



Winners of the 28th Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition

Rita Mukherjee Hoffstadt

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition is the American Alliance of Museums' premier venue for honoring achievement in one of the major functions of the museum field—the creation of exhibitions. The competition recognizes exhibitions for overall excellence or for specific innovative techniques that move our field forward. AAM received 39 entries from a broad variety of institutions on a wide range of topics.

This year, the competition awarded two overall excellence awards and six special achievement awards. In addition, the competition awarded two honorable mentions: to the Long Island Children's Museum, in Garden City, New York for *Broken? Fix It!* and North Dakota Heritage Center and State Museum in Bismarck for *Innovation Galleries: Early Peoples*.

The Excellence in Exhibition competition is sponsored by four of AAM's professional networks: research and evaluation, curation, education, and exhibitions. Stacey Swigart (CARE) served as this year's competition coordinator. The 2016 judges were Robert DeHart, Curator, the Tennessee State Museum (CurCom); Susan Foutz, Director of Research and Evaluation, Children's Museum of Indianapolis (CARE); Niki Ciccotelli Stewart, Chief Engagement Officer, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (EdCOM); and Doug Simpson, Associate Principal, Cambridge Seven Associates (NAME).



Special Achievement Award

Risky Subject

The 6,241-square-foot traveling exhibition **National Geographic Sacred Journeys** opened August 29, 2015 at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis. The exhibition was produced in collaboration with the National Geographic Society. It created a learning environment that gave children eight and older and their caregivers a deeper understanding of the beliefs and practices of a variety of religions. The museum's target audience was American Christian, and the exhibition was designed for the adult caregiver to discuss the exhibit content with younger family members and help bridge the gap between concrete examples and abstract concepts.

Sacred Journeys transports visitors to sacred places and events found around the world to help them understand why these places and events are sacred. Through a multiscreen video presentation, visitors meet exhibit "guides" who are making a sacred journey

to places that represent five of the world's major religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Guides invite visitors to follow them on their journeys via destinations featured in the exhibition. Each journey is depicted through immersive environments and sites from around the world, and each site's religious significance and history is conveyed through artifacts and National Geographic photography.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to award this exhibition because of its ability to take a controversial topic and make it relevant to children in a format that opened up conversations between kids and adults, and was understandable by a variety of age ranges.

Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009), *Siri*, 1970, tempera on panel, 30 ½ x 30". Brandywine River Museum of Art, purchased for the Museum by John T. Dorrance, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Felix du Pont; Mr. and Mrs. James P. Mills; Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Sharp; two anonymous donors; and The Pew Memorial Trust, 1975.



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Special Achievement Award

Interpretation

Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio, a 13,250-square-foot traveling exhibition created by the Denver Art Museum, opened to the public in Denver on November 8, 2015. The exhibition explores the converging and diverging artistic practices and sensibilities of a father and son. Through immersive experiences, it illuminates the relationship between the two, and puts human faces to the names and art featured in the gallery.

The exhibition is organized thematically. It uses the Wyeths' own words to frame the exhibition story and

help visitors look closely at the works while sparking their own imagination. Whimsy is used throughout the exhibition, and includes five miniature doors that visitors can look through (above; Andrew Wyeth, blocked by the door on the left, laughs with his neighbor Siri, whose more serious portrait is above).

The judges gave a special achievement award to *Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio* for the way in which the exhibition elevated the experience with immersive environments and large-scale images that used design and humor to enhance—not distract from—the artwork.

Planning Process

The **Science Behind Pixar** was developed by the Museum of Science, Boston as a 13,000-square-foot traveling exhibition that first opened at the museum on June 28, 2015. The exhibition uses Pixar’s movies and characters to engage visitors in topics around computer science and math, and gives visitors a behind-the-scenes look at the eight steps of the technical development process used to create Pixar’s films. An open floor plan invites visitors to explore in many directions, while large-scale character models and illuminated titles (Modeling, Rigging, etc.) draw visitors into the space.

The team used extensive evaluation in their process to ensure that diverse learners of all ages would be able to achieve learning goals; that the content was accessible

to visitors with disabilities; and that the exhibition was equally engaging for both girls and boys. Summative evaluation indicated that visitors to the exhibition were more interested in using animation, computer programming, and math—both in creative projects and in careers—after their visit. In addition, evaluation showed that participants had a stronger understanding of how computer programmers approach problem solving, as well as more positive attitudes about computer programming.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to award this exhibition because of the processes that were employed to share the exhibition content and provide learning opportunities in science: evaluation, prototyping, and Universal Design.



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NATIONAL AQUARIUM/2016 THOMAS HOLDSWORTH

Special Achievement Award

Engagement with Living Collections

Living Seashore is a 2,800-square-foot permanent exhibition that opened May 12, 2015 at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland. The exhibit team wanted to surprise and delight visitors with fun, emotive, and memorable learning opportunities by capturing the way people explore and play at the beach. Two large touch pools, hands-on experiences, and facilitated conversations promote exploration, discovery, and caring for nature.

Designed to transport visitors to a protected beach along the ever-changing mid-Atlantic seashore, aesthetic choices reflect the gallery theme and tone. Interactive exhibits encourage visitors to learn about dynamic microhabitats and animals that make the mid-Atlantic a local and global aquatic treasure.

In addition to the fun and playful experience, the exhibition is grounded in accurate science and conservation education. People are placed in the center of the story, and the exhibition showcases inspiring stories of everyday people working to protect the mid-Atlantic—like “Shore Heroes.” These compelling stories model what we all can do to protect our waters.

The judges gave a special achievement award to *Living Seashore*—a content-rich experience in a relatively small space—to recognize the level of research that went into making it. It was clear that deep thought had gone into the exhibition’s development and into ways to change audience behavior.

Reframing Collections

Object Project, a 4,000-square-foot permanent exhibition at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC opened on July 1, 2015. The museum created the exhibition after learning from visitor studies that audiences wanted to learn more about themselves in a customizable experience, and sought content that invited participation and let them reach their own conclusions. Visitors also wanted to make personal connections between present and the past, and explore links between things and ideas.

Object Project uses common objects and uncommon exhibition techniques to encourage visitors of all ages to discover fascinating stories about innovations from the past that are still with us today. More than 250 authentic objects from the museum's permanent and teaching collections help visitors explore how people, innovative things, and social change shaped life as we know it. The exhibition is divided into four sections: Bicycles, Refrigerators, Ready-to-Wear

Clothes, and Household Hits (ranging from window screens to toasters). Each section is filled with content that visitors can relate to personally, that sparks intergenerational conversations, and that encourages further exploration. For example, in the section on bicycles (**below**), visitors learn how Americans took to the wheel from the 1880s to the 1910s in a nationwide bicycle craze, going new places and thinking differently about themselves. Visitors can look at objects, including a “Good Sense” cycling corset, tintypes, and bicycle racing medals. They can also sit atop an “ordinary,” or high-wheel bicycle, pull out gallery boards, flip through a “scrapbook,” or peer through stereoscopes.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to give an award to this exhibition for the creative, playful strategies used to elevate the ordinary—piquing curiosity and providing something that almost anyone can relate to.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY





JKA PHOTOGRAPHY

Special Achievement Award

Contextualizing Collections With Community Voice

Pacific Worlds, an 8,000-square-foot temporary exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California (May 30, 2015 to January 3, 2016), explored the historical and contemporary connections between the Pacific Islands and California. The show provided a new way forward for museums with “legacy collections” to reinterpret those collections in collaboration with diasporic communities. *Pacific Worlds* was developed about, with, and for Pacific Islanders in California. Historic artifacts are explicitly connected to contemporary people, as in a wall of faces of Pacific Islanders from the Bay Area that is juxtaposed with a century-old, 27-foot long outrigger canoe from Papua New Guinea ([above](#)).

The exhibition used historic objects and contemporary interviews to explore seven historic and ongoing cultural practices: kava, board sports, food and fishing, dance and music, tattoo, war and the military, and textiles (tapas and fine mats). Artifact interpretations included quotes from contemporary Pacific Islanders. Wherever possible, contemporary objects were displayed alongside historic ones. The exhibition included 221 historic artifacts from the Oakland Museum’s collections, most of them never before exhibited, along with 15 contemporary items.

The judges gave a special achievement award to *Pacific Worlds* for its multidisciplinary approach to community engagement, particularly in its use of first-person labels.

Overall Excellence Award

Nation to Nation

Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations (September 21, 2014 to March 20, 2020), at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC is a temporary 8,000-square-foot exhibition, and the first to tell the story of Indian treaties on a national scale. While the museum recognized that treaties are key to the history and current relationship of Native Nations and the United States, the powerful, and sometimes tragic, story about them is missing from the national narrative.

The museum knew it needed to tell the story of United States treaties with Native Nations in an engaging way that would provide new understandings, and employ different techniques to reach multiple learning styles. It divided the exhibition's vast subject matter into four sections: Two Ways of Being; Serious Diplomacy; Bad Acts, Bad Paper; and Great Nations Keep Their Word. Arranged chronologically, these sections illustrated how treaties started out as agreements between equal parties, then became tools of dispossession, and finally assumed new life as the legal foundation for Indian self-determination and sovereign rights. Highlights of the exhibition were the treaties themselves, which are rarely shown due to their fragility (right). Case studies explored eight treaties chosen from the more than 350 that were ratified, and showed individuals arguing their perspectives, making difficult decisions, reaching compromises, and suffering consequences.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to give an Overall Excellence award to *Nation to Nation* because it excelled in every judging category as it tackled a difficult topic while presenting multiple perspectives.

KEVIN WOLF/AP IMAGES FOR THE SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN





Overall Excellence Award

Coast to Cactus

Coast to Cactus in Southern California, an 8,000-square-foot permanent exhibition, opened at the San Diego Natural History Museum in California on January 17, 2015. San Diego County is home to more species than any other area of comparable size in the continental United States, and *Coast to Cactus* aims to be the “visitor center” for southern California’s diverse habitats. The exhibition tells its story through its “Big Idea”—*A uniquely varied environment makes the southern California region a place of extraordinary biodiversity that we all should treasure.*

The exhibition is structured as a virtual, self-directed walk through southern California’s various habitats (such as the backyard patio of a midcentury California ranch house) during different



PABLO MASON

seasons of the year. Advance organizers communicate the main message of each habitat zone. Reading rails connect to animals and plants in open dioramas and landforms and, in addition to text and visual imagery, feature some combination of other media, such as touchable cast-bronze models, specimens, digital media, or simple mechanical interactives.

The Excellence in Exhibition Competition chose to give an Overall Excellence award to *Coast to Cactus* because it excelled in every judging category; it employed commendable interpretive strategies, inclusive content for a variety of audiences with bilingual labels; and the diversity of evocative, immersive, reflective, and playful spaces.

Conclusion

This year, competition entries broke another record with 39 applications from a wide array of institutions, and the judging process and discussions were lively and rigorous. Next year’s competition entry form is included in this issue of *Exhibition*, and we encourage

readers who have been a part of creating noteworthy exhibitions to submit their entry for consideration! ■

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