Translating Labels for Museum Exhibitions

By David McKay

Translators who work for museums may find themselves confronted with all sorts of documents, from a terminology-laden conservator's report on the restoration of a 19th-century masterpiece to a brochure advertising an upcoming children's workshop. They will undoubtedly encounter many text types that are not specific to the museum world, such as press releases, annual reports, scholarly articles, websites, blogs, newsletters, subtitles, and popular books. Museum translators also deal with other, more specialized, varieties of text, such as provenance records (which describe the ownership history of an object). Any translator grappling with such records for the first time will understand the need to learn the relevant conventions. For example:

> *Prov.:* "Paton, the Shippainter"; Tollemache Estates Sale, 15 May 1953, no. 60 as Richard Wilson; Messrs Edward Speelman Ltd.; purchased 1955[1]

Less obvious perils await the translator when the text seems straightforward at first glance and the greatest challenges are posed by the context and audience. I will focus here on such challenges in the translation of one major text type: exhibition labels. Even this topic is still very broad, so I will limit myself to a few introductory remarks, drawing primarily on my personal experience as a translator for Dutch museums. Most of the examples relate to the visual arts, but many of the same principles apply to translators of other types of museum exhibitions.

"Label" is used broadly in this context as a generic term for the many panels, plaques, cards, and other printed surfaces—on walls, in display cases, and elsewhere in museum galleries—that provide information relating to an exhibit. This information may range from a simple statement of the title and artist of a work to a general introduction several paragraphs long. Most museum labels are interpretive, in the sense that they try to make the displays more meaningful and relevant to visitors. Freeman Tilden, author of the classic *Interpreting Our Heritage,* formulated six well-known principles of interpretation, the first of which is highly relevant to translation:

> Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.[2]

This suggests a basic guideline for all exhibition translation: consider the impact of the translation on the visitor's experience.

Repackaging Information

With this in mind, it is useful for translators to think about how to write a good label. Museum visitors rarely read each label diligently from start to finish. Instead, they often stroll around the galleries in search of objects, images, and information that appeal to them. Some of them might be willing to wrestle with complex sentences under other circumstances: in their professional reading, or when curled up on the couch with a book. At museum exhibitions, however, most of them are looking for information that is presented in a straightforward, easily digestible way and that helps them to engage with the objects around them.[3] Let us look at one example of how we might revise our label translations so that they communicate more effectively. Consider these two versions of the same sentence:

1. In this painting, the often erotic image of a woman bathing instead conveys a melancholy mood.

2. The image of a woman bathing often has erotic overtones, but in this painting, it conveys a melancholy mood.

In both versions, we learn that this type of image is often erotic. But in Version 1, this information is embedded in a long, complex noun phrase: "the often erotic image of a woman bathing." In Version 2, it is presented explicitly in the form of a complete clause: "The image of a woman bathing often has erotic overtones." This invites readers to stop and process the first piece of information before moving on to the next one.

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Furthermore, Version 2 moves from old information to new information. In fact, it begins with the reader's immediate experience: the appearance of the painting. This is a common strategy in museum labels, which often begin by noting a visible fact about the object in question, perhaps one of its more striking or puzzling features. In contrast, Version 1 scrambles old and new information together. Finally, Version 2 uses parallelism to make the contrast clear; the first clause ends in "erotic overtones," as opposed to the end of the second clause, "melancholy mood."

Notice also that packaging information effectively does not necessarily mean using short, staccato sentences. Version 2 is a single sentence and is longer than Version 1. The key difference is that it presents one chunk of information at a time in a logical order. This raises the issue of faithfulness to the original text. Do translators have the freedom to reorder information in this way? I would say that they have the responsibility to do so. As we all know, the order of words and phrases often has to be changed radically in translation, for both grammatical and stylistic reasons. Finding an order of presentation that communicates the author's message effectively in English is a crucial part of the translator's job, and copying the word order in the source language is unlikely to be a helpful strategy. In this context, the best way to be faithful to the original message is by presenting it somewhat differently in translation.

Obviously, translators have much

less freedom than label writers, and it is important to be alert to possible departures from the intended meaning. I often have the luxury of working with Dutch-speaking museum educators who can read the English translations critically and discuss potential problems. When this type of safety net is absent, we have to be doubly careful. For instance, consider the following two versions of the same sentence:

1. This is an early Italianate landscape by Jan van Huysum.

2. This is one of Jan van Huysum's early Italianate landscapes.

The two versions may seem identical in meaning at first glance, and in the context of an entire exhibition about Van Huysum, Version 2 probably reads more naturally. But Version 2 also introduces a subtle presupposition, which is that Jan van Huysum painted more than one early Italianate landscape. If the translator does not know for certain that this is true, then it has to be checked. The lesson of this example is always be alert for ways in which stylistic changes may affect meaning.

A Global Audience

What sorts of visitors will be reading the English labels? Outside the English-speaking world, and even at major museums in English-speaking countries, many will not be native speakers of English. Furthermore, most of them will not be experts in the field, but tourists ➡

or other casual visitors. They are likely to form a heterogeneous group: retired Italian schoolteachers, French businesspeople, Australian teenagers with Eurail passes, and Russian families on vacation. This makes it important to respect the likely limits of their English skills and their knowledge without adopting a patronizing tone.

For example, a technical description of papermaking might describe a beater that "macerates and hydrates the cotton fibers into a slurry." This description includes both the specialized term "slurry" and the difficult English words "macerate" and "hydrate." The majority of visitors will be better served by a different version of this description. We might write, for instance, that the beater "soaks the fibers and turns them into a pulp, called a slurry." This version simplifies or omits the difficult words and introduces the technical term by means of a near-synonym.

Different museums have different styles, and it can be worthwhile to discuss these issues with the client. Some exhibitions and labels are pitched at specialists, rather than at the general public. Yet in general, there are plenty of reasons to keep the translation simple. This may be true even when the vocabulary in the source language is more complex. It is important to remember that the audience for the source-language labels (in Dutch or Japanese, for example) often consists largely of native speakers, in contrast to the diverse international audience for the English versions. It follows that communication strategies that are appropriate in source texts may not be appropriate in translations.

For example, a Dutch label might use the phrase *tussen droom en daad* (literally "between dream and act"), a reference to a well-known line of poetry by the great Flemish writer

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Willem Elsschot. The suggested meaning is very similar to the meaning of the English proverb, "There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," and it might be tempting to use this proverb in the translation. In a scholarly book or article, this would probably be an excellent solution. But the archaic word "'twixt" could well confuse museum visitors who are not native English-speakers (even if some of them can look it up on their iPhones). It might be better simply to paraphrase the intended meaning, or at least to modernize the wording of the proverb: "There's many a slip between the cup and the lip."

Writing Blind

Museums often send translators detailed descriptions of objects but no images of the objects being described. This places the translator in a position of ignorance, relative not only to the authors of the labels but also to their future readers, who will have the object in front of them. Translating on the basis of guesswork is a dangerous game. The best solution is to request images of the objects described, unless they are so well known that you can easily Google them. A few brief examples in English should give some impression of the complexities involved.

• The ring has matte petals surrounding a lapis lazuli stone in a scalloped setting. The stone has

been cut *en cabochon*, without facets. The earrings are decorated with tiny balls, or grains, of gold.

• [Describing an abstract painting] The tiny black shapes in the upper left corner appear very far away from the large plane. The colors chosen by the artist influence the weight of the elements.

• [Describing a triptych] The right panel seems to depict a theater lounge, with a warrior or soldier at far right—the counterpart of the lovers at left.

Usually the client will be able to send images of some or all of the objects in advance. In other cases, you may need to request specific images after finishing the first draft. Digital photography and e-mail have greatly simplified this process. If in spite of this, some images are not forthcoming, then the second best solution is to keep track of any uncertainties or guesswork and present your questions to the client before putting the finishing touches on the translation.

Tense Decisions

In the context of an exhibition, it can often be difficult to choose between the past and present tense. In some cases, both options are available.

1. Rembrandt uses light and shadow to suggest the spiritual dimension of his subject.

2. Rembrandt used light and shadow to suggest the spiritual dimension of his subject.

Even if we are discussing a dead painter, the use of the present tense can emphasize the enduring presence of his work. But we do sometimes use the past tense to emphasize the original, historical act of creation or to situate this statement in the biographical context of Rembrandt's life.

In other cases, the conventions of English may require a different tense than the one used in the source language. For instance, the narrative (or historic) present often sounds unnatural in English.

1. Around 1500, Michelangelo **returns** to Florence, where he **begins** work on the Statue of David. He **completes** it in 1504 and **returns** to Rome soon after.

2. Around 1500, Michelangelo **returned** to Florence, where he **began** work on the Statue of David. He **completed** it in 1504 and **returned** to Rome soon after.

3. Around 1500, Michelangelo **returned** to Florence, where he **began** work on the Statue of David. He **completes** it in 1504 and **returns** to Rome soon after.

Version 1 sounds unconventional in English, but analogous uses of the present tense are quite normal in some other languages. Version 2, which uses the past tense, would generally be preferable. The source text may even hop back and forth between the two, but in English this is rather disorienting, as we see in Version 3. Timelines are one exceptional case in which the narrative present tends to be used in English.

Packaging information effectively does not necessarily mean using short, staccato sentences.

1499-1501: Michelangelo **returns** to Florence.

1505: Michelangelo **is** invited back to Rome by Pope Julius II.

There is another important case in which the narrative present is required in English, while other languages may prefer the past tense. This is when describing events in fictional stories, myths, and legends.

In the version of the Narcissus story recounted by Pausanias, he **does** not fall in love with his reflection, but with his twin sister.

Retellings of stories from the Bible and some other religious texts may use the present or the past tense, depending on whether the content of the story is being treated as a historical event or a mythical tale. The author's perspective is crucial in such cases. Similarly, the present tense, rather than the past, is used to discuss the narrative content of a pictorial representation such as a painting, sculpture, or photograph.

The snake **is** strangling the male figure, who **is** petrified with fear.

What's in a Name?

Works of art in museum collections tend to have generally accepted titles. Source-language titles therefore cannot simply be translated word for word. If the work has been referred to in English before, then the accepted English title should generally be used. In fact, some traditional titles have survived even though they no longer reflect modern English usage. For example, the word "cattle" is sometimes used in the titles of 17th-century paintings to refer to livestock other than cows, such as goats or sheep.

On the other hand, the titles of works of visual art are more fluid than the titles of books or films. Sometimes new research reveals that a traditional title was inaccurate. The well-known painting by Paulus Potter traditionally known as *The Young Bull,* which is in the collection of the Mauritshuis in The Hague, is now thought to be based on drawings of several different animals, including at least one adult bull. Therefore, the Mauritshuis has changed the title to *The Bull,* though the traditional title is still frequently encountered.

When translating exhibition labels, it is important to understand the curator's general approach. Do these works have generally accepted English titles? Are the traditional source-language titles being used, or have some or all of them been changed? Even if traditional titles are clearly being used some of the time, the translator should consult with the client about any source-language titles that deviate markedly from the traditional English versions. The source-language title and the English one do not always correspond neatly.

The Chicago Manual of Style provides succinct guidance on the typographical treatment of the titles of works of art:

Titles of paintings, drawings, statues, and other works of art ➡

are italicized, whether the titles are original, added by someone other than the artist, or translated. The names of works of antiquity (whose creators are often unknown) are usually set in roman. Titles of photographs are set in roman and enclosed in quotation marks.[4]

Finally, it should be noted that the names of some artists differ from one language to another. This is true mainly of pre-modern artists, but even the 20th-century painter who started his career as Piet Mondriaan, later moving to New York City and changing his name, is still referred to as Mondriaan in Dutch and Mondrian in English.

Resources

There is much more to be said about translating museum exhibitions, but I hope that this somewhat idiosyncratic collection of introductory comments will inspire interested translators to learn more. Here are a few resources that should prove helpful, especially when working for art museums.

Oxford Art Online
www.oxfordartonline.com
This is a subscription-only online service that can be accessed through many academic libraries. It includes *Grove Art Online,* the web edition of the authoritative art reference work, which, according to the website, contains "23,000 subject entries, 21,000 biographies, 500,000 bibliographic citations, and 40,000 image links and 5,500 images." Besides being a treasure trove of information about artists, techniques, schools, themes, and individual works, *Grove* can also be a useful reference for generally accepted titles and the spelling of proper names.

> ## Always be alert for ways in which stylistic changes may affect meaning.

The Getty Vocabularies
www.getty.edu/research/
conducting_research/vocabularies/
These online glossaries contain specialized art and architectural terminology, artist names, and geographic names of places especially relevant to art and architecture. *The Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)* includes some foreign-language equivalents, and there are also separate sites with versions of the *AAT* in foreign languages, such as Dutch (www.aat-ned.nl) and Spanish (www.aatespanol.cl).

The Fine Print
www.thefineprintuf.org
Blunden, Jennifer. "Dumbing Down for Museum Audiences: Necessity or Myth?" *The Fine Print* (Number 3, February 2006), 27-33, www.emend editing.com/html/ezine/issue3/PDFs/TFP3Print.pdf.

Books
The J. Paul Getty Museum, in collaboration with various institutions, has produced the *Looking at…* series of art glossaries, or "guides to technical terms." Each one deals with a different art form (e.g., *Looking at European Sculpture* or *Looking at Photographs*), and the entries not only define terms but place them in context and explain how they are used in practice. Since each guide is only about 100 pages, it is feasible to skim through the relevant one when embarking on a major translation project.

Meyer, Ralph. *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* (London: Faber & Faber, Fifth edition, revised and expanded, 1991).
This is a comprehensive tome, especially useful for texts on art conservation, restoration, and other technical matters.

Routledge Heritage Series
www.routledge.com/books/details/97
80415366342/
The Routledge series *Heritage: Care—Preservation—Management* includes both useful introductory works, such as *Museum Basics* and *Handbook for Museums,* and books on more specialized topics, such as *Hands-On Exhibitions and Museum Ethics.*

Serrell, Beverley. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 1996).
This book provides a clear and complete introduction to the issues that label writers face.

Author's Note: I am grateful to Beverley Jackson for her helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

Notes
1. From *View of Portsmouth from Portsdown Hill,* in Ann Sumner and Greg Smith (eds.), *Thomas Jones (1742-1803)*: *An Artist Rediscovered* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 143. Ideally, a provenance

record makes it possible to retrace a work of art's ownership history from the work's creation to the present day, thereby helping to guarantee its authenticity. This relatively brief British-style provenance record shows that the painting's first owner was "Paton, the Shippainter," that it was sold to Messrs Edward Speelman Ltd. on May 15, 1953 at Tollemache Estates Sale, where it was lot number 60, incorrectly attributed to the artist Richard Wilson, and that the present owner purchased it in 1955. Possibly the most comprehensive and useful introduction to provenance issues is Nancy H. Yeide, et al. *The AAM Guide to Provenance Research* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2001), which explicitly discusses conventions for provenance records on pages 33-34.

Communication strategies that are appropriate in source texts may not be appropriate in translations.

2. As cited on page 10 of *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach,* which is listed in the Resources section of this article. The complete list of Tilden's principles for interpretation can also be found in the Wikipedia article "Heritage Interpretation," last checked on July 11, 2011.

3. Many exhibit labels do not describe individual objects, but provide background information or introduce an entire gallery or display case. In this article, I focus largely on labels that describe objects, because they raise some of the most interesting translation issues.

4. Chapter 8, Names and Terms, 8.193 "Paintings, Statues, and Such." *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

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Columns and Departments

Evelyn Yang Garland is a Mandarin Chinese interpreter and translator based in the Washington, DC area. She is the owner of Acta Chinese Language Services, LLC. She also teaches the course "Introduction to Translation Theory" offered by the University of Chicago. She is an ATA-certified English→Chinese translator, a Maryland court certified interpreter, and a member of the Translators Association of China. Contact: egarland@actalanguage.com.

John Matthews is an ATA-certified Japanese→English freelance translator focusing on legal issues, pharmaceutical development, and other business-related areas. He worked for 20 years at the Consulate General of Japan in Kansas City, were duties included in-house translation. He has been a member of ATA and the Mid-America Chapter of ATA (MICATA) for more than 20 years. He is a former president and the current treasurer of MICATA. He is also a member of ATA's Japanese Language Division and the Kansas City Heart of America Japan-America Society. He has an MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management focusing on East Asia and a BS from Georgetown University in Japanese and applied linguistics. Contact: jwmatt@yahoo.com.

David McKay translates for Dutch museums, scholars, literary authors, and publishing houses. Recent projects include the *Encyclopedia of Fictional Artists*, a Gauguin exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, and Daniëlle Hermans's *The Tulip Virus*, a thriller about the 17th-century Dutch tulip trade published in the U.S. by Minotaur Books. Contact: mckay@openbooktranslation.com.

Dorothee Racette is the president-elect of ATA. She works as a full-time freelance translator in upstate New York. She is an ATA-certified English↔German translator specializing in medical and biomedical texts. She served as the administrator of ATA's German Language Division from 2000-2004 and chaired the Divisions Committee from 2001 to 2005. Contact: dracette@hughes.net.

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