The British Museum

Practical guidelines
Writing text for galleries and exhibitions at the British Museum

August 2022

Contents

Nero: the man behind the myth (27 May – 24 October 2021) in The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (Room 30).

Musicians performing in the Great Court. Photo by Benedict Johnson.

Introduction

This guide summarises the general principles and processes that inform the development of text for permanent galleries, changing displays and special exhibitions at the British Museum.

Each permanent gallery and special exhibition is unique and designed to reflect the objects within it, but works within a consistent, coherent framework. This ranges from the title panel of the gallery, which gives a brief description of the contents, to specific information on labels about individual objects. In both permanent galleries and special exhibitions clarity and consistency are vital. Although digital media is becoming increasingly significant, text is still the main way we communicate with our visitors about the objects on display.

Writing text is a collaborative, team effort. The best text is developed as part of a clear interpretive plan, all elements working together to deliver the main messages of a display. It is essential that writers (curators) and editors (interpretation staff) work together from the beginning towards common goals.

This document is informed by – and sits alongside – the Museum-wide Brand Identity Guidelines, which set out the Museum's tone of voice and house style. The tone of voice, however, can vary quite widely between exhibitions. The Brand Indentity Guidelines are available on request.

China and South
Asia (Room 33),
*The Sir Joseph
Hotung Gallery.*

What is interpretation?

Broadly speaking interpretation can be regarded as anything that helps visitors make sense of their visit to the Museum. The Interpretation Team at the British Museum works collaboratively with colleagues from across the organisation on a range of projects. The core of the Interpretation Team's work is focused on the development of new permanent galleries and special exhibitions.

Every new gallery and exhibition has a core project team, consisting of the lead curator(s), a wide range of designers (including 2D, 3D and lighting designers for example), an interpretation manager and a project manager. Interpretation managers (Department of Learning and National Partnerships) act as the audience advocate when developing gallery and exhibition narratives. Their role is much broader than editorial. They help the team define the audiences for an exhibit, collaboratively shape the overall narrative and structure of a display, and establish the information hierarchy. A commitment to improving access (physical, sensory, intellectual, cultural and emotional) for all current, future and potential users of the Museum's collection, expertise and resources is at the heart of our approach to interpretation. Interpretation managers also have editorial responsibility for ensuring text is accessible and that it adheres to these guidelines ensuring consistency across the organisation.

Developing effective interpretation requires excellent knowledge of visitors' motivations, interests and behaviour. Therefore the Interpretation Team leads on visitor research and evaluation for permanent galleries and special exhibitions. Summative evaluation of exhibitions and gallery projects is used to measure visitor satisfaction and to identify areas where improvements can be made.

China and South
Asia (Room 33),
*The Sir Joseph
Hotung Gallery.*

Our audience

Typically more than six million visitors come from all over the world each year to see the British Museum's collection. The Museum's audience is characterised by diversity. A high proportion of visitors do not speak English as their first language as around 75% of the Museum's audience comes from overseas.

For exhibition and display planning purposes the Museum segments its audience into seven categories, six of which are based on their motivation for visiting (social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual). Percentages given here represent proportions based on the 2017/2018 annual survey.

Self-developers
'Self-developers', non-specialists with an intellectual motivation looking to improve their general knowledge, typically make up 30% of our audience.

Sightseers
A significant proportion of our audience consists of 'sightseers', first-time visitors making a general visit to the Museum (18%). They are keen to see star objects from across the full range of the Museum's collection.

Art lovers
'Art lovers', visitors who are spiritually or emotionally motivated and who are seeking a deep engagement, comprise around 14% of the Museum's audience.

Repeat social visitors
'Repeat social visitors' with a social motivation comprise 7% of the audience. They are motivated by a desire to spend time with friends enjoying a relaxed and worthwhile activity.

Experts
'Experts' comprise around 6% of the Museum's audience.

Families
'Families' make up 25% of the Museum audience. Their needs tend to be driven by the youngest child.

Schools
'Schools' typically make up 5% of total visits to the Museum (they are considered as a discrete audience and they are excluded from the % given above).

The Museum has more than 80 permanent galleries and the average length of visit is around 2 hours 20 minutes. This means that most visitors may spend only a few minutes in individual galleries, selectively browsing a handful of objects. For this reason labels are very important – visitors do read them, but they are often scanning them quickly for essential information. They are also looking for something in the label that helps them make a personal connection with the object.

The Museum's Interpretation Team identifies four types of visitor behaviour, classified by how visitors select objects to explore and what kind of interpretation they need to make meaning from objects:

- **Browsers** – engage with only a small number of the objects they encounter in a display.
- **Followers** – engage more systematically with a display, looking at a greater proportion of the objects often in a more structured way, reflecting the organising principles of the exhibit.
- **Searchers** – seek out particular objects in permanent gallery displays, key items such as the Sutton Hoo helmet for example, or the Lewis chessmen.
- **Researchers** – are much more focused visitors who engage very deeply with the displays in a gallery.

Because most of our visitors (93%) have no specialist knowledge, and will be reading on their feet, information needs to be concise, legible and layered.

Equality Act 2010
The Interpretation Team's work is informed by the Museum's Equality and Diversity Policy. The passing of the Equality Act in October 2010 informs the Museum's ongoing commitment to producing accessible information for the widest range of visitors – including people with mobility, visual, hearing and learning difficulties. This means that larger type sizes and clear typefaces are being used, reflecting best practice in the sector.

The Act simplified, strengthened and harmonised legislation to provide Britain with a new discrimination law that protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society. It protects people from discrimination on the basis of age, disability, race, religion and belief, sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment. Text is written and edited with this legislation in mind. New permanent galleries and admission-charging special exhibitions should always have text available in large print formats.

A young visitor to one of the Museum's Hands on desks. Around 11% of the Museum's audience is under 16. Photo by Benedict Johnson.

How do our visitors behave?

The Museum's displays fall broadly into two categories: a large number of permanent galleries for which admission is free, and two large special exhibitions in The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (Room 30) and The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery (Room 35) which have an admission charge. The Interpretation Team's internal visitor research has identified that the permanent galleries and admission-charging exhibitions attract significantly different audiences with distinct motivations. The differences in motivation are reflected in how people behave and how they engage with the objects and the written texts. This has an impact on how panels and labels are written and how the text as a whole is structured.

Permanent galleries

The Museum's free-admission displays can be viewed as an immense encyclopedia of human civilisation, from deep history to the present day. These displays attract many first-time visitors, the vast majority from overseas. Most want to see as much of the collection as they can – as many star objects as possible – in what is, on average, a 2 hour 20 minute visit. Not surprisingly, tracking visitors' movements through the permanent galleries has established that most visitors stop at a very small number of objects, often only about four to six objects in any given room, and the average length of visit per room can be as short as three to four minutes.

We now design galleries around a limited number of key objects carefully chosen to focus visitors' attention, and to act as gateways to the themes and messages we wish to communicate. Visitors can encounter and access them in any order, and the objects build on one another to reinforce an open, non-linear narrative.

The text for gateway objects is always closely integrated with the object and starts with what the visitor can see. The text then builds out to introduce a bigger theme, usually illustrated in the case by a supporting cast of objects. In this way, gateway labels carry key themes and messages for the gallery. Panels are generally shorter than in exhibitions, providing visitors with visual clues to the gallery's structure, and reinforcing the main messages.

Special exhibitions

Admission-charging special exhibitions in The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (Room 30) and The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery (Room 35) attract visitors mainly from London, the south-east of England, and the rest of the United Kingdom. These exhibitions tend to attract a highly motivated audience, many of whom are regular repeat visitors. Exhibition visitors tend to stop at most of the objects, read a large proportion of the texts, and follow the intended sequence closely. Consequently, we have to manage word count carefully to try to ensure that the exhibition doesn't become too tiring or demanding. We aim for an average dwell time for a special exhibition of between 50 and 60 minutes. This also helps ensure that visitor capacity for the space is not exceeded, and that daily attendance targets are met. Our formative and summative exhibition evaluation indicates that visitors expect and welcome a strong coherent narrative, something more akin to a novel or film, and an object-based exhibition that is aesthetically, intellectually, and emotionally satisfying. Examples of exhibition evaluations are available form the Interpretation Team on request.

The Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate* (22 October 2020 – 21 February 2021) in The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (Room 30).

Writing effective text

Interpretive planning

Text writing takes places towards the end of a long process of interpretive planning. The process begins with the development of a scope paper, an interpretive plan. This document is used to capture the project objectives, and to define the key messages the project team wishes to communicate to the audience. The document also defines desired visitor outcomes, the core and target audiences for each project and the basic narrative structure. Once the scope paper is agreed and signed off, detailed planning and development begins.

During the planning stage of a gallery or exhibition, the interpretation manager produces a section-planning document, initially based on discussions with the curators. This sets out in detail the content of each section, including the number of panels and objects, and the key messages they carry. The section plan is used as the basis for work with the 3D designers. The section plan also helps define the 2D requirements. Once the section plans are completed, writing and editing begins.

The Museum's aim is to create text that is visitor-centred and usually object-focused. Regardless of whether the text is for a special exhibition or a permanent gallery, it is generally written to encourage visitors to look more closely at the objects on display and to reveal something that they might otherwise miss. It makes connections with the overall narrative and messages and prompts visitors to look back at the objects.

Bringing objects to life

Museums have traditionally privileged sight over the other senses. However, we aspire to provide a multi-sensory experience for our visitors and to cater more effectively for our audiences. Although increasingly galleries and exhibitions feature handling objects, soundscapes, or digital media, text is still the most common means to convey an object's meaning and material qualities to visitors. To help visitors imagine an object's original use, text may include sensory details in the labels – the sounds an object makes, whether it has a distinctive smell, or how it feels to hold or touch. Such an appeal to a visitor's senses can make text livelier, and transport them to the place and time from which the object came. Explaining that an ornate drinking cup once smelled of cherry brandy, for example, makes a more immediate and personal connection.

This is just one of many ways to bring objects and the people that used them to life through text, and to make text as close to a personally guided tour as possible. The following list gives a summary of some of the main techniques that writers can draw on to craft engaging interpretive panels and labels that appeal to all audiences.

Content
- Know what you want to say and put the important information first.
- Tell stories and relate them to the main themes and messages in the interpretive plan.
- Answer obvious questions (e.g. 'Why is there a hole in the middle?').
- Avoid jargon and technical terms. If they are essential, define them.
- If it's not obvious, describe the object's function.
- Avoid overloading text with unfamiliar names, numbers and dates.
- Admit uncertainty.
- Relate all text to the agreed intellectual framework and narrative of the gallery or exhibition (as defined in the scope paper).

Know your audience
- Keep label titles short – as a general rule, they should describe what the visitor can see.
- The less you write, the more visitors read, but avoid saying too little.
- Begin in a gripping way – start with a hook.
- Be inclusive by relating descriptions to visitors' everyday experience and understanding – make visitors feel included in the narrative and make the unfamiliar seem familiar.
- Refer to concrete, visible (or other sensory) qualities of the objects to encourage visitors to use their powers of observation.
- Draw attention to detail – if a label can be read without encouraging visitors to look at the object, it is not doing its job properly.

Style and voice
- Make text about people. Avoid writing 'it was thought', 'the Renaissance developed'.
- Avoid cultural and gender bias – don't make 'he' the default pronoun. Use gender neutral language where appropriate (e.g. 'people' or 'they').
- Vary the pacing of sentences and write as you would speak – read your text out loud to see if it flows.
- Use active verbs rather than passive ones.
- Avoid complex sub-clauses and double negatives.
- Check you haven't started most of your labels with 'This cup…' or 'This pot…'
- Use dates, not centuries where possible (e.g. 1820s rather than 'early nineteenth century').

The BP exhibition I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria in The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (Room 30). The show used design, digital media and bold graphics to create an immersive, narrative-driven experience.

Information hierarchy: levels of information and word counts

Galleries and exhibitions contain various levels of written information. Few visitors will read all the information, but they should be able to recognise how that information is organised, what is general and what is specific, and how objects relate to the main stories or themes. If information is layered, everyone can pick out what they want to read.

Written information in galleries and exhibitions is designed to best display and interpret the objects and subject matter, but usually fits into one of the following categories:

Title or introduction panel
(about 50 words)

Section introduction panel
(about 100 words)

Sub-section panel
(80–100 words)

Gateway panel or label
(about 120 words)

High-level quotations on panels or walls
(max. 25 words)

Image or map captions on panels or labels
(max. 30 words)

Standard single labels
(60 words)

Group labels
(80 words)

Special graphics (decoding diagrams etc)
(word counts vary)

The word counts given here for all categories are approximate, depending on the size of the label and the font size. In terms of panel and label lengths, less is often more for visitors trying to make sense of the Museum's vast collection.

Word counts, typefaces, type sizes and reading height of text are part of the house style used by the Interpretation Team and the Exhibitions department. They are based on access guidelines and best practice in the museum sector.

The Citi exhibition
*Arctic: culture
and climate* (22
October 2020 –
21 February 2021)
in The Sainsbury
Exhibitions Gallery
(Room 30).

The Citi exhibition
Manga (23 May –
26 August 2019)
in The Sainsbury
Exhibitions Gallery
(Room 30).

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Panels: functions and types

Evaluation tells us that most visitors to permanent, free galleries do not read traditional panels, but prefer to start with objects. Visitors to special exhibitions are far more likely to read panels and follow a narrative, but many of the same rules for writing apply. Keep them concise and interesting, giving only the most important information. Break the text into short paragraphs, making it easier to scan.

Note: not all displays will have all of these types of texts – each project will have its own hierarchy.

Title or introduction panel/text (Level 1)
This is the first thing a visitor sees. It appears at the entrance to a gallery or exhibition and describes the content or gives the high level message, setting the display briefly in its historical and geographical context. The panel title will be the title of the gallery or exhibition.

Section introduction panel/text (Level 2)
A display is usually divided into chronological or thematic sections. This information introduces such a section. It consists of a short title and explanatory text, and may include images, maps or illustrations. In permanent galleries they may take the form of a 'gateway' panel.

Sub-section panel/text (Level 3)
Sub-section panels introduce specific sub-themes or major groupings within a section of an exhibition or gallery. They consist of a short title and explanatory text.

Gateway panel/label (Level 4)
A gateway panel or label acts as an object-focused introduction to a section or sub-section. It describes an object of outstanding interest, and introduces the theme for that part of the display. The text describing the object and theme may be written in two parts or separate sections (as in Rooms 92–94: Japan), or integrated (as in Rooms 38–39: Clocks and watches).

High-level quotations
These may be included above the title on a panel, or on the wall above case height. They help navigation in temporary exhibitions when a room is crowded, but also add insight, context and non-curatorial voices and perspectives.

Digital media, map and image captions
Captions should place an image in context, making clear how it relates to the key message or theme. For digital media a concise caption usually has a very short title, an indication of duration and whether it has sound.

The Islamic world
(Rooms 42–43),
*The Albukhary
Foundation Gallery.*

*Sicily: culture
and conquest*
(21 April – 14
August 2016)
in The Joseph
Hotung Great
Court Gallery
(Room 35).

Labels: functions and types

Evaluation tells us that in permanent galleries (and free exhibitions) at the British Museum most visitors are attracted to an object and then look for the nearest information. Labels are object-specific texts that answer that need. In special exhibitions with an admission charge, visitors are more thorough and systematic in reading labels.

Labels identify and describe individual objects or groups of objects. They support the key themes and messages of the gallery, but visitors should be able to read them in isolation or in any order.

Where possible, labels are placed directly next to the object. If this is not possible, objects may be numbered and the number will be included on the labels to help visitors locate them. Images of the object may also help visitors match object and text. Object numbers will usually go from left to right and top to bottom.

Displays may also include image labels, and themed labels that sit alongside object labels. Themes might highlight aspects of conservation or science, or give information about a particular style or period.

Labels contain essential information about an object, including name, date, material, where it comes from and its function. For new galleries and temporary exhibitions, the label format and presentation of information will be agreed in advance with the interpretation manager. Although the format may vary from gallery to gallery or exhibition, it is always consistent within a display.

Regarding the order of the information, each item should begin on a new line without punctuation at the end of items except for the brief commentary. If objects are to be numbered, the numbers are usually added later to the finished labels so please do not include them at this stage. The interpretation manager will ensure text follows house style.

As a guide, in older galleries, information on labels is organised in the following way:

Presentation of labels (excluding Prints and Drawings)
1. Description of object
2. Country of origin, culture, date (divided by commas)
3. Provenance (if known)
4. Material
   [line space]
5. Brief commentary (this should be punctuated normally, and end with a full stop)
   [line space]
6. Donor, lender or bequest
7. Departmental abbreviation and registration number

In new labels, dates, materials, technique and provenance tend to be placed after the main label text as this information is usually of secondary interest to the majority of readers.

Note: the focus here is on basic label format. In reality a wide-range of label texts are usually used in special exhibitions, including family labels, labels written by artists and labels that have been co-written with community groups. A selection of examples of different types of labels from recent shows has been appended to this document.

Money (Room 68).

The BP exhibition *Troy: myth and reality*, (21 November 2019 – 8 March 2020) in The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (Room 30).

Labels for drawings, prints and paintings

Labels for paintings and works on paper usually follow a different order of information. Labels in the Prints and drawings gallery (Room 90) follow a template. Standard templates contain a maximum of 18 lines of text (about 110 words) and double labels a maximum of 36 lines (about 220 words). For most Prints and Drawings exhibitions (Room 90), labels are produced using Word templates (available on request).

Presentation of information on labels for the Prints and drawings gallery
1. Exhibition catalogue number (if appropriate)
2. Artist's name and, in brackets, dates
3. Title of work, date (if appropriate)
4. Medium (if there is an inscription, add a semi-colon after the medium followed by 'inscribed' and then the words on the inscription)
   [line space]
5. Commentary (this should be punctuated normally, and end with a full stop)
   [line space]
6. Donor/bequest
7. Departmental abbreviation and registration number

Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint (20 May – 22 August 2021) in The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery (Room 35).

Reflections: contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa (17 May – 15 August 2021) in the Prints and drawings gallery (Room 90).

Acknowledging sponsors and funding

New permanent galleries and major temporary exhibitions, as well as many individual objects, are funded by corporate or individual sponsorship or arts funding.

The name of a major sponsor usually appears on the title panel of the gallery or exhibition, or on specially designed panels or plaques. The exact wording is agreed with the Museum's Advancement department. Logos are included for some corporate sponsors.

Funding for individual objects is usually acknowledged on the object label. Most funds, such as the British Museum Friends or the Art Fund, have standard wording and a logo. The Interpretation Team follows the advice of Advancement, Marketing and Design in these instances.
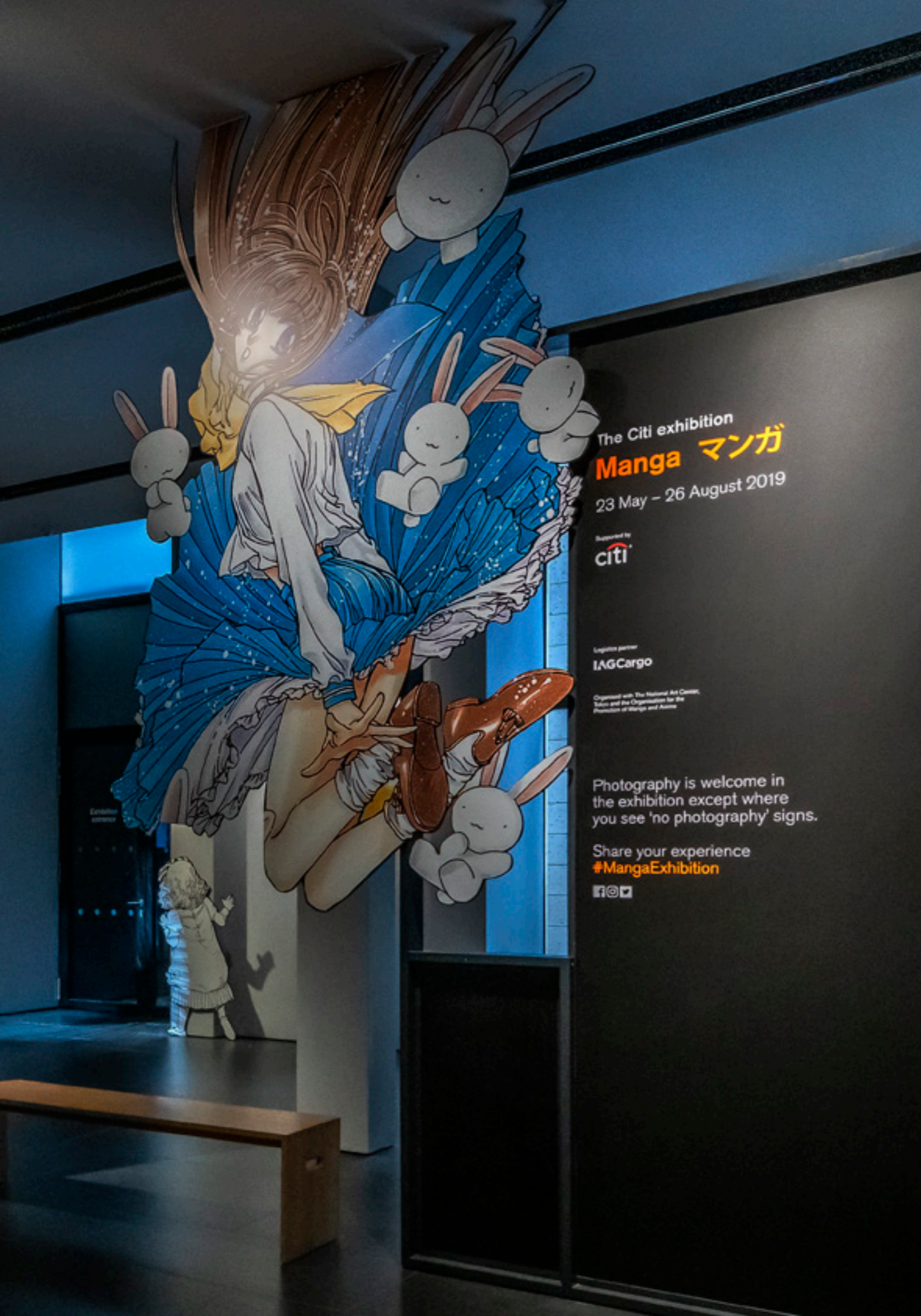
Text: processes

Writing and editing panels and labels for galleries and exhibitions is a major task. The project manager provides a schedule for the display as a whole. This will indicate when text should be sent to the interpretation manager for the exhibition and it is essential that these dates are respected. The text due date is often significantly ahead of the display opening date; this is essential to allow plenty of time for the whole process: editing, review, design, production and installation. The interpretation lead usually manages the text schedule.

Curators may be asked for panel texts first and then labels (the latter may be sent in batches). The panel texts often outline the main narrative. Alternatively, for a larger display it is often better to write the text by section, to ensure that panels and labels work together in supporting the section's main messages and themes.

For major special exhibitions and new permanent galleries, the curator and interpretation manager work together to agree the writing style and tone of voice, and may produce sample text in advance of delivering the rest of the text. Experience indicates that this makes the process much simpler in the long run.

Sending text

Draft text files for editing are required in Word, with no tabs, indents, headers, footers or similar formatting. The project curator sends these files to the interpretation manager, keeping a copy of anything that is sent. The interpretation lead for the project edits the definitive copy and is the only person who makes changes to this document.

Editing and designing

The interpretation manager will usually edit the panel and label text and then meet the curator to discuss and reach an agreed version. This requires time (schedules from previous projects are available on request). Any changes made by the interpretation manager are designed to ensure intelligibility, consistency and clarity, and that the text fits the space available and is in the house style.

At this point, the text is distributed by the interpretation manager to the Head of Interpretation and other agreed stakeholders, such as the heads of department and, for larger exhibitions and galleries, to the Director and Deputy directors. The time taken for this varies, but typically is around four weeks.

Once the final corrections have been agreed and collated, the interpretation manager will send the text, together with images and map and timeline briefs, to the 2D designer. At this point, there should be no further major corrections.

Proofing

The 2D designer works on the design and sends out proofs. Corrections are co-ordinated by the interpretation manager and they manage communication with the designer. The interpretation manager checks all proofs for consistency and errors, but curators have ultimate responsibility for ensuring that information in the final proof is accurate, factually correct and that it reflects current scholarship.

There are three sets of proofs before final sign-off, when the text goes to production. The sign-off process will have been agreed in advance by the curator, project manager and interpretation lead.

Time for correcting proofs is often limited but this stage needs to be prioritised. Proofs need to be checked carefully to avoid expensive and reputationally damaging mistakes. Delays have a knock-on effect on the production of graphics and can result in significant additional costs and graphics not being completed in time for the opening of the gallery or exhibition.

Graphics: practicalities

All supporting graphic material and high-resolution digital files are sent to the 2D designer with the final edited text. These elements are indicated clearly in the text document and on the section plans, which the designer uses as a guide.

Maps

The 2D designer produces maps for the gallery or exhibition in response to a map brief developed by the interpretation manager, from reference material usually provided by the curatorial team. This brief usually includes a photocopy of a relevant map or a clear sketch as reference, with all the information to be included clearly indicated.

Maps should generally include only the key sites, towns, provinces, countries and physical features mentioned on information panels and labels. Most visitors will be reading on their feet, so keep maps as clear and simple as possible. It is not appropriate to reproduce the sort of detailed map that can appear in a book or article.

Supply a typed list of all the names to go on the map. Mark the different categories (countries, regions, names of peoples) clearly so the graphic designer can distinguish them typographically. All the maps within a gallery or exhibition must be typographically consistent (guidelines are available from the Interpretation Team).

Information on the map should be contemporary with the period covered by the display. Modern boundaries or towns may be needed as points of reference and these can be distinguished typographically from ancient features. Contours will not be included unless absolutely necessary as they are easily confused with other kinds of boundary.

Rivers should be marked if they are mentioned in texts or provide points of reference. Only the name of the river needs to be given (Indus or Thames), the word 'River' is not necessary.

Inset maps on a smaller scale are often helpful to locate a region within a larger geographical context.

All maps should include a scale in kilometres, and the north point. A key should also be provided if necessary.

Names and boundaries of politically sensitive areas are usually based on United Nations guidelines, but must be checked with the Keeper of the relevant department and the Head of Interpretation. Such maps usually include a standard British Museum disclaimer: 'The names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the British Museum'.

Timelines

The graphic designer will design the timelines for the gallery or exhibition. They will need a timeline brief, together with the dates and text.

Timelines can be useful to give visitors a broad sense of an exhibition or gallery's chronological structure, and to provide context. As with maps, keep them as brief, and as clear and simple as possible. Beware of using contextual events that are not familiar to visitors or that create cultural bias. Events usually need a brief explanatory text, explaining their significance, and linking them to the main narrative.

Photographs and supporting images

Any object photographs required for the display, including enlargements of objects such as coins and seals, should be highlighted as early as possible so that time can be booked with the Museum photographers.

Contextual photographs for information panels and labels may have to be ordered from outside sources – other museums or galleries, some of them abroad, or agencies. This process can be time-consuming – copyright has to be agreed and reproduction fees negotiated. Many institutions now demand payment in advance and this has to be organised via the project manager. Specialist photographs are usually sourced by the curator or project curator, but the interpretation managers can sometimes help with general picture research and management.

The designer will advise on the quality of the photographs for reproduction in an exhibition, typically 3000 dpi, but it will depend on the printed size required. Departments give original transparencies to the graphic designer at their own risk. It is advisable to have digital copies made.

A graphic timeline in The Asahi Shimbun Displays *Akan drum: the drummer is calling me* (12 August – 10 October 2010) in Room 3.

Drawings, illustrations, decoding graphics and plans
It is important that drawings or plans within a gallery or exhibition should be drawn in a consistent style and to a high standard. If these are needed, a clear brief should be developed, and sufficient time should be allowed for illustrators to prepare them. They should be discussed with the graphic designers to agree dimensions, medium and style, and to make sure that drawings are suitable for reproduction on exhibition graphics. Note that illustrations prepared for books may not always reproduce successfully.

Copyright
Copyright must be cleared for all quoted material, maps, photographs and illustrations used on panels or labels by the project curator, interpretation staff or someone else, to be agreed with the project manager at the time.

Under current copyright legislation, if illustrations are copied from books, they must be cleared for reproduction with the copyright owner (the author and/or the publisher), which may take some time.

The credit line for all images and third-party material should be given in the relevant caption. Occasionally credit lines, for instance for quotes that appear throughout a display, may be added to the general acknowledgments panel.

The Citi exhibition *I object: Ian Hislop's search for dissent* (6 September 2018 – 20 January 2019), in The Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery (Room 35). The graphics were designed to accommodate speech bubbles, incorporating comments from guest curator Ian Hislop.
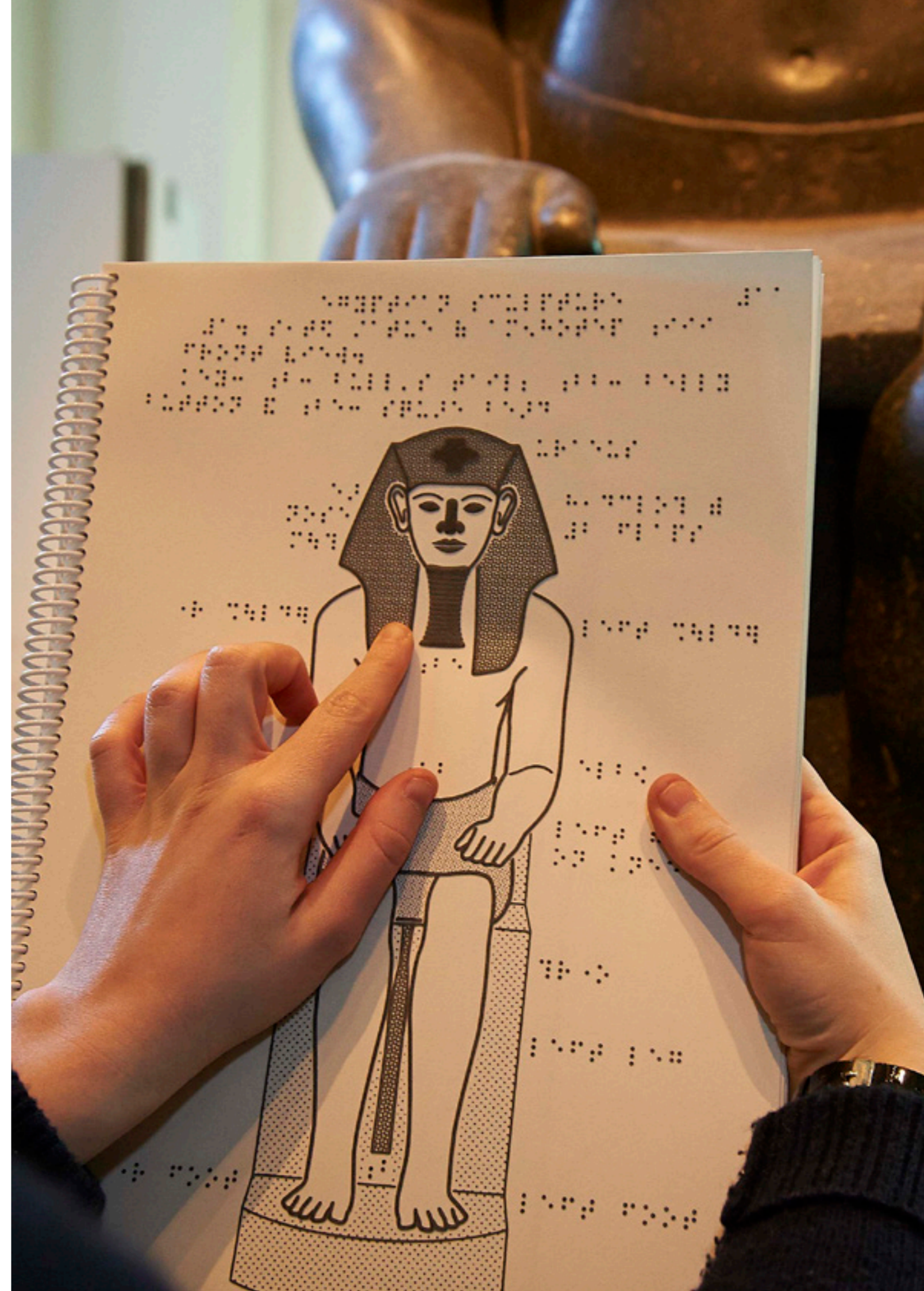
Supporting interpretive materials

Tactile and large print guides

All new permanent galleries, and some special exhibitions, have tactile guides with raised images and Braille text (or an appropriate alternative). Interpretation managers coordinate the production of these resources in consultation with the Royal National Institute of Blind People, curators and the Equality and Diversity Manager.

2D designers also produce a large print guide containing all the exhibition text. These resources should be developed for all new permanent galleries too. Large print guides are displayed in holders at the start of the exhibition or gallery. It is desirable that the location of large print guides is consistent across the Museum in permanent galleries.

Family labels, trails and learning materials

Where appropriate special exhibitions have young learner labels (or other appropriate interpretation), developed collaboratively by specialist staff in Learning and National Partnerships, the interpretation lead and the curatorial team. The Learning and Communities teams produce additional resources for families, teachers, students and community groups to cover most permanent galleries and all special exhibitions. They also provide advice on using displays to support different areas of the National Curriculum.

A touch tour is available in Egyptian sculpture (Room 4), with interpretation in multiple formats, including a Braille book with tactile drawings.

Gallery refreshment projects

In time, new research makes it necessary to change the interpretation provided in the galleries, or the panels may be damaged or worn. Changes to panels and larger quantities of labels are scheduled as small projects and are usually produced by external contractors. Projects should be discussed with the Head of Interpretation at an early stage.

When sending corrections as part of a small refreshment project, specify the gallery and the location (e.g. case number) of the panels or labels to be replaced, and the category of label needed.

Japan (Rooms 92–94), *The Mitsubishi Corporation Galleries.*

Updates and replacement labels for older galleries

Small quantities of standard replacement labels (no more than about 10) for older galleries may be produced in-house by curatorial departments using approved templates. Exhibitions and Capital Planning and Programme Management keep records and stocks of the paper used for labels in galleries.

In existing older galleries, there are four basic types of label. These are also used for gallery refreshments where the original design and structure remain unchanged. The information follows the format shown on page 23.

Shelf labels
Word count: about 30 words (including essential information)
These are designed for use with glass shelves. They fit into label trays attached to the front of the shelf and are shallow enough not to cast a shadow on to objects below.

Square labels
Word count: about 70 words (including essential information)
These are used on vertical panels – displaying jewellery or coins – or on label slopes at the front of cases.

Base labels
Word count: about 45 words (including essential information)
Labels for the base of a case are in a larger type size because they are further away from the reader.

Ex-case
Word count: about 75 words (including essential information)
Labels for free-standing, ex-case objects are set in a larger type size.
Where necessary, these can sometimes be used as base labels in cases.

Label template training
If you would like information on using the templates, and on printing and cutting labels, please contact the Training and Development team in Human Resources at training@britishmuseum.org and request a Label Template Training session.

China and South
Asia (Room 33),
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Interpretive planning documents

This section details what our interpretive planning documents are, what their purpose is, and the sequence in which they are developed.

Scope paper (or interpretive plan)
What – The scope paper (or interpretive plan) is a short overview document that sets out the big idea for an exhibition or permanent gallery, the objectives, key messages, visitor outcomes, key objects, broad interpretive approach and target audiences.

Who – The scope paper is developed collaboratively by the lead curator, the Head of Interpretation, Head of Exhibitions and other stakeholders (this varies slightly from project to project). It is signed off by the Directorate and the Keeper.

Section plan
What – The section plan is the detailed interpretive plan or road map for the exhibition. It details all the exhibition content and interpretation elements. Section by section, subject display by subject display, it sets out the visitor route, object groupings and key messages, graphics requirements, digital content and any other interpretation and display elements.

Who – The section plan is produced and managed by the interpretation manager, and developed collaboratively with the curators, designers and wider project team. It is primarily to provide information to the 3D and 2D designers to shape the exhibition design, and to keep track of changes as the design develops iteratively. The section plan is eventually superceded by design drawings.

Digital interpretation in the exhibition *Ancient lives: new discoveries* (22 May 2014 – 12 July 2015) in Room 5.

Text package
What – The text is drafted for each of the graphics listed in the section plan, such as section panels, sub-section panels, object labels and family labels. The text is edited, proof read, reviewed by senior stakeholders and signed off, before being issued to the 2D designer (see 'Writing, editing and proofing process' for next stage).

Who – The text is drafted by the curator, in close discussion with the interpretation manager. In some instances the interpretation manager drafts text for review by the curator. The interpretation manager is responsible for editing and proofing the text. They circulate it for review and comment to the Head of Interpretation, Head of Exhibitions, Keeper of the relevant curatorial department and to the Director. The interpretation manager collates comments and agrees amends with the curator.

Briefs (digital media, and other interpretive elements)
What – Detailed briefs are drafted for each of the digital media, graphic (e.g. maps, timelines) and low-tech interactive elements in the exhibition. The interpretation lead usually manages this process. The briefs set out the requirements, messages, storyboard (as appropriate), assets and considerations for each of these elements. They are then issued to the appointed contractor or in-house team member and follow their own timelines for design development, review and production.

Who – The interpretation manager writes the briefs for the elements identified above, in close discussion with the curator(s), project manager, Head of Exhibitions, Senior Designer, Head of Schools and Young Audiences and Head of Interpretation (as appropriate).

A visitor following the *Collecting histories* trail in Africa (Room 25), *The Sainsbury Galleries*.

The writing, editing and proofing process

1. Writing
Text is drafted for each graphic item listed in the section plan, delivering the identified key messages, agreed narrative and target word counts provided by the interpretation manager.

2. Editing
Text is edited by the interpretation manager and edits are then discussed and agreed with the curator(s). Text usually goes through two rounds of editing and review until a draft text package has been agreed. The interpretation manager will suggest revisions that ensure the text delivers the agreed narrative, is engaging and accessible for the target audience, and fits the agreed word counts and house style outlined in this document.

3. First review
The text is reviewed and commented on by the Head of Interpretation, Head of Exhibitions and Keeper of the relevant curatorial department. The interpretation manager and curator discuss the comments and revise the text in line with the feedback received.

4. Second review
The text is reviewed and commented on by the Director and Deputy directors. The interpretation manager and curator discuss the comments and revise the text in line with the feedback received.

5. Issue to 2D designer
The interpretation manager issues the final text package to the 2D designer for artworking. There should be no rewriting and only minimal changes to the text after this point.

6. Artwork proofing
The 2D designer issues two sets of proofs for review and proofing corrections. At this stage the text has been finalised and any corrections are minor proofing changes and minor edits where required. More substantial changes at this stage may incur additional design fees. The interpretation manager is responsible for agreeing and marking up the corrections, and issuing them to the 2D designer.

7. Sign off
The third proof is circulated to the Head of Interpretation and the Head of Exhibitions for review and sign off. The interpretation manager is responsible for returning any final corrections from this round and for signing off the final proof for production.

The Asahi Shimbun Displays *Collecting histories: Solomon Islands* (20 June – 1 September 2019) in Room 3.

Other policy and guideline documents

The Museum's approach to interpretation and text is informed by other internal policy documents and guidelines held by the Interpretation Team and which are available on request:

- Accessible and inclusive design
- Accessible subtitles and captions
- Copy editing and style sheets
- Gateway objects
- Large print guides
- Maps
- Timelines
- Visitor research and evaluation reports

For further information please contact the Head of Interpretation by emailing: learning@britishmuseum.org

The BP exhibition
Troy: myth and reality,
(21 November 2019
– 8 March 2020),
in The Sainsbury
Exhibitions Gallery
(Room 30).

Appendix

This appendix includes several examples of different types of text from recent special exhibitions and permanent gallery displays. More examples are available from the Interpretation Team on request.

Object labels: guest voices
The object labels in the Citi exhibition *I object: Ian Hislop's search for dissent* (6 September 2018 – 20 January 2019) were designed to accommodate speech bubbles, incorporating comments from guest curator Ian Hislop alongside more traditional label texts.

The advantages of coins in terms of their status and dissemination are shared by banknotes – with the added bonus that it is even easier to adapt them to the purpose of dissent.

You don't need a sharp object, just a pen.

Defacing government property
Countries have different rules about defacing currency. In the UK, European Union and China, for example, defacing banknotes is illegal, so alterations to designs have to be subtle if they stand a chance of remaining in circulation. In the USA it is not illegal, so defaced banknotes remain in circulation indefinitely.

1. **'The C.I.A murdered Kennedy'**
   One dollar banknote, USA, 1970s
   Given by T.S.N. Moorhead

2. **'Impeach the tyrant', referring to former President Barack Obama, and other anti- government messages**
   10 dollar banknote, USA, 2010s
   Given by Francis Allard

A very neat example of dissent at the expense of the British Museum itself. Not only does it mock the pomposity of the whole process of collecting and exhibiting old artefacts, it suggests that you can stick anything in the Museum and no one will even notice for days. Very funny – though I am not entirely sure the Museum thought so at the time.

Peckham Rock
Marker pen on found rock by Banksy (born 1974), UK, 2005

In 2005 the artist known as Banksy installed – without permission – this 'cave painting' fragment in one of the Museum's galleries. He even gave it a fake identification number and label, mimicking the Museum's house style. It remained on the wall for three days before the Museum was alerted to the hoax via Banksy's website.

On loan from the artist
Featured in the British Museum/ BBC Radio 4 series 'I object'

Peckham Rock in situ in the Roman Britain gallery, 2005.
© 22

Special graphics
The Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate* (22 October 2020 – 21 February 2021) included this almost life-sized graphic of a caribou, showing how every part of the animal is used by Arctic Peoples. This section of the exhibition also incorporated handling materials, and introduced the Young explorers labels used throughout the show.

sleeping bag and mattress

kayaq

Material matters

Arctic Peoples are very skilled at using the materials available to them. Look at how many things can be made from one caribou (wild reindeer).

Do any of these surprise you?

Take this opportunity to touch some of the different materials you will see in the exhibition.

Handling materials
These handling materials have been obtained from reindeer herds in Sweden, Norway, Finland and the UK. They are by-products of herds farmed primarily for their meat, but no part of the reindeer goes to waste.

trousers

drum

foreshaft

harpoon line

Young explorers look!

As you walk around the exhibition look for this symbol.

It tells you that the object used to be something else. Can you work out what?

For example, a bag made from dried fishskin used to be a fish.

thread

scraper

bow and arrow

caribou hide

socks

parka

sinew (ligament)

rib bone

fishing line

antler

tent

bag

Using a scanning electron microscope, Museum scientists have magnified a caribou hair to reveal a structure that looks like bubble wrap. This traps hot air, which keeps the animal very warm, as well as anyone wearing clothes made from caribou fur.

boots

binding and struts

mittens

foreleg

bucket

**Find me: ice scratcher
What did I used to be?**

Ice scratcher

Mimicking animals is an important hunting skill. Before rifles were adopted, a hunter would have to get close to his prey. The seal claws, bound with sinew to one end of this driftwood ice scratcher (8), enabled him to emulate a seal sunning on the ice. The familiar noise calmed his prey, lulling it back to sleep, so he could approach it unawares.

(8) Inupiat or Yupiit, USA – before 1860s
Donated by Augustus Wollaston Franks
British Museum

What things – objects or otherwise – reflect who you are?

#IObject

How would you send a secret message?

#IObject

Gateway objects
Two examples of gateway objects from Money (Room 68), a recently refreshed permanent gallery. The actual objects are displayed on a bright pink background to catch visitors' attention and to direct them to some of the most important coins in the gallery.

Young learner labels
Peru: a journey in time (11 November 2021 – 20 February 2022) included a thread of labels for young learners (age 7–11). About 6% of visits to this exhibition were made by families.

'I liked the red information cards for children that were by many exhibits. My 5-year-old grandson loved that.'
Visitor feedback

The earliest coins

Electrum coins, about 650 BC, Lydia (modern Turkey)

These are some of the earliest coins in the world. Made from electrum, a naturally occurring mixture of gold and silver, they were issued in Lydia. Although irregular in size and shape, these early coins were produced according to a strict weight standard. They had a design on one side, and the other side was marked with simple punches. The lion's head seems to have been a royal symbol, so we assume that the coins were authorised by the kings of Lydia.

Image: this tiny coin was made by hand – a piece of electrum was placed on a die and hammered with a punch
© Trustees of the British Museum

Circulating messages

Penny defaced by suffragettes, UK, 1903 or later

In 1903, as part of the campaign for women to be given the vote in the United Kingdom, a group including Emmeline Pankhurst set up a radical organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The WSPU used tactics including civil disobedience, rallies and demonstrations. This coin – an ordinary penny minted in 1903 – was illegally stamped with the suffragette slogan 'Votes for Women'. It circulated as small change and spread the message of the campaigners.

Image: detail of the countermark across the portrait of King Edward VII
© Crown Copyright

Pacific Ocean riches: fish were an important food source.

What other food sources can you spot?

Landscape: Look for the symbols showing bird feathers from the rainforest, circular mountain lakes and ocean waves.
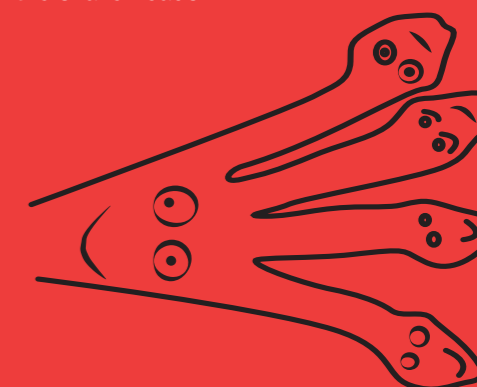
What other landscape features can you see nearby?

Powerful creatures: birds represent the sky, big cats (like jaguars and pumas) have power and snakes can travel through the underworld.

Keep your eyes open for these animals – they appear lots of times!

Mythical beings: can you spot the twitching cat whiskers and the snake heads?

What other animals can you see being used to represent powerful mythical beings?