

**A STUDY OF VISITORS TO SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
INTERNATIONAL ART MUSEUMS**

Prepared for

*Smithsonian Council Meeting*

**ART AT THE SMITHSONIAN: THE MUSEUM IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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# A Study of Visitors to Smithsonian Institution International Art Museums

## Introduction

This survey examined visitor experiences and satisfaction at three Smithsonian art museums that comprise the International Art Museum Division (IAMD). It solicited suggestions for enhancing visits to these museums. And, it investigated visitor characteristics and activities at art museums.

Visitors to three museums, the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the National Museum of African Art, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, were interviewed as they exited the buildings. Interviewers worked in teams of two, one to randomly select respondents, and one to intercept and interview the respondent using a structured questionnaire (Appendix A). Data collection took place on 10 days between July 19 and August 2. A total of 432 individuals were intercepted, with 360 completing an interview (83%).

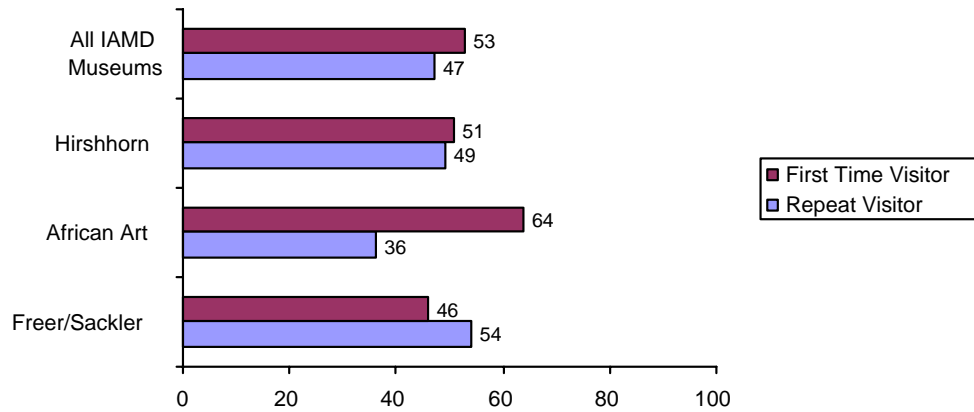
At the time of the study, the Freer Gallery was presenting “Whistler in Venice: The First Set of Etchings.” At the Sackler, ancient and historic portraits were displayed in “Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits.” At the Hirshhorn, Clyfford Still’s large canvasses covered the walls of the museum. At African Art, “In the Presence of Spirits,” from the Portuguese National Museum, displayed objects reflective of the spiritual world of certain regions of Africa.

These museums vary in the types of art presented for the public. Visitor characteristics and responses differed accordingly, but were also similar in a number of ways. Characteristics of first time visitors and return visitors also had notable divergences. However, this study was small in scale and distinctions between groups may be influenced by the small size of the samples.

## The Visitors

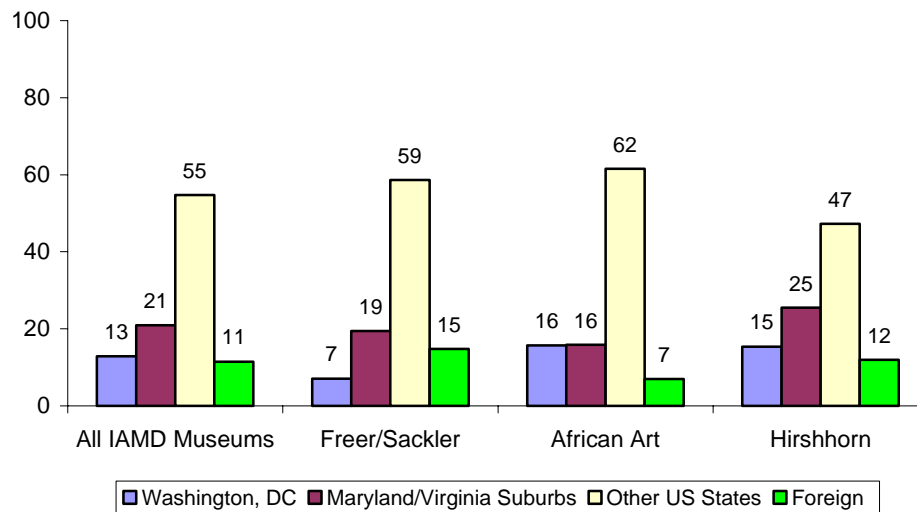
Slightly more people were visiting the museums for the first time as returning (53% versus 47%). Visitors to the National Museum of African Art were the least familiar with that museum, as nearly two-thirds were visiting for the first time.

Figure 1: Visitation to the Museums, by Museum (Percent)



A majority of visitors were not residents of the Washington Metropolitan Area (D.C. and its suburbs),<sup>1</sup> two-thirds traveled from other parts of the United States or foreign countries. Compared to the other museums, Hirshhorn visitors were more likely to be from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs and Freer/Sackler visitors were less often from D.C.

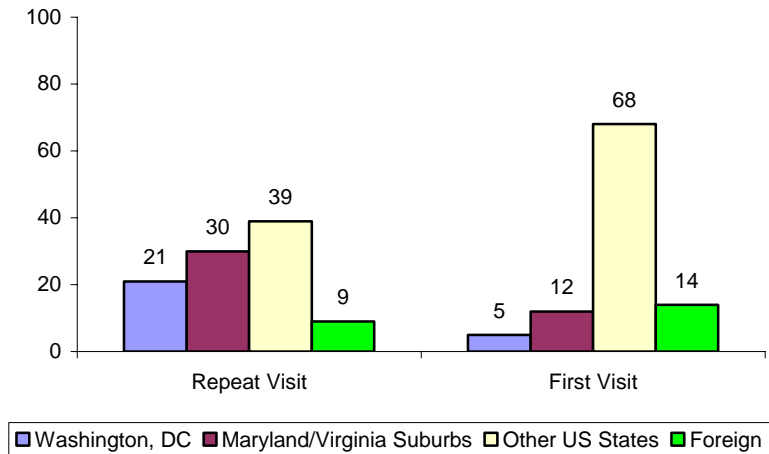
Figure 2: Residence of Visitors, by Museum (Percent)



<sup>1</sup> The geographic origin of visitors is defined in four groups: Washington D.C., suburban regions of Maryland and Virginia in proximity to Washington, regions of the United States beyond the Washington Metropolitan Area, and nations other than the United States.

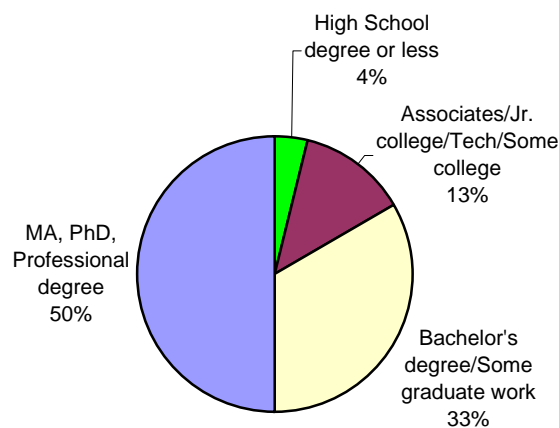
First time visitors were almost twice as likely to be from areas outside the metropolitan areas as repeat visitors, and repeat visitors were about three times more often from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs than first time visitors.

Figure 3: Residence of Visitors, by First and Repeat Visitation (Percent)



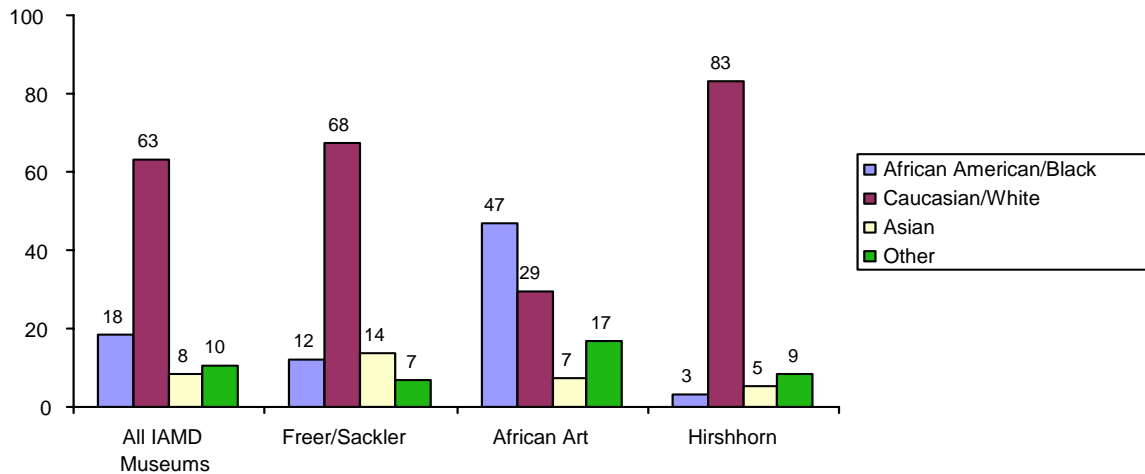
Visitors to the art museums were well educated. Over four-fifths of visitors over the age of 25 have at least a Bachelor’s degree, and half hold an MA, Ph.D., or professional degree. Hirshhorn visitors were most likely to have an Associate or Technical degree or have completed some college and African Art visitors were most likely to hold a Bachelor’s degree, or a high school degree or less.

Figure 4: Educational Attainment of Visitors



Approximately three-fifths of United States visitors identified themselves as White, one-fifth Black, and 8% Asian. Other racial or ethnic groups, such as Hispanic, Native Hawaiian, or those of multiple ethnic identification, accounted for 10% of the population. African Art museum visitors differed from other museums in that almost half of the visitors were Black, and less than one-third were White (7% were Asian and about one fifth were of another ethnicity).

Figure 5: Racial or Ethnic Identification of U.S. Visitors, by Museum (Percent)



#### Additional Characteristics

- Racial or ethnic identifications of the entire population, with visitors from outside the United States included, were virtually identical to the U.S. population.
- The average length of stay in the museum was fifty-seven minutes. After one hour, three fifths of visitors had left, and after one-and-a half-hours, 83% had left.
- Approximately two-fifth of the visitors were alone, two-fifth were with one or more adults; 18% visited with children, and less than 4% were teens, school, or tour groups.
- The average age of visitors was forty-two. Two-fifths of the visitors were between the ages of 45 and 64. Slightly less than two-fifths were between the ages of 25 and 44. 17% were under 25 and 7% were 65 or older.
- More women (61%) than men visited the museums.

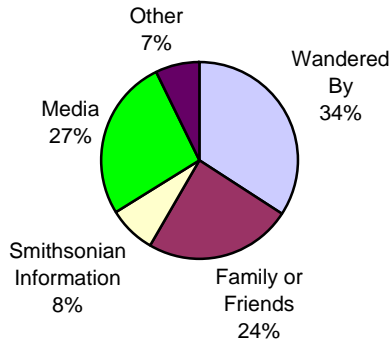
#### Why Are Visitors Here?

- First time visitors to these museums either wandered in or heard about the museum from a media source, such as newspapers or tourist guidebooks.
- Return visitors obtained information about museum offerings from media, such as newspapers or magazines, or a previous visit.
- On-site Smithsonian sources of information were not used to a high degree by either group.

First time visitors were asked where they had heard about the museum they were visiting. One-third had wandered by, with about a quarter having heard from a media source such as the newspaper, Internet and guidebooks, or else friends and family. A Smithsonian source of

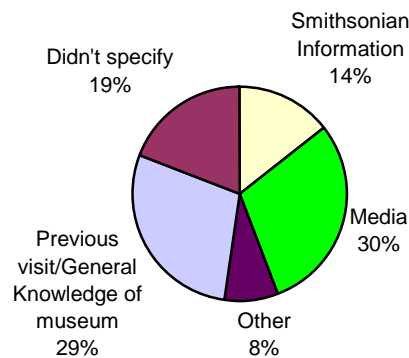
information such as a banner, Metro ad, or the Castle information desk was used by 8% of the visitors.

Figure 6: Sources of Information about the Museum, First Time Visitors Only



Repeat visitors were asked if they came for a particular reason, or for a general visit. Nearly three-fifths of these visitors had come to the museum to see or do something specific. Most visitors with an agenda came to see an exhibition (one-third of return visitors), with both the Whistler (at the Freer) and Clyfford Still (at the Hirshhorn) exhibits as popular destinations. The remainder of visitors with an agenda came for a program or the museum shop. These return visitors most frequently mentioned media, such as newspapers or magazines, or a previous visit, as the source of information about their destination at the museum.

Figure 7: Sources of Information About Destination, Repeat Visitors Only



## Visiting Art Museums

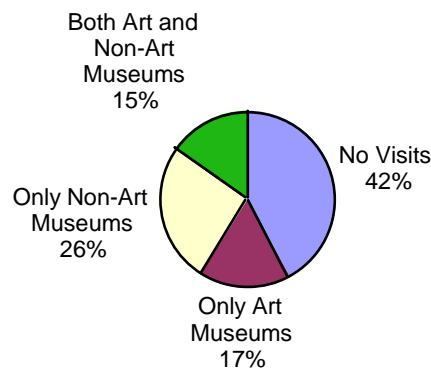
- These visitors frequently go to art museums, and many made the museum of interview the first destination in their trip to the National Mall.

To gauge how these Smithsonian museums fit into visitors' museum going activity, respondents were asked if they had visited any other museums on the National Mall, and whether they had been to another art museum within the past year. Almost three-fourths of all respondents had visited some type of art museum this past year.

For many, the museum at which they were interviewed was the start of their National Mall visit. Two fifths of all visitors had not been to any other museums. A majority of African Art museum visitors were making the museum their first stop (three-fifths had not been to any other museums). Hirshhorn visitors were more likely to have visited another museum, as only one-third had not been to any other National Mall museums.

Of those visitors who visited another museum, one quarter had been only to non-art museums, such as the National Air and Space Museum, the Arts & Industries Building, and the National Museum of American History. First time visitors were more likely than return visitors to have visited only non-art museums, with one-third falling in this category. About one-fifth of visitors had only been to an art museum, such as the Freer/Sackler or National Gallery of Art.

Figure 8: Visits to Other Mall Museums on This Trip  
(Percent)



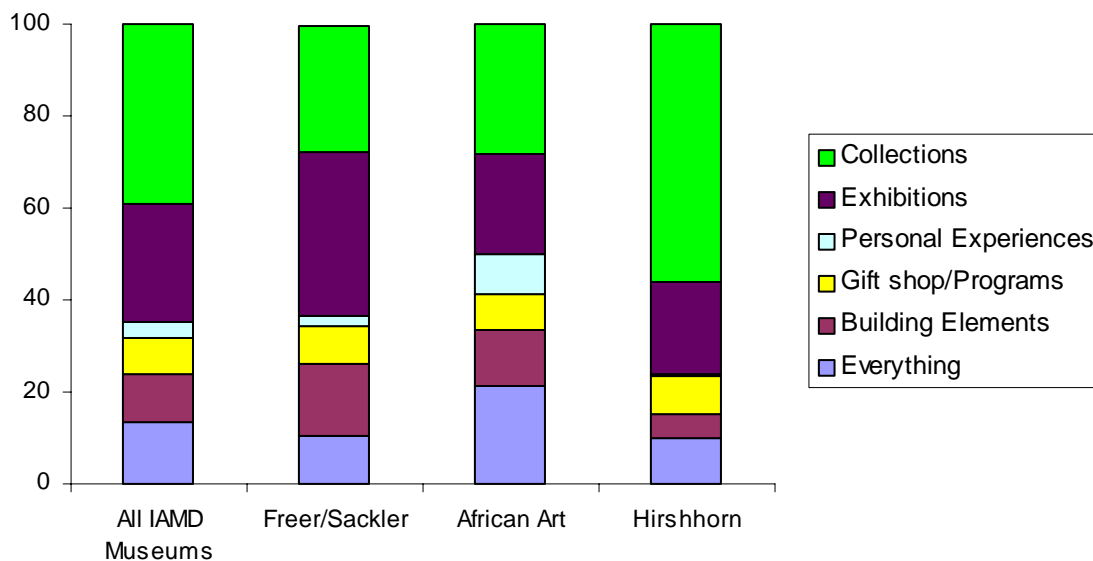
## The Museum Experience

### What Did Visitors Like and Why?

- Visitors enjoyed groups of objects and thematic exhibitions. Reasons why most often included individual experiences, such as viewing a favorite medium or artist, or seeing something for the first time.

Visitors were asked what they enjoyed most during their visits to the museum and why. Thirteen percent reported enjoying everything. Of those that gave a specific answer, objects were most frequently mentioned, with two-fifths of respondents mentioning groups of collections, such as sculptures, Islamic art, or ceramics. One quarter of respondents enjoyed an exhibit, such as Whistler’s etchings, In the Presence of Spirits, or Clyfford Still. Approximately one-fifth found the design or atmosphere of the building, shops and programs most enjoyable, and 3% noted a personal experience such as spending time with family or friends, or learning something new. Half of the Hirshhorn visitors specified collections they enjoyed and more than one-third of Freer/Sackler visitors mentioned an exhibition. African Art visitors were more likely to report enjoying everything, and provided most of the responses regarding a personal experience.

Figure 9: The Best Part of the Museum Visit, by Museum  
(In Percent)

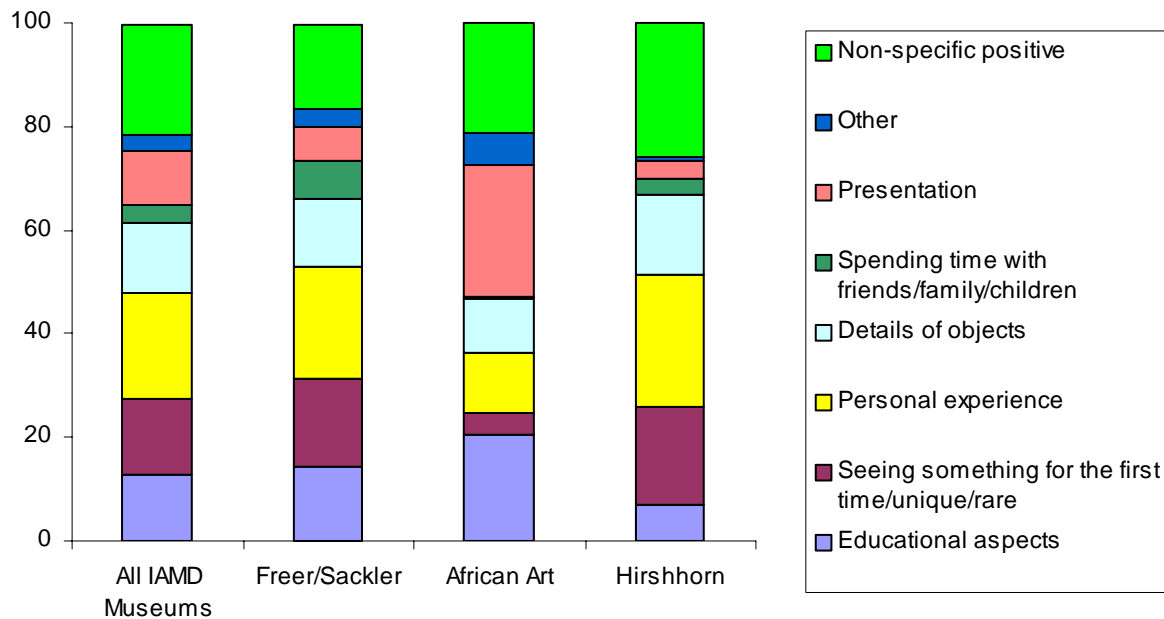


One-fifth of visitors gave a non-specific positive response (such as “it was nice”) as to why they enjoyed the best part of their visit. A personal experience, such as having a personal connection with the artist, objects or culture, or remembering another time in their lives, was mentioned by a fifth of respondents and 14% enjoyed their experience because they were able to see something unique, rare, or for the first time.



African Art visitors were at least four times more likely than Hirshhorn or Freer/Sackler Gallery visitors to mention the presentation of the museum, such as the layout of an exhibit or the atmosphere of the museum (26% compared to 3% and 6% respectively). Conversely, they were four times less likely to mention seeing something unique or for the first time (4% compared to 19% and 17%).

Figure 10: Reasons for Enjoying the Best Part of the Museum Visit, by Museum (Percent)



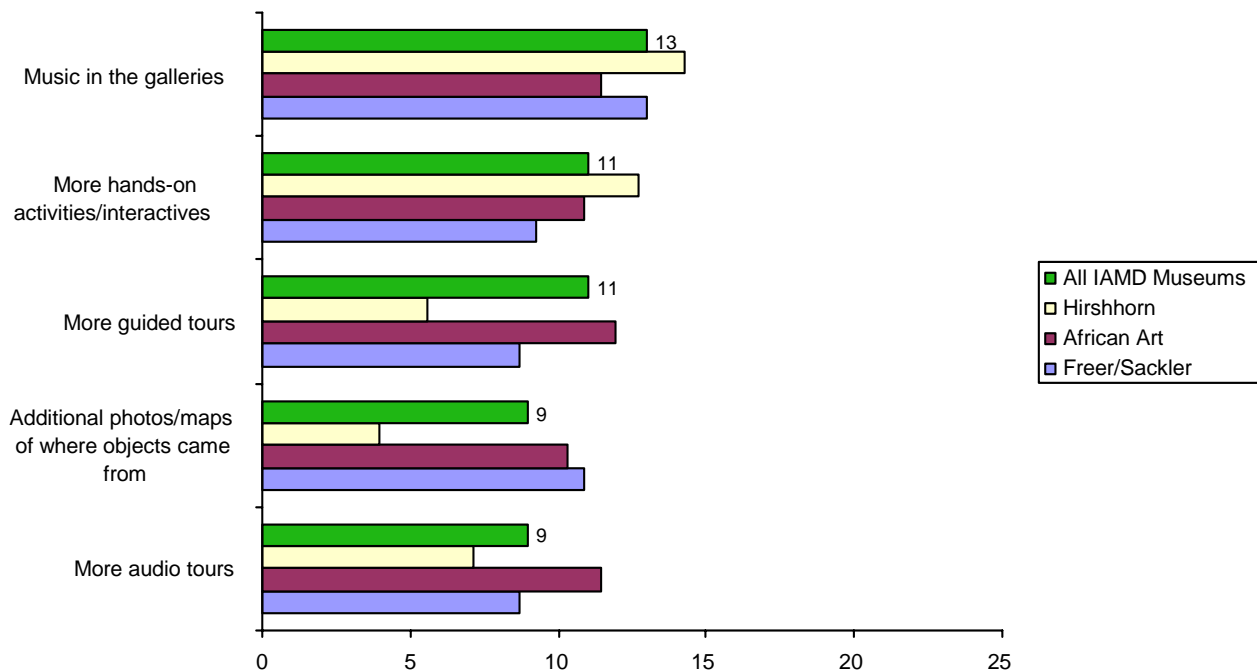
The most frequently mentioned reasons for enjoying exhibitions and collections were non-specific positive responses. The second most common reason for enjoying the collections was the design and details of the objects; in respect to exhibitions, it was seeing, something unique or for the first time.

## What Changes Might Enhance the Presentation and Visitor Services in the Museums?

- For improving the presentation at the museums, visitors suggested elements, such as music and hands-on activities, that contribute to immersive, interactive experiences. For improving visitor services, such as food and extended hours, visitors suggest an interest in spending more time at the museums.

Visitors were asked to select, from a list of options, changes to the museum’s presentation of objects and cultures, and visitor services that might enhance a future visit. Slightly more than one-quarter of respondents had no suggestions for changes to the presentation at the museums they were interviewed at. Since visitors could make more than one suggestion, the responses can be examined collectively. Of all the responses, 13% were adding music to the galleries and 11% each were having more hands-on activities and expanded information about objects, cultures, or artists. Nine percent of the responses were having more guided tours and photos or maps of where objects came from. Having more guided and audio tours was selected at the African Art museum more often than at the other museums and Hirshhorn visitors twice as often chose expanded information about an object, artist, or culture as visitors at the other museums.

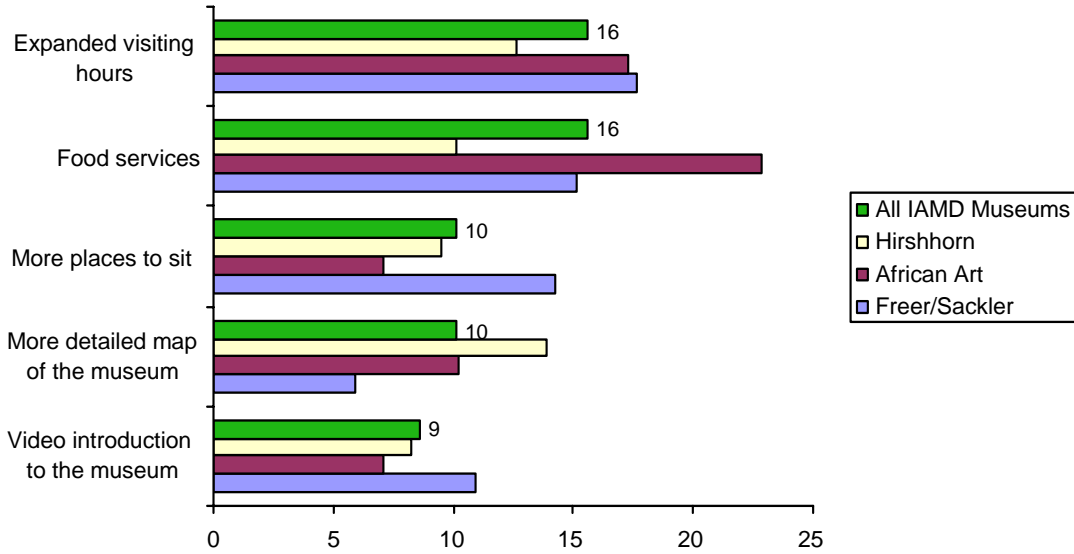
Figure 11: Suggestions for Changes to the Presentation of Objects and Cultures, by Museum (Percent)



Visitors were more content with visitor services than the presentation at the museums. When asked what changes to visitor services could enhance a visit, one third of respondents had no suggestions. Of those who responded, the most frequently selected options for enhancing a visit

were adding or expanding the food services and expanding visitation hours, both were 16% of the responses. The next most frequent responses were having a more detailed map of the museum available, and providing more places to sit (both 10%). African Art visitors were most likely to select more food services, Freer/Sackler visitors were most likely to select expanded visiting hours, and Hirshhorn respondents most likely to select a more detailed map of the museum.

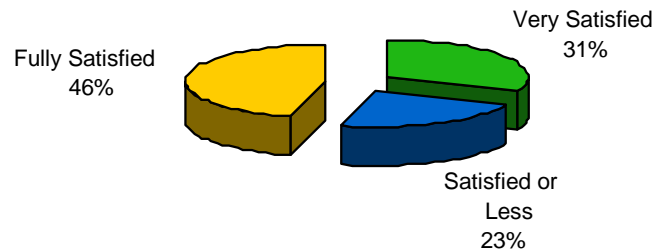
Figure 12: Suggestions for Changes to Visitor Services, by Museum (Percent)



## Satisfaction with the Museum Visit

Visitors were asked to describe their satisfaction with their overall museum visits. Less than 3% of respondents were not satisfied with their visit, and responses are reported here in three categories: fully satisfied, very satisfied and satisfied or less. Overall, 46% were fully satisfied with their visit, while a third were very satisfied, and less than a quarter were only satisfied or less.

Figure 13: Satisfaction with the Museum Visit  
(Percent)



There were no significant differences among museums or between first and return visitors in satisfaction. Therefore, it is helpful to look to factors that are related to one's level of satisfaction with the museum visit.

### Factors in High Satisfaction

Visitors who were fully satisfied:

- most often mentioned exhibitions as the best part of their visit,
- were most likely to select either no changes to visitor services or expanded visiting hours,
- were most likely from Washington D.C.,
- were visiting alone or with other adults,
- were between 35 and 64 years of age.