Enriching Visitor Experiences

The Reinstallation of the Denver Art Museum's European and American Collections

Funded by The Getty Grant Program

Designing Visitor-Friendly Galleries

"I liked the way that the resources seemed to appeal to every different level of person coming to a museum. There were things for little kids, and parents, and people who have a vast knowledge of art as well as novices."

—Visitor panel participant

Since the late 1980s, the Denver Art Museum has been reinstalling the permanent collections with an eye to making our galleries and artwork more inviting and accessible to visitors. The reinstallation of our European and American collection is only the latest in this ongoing effort. Like our earlier installations, it builds on what we've learned and experimented with to date—and hopefully will provide inspiration and insights for future projects.

Some of the museum's most devoted and frequent visitors are people who have a strong interest and background in art. But roughly seven out of ten of our visitors are "novices"—adults who define themselves as interested in art but not very knowledgeable. Many of our family visitors fit into this category, and they are often most comfortable visiting with children. The challenge for our interpretive teams is to devise materials that help all three audiences—more sophisticated visitors, novices, and families—get more out of their experiences with art. (Our 1986 research on novices and more sophisticated visitors has been central to

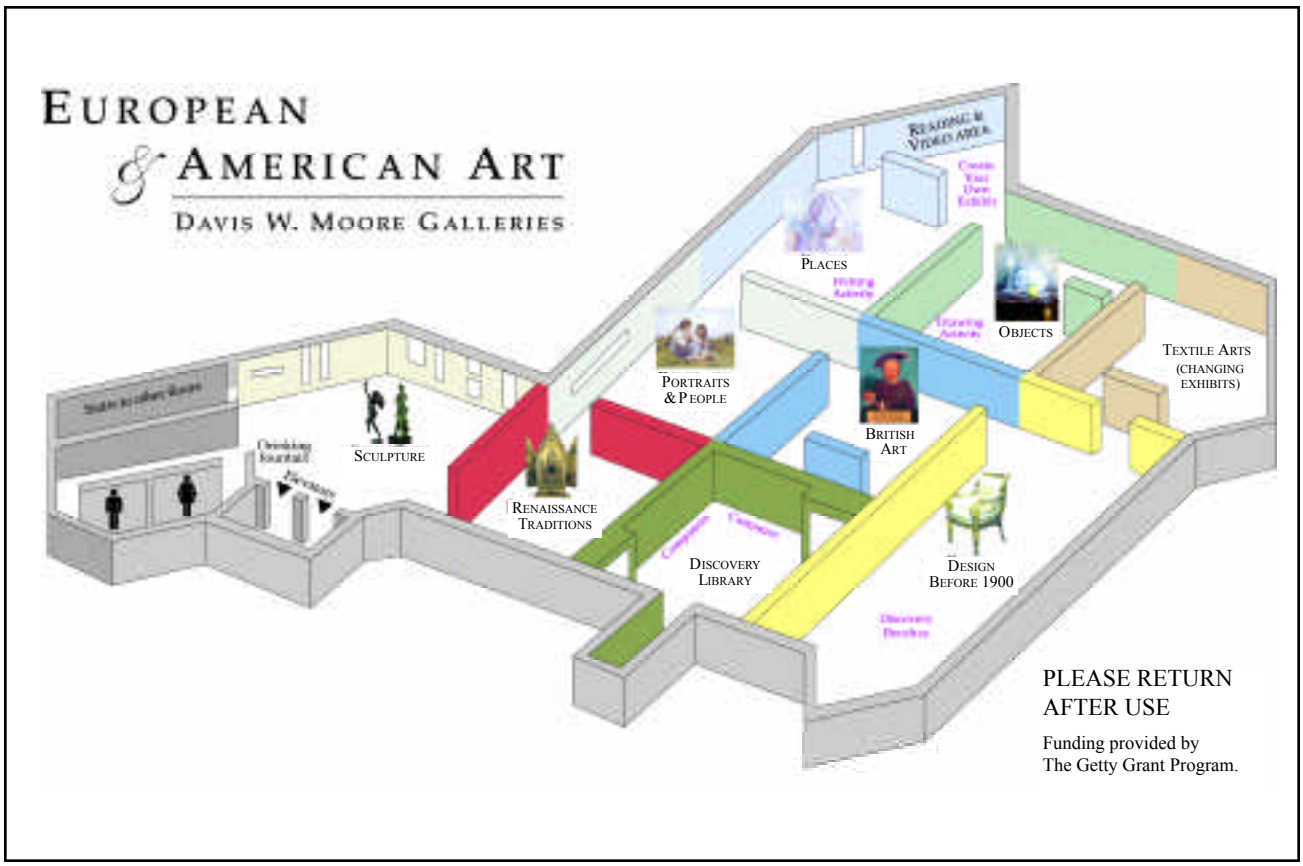
A sculpture installation in the first gallery introduces visitors to the floor's thematic approach.

all of our reinstallations. The report can be ordered from the Education Department.)

What we came up with for our European and American galleries was not a single strategy, but a deliberate range, including a hanging based on thematic groupings, visual labels, a random-access audio program, and hands-on activities targeting adults. We also created a seating area in the galleries where visitors can look at books and videos related to the artists on view; an orientation stand with pick-up maps;"connection cards" with topics visitors can pursue at home; and "Eye Spy" games in which visitors hunt for details from works on view. While the last is aimed at families, we sometimes find adults enjoying the games on their

"I'm not a person who goes to the museum a lot, simply because I don't [have] enough information to keep me interested. I don't know how to fill in the pieces, which is what this [floor] is doing. . . . It just makes it so much more accessible."

—Visitor panel participant



The setting for the installation is roughly nine thousand square feet of gallery space. Visitors can pick up a laminated version of this map as they enter the galleries.

own. All of these interpretive materials were made possible by the generous support of The Getty Grant Program. The floor also includes a Discovery Library created with separate funding.

"It's far from stuffy."

—Visitor panel participant

The interpretive team, led by the museum's master teacher for European and American art, Melora McDermott-Lewis, included two curators (one of painting and sculpture, the other of modern and contemporary art), an exhibit designer, a graphic designer, and a writer. But as curator Gwen Chanzit points out, "We didn't really worry about departments. We just erased all those boundaries and all worked together. No decision was made without teamwork." A freelance writer and designer and additional education, installation, and publications staff supported this core team.

A video and reading area lets visitors pursue information about the artists who intrigue them.

Dozens of visitors also helped shape our interpretive strategies. Some gave us formative feedback when we tested prototypes in the galleries. Others participated in visitor panels—discussion groups led by a moderator. (See *Visitor Panels:A Handbook for Improving Interpretive Materials through Audience Input* for a description of this technique.) All gave us valuable advice.

"If you . . . provide some greater method for people to dive in deeper, you . . . do wonderful things for the museum and for people to appreciate it."

—Visitor panel participant

A Thematic Approach

"When I go to a museum, I get overwhelmed. [With] this, I can feel like, okay, I've got a little control here. I can kind of figure this out all by myself."

—Visitor panel participant

Keeping in mind visitor experiences and the collection's strengths, we reviewed our holdings. We wanted an installation that emphasized the pleasure of looking, so that visitors wouldn't feel they needed an art background to enjoy a rich experience. At the same time, the installation needed to be equally exciting and intriguing to our more sophisticated audience. We felt that a thematic approach would be less daunting to novice viewers than a chronological arrangement and would give them more confidence to make their own connections. And unexpected juxtapositions would help more knowledgeable visitors see the art in a new light.

But our thematic solution was also based "on the nature of the collection itself," notes Timothy J. Standring, curator of painting and sculpture. "Our collection isn't representative of every school, nor does it work well chronologically. But we've got good selections thematically across the board, both American and European. So there was also a very pragmatic reason for hanging the art thematically."

"By putting the two different types of grapes one over the other . . . you look at things that you might not look at ordinarily," one visitor points out.

"I've never had any formal training. But it's simple for me to make a comparison when they're stacked like that."

—Visitor panel participant

Looking at our holdings, we narrowed the themes down to Places, Objects, Renaissance Traditions, and Portraits and People. To introduce visitors to the floor's concept, we set up a gallery devoted to sculptures of women in the floor's lobby. This was a pragmatic decision as well: the light levels were too high to display paintings.

In each gallery we juxtaposed works from different traditions, countries, and centuries in ways that a viewer might find surprising or intriguing. In the process of arranging the objects, new relationships came to light. "We were excited by how much more we saw in the works as we put them together," notes McDermott-Lewis. We anticipated that nontraditional arrangements would encourage visitors to look longer and get more out of each work. "We hope it's not only easy to tell what two or three works have in common," McDermott-Lewis says, "but that it also becomes clearer what makes each one special."

"As a working artist I liked the placement of contemporary artists' work alongside known masters."

—"Tell Us What You Think" comment card

"I developed a method of comparing. . . . Once I got it, it was like, oh, this *is the game."*

—Visitor panel participant

Still Life, 1950–67, René Magritte, TL 17892

Soup Tureen and Apple, 1877, Berthe Morisot, 1997.218

"You don't think of whimsy in a museum," says a visitor, but juxtaposed paintings often carry on amusing visual dialogues.

"Human Connection" Labels

"It gives more meaning to the painting. . . . It draws your attention to things that you would otherwise not notice."

—Visitor panel participant

Visitors want to know about the people behind a work of art—those who made it and those who originally enjoyed or used it. In our 1986 study of visitors' memorable experiences, we found that both novices and more sophisticated visitors are interested in understanding more about the artist and the creative process—and that making this "human connection" can greatly enhance their experiences with artworks.

With this goal in mind, we developed "human connection" labels with a strong visual emphasis for thirty objects in the installation. Visitors felt strongly that each label should be specific to an object and should help them see and understand more about that individual work or artist. "We included a lot of anecdotes, and quotes from the artist whenever possible, because it can communicate to people a lot better when artists say something in their own words," notes writer Lisa Levinson. We looked especially for quotes that "said something about the specific work that we have, or that revealed something about the artist himself—his personality, what his intention was in making his paintings."

Written in the form of short, conversational blurbs, the text allows readers to

The laminated pullout labels are placed beside the artworks in boxes painted the color of the gallery wall.

"I think if you haven't studied it, you look at the painting and say, 'That's attractive.' But if you have some tidbits, it . . . makes you think about maybe what the artist was thinking about at the time, or what was going on at the time. More than just, 'Oh, some brushstrokes.'"

—Visitor panel participant

sample the information quickly and in any order. We avoided "words you don't use in everyday conversation," explains Levinson. The opening line of each blurb is highlighted to give visitors a sense of what's coming.

Almost two-thirds of each label is devoted to visuals, a definite plus for most visitors. The small bits of text look much less daunting and, as one visitor noted, the play of text and illustrations encourages "visual thinking." For graphic designer Mary Junda,"The first priority was to underscore visually the point made in the copy. The main focus is always the painting that's in the museum's collection. From there the labels help viewers make comparisons, sometimes using other works by the same artist." The labels highlight details that offer "inside information" about the artist. "It helps the viewer crack the code, to see and enjoy the artist's point." Because details are highlighted and discussed in the labels, one visitor observes that "you're spending a lot more time with the piece and think about it a lot more." Highlighting details is also practical: it lets viewers look closely when they're not allowed to get too close to the actual painting.

Rather than grouping the labels in a single rack in the center of each gallery, we designed them to be pulled out of wall boxes placed directly beside the artworks. That way viewers can find information about the works where and when they want it. The labels are meant to be clearly visible, yet unobtrusive.

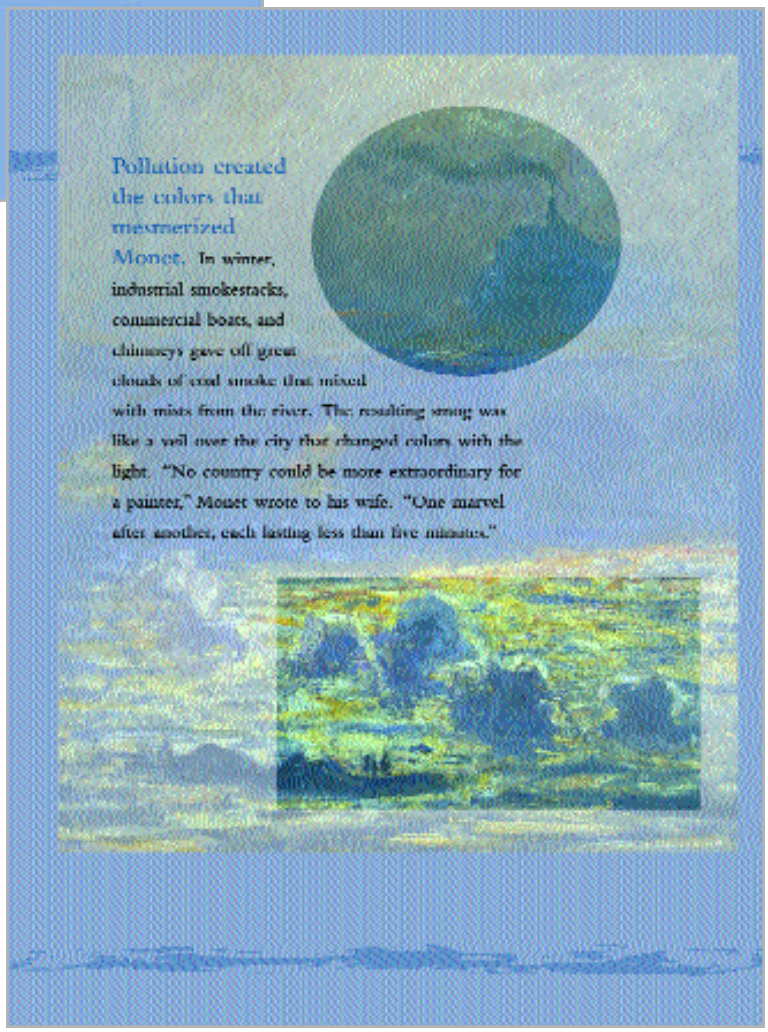
"I kind of liked the fact that they explain a little bit about the artist and why they were . . . painting a certain way. . . . Not really putting an opinion in your head—just rather letting you interpret it your own self."

—Visitor panel participant

Designed in a two-fold format,the labels are made up of small bits of text that can be read in any order, each illustrated by a different visual.

When the labels are in their wall boxes,only the titles are visible. Once they're pulled out, the cover image helps visitors connect it with the correct work (above).

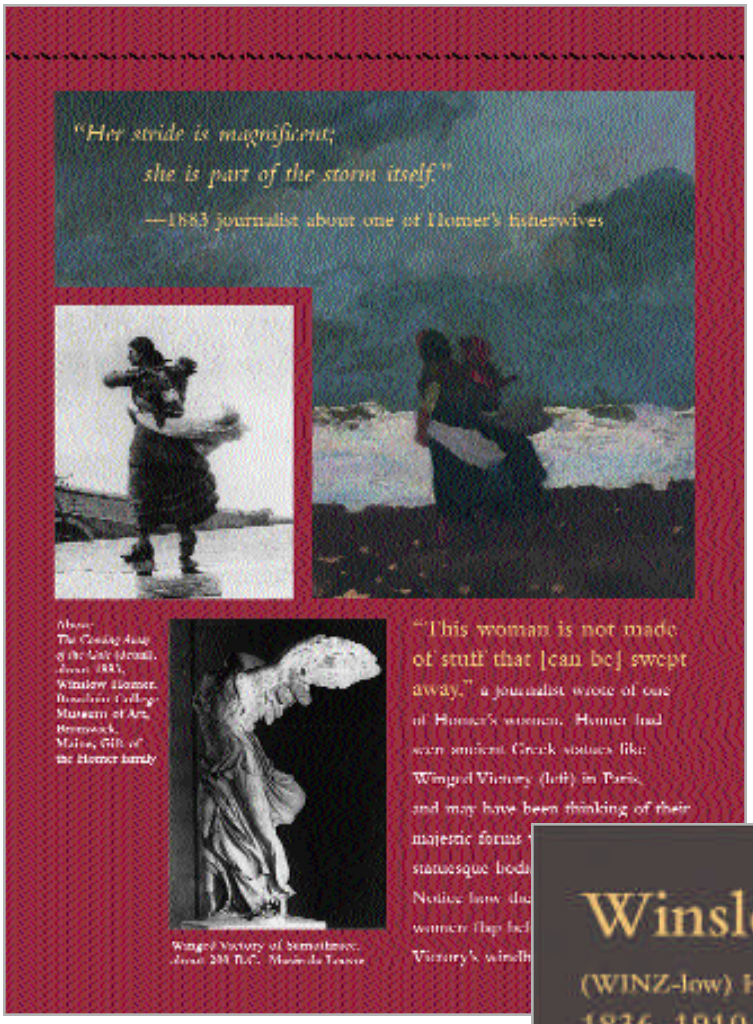
A strong lead sentence draws the reader into each new topic (right).



Sample Pages from Pull-out Labels

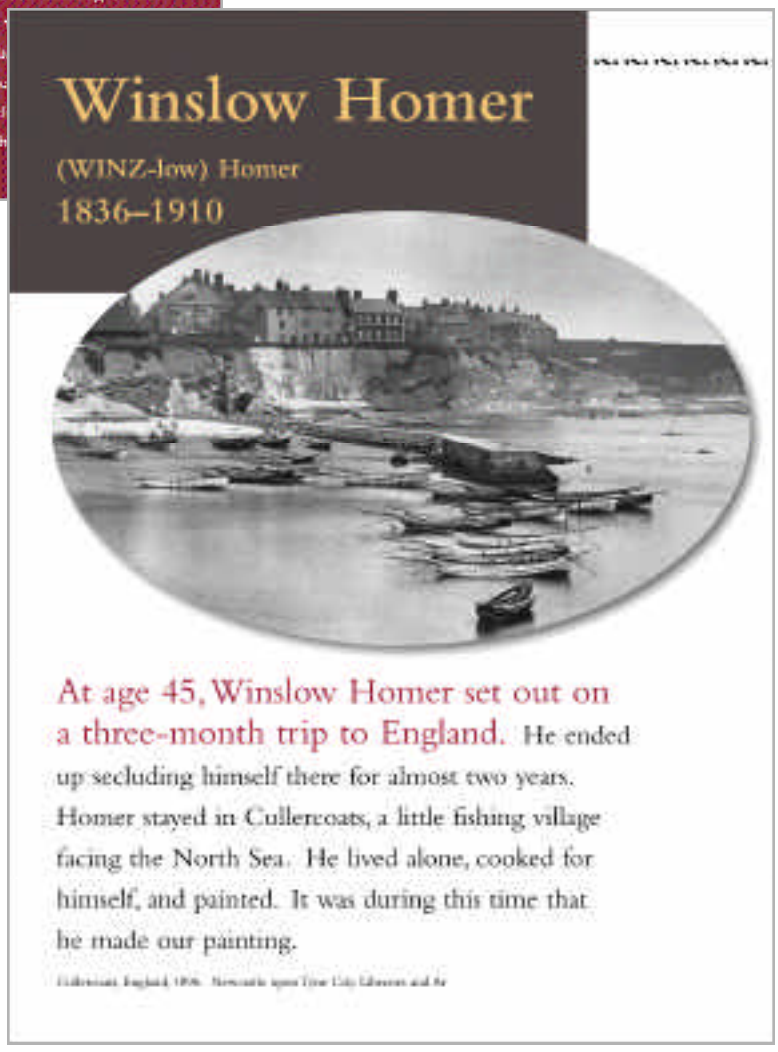
"The titles were fascinating. They made you curious before you got into it."

—Visitor panel participant



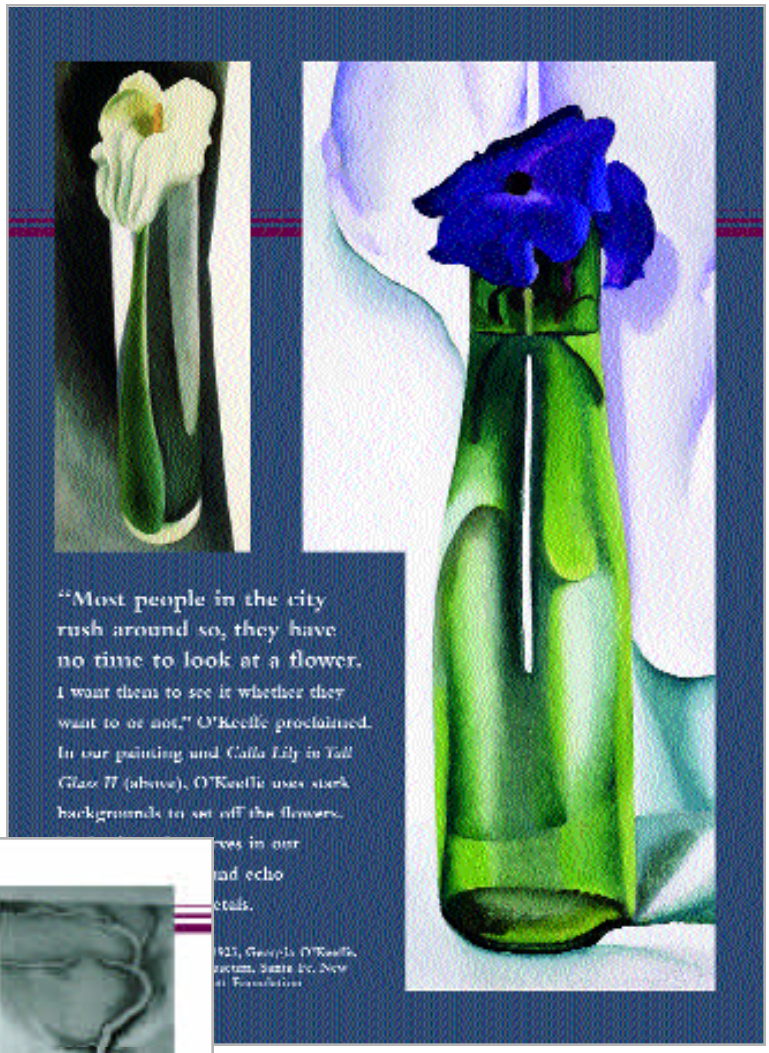
Photos invite comparisons with related works (above),and give context to the painting's subject (right).

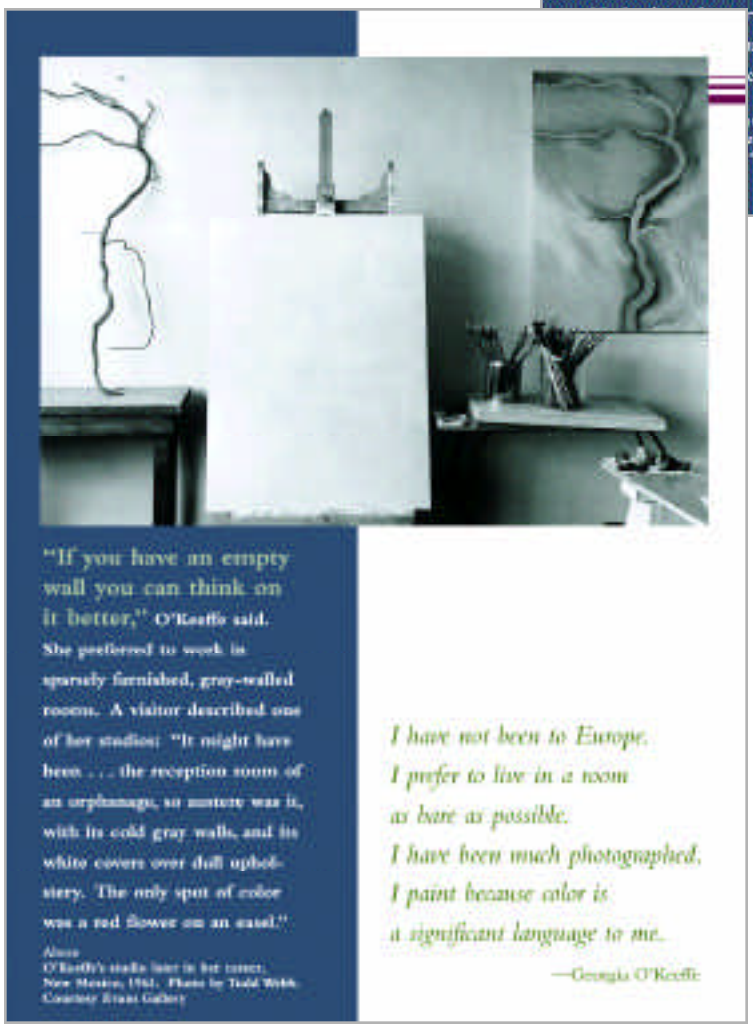
The first panel of each label provides a key to pronouncing the artist's name (right).



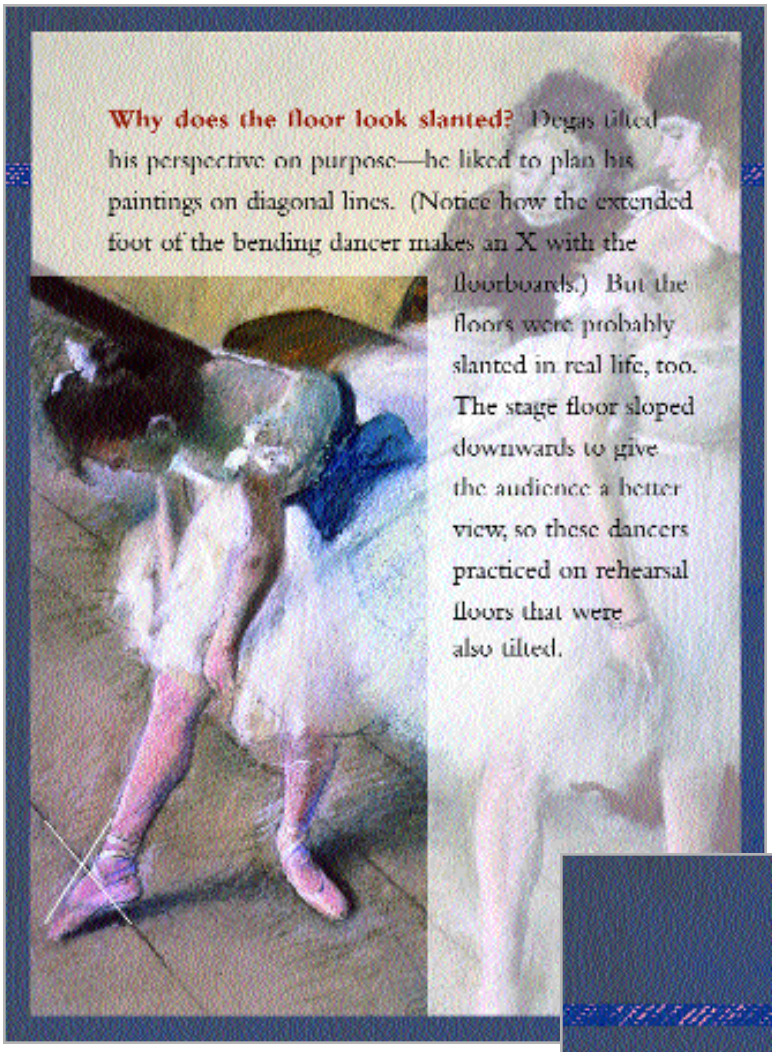
"This painting here—I've probably walked by it a hundred times and never saw it. It's kind of neat just to sit there and read this and look at the painting."

—Visitor panel participant



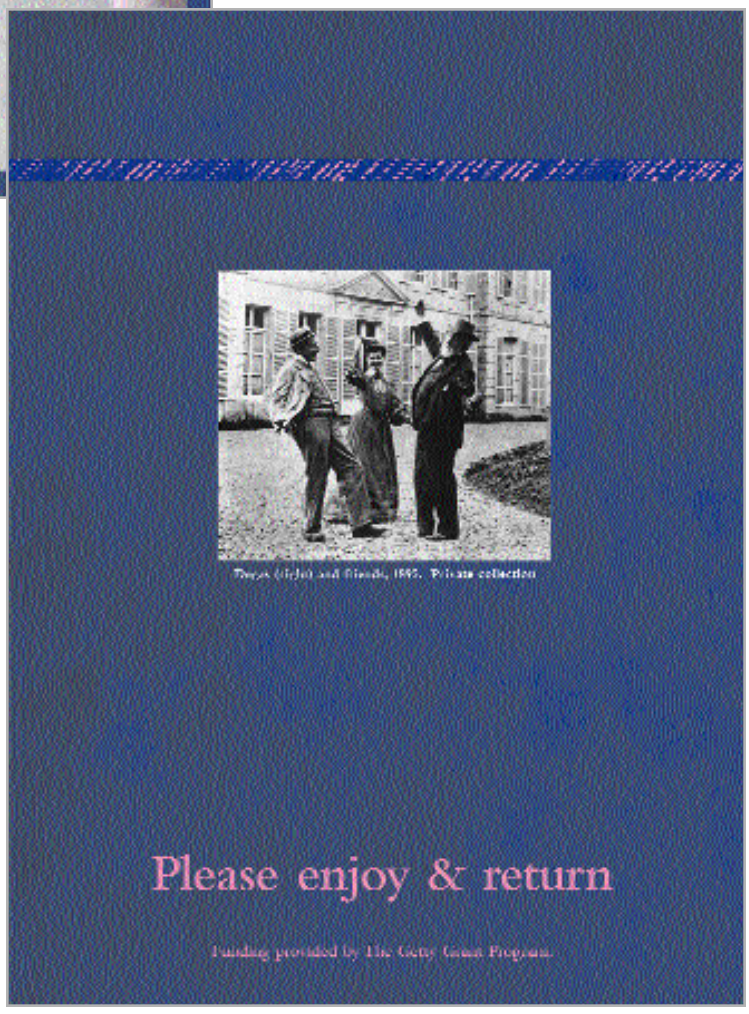


Quotes—especially the artist's own words—are used whenever possible.



Highlighted details (left) enable the viewer to look more closely at the artist's techniques.

The image on the back cover (below) ends the label on a more personal or whimsical note.



"You can look at that detail without getting too close to the painting and setting the alarms off. . . . You can look right at them right in your hand and look as close as you want to."

—Visitor panel participant