



## Labels that Stimulate Exploration a labels project evaluation study



Web image courtesy of Art Gallery of Nova Scotia  
(<http://www.agns.gov.ns.ca>)

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) collection features artists from Nova Scotia, as well as Canadian, American, British, and European works. As at many art museums, the issue of whether or not to include written material (extended labels) in exhibitions, and the related issue of who was responsible for the writing, editing, and presentation of labels created tension among educators, curators, and artists. Thus a Labels Project at the AGNS was intended to address this issue, and stimulated a summative evaluation study during 1996. The visitor study reported is a portrait of an institution of that time period. The directorship and

education staff has since changed, and current practices reflect the new staff's ways of thinking about interpretation.

The Labels Project was to enhance the casual visitor experience with the art on exhibition through a program of sectional and object labels that provide information, and encourage and stimulate further exploration. The primary reason for this project was to encourage looking, and thus to enrich the aesthetic experience of AGNS visitors.

The goals of the program were:

- \* To stimulate and empower visitors in order that they can share in the excitement that 'art specialists' feel in their contact with visual arts.
- \* To provide a variety of forms and types of written material.
- \* To increase visitors' comfort level in the Gallery by providing materials that respond to their needs and interests, thus improving the quality of their experience and encouraging return visits.

Critical outcomes for AGNS were to clarify the direction the Gallery intended to follow and ease tensions among staff by formalizing research and literature searches, and establishing policy and guidelines for both the text and format of labels in a written document. The project was initiated and conducted by the Education Curator who later became the Gallery's Deputy Director, Head of Programming.

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There were three objectives and benefits of the Label Project:

- \* To share the curatorial premise of installations in a clear, concise, and engaging manner in order that visitors have a framework from which to begin their explorations.
- \* To engage visitors 'in conversation' about individual objects by providing information and asking questions that encourage further, deeper engagement.



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- \* To increase visitor understanding, comfort and confidence thereby helping visitors to feel part of the Gallery, extend their contact with art, and return to AGNS.

These objectives fit well with Beverly Serrell's belief (1996) that when designing interpretive labels, "The museum's mandate to present information must be tempered by a responsiveness to what visitors are interested in and capable of receiving and processing" (p. x). Rice (1998) also confirms the importance of 'attempting to navigate' between the museum's construction of the institutional perspective or version of reality about artworks and the visitors' ways of knowing.

A full program of visitor, in-gallery information with bilingual (English and French), sectional labels for each permanent collection installation, and object labels was developed and installed for 30-40 percent of the collection on exhibition at AGNS. In addition, an evaluation study of the program was planned for the summer of 1996 when all introduction text panels in permanent collection galleries and wall text labels throughout the permanent collection were to be in place. The evaluation was intended to elicit visitor response and reaction to the presence, content, and format of the labels. Several key issues were identified for the evaluation study. The audience research was to determine if visitors were:

- \* Using extended text labels and text panels
- \* Considering questions asked on labels
- \* Engaging in deeper engagement with objects.

AGNS also wanted to find out about:

- \* Visitor expectations
- \* The type of information visitors thought would be available
- \* The nature of the visit experience
- \* Ways in which information about artworks could be presented more effectively.

Overall, the evaluation attempted to assess the ability of the extended text labels to increase visitor engagement and confidence with looking at and responding to art. The study also evaluated whether the experience with additional interpretive information in the permanent galleries help people to feel a part of the Gallery, extend their contact with art, and encourage them to return to AGNS (see also Soren, 2000b).

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### **Stimulating and Empowering Visitors through Interpretive Labels**

I was invited to conduct the Labels Study and I trained two students who were recruited to assist with in-gallery observations and interviews. One was a fine arts student working at AGNS on a student mentorship grant with the exhibitions curator. She had designed labels for a temporary AGNS exhibition, "Face Value: Nova Scotian Portraiture" and was quite interested in the evaluation phase of label development. The other was a Nova Scotia College of Art and Design student who was doing a summer internship at AGNS because of an interest in museum education and had designed one of the labels for the permanent collection. They each received a training manual before the data collection period and I supervised them throughout the six

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days. I also asked the evaluators to summarize their perceptions about visitor experiences with labels after each day of observations and interviews, and their comments were incorporated into the final report.

A didactic panel explaining the nature of the audience research study was posted at the information desk. People working at the information desk were also informed about the nature of the study and were able to answer questions about the Labels Project evaluation if visitors wanted to know more. Visitors who participated in the survey received a Maud Lewis button from the AGNS gift shop in appreciation for their time and assistance with the Labels Project.

In-gallery observations and conversational semi-structured interviews (e.g., Diamond, 1999) focused on visitor response to the interpretive panels and labels. The evaluation team wrote field notes about observed reading and looking behaviours in permanent collection galleries. An observation protocol helped to focus observations of visitor behaviour in the galleries. We noted the following behaviours:

- \* If the visitor was accompanied by anyone
- \* Conversational patterns if accompanied
- \* Special needs (children, physical challenges, etc.)
- \* Use of information brochure
- \* Number of artworks in gallery
- \* Number of artworks with extended labels in gallery
- \* Number of artworks stopped at
- \* Time spent at four individual works
- \* Number of extended labels read
- \* Introductory text panel reading behaviour
- \* Extended label reading/looking at artwork behaviour
- \* Talking/discussing behaviour.

During interviews, we asked visitors we had observed about their attitudes, expectations and images prior to their visit, visitor experience with text panels and labels in the galleries, and potential visit outcomes. Visitors also filled out a demographic form with questions related to gender, home, age, language(s) spoken, membership, frequency of visits to the AGNS during the past two years, educational background, and occupation.

We conducted in-gallery observations of 56 visitors and 41 informal conversational interviews focused on visitor response to the interpretive panels and labels. The evaluation (Soren, 1996) highlighted the following visitor response related to the key issues about introductory text panels and wall text labels developed for the permanent collection galleries at AGNS:

\* ***Are the labels read?***

The Labels Project visitor behaviour data indicated that 50 to 60% of visitors observed read text on extended labels and about 30% took the time to closely read introductory text panels as an orientation to a gallery. Introductory text panels were read by fewer visitors than extended labels.

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\* ***Who is reading them?***

The profile of visitors observed and interviewed about the information panels and extended labels tended to be well educated, English-speaking, local residents and tourists. People from all age categories read labels. Visitors interviewed ranged in age from 18-24 years (19.5%), 25-34 (17%), 35-44 years (24%), 45-54 years (19.5%), 55-64 years (5%), and over 65 years (15%). Many were working professionals, but there were also a considerable number of students and people who were retired. Almost 60% of the visitors were visiting for the first time. There were also occasional and frequent visitors to the gallery in the sample. This sample of visitors provided a thoughtful critique of the newly developed AGNS labels as individuals experienced them throughout the permanent collection galleries.

\* ***Are the language and content appropriate?***

The most successful aspect of the extended labels and information labels was that they seemed to be accessible and easy to understand. Some visitors were less convinced that the text was useful. Several people offered cautionary comments about interpretation advising that the information provided can change a visitor's perspective, control the visitor, take too much of a person's time in the gallery, take away from looking at the art, or that curatorial authority is most important in the art gallery.

\* ***Are they readable from a design standpoint, i.e., placement, typesize, visual density?***

Some people found that the text was too long and dense in some cases and suggested keeping text "concise and precise," subtle, and informal.

\* ***Do those who read the labels read all or most of them, or do they select randomly?***

More than half of the visitors observed (54%) read extended labels to some extent. Some (13%) seemed to read all of the labels in an area, 18% read most of the labels, and 23% read quite a few of the labels. The rest of the visitors glanced at a few labels (10%), read one (5%), or were not observed reading (31%).

One-third (30%) read the introductory text panel for a gallery deliberately and thoughtfully, or read and discussed panels with others. An equal number of people (29%) glanced at or skimmed through material, read some of the material, hardly read the material at all, or didn't appear to be taking in the material. Just less than half of the visitors observed (42%) did not read, look at, or notice introductory text panels.

\* ***Do people read the labels and look at the work? If so, which do they look at first, and do they look back and forth between the object and the label?***

There were a variety of different ways in which people read labels and looked at works. Some (15%) began to read a label, looked at the work sometimes closely, and turned back to the label to find out more about the work. Others (15%) both read the label and looked at the work closely. A third group (15%) read labels and looked at works with someone else. A fourth group (15%) were browsers who skimmed or glanced at labels but did not take the time to read content. A fifth group (13%) just looked and did not read labels. A sixth group (10%) read more than looked at the works. A seventh group (13%) appeared to have some difficulty reading text, having to lean in to look closely at text or put on glasses to read text; all of these visitors except one wore glasses.

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\* ***Do the labels facilitate interaction between visitors, i.e., do people read them to each other, do they discuss the information, etc.?***

About 60% of the visitors came with someone else and were able to talk about and discuss works. Because the galleries were quite quiet, the evaluators were often able to overhear conversations and strategies people used to understand text. Half of the visitors who discussed works spent considerable time discussing works, explained works to one another, or discussed particular artists.

There were individual preferences for how people looked at, read, and talked about works in the galleries, which suggests that a variety of experiences should be available to satisfy the range of visitor preferences for learning about artworks and artists. Findings indicated that opportunities need to be provided for those who prefer to look at works and not read labels, read minimally about works, or read intensely and discuss works as they look at them.

\* ***Do the questions asked in the text help visitors access the art?***

Half of the visitors interviewed (49%) did not try to answer questions asked on extended labels, "didn't come across any," or were not interested in trying to answer questions. Some visitors (11%) chose not to respond to this question. There seemed to be a split between those who found the questions made them "think more," "contemplate what was said," and those who found them too directive, controlling, and wanting answers. Most visitors interviewed in the Labels Project felt they were being engaged in conversation about artworks in the permanent collection through current information provided by extended labels and information panels. Some commented that energy could also be put into talks with curators, artists, tour guides, or audio-visual aids, which provide other perspectives on works. Talkback books at various locations in the Gallery also provided good insight into people's responses to interpretive material in different areas of the Gallery.

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**Images of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia**

Intrigued by people's images of science, scientist and science exhibits, and what these questions told me about individuals' expectations prior to their science centre or science exhibition experience (e.g., Soren, 2001; Soren, Lord, & Nicks, 1995), I wanted to know more about people's images of visual arts, artists, and art exhibits. I also wondered how images at an art gallery in eastern Canada would compare with people's images of world renowned art galleries such as the Tate Gallery and The Art Institute of Chicago (Soren, 2000a).

Three-quarters of the visitors interviewed commented that they had an image of AGNS prior to their visit based on past visits, other museums they had visited, what others who had visited had told them, or books they had read. These images related to:

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- \* Nova Scotia work, culture or art (14%)
- \* AGNS as a quiet, serious, traditional institution (14%)
- \* AGNS as a nice, bright, relaxing place (11%)
- \* The building housing the AGNS collection (11%)
- \* The location of the Gallery in downtown Halifax (11%)
- \* The folk art collection (9%)
- \* Other museums visited (6%).

**Nova Scotia work, culture or art:** Several people anticipated that they would see "lots of nice paintings" related to Nova Scotia, or Nova Scotia as a province in Canada. An English man who had visited Cape Breton wanted to see "the landscapes I just saw," while an Englishman from South Hampton knew from previous visits that there would be "a lot of Nova Scotian art, lots of historical works." A man from Florida expected to see Nova Scotian work and culture because he had family in the province. A museum educator from Ontario saw a summary in The Lonely Planet's guide on Canada (Lightbody & Smallman, 1994) with a brief description of places to go in Nova Scotia that described AGNS as having Canadian works and decided, "Ah, great! I'm going."

**AGNS as a quiet, serious, traditional institution:** Another group talked about the traditional, conservative nature of the Gallery. A financial consultant from Regina thought of AGNS as a "formal institution, quiet, serious" because of experiences with "other similar galleries." He was surprised and enjoyed the children's classes going on, commenting that "it made the gallery kind of come to life - like there was a reason for it." A student at Dalhousie University in Halifax considered AGNS "quite traditional, conservative," and a teacher from Dartmouth anticipated that the museum would be "formal, stiff" because of "the structure of the building." An Internet executive from Halifax thought of the Gallery as "sometimes a bit stuffy" because of his experiences at openings that he sometimes attended when "things seem upity." Two adolescents from Halifax thought of AGNS with "lots of old, historical stuff," portraits and "ancient things."

**AGNS as a nice, bright, relaxing place:** In contrast, local visitors talked about AGNS as a nice, bright, relaxing place to spend time. From past visits a retired lawyer from Dartmouth knew that it would be a "nice, relaxing place to wait for my wife" and a teacher, also from Dartmouth, thought of a place where she could "just enjoy the artwork." A teacher from Halifax, a member who came "quite often," thought of the Gallery as "a pleasant place to bring my sister from out of town." A young couple from Halifax thought of the Gallery as "segmented, with different feelings in each section" because of past visits. A homemaker from Halifax found AGNS "nice and bright" because of artworks by folk artists, such as Maud Lewis.

**The building housing the AGNS collection:** The building, itself, was the focus of tourist and first time visitors' images. A couple from Florida "didn't expect such a big building" because they thought of a gallery as "a smaller place - a storefront building often" - a private, commercial gallery rather than a public institution; they suggested the name "Art Museum of Nova Scotia" may be more appropriate. A couple from New Jersey also thought of the name "gallery" as a "less organized experience, more like a shop than a museum."

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**The location of the gallery in downtown Halifax:** A couple from Colorado "assumed Halifax would be old" and "an easy-to-get-around and walk city" like Edinburgh, Scotland. They found Halifax smaller than they had expected, liked the Gallery's old building, and were surprised it was modernized. A local woman who worked in the military thought the Gallery would be "not as vast as other galleries" like the National Art Gallery in Ottawa or the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Two people imagined the location of the Gallery in downtown Halifax.

**The folk art collection:** The AGNS folk art collection attracted three accompanied visitors. A police officer knew what objects were at the Gallery because he had seen some of them in Richard Henning Field's *Spirit of Nova Scotia* (1985). A museum educator from New Jersey whose family had a summer home in Halifax thought of a "well rounded permanent collection" and "folk art, particularly" because of her experience going to other museums and AGNS, and her art background. A Nova Scotia College of Art and Design student imagined "a place with a lot of folk art" and wished the Gallery "would emphasize contemporary art more."

**Other museums visited:** The Gallery was compared to other museums experienced by several visitors. Two doctors from Calgary thought AGNS would be "a typical Art Gallery similar to the Glenbow [in Calgary];" they had heard about the Gallery and a sister who lived in Nova Scotia said "we should check out the portraiture exhibition." A Korean couple thought of museums in Québec City.

Overall, the prior images were split between visitors who expected a stuffy, formal, conservative, serious, traditional gallery and visitors who knew more from past experiences that AGNS was a nice, bright, relaxing, pleasant place to spend time. Generally, AGNS tended to be imagined as a smaller, less crowded art gallery that provided an enjoyable, relaxing, comfortable, fun or intimate experience about daily life in Nova Scotia as well as a variety of other styles and art-historical periods. First time visitors tended to compare AGNS with other galleries they had visited, most often near their homes. Local visitors who had visited before were reminded more of other relaxing, quiet experiences like the park, church, or library. Because of the Gallery's name, most visitors who did have prior images anticipated that they would see Nova Scotian historical, folk and contemporary art and crafts, and after their visit confirmed that they had experienced a range of Nova Scotian art and crafts.

It was also significant that 25 percent of the individuals or groups interviewed were unable to think of a prior image of the Gallery before they came to the building. For instance, a local "home engineer" avoided the question and commented instead: "I haven't been very often. I probably don't take advantage" of visiting the Gallery but "I direct other people to the Gallery." She said there is "good newspaper coverage" and she read about exhibitions in lieu of visiting.

This visitor study indicated that it would be helpful for first time visitors and people with no clear idea of what to expect at AGNS to have a more tangible, concrete image of the Gallery. The Labels Project Evaluation Study highlighted the need for a more focused approach to marketing and promoting that could help potential visitors to image AGNS as a relaxing, comfortable, intimate place to visit in downtown Halifax with artifacts celebrating Nova Scotia's heritage. If the image was conveyed more effectively in promotional and orientation materials, it would give

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people a clearer indication of the kind of collection AGNS offers and the unique atmosphere and learning environment a visitor is likely to experience. This image could be conveyed in the banners, posters and promotional materials outside the building, and through an orientation panel/map in the entrance that explains what information to expect on each of the four levels and how to access each level. There could also be inexpensive but compelling orientation materials at the information desk with information about activities for engaging visitors in conversation about works on display, in addition to the current material in the Visitor's Guide. Materials could be developed that visitors would want to take away with them, use to tell family and friends about the AGNS experience, and provide an image of what to expect when visiting. Take-home orientation materials and gift shop items could help to further promote the Gallery as an engaging place to be.

Generally, a pre-conceived image from a past visit or a museum's marketing would likely help visitors to reflect on the kind of experience they expect to have in a museum setting prior to visiting and make their visit a more focused and meaningful learning experience. Prior images also inform Personal Meaning Mapping (Falk, Moussouri, & Coulson, 1998), a methodology that assumes that each individual brings varied prior experiences and knowledge into a learning situation and that these past experiences shape how that individual perceives and processes what s/he experiences.

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### Redesigning Labels and Refining Images

Virginia Stephen was the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's Deputy Director, Head of Programming, in 1998 and had commissioned the Labels Project audience research in 1996. In 1992/93, she had conducted a review of the literature on labels in museums, interviewed appropriate staff in various institutions, and subsequently developed a Label Manual and policy for the AGNS (Stephen, 1995). The Labels Project was consistent with a new strategic plan, which emphasized bringing art and people together and providing opportunities for engagement with art. In June 1998, just prior to an opening of an expansion of the Gallery, Stephen reported on the impact of the Labels Project Evaluation Study for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia two years after the study.

### The usefulness of the Labels Project study for AGNS ...

*It has been very useful from a number of directions. One of them is that I'm in the process now of developing new text panels for our new installation, so the feedback about the technical aspects (e.g., in terms of writing style and size) has been helpful. The nice thing about the study was that we found out that we are probably doing introductory panels for the galleries right with minor changes. We will continue to do them bilingually. The writing style has changed a bit largely because I am writing the new labels myself. It's hard to say what influence the study would have on another writer.*

*One of the most valuable and useful things about the Labels Project study was the fact that there was a document from it and it validates the whole exercise of doing labels in the eyes of the other Gallery staff. Before it was Virginia's "little soap box" and now it's become a very integral part of all of the exhibitions and installations and it's viewed as a serious and important aspect of the Gallery's work.*



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*The whole Labels Project report was distributed to all section heads and to everyone who has a Label Manual, which goes to anybody who is going to be writing text directly, so they have the feedback. We haven't yet had a more formal workshop after the study but we have discussed the contents a lot in more informal ways as part of our exhibition review process and evaluation of all the exhibition changes. So there is reference to the study, and looking back at it.*

*The one thing that was particularly valuable to me was that we didn't really find anything that was new to me. It really confirmed a lot of my instincts, and in that way it validated. That was exciting to me because it meant that we were doing something right and we were starting off on the right track with it. There were no really bizarre things that we hadn't ever thought about that came out of it. Visitors' comments were as I thought they would be, in the range that I thought they would be, and largely the percentages too. We weren't wasting our time.*

## Recommendations from the Labels project related to the Gallery's image ...

*Our new logo [being released the day of the interview] and new letterhead emphasizes the name 'AGNS' rather than 'The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.' It is looking at a shorter, snappier more conversational image. The logo itself has a square in the middle, with a dark centre, and then white, and then a thin line - so it almost looks like a slide or painting frame. There are four swirls of colour around it, like big paintbrush strokes, that go into swirls - one green, one red, one purple, and one yellow - like a pinwheel. It is meant to project the Gallery as a centre of activity, as contemporary, as colourful, with things happening and outreach - reaching out from the centre, whirling into a centre. We will usually include the first line of our mission statement - bringing art and people together - with the logo.*



Old AGNS logo



*Bringing Art & People together*

New AGNS logo, since 1998, following  
Labels Project Evaluation Study

This Labels Project study was made available to the broader art gallery education community. As Chair of the Canadian Art Gallery/Art Museum Educators Research Committee, Stephen facilitated a two and a half hour workshop in June 1997 in Kingston, Ontario, for thirty art gallery educators on developing and writing labels for art galleries and art museums. She also used some of the material in various workshops and conference presentations and in sessions with museology students. People who do visual identity and wayfinding for any kind of building should be interested in this type of evaluation study, Stephen argued, as well as people in advertising, arts education, and public administration. The two research assistants for the AGNS Labels Project were art history students from the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design and became quite fascinated with the Labels study.

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In summary, Stephen felt that the visitor study was useful and important. She commented that “in an ideal world” she would like to do a follow-up study of the new labels being developed to look for improvement in the labels or change in visitor response. Money, time, the huge burden on staff, and moving on to other things made further visitor study challenging. The Gallery’s staff could not do another labels evaluation project in-house; they needed to find funds to bring an external consultant in again to do more audience research.

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