

Collections

Writing on the Wall

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Many wall labels, like the ones here in the European Art gallery (19th and 20th century), provide not only essential information (title, date, media used, acquisition information, found in the “tombstone”), but often include a narrative “chat” that explores different aspects of the work, such as its conservation, technique, or historical context.

This story is part of a series of articles about “museum-speak,” or the lingo of those who work in museums, as well as museum-related knowledge. It is intended to deepen your understanding of the behind-the-scenes workings of a museum, and in particular the operations of the Harvard Art Museums.

If you’re like a lot of museum visitors,

you probably don't read *every* wall label in *every* gallery you visit. That's OK—labels are secondary to the objects themselves. But the writing on the wall is a fruitful source of information about corresponding object(s)—and there's more to each label than you might think.

First things first: What are we referring to when we say “wall label”? It sounds pretty self-explanatory, but there are different terms used to refer to various sizes and formats of descriptive wall text.

At the Harvard Art Museums, every object receives a tombstone. This macabre moniker is the traditional term used to refer to a bare-bones (ahem) label. The tombstone simply lists the object's name and artist's name (if applicable), the creation date (and occasionally the place), medium (material), and a line summarizing when and how the museums came to possess the object.

The last bit of information on each tombstone is an accession number—an alphanumeric block that is assigned when an object is added (accessioned) to the museums' collections. An accession number corresponds to the object's curatorial file. Museums staff, researchers, and even visitors can use an accession number to search for detailed object information on the museums' [website](#) or internal databases. (There's a lot more to know about accession numbers, including how to decipher their codes, but we'll save that for a future post in the Museum-Speak series.)

In addition to tombstones, some objects also receive more lively treatment with chats, or short narrative descriptions. A chat comes after the tombstone information, on the same label; group chats describe and refer to multiple objects.

Our typical 150-word chats are meant to be engaging, informative, and accessible to many audiences. The content can include information about objects' materiality and conservation, artistic technique, as well as biographical details about the artist(s) or important historical context. It often also helps position the object(s) relative to surrounding works. Individual labels join longer text panels that introduce a gallery (or section of a gallery), and that help lay out the proposition at work there.

In the end, if a label chat spurs an actual chat—a real-life, in-the-gallery discussion among visitors—that counts as a success.