

# OPENING OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LANGUAGE



**O**n May 3, 2008, the National Museum of Language opened in College Park, Maryland, with an exhibit called «Writing Language: Passing it on.» For the next year, the exhibit will be on display, encouraging visitors to learn about writing systems from around the world. They include languages that are written with letters from alphabets like Arabic, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and those that use symbols from logographs like Chinese and Japanese.

A trailblazer in the field, there are no more than three museums in the world with a similar focus. They include Denmark's Language Museum in Arhus, Denmark; Iceland's World Language Centre in Reykjavik, Iceland; and Spain's Linguamón – Casa de les Llengües in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.

Although there are several museums dedicated to single languages, the National Museum of Language is notable because it is dedicated to the beauty and complexity of world languages in all aspects.

One example of this interplay can be seen in the museum's replica of Wang Hui's (1632-1717) «Ode to Plum in May.» Poetry and calligraphy become intertwined aesthetics that are displayed in the painting's upper right hand corner. This illustration demonstrates how writing systems are often tied to cultural traditions, in this instance, the structure of the Chinese calligraphy contributing to the artist's concept of the natural landscape.

While the museum has been in the planning process for 11 years, the original impetus came much earlier. Founder Amelia Murdoch got the idea for the museum on January 11, 1971, after a temporary language exhibit at the National Security Agency. In 1985 a group headed by Murdoch considered approaching the Smithsonian about opening a language museum, but the plan fell through at the time.

«By 1997 I thought, 'It's now or never, '» Murdoch said. In July of that year the founders held their first meeting. Murdoch said her goal from the beginning was not just to explore languages but the importance of languages in societies and even everyday interactions.

Fulfilling the founder's aims, visitors can look at areas in society such as literature, history, religion, law, commerce, and diplomacy, and explore language not only as it relates to their own life experiences but to how those experiences are also encountered in cultures from all over the world.

Located in the Washington, DC, area, the museum attracts many language experts; visitors may stumble upon a treat depending on who drops in on a particular day. One visitor, an Arabic language instructor, brought his class to the museum and spoke about the role the Arabic calligrapher plays in many social and business interactions.



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In addition to the exhibit, the museum includes an activity room to present calligraphy in different languages. «I really liked writing my name in Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese,» said sixth-grader Michael Mouck from University Park Elementary school, who visited the activity room. Mouck said he likes learning about languages and wants to study Chinese, French and Japanese.

Uchenna Uzomah, another sixth-grader from University Park, said it was a good exhibit and only suggested making the museum bigger. Expanding the museum is the next step the founders want to take. Murdoch said the Board of Directors is currently



looking to expand to a larger interim building until they raise money for the construction and upkeep of the final museum.

With this larger vision in mind, the National Museum of Language is dedicated to bringing together diverse language circles – academic, governmental, social, business, scientific, literary, technological – and to providing a forum through which they can communicate effectively, focusing attention on language as it relates to all aspects of life, human development, and human history.

Visitors of all ages are welcome to experience the current exhibit: Writing Language: Passing It On. While younger ages can enjoy touching cuneiform and papyrus, older children can see their names written in several writing systems and interact with a variety of multi-media presentations. Adults can study the evolution of the alphabets, and logographic systems. All are encouraged to learn «hello» in several different languages. For the exhibit, the museum motto is «For ages 9 to 99,» and that idea animates its existence—there really is something for everyone.»

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<http://languagemuseum.org>

