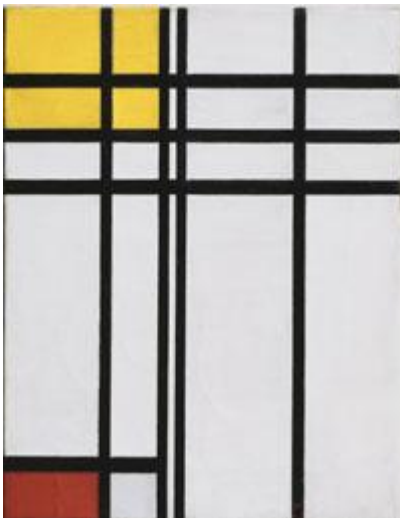


Museum Plaques: Decoded

While every museum is a little bit different, there are some overarching organizational principles that they all share. When visiting almost any museum a visitor can expect to find small captions or plaques near art objects. These plaques will include information, such as:

- the artwork's title
- the artist's name and nationality
- the materials used in the artwork's creation
- the date that artwork was completed
- the artwork's physical dimensions
- the artwork's legal status at the museum
- the artwork's catalogue number



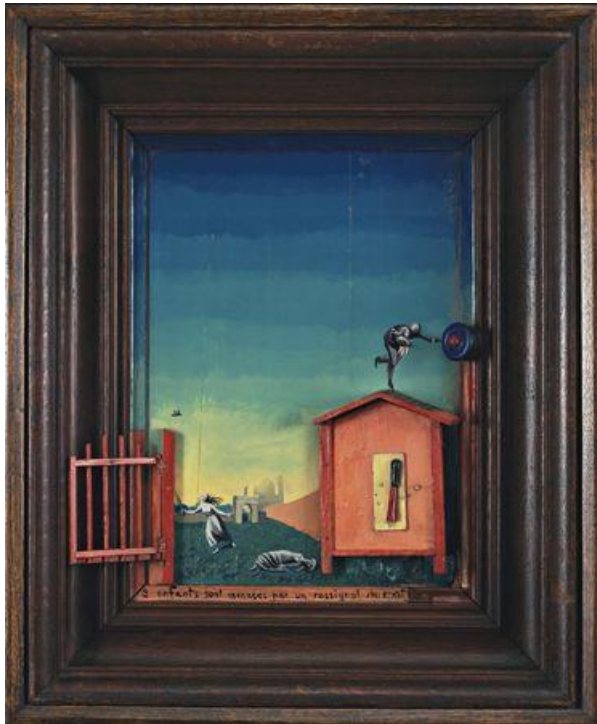
A museum may also provide additional information, such as the historical background of an artwork or movement, biographical information on an artist, comparisons to other art objects or possible interpretations of an artwork's meaning.

The next few pages of this guide include several real life examples of museum plaques, along with more specific explanations of the different items included on them.



Example: At the Museum of Modern Art

For this artwork the museum has provided both basic information and a section of commentary, which puts the work and artist in the context of a greater artistic movement.



Max Ernst. French, born Germany. 1891-1976. Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale. 1924. Oil on wood with painted wood elements and frame, 27 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 4 1/2" (69.8 x 57.1 x 11.4 cm). Purchase. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Dada, June 18–September 11, 2006

Made in 1924, the year of Surrealism's founding, Ernst described this work as "the last consequence of his [sic] early collages—and a kind of farewell to a technique..." He later gave two possible autobiographical references for the nightingale: the death of his sister in 1897, and a fevered hallucination he recalled in which the wood grain of a panel near his bed took on "successively the aspect of an eye, a nose, a bird's head, a menacing nightingale, a spinning top, and so on."

Max Ernst (French born
Germany, 1891-1976)
Two Children and
Nightingale, 1924

Made in 1924, the year of
Surrealism's founding,
Ernst described this work as
"the last consequence of his
[sic] early collages—and a
kind of farewell to a technique."
He later gave two possible
autobiographical references for
the nightingale: the death of
his sister in 1897, and a
fevered hallucination he recalled
in which the wood grain of a
panel near his bed took on

The basic label:

(A) Max Ernst. **(B)** French, born Germany. **(C)** 1891-1976. **(D)** *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*. **(E)** 1924. **(F)** Oil on wood with painted wood elements and frame, **(G)** 27 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 4 1/2" (69.8 x 57.1 x 11.4 cm). **(H)** Purchase. **(I)** © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

(A) – the name of the artist. This may include any other names that the artist was known by.

(B) – biographical information about the artist; his country of birth as well as his nationality

(C) – more biographical information about the artist; the dates of his birth and death

(D) – the title of the work of art

(E) – the year that the work of art was completed.

(F) – the materials that the artist used. Here they include oil paint, wood with pre-made painted wood pieces and a pre-made frame.

(G) – the dimensions of the work of art, its height, width and length. This is often included as a reference for those who access a museum catalogue online or in a book, so that they can understand how big the object is in real life.

(H) – this explains the capacity in which the work of art appears in the museum. This object has been purchased and is part of the permanent collection. A work may also be noted as donated by an individual or organization or on loan from another museum or private collection.

(I) – this information contains the copyright and licensing information of the work of art. The amount of this type of information provided will vary greatly from museum to museum

The additional commentary:

The curator leaves visitors with additional information about this object, mentioning both how the work is related to the artist's prior work, and how it relates to the larger movement of Surrealism. Also in this commentary are some possible explanations for the content of the artwork, specifically biographical information that might explain the artist's choices.

Example: At the Philadelphia Museum of Art

For this artwork the museum has provided only a plaque with basic information.



Tomb Figure of a Bactrian Camel, 618-907
Chinese
Earthenware with sancai (tricolor) glaze
32 x 10 x 25 inches (81.3 x 25.4 x 63.5 cm)
Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen, 1964
1964-9-1

Tomb Figure of a
Bactrian Camel, 618-907
Chinese
Earthenware with sancai
1964-9-1

The basic label:

(A) *Tomb Figure of a Bactrian Camel*, **(B)**618-907
(C) Chinese
(D) Earthenware with sancai (tricolor) glaze
(E)32 x 10 x 25 inches (81.3 x 25.4 x 63.5 cm)
(F) Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen, **(G)** 1964
(H)1964-9-1

(A) – the title of the artwork. In this case the object is an archeological artifact and the name of the artist and the original title are unknown. This title has been assigned by a modern day expert and is more descriptive of the artifact’s cultural background and the context that it was found in.

(B) – an estimated date of the artwork’s creation. With archeological artifacts such as this one it is often impossible to know the exact date that the object was made. Experts usually assign a range of dates, based both on knowledge of the culture that the object came from as well as scientific data from the dig site, such as carbon dating techniques.

(C) – the culture that created the object.

(D) – the materials that the artist used.

(E) – the dimensions of the work of art, its height, width and length. This is often included as a reference for those who access a museum catalogue online or in a book, so that they can understand how big the object is in real life.

(F) – this explains the capacity in which the work of art appears in the museum. This object donated to the museum by an individual.

(G) – the date that the object was donated to the museum.

(H) – the artwork’s catalogue number. Museums usually assign a number to every artwork in their collection and then organize them into a catalogue. Many museums have searchable catalogues online where information about artworks can be accessed by the title, collection or catalogue number.