

Take Our Word: It's Worth a Look

The Washington Post Friday, October 3, 2008; WE05



Bonjour! Guten tag! ¡Hola!

When you walk through the doors of the new National Museum of Language in College Park, there is no wrong way to say hello.

The museum, which opened in May, is the only one in the country dedicated to language in general, and it offers visitors an interesting look at how writing systems have developed and continue to change.

Tucked in a nondescript office building along Route 1, it lacks the eye-catching architecture of popular Washington museums. But, like an oyster, it's what's inside that counts, and this museum is a pearl.

The main exhibit chronicles the two ways that written languages formed: alphabetic (based on sounds) and logographic (based on pictures or symbols). The Phoenicians get credit for the first alphabet, which they formed around 1050 B.C.; it led to the Roman and Hebrew alphabets, which are still in use today. According to part of the exhibit, serifs you see in sentences such as this one are remnants of how Roman words were once chiseled.

Logographics were used by the Chinese and the early Sumerians, and there is a fascinating exhibit on how China influenced Japan's early written language. The influence of culture (and neighboring countries) in how language formed is a common theme throughout the museum. For example, in Japan men and women had separate syllabaries (a way to write sounds). Men wrote to study religious scripts, and women wrote stories and diaries. The world's first novel, "The Tale of Genji," was written between 1001 and 1020 in a script predominately used by Japanese women.



Museum staff member Jill Robbins, above, leads the calligraphy demonstration.

For kids, there is a table of Japanese books that are used to teach the language to young readers. There are also Japanese comic books that show how both syllabaries are still in use.

After browsing through the main exhibit, try typing in your name into a computer to see how it would look in different alphabets, then head into the activities room. A movie explores Chinese calligraphy, and you can practice special paper and brushes. Play computer games to test your knowledge of linguistics.

The museum also houses the Allen Walker Read Library, the personal collection of the man who, among other linguistic feats, found the origin of the expression OK. (It was first used in a Boston newspaper in 1838 to stand for "oll korrekt," that's "all correct" to you and me).

With only three rooms, the museum is small, but it packs a lot of information and activities into the tiny space. Docents such as Jill Robbins are attentive to visitors, a benefit often lost at larger museums. In one activity with young visitors, Robbins uses clay etchings to challenge them to guess what the primitive markings mean.

The docents also can say "the end" in 10 languages including *fin*, *ende*, *al-nihaya*, *finis* and *kkeut* (French, German, Arabic, Latin and Korean).

-- Amy Orndorff

WHERE IS IT? 7100 Baltimore Ave., Suite 202, College Park, MD

- about a 10-minute walk from the College Park Metro station.

HOW MUCH? It's free!

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

The museum is open Tuesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the first and third Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

Call 301-864-7071 or visit <http://www.languagemuseum.org>.



Mattias McNulty, 5, top left, and brother Johannes McNulty, 2, learn to make Chinese characters at the National Museum of Language in College Park.