


# **A Nation in a Nutshell:**

**A Visitor Study of *Colombia at the Smithsonian:*  
*Colombian Presence in the Collections of the Smithsonian Institution***



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## Preface

Sometimes the simplest exhibitions are not the simplest to study. This visitor study of *Colombia at the Smithsonian* presented several challenges for the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A), mainly because of the exhibit's location in a high-traffic area of the Castle. In this venue, a formal visitor survey was out of the question, and identifying individuals for qualitative interviews was not straightforward, because visitors who took a special interest in *Colombia* were often difficult to identify among the crowds of casual visitors milling around in the exhibit room. OP&A study team members spent time patiently observing and waiting to identify individuals to interview. In the end, their observations and interviews add up to a suggestive (if perhaps not definitive) picture of how Castle visitors approached *Colombia*.

This report comprises part of a larger body of analytical work that OP&A has done for the Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC)—including visitor studies of other SLC-sponsored exhibitions such as *Retratos*, *Celia Cruz*, and the recent *Soumaya* exhibition (whose run in the International Gallery overlapped *Colombia's* run in the Castle), as well as a program evaluation of the SLC's Latino Initiatives Pool. OP&A hopes to continue to work with the SLC to provide constructive feedback on its innovative programs, and to support it in its efforts to reach out to Latinos and non-Latinos alike.

I would like to thank Pilar O'Leary and Henry Estrada of the SLC for bringing in OP&A to assess this exhibit, and OP&A staff members Ioana Munteanu and James Smith—who spent many hours observing and interviewing visitors, and who wrote the report now in your hands.

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## Introduction

From September 6, 2006 through January 15, 2007, the Smithsonian Institution Castle hosted *Colombia at the Smithsonian: Colombian Presence in the Collections of the Smithsonian Institution*, a small exhibit featuring nearly 100 objects that illustrated the cultural and natural heritage of Colombia, ranging from insect specimens to modern art. The exhibit, sponsored by the Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC) consisted of four main displays:

- A sampling of objects created by Colombia's Native American peoples, drawn from the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian;
- A display of Colombian currency and stamps, drawn from the collections of the National Postal Museum and National Museum of American History;
- A sculpture by the renowned contemporary Colombian artist Fernando Botero, from the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden;
- A selection of Colombian natural history specimens (biological and geological), drawn from the collections of the National Museum of Natural History.

In addition, the exhibit offered a listening station featuring Colombian music, and a large Botero painting mounted in the Great Hall of the Castle, a short distance from the rest of the displays.

Shortly before the exhibition opened, the SLC asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a visitor study of *Colombia at the Smithsonian*. The study was intended to sound out visitors' thoughts on the design and content of the exhibit, their thoughts on exhibits with Latino or Latin American themes at the Smithsonian, and their awareness of the SLC and ideas about its role.

## Methodology

Having ascertained that the space in which the *Colombia* exhibit was displayed was not conducive to a formal visitor survey, the OP&A study team used two methods to determine how visitors approached and thought about the *Colombia* exhibition:

- Semi-structured qualitative interviews; and
- Unstructured observation of visitors in the exhibit space.

Approximately eight hours of observation revealed that many visitors in the room where *Colombia* was on display paid little or no attention to exhibit. Of these, some were passing through the exhibit space on their way from the Great Hall to the Commons; others were more interested in the *Legendary Coins and Currency* exhibit that shared the room with *Colombia*; and others were simply wandering around, taking in the various displays casually and randomly. The study team did not approach such visitors for interviews. Rather, the team approached only those visitors who spent some time with the *Colombia* displays, on the assumption that these individuals would be more likely to be able to form and voice an opinion of the exhibit and the SLC.

The study team conducted 18 qualitative interviews, ranging in length from a few minutes to half an hour, and involving a total of 21 people of all ages. Interviews focused on visitors' opinions about the exhibit's design and content, although the study team also queried visitors on their interest in Latino heritage, as well as their knowledge of the SLC and their views of its role. Most interviewees (17) were non-Hispanic whites—although the study team also talked to three Hispanic whites and one Hispanic of African origin—and most (16) were female.<sup>1</sup> Five interviewees said they lived in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area; 14 were from in other U.S. regions; and two were from in countries

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<sup>1</sup> Race (and approximately age) were established through the interviewer's observations; Latino origin emerged in the course of interviews.

other than the United States. Most of the visitors intercepted said they were visiting the Smithsonian for the first time.

## Findings

### Observations

With the exception of the music listening station, which was rarely used, individual displays within the *Colombia* exhibit attracted attention from many visitors, ranging from a casual glance to extended visual inspection of the objects coupled with text and label reading. Indeed, many visitors looked at all four *Colombia* displays and read at least some exhibit text—although in many cases, observation of the *Colombia* displays was mixed in with observation of other displays in the room. The biological specimens seemed to attract the most attention, especially from children.

However, most of the visitors of the visitors who looked at the *Colombia* displays—including many of those who looked at all four displays—did not appear to approach them as a cohesive exhibit. Few visitors read the introductory text panel and then proceeded to inspect the cases from left to right. Rather, it was far more common to see, for example, visitors who would look at one or two *Colombia* displays; then look at other, unrelated displays in the room or disappear into the Commons for several minutes; and then return and examine another one or two *Colombia* displays before moving on. In terms of general flow, visitors working their way from right to left or simply dipping in at random appeared to be as common as visitors working their way from left to right.

The study team's observations also suggest many visitors did not recognize where the boundaries of the exhibit lay. For example, visitors commonly turned from the rear side of *Colombia* displays to the adjacent Castle collection displays and back—sometimes several times. Likewise, visitors moving from right to left on the *Colombia* displays often proceeded on to the Castle ivory carving display without missing a beat.

## Interviews

### *Reasons for Visiting*

Most of the visitors with whom the study team spoke were first-time visitors to the Smithsonian. The study team assumes this reflects the Castle venue; visitors typically come to the Castle to get a general idea of what Smithsonian has to offer, rather than to see specific exhibits.

Few of the visitors with whom the study team spoke came to the Mall specifically to see the *Colombia* exhibit, although a few did come to see Hispanic Heritage Month programming which they knew included this exhibit. Some decided to check out the *Colombia* exhibit after noticing the panel announcing it in the Great Hall.

Interestingly, a few interviewees who came specifically for Hispanic Heritage Month programming were not aware of the *Myth, Mortals, and Immortality* exhibition of Mexican art in the International Gallery. They were, however, interested in the prospect of seeing a larger and more in-depth Latin American-themed exhibition once they were told about it, and asked to be directed to it.

### *General Impressions*

In general, interviewees saw the *Colombia* exhibit as similar to other Castle exhibits—a small sample of the great diversity that Smithsonian museums have to offer. Few were surprised to see an exhibit devoted to a Latin American country in the Castle:

I expect to see worldwide exhibits here. I don't expect to see only the United States.

I don't necessary look at the Smithsonian as the museum of [the United States]. I would think that its purpose is to have artifacts from all over.

I expect to see things that are diverse and international. My mom used to get the *Smithsonian* magazine when she was alive, and there were articles about things

from all over the world. ... So I'm not surprised to see something focusing on [another country].

Indeed, several interviewees were appreciative that the Smithsonian would offer such an exhibition in a prominent venue, as it “raises awareness about Colombia,” “provides a good snapshot of Colombian artifacts,” and shows “the Smithsonian’s collaboration with Colombian scholars.”

Interviewees indicated they approached individual *Colombia* displays based on curiosity (something caught their eye) or personal interest (in the subject matter of a display). For example, art lovers were drawn to the Botero sculpture; those with an interest in crafts or indigenous cultures gave the Native American artifacts a closer look; and children were attracted by the enormous insects, colorful birds, and other curiosities in the natural history case.

Interviewees generally praised the beauty and visual appeal of the individual displays. Individual displays were lauded with terms such as “beautiful,” “awesome,” and “cool.”

#### *Colombia as a Cohesive Exhibit*

Despite general praise for the individual displays, several interviewees indicated that they had not realized the four display cases constituted a single exhibit:

*Interviewer:* Did you realize this was a single exhibit?

*Interviewee:* If I hadn't been told that it was [by you], I wouldn't have known that.

Both interviews and observations suggested several reasons why this might be the case. These pertain to the exhibit's venue and audience; its organization; and its spatial boundaries.

*Venue and Audience.* As noted above, the room in which the exhibit was situated is small and serves primarily as a transit area between the Great Hall and the Commons. For most



visitors, this room is not perceived as a destination in itself, so they tend to approach displays somewhat casually. More generally, as noted above, the crowds drawn by the Castle consist largely of casual, often first-time Smithsonian visitors who are looking for a quick taste of what the Institution's museums have to offer, rather than for specific exhibits.

*Organization.* The organization of the exhibition appeared somewhat difficult for some visitors to grasp:

It's fairly incoherent. ... There's a case that has a couple artifacts; and then we have a case that's just money and stamps—which is never the most interesting thing; and then some dead creatures and rocks. It doesn't strike me as the most coherent exhibit I've ever seen.

Indeed, some had difficulty identifying the connecting theme even after the unity of these displays was pointed out:

*Interviewer:* Did you realize the [biological display] was connected to the rest of these displays?

*Interviewee:* No. I don't know what the connection would be.

Several admitted that the reason for their failure to note the connecting thread among the displays was that they simply had not read much of the exhibit text:

I'm seeing so much in a day that it's hard to stop and read everything. So unless there's something in plain sight saying these are grouped, I probably wouldn't read enough of it to notice.

*Interviewer:* Did you realize this was a single exhibit?

*Interviewee:* Not necessarily, other than that they all seemed to be of South American origin—you know, the pottery and the art and the animals. I probably would have known if I had read the whole sign. It's been a *long* day.

*Spatial Boundaries.* The exhibit did not define itself well spatially. Interviews tended to confirm the study team's observational conclusion that casual visitors often did not appreciate where the boundaries between *Colombia* and other displays lay. For example,

when asked about their favorite *Colombia* display, interviewees sometimes mentioned items that were *not* a part of the exhibit—ivory, porcelain, or furniture from the Castle collections, or even coins from the *Legendary Coins and Currency* exhibit. More explicitly, when queried about how the exhibition might have been improved, one interviewee responded:

I guess [it would be better] if there was some way it could be isolated by itself, because it's in the middle of a little bit of everything. There's a Ming vase over there, Chinese stuff over here—so it gets a little lost.

### *Comparison with **Legendary Coins and Currency***<sup>2</sup>

Despite facing similar challenges with the venue, the *Legendary Coins and Currency* exhibit opposite *Colombia* appeared to be more successful in spatially defining itself, for several reasons:

- The large circular title plates and text panels adjacent to each display provided prominent markers to indicate the cohesion of these displays. By contrast, the only prominent marker that the *Colombia* displays were part of a single exhibit was the introductory text panel, and few visitors seemed to notice—let alone read—this.<sup>3</sup>
- Objects were presented on only one side of the *Legendary Coins* display cases. By contrast, putting objects on both sides of the *Colombia* cases obscured the boundaries of the exhibit because of the proximity of the rear-side displays to unrelated displays of Castle porcelain and furniture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These comparisons are based on the study team's observations, and were not explicitly mentioned by interviewees; however, they are presented here in the context of discussing interviewees' comments suggesting their difficulties in appreciating where the boundaries of the *Colombia* exhibit lay.

<sup>3</sup> Some visitors did not stop upon entering the *Colombia* room, but rather looked around as they continued walking toward the Commons. Others proceeded perhaps ten feet into the room before stopping to get their bearings. Such visitors were likely to miss the *Colombia* introductory text panel, at least on their way from the Great Hall to the Commons.

<sup>4</sup> Further, some visitors missed the rear sides altogether or did not appear to be interested in them; and some noticed them only after being drawn to the adjacent Castle porcelain and furniture displays.

- The introductory text panel for *Coins and Currency* was more concise and uncluttered than the *Colombia* introductory panel, making it more likely to be read by casual visitors.<sup>5</sup> It also had a location where visitors entering the room were more likely to notice it—closer to the door at the end of the corridor from the Great Hall.

### *Observations by Careful Viewers*

Some visitors did appreciate *Colombia* as a cohesive whole, and interviewees in this group were generally positive in their comments, seeing the exhibit as a nice cross-section of Colombia’s cultural and natural heritage. However, two criticisms surfaced among these interviewees, involving the exhibit’s scale and lack of contextual information.

*Scale.* A few interviewees expressed disappointment with the size and scale of the exhibit:

I looked at this and said, “Is that *it* for Latin American history?”!

It was nice, but it was a little disappointing, in terms of scale. After going to [the *Soumaya* exhibition] and then coming here, I expected more.

*Lack of Contextual Information.* Some interviewees expressed a desire for more information on the cultural, historical, or geographic context of the objects on display:

They don’t really discuss the history of the objects. They give names for the Native American artifacts, but don’t say what their significance is. . . . If they gave more descriptors to the individual artifacts, it would make it more of an exhibit, rather than just a collection of items.

I’ve never seen birds like that before. Are they still around, or are they extinct? It doesn’t say. It doesn’t tell you anything about them; it’s just got the [scientific] names for them that you can’t pronounce.

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the “clutter” of the Colombia panel, however, was an unavoidable effect of presenting the text in two languages.

Moreover, as with some casual visitors, a few interviewees who approached the exhibition as a unified whole indicated a preference for a more thematic arrangement, rather than the collections-based approach.

*Thoughts on Latino Culture and the Smithsonian Latino Center*

When asked about their interests, most interviewees reported a casual interest in Latino culture and history. This interest appeared to be rooted in a recognition that Latino culture comprises a part of the wider cultural diversity of the United States:

It's good to display the characteristics of our diversity.

I like that America is a melting pot, but at the same time people retain unique cultural aspects of their background. ... My family has long lost that; we have been here so long we have no cultural background other than just the United States.

A few interviewees, however, expressed a much stronger interest in representations of Latino culture and history, usually because of their own ethnic background. For example, an army linguist of Puerto Rican and Trinidadian descent discussed Latino-themed exhibits in the context of the need to promote mutual respect and appreciation among the many groups that comprise the nation's population:

I'm a soldier. I just got back from Iraq. We go and fight for America, and we come together across the waters. But when we come back, we tend to separate. ... It's your display as well as mine, even if you are not of Latin descent. We are part of you; you are part of us. This is what America consists of. So I want [other Americans] to embrace our culture, as we have embraced their culture. And that's how we'll come together not only in conflict, but also when we come back.

When queried about what sorts of Latino-themed exhibitions might interest them, visitors offered a wide range of responses, including the following:

I would like to see the early beginnings of [Latin American] culture and how it was changed by Europe.

I'm a Mexican-ophile, so anything having to do with Mexico, or specifically the border. The border between the U.S. and Mexico is a fascinating area.

I would like to see more on the African Latino communities. ... [Or] why not do Spain first? To understand what Latino culture is about, people need to understand the root—what it means to be Spanish, and the different ethnic groups in Spain.

I would like to see more Hispanic speakers coming and talking about the culture, customs, and shows—things we don't know. I'm from Venezuela, so I don't know too many things about Ecuador or Colombia, but having these kinds of exhibits put you in contact with the culture.

Most interviewees were not familiar with the SLC, even though some had previously visited SLC-sponsored exhibits like *Celia Cruz* and *Retratos*. When queried on their ideas about the role of such a Center, they most frequently mentioned two general missions:

- Outreach to the Latino community, both by offering a wide range of programs of interest to Latinos (internship programs, community-based programs) and by creating connections with Latino constituencies through schools, universities, churches, community centers, and so on.
- Increasing the general public's awareness and appreciation of Latino culture through exhibits (on Latino history, traditions, culture, customs, and so on) and public programs (lectures, performances, workshops, and so on).

## Discussion

It will always be a challenge to entice Castle visitors to pause and consider a small exhibit such as *Colombia*. The Castle is typically visited by first-time Smithsonian visitors who want to get an idea of what the Institution has to offer, and most of whom have only a passing interest in Latino art, history, and culture. In long run, of course, increased outreach efforts to Latino communities could raise the percentage of Castle visitors who are likely to be specifically drawn to Latino-oriented exhibits. And in the shorter run, increasing the visibility of such exhibits (for example, through banners or panels outside the Castle similar to those used by other museums to advertise their new or permanent exhibitions) might increase the percentage of passing visitors inclined to give these exhibits their attention.

The major issue emerging from the study team's interviews and observations was the contrast between *Colombia* considered as four separate displays, versus *Colombia* considered as a single cohesive exhibit. Individual display cases within *Colombia* were successful in attracting the attention of many of the casual visitors who file through the Castle every day. However, for many visitors, *Colombia* did work well as a cohesive exhibit.

The study team is aware that the SLC would like to do similar country-based exhibits in the future. Faced with the relative success of *Colombia* as a set of individual displays and its problematic aspects as a cohesive exhibit, the team would suggest that two issues should be considered in approaching these exhibits:

- How to make the connection among displays more explicit and define the boundaries of the exhibit more clearly, in order to increase visitors' recognition that the displays comprise a cohesive whole.

- How to maximize the visual and educational impact of each individual display case, for the benefit of those viewers who do *not* approach the displays as a cohesive whole.

Creating an exhibit that succeeds as a cohesive whole will be a challenge in the venue where *Colombia* was situated.<sup>6</sup> Even the *Legendary Coins and Currency* exhibit, (which—as noted above—spatially defined itself somewhat more successfully than *Colombia*) seemed to attract more “grazing” than sustained attention. And the question of cohesion aside, it is not clear how any exhibit, no matter how cleverly conceived, could do justice to a whole nation in such a physically *small* space. Nevertheless, in approaching future exhibits, the SLC might consider using some of the strategies employed by *Legendary Coins* to define spatial boundaries more clearly, as noted above.

With regard to efforts to increase the impact of each display case in isolation, the study team would make two suggestions:

- Each individual display case might articulate a simple message or “headline” that ties in with the objects on view, and that the SLC would like visitors to absorb. For example, the *Colombia* display case with Native American artifacts might have been headlined, “Colombian culture predates Columbus”—or something to that effect. The biological side of the natural history display case might have had a similar headline indicating, “For a country of its size, Colombia possesses incomparably rich flora and fauna.” The benefit of such headlines would be that even visitors who fail to grasp the larger picture, or who spend time with only one or two displays, would be more likely leave knowing a little more about the nation being presented.

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<sup>6</sup> The study team is assuming the venue of similar future exhibits will be the same as the venue of the *Colombia* exhibit. A change of venue might in itself solve some of the problems identified in this report, although the study team cannot suggest any clearly superior alternatives. The only possibility that readily suggests itself—the Ripley Center concourse—would raise challenges similar to those raised by the current Castle venue. Other venue possibilities might include spaces in Smithsonian museums whose subject matter overlaps with SLC exhibit subject matter, such as the National Museum of the American Indian or the National Museum of Natural History.

- Additional materials (such as photographs and maps) that serve to place the objects in their historical and cultural context could be added in or around each display case. For example, photographs of Colombian Native American groups might have enhanced the first display case. Likewise, the Botero sculpture might have benefited from a photograph of the artist and some quotations about what he hopes to convey through his art.