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# A Telling Image:

## Bridging Folk and Fine Art Visitor Repertoires in Exhibit Design through Contemporary Murals in Folk Arts Contexts

BY EDWARD Y. MILLAR

*In the absence of a permanent installation delineating between the folk art gallery and the fine and contemporary art galleries within the same museum, temporary delineations—such as murals—provide an important bridge for museumgoers. As visitors to the museum are asked to engage with both fine art and folk art exhibits and their respective lexicons, sets of meanings, and paradigms, curators are responsible to provide interpretive direction not only within the exhibit but between them. Building into exhibit design the interpretive materials, which can function as a step transition between folk art and fine art, enables visitors to more easily identify linkages and differences between folk and fine art, facilitating a more meaningful interaction with both. The installation of two contemporary art murals—drawing from tradition—during two recent folk arts exhibitions at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University ([www.castellaniartmuseum.org](http://www.castellaniartmuseum.org)) served as a bridge between folk art, fine art, and the interpretive sets of meanings necessary for visitors to engage with them.*

### Building Blocks and Crafting Connections

Designing an exhibit is a lot like playing with blocks—figuring out how the many individual pieces of varying shapes, sizes, colors, and connections can be fit together to make *one cohesive whole*. For example, how an interpretive panel in one section connects to a fieldwork photo in another, to how the title of the exhibit relates to a displayed work. Every component of an exhibit must be both distinct from one another but also still circle back to the “big



The murals installed by Erwin Printup, Jr., were the first things visitors to the *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II* exhibit at the Castellani experienced, bridging the fine and contemporary art world of the neighboring galleries with the folk art exhibition within it. All photographs by the author.



In addition to the encoding of the space through the narrative murals, Erwin’s visual signature communicated further inside knowledge—on who had installed the exhibit—leading visitors to draw a further connection between his inclusion in the exhibit and family ties to beadwork. Erwin is a well-known artist within the Tuscarora community, with his work displayed throughout the Tuscarora Nation House, a mural installation at the local school, and in the Tuscarora Exhibit at the New York Power Authority’s Niagara Power Vista.

idea”: the overarching message expressed through the exhibit’s purpose and scope (Chambers 2009, 68; Serrell 2015, 8). As a curator, one of my main responsibilities in exhibit design or assembling the various blocks (to continue that analogy) is to equip visitors to the exhibit with an *instruction manual*: to provide a mixture of specialized and contextual information that enables them to have meaningful interactions with the displayed works.

Covering all of the interpretive elements of an exhibit from its written content to the overarching structure and layout, the instruction manual functions as a set of guidelines that educate rather than dictate. These guidelines prepare visitors with the meanings, lexicon, and paradigms necessary to interact with a work in an informed and approachable way, without declaring opinion of the work or being “preachy”

(Serrell 2015, 117). Any interpretive component of an exhibit, whether textual, visual, or aural, conveys information about the works on display and *how it all fits into wider sets of meanings*. In essence, the instruction manual teaches visitors “how to look” (Hernandez 1987, 70) at folk art or fine art as an informed observer: that is, holistically and not in isolation.

Yet, as anyone who has ever had the pleasure to assemble “ready-to-assemble” furniture can attest, whether the instruction manual is vigorously hurled into the fireplace (*sometimes*, literally), followed as infallible doctrine, or somewhere between, can vary greatly from person to person. This is an acute challenge where folk arts and fine arts are displayed within the same museum, as the repertoires and interactions asked of visitors with each varies: though common to both, we hope for

visitors to walk away *at least* with more from their experiences than the wall of an exhibit being “a nice shade of green.” Where the similarities and differences are poorly articulated on the curatorial side, we run the risk of a visitor interacting with folk art *as* fine art, privileging the aesthetic expression of the individual while overlooking their role within their community and community tastes (or vice versa). A further challenge is added in needing to maintain internal cohesiveness and museum identity *between* folk arts and fine arts exhibits—lest the museum feel like two divergent spaces in one.

At the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University, one recent approach we experimented with to face this challenge has been to foreground *visual* interpretive elements, in the form of installing temporary, contemporary art murals rooted in the traditions



featured in that specific exhibit. Narrative murals designed and installed by Erwin Printup, Jr., to accompany the *Made of Thunder*, *Made of Glass II* beadwork exhibit at the Castellani Art Museum in 2016, merged two traditional Haudenosaunee folk narratives and incorporated a breadth of traditional motifs used in beadwork. Calligraffiti murals installed by Muhammad Zahin Zaman, as part of the *Appealing Words* cross-community calligraphy exhibit in 2017, blended three forms of traditional calligraphy and graffiti into one new contemporary script. These murals functioned as a visual bridge between the interpretive elements found in the folk art and fine art galleries, facilitating a *step transition* for museumgoers between the two repertoires of meaning.

### Exhibit Interpretation: A Visitor's Manual (Not Doctrine!)

All of the interpretive elements that are curated in an exhibit do more than communicate ideas or information: they also identify and direct the viewer toward linkages *between* them. For example, a sentence on a panel describing the relationship between the edge—shape of a *qalam* (reed pen) and the ability to transition quickly between wide and narrow strokes in the Arabic Calligraphy section of the *Appealing Words* exhibit also, more generally, tells the reader that the shape of the writing implement influences the design of what is written. So, even if a visitor reads only this *one section* and *one panel*, it plants a seed of

information applicable to all of the other calligraphy traditions in the exhibit. In another example, fieldwork photographs of paint being sprinkled onto water starting an *ebru* (Turkish paper marbling) work shows not only that specific technique but also guides the viewer to reflect on the sequence of techniques that led to the finished work on display.

This model stands in contrast to the “whatever interpretation” constructivist approach in museum interpretation that Cheryl Meszaros identifies (Meszaros 2006, 12), in that although visitors are not necessarily expected to make use of the provided interpretive materials and/or make the same connections in the same way that I might, as the curator



Muhammad's calligraffiti technique blends three calligraphy traditions—Arabic, English, and Bengali—into one, adapting and altering them into his own typography. For example, *nuqta* dots used in Arabic calligraphy in measuring proportion, are instead seen here as used to fill letter space.

developing the exhibit, they *are* expected to “move about” within a specific repertoire of meaning conveyed by the curator. This encourages self-reflection on the visitor’s part of *how* they construct meaning when interacting with displayed works (Meszaros 2006, 168), in effectively setting parameters or boundaries of conclusions while *also* acknowledging the curator as not having the *only* authoritative interpretive opinion (Chambers 2009, 75).

The type and tone of interpretive information, which curators provide for fine art and for folk art to museumgoers, differs in perspective in one key way. The instruction manual accompanying fine and contemporary artworks encourage visitors to have a meaningful interaction with the visuals of the work, firstly, and secondly, the meanings or situations (where provided) that led to it. The use of limited information labels (containing perhaps nothing more than the name, year, and title of work) minimizes “noise” so as to not affect a viewer’s visceral interaction with a work. This perspective extends through to when contextual information is included, such as an artist biography or description of the meanings expressed in the work: the end focus is still on how those experiences resonate through the visuals of the work. In other words, the fine art instruction manual points to the world of *meanings seen*.

The instruction manual for folk art, on the other hand, encourages visitors to interact with the meanings (and situations) leading up to and revolving around the works, firstly, and secondly, how the displayed work itself looks. For example, labels for a set of beaded picture frames by Bryan Printup in *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II*, which featured blue jays and cardinals, focused equally on community folk belief about them, Bryan’s relationship to that knowledge, and on *how* that influences *why* they were included by him. If working from the *visual* foregrounding of the piece—and with limited context—visitors would be unable to draw a connection between the sets of meanings

(community and personal preference), which led to their creation on the picture frame. In other words, the folk art instruction manual points to worlds of meanings *seen and unseen*.

In partial contrast to Jo Farb Hernandez’s conclusion “...that distinctions between folk art and fine art should be eliminated whenever possible... and doing away with the need to explain what “folk art” is doing in a “fine art” museum” (Hernandez 1987, 74), commonalities between folk art and fine art should be deconstructed and articulated *as a transitioning point*, leading to their differences. The elimination of distinctions between folk art and fine art—both the specific works and in the *instruction manuals*—should not be the *finishing line* but the *starting point* to explore those differences, why they matter, and how they complement one another.

For example, the relationship between a folk artist to community issues is similar but distinct from a contemporary artist’s reactions to the same community issues. The former operates within a shared repertoire of technique, form, and function to react to those issues, and the contemporary artist forges new connections, expressions, or alterations of tradition in reacting to shared issues. This articulation is important in educating visitors on the divergent ways that similar meanings and experiences can be expressed: removing them would detach the bonds that link artist, meaning, and the circumstances leading to the created work, resulting in further—not less—objectification. Highlighting their links and distinctions better prepares visitors for interacting not only with the fine and folk artworks on display, but also “welcoming” them into the values of the museum in including both (Meszaros 2008, 166). The use of contemporary art murals rooted in tradition within the folk art exhibitions did precisely that: simultaneously deconstructing and articulating similarities and differences between fine art, folk art, and their repertoires of meaning.

## Reading Pictures: Narrative Murals

In the spring of 2013, the Castellani hosted Gerry Biron’s *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II* exhibit, which brought together historic and contemporary beadwork from Haudenosaunee and Wabanaki communities, and paired them with contemporary portraits of featured beadworkers by Gerry Biron. Drawing on the historic beadwork collection of Gerry Biron and Grant Wade Jonathan (Tuscarora), contemporary beadwork, and painted portraits of featured beadworkers, *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II* involved both fine art and folk art through its exhibit materials.

As part of the exhibit’s installation at the Castellani, we partnered with Erwin Printup, Jr., a Cayuga/Tuscarora illustrator, to design and install temporary murals for the exhibit: an idea born out of brainstorming sessions with Gerry Biron, Grant Wade Jonathan, Bryan Printup, and Erwin. The themes of Erwin’s illustrations—for example, in *Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message*—often draw on traditional Haudenosaunee narratives and motifs. Erwin had also previously been involved with the Castellani Art Museum, featured in an exhibit of Native American illustrators at the Castellani in 2008, entitled *Many Winters Ago*. Aside from his works as an individual artist, Erwin had a unique connection to the *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II* exhibit: his mother, sister, and niece were all beadworkers featured in the exhibit.

Initially, a few design ideas were tossed around—from the layout of the pedestals in the shape of a turtle to referencing the Great Turtle from the Haudenosaunee creation myth through to the hanging of beaded birds from the ceiling—but logistical or design concerns intervened. Difficulties in settling on the design were rooted in concerns of suitability (and objectification)—if the *physical* space of the gallery was going to be altered in a meaningful way, the design and its meanings needed to fit *purposefully* and clearly into the exhibit. The murals needed to both be *distinct* from





The murals installed by Muhammad as part of the *Appealing Words* exhibit were placed within the direct visual sightlines of both entryways to the gallery, enabling it to function as a visual bridge, despite being located on a rear wall.

the exhibit to maintain its role as a transition for visitors into the exhibit from their preceding space and also be clearly *interwoven*, so as not to be mistaken by visitors as an “ambience only” installation (Serrell 2015, 167). Ultimately, the design and installation of the temporary murals were left up to Erwin, who designed three murals, installed over a period of two weeks, using a mix of vinyl and black electrical tape.

The three murals were spread throughout the gallery: one large mural in the main entryway, one in the secondary entryway, and one large central mural at the other end of the gallery. Each of the entryway murals featured a variety of traditional motifs commonly found on beadwork, from sky domes to flowers to fiddlehead ferns, creating a direct visual bridge to the designs visitors would expect to find on

the beadwork featured in the exhibit. The designs used in the “Welcome Mural,” as Erwin called it, were intended specifically for this purpose: to immerse visitors in Haudenosaunee culture through exposure and grounding in a shared visual repertoire. For visitors to the exhibit who were *already* familiar with those motifs and were members of the Haudenosaunee community, the three murals provided more than a visual refresher, as together they told two Haudenosaunee folk narratives: The Creation Story and the Grapevine Legend.

Written descriptions for the murals were developed in collaboration with Erwin, who had learned the narratives from a storyteller in his community—the text was not installed next to the murals but included in the exhibit catalog only. On one level, this enabled the visual qualities of the murals to be foregrounded and maintain the

function of the mural in being a bridge between the folk art and fine art *instruction manuals* for the visitor through focusing on visual repertoire. On another level, codifying this space by communicating a specific, insider message helped to carve out and articulate the exhibit gallery space itself as being *for* community insiders.

The following descriptions are taken from the *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II* exhibit catalog:

#### **Creation Story (Welcome Mural)**

*Three semi-circles form a sky-dome design, each depicting the sky-world that encompasses all of creation and its inhabitants. Sky woman, whose fall through a hole in the sky-world led to the peopling and creation of Turtle Island (North America), is represented as a flower in full bloom. The flower roots emerge and bridge the sky-world with creation, speaking to the roots of tradition in past, present, and future peoples. The seven circles*

which unite and support the earth holding the flower draw from the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee, encouraging visitors to reflect and be mindful of how their actions would impact seven generations.

### **Grapevine Legend (Welcome Mural)**

The grapevine legend, depicted by the two figures united by the yet-unbroken vine over a raging river current, evokes the traditional story of the separation of the Tuscarora from the other Five Nations of the Iroquois. Geometric designs underneath the scene draw on early patterns on Iroquois pottery to represent a shared foundation in Mother Earth.

### **Double Scroll and Fiddlehead Fern (Welcome Mural, alternate)**

This entryway design merges the flowing river currents of the Grapevine mural, with the double curve or double scroll design of the fiddlehead fern, found throughout the beadwork of the Northeastern Woodland nations. It reminds us of the common experiences and connection to nature, and the diverse meanings drawn from them.

### **Great Turtle Mural**

The Great Turtle mural concludes the Sky woman creation story in the Welcome Mural, providing the final rest and respite from her descent through the sky domes. On its back, the Hiamatha design represents a global message of unity and peace in the model of the Haudenosaunee, throughout Turtle Island (North America) and Mother Earth.

These written descriptions were written in a way to directly connect the visuals of the murals with the narrative knowledge they represent. Rather than summarizing or retelling the entire Creation Story or the Grapevine Legend and then pointing readers to where it is represented visually in the murals, this writing approach focused on using the visuals of the murals to retell that specific portion of the narrative. Although this resulted in a fragmented presentation of both narratives, it helped visitors to the exhibit to think directly about the relationship between image, meaning, and the shared repertoire of knowledge necessary to understand them—as they moved to engage with the beadwork in the rest of the exhibit.

## **Seeing Words: Calligraffiti Murals**

In fall 2017, we curated an exhibit at the Castellani entitled *Appealing Words: Calligraphy Traditions in Western New York*, which brought together four different types of traditional calligraphy—Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, and Chinese—medieval manuscripts from the collection and two contemporary interpretations of traditional calligraphy. In bringing together numerous calligraphy traditions into one exhibit, *Appealing Words* provided a comprehensive introduction to traditional calligraphy practiced locally, and through its development, connected those calligraphers with one another.

The works of Rosemary Lyons, a Buffalo-based contemporary illuminator and calligrapher, and Muhammad Zahin Zaman, a Buffalo-based calligraffiti artist, formed an integral part of the exhibit's interpretive plan. In situating their works in relation to the traditional works in the exhibit, their accompanying interpretive materials provided a crucial resource in articulating why their works are contemporary art *drawing from* tradition, rather than a tradition in contemporary practice: for instance, the act of giving traditional forms new purpose, context, and content. However, interpretive materials *also* drew connections between folk art's community dynamic and their own work's relationship to their communities and associated social justice movements.

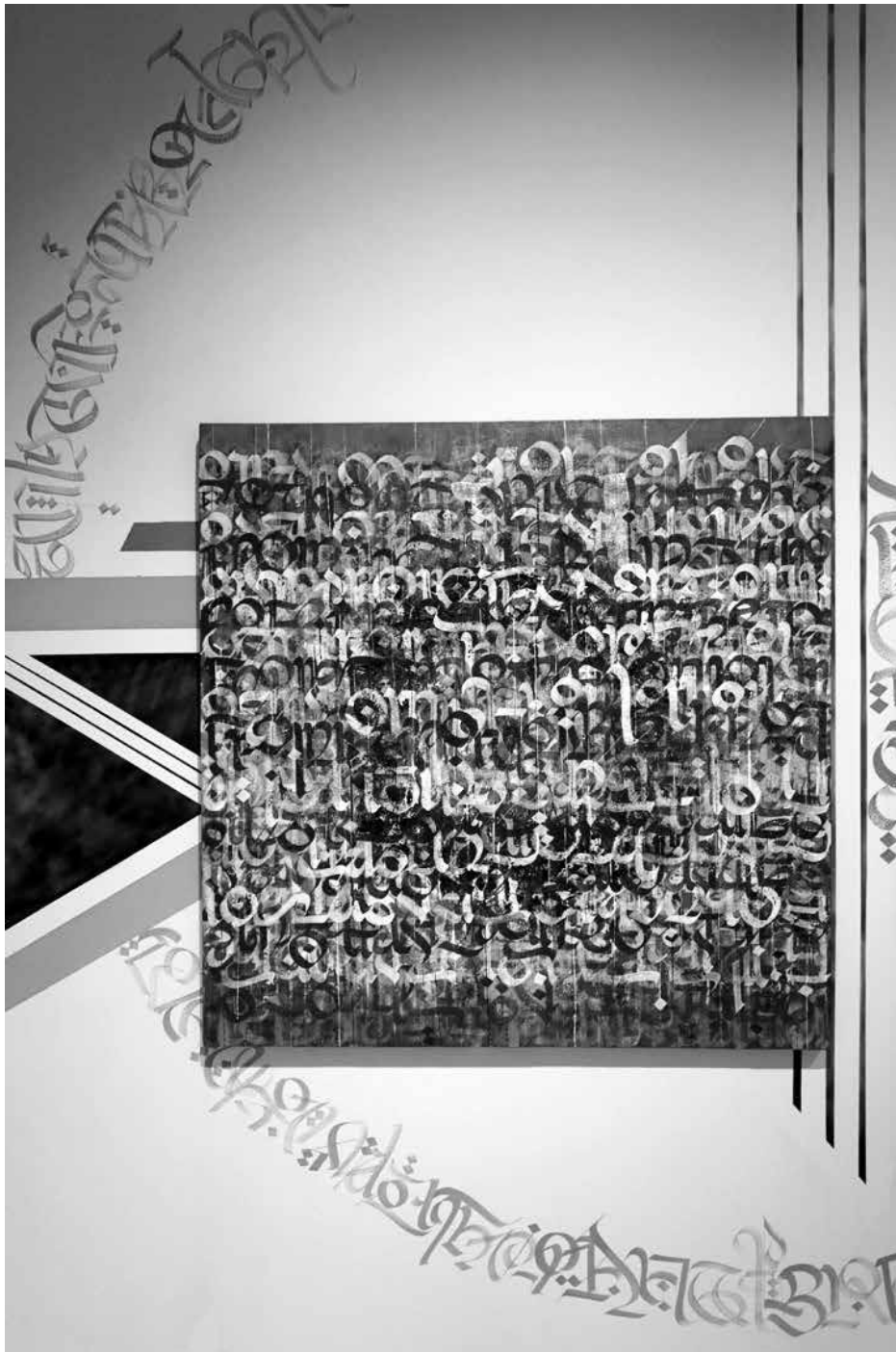
Muhammad Zahin Zaman's experience with calligraphy began by learning traditional Arabic calligraphy from another local calligrapher, but he felt restricted by the breadth of rules. He instead began to explore calligraffiti: a more free-form interpretation of Arabic calligraphy, which has recently been spreading throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Calligraffiti alters the traditional script with a more open and free-flowing approach, merging it with graffiti aesthetics and techniques—in addition to providing new context in being public, in outdoor installations. After meeting eL Seed during his Coney Island

installation, Muhammad began work on developing his own calligraffiti script and approach, eventually developing his own typography tied into his personal identity as a Bangladeshi American: fusing the Arabic, Bengali, and English scripts into one new script. As part of his calligraffiti installation, Muhammad installed two large murals in his section on the far side of the exhibit gallery.

The two murals installed in the exhibit were directly integrated into both his own section of the exhibit and the wider theme. A large, nearly floor-to-ceiling circular installation of a quote attributed to Jalaluddin Rumi, a 13th-century Sufi mystic and poet, reading: "Love will come through all languages on its own," tied together the cross-community structure of the calligraphy exhibit. Accompanying the circle, geometric lines and triangles spray painted onto the wall were installed by Muhammad to create an aesthetic balance to the ringed quote. On the neighboring wall, two large *nugta*—brush stroke "dots" commonly used for measuring and ornamentation in Arabic calligraphy—accompanied by a contemporary alteration: a paint-drip flowing from the bottom dot. Beneath the *nugta*, Muhammad wrote *Peace* and *Salam* twice: once in English in his own typography and once in Arabic in a free-flowing script.

His other works in the exhibit, consisting of two works on canvas and three planks, featured messages relating to issues reflecting personal experiences of community identity. The series of three separate wooden panels, entitled *My Country, My Home*, featured the phrase written repeatedly using *red, white, and blue* hues: made in the wake of growing Islamophobia in the country and the impact it has had on his identity as a Muslim American. Their installation as neighboring but separate planks also helped to communicate this feeling of division—inviting viewers to imagine what the three would look if made whole. The two works on canvas bore cross-community messages in picking up themes of love, devotion, and humility common to all of





Muhammad's works were installed partially over the murals intentionally: while obscuring the full text of the murals, Muhammad and I felt that it gave an interwoven feeling to both the mural and his featured artworks. This installation was actually Muhammad's first major mural and has since gone on to be a part of major mural installations at other venues in Buffalo, including the Burchfield Penney Art Center and the Buffalo Arts Studio.

aesthetics and meanings. Although the vast majority of Muhammad's works are written in English in his own blended typography, Muhammad uses the same flat-angle brush (or pen) used in Arabic calligraphy, maintaining the same signature movement between wide and narrow strokes. On many of his works, Muhammad writes the same phrase over and over and over again, creating a layering cascade of words and letters: a way of writing through the issues or emotions that he is feeling at the time. This use of calligraphy as meditation and reflection through repetition of impactful phrases was shared by the Arabic calligrapher in the exhibit, Amjad Aref. Amjad mentioned in an interview that through his daily reading of the Quran, he might come across a particular *sura* that resonates with him at that time, and in order to commit it to memory and reflect on it further, he would write it out in calligraphy.

Convergences and divergences between the traditional Arabic calligraphy in the exhibit and Muhammad's calligraphitti were articulated in the interpretive materials on three levels: through visuals, text, and audio recordings. *Visually*, visitors were asked to draw direct connections and differences between calligraphitti and Arabic calligraphy through the placement of the murals and works side-by-side. Through written label and panel descriptions of calligraphitti and Arabic calligraphy, visitors *read* about the applications of both forms of art—and where they might be encountered. Finally, through the audio vignettes in the exhibit, visitors could *hear* Muhammad articulate and identify similarities and differences between his calligraphitti work and traditional Arabic calligraphy—and also an overview of traditional Arabic calligraphy by Amjad. By appealing to these three levels of engagement in a variety of forms and *starting from* the shared visual engagement of the fine art interpretive materials—just as in the beadwork exhibit—visitors were eased into and provided with the tools necessary to navigate the folk art works and meanings in the exhibit.

the major religions, with the colors on each canvas rooted in the elements mentioned in their message: blue for *As the water covers the sea, your love covers me* and an earthy brown for *I am from the dirt, and I will go back to the dirt*. These works were installed over the murals, with the letters flowing from

the wall, to the canvas and planks, and back onto the wall, creating a three-dimensional installation.

The placement of Muhammad's calligraphitti next to the traditional Arabic calligraphy works by helping to provide a visual bridge with Arabic calligraphy in both



## Casting a Wide Net: Reflections on Interpretive Material Design

In the *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass II* beadwork exhibit and the *Appealing Words* calligraphy exhibit, the installation of contemporary art murals, drawing from traditional art, was featured as a bridge for visitors between folk art, fine art, and the interpretive materials provided in each exhibit. Instead of throwing visitors into the deep end and barraging them at once with new *ways* of meanings alongside the new works themselves, the murals helped visitors test the waters by tapping into a common level of engagement—visual—to lead them into new sets of meanings. Foregrounding the visual elements of the *instruction manual* acknowledges that the sights, which visitors see, are interpretive materials in themselves, informing and influencing how subsequent works are experienced. By decentralizing and dispersing the meaning-making opportunities of the instruction manual between different categories, visitors are taught that the conclusions and meanings will be at the *confluence* of those disparate pieces—rather than found wholly in one.

This approach to casting a wide net of interpretive materials and multiple points of engagement for visitors to interact with ensures that at least *some* degree of contextual information is being communicated to visitors, even if they were to idly saunter past with no more than a passing glance. Just because text is written on a panel does not mean that it will be read; nor does the inclusion of fieldwork photos

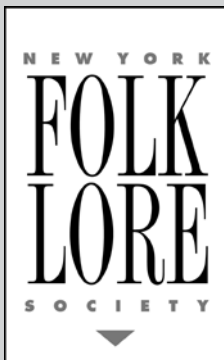
mean they will be paid attention; nor will providing audio vignettes mean they will be listened to. If all three categories of text, visual, and audio interpretive materials are included in various ways, however, there is a good chance that one might stick, pulling them into the wider net of holistic exhibit experience. ▼

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