

The Griffith Observatory Exhibit Program: Turning Visitors into Observers

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Introduction

For most Southern Californians and the many visitors who come to Los Angeles, the venerable Griffith Observatory is the shining white building in the Hollywood Hills, once referred to by director E. C. Krupp as "the hood ornament of Los Angeles." It is also familiar to moviegoers in numerous films, most notably the famous James Dean flick, *Rebel Without a Cause*. Funding for construction of the Observatory was given to the city by Griffith Jenkins Griffith, who wanted to create a "people's observatory." Since opening in 1935, the institution has been sharing the skies for free with anyone who wants to see them.

World-famous Griffith Observatory re-opened in November 2006, after a nearly five-year renovation and expansion project that restored the building, remade the planetarium, doubled the public space, and created a new, permanent exhibit program. The theme of the exhibits is "turning visitors into observers." The premise was to develop exhibits to engage visitors in observation, either directly or by experiencing the results of astronomical study. The exhibits were designed to be large, unique, and very visual, so as to provoke engagement, wonder, and inspiration. Writing the 165 panels that accompanied the dozens of exhibits focused on an inviting and conversational tone, as if the exhibits themselves could answer the questions visitors might have about what they were seeing. The panels make adroit use of imagery and very focused and meaningful written captions intended to connect with the Observatory's very broad, very diverse audience. This poster presents images of a selection of the exhibits, discusses the approach we took in writing the exhibits, and presents some lessons learned that other institutions may find helpful.

Lessons Learned

As with any large exhibit project, there are a number of lessons that may be useful to other organizations:

Define a clear mission for the exhibit program, one specific to your audience. This is absolutely critical, and the step most often overlooked in the rush to design. Being clear-eyed about purpose and audience from the very beginning—resisting the temptation to "design to the space and time"—will yield benefits throughout the process. In the Observatory's case, defining a clear mission enabled us to sort through the myriad suggestions and content by constantly returning to fundamental questions. We also developed a clear sense of our very broad audience in terms of their education, background, learning styles, and native language. For that reason, we chose a very visual approach by which meaning was imparted by observation rather than reading.

Benchmark against other institutions. Though travel dollars are always in short supply, you will never regret seeing what other programs have done. The Observatory benefited enormously from conversations with other leading institutions to understand their approach, successes, challenges, and choices. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Creating The Exhibits

As the Observatory's non-profit partner in the project, Friends Of The Observatory (FOTO) hired C&G Partners, LLC to design the exhibits and Maltbie, Inc. to fabricate them. The Observatory's curatorial team, including Dr. Krupp, Dr. Bruce Bohannon (Exhibit Content Specialist), area astronomers, and Observatory staff devised content outlines to guide the design and writing.

Because the words on most of the exhibits are likely to stand in place for more than a decade and appeal to an astonishingly multi-generational and ethnically diverse audience, the exhibit captions required extreme clarity and approachability. The challenges were many:

Text had to fulfill the core precept of the observatory's mission: turning visitors into observers;

The material had to fit very precisely designed and limited spaces on each panel;

The words had to be the equivalent of a popular-level astronomy book, yet written at about a 7th-grade reading level and be friendly and approachable.

To achieve these goals, the senior exhibit writer (Petersen) developed the "voice of the Observatory," a writing role that modeled the exhibit tone, as if to suggest a personal discussion between the Observatory visitor and the exhibits. It was very important that no one participant's voice (writing style) be allowed to dominate the panels. Thus, the exhibition writer kept the language level and tone as even as possible through several rounds of curatorial review and the rigors of design and layout.

The writing and layout processes proceeded in parallel. The writer worked in residence with the exhibit design team in New York City for eight and a half months, also advising on science issues and image selection and helping to resolve design issues. She met frequently with the curatorial team in Los Angeles. After approval, completed layouts were sent for fabrication.

An Introduction to the Griffith Observatory Exhibits

Each visitor to Griffith Observatory is cast in the role of observer, with an opportunity to do real observing in authentic environments. The exhibits explore fundamental questions of astronomy—what do we observe, how do we observe it, and why is it important—while prompting visitors to ponder their own relationships with the universe. Each major exhibit area focuses on unique aspects of observation and the science of astronomy. The exhibits consist of sets of panels, illustrations, models, and carefully selected interactive pieces. Here is a representative sample of the more than 165 panels in the exhibition.



The Ahmanson Hall of the Sky establishes a personal connection to the sky for the visitor, answering six of the most-asked questions at the Observatory and anchored around the Observatory's public solar telescope. Six alcoves demonstrate *Day and Night*, *Sun and Stars' Paths* (right), *Seasons*, *Moon Phases* (left), *Tides*, and *Eclipses*.



The **Widener Hall of the Eye** explores the nature and progress of human observation of the sky and the tools used for that exploration. Using the Sky gives five examples of how people have used the sky for thousands of years to improve their lives and acquire important knowledge. **Extending the Eye** gives visitors the chance to see and manipulate telescopes, lenses, and mirrors on a unique astronomical "workbench," highlighting such advances as Galileo's telescope (right).



Beyond the Visible presents a wall of visuals (left) that reveal how our ability to detect and record radiation beyond visible light has opened the universe to further study. Each wavelength that astronomers study is illustrated, using images from ground-based and space-based facilities.



Elements (left) presents the chemical elements in an 8-foot-high periodic table sculpture, showing visitors how the elements are created through stellar evolution. **The Active Sun** shows our star through recent spacecraft data. **Our Sun Is a Star** features scale models and animations to show the Sun's critical importance to us and our understanding of all stars.



The **Richard and Lois Gunther Depths of Space** allows visitors to explore the planets, stars, nebulae and galaxies as seen by our ground-based and orbiting observatories in space.

Observing in California uses a series of models, illustrations, and hands-on artifacts to show how California observatories and researchers engineered scientific and technological breakthroughs that helped reveal the modern universe during the 20th century.

The Edge of Space provides visitors with an experience that bridges the familiar Earth-bound view of the sky with the larger universe. It contains **Pieces of the Sky**, with the Observatory's extensive meteorite collection and teaches about the role of impacts in shaping planetary surfaces. It also features the **Cloud and Spark Chambers**, which demonstrate the constant bombardment of cosmic rays that link us to the high-energy universe. **Our Moon** allows visitors to explore Earth's closest neighbor in space and includes an Apollo 14 lunar sample.



The Planets takes visitors on a tour of the solar system in a "you are there" journey of exploration. Above them hang 3D models of the worlds of our solar system (above), sized properly to each other and to the theater, which represents the Sun. **Other Worlds, Other Stars** highlights the ongoing search for extra-solar planets, using an ever-changing LED counter of known planets to showcase the pace of discovery. Our **Milky Way Galaxy** is illustrated on an 8-foot luminous glass model that floats in midair. The **Iconic Universe** is an image series of distant nebulae, galaxies and stars. Nearby, the **Big Dipper** is a 4-foot sphere that can be viewed from all sides to show how perspective changes the perceived form of this familiar star pattern.



Visitors can use specially mounted telescopes to view details in the 152-foot-long **Big Picture**, showing a small portion of the constellation Virgo as seen by the Samuel Oschin Telescope. It is accompanied by the **Depth of Space**, a series of animations that show the 3D character of our universe. Seated across from the image, against the outer wall of the **Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon** theater, is a statue of Albert Einstein (left), his extended finger represents the amount of sky covered by the Big Picture.



About the Authors

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