

A Snapshot of Spring Break at the National Museum of African Art
Report of Interviews with Visitors Regarding the National Museum of African Art

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Acknowledgments

Excellent qualitative data was collected at NMAfA and NMNH by Marissa Peeters, who is interning at OP&A following her graduate work at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. Interviews were also conducted by OP&A staff members Kathy Ernst, David Karns, Amy Marino, and Whitney Watriss. The report was written by Kathy Ernst.

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Carole M.P. Neves, Director, Office of Policy and Analysis

Impetus for the interviews

In March 2004, Dr. Sharon Patton, Director of the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA), sought the assistance of the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) in the design and conduct of methods, including a survey instrument, to collect visitor satisfaction and experience data. A better understanding of NMAfA's audience, as well as of visitors who choose *not* to come to the Museum, and the impact of NMAfA's exhibitions and programs on its visitors, is of primary interest to the Museum.

As a first step, OP&A recommended conducting at least 20 in-depth interviews with visitors at NMAfA to obtain insightful data to inform the design of a survey questionnaire. NMAfA provided six areas of inquiry:

1. Who is our audience (demographics)?
2. Why did visitors come to the museum (what motivated their visits)?
3. Did visitors come to see an exhibition or attend a program?
4. What were the visitors' impressions of the art, its presentation (exhibitions) and the supportive programs?
5. How, if at all, did visitors' impressions about Africa and African art change after visiting the museum?
6. Why would visitors recommend visiting the museum to family and friends?

Methodology

OP&A conducted 25 interviews with visitors to NMAfA. Conversations took place mostly in the Pavilion and outside in the Haupt Garden as visitors exited the Museum; a few interviews were held outside of the exhibitions on the 2nd and 3rd levels.

Perhaps as interesting as visitors' responses to the above questions are the reasons why visitors choose *not* to come to the Museum. OP&A spoke with an additional 13 Smithsonian visitors who were not at NMAfA – 11 in the Castle or outside the Castle in the Haupt Garden and two at the *African Voices* hall at the National Museum of Natural History – to ascertain whether Smithsonian visitors have heard of NMAfA and learn about their level of interest in the Museum.

Interviews were conducted between April 7 and 28, 2004 – a period of typically high visitation at the Smithsonian when many schools are on spring break. The weather was unusually cooperative, with a long stretch of unseasonably warm spring days.

All visitors were selected in a non-systematic manner; however, interviewers attempted to speak to visitors of different ages, genders, races/ethnicities and group compositions, i.e., persons visiting alone, couples, groups of adults, and families with children. Visitors at NMAfA were approached by the interviewer and asked if they would like to talk about

their experiences in the Museum. Non-NMAfA visitors were engaged in a more general conversation about their Smithsonian visits and were asked if they had heard of NMAfA and about their levels of interest in NMAfA.

Response rates were high; visitors rarely declined to participate. Conversations were recorded; for practical reasons of capturing a coherent recording, interviewers did not speak to large groups of children, including school groups. Conversations, on average, lasted 15 minutes.

It is important to note that the sample of 25 visitors that OP&A interviewed at the Museum should not be construed as representative of NMAfA visitors because of its small size. The discussions conveyed some general impressions and provided helpful hints on issues that merit further study. This report, however, should not be regarded as a reliable description of the distribution of visitor experiences and attitudes toward NMAfA.

Visitors to NMAfA

The OP&A interviewers did not formally request specific demographics of interviewees. Rather, they observed gender and group compositions and estimated age and race/ethnicity. Other demographic information such as residence and occupation was brought up in the interviews.

- **Group composition:** Of the 25 interviews conducted at the Museum, 14 were with persons visiting alone and 11 were with groups of two or more. A total of 42 people were interviewed in all (although two small children did not participate.)
- **Gender:** 27 of the interviewees (64 percent) were female, and 15 (36 percent) were male.
- **Age:** By interviewer estimates, 6 interviewees (14 percent) were under 20 years of age; 18 interviewees (43 percent) were between 20 and 40 years; 10 interviewees (24 percent) were between 40 and 60 years; and 8 interviewees (19 percent) were over 60.
- **Residence:** 13 interviewees (31 percent) resided in Washington D.C. or its metropolitan area; 22 (52 percent) resided in other U.S. states; and 7 (17 percent) resided outside the United States.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** 26 interviewees (62 percent) were Caucasian/white; 11 interviewees (26 percent) were African American/black; 3 interviewees (7 percent) were Hispanic and the remaining 2 (5 percent) were Asian.

Motivation for Coming

The related questions of what motivated visitors to come to NMAfA on the day they were interviewed and how they found out about the Museum will be best explored in a representative sample survey. However, discussions with visitors revealed some patterns.

Of the 25 individuals/groups interviewed at NMAfA, 17 were visiting the Museum for the first time. Most were out-of-town or foreign visitors, although a small number were local. Seven individuals/groups were repeat visitors who had been to the Museum between one and five times before. Interestingly, over half of the repeat visitors were from out-of-town; NMAfA was a regular stop on their circuit when in DC. A couple from Gainesville, Florida offered that “every time we come to Washington, DC we come here.” Only one person interviewed can be characterized as a frequent visitor – a local resident who claimed to have visited 50 times.

As noted, the majority (68%) of the 25 individuals/groups interviewed were making a first visit to NMAfA. Often it was part of their one-week, or three-day, or one-day junket to the Smithsonian. A typical remark was, “We’ve decided to spend three days at the Smithsonian. This is as far as we’ve gotten and we won’t see all of it but we’ll try.” Many said they had been at the Sackler or were just walking around and basically stumbled upon the Museum – “Serendipity; we ran across it on our way somewhere else.” Sometimes they deliberately selected it – “I just saw it on the brochure and came here first because I like African art in general and like to understand it better.” In some instances these first-time visitors researched their visit to NMAfA on the Internet, for example, a teacher from New Jersey bringing students of African origin and an art writer from New Mexico who found it online and “thought it would be cool.” Several people we spoke to work in the neighborhood, and NMAfA is anywhere from an occasional to a habitual stop.

Art? Culture? Both?

Part of understanding motivation is understanding what visitors expect to find in NMAfA. One early interviewee, when asked about his interest in art, said, “I don’t consider this an art museum... The art museum is over there [NGA]... I consider this a culture museum.” He went on to say that he would recommend it to his friends who speak different languages and are interested in international culture, but if his friends were “artsy fartsy types,” he would direct them to the National Gallery. This prompted us to delve into this area with subsequent interviewees. Almost universally, the visitors we spoke to felt the Museum succeeds in being both an art and culture museum. On one end, a woman who said she was personally more interested in contemporary art also liked to see the old and new juxtaposed: “There is a connection between the stool and the steel bed... there is a continuum... Whether we can get there intellectually is a different question.” At the other end, a person whose main interest is African culture commented that “Some of these objects are created purely as art but a lot of it is created as art with a

purpose, it has a function within society. I think they do a pretty good job of explaining that. That's a good thing."

It is fair to say that all of the people we spoke to at the Museum had a pre-existing general interest in art and/or in learning about different cultures. Quite a few were specifically interested in African art and/or African culture, such as a man visiting from Florida who works in African studies and seeks out African collections in larger museums. In a couple of cases, visitors came to find out about a particular object, for example, a woman from Connecticut whose visit was "spurred by the fact that I've got a six foot gigantic mask from Burkina Faso that is a crocodile," and a man from New York who has a collection of West African masks and admitted that "33% of my visit was motivated by money." It was rare to find a first-time or frequent visitor who came to see a particular exhibit. An exception was a man from Ohio who has been to the Museum three or four times and came that day to see *Kerma and Benin*. Again, these distinctions of type and level of interest and specific motivating factors can be clarified in a survey.

Visitor Impressions

By and large, the people we spoke to were very enthusiastic about the Museum. Common comments were "very nicely done," "museum was interesting," "it's a wonderful museum," and "it was better than expected." One foreign visitor went so far as to say that NMAFA is the "best in the world of its kind...devoted to African and only African." Many people commented on the layout, e.g., it was "beautifully organized," and there were several references to ease of movement, for example, "the way it flows, the exhibits, they flow. When you walk into the room, I don't know if it's the writing, the setting, or what – it really captures whatever the room entitles." Other people appreciated the Museum's "centrality," particularly with respect to the design of the building around the fountain, and it's manageable size – "It's nice and small so you can get through it. It's not overwhelming."

Visitors commented favorably on the objects, saying they were "impressive" and that "the quality of the pieces is good." Another said, "This art...like a Picasso, African Art is by itself, good. Not everything of course. But you have in here...even a chair, a little chair, is a beautiful work of art. You find good things here." One art teacher loved the use of big ideas or themes "so that you collect the things from other countries." Quite a few visitors said how much they liked the store, in particular the good selection of music and books.

The exhibitions

When asked about the favorite thing they saw, interviewees split into roughly three groups, with one third each favoring the contemporary show *Insights*, the masquerade exhibition *Playful Performers*, and, in general, the "older ancient things" and "masks and sculptures... with the maps that showed where the different art was from."

One mask collector had never seen masks like those in *Playful Performers* and was inspired to start looking for them. A typical response to *Playful Performance* was by a young woman from Chicago:

It's nice. It opens you up to know children dressed up and had certain ceremonies that meant things to them. We may do things like that but in a different way. I liked the ones where they dressed them up with all the colors. [Wondered] why do they have socks on their hands? I liked the actual people. I liked the chance for kids to draw their own masks.

As noted, at least a third of those interviewed said they especially liked the contemporary show *Insights*. A female art writer from New Mexico particularly appreciated seeing several women's work as she explained that it is pretty unusual to see African or African American women in a contemporary art show.

What kids liked

"The learning center where you can draw your own masks [in *Playful Performers*]" was the favorite of one teenage exchange student visiting with a family from Connecticut. The kinetic sculpture in the contemporary exhibit drew the most animated responses from the kids and teenagers who participated. As one seven-year old girl exclaimed, "There was this big huge thing...and after half an hour it went CLANG, CLANG, CLANG ... CLANG, CLANG, CLANG and his foot would go up and down! It scared me to death!" A student at Montgomery College observed, "One sculpture [was] like some kind of monster...it started moving and some girls got scared and fell on the floor and started laughing...Interesting and kind of scary too." This bears out research findings that many museum visitors seek transformational experiences and that "among the most intriguing of those...is fear or alarm."¹ This would be an interesting phenomenon to explore further in a survey.

Want more

When pressed, the people we spoke to would not change anything about the Museum. They simply wanted ... more. Some wanted more of everything: "It's nice but I want to see more...a lot more." And from another: "the culture is so much more rich than ours, it makes me want to learn more about it. Kinda wish there had been more...it's actually kind of small...Just more in general." Others wanted more on modern Africa. A young man from Charlottesville thought, "It would be interesting to know what is going on in the culture today." Another male visitor observed, "I didn't see much that deals with the true contributions of Africa to modern society... Yes, beads and carvings from thousands of years ago...It has some significance because we used that for trade, but when you talk

¹ McCracken, Grant. 2003. "CULTURE and culture at the Royal Ontario Museum: Anthropology Meets Marketing, Part 1." *Curator* 46/2 April.

about modern times...nothing.” And a local African American women shared that “when I visit [Africa] and bring pictures back, my friends say, ‘you were in New York’ and I say, ‘believe me, we are here in Africa.’ So, the progress of the country should also be reflected.”

Outcomes of Visits

When asked to define the general experience they had or changes that occurred as a result of their visit, a number of interviewees said it made them want to visit Africa: “To look at the stuff that is actually there and just wonder what it would be like to actually go over there and visit.”

Many cited educational outcomes: “I like to see things and get an experience of [where I] haven’t been...Just to learn and to take something new from another culture.” A visitor from India told us, “earlier I thought all regions have got one thing...I found that there was not a straightforward thing...every region of Africa [has] a different culture, different types of objects and everything.” Another said, “I have seen a few things in here today that I did not know they did...It’s interesting how they exaggerate the bodies...And the importance of the mother-child connection; it’s almost like it’s a religion, the mother-child connection is so important.”

With the exception of one or two people, no one felt that their view of African art or culture changed as a result of their Museum visit. Two different interviewees said more human interaction was needed toward this end. An African American man visiting from North Carolina said, “If you are looking for that, you are not going to get it by going to a museum. This gives you a taste, a little bit of it. You are going to find it by interacting with people. Maybe you can actually have people of some of these cultures...in here to give some of the tours.” A local white woman interviewed in the Castle offered that “if some of the African nations perhaps participated – at the Corcoran my husband and I rarely miss...an embassy event. Culturally they’re fabulous. You get a different taste for the culture and you can speak with folks who are living there.”

Some of the visitors referred to a feeling of refreshment. One woman from Canada said she felt “peaceful,” and another visitor referred to the Museum as “a nice refuge.” Still another said, “the mood was very quiet and nice; it’s pretty.”

Several, mostly foreign, visitors spoke about feelings of personal relevance. A man from Venezuela who visits Washington twice a year and almost always comes to NMAfA mused, “there is something very, very interesting to me...I don’t know what it is, perhaps because it is primitive...especially the baskets...it’s very similar to the Amazonian Indians, the way they weave things with palms.” A woman from Ghana exclaimed, “We are happy. We came because we wanted to see something of Africa, so when we entered I saw Burkina Faso, Zambia, so I’m very, very happy.”

A related and unexpected outcome was that the Museum served as something of a lightning rod for some African American visitors' feelings of racial inequality. One couple commented on the Museum being "small...and on a side...It makes you wonder why this one is so small compared to the rest of them. And then if you're African or if you're black, it makes you just wonder sometimes." A young black woman said, "It's weird that it's way in the back...It's not one of those museums you pass up on the main street. You have to go back and find it." And a third African American visitor observed, "It's art, but art will never feed a person. You can bring a thousand kids in to look, but they go home and are still hungry...Most inner city kids get outdated books..."

Preconceptions of Africa

Many visitors expressed preconceptions about Africa as strife-ridden, disease-ridden, economically depressed, and exploited. It was interesting to hear persons making their first visit to NMAfA talk about seeing Africa in a positive rather than a negative light. For example, it was startling to hear one visitor in a group comment, "I'd never set foot in here before...but I've probably been to the Sackler 50 or 100 times." The group – a grandmother, mother, and daughter who said they were oriental art fans – chose to visit NMAfA that day because "we talked about how we never make it in here." They had a delightful time in the African Art Museum, including spending half an hour in *Playful Performers*. What came out in the interview was that the women felt "it was good to see African children who hadn't had limbs lopped off or lying dead...it is very different than what you usually hear about life in Africa." Other interviewees had a similar reaction to *Playful Performers*. One said, "At least people are strong enough to still have joy...even though we can see the strife in some of the work, you can still see that regardless they're proud." Another (who came back to see *Playful Performers* a second day) commented, "There is so much of Africa being poverty stricken...I was wondering what social strata this represents...who is not starving and has the chance to go play because a lot of African children don't." While these visitors were having a positive experience in the exhibition, it seems they in fact were expecting to have a depressing one. These responses suggest that further research is needed to test whether people have negative pre-conceptions of Africa that create a disincentive to coming to the Museum.

Recommend to others?

The visitors we spoke to split evenly between those who would recommend the Museum without qualification and those who would recommend the Museum only to people whom they felt had an interest in the subject matter.

Non-Visitors to NMAfA

OP&A spoke to a small sample of 13 individuals/groups – 11 inside and outside of the Castle and 2 at the *African Voices* hall in NMNH.

- **Group composition:** 5 interviews were with persons visiting alone; 4 were with two adults; and 4 were with groups of adults and teens/children. A total of 25 non-NMAfA visitors were interviewed in all.
- **Gender:** 12 of the interviewees (48 percent) were female, and 13 (52 percent) were male.
- **Age:** By interviewer estimates, 7 interviewees (28 percent) were under 20 years of age, 4 interviewees (16 percent) were between 20 and 40 years, 8 interviewees (32 percent) were between 40 and 60 years, and 6 interviewees (24 percent) were over 60.
- **Residence:** 4 interviewees (16 percent) resided in Washington D.C. or its metropolitan area; 19 (76 percent) resided in other U.S. states; and 2 (8 percent) resided outside the United States.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** 23 interviewees (92 percent) were Caucasian/white, and 2 interviewees (8 percent) were African American/black.

Subject matter

Some people stated flatly that African art or culture wasn't an interest of theirs: "African art doesn't appeal to me which is why I didn't go there." With groups that included children, it was often the case that art museums in general were avoided. For example, grandparents showing their grandson the Smithsonian on spring break said, "Being a 12-year-old and not interested in art, we didn't venture into art museums." A mother with a five- and eight-year old likewise said she had tried art museums but the kids' attention span is shorter there. She hadn't seen anything about *Playful Performers* in her DC guidebook or in the newspaper but responded favorably – "Oh! Oh that might sound nice, guys" – and decided to check it out.

Publicity

Lack of information was a common theme in talking to visitors at other Smithsonian locations. No one mentioned the signage/banners on the outside of the Museum (and OP&A staff observed that the signage/banners did not convey what the visitors might find attractive about the exhibitions, e.g., contemporary art and children-oriented

exhibition of masks and masquerades.) Also, most of the Castle interviewees had come in from the Mall side, yet the posters are at the Independence Avenue gate.

Quite a few of the non-visitors we spoke to said they would be interested in going to African Art but were simply uninformed. A couple from Chicago interviewed in the Castle – she an art history major and he a sociologist – said “[We] didn’t know NMAfA existed. We just walked by it. I don’t think we know much about it, but I’m interested...It wouldn’t take much of a hook to get me to visit. I mean, I just don’t have any information about it.”

A family of four interviewed outside the Castle near the A&I Building was on a three-day blitz of SI. They said they were aware that there was an African Art Museum, but weren’t planning to go because “It is a little more out of the way.” The wife was an art teacher with children from Sierra Leone and Kenya in her classes; she said she needed to gain confidence in how to incorporate African art more into her teaching, “So if you could tell me what I could see, that would encourage me [to go].” Both the Hirshhorn and Freer-Sackler were on their agenda for that day, and the parents were quite surprised when told that African Art was located between those two. They hadn’t seen anything “that stuck out, like saying this is the newest attraction” in the information center. They said that in Europe you really got a sense of what is around including from posters on Metro and TV in the hotel.

Two local women intercepted outside of the Castle said they are frequent visitors to the National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian. Yet, one hadn’t been to NMAfA for years, and the other didn’t think she had ever been: “I really never go and never hear anything about it, to tell you the truth.” These women said they strongly encourage “cooperation between the Smithsonian and the Art Gallery...We came down specifically for Maya today and made our way over to the Freer and Sackler because we were here and wanted to see the Buddha exhibit and it was a perfect teaming.”

OP&A conducted a very limited number of interviews at Smithsonian locations that have a logical connection to what is in NMAfA and where some cross-referencing signage might be helpful. In general, the people in those locations would come to NMAfA if they knew about it. For example, a male visitor from Austria intercepted in *African Voices* was in the textile business and was interested in “old African art, Ashanti gold...it is wonderful...and the art of South Africa, Botswana and the art of ceramics...” An African American teacher in *African Voices*, when told about *Playful Performers*, said, “Okay that’s where I’m headed then, see, I didn’t know that.”