help others in the field with their efforts. At the end of the grant, the Museum will publish their process and plans as a free e-book for other museums and

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cultural organizations. AAM will also create a systematic organizational content strategy and interpretation plan to inform the reinstallation of the full collection starting in 2023 (See Supporting Documents: “Logic Model” for all of the inputs, outputs, outcomes, and measures of success are listed in the logic model). The museum hopes this transparency and transformation will draw new visitors along with concurrent initiatives taking place.

Whenever a project relies on community engagement, there are always risks, including low participation, no positive results, or inconclusive results. To mitigate these risks, the feedback mechanisms will be implemented in a controlled environment with specific quantitative and qualitative questions created to inspire feedback. The involvement of a variety of partners will help generate interest and participation. All other risks discovered throughout the project will be monitored closely, and adjustments will be made as needed to ensure valuable results. The beauty of this project is that it is ever-changing and developing, with the collective working group improving the process every step.

The four key phases outlined above will repeat throughout the grant period with new information gathered from the community and new potential interpretation strategies. The overall goals for this project are to:

1. Transform how the Museum engages local community members with their collections;
2. Develop a multidisciplinary, accessible approach to gallery installations;
3. Create an interpretation strategy that is welcoming and accessible for all visitors with multiple engagement points to better serve current visitors and draw new visitors;
4. Increase capacity within the Museum for community-centered interpretation;
5. Increase capacity in the community for connecting to the collection; and
6. Present AAM’s collection in surprising ways, from community-produced e-books to TikTok videos.

Along with the Museum’s exemplary collections and spaces, AAM has considerable opportunity for audience growth (See Supporting Documents: “Attendance Growth Planning Strategy”). AAM’s current audience largely draws from the city (Akron) and county (Summit) in which it’s located, within 50 miles of the Museum. Specifically, the majority of visitors (60% in the 2019 fiscal year) are from Summit County, with only 30% of visitors from Akron itself. Summit County has 500,000 residents, with nearly 13% in poverty; the median income is \$53,000. This region also has a growing senior population, currently at 18%. Also, the local demographic is largely working-class, with 68% of the county earning only a high school degree. Addressing the challenges of connecting AAM’s local audience to its modern and contemporary collection, as well drawing more widely on a regional audience, will be essential to developing audiences to sustain and grow the museum in the future.

Project Results

Overall, this project will fundamentally transform knowledge production at the Akron Art Museum. Interpretation of collections will be a collective act meant to connect people and objects rather than a singular practice meant to inform a select group. All Museum text will be transformed, from in-gallery labels to promotional postcards to the quarterly magazine and more. After this pilot, AAM will work to scale this project to be essential practice for interpretation on an ongoing basis.

The quantitative project results are multifold. First, AAM hopes to increase participation onsite and online. Over the three years, AAM hopes to increase onsite audiences by 25% and digital audiences by 10%. The project is projected to impact 250,000 onsite visitors and 61,000 offsite visitors. Attendance numbers will be tracked through ticket sales, and online visitorship will be tracked on all digital properties (website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Soundcloud, and TikTok). As this project is about fundamental change in practice, there other changes that will also be tracked and hopefully see positive results as they develop through the project. At the beginning and throughout the project, the collective working group will be asked to track their attitude about

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the collections, AAM overall, and AAM's interpretation. Ideally, they will become more engaged with AAM and its collection by the end. Word-of-mouth referrals will also be a signifier of success. Patrons are regularly asked how they heard about programs; we will track how many have heard about the program from our collective working group participants' networks. Inviting friends and family is a strong signifier of pride and ownership.

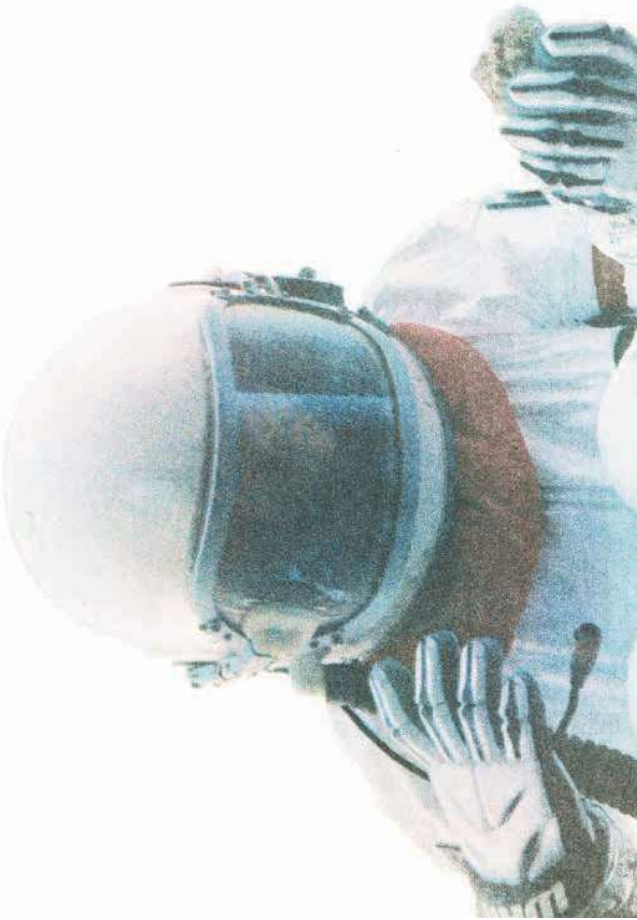
There will also be many tangible products created during the project, and the usage numbers and reviews for each will offer useful evaluation data. At the end of the project timeline, AAM will have an interpretation framework to use internally when creating future exhibition installations, a guide to benefit other museums seeking to transform their own interpretive authority structures, and audio resources for museum professionals about the challenges, failures, and successes throughout the project. For other museums and individuals in the field, this project will act as a case study to help address visitors' fears of "not getting the art." Fundamentally, AAM will have a visitor-centered interpretation strategy that will be available online for any museum to use.

To disseminate widely, AAM will use a variety of audience-focused platforms. For fellow museum professionals, staff will regularly produce podcasts and a blog with project updates and will also seek opportunities to present the project's concept at industry conferences and in museum publications. The many results of this project will benefit organizations across the country by developing a way to test and improve interpretation at the museums. But, every community is different and has different needs. This project will provide the framework but the problems, potential solutions, and interpretation strategies will differ from one organization to another.

For community members, audio and video resources (such as social media videos) will be essential products of this project. Usage statistics of these products will be key indicators of success, as will the comments on the sharing platforms. The non-textual interpretation (dance, theater, etc.) in the galleries are also expected to produce positive results; ideally, audiences for such performances will grow by 25% over the life of the grant. Patrons, both digital and virtual, will benefit from transformed and augmented interpretation in our members' magazine, on our blog, on social media, and through e-books, gallery labels, and the performances. *Making the Museum Ours* will also result in three to six eBooks created through visitor/curator collaboration, accessible online and printable on demand. While sales might be a useful data point, the qualitative comments about such products will offer key data on how AAM can continue to employ eBooks as a bridge to the galleries. Collectively, the project will result in robust resources for both museums seeking to do community-centered interpretation as well as community members looking for new ways to engage with the Akron Art Museum.

Long-term, the information gathered through this project will inform the way AAM functions for many years into the future. Although the study will be over, the data will be used to continue to use best practices for audience interpretation, continue programming that was most successful at generating attendance and interest in the Museum. Also, the podcast, blog, and various communication techniques developed or improved through this process will continue to be distributed. Financially, expenses for all on-going interpretation techniques developed through this project will be funded through general operating contributions and will be part of the typical operations of AAM.

Overall, *Making the Museum Ours* will help the Akron Art Museum make systematic changes to the interpretation of art and exhibitions throughout the organization to improve accessibility and equity in the museum's gallery design and interpretation, resulting in increased attendance and community engagement.



Christine Zuercher, *Distant Transmissions #1*, 2018, gum bichromate print, 20 x 24 in., Courtesy of the Artist

” I LOVE THE INTIMACY BETWEEN THE ARTIST AND THE OBJECT, AND I THINK THAT TRANSLATES TO THE VIEWER. I LOVE THE IDEA THAT THESE FORMS OF TECHNOLOGY, PHOTOGRAPHY INCLUDED, LIKE BRINGING US TOGETHER. —CHRISTINE ZUERCHER

Making Your MARK

THROUGH MARCH 14, 2021

Corbin Gallery, O'Neill Lobby, and Arnstein Gallery

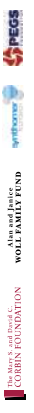
Realism is often a sticking point for viewers. “My kid can do that” is a refrain heard in many galleries. Working artists usually have a well-honed ability to render life realistically, but some of them choose to diverge from that representational approach. Seemingly simple works, bare squiggles on paper, require incredible control of a brush or careful cajoling of a monoprint plate.

The new exhibition *Making Your Mark* offers a panoply of fine craftsmanship. Many of the artists employ everyday tools to accomplish extraordinary results. Andrea Myers transforms scrap fabric into an ocean of texture. Her work, *Blue Seems*, is at once abstract and evocative, reminiscent of sweeping seas or kites in the sky. Close inspection reveals the artist’s handiwork, with countless stitches through multiple layers of fabric. Erykah Townsend also assembles varied elements into a cohesive whole in her *Holographic Meatloaf*. (*Crayola Box 8*) *Brown= S16, Red= S34, Orange= S04, Yellow= S27, Green= S20, Blue= S11, Purple= S22, Black= S13, Keep Blank= S01*. Just as digital images are composed of pixels, this large-scale collage is rendered from small square-shaped images glued into place. Townsend turns a still from a mass-market cartoon into mesmerizing

art, while also employing a quotidian craft supply. And while most visitors might not have the commercial printing capabilities needed to create the three panels in Taryn McMahon’s *Hanging Gardens*, many might own an X-Acto knife. McMahon demonstrates great skill in drawing a humble craft-knife blade across a flat paper surface, without finching, to transform the two-dimensional print into a near-breathing mass of plants. While each of these works is evocative and grounded in reality, the artists have crafted their own styles to express their unique visions.

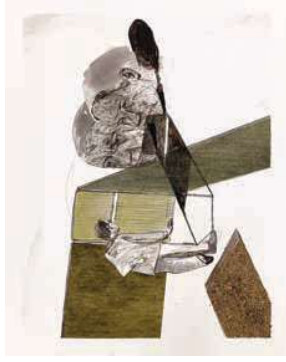
Making Your Mark includes works by nine regional artists, individuals employing their craft to engage our community. The exhibition is on view throughout the building until March 14, 2021.

Exhibitions and programming in the Mary S. and David C. Corbin Foundation Gallery, including the Live Creative Studio, are made possible with support from the Mary S. and David C. Corbin Foundation with additional funding from Alan and Janice Well Family Fund, Synthomer Foundation, Peg’s Foundation, Robert O. and Althea Mae Orr Family Foundation, Charles E. and Maebel M. Richie Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Considine, and the Kenneth L. Caihoun Charitable Trust, KeyBank, Trustee.



“THE IMAGES ARE NOT SPECIFIC STORIES AND THE CHARACTERS ARE NOT SPECIFIC PEOPLE. THEY'RE THE RESULT OF ME SEEING SOCIETY AND ALSO TRYING TO WRITE THIS LIKE FICTION. IMAGINE THAT YOU'RE WRITING FICTION. NOTHING IS REAL BUT ALSO IT'S VERY FAMILIAR. WHEN PEOPLE SEE THESE IMAGES, THEY CAN INTERPRET IT THEMSELVES.”

—OMID SHAKARI



Above: Omid Shakari, *Emergency Management*, 2019, ink, gouache, powdered bullet shells on paper, 21 x 17 in., Courtesy of the Artist



Right: Omid Shakari, *Emergency Management (detail)*, 2019, ink, gouache, powdered bullet shells on paper, 21 x 17 in., Courtesy of the Artist



Above: Erykah Townsend, *Holographic Meatloaf*, (Crayola box of Brown=516, Red=524, Orange=527, Green=529, Purple=531, Yellow=532, Black=501, 2019), collage, paper, collage paste, acrylic, fiber paste, Collection of the artist

Right: Erykah Townsend, *Holographic Meatloaf*, (Crayola box of Brown=516, Red=524, Orange=527, Green=529, Purple=531, Yellow=532, Black=501, 2019), collage, printed paper, collage paste, acrylic, fiber paste, Collection of the artist



“AS A PRINTMAKER, I REALLY APPRECIATE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I TAKE A THING AND USE IT AS A MATRIX TO BECOME SOMETHING ELSE. AND WHAT'S BEAUTIFUL ABOUT THAT PROCESS IS THAT THE MATRIX STILL REMAINS AS AN OBJECT.”

—MICAH KRAUS



Micah Kraus, *Roofline*, 2018, laser engraved monotype collage, 41 x 49 in., Collection of the artist

“WHY DOES ANYONE HAVE TO KEEP ARTMAKING IN THE SAME BOUNDARIES? WHY CAN'T I JUST KEEP PUSHING MYSELF TO MAKE DIFFERENT STUFF?”

—ERYKAH TOWNSEND



Andrea Myers, *Blue Seems*, 2020. remnant denim, fabric, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60in., © Courtesy of the Artist

”

I'M OKAY WITH BEING UP FRONT WITH THE VIEWER—'YES IT'S FABRIC,' OR 'YES IT'S DENIM'... BUT THE ACCESSIBILITY OF THAT CAN LEAD INTO TRANSCENDENCE OF MATERIALITY.

—ANDREA MYERS



Above: Michaelle Marschall, *Plan Depreh*, 45 feet, 2018, wood lithograph, 25 x 19 in., Courtesy of the Artist

Left: wood lithograph block for *Plan Depreh*, 45 feet



”

I'M VERY MUCH AN EXPERIMENTAL KIND OF ARTIST... I CAN WORK ON SPONTANEOUS DRAWING AND BUILDING UP LAYERS, AND THAT'S BEEN NICE.

—MICHAELLE MARSCHALL

WHAT STORIES
DO YOU SEE?

WHERE DO STORIES COME FROM?

Great stories have cultural resonance each time they are told over generations. These powerful stories are often used to embellish inhabited spaces from walls to floors. Artists might choose to display a series of narrative scenes or focus on a single dramatic moment. Clearly recognizable symbolic elements help viewers identify the story.

HOW DO ARTISTS TELL STORIES?

WHY DO WE
TELL STORIES?

14.8517" w x 17.3216"
165%

1

HOW DO YOU PICTURE
THE FUTURE?

WHAT WAS THE WORLD LIKE THEN?

In 1939, the New York City World's Fair with its theme "The World of Tomorrow" captured a hopeful moment in American history. In this wave of progress, the nascent technology of the 1930s fueled art and art making. During the fiscal crisis of the Great Depression, artists were interpreters of society.

HOW DO ARTISTS INNOVATE?

HOW DOES ART
CAPTURE A MOMENT
IN TIME?

14.8517" w x 17.3216"
165%

2

HOW DO ARTISTS CREATE ILLUSION?

WHY DO WE PAINT?

Painters have broad motivations for creating works of art including religious devotion, commercial interests, and personal expression. In applying paint to a surface, artists make choices about the way their painting looks. Painters often represent the illusion of space on a flat surface. Others choose to create their own sense of space or avoid representing space altogether.

HOW DO PAINTERS GO BEYOND THE SURFACE?

HOW IS A PAINTING MADE?

14.8517" w x 17.8897"
165%

3

HOW CAN SCIENCE ILLUMINATE ART?

HOW DO WE KNOW IT'S REAL?

Historically, apprentices trained in the workshops of master artists by learning to mimic their teacher's style. Copying the works of a great artist was another way to enhance a student's craft. Generations later, these workshop paintings and copies can be confused with authentic works by well-known artists. Cunning forgers also create works in the style of great masters, but their motivation is deception.

WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY?

14.8517" w x 16.4966"
165%

4

HOW DOES ART EXPRESS IDENTITY?

A portrait can be a representation of a person's visage. Symbols, like fierce lions or a proud rooster, can also be used to stand in for a person. Portraits of famous individuals can become iconic symbols through persistent reproduction in the media. Images of people are not always portraits. Artists also explore the absence of identity, or anonymity, within our society.

HOW DO YOU PORTRAY A PERSON?

14.8517" w x 17.3387"
165%

5

WHAT DOES A LION LOOK LIKE?

A lion can be identified as a large feline with a thick mane. Artists, unconstrained by describing the beast accurately, offer a variety of representations. The symbolic connotations of lions, while culturally specific, derive from the perceived ferocity and power of this creature.

WHAT DOES A LION MEAN?

14.8517" w x 13.4347"
165%

6

HOW ARE ART AND TRADE CONNECTED?

The European desire for porcelain and other goods from the Far East—and the promise of profits for merchants—fueled sea trade throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. These prized imports, emblems of wealth, were proudly framed, mounted, and displayed. European artisans, quick to capitalize on this craze, mimicked Asian styles and techniques.

HOW DO CULTURES PICTURE EACH OTHER?

14.8517" w x 14.1607"

165%

7

HOW DOES
SCULPTURE
TAKE SHAPE?

HOW DO OUR BODIES INSPIRE ART?

Idealized, stylized, or faithfully realistic, the human form can be found throughout history. Sculptures of the human figure, whether cast in bronze or formed with clay, literally occupy space. Sculptures often engender an emotional response from their viewers by showing evocative human expressions.

HOW DO ARTISTS EXPRESS EMOTIONS?

14.8517" w x 16.7512"
165%

8

HOW DO ARTISTS TRANSFORM MATERIALS?

Artists can transform raw materials such as gold and clay into a variety of finished works. Forming and decorating techniques can make a single material look matte or shiny, textured or smooth, luxurious or unassuming. Artisans' experimentation can lead to discoveries such as ruby red glass made by using gold and reducing oxygen in a kiln to turn the clay black.

WHAT MAKES RAW MATERIALS VERSATILE?

14.8517" w x 16.5"
165%

9

HOW DO ARTISTS INNOVATE?

HOW DO ARTISTS TRANSFORM MATERIALS?

Artists can transform raw materials such as gold and clay into a variety of finished works. Forming and decorating techniques can make a single material look matte or shiny, textured or smooth, luxurious or unassuming. Artisans' experimentation can lead to discoveries such as ruby red glass made by using gold and reducing oxygen in a kiln to turn the clay black.

WHAT MAKES RAW MATERIALS VERSATILE?

10

HOW DO WE GIVE
MEANING TO ART?

HOW DOES RITUAL BRING ART TO LIFE?

In museums, Indian sculptures are placed on pedestals so that visitors can appreciate the fine details cast in bronze. Originally, the sculpture in the case was meant to be used in Hindu religious processions. Worshippers would only see these icons once they were dressed, decorated, and blessed by priests, like the one on the platform.

WHY WAS THIS MADE?

14.8517" w x 16.1448"
165%

11

WHY DOES INDIA FASCINATE ARTISTS?

WHAT DOES INDIA LOOK LIKE?

The splendor, activity, and excitement of India have long captivated artists. Not a native among them, each artist here creates an image of their impressions of a country, its land, and people—an image that illustrates their ideas of *their* India.

HOW DO TRAVELERS SEE INDIA?

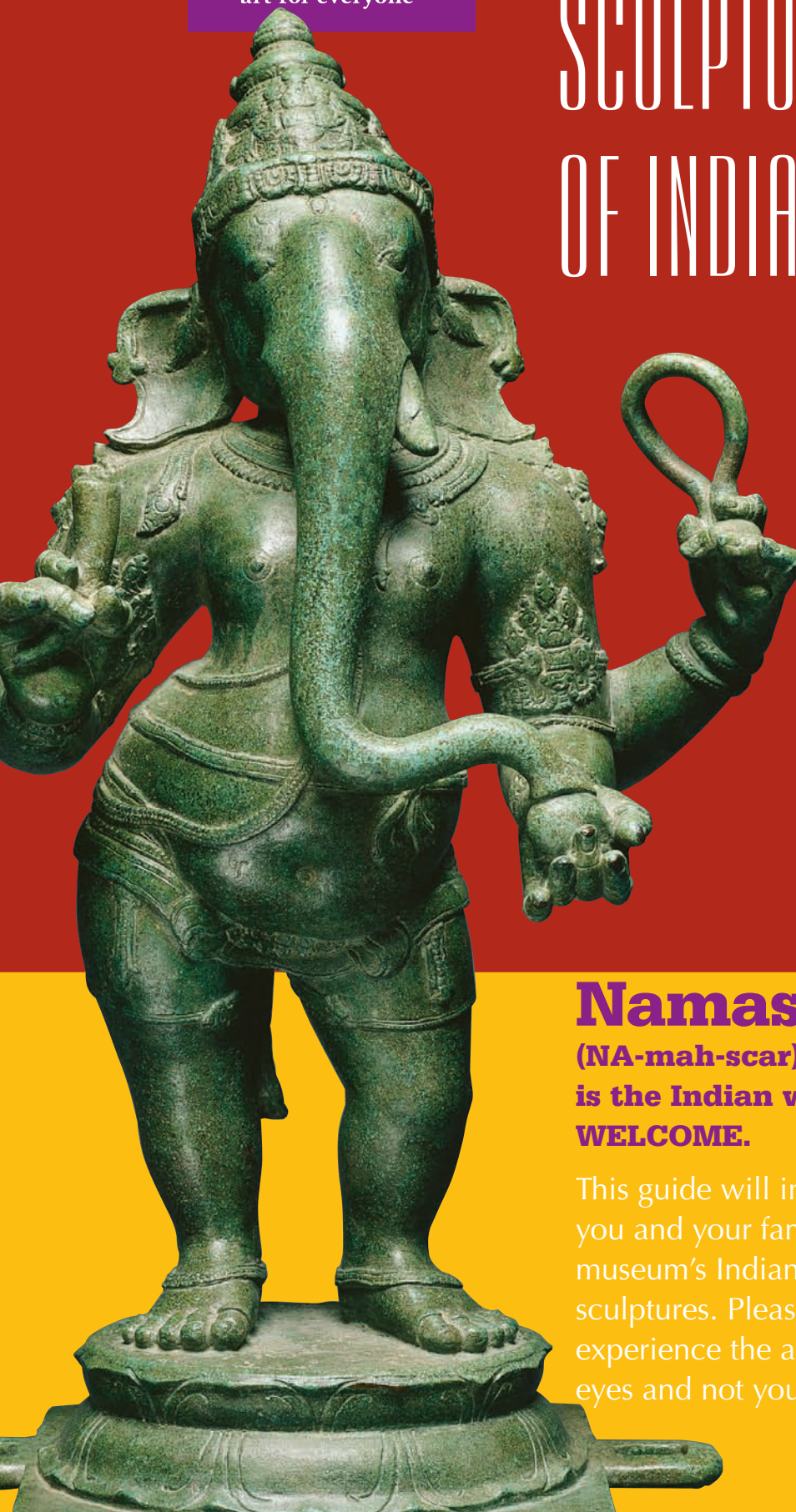
14.8517" w x 14.75"
165%

12

The
Cleveland
Museum
of Art

A world of great
art for everyone

BRONZE SCULPTURES OF INDIA



Namaskar
(NA-mah-scar)
is the Indian word for
WELCOME.

This guide will introduce you and your family to the museum's Indian bronze sculptures. Please experience the art with your eyes and not your hands.

Meet Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance.

His dance keeps the universe in motion. He also symbolizes the power of the Chola kings.

The god's four hands and the objects that he holds symbolize his many supernatural powers. He is so awesome that two hands are not enough to express his great power. Let's talk about the symbols in this sculpture of Nataraja.

Who were the Cholas?

A little more than one thousand years ago, South India was ruled by powerful kings and queens called the Cholas. The Chola dynasty (AD 850–1279) was one of the richest in the history of India. During their 400 year reign, the Cholas used their riches to build grand temples throughout the kingdom.

The drum signifies life.

This hand gesture blesses and protects.

This hand gesture in combination with the raised foot offers salvation.

Shiva Nataraja: Lord of the Dance, Chola Period, 11th century, bronze, 43-7/8 in. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund CMA 1930.331



The flames represent destruction.

The halo of flames symbolizes this universe.

By standing on the back of a dwarf, Shiva triumphs over ignorance.

The trident is one of the weapons that Shiva uses against demons.

Right: Trident with Shiva as Ardhanari, Half-Woman, Chola Period, ca. 1050, bronze, 13-3/4 in. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund CMA 1969.117

The art of the Chola dynasty comes from the Hindu tradition. Hinduism is the most common religion in India, practiced by about 2/3 of the population. For Hindus, God can be seen in many forms. In this image of Shiva with a trident, the god is shown as both male and female. Shiva's left side is female and the right is male. In the Hindu belief, God is not a man or woman but has the best qualities of both.

To read about Shiva, turn to the **INDIAN MYTHS** at the back of this guide.

Shiva leans against his animal mount, Nandi, the Bull.



The axe represents his ability to cut through ignorance.

The lasso removes obstacles.

Meet Ganesha.

He is the god of good fortune and the remover of obstacles. This elephant-headed god holds objects, or attributes, that have special meaning. Let's learn about Ganesha's attributes.

To read about the meaning of the tusk, turn to **INDIAN MYTHS** at the back of this guide.

The little ball is a type of Indian dessert. It represents good fortune.



Ganesha, Chola Period, ca. 1070, bronze, 19-3/4 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer CMA 1970.62

Meet Hanuman, the monkey god.

He leans forward with his right hand over his mouth. He stands like this to show his respect for his leader, Prince Rama. Rama was a fair and just prince who lived in northern India.



To read about how Hanuman helped save Prince Rama's wife, turn to **INDIAN MYTHS** at the back of this guide.

Detail: *Monkey General Hanuman*, Chola Period, ca. 1000, bronze, 21-5/8 in. John L. Severance Fund CMA 1980.26

Activity

Use your imagination to draw a picture of Prince Rama talking to Hanuman.

Dressed for Success

If you saw this sculpture of Shiva and his wife Parvati at a Hindu festival, it would look very different than it does here at the museum. This figure would be dressed in its best clothes for a special day out. It would be wrapped with layers of red, gold, purple, blue, yellow, and green silk, adorned with gold necklaces and earrings, and covered in flower garlands. The hands, heads and halos would remain showing.

Shiva as Tripuravijaya, Victor of the Three Cities, and Consort, Chola Period, ca. 950–60, bronze, 32-1/4 and 25-5/8 in. John L. Severance Fund CMA 1961.94



One Fine Day

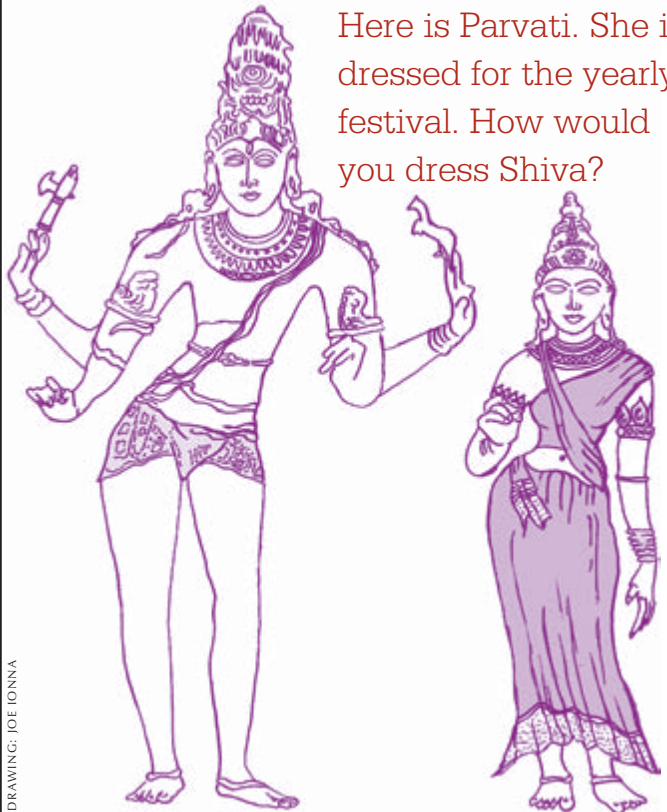
Where does the word HOLIDAY come from? It was originally two words: HOLY DAY, a time when the local church or temple and the community would gather to honor a special deity or saint. In India, on holy days, the bronze sculpture of the god or goddess would be placed in a chariot and wheeled through the streets. On these special days, large crowds would gather to get a glimpse of the beautiful bronze icon.

Activity

Make a list of the sounds and smells you experience at a parade.

Activity

Here is Parvati. She is dressed for the yearly festival. How would you dress Shiva?



DRAWING: JOE IONNA

Talking with Hands

Why does this sculpture have so many hands? Look more carefully at the hands. They are all in different positions. In Hindu art, the hand gestures (called mudras) help the viewer discover the personality of the god or goddess. What can we learn about Shiva from his hand gestures and the symbols that he holds?

The axe represents his ability to cut through ignorance.

The antelope symbolizes Shiva's home in the forest.

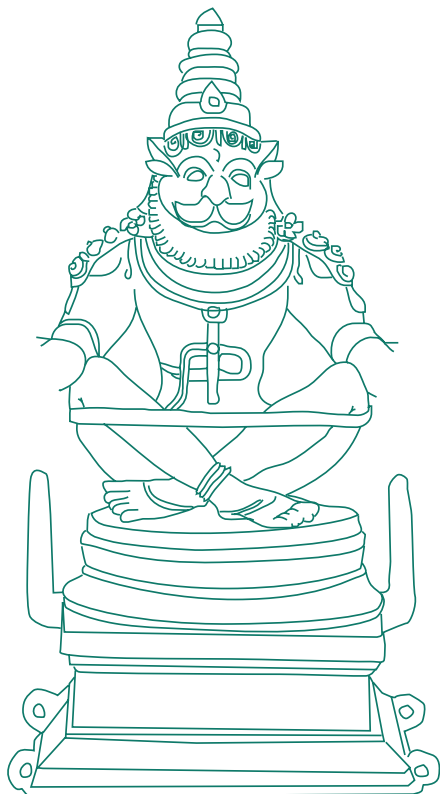
These hands once held a bow and arrow used for destroying the city of the demons. They are now missing.



Activity

This is Narasimha the Man-Lion. Looking at the sculpture, draw Narasimha's hands and the objects that they hold. Remember drawing is easy when you just try to capture simple shapes and forms.

To find out who Narasimha really is turn over to the **INDIAN MYTHS** section.



Hindu Gods and Goddesses

The
Cleveland
Museum
of Art

A world of great
art for everyone

Among the many Hindu gods, the most important are Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer. These three gods can be worshipped in many visual forms: as a man or woman, or even part human or part animal. For example, Vishnu comes to earth in the forms of Narasimha and Rama to fight evil. One of the most popular forms for Shiva is as the Dancer, Nataraja.

There are many stories told about the adventures of these gods. Here is a small selection.



The Courtship of Shiva and Parvati

Parvati, the daughter of the god of the Himalayan Mountains, met Shiva when she was a shy teen. She fell in love with him immediately. Shiva, who spent all his time in meditation and prayer, didn't notice the beautiful young woman.

But Parvati was not discouraged. For years, she did nothing but pray for Shiva to marry her. Shiva did not acknowledge her, but the gods in the heavens did. The gods told Shiva of Parvati's love.

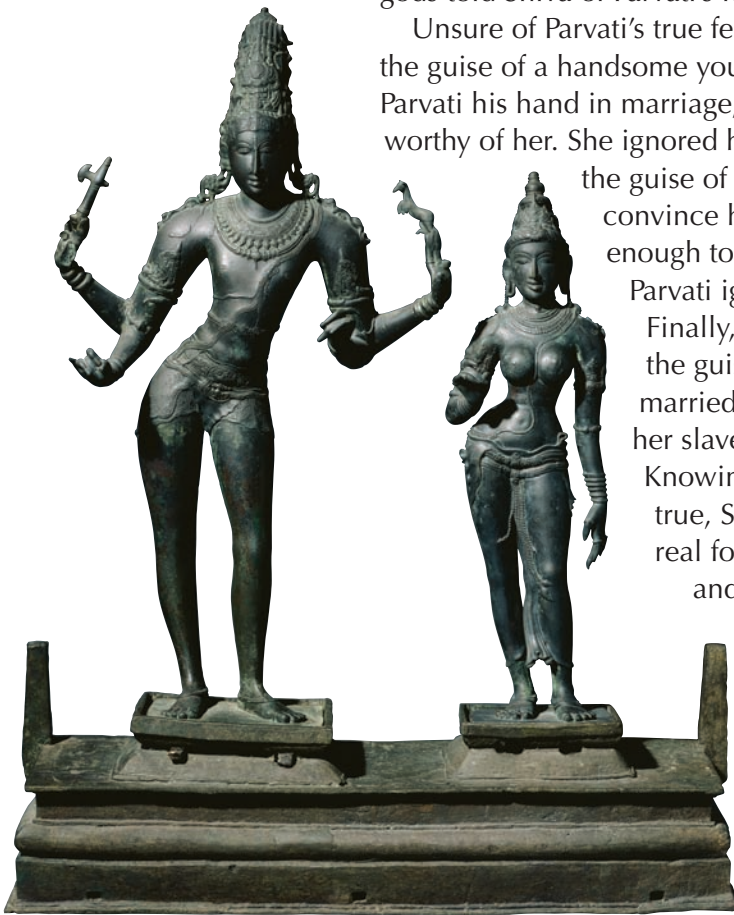
Unsure of Parvati's true feelings, Shiva tested her. In the guise of a handsome youth, he tried to offer Parvati his hand in marriage, saying that Shiva was not worthy of her. She ignored his proposal. Second, in

the guise of an old man, he tried to convince her that she was beautiful enough to marry the god Vishnu.

Parvati ignored him altogether.

Finally, Shiva came to Parvati in the guise of a dwarf. If she married him, he would become her slave. Parvati again refused.

Knowing that Parvati's love was true, Shiva came to her in his real form. He proposed marriage and she accepted.



Shiva as Tripuravijaya, Victor of the Three Cities, and Consort, Chola Period, ca. 950–60, bronze, 32-1/4 and 25-5/8 in. John L. Severance Fund CMA 1961.94

Nataraja

Shiva sometimes takes the form of Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance. His dance keeps the universe in motion. He demonstrates his power by stamping out ignorance, manifested through the dwarf crushed under Nataraja's foot. When the universe grows old and falls into disrepair, he will use the fire in his left hand to destroy it. He will then use the drum in his right hand to create the universe anew. Because Nataraja has such awesome power, the Chola kings used this form of Shiva as a symbol of their own empire.

Shiva Nataraja: Lord of the Dance, Chola Period, 11th century, bronze, 43-7/8 in. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund CMA 1930.331

Ganesha and the Moon

Why does Ganesha hold his broken tusk in his right hand? Would you believe the moon had something to do with it?

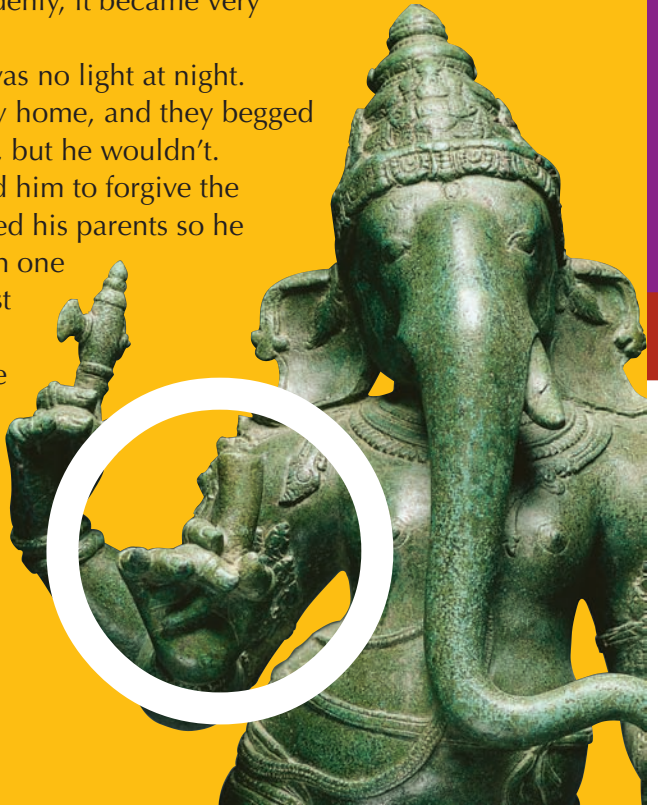
One night at a party, he ate so much dessert that he was ready to burst. On his way home, he fell and his full belly split open. He grabbed a friendly snake from the tall grass and wrapped it around his belly like a belt.

Ganesha soon heard loud laughter. He looked up to see the moon laughing at him. The moon told Ganesha that he looked stupid. Ganesha got so mad that he broke off his tusk and threw it at the moon, but the moon only laughed louder. Ganesha chased the moon, who ran and hid. Suddenly, it became very dark.

Without the moon, there was no light at night. People couldn't find their way home, and they begged Ganesha to forgive the moon, but he wouldn't. Then Ganesha's parents asked him to forgive the moon. Ganesha always obeyed his parents so he forgave the moon, but only on one condition: that the moon must disappear from the sky one night a month. Today we have a name for the night with no moon: we call it the new moon.

For Ganesha's further adventures, go to your local library.

Detail: *Ganesha*, Chola Period, ca. 1070, bronze, 19-3/4 in. Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer CMA 1970.62



Activity

A Comic Strip: Ganesha and the Moon, illustrated by YOU.

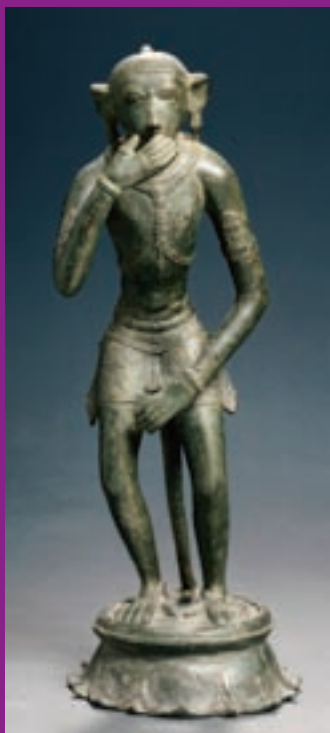
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Hanuman, the Monkey King

Hanuman might not look strong, but he once moved a whole mountaintop to help Prince Rama's wife, Sita. She was kidnapped by Ravana, an evil king from Lanka. When Rama set off to save Sita, the monkeys of the forest were the most helpful.

When Rama and the monkey army got to the tip of India, they could barely see the island of Lanka. Hanuman leapt across the water. He sneaked into Ravana's castle where he found Sita being held captive. He told her that her prince soon would save her. Returning to his waiting army, Hanuman ordered the monkeys to throw rocks into the ocean to make a bridge. They reached the island, but Ravana's men were waiting for them. There was a great battle, and many of the monkeys were injured.

To save the monkey army, he flew a long way to the Himalayan Mountains. He brought back a mountaintop covered with healing herbs. After nursing the monkey army to health, Hanuman helped defeat Ravana and rescued Sita. Prince Rama was so grateful that he made Hanuman the king of the monkeys.

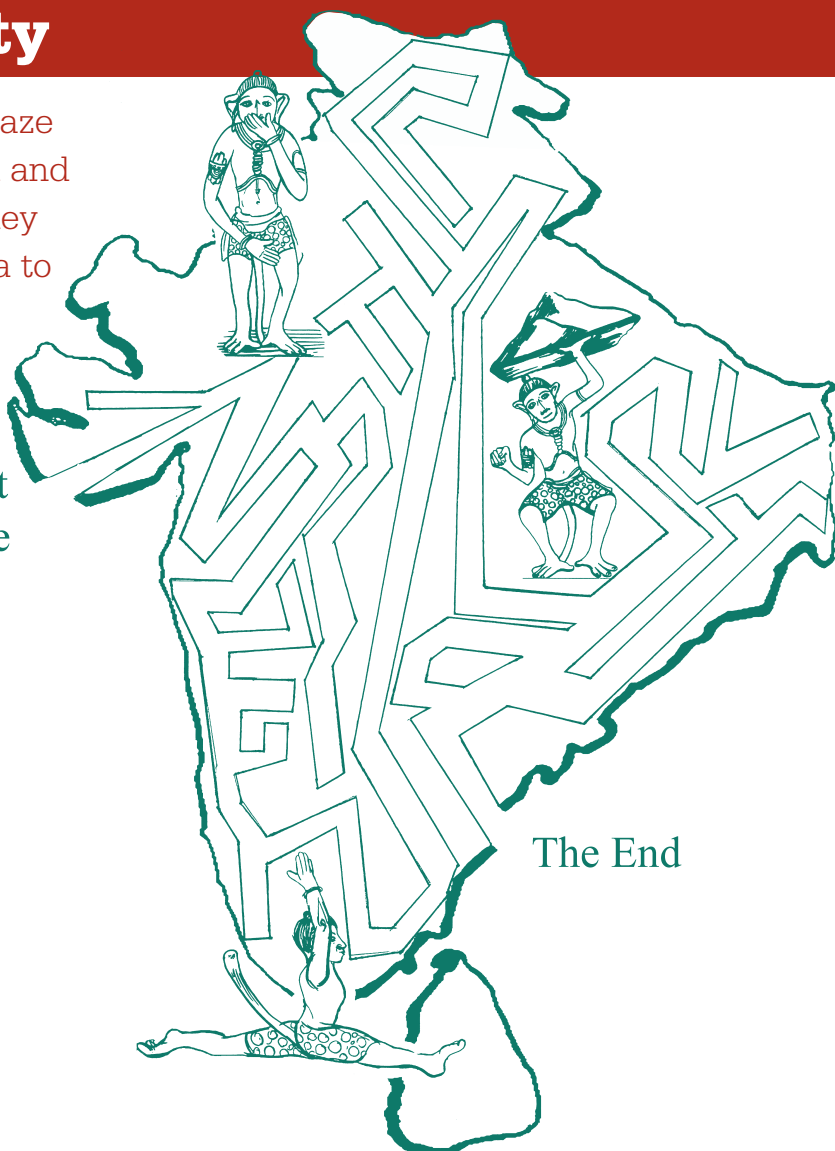


Monkey General Hanuman, Chola Period, ca. 1000, bronze, 21-5/8 in. John L. Severance Fund CMA 1980.26

Activity

Follow the maze on Hanuman and Rama's journey through India to save Sita.

Start Here



The End

Narasimha

Many years ago, there was an evil demon king named Hiranyakashipu (Hir-ah-nee-ak-ah-SHEE-pu) who brought trouble and misery to everyone on earth.

The god Brahma told the demon king that he could not be killed by weapons. He could not be killed by day or by night. He could not be killed on the earth or in the sky. He could not be killed inside his palace or outside his palace. And he could not be killed by man or by beast. The demon king thought he was invincible.

In order to restore peace and order to the world, the god Vishnu took the form of a man-lion called Narasimha (neither man nor beast). He came down to earth and hid in a pillar on the porch of the demon's palace (neither inside nor outside). He waited until twilight (neither day nor night), when he grabbed the demon king, placed him on his lap (neither on the earth nor in the sky), and destroyed the demon with his claws (not a weapon). Thanks to Vishnu, in the guise of Narasimha, the people of the world were able to live peaceful and safe lives.



Yoga Narasimha, Vishnu in His Man-Lion Avatar, Chola Period, ca. 1250, bronze, 21-3/4 in. Gift of Dr. Norman Zaworski CMA 1973.187

Activity

Write a riddle even more cunning than the one in the story of the demon king.

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Audio Tour

An informative and lively self-guided tour exploring the stories behind the sculpture is available at the ticket center.

Museum and Exhibition Hours

Tuesday–Sunday
10 am–5 pm
Wednesday and Friday
10 am–9 pm

Directions

Located in University Circle, the museum is three miles south of I-90, using the Martin Luther King Jr. Drive exit. Just follow the University Circle signs marked "Art Museum."

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Cover: *Ganesha*, Chola Period, ca. 1070, bronze, 19-3/4 in. Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer CMA 1970.62

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