

Asia in America:
Views of Chinese Art from the
Indianapolis Museum of Art



Two Studies of Visitor Responses to the Exhibition

Office of Policy and Analysis
Smithsonian Institution
April 2005

Preface

The number and diversity of exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution is remarkable. As a result, the types of visitor studies conducted by the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) tend to vary with OP&A's ambitious mandate of producing relevant research tailored to individual exhibitions.

The two visitor studies of *Asia in America: Views of Chinese Art from the Indianapolis Museum of Art* look at visitors' reactions to the exhibition by using two distinct methodologies: interviews with visitors and the distribution of questionnaires.

Thanks to the work of Ioana Munteanu and Andrew Pekarik, who collected and analyzed the data and presented the results in a palatable form, the reader will learn a fair amount about the exhibition as well as visitors' perceptions about Asian art. The objective of this research is to provide one set of inputs for future exhibition planning at both the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. In addition, it is hoped that these two approaches will provide useful comparative data and encourage similar undertakings elsewhere.

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

Table of Contents

Preface	i
Table of Contents	ii
Introduction	1
Interview Study	1
Key responses.....	2
Visitors' Approaches to the exhibition	3
Individual Objects	3
Comparisons.....	4
Evaluation	5
Positive Features.....	5
Negative Features	6
Satisfying Experiences in the Exhibition	7
Comparison Experiences	7
Chinese Art Experiences	7
Responses to Other Exhibitions	8
AMSG Exhibitions and Key Points.....	8
Background Patterns Regarding Knowledge	9
Asian Art	9
Smithsonian Museums.....	9
Survey Study	10
Major Findings.....	10
Audience Profile	10
Audience Interest and Experience in Viewing Asian Art.....	10
Visitors' Experiences in the Exhibition	10
Audience Opinion Regarding Information and Presentation	11
Rating of the Exhibition	11
Analysis	12
High Ratings of the Exhibition.....	12
Low Ratings of the Exhibition.....	12
Comparison to <i>Return of the Buddha</i>	12
Discussion	15
Appendix A: Sample case labels	17
Appendix B: Visitor Responses.....	18

Introduction

Asia in America is a series of exhibitions at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (AMSG) that showcases collections of Asian art from United States (U.S.) museums. These exhibitions are curated by the staff of the lending museums. This exhibition of Chinese art from the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA), presented from September 2004 to March 2005, was the first in the *Asia in America* series. It was held while the IMA is being expanded and renovated. From IMA's perspective the presentation in Washington was an opportunity not only to introduce the collection to the many visitors of the AMSG, but to experiment with new methods of presentation. The IMA staff, in conjunction with the staff of AMSG, asked the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to study visitor responses in the exhibition, so that relevant findings could be applied to the new galleries in Indianapolis and to future exhibitions at AMSG. In particular, the IMA staff wanted to know how its approach to content and labels affected visitors.

The exhibition, mostly comprised of ceramic objects, was presented in three rooms. The first, which also served as a major thoroughfare on the museum's second level, contained six signature objects, each in its own case. The central item was a brightly glazed Tang-Dynasty saddled horse. The second room also included a few objects presented individually, especially a large porcelain vase with design of peaches, but was mostly given to pairs of closely related objects. The third room included pairs of objects, a major single item (a Tang Dynasty ceramic figure of a noble lady), and more extensive comparative series. The largest of these was a case with nine vases of similar size but varied colors, shapes, and decorations. The interpretive material in the exhibition included a brochure and two introductory texts in the first room, two general texts regarding comparisons, and one succinct label for each case. These case labels had titles identifying the focus of the comparison, three bulleted points (each expressed in one or two sentences), and, in one instance, a drawing with overlapping maps of China and the United States. See Appendix A for sample text.

The OP&A study applied two distinct methods. The first was a series of open-ended interviews with visitors. Interviews focused on the experience of visitors in the exhibition, their opinions of how it compared to other exhibitions, and their relationship to Asian art. OP&A staff conducted 24 interviews ranging in length from five minutes to 75 minutes. Just over one-third of the interviewees were first-time visitors to AMSG.

The second method was a written survey that was modeled, in part, on the recent study of a major exhibition at AMSG, *Return of the Buddha*.¹ The questions and hypotheses of the survey were influenced by the content of the interviews that preceded it and by the interests and questions raised by IMA and AMSG staff. The survey was administered as a single-day census survey – every one of the 93 people who visited the exhibition on February 11, 2005 was asked to participate. Only 5% of visitors refused to answer any questions.

¹ *A Survey of Visitors to FSG's Return of the Buddha Exhibition*, Office of Policy and Analysis, Smithsonian Institution, 2004. Available online at www.si.edu/opanda/REPORTS.htm

Interview Study

Key responses

Visitor Opinions about the *Asia in America: Views of Chinese Art from the Indianapolis Museum of Art*

A number of interviewees referred directly or indirectly to the series and its aims, i.e., to show Asian art from public collections outside Washington, DC. Some learned of this purpose from the text panel in the first room of the exhibition, others from the museum's calendar of events.

While the idea of showing Asian art from other museums was received positively in general, interviewees commented particularly on their pleasure at being able to compare objects from the Freer Gallery of Art (FGA) collection with similar examples from Indianapolis. There was interest in what exhibitions would come next in the series, and it seems likely that the series as a whole has the potential to establish a clear, positive identity of its own.

One interviewee recalled having seen and admired the IMA Chinese collection twenty years ago, and was very pleased to see it again. Another recalled visiting IMA, but not noticing the Chinese art. One interviewee felt, however, that the rationale for the exhibition was not strong enough in his opinion to make it an important exhibition in comparison with *Dreamworlds*, a special exhibition of modern Japanese prints.

The location of the exhibition caused some problems. Visitors who entered from the third room did not read the introduction until the end. Because the first room of the exhibition was in a hallway, the rest of which is a permanent exhibition of Southeast Asian art, there was some confusion about the boundaries of the exhibition.

I always like to have the opportunity to see pieces from other museums which I am not likely to get a chance to visit, and I don't know if I'm going to be going to Indianapolis anytime.

And if I were a connoisseur of Asian art, I would be delighted to have a new bunch of things to look at. On the other hand, from my point of view, it's just not that important or monumental. It is not sufficiently distinctive to be an independent draw, even though I understand the opportunity to see new things, and things of quality.

I came in the back side instead of the front side, so I didn't even realize that I was in a different exhibit for a minute. It looks like it's about general principles of craftsmanship and materials and things like that.

There was a description of Buddhism. I couldn't tell if that was part of the Indianapolis [exhibition] or part of the Sackler.

You have a problem of situating it. Maybe it would be more effective if it was closer to an entrance. I find the orientation in the Sackler and the Freer a little difficult.

Visitors' Approaches to the exhibition

Visitors' remarks about their experience in the museum showed them to be engaged in two major ways, corresponding to the two major types of displays in the exhibition. One approach focused on admiring individual items, and the other on close examination of the differences between objects.

INDIVIDUAL OBJECTS

Those who focused on individual items stressed either objects that strongly attracted them, or objects that differed in some way from what they expected. The most striking objects for these visitors were:

- Neolithic *cong*
- Cong-shaped celadon vase
- Tang horse
- Peach vase
- Grape-design platters
- Exhibit case with nine vases
- Neolithic stem cup
- Tang noble lady
- Bronze bell

The *cong* attracted the most attention because of its color, its shape and its age.

It seems that these two strategies -- appreciating key objects and comparing similar objects -- both helped visitors to deal with what one visitor articulated as the problem that arises in exhibitions with numerous, relatively small things. The exhibition design supported these viewing strategies by physically setting apart key objects and by establishing clear comparisons of similar items.

The scale of the exhibition supported these approaches. Several visitors noted that the exhibition benefited from its relatively modest size.

We were noticing the age of the cong, or "tsang" -- Is that how it's pronounced? -- It amazes me. There is an object that's almost four thousand years old and it looks so modern, so intensely modern-looking. There's just something about that. Something about the artistry just transcends time. Here you can have that fantastically ancient piece and it resonates with you with a modern sensibility.

There is something about a lot of little things that I find difficult. I don't have the patience for it, you might say. That's why, for example, [with] some of the Iranian miniatures that you find here sometimes and at the Freer -- I enjoy looking at a couple of them and I might say, "Oh, this is remarkable. Look at the wonderful design. Look at the beautiful colors, and so forth." But I don't have the patience to wade through forty or fifty of them. Whereas, if I go to an exhibition of larger paintings, the pace is such that I find it much easier to respond. So with ceramics, I often have a lot of trouble, even though I can appreciate and enjoy individual pieces. It requires a lot of patience and my inclination is to skip through and concentrate on a few things.

It was very nice that it was small and compact. It was not overwhelming.

COMPARISONS

Most of the interviewees were very taken with what a number of them referred to as “doubling,” in which similar items were displayed side-by-side. This was the feature most often singled out as making the exhibition different and distinctive. Some visitors came specifically to see this exhibition because they had heard that it offered an opportunity to compare similar items.

The comparisons were praised because they were:

- Unique
- A challenge
- A rare opportunity
- An aid to appreciation
- Training in seeing subtleties
- A source of insight
- A reminder that each piece is unique
- A cause for more careful looking
- Easy to look at
- An invitation to spend more time
- A stimulus to speculate
- Educational

One interviewee was frustrated because he felt unable to make an objective judgment in favor of one object over another when faced with a comparison.

The comparisons most often referred to specifically were the jar and the photo, the *cong* and the *cong*-shaped vase, the two plates with designs of grape vines, and the row of vases.

I think it's the doubling of pieces that makes it stand out from anything I've seen.

The beholder can achieve a certain kind of discerning eye to differentiate different styles and different approaches to an artistic presentation. That is something that is quite interesting.

It certainly strengthened my position that you can approach art from different angles, even when you have the same theme or object.... So the double vision that tried to convey the solution to the spectator is very encouraging for me. It is something that certainly gives me more insight into my way of looking at Chinese art.

It's engaging. It requires a certain amount of work, I guess, because you have to spend time making comparisons. But it is very satisfying to make those comparisons.

I thought it was interesting that although the objects looked alike, they really weren't. They were made at different times. So they would have three bowls together, but they weren't the same thing. They were from different times and materials and so forth.

I was trying to imagine why one person would choose one thing over another. ... Just the idea of why people would do things differently is interesting. I didn't come up with anything, but it's sort of interesting to speculate on that.

Evaluation

Interviewees were asked to evaluate the exhibition -- how it was particularly good and how it fell short in comparison with others. Some evaluated it in the abstract, while others compared it to specific exhibitions they had seen at AMSG and elsewhere. Overall the response was strongly positive, but not enthusiastic.

POSITIVE FEATURES

Content

Objects in the first room

Unique objects

New kinds of objects

Variety of objects

Unexpected styles

I enjoyed the art, and putting things that were similar next to each other was very interesting.

There's not a whole lot of pieces to look at. But you notice it more because there's not a lot of pieces, so you look at the pieces a long time.

Presentation

Comparisons and juxtapositions

Display cases not crowded

Compact, with small rooms

Nicely arranged and spacious

Quiet and contemplative

Able to walk around some objects

Expanded views of small objects

"Exquisite" lighting

Red wall color

Provided a sense of focus

Enjoyable and beautiful

I enjoyed it, but since I'm not an artist, I don't know if it affected something I'm going to take away from here, but I enjoyed the time I spent watching it, which is what I'm looking for.

I found the plaques very helpful. They gave me a little more information than when I went across the hallway and looked [at labels there]. I learned something [there], but I learned more here. I thought I learned more looking at these pieces, just by virtue of the information, and the ability to compare the different pieces.

I felt very focused. It could be a spatial thing. I felt very focused on each individual exhibit.

Interpretation

Innovative, interesting commentary

Less-wordy labels

A good exhibition for young people

Illustrates broader principles

Good teaching exhibition

I found that the text, the points made in the text, were provocative. They get you to think. I really enjoyed it.

NEGATIVE FEATURES

Content

Mostly ceramics
Not enough “striking” pieces
Good objects, but not the best
No “super-star” piece
Not that large a collection
“Crafts” in second and third rooms
Differences too subtle

Well, I think that my favorite exhibition of Asian ceramics is the Sir Percival David Collection in London and it has Imperial porcelain, which I think is the peak.

The pieces are interesting, but for me I like golden colors and sculptures and jewelry. And this exhibition is nicely displayed, but they just have pieces of clay, and so maybe you could add more pieces -- like more sculptures, full-sized bodies.

Presentation

No music
Exhibition boundaries unclear

There's nothing in particular that tied it all together for me in a simple, easy-to-remember way. Which could just speak to what I've been trained to look for in art.

Interpretation

Does not “drive you into the culture”
No central theme
Missing information

I would like more explanations, however. For some kinds of bowls it does not say what kind of ritual it is.

The first room I would give [the highest rating]. The rest -- there are certainly a lot of wonderful pieces and the overall effect is very good, but the nature of the pieces in most cases is more limited in terms of their potential appeal. That's a very difficult matter artistically, and goes to the difference between arts and crafts, for example. Some of the craft, some of the pottery and so forth, I am able to see, to understand or to appreciate the beauty in terms of technique and form and everything else. But, in terms of more profound interest, the things of the first room are far more appealing.

Impact

Not emotionally affecting

Satisfying Experiences in the Exhibition

When discussing their response to the exhibition, interviewees described a wide range of experiences. Many of these are typically encountered in art museum audiences: appreciating beauty, seeing new things, learning, and seeing the “real thing.” Other experiences related directly to either the comparisons or to the subject of Chinese art.

COMPARISON EXPERIENCES

The juxtapositions and case labels led to experiences such as:

Comparing objects

Making value judgments

Careful looking

Inquiring into the artistic act

It helps you learn to look at things more carefully.

It made me wonder about the artists... Was it the same artist? Were they different artists who had seen each other's work? Were they both working from a similar model? I couldn't tell, but it made me wonder. I like wondering about it.

I like how they explain techniques, like whether it was hand-crafted or made in a mold. So you can understand and picture yourself in that era better.

CHINESE ART EXPERIENCES

The exhibition's contents and subject matter gave rise to reflections about:

Past vs. Present

Modernity

Civilization

Objects of everyday life

Craftsmanship

Asian art

Well, the tsang, kang -- however it is pronounced -- that reaches out to me. But that's not because of the artistry, but because of the fantastic age of the thing. And because it looks so intensely modern.

It is an introduction to the basics of Chinese civilizations, especially the skills and craft in art that reflects the high degree of civilization that they have achieved.

It gives you a sense of the period at the time and how people lived. You see what people used to cook and what they used to decorate their homes and it goes to show how they lived their lives.

I was amazed how they can do this type of work.

[The aim of the exhibition] was to make people think about how Americans view Asian objects of art. How we think about it. To make us think about how we view Asian art.

Responses to Other Exhibitions

As interviewees evaluated this exhibition, they thought about their favorite exhibitions at MSG and described why they liked those exhibitions so much. The ones praised most highly were *Return of the Buddha* and *Dreamworlds*, although one interviewee claimed to have learned more in this exhibition from Indianapolis.

MSG EXHIBITIONS AND KEY POINTS

Return of the Buddha

Transcendent
Emotional
Ancient
Showed influences on Chinese art

I came many times [to The Return of the Buddha] and I was sorry to see it leave. Beyond gender, beyond nationality or culture -- everyone felt the transcendence.

It was beautifully lit and not too crowded at all, but I think the emotional appeal [made it special]. For a lot of Westerners, we saw ourselves in that exhibit.

Dreamworlds

Larger
A new perspective
Print-making process

The Dreamworlds is bigger and the nature of it is to open up a whole new vision of Japanese art.

Cai Guo-Qiang's "Traveler"

The boat on the porcelain as you come in [struck me]. There is a lot of overblown rhetoric about it, but it is very striking.

Japanese Storage Jars in the Freer

My favorite [Freer or Sackler exhibition] that I've ever seen was the storage jars, the ancient ceramic storage jars. I saw it a couple of times.

Twelve Centuries of Japanese Art

The Cave as Canvas

There are a couple of things in [The Cave as Canvas] that once you see them you say, 'Oh, Asian art has many examples worth coming back to.'

Devi

Background Patterns Regarding Knowledge

Some interviewees shared similar attitudes regarding their knowledge of Asian art, and their image of Smithsonian museums.

ASIAN ART

There were interviewees who were noticeably self-conscious about their lack of detailed knowledge of Asian art. The subject seems to be regarded by them as vast and complex and the domain of specialists and connoisseurs. This sense also generates a strong desire for information and learning, not only for facts, such as the names and dates of Chinese Dynasties, but also for contact with previously unknown forms, glazes, styles, etc.

I still have this hunger to understand Asian art. When I come to an exhibit like this, my knowledge and understanding will be more enhanced.

I think a lot of people are very mystified by [Asian art], because there are thousands of years of history and people are very mystified by it.

I didn't have perhaps the background or sophistication to distinguish one [plate with grape vines] from the other.

SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS

Interviewees who talked about Smithsonian museums in general associated them with large collections and deep knowledge.

The Smithsonian brings with it a huge background of research and education. That probably makes me consider that I am a relatively lay person. I don't yet have the understanding of Asian art that I would like to have.

Sometimes museums are a little formidable to students and to a lot of people. They need to see it as a place of learning, and I think the Smithsonian does that remarkably well

I've often wondered how all of Western Europe and North America came to appreciate, enjoy and attend opera, because Italian opera is Italian. Apparently there are strains or aspects of it that have a more universal appeal in which the fact that it is culturally specific is a little limiting but not a major impediment, compared to everything else. My experience with Asian art has been similar. If you immerse, if you give it more than a cursory look, you will find that even though it is culturally specific and it's not your culture, there are common aesthetic threads that make it worth coming back to. It is partly because art appreciation is partly a matter of knowledge, and Asian art starts out for a typical Western viewer as a novelty, and the burden is on it to prove itself. But at the same time the burden is on the viewer to abandon or relax some of the cultural specificity. The same thing is true in appreciating modern art. It takes a certain openness of mind.

Survey Study

Major Findings

AUDIENCE PROFILE

The demographic characteristics of the visitors to *Views of Chinese Art: Views of Chinese Art from the Indianapolis Museum of Art* were similar to audiences in previous OP&A studies at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art.²

AUDIENCE INTEREST AND EXPERIENCE IN VIEWING ASIAN ART

Visitors to *Views of Chinese Art* were not novices to Asian art. Half of the visitors to *Views of Chinese Art* had visited the Sackler Gallery or the Freer Gallery at least once before. In addition, 70% of the audience said that at least once a year they looked at Asian art when visiting an art museum. Five percent of the respondents came specifically to see the exhibit.

Views of Chinese Art visitors are interested in Asian art and culture but less interested in Chinese ceramics. About forty percent said they were very interested in Asian art and culture, while 21% indicated the same level of interest for Chinese ceramics (see Table 1.)

Table 1.
Interest Levels of Visitors in the
Views of Chinese Art Exhibition

	Very Interested	Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested
Asian art	41%	33%	22%	5%
Asian culture	39%	39%	18%	3%
Chinese ceramics	21%	32%	41%	6%

VISITORS' EXPERIENCES IN THE EXHIBITION

Aesthetic and learning experiences were the most prominent experiences in *Views of Chinese Art*. More than half of respondents indicated that they were moved by the beauty of the objects (65%) and that they gained information and knowledge (57%). These two experiences are typically prominent among the satisfying experiences of visitors to Sackler Gallery exhibitions.

² Compared to other exhibitions at the Galleries, these visitors were somewhat more likely to be young (26-35), female, and Latino, to have post-graduate or professional degrees, and to have come alone. For the demographic characteristics of visitors to this exhibition, see Appendix B.

AUDIENCE OPINION REGARDING INFORMATION AND PRESENTATION

Half or more of the visitors felt that the information was new (51%), the language was easy to understand (53%), and the information was useful (63%). A minority felt that the information was oversimplified (16%) or that there was too little of it (13%).

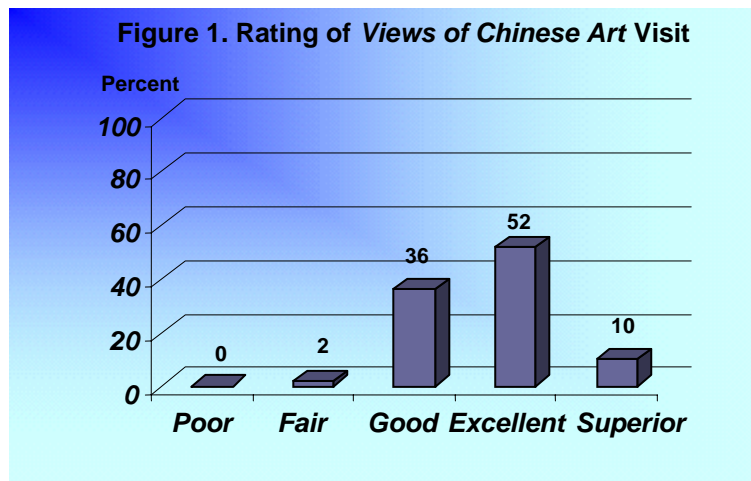
Respondents found features of the exhibition's presentation to be very effective. About three-fourths of the visitors said that lighting (77%), grouping of objects (75%), and content of labels (73%) enhanced their experiences in the *Views of Chinese Art* exhibition. For about a quarter of the visitors, wall color and label format were either not noticed or considered to have had no effect.

Table 2.
Visitors Opinions Regarding
Views of Chinese Art Exhibition Design

	Enhanced	Detracted	No effect	Didn't notice
Lighting	77%	7%	10%	7%
Groupings of objects	75%	5%	11%	9%
Content of labels	73%	3%	16%	9%
Wall color	51%	1%	23%	24%
Format of labels	48%	6%	25%	22%

RATING OF THE EXHIBITION

Although slightly more than sixty percent of respondents rated *Views of Chinese Art* in the top two categories of the scale, only one in ten rated it as "superior." The remaining 40% of visitors rated it as good or fair (See Figure 1.)



Analysis

HIGH RATINGS OF THE EXHIBITION

Visitors who gave the exhibition the highest rating (“superior”) were significantly more likely than other visitors to have read over three-quarters of the labels (63% vs. 10%), to have reported that learning opportunities were superior (63% vs. 11%), that the diversity of objects was superior (44% vs. 7%), and that “changing my understanding of Chinese art” was one of their most satisfying experiences (44% vs. 12%). They were also much more likely to be male (67% of those who rated the exhibition “superior” were male).

In particular, male visitors (38% of visitors) were more likely than female visitors to indicate that they:

- Read labels (76% of males vs. 61% of females)
- Gained information (66% vs. 51%),
- Liked the label format (62% vs. 40%),
- Compared design motifs (41% compared with 22% females), and
- Felt that learning opportunities were “superior” (27% vs. 11%).

This gender pattern was absent among the visitors in *Return of the Buddha*, and may be related to the comparison activities, the labels, and the way that the label information was presented.

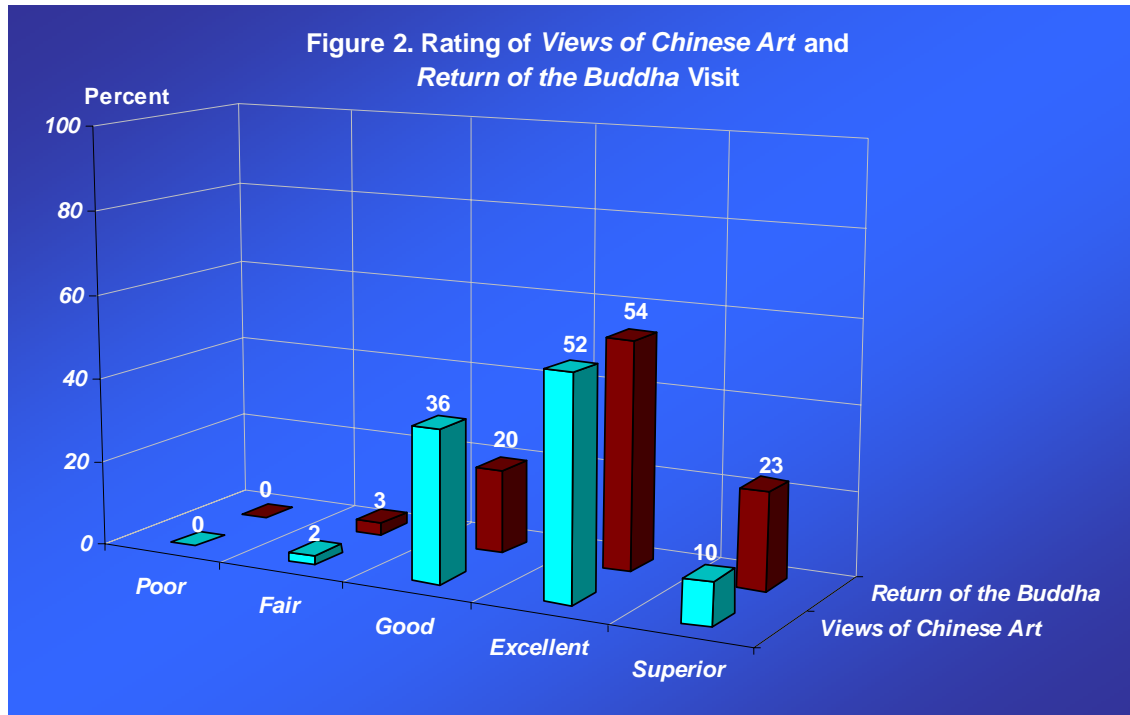
LOW RATINGS OF THE EXHIBITION

Visitors who gave the exhibition a relatively low rating (“good” or “fair”) were significantly more likely than other visitors to have felt that the diversity of objects was less than excellent (79% vs. 26%), that the learning opportunities were less than excellent (70% vs. 26%), that the information was not new to them (56% vs. 42%), and that there was too little information (20% vs. 9%). As a group, they were also more likely to have little or no interest in Asian culture (33% vs. 15%), and to be ceramicists (14% vs. 7%).

COMPARISON TO *RETURN OF THE BUDDHA*

Since many of the questions asked in this study were also asked in the *Return of the Buddha* study, it is possible to compare the study results of these two Sackler Gallery exhibitions.

The overall visitor rating for the *Views of Chinese Art* exhibition was considerably lower than the rating for *Return of the Buddha*, since fewer respondents rated *Views* as “superior” and more rated it as “good,” as shown in Figure 2.



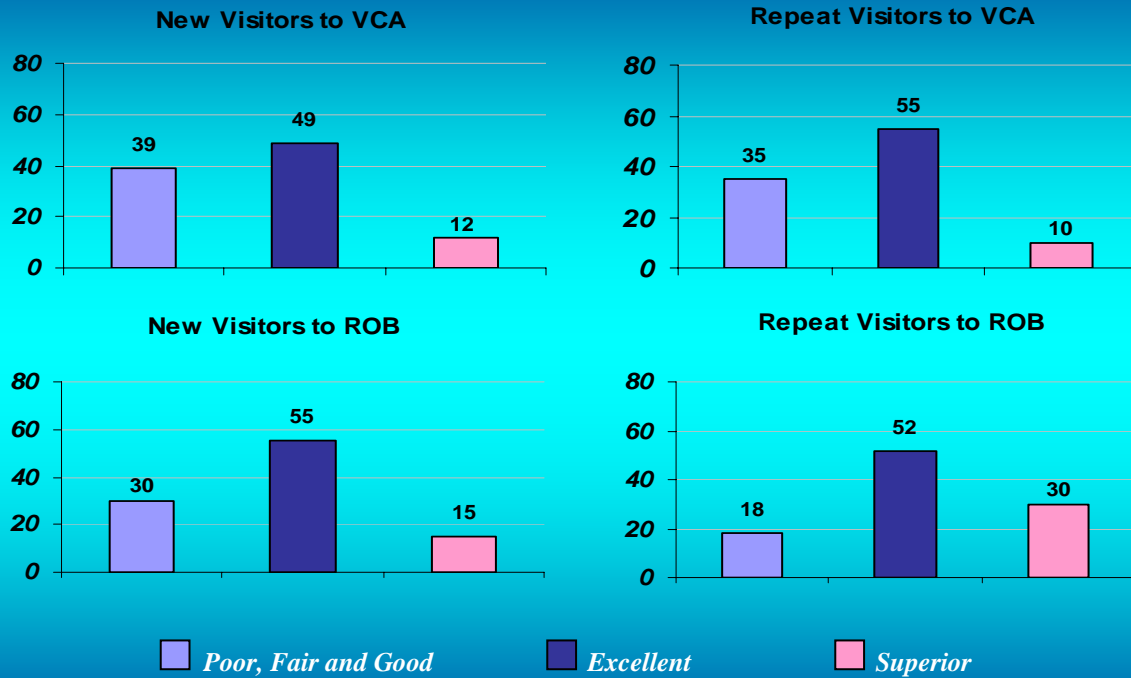
In the study of *Return of the Buddha*, we found that repeat visitors (i.e., those who had been to the Freer Gallery or Sackler Gallery at least once before) behaved differently in *Return of the Buddha* compared to new visitors (i.e., those making their first visit to the Sackler Gallery). The repeat visitors were more likely to have read labels and texts, compared dynastic styles, and examined details and sculptural techniques. The repeat visitors also rated *Return of the Buddha* more highly than the new visitors did.

In *Views of Chinese Art*, too, repeat visitors were more likely than new visitors to have read labels (77% vs. 59%), examined glaze effects (51% vs. 28%), talked to companions (48% vs. 21%), looked at motifs (46% vs. 15%), compared shapes (40% vs. 18%), and compared the drawing quality of designs (31% vs. 7%).

Nonetheless, unlike the repeat visitors in *Return of the Buddha*, repeat visitors in *Views of Chinese Art* gave the exhibition approximately the same rating as new visitors (see Figure 3).

As Figure 3 illustrates, the repeat visitors in *Return of the Buddha* gave that exhibition a noticeably higher rating (30% “superior”) than repeat visitors gave to *Views of Chinese Art*. Moreover, new visitors in *Views of Chinese Art* were more critical of their exhibition than new visitors in *Return of the Buddha* (39% “Fair” or “Good” in VCA vs. 30% in ROB).

Figure 3. Exhibitions Rating, *Views of Chinese Art* (VCA) and *Return of the Buddha* (ROB)
(Percent)



Discussion

The interviews highlight how the exhibition's content, design, and interpretation worked together for some visitors. The isolation of key items, the doubling of others, and the succinct case labels focused careful attention on the details of materials, shapes, and techniques.

The interviews reveal how often this concentration led to broader reflections. Some were inspired by close looking to think about the making of art or how art transcends time, and others were inclined to think about the culture and life within which these artworks were born. Although interviewees felt that they learned something in the exhibition, there was also the sense that they wanted to know still more. In particular, some clearly wanted to know more about the use of the objects.

When viewed as a whole, these interviews also suggest that Asian art (or at least Chinese art) is especially attractive to those who are drawn to the distant past. The *cong*, in particular, was so striking because it related most directly to this fascination with deep antiquity. For some people, Chinese art is their point of contact with ancient Chinese civilization in particular, and Asian civilization in general. Looking at the art appears to engage wonder about the remote past.

At the same time that the interviewees were drawn to know more, a number of them seem to feel daunted by the scope of the challenge of being knowledgeable about Asian art and civilization. A museum display, aimed at a diverse visiting public, always is pulled in two ways: saying less can disappoint some, while saying more can intimidate others.

This conflict is apparent in the survey results. On the one hand, the terse, bulleted labels and the comparative approach were particularly effective for a relatively small group of visitors, mostly male. It drew them into engagement with the objects and resulted in learning. On the other hand, a significant segment of repeat visitors were bothered by the feeling that there was too little information, and that the information was oversimplified. In other words, the exhibition's strong point for some was also its principal weakness for others.

One lesson we could draw from this research is that no approach will please everyone. A museum that wishes to successfully engage a diverse public needs a diversity of approaches. For example, some interviewees who particularly liked the concise labels in this exhibition noted that they liked longer, more discursive labels elsewhere in the museum. Variety is preferable to consistency – in texts as in design. Perhaps those eager to know more might have been satisfied with just one or two cases in which additional texts and graphics (or even additional types of objects) presented the context within which some of these ceramics were made and used. At the same time it is also possible that they were able to find another exhibition in the museum that satisfied their need for deeper levels of information.

It is important to look at any exhibition within the context of the museum as a whole. Previous studies at the Freer and Sackler Galleries and elsewhere at the Smithsonian have suggested that the average rating that visitors give a museum as a whole is higher than the average rating of any particular exhibition within that museum. This has led to the hypothesis that a visitor rates the museum on the basis of his/her single best experience in the museum, not on a cumulative average of all his/her experiences. If this is true,³ then higher levels of satisfaction can probably be achieved by increasing the extent of diversity in approach and content.

Although visitors in this exhibition were not formally observed, the study team spent a considerable amount of time in the exhibition noting visitor behavior. Only the most serious and committed visitors viewed the majority of objects in the exhibition. Casual visitors looked at only one or two cases. The most serious circulated systematically, case by case, sometimes returning to an earlier case for a second look. Many visitors appeared to be searching for the exhibition, presentation, or object that would speak to them directly.

³ This hypothesis is currently being tested in an OP&A study at the National Museum of American History.

Appendix A: Sample case labels

Motifs across materials:

- Craftsman often borrow or are inspired by decoration from other materials or times. Notice that the triangle and hook pattern in the rectangular frame in the central section of the jade is also found on the bronze tripod.
- Not only were designs copied between materials but less expensive materials were often substituted for more costly ones.
- This bronze tripod is perhaps the earliest example with sculptural animals on the lid. The later ceramic tripod faithfully imitates a more costly vessel of bronze.

Drawing quality

- Individually hand-painted designs can look similar due to repetition or the use of sketchbooks or models.
- Comparing details closely can reveal all sorts of differences that might make one item more appealing than another.
- Notice how the details reveal the ceramic painter's artistry, such as the relative grace of the depictions of the curving tendrils, the modeling of the grapes, and the arrangement of the leaves in relation to the grape clusters.

Shape and decoration:

- Choices of shape and decoration are limitless.
- The floral decorations are carved through the cream-colored slip to reveal the dark body of the vase. Their similarities suggest a similar data and place of origin.
- However, the variations in shape and decoration reveal the creativity and inventiveness of the maker(s).

Confronting dragons:

- Motifs from the past occur in all the arts throughout Chinese history.
- About 2,300 years lie between these objects, yet similar dragon designs appear in both rectangular shapes. On the bronze we can see one of the earliest attempts to portray intertwined dragons in relief.
- The high-quality porcelain was made during the early 1700s, a time when the use of ancient motifs was popular.

Appendix B: Visitor Responses Regarding the *Views of Chinese Art* Exhibition

1. Is this your first visit to this museum (the Freer and Sackler Galleries)?

49% No
51% Yes

2. What led you to visit this museum today? [Mark all that apply]

20% Wandered by
59% Came for a general visit
5% Came to see this exhibition of Chinese art
8% Other:
 “Noguchi at the Hirshhorn”
 “[My] Wife forced me to come”
 “General interest also”
 “I came to see Freer Black and White exhibit”
 “Guest in from out of town”

3. On your visit to this exhibition of Chinese art from Indianapolis, which of the following did you do? [Mark all that apply]

80% Walked around the objects
76% Looked at the objects up close
67% Read labels
37% Examined the glaze effects
32% Talked to my companions
30% Looked at the motifs across objects
27% Compared the shapes of the objects
18% Compared drawing quality of design
4% Other:
 “Looked at certain forms i.e. horse, bowl, etc”
 “Relate it to modern Chinese art”
 “Wondered how [the ceramics were] made”
0% None of these

4. What percent of the labels did you read?

5% None
17% Less than 25%
47% 25-50%
16% 51-75%
16% Over 75%

5. How did the following elements contribute to your experience in this exhibition?

	Enhanced	Detracted	No effect	Didn't notice
Lighting	77%	7%	10%	7%
Groupings of objects	75%	5%	11%	9%
Content of labels	73%	3%	16%	9%
Wall color	51%	1%	23%	24%
Format of labels	48%	6%	25%	22%

6. Thinking about labels/information in the exhibition, which apply to you? [Mark all that apply]

63% Information was useful to me
53% The language was easy to understand

- 51% Information was new to me
- 37% The objects used to explain the differences were relevant
- 16% Information was oversimplified
- 13% Too little information
- 6% Information was too detailed for me
- 3% Too much information

6. Which of the following experiences did you find most satisfying in this exhibition today? [Mark all the apply]

- 65% Being moved by the beauty of the objects
- 57% Gaining information or knowledge
- 46% Relaxing
- 40% Seeing the real thing
- 40% Experiencing a culture different than my own
- 26% Feeling inspired to learn more
- 25% Reflecting upon the meaning of what I saw
- 24% Spending time with friends/family
- 21% Recalling my travels or other memories
- 16% Changing my understanding of Chinese art
- 15% Feeling a spiritual connection
- 15% Feeling inspired in my personal/professional development

7. Overall, how would you rate this exhibition of Chinese art from Indianapolis?

- 0% Poor
- 2% Fair
- 36% Good
- 52% Excellent
- 10% Superior

8. Please rate the following aspects of the exhibition of Chinese art from Indianapolis?

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Superior	Not Applicable
Personal enjoyment	1%	4%	35%	35%	24%	
Learning opportunities	1%	3%	37%	37%	17%	4%
Diversity of objects	3%	3%	36%	44%	12%	3%
Personal relevance	3%	13%	51%	13%	5%	15%

9. Is there anything that would have made this exhibition more appealing?

- 27% No
- 56% I am not sure
- 17% Yes. If yes, what would that be?
 - “Translation to other languages”
 - “More information besides the labels”
 - “Who used these [ceramics] and how”
 - “Buried Army”
 - “Audio”
 - “More written stuff”
 - “More historical background”
 - “Layout and colors, walls and labels”
 - “Media (movie, documentary)”
 - “I would include one or two general explanations at the beginning”
 - “More objects”
 - “More technical information on how [the ceramics were] made”

10. Which of the following statements apply to you?

- 32% I have read books about Chinese ceramics
- 11% I collect ceramics
- 10% I create ceramics
- 15% I have read books about ceramics in general
- 54% None of the above

11. How interested are you in the following?

	Not Interested	Somewhat Interested	Interested	Very Interested
Asian art	5%	22%	33%	41%
Chinese ceramics	6%	41%	32%	21%
Asian culture	3%	18%	39%	39%

12. How many times a year do you look at Asian art when visiting an art museum?

- 29% Less than 1
- 41% 1-3 times
- 16% 4-6 times
- 15% 7 or more

13. With whom are you visiting today?

- 44% Alone
- 35% One other adult
- 15% Several adults
- 3% Adult(s) with children(s)
- 3% Organized group
- 1% Group of teens

14. Where do you live?

- 19% Washington DC metro area
- 18% Southeast
- 15% Midwest
- 11% Mid Atlantic
- 6% West
- 5% Mountain Plains
- 4% New England
- 9% US Unspecified
- 13% Country other than US

15. What is your gender?

- 62% Female
- 38% Male

16. What is your age?

- 18% 12 to 25
- 29% 26 to 35
- 16% 36 to 45
- 18% 46 to 55
- 18% 56 to 65
- 3% 66 and above

Mean = 40

17. Are you of Latino/Hispanic origin?

89% No

11% Yes

18. What race do you consider yourself to be?

63% White

30% Asian

10% African American/Black

1% American Indian/Native Alaskan

0% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Race and origin (US only)

50% White, not Latino

22% Asian, not Latino

13% Black, not Latino

10% White, Latino

5% Multiple races, Not Latino

19. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (age 25 and above)

3% High school graduate or less

3% One or more years of college, no degree

8% Associate degree

21% Bachelor degree

64% Graduate or professional degree