Death with Dignity
Ethical Closings
Education Without Borders
Bright Ideas in Publishing
The recession may have reined in the number of submissions to the 29th annual AAM Museum Publications Design Competition (Pub Comp) but not the overall quality of submissions. And if there was one theme during the competition this year it was diversity—wider arrays of awards were handed out to more organizations than in the past.

More than 120 books, catalogues, posters, invitations, press kits and other materials have been selected as winners. The competition, which acknowledges excellence in the graphic design of museum publications, is the only national, juried event involving publications produced by museums of all kinds and sizes. This year’s contest drew more than 700 entries.

In 2000, AAM introduced the “best-of-show” award—the Frances Smyth-Ravenel Prize for Excellence in Publication Design. Known as the Franny, the prize is named for the late editor-in-chief at the National Gallery of Art, a longtime Pub Comp judge who was instrumental in helping the competition achieve the national stature it has today. This year, the judges awarded the Franny to the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa., for *N.C. Wyeth Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings*, designed by Patricia Inglis, Inglis Design. The judges loved its classic presentation, timelessness and flawless production.

Competing institutions were divided according to budget; museums with annual operating budgets of $750,000 or more and those with budgets of less than $750,000. Within each budget division, entries competed in 15 categories, including books, educational resources, newsletters, fundraising materials and scholarly journals. Entries in all 15 categories were eligible for the Franny.

Two teams of judges chose the winners. Comprising the first team were Andrea
Stevens, director of strategic communications, SITES, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and Susan v. Levine, creative director, AAM. Serving on the second team were Bennett DeOlazo, creative director, Studio B, Alexandria, Va., and Robert Wiser, art director, Archetype Press, Silver Spring, Md.

Many of the winning entries featured something you’d want to keep, from the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts’ quirky Coke-bottle shaped refrigerator magnets to small palm-sized kaleidoscopes from the Dallas Museum of Art. Another trend was the use of materials that echoed the theme of the exhibit, such as the pink, undulating waves on the Freer/Sackler Gallery’s invitation to “Gardens and Cosmos” and the stamp-like crimped edges of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum’s “Alphabetically A to Z” exhibition calendar. “One of the more interesting trends this year was the emergence of crossover pieces: posters that were educational materials, invitations that doubled as calendars. These entries were a great way to solve design problems and cut down on costs,” said DeOlazo.

One thing that the judges were unanimous on was the desire to see more green printing. They would have liked to have seen more vegetable-based inks, post-consumer waste and chlorine-free paper, and waterless printing. “Green printing isn’t merely about saving money but presenting your institution as one that is not only concerned with the well-being of the environment but is actively doing something to protect it,” said Stevens. “Publicity like that is hard to come by and is often invaluable.”

The judges unanimously felt that next year’s competition would be very telling, with the economic downturn likely taking a toll on museums’ printing budgets. And while the task may seem daunting, it could also be a source of inspiration. “What is going to be the most interesting part of the competition next year is seeing how each entrant tries to reconcile the effect of the recession with the need to continue to produce publications that generate income and interest for their museum,” said Wiser. “It’s going to take some really creative thinking, but I think the results will be worth it.”
