

*An Analysis of
Existing Data on
Visitors to the
Freer and Sackler
Galleries*



Office of Policy and Analysis
November 2007



Table of Contents

Image Credits	iii
Preface.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Problems and Recommendations.....	1
Part I: Visitors to the Freer and Sackler Galleries.....	5
Demographic Data from Fourteen Studies	5
Demographic Characteristics	6
Exhibition-specific, Local Audiences	8
Trends Over Time	9
Freer Visitors.....	10
The “Core” Sackler Audience.....	10
Limitations of Demographic Data	10
Suggestions	11
Part II: Ratings and Experiences at Sackler Exhibitions	13
Ratings at the Smithsonian.....	13
Why Ratings Differ.....	14
Suggestions	20
Part III: Other Sources of FSG Visitor Information.....	21
Study materials.....	21
Review of the literature.....	21
FSG Visitor Comment Books	25
Visitor Comment Forms (VIARC).....	39
Docents and Desk Volunteers	42
Observations	45
References.....	47
Appendix A: FSG Survey Studies, 1994-2007	A-1
Appendix B: Summary of Demographic Characteristics	B-1



Image Credits

Front cover: Landscape: Palaces Among High Hills, 1644-1911, Qing dynasty, China, Color and gold on silk, H: 1.0, W: 1.0 cm, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1911.193

Page i: Elliptical Bowl, 225-650, Sasanian period, Iran, Silver and gilt; hammered, chased, repousse, gilded, H: 7.3 W: 27.0 D: 12.8 cm, Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, S1987.111

Page iii: Pen Box, 13th century (1210-11), Shazi, Iran, Brass inlaid with copper, silver and black organic material, H: 5.0 W: 31.4 D: 6.4 cm, Purchase, F1936.7

Page v: Bowl, 30 - 395 B.C.E., Roman Period, Possibly Alexandria, Egypt, Glass, H: 5.2 W: 17.5 cm, Purchase, F1965.16

Page 1: Bowl With Design Of Mynahs, 1723-1735, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng reign, Jingdezhen, China, Porcelain with enamels over clear, colorless glaze, H: 4.6 W: 8.1 cm, Purchase, F1930.35a-b

Page 5: Ornament, Ca. 500 B.C.E., Eastern Zhou dynasty, China, Jade, H: 1.0 W: 1.0 cm, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1916.146

Page 13: Landscape: Pavilions on Both Banks of River, Distant Hills, 1368-1644, Ming dynasty, China, Color on silk, H: 1.0 W: 1.0 cm, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1911.162d

Page 21: Pair of Nilgiri Earrings, Late 19th-early 20th century, India, Gold sheet metal, H: 9.2 W: 5.9 cm, Purchase--Funds provided by Miss Narinder K. Keith and Miss Rajinder K. Keith, F1990.2a-b

Back cover: Incense Burner, 19th century, Edo period or Meiji era, Kyoto, Japan, Stoneware with iron glaze, silver lid, H: 10.5 W: 16.1 D: 14.5 cm, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1893.7



Preface

Although the Freer and Sackler Galleries (FSG) Director, Julian Raby, has always been interested in increasing the Galleries' awareness of its effect on visitors, the Galleries' request for a meta-analysis of exhibition studies and comment cards and forms, collected over more than a decade, revealed knowledge and insights that should lead to new practices that better serve visitors. Much of the visitors' knowledge and insights will be applied by diverse departments within the museum.

Theresa Esterlund, Manager of In-Gallery Interpretation, who specifically asked the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to examine the studies, conducted an ongoing dialogue with OP&A during the course of the work. Over the time which we have worked with Theresa, we have increasingly appreciated each other's experience and skills. We are especially grateful for her for arranging two seminars during which Andrew Pekarik and Kathleen Ernst, senior OP&A analysts, could present their findings and conclusions to FSG staff. I am thankful to Erin Hoppe and Bianca Yip, OP&A interns, who entered and coded data from comment books, thus opening the door for analysis. I also thank Lance Costello who designed the report. He has a keen eye and quietly accomplishes the job. Above all, I am grateful to Andrew and Kathy who, amidst an enormous amount of work, helped us to get closer to understanding the challenges of making the FSG more knowing so they can more fully satisfy their visitors.

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



Introduction

Performance matters to the Freer and Sackler Galleries (FSG). Over the past several years, the FSG has asked the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) and its predecessor (Office of Institutional Studies) to conduct visitor studies, solicited visitors' comments through the use of comment books and forms, and engaged in observations. Rigorously analyzing multiple sets of findings and exploiting the opportunity to analyze a large breadth of information are rarely done.

This report presents OP&A's analysis of this data in three parts. Part I examines fourteen visitor studies conducted at the FSG to identify who the visitors to the Galleries are. Part II looks at how visitors rated exhibitions at the Sackler and the experiences they had at these exhibitions. Part III presents visitor inputs from comment books and forms as well as knowledge gained by docents and desk volunteers.

Several problems surfaced from the meta-analysis of FSG visitor information. When the following issues, which represent the collective observations of visitors, are addressed the FSG can better align their exhibitions with processes, services, education, ideas, and the physical setting; meet higher quality standards; and increase visitorship. For each of these problems, OP&A staff generated recommendations which, if implemented, will become visible to visitors and move the Galleries into a more visitor centered direction.

Problems and Recommendations

1. Wayfinding in the building is poor

Suggestion: Iterative experimentation and testing of wayfinding improvements should occur, preferably in the next six months.

- Establish five key wayfinding problems (e.g., how to get to the Freer from the Sackler; how to get to the Sackler from the Freer; how

to find exits, bathrooms, shops, Imaginasia, American art, and the auditorium...)

- Obtain inputs from docents and VIARC volunteers
- Conduct a baseline study to determine the degree to which visitors are having difficulty with the wayfinding problems
- Experiment with a signage program to address the five areas and test visitor responses to the new improvements against baseline

2. Visitors want better orientation to exhibitions

Suggestion: Every exhibition should start with an orientation section that prominently displays the main message(s) of the exhibition, historical settings, and other relevant background information including maps and timelines.

3. Visitors want more context relating to the objects (i.e., where the objects fit in the history of Asia; information about how they were made and the roles they play in peoples' everyday lives)

Suggestion: Every exhibition should address the issue of context and cultural significance. There should be a mix of information on history and culture, as well as art.

4. The museums are not paying enough attention to people who are not there for art, but rather are information-oriented and interested in Asian culture and history.

Suggestion: A semi-permanent exhibition on Asian culture and history should be created featuring objects that help deliver the larger thematic messages about the nature of Asian civilization.

5. People making the exhibitions do not understand the diversity of visitors.

Because the Freer is planning a major rehabilitation and remodeling project to begin in 2009:

- a. Suggestion: A study that baselines what is working and what is not working should be undertaken. (At the moment very little is known about the experience of visitors in the Freer Gallery. Are visitors who arrive specifically to visit Freer exhibitions different in substantive ways from the visitors to Sackler exhibitions? What do they expect? Do visitors compare their

Freer experiences with their Sackler experiences? An entrance-exit study of FSG could answer these questions.)

- b. Suggestion: Expectations of visitors, especially at the Freer, should be studied. (It would be very useful to know the expectations of visitors who are coming to the Freer and Sackler Galleries for reasons other than to see specific exhibitions. Such a study should include both interviews and surveys and focus on entering as well as exiting visitors. What experiences are they seeking? What are the motivations behind these searches? What are they expecting to encounter in the galleries? To what degree were specific expectations met on exit? Which exhibitions exceeded visitors' expectations?)
- c. Suggestion: The relationship between Freer and Sackler should be investigated. (Is there more exchange between the two Galleries than there was in the past? What motivates people to move from one gallery to the other? How do they find out how to do it? These questions could be answered by a study that interviews people passing from one gallery to the other through the connecting passageway.)
- d. Suggestion: A study to understand the causal link between what the Galleries do and how visitors respond should be conducted. An experimental gallery to understand cause and effect should be established. For example, the same objects should be displayed but the presentation/design, punchy headlines, journalistic labels, colors, lighting and so on should be modified. Do visitors like it better or worse? (It is easy enough to say that an exhibition should lead visitors to new experiences beyond what they expected. In practice, however, this is quite difficult to do. Little is known about how to improve the likelihood of a visitor having particular experiences. This situation calls for an active program of experimentation. It would be relatively simple to set aside a small exhibition in the Freer or Sackler and use it as a setting for experimentation. For example, by periodically changing the text in different ways and measuring the results, exhibition teams could develop a much clearer understanding of how written materials influence visitor experiences in the Galleries.)
- e. Suggestion: A study of why visitors go in certain galleries should be done. What is it about one room vs. another that draws them in?

f. Suggestion: Ways to better orient visitors when they come into the Galleries (e.g., a computer terminal where visitors can find what interests them by country, type of object, etc.) should be investigated.

6. Exhibition titles: Because FSG exhibitions draw visitors so differently, even with comparable reviews in the Washington Post, there may be a problem with titles and related graphics that represent the exhibitions to the public.

Suggestion: Title testing should be conducted long before deadlines to pick titles. When the best titles are arrived at, the effects of alternative graphics should be tested. (It is important to attract a strong local audience to the Sackler Gallery exhibitions because they are more likely than non-locals to come especially for the exhibition and because the Galleries serve these visitors most effectively. In order to increase the draw of its exhibitions, the Galleries should consider testing titles and images for new exhibitions with current and prospective visitors. The point of such testing is not to “vote” on titles or graphics, but to help curators and designers understand what ideas and expectations are evoked by particular combinations of words and pictures, and which of those combinations is most likely to attract an audience in tune with what the exhibition is planning to provide.

Other

Suggestion: A cyber-panel should be established to investigate the “core” Sackler audience.

Future studies of Sackler exhibitions should include an opportunity for respondents to volunteer to provide their e-mail addresses in order to be included in an electronic panel that would pose targeted questions about their experiences within the Gallery.



Part I: Visitors to the Freer and Sackler Galleries

Demographic Data from Fourteen Studies

Smithsonian researchers have conducted 14 separate visitor survey studies at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, ten of them during the past four years.

Three of these were museum studies: a year-long study of Freer and Sackler visitors conducted between October of 1994 and September of 1995, and separate exit surveys at the Freer Gallery and the Sackler Gallery, conducted as part of an Institution-wide study of Smithsonian visitors in the summer of 2004:

- 1994-95 Year-long study (Year-long)¹
- All Museum Survey, Freer Gallery of Art (AMS FGA)
- All Museum Survey, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (AMS SGA)

The other 11 were studies of exhibitions at the Sackler Gallery:

- *Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion (Puja)*
- *Twelve Centuries of Japanese Art from the Imperial Collection (12 Centuries)*
- *Music in the Age of Confucius (Confucius)*
- *Return of the Buddha: The Qingzhou Discoveries (Return)*

¹ The appellation in parenthesis refers to the name by which the study in question will be identified in subsequent references.

- *Views of Chinese Art from the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA ceramics)*
- *Caravan Kingdoms: Yemen and the Ancient Incense Trade (Yemen)*
- *Style and Status: Imperial Robes from the Ottoman Empire (Style & Status)*
- *Hokusai (Hokusai)*
- *Facing East: Portraits from Asia (Facing East)*
- *In the Beginning: Bibles Before the Year 1000 (Bibles)*
- *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries (Portugal)*

All of the exhibition studies surveyed exiting visitors. In addition, four surveyed visitors entering the exhibition (*12 Centuries of Japanese Art, Style and Status, Hokusai, and Facing East*), four surveyed visitors entering the Sackler Gallery (*Puja, Twelve Centuries of Japanese Art, Music in the Age of Confucius, and Hokusai*), and one surveyed visitors entering the Freer (*Puja*). The sample sizes varied widely, from as few as 72 to as many as 606. (See Appendix A.)

Demographic Characteristics²

Sex

The percentage of women in Sackler exhibitions varied from a high of 65% (*Style and Status*) to a low of 47-48% (*Facing East* and *Puja*). The average was 55%. Women generally outnumber men in art museums.

Age

The average age of Sackler visitors was 45 (median age 47). The average age ranged from a low of 40 (*IMA Ceramics*) to a high of 52 (*Bibles*). In *IMA Ceramics* the number of visitors belonging to Generation X (born 1965-1981) was especially high (44%) and the number of those aged 55 and over was especially low (22%). In *Bibles* the percentage of Generation X visitors was especially low (19%) and the percentage of visitors over age 65 was especially high (23%).

² See Appendix B for the averages, medians, minimums, and maximums. The median is the mid-point in the data; half the values are lower than the median, and half are higher.

Ethnic Identity

This question has not been asked much in recent surveys, and changes in the standard way of asking it make it difficult to compare old and new data. U.S. residents who identified themselves as white were most numerous among visitors to *Puja* and *Style & Status* (83-84%), and least numerous at *IMA Ceramics* (50%). For self-identified Asian Americans, the situation was close to a mirror image, with a low of 8-9% at *Puja* and *Style & Status* and a high of 22% at *IMA Ceramics*.

Residence

Foreign visitors ranged from 2% of visitors (*Bibles*) to 18% (*Confucius*). The average across all exhibitions is 9%.

Local visitors (i.e., those from the Metropolitan DC area) were least numerous in *IMA Ceramics* (19%) and most numerous *12 Centuries* (60%). The average is 42%.

Data from a few studies suggest that DC residents and suburban residents sometimes respond differently. For example, *Style & Status* drew an especially high number of visitors who live within five miles of the Mall (26% compared to an average of 17%), while *Bibles* drew an especially high number of visitors who live between five and ten miles from the Mall (27% compared to an average of 15%).

Visit Group

Over one-quarter of all respondents to these surveys were alone (average 28%). Lone visitors were especially numerous in *IMA Ceramics* (44%) and least represented in *Bibles* (12%). Groups of two adults (40% of visitors on average) were also scarce in *Bibles* (12%), where most visitors (61%) came in groups of three or more adults.

Education

This question has also not been asked much in recent years, because it shows little variation. Across the four exhibition studies where it was measured, an average of 55% of visitors ages 25 or older had graduate degrees, and 33% had college degrees.

Visit History

First-time visitors ranged from a low of 31-33% (*Yemen* and *Style & Status*) to a high of 62% (*Puja*). The average was 45%, but in this case the median (49%) is a better measure across the studies, since it is less affected by extreme values.

Information Sources

Hearing about the exhibition through word of mouth was highest in *Hokusai* and *Bibles* (31% and 34%) and lowest in *Yemen* (12%). Print media was highest in *Yemen* (45%), and wandering by or seeing a banner was highest in *Return* (45%). Those who heard about the exhibition through the internet ranged between 3% in *Bibles* to 14% in *Hokusai*. The average was 7%.

Motivation

The percentage of visitors who came to the Sackler specifically to see the exhibition at which they were surveyed ranged from 4-5% (*Puja* and *IMA Ceramics*) to 87% (*Hokusai*). The average was 50%, but here too the median (56%) is a better measure, since it is less influenced by the very high and very low values.

Interest

In a number of studies, visitors were asked how interested they were in certain subjects relating to the exhibition they were visiting. The question asked most frequently concerned visitors' level of interest in Asian art. The percentage who marked "very interested" ranged from a high of 55% in *Facing East* to a low of 29% in *Style & Status*.

Exhibition-specific, Local Audiences

As the data indicate, the characteristics of Sackler audiences tend to vary according to the exhibition on display. The widest variation was found in regard to:

- motivation for their visit (whether they came to the Sackler to see a particular exhibition, or came for another reason)
- residence (local, non-local, foreign)
- visit history (first-time versus repeat visitors)

A closer look at these three elements will highlight the special character of the Sackler audience.

Some visitors to the National Mall will come to the Sackler Gallery for a general visit without regard to the specific exhibition(s) on display. This audience is not well-studied and probably consists mainly of visitors who enter at the Freer. This audience was most evident in the survey data for the exhibitions that drew relatively few exhibition-specific visitors: *Puja*, *IMA Ceramics* and *Facing East*. It seems from the limited data available that this audience may be closer

to the profile of Smithsonian visitors overall. For example, the three exhibitions listed above were the only three that had more male than female visitors, which reflects the general Smithsonian visitor population.

More typically Sackler exhibition audiences were dominated by those who came to the museum specifically to see the exhibition. One indicator of the drawing power of a Sackler exhibition was the percentage of local visitors who came to the museum specifically to see that exhibition. At the high end were those in which 80% or more of local visitors came specifically to see the exhibition: *Style and Status*, *Hokusai*, *Bibles*, and *Portugal. Return and Yemen* were in the middle, with 60-70% of local visitors coming to the museum specifically to see them). The remaining exhibitions—*IMA Ceramics* and *Facing East*—were in the low range, with 13% and 40% of local visitors coming specifically to see them, respectively.

For obvious reasons, local visitors are more likely than non-local visitors to be making a repeat visit. Nonetheless, the percentage of first-timers among local visitors varied considerably among the exhibition audiences surveyed, from a low of 9% (*Portugal*) to a high of 31% (*Bibles*). This reflected the degree to which the exhibition attracted a new audience.

Local visitors played such an important role in the Sackler exhibition audiences because they were more likely to know about the exhibitions in advance. The data demonstrate, for example, that local residents were more likely to have heard about an exhibition through newspapers and other print media, while non-locals were more likely to have become aware of an exhibition by seeing a banner. Interestingly, locals and non-locals were equally likely to have become aware of an exhibition through word of mouth.

Trends Over Time

Since the data from these surveys covers a span of 13 years, we can consider whether or not there have been significant changes in the Sackler audience over this period. The variations from exhibition to exhibition do not seem to bear any relationship to chronological change. They are affected much more by the degree to which a local audience comes to the Sackler Gallery to visit a specific exhibition.

If we compare the Sackler exhibition exit data with the summary data in the 1994-95 study we can find some differences, but it is unlikely that these differences reflect a change over time. Instead they probably are due to the fact that the early study was evenly divided between Freer visitors and Sackler visitors, and was conducted at museum exits both during and between special exhibitions. At this point, it is impossible to disaggregate the 1994-95 data.

Freer Visitors

There is considerable overlap between Sackler visitors and Freer visitors. In the 1994-95 study, 38% of visitors visited the Freer only, 31% visited the Sackler only, and 31% visited both. The percentage that visits both has probably increased since then with the improvement in the passageway between the two museums and signage guiding visitors from one to the other.

The 1994-95 study found that non-local and foreign visitors were much more numerous at the Freer Mall entrance, while local visitors were equally likely to enter at the Freer Mall entrance or the Sackler Pavilion. If this is still true, those entering the Freer are probably much less likely to be interested in specific exhibitions and more likely to resemble the general Smithsonian audience than those who enter through the Sackler pavilion.³

The “Core” Sackler Audience

Despite the ebb and flow of these various demographic characteristics, there is a core audience that regularly visits the Sackler to see whatever is on exhibit. If we assume that those who have visited the Sackler Gallery five or more times before they were surveyed fall into this category, this core audience was about 36% of visitors. This core audience is more likely than others to be local (66% live in the DC Metropolitan Area, compared to 50% of all visitors) and to have been visiting alone when surveyed (35%, versus 28% of all visitors).

Limitations of Demographic Data

It is also important to appreciate that a particular exhibition’s subject matter (and the public’s perception of it) drives the demographics of visitation to the Sackler. When the topic is textiles, as with *Style & Status*, women are much more numerous. When the topic is bibles, older people in church groups are more numerous. When the subject is a mainstream Asian artist such as Hokusai, many more people come to the Sackler specifically to see the exhibition.

This allows the museum to attract a range of different audiences, including a substantial percentage of new visitors, with each new exhibition. But it also makes it difficult to get a “fix” on the Sackler’s audience.

³ It should also be noted that no past study has investigated visitors entering or leaving the Freer and Sackler complex through the National Museum of African Art or the Dillion Ripley Center.

Suggestions

Study Visitors to the Freer

At the moment very little is known about the experience of visitors in the Freer Gallery. Are visitors who arrive specifically to visit Freer exhibitions different in substantive ways from the visitors to Sackler exhibitions? What do they expect? Do people compare their Freer experience with their Sackler experience? An entrance-exit study of FSG could answer these questions.

Study the Relationship between Freer and Sackler

Is there more exchange between the two galleries than there was in the past? What motivates people to move from one gallery to the other? How do they find out how to do it? These questions could be answered by a study that interviews people passing from one gallery to the other through the connecting passageway.

Establish a Cyber-panel to Investigate the “Core” Sackler Audience

Future studies of Sackler exhibitions could include an opportunity for respondents to volunteer to provide their e-mail addresses in order to be included in an electronic panel that would be asked targeted questions about their experiences with the Gallery.



Part II: Ratings and Experiences at Sackler Exhibitions

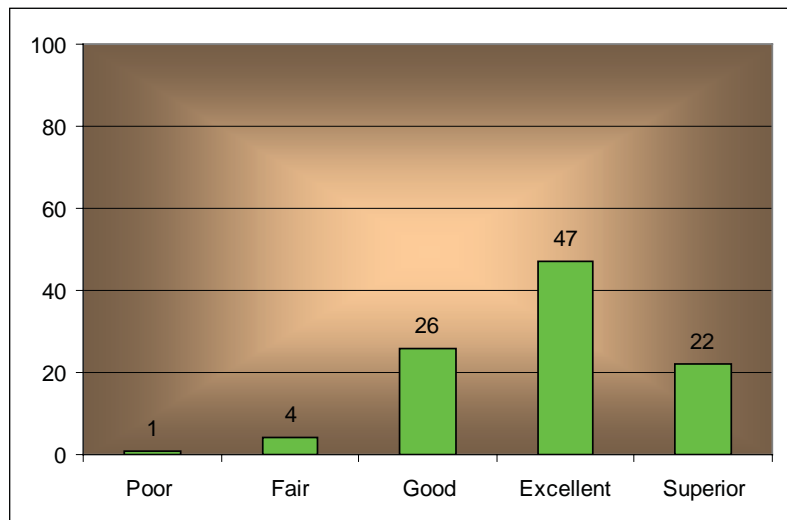
Ratings at the Smithsonian

Since 2004 surveys conducted by the Office of Policy and Analysis have asked visitors to rate exhibitions using the scale Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent, Superior. The average of these ratings across 40 Smithsonian exhibitions surveyed so far is presented in Figure 1.

Nearly half of the visitors on average rate Smithsonian exhibitions as Excellent. These visitors presumably were very satisfied, and had no objections that would have led them to rate it as less than Excellent, i.e., Good, Fair, or Poor,⁴ but also they were not excited enough by the exhibition to mark it Superior.

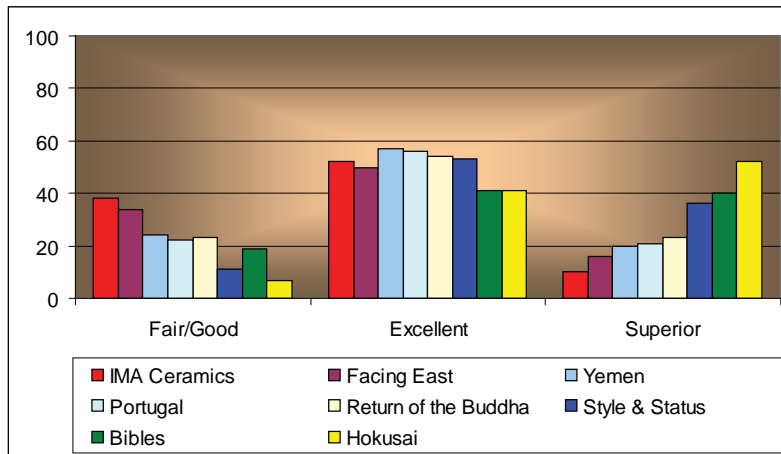
This dynamic is apparent in the scores across the eight Sackler Gallery exhibitions that were rated by visitors, as shown in Figure 2. Between 40% and 60% of

Figure 1: Average Ratings of Smithsonian Exhibitions 2004-2007



⁴ Out of the nearly 2,000 exiting visitors surveyed in these studies, only one person rated an exhibition as "Poor."

Figure 2: Ratings of Sackler Gallery Exhibitions 2004-2007



visitors rated the exhibitions Excellent. In general, across these eight exhibitions, as the proportion of visitors who rated the exhibition Superior decreases, the proportion who marked it Good or Fair increases. In other words, overall the more visitors were excited, the less they were critical, and vice versa.

In the case of an individual exhibition, the ratio between those who were thrilled by the exhibition

(rating it Superior) and those who were critical of it (rating it Good or Fair), offers the clearest and simplest picture of how they compare with one another. See Figure 3.

- In *Hokusai*, *Bibles*, and *Style & Status*, the percentage of visitors who were excited by the exhibition was much greater than the percentage who were critical of it to some degree.
- In *Return*, *Portugal*, and *Yemen*, the two groups were approximately in balance.
- In *Facing East* and *IMA Ceramics*, the proportion that found fault was larger than the proportion that thought it was special.

Why Ratings Differ

The fact that different exhibitions elicit different visitor ratings is interesting, but in itself not particularly useful unless we can understand some of the reasons why. The two significant factors that can explain ratings are the nature of the audience and the experiences that people have in the exhibitions.

Audiences

As noted in Part I, each Sackler exhibition draws a distinctive audience. Some attract a substantial percentage of local visitors and others do not. The best predictor of how a visitor rated an exhibition was whether or not that visitor came to the Sackler specifically to see the exhibition at which he or she was surveyed.

This is intuitively reasonable. An exhibition of Chinese ceramics, for example, will be much more exciting for those who are interested enough in the subject to take the time and trouble to come to the museum specifically to see that exhibition. On average we can expect that such an exhibition would be less interesting to those visitors who came to the museum for other reasons and who wandered into the exhibition.⁵

Figure 3: Ratings of Sackler Exhibitions 2004-2007 (Good/Fair and Superior only) (in Percent)

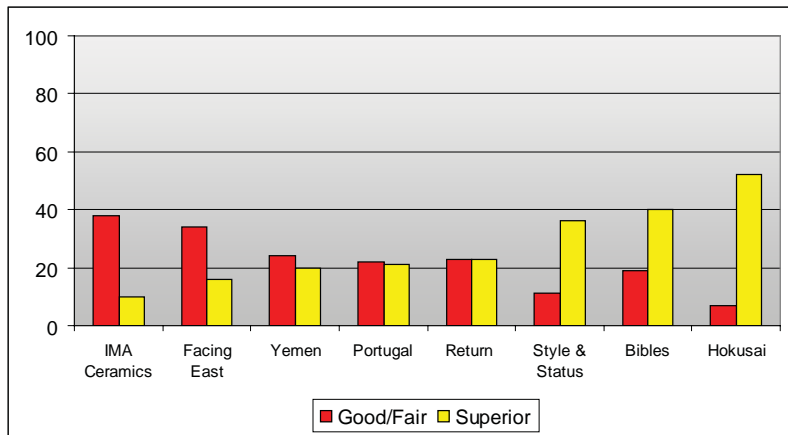


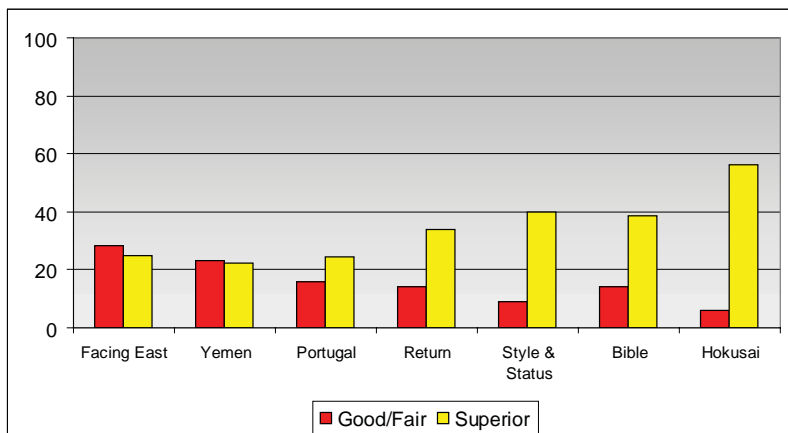
Figure 4 shows the Superior and Good/Fair ratings for the exhibition-specific visitors only, i.e., those who came to the Sackler specifically to see that exhibition.⁶

Among these intentional visitors, *Return* and *Portugal* also had a higher proportion of excited visitors than of visitors who found the exhibition lacking in some regard; *Yemen* was still balanced; and *Facing East* was also balanced.

Figure 4: Ratings for Sackler Gallery Exhibitions 2004-2007 Exhibition-specific Visitors Only (in Percent)

Figure 5, by contrast, shows the ratings of those who did *not* come to the museum specifically to see the exhibition at which they were surveyed. This type of visitor was obviously harder to please.

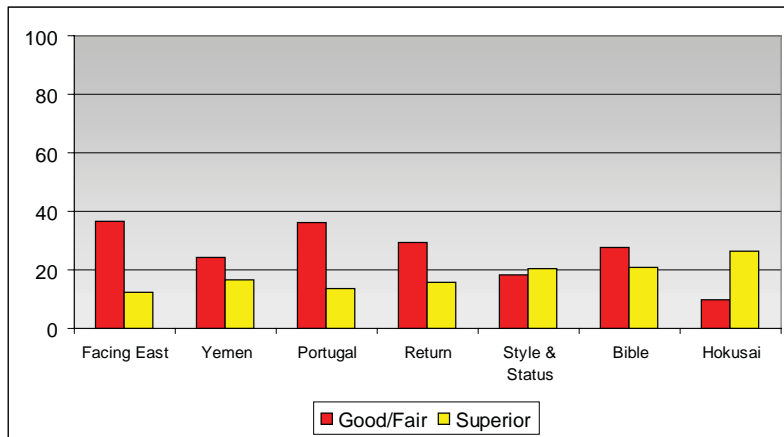
Among these visitors, only *Hokusai* continued to have a higher proportion



⁵ Of course, there are also those visitors wandering the museum who are so uninterested in the topic that they will not even enter the exhibition. Those visitors were not included in the exhibition exit surveys and presumably they found other exhibitions that interested them more.

⁶ The sample for *IMA Ceramics* was too small to allow for this division. Only five surveyed individuals came to the Sackler specifically to see *IMA Ceramics*.

Figure 5: Ratings for Sackler Gallery Exhibitions 2004-2007 Non-exhibition-specific Visitors Only (in Percent)



of visitors excited by the exhibition; *Style & Status* was balanced; all the others had higher proportions of visitors who found fault to some degree.

One important implication of this discussion is that the overall rating for an exhibition is greatly affected by the percentage of visitors who come specifically to see the exhibition. Figure 6 shows the relative size of these two sub-groups for each of the exhibitions.

The ration between exhibition-specific visitors and other visitors changes depending on:

- The attracting power of the exhibition
- The time of year
- The period during the exhibition when the survey is conducted

Sackler exhibitions differ in their ability to draw visitors, especially local residents. As noted in the demographics section of this report, print media and word-of-mouth are important factors in attracting the interest of visitors. Titles and graphics associated with advertising, banners, and other public presentations probably have an effect as well.

When the number of Smithsonian visitors on the Mall is especially high, the proportion of visitors who come to the Sackler Gallery for reasons other than the exhibition is also likely to be high. (In general, tourists are less likely to know about special exhibitions than local residents.) The number of Mall visitors who enter the Sackler Gallery is thus likely to be larger during periods of peak SI attendance.

At different times during an exhibiton's run the ratio of exhibition-specific visitors to other visitors is likely to vary. Other studies at the Smithsonian have shown that exhibition-specific visitors are generally more numerous in the first month of an exhibition (when the local media cover the exhibition). Exhibition-specific visitors also tend to be more numerous at the very end of an exhibition in cases where that exhibition has strong word-of-mouth. A truly representative

sample of visitors to an exhibition would require that the survey be administered periodically over the whole course of an exhibition.⁷

Experiences

Visitors' ratings of exhibitions are also affected by their experiences in the exhibition, and it is possible to explain differences in ratings by the *range* of the experiences they reported, and the *difference* between the experiences they looked forward to on entrance and the ones that they actually had before they left the exhibition.

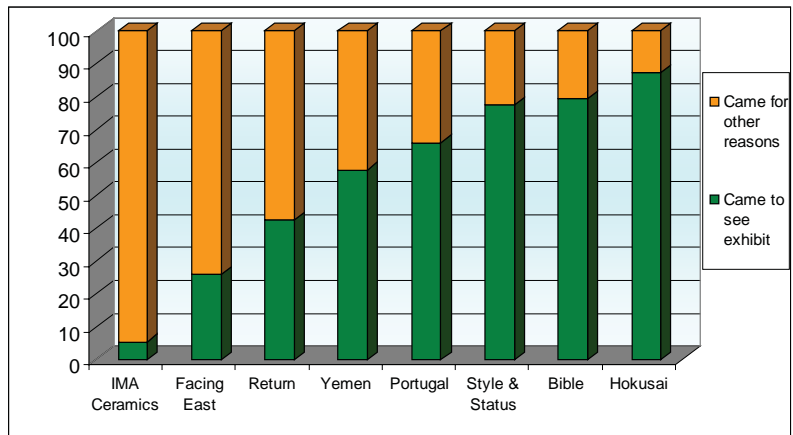
The six experiences discussed here are the core museum experiences cited by visitors in the Sackler Gallery. They were arrived at through extensive interviews with Sackler visitors, starting in 1997, and through careful consideration of survey results that included these items. The full set of six was measured at entrance and exit for three exhibitions: *Style & Status*, *Hokusai*, and *Facing East*, and the discussion in this section is limited to these three exhibitions.

The six experiences are:

- Gaining information or knowledge (*information*)
- Enriching my understanding (*understanding*)
- Being moved by beauty (*beauty*)
- Seeing rare/valuable/uncommon things (*rare things*)
- Imagining other times/places (*imagining*)
- Reflecting on the meaning of what I'm looking at (*reflecting*)

The first two, *information* and *understanding*, are learning experiences. *Beauty* and *rare things* are object experiences. *Imagining* and *reflecting* are introspective experiences. Entering visitors were asked which of these they were especially

Figure 6: Exhibition-specific Visitors and Visitors who Came for Other Reasons (in Percent)



⁷ Among these exhibition studies, only *Style & Status* and *Yemen* were fielded during the final month of the exhibition. None were conducted during the first month of the exhibition.

looking forward to and exiting visitors were asked which they found to be especially satisfying in the exhibition.⁸

There is a very close association between the number of experiences that visitors chose on exit and the rating they gave the exhibition, as shown in Figure 7.

The group of visitors who rated the exhibition as Good or Fair when they left reported finding an average of only two of the six experiences as very satisfying; those who rated the exhibition Excellent reported an average of 3.5 experiences (the same as the average for all entering visitors); and those who rated the exhibition Superior reported an average of over four experiences.

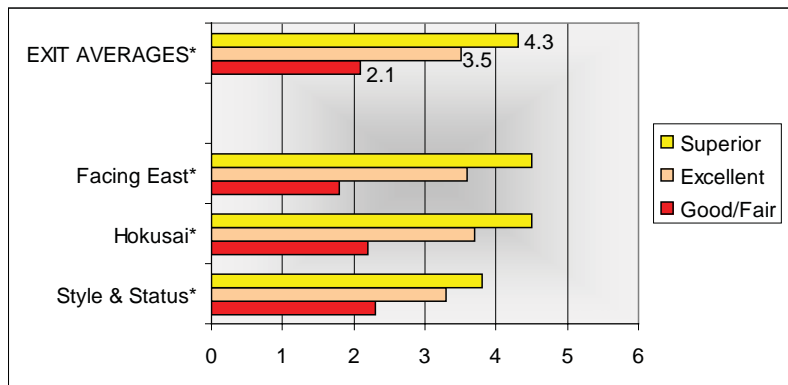
It seems reasonable to assume that the more different experiences that an individual reports as very satisfying, the richer that person’s overall experience in the exhibition has been. And visitors who rated exhibitions higher on average reported richer experiences than those who rated them lower.

In addition, at least for these three exhibitions, the exhibitions with high ratings (*Style & Status* and *Hokusai*) were the ones where exiting visitors reported more experiences than entering visitors were anticipating. When they left with the

same number of experiences as they anticipated (*Facing East*), the exhibition does not get such high ratings. The differences between entrance and exit in these three exhibitions is summarized in Table 1.

In *Style & Status* the average number of experiences for all visitors increases from 2.7 on entrance to 3.5 on exit. In *Hokusai* it increases from 3.6 on entrance to 4.0

Figure 7: Average Number of Experiences by Exhibition Rating (Number between 0 and 6)



*Statistically significant differences among the three ratings for each exhibition

⁸ In *Style & Status* visitors were asked to select the experiences they were “looking forward to” on entrance and the ones they found “especially satisfying” on exit. In *Hokusai* and *Facing East* the question was worded differently. For each experience entering visitors were asked to mark whether they were looking forward to it “Not at all, Somewhat, or Very Much”, and exiting visitors were asked how satisfying they found it, “Not at all, Somewhat, or Very Much.” These results only discuss those who marked “Very much.” Very few visitors marked any experiences “Not at all.” The results for *Style & Status* seemed close enough to those from *Hokusai* and *Facing East* to justify treating the two question formats as approximately equivalent.

on exit. In *Facing East* it declines from 3.4 to 3.1, but the difference is not statistically significant.⁹

One implication of the experience data is the strong possibility that increasing the number of experiences that visitors find very satisfying in the exhibition is likely to increase the rating of an exhibition. This is supported by comparing the average number of experiences on entrance with the average number of experiences on exit.

Style & Status stands out as the exhibition in which all of the six experiences increased between entrance and exit. The exhibition did a particularly good job at communicating information and increasing understanding. The tracking study for that exhibition demonstrated that visitors spent more time reading label and panel texts than looking at objects. The panels, in particular, were notable for their combination of colorful graphics and engaging text. Visitors interviewed in that exhibition spoke highly of the information that was provided.

Table 1: Differences Between Percent of Visitors who Looked Forward to Experiences Very Much on Entrance and Those who Marked Those Experiences Very Satisfying on Exit

Experience	Difference from Entrance to Exit		
	Style & Status	Hokusai	Facing East
<i>Information</i>	Increase	No change	No change
<i>Understanding</i>	Increase	No change	Decrease
<i>Beauty</i>	Increase	Increase	No change
<i>Rare things</i>	Increase	Increase	No change
<i>Imagine</i>	Increase	Increase	No change
<i>Reflect</i>	Increase	Increase	Increase
Overall	Increase	Increase	No change

Information was less available in *Hokusai*. Visitors complained that labels were hard to read (due to small print) and a significant percentage felt that there was not enough information in the exhibition about Hokusai’s life, his times, or the art-making process.

In *Facing East*, even though there was no increase in information experiences between entrance and exit, those who marked the *information* experience as very satisfying were more likely than visitors as a whole to rate the exhibition as Superior. The only other experience that had that effect was *reflecting*.

The *reflecting* experience was the focus of the theme in *Facing East*, which prompted visitors to ask what portraiture is and why it is done. The most remarkable finding in this exhibition, however, was the significant decrease

⁹ Statistical significance in this paper is set at .05. This means that when a difference is statistically significant there is only a one in twenty chance that that difference is an accident of the sample that was chosen for the study.

between entrance and exit for the *understanding* experience. The *Facing East* study report proposed some possible explanations for this, including the disparate nature of the materials and a design that downplayed the conceptual organization and themes.

Suggestions

Expectations

It could be very useful to know the expectations of visitors who are not coming to the Freer and Sackler Galleries to see specific exhibitions. Such a study should include both interviews and surveys and focus on entering, as well as exiting visitors. What experiences are they seeking? What is the motivation behind that search? What are they expecting to encounter in the galleries? To what degree were those specific expectations met on exit? Which exhibitions exceeded their expectations?

Marketing

It is important to attract a strong local audience to the Sackler Gallery exhibitions, because they are more likely than non-locals to come especially for the exhibition and because the museum serves these visitors most effectively. In order to increase the draw of its exhibitions the museum should consider testing titles and images for new exhibitions with current and prospective visitors. The point of such testing is not to “vote” on titles or graphics, but to help curators and designers understand what ideas and expectations are evoked by particular combinations of words and pictures, and which of those combinations is most likely to attract an audience in tune with what the exhibition is planning to provide.

Experimentation

It is easy enough to say that an exhibition should lead visitors to new experiences beyond what they expected. In practice, however, this is quite difficult to do. Little is known about how to improve the likelihood of a visitor having particular experiences. This situation calls for an active program of experimentation. It would be relatively simple to set aside a small exhibition in the Freer or Sackler and use it as a setting for experimentation. For example, by periodically changing the text in different ways and measuring the results, exhibition teams could develop a much clearer understanding of how written materials influence visitor experiences in the Galleries.



Part III: Other Sources of FSG Visitor Information

Part three of the analysis of Freer and Sackler galleries (FSG) visitor information looks at three sources of visitor input found outside of the bounds of formal research: (1) visitor comment books located in the galleries of special exhibitions; (2) visitor comment forms located at the VIARC information desks; and (3) knowledge of docents and desk volunteers gained from talking to and observing visitors.

Study materials

FSG provided the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) with the following data to conduct the analysis:

- Visitor Comment Books from six special exhibitions on display in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery between April 2004 and September 2007.
- Visitor Comment Forms collected at the VIARC information desks located at the entrances to the Freer and Sackler galleries, 2003 to 2007.

In addition, OP&A looked at two transcripts of discussions that it conducted with FSG docents – a directed discussion with approximately 25 docents on October 17, 2007 and a discussion in January 2006 around the design of a visitor survey for the exhibition *Style and Status*.

Review of the literature

A review of the literature on analysis and use of visitor comment systems must begin with a discussion of their inherent statistical limitations and the inadvisability of drawing conclusions about the general visiting population

from the information contained therein. Pekarik explains that, because those who choose to write in comment books are not representative of the population of visitors in an exhibition, one cannot assume that because a large (or small) proportion of comments expresses a particular viewpoint, that a similar proportion of the overall audience also holds the same viewpoint. And because visitors write about what is important to them at the time and don't express an opinion about other subjects, it is impossible to use the frequency of particular comments as a measure of audience attitudes. He notes that "the fundamental unreliability of these data contradicts our instincts" and cautions against the misinterpretation or misunderstanding that can result from an isolated eloquent positive or negative comment – "the number or proportion of a particular remark or type of remark is not only irrelevant, but potentially misleading." (Pekarik, 1997).

Another criticism holds that visitors view comment books in much the same way as guest books, that the model of "a polite guest paying a visit" shapes the entries, and that therefore their utility as sources of insight is questionable. In a study of Israeli settlement museums in the 1980s, Tamar Katriel described the thousands of comment book entries she recorded as "highly appreciative notes by both adults and children, who express their gratitude to the museum... for a moving and edifying experience in semi-ritualized terms." She saw the visitors as inscribing themselves into the museum text in a gesture of closure, and not necessarily providing any thoughtful feedback on their museum experience. (Macdonald, 2005).

A further limitation is the fact that there is usually little to no demographic information included with comment book inscriptions, making any socio-demographic correlations unfeasible. (Macdonald, 2005). However, some visitor comment systems such as individual comment cards may include a section for visitors to fill in such information. One example is a study at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) conducted by the Smithsonian Office of Institutional Studies in 1996. In that case, the museum wished to study a small two-case exhibition – *Flight Time Barbie: Dolls from the Popular Culture Collection* – that consisted of 32 Barbie and Ken dolls of African American and Hispanic as well as Caucasian race. The museum did not have the budget for a full scale survey but wanted to better understand if the exhibit was reaching the target young female women in the predominantly male audience and imparting a message about women in science careers. Comment forms on tear-off pads and a box to deposit the comments were placed on a counter at the exhibit. The forms asked visitors to PLEASE share their thoughts – were they surprised? What did they think of the exhibition? At the bottom of the form visitors were to indicate their gender, age, residence, number of visits to NASM, and how many Barbie dolls they owned. Out of 1,766 comment sheets returned, only 40 did not complete the background questions. (Pekarik, 1997).

All of the above caveats notwithstanding, the literature contains multiple examples of visitor comment systems yielding rich and insightful visitor information and being put to a variety of uses. Pekarik notes that comments tend to be written by people who have a strong emotional or ideological response to the exhibition and thus can reveal issues that visitors care deeply about—bearing in mind that the researcher cannot extrapolate those ideas to the overall audience. He suggests that coding schemes can extract “structures of meaning,” for example, the range, types, and patterns of ideas evoked by the exhibition and themes around which they coalesce. (Pekarik, 1997). Likewise, Macdonald says comment book entries are “inscriptions of visitor interpretations and thus provide access to aspects of visitor meaning-construction.” (Macdonald, 2005). And Worts similarly explains, “This idiosyncratic material provides a glimpse into a powerful area of creative meaning-making that is part of the potential of every visitor.” (Worts, 1995).

Macdonald advocates for plural approaches – combining different research methods and sources (such as comment books) to potentially get a fuller and more nuanced picture of visitor understandings and experiences. For example, she has used visitor comment books for insights in structuring interview and survey questions; to test seemingly “one off” single comments from interview studies against the thousands in visitor books; and to illuminate commonalities and differences in research results and consider possible reasons for any disjunctions. (Macdonald, 2005).

Macdonald and others suggest that the format and context of visitor comment systems greatly affect the nature of the comments. As comment systems become more of an integral part of an exhibition, the museum moves from the “transmission model” where visitors are seen as receivers of messages, the visit as an opportunity to learn, and the effectiveness of the museum judged accordingly, toward an “active audience model” where there is an emphasis on participation and a genuine interest in accessing and addressing visitors’ active meaning-making – their assumptions, motives, emotions, and experiences. (Macdonald, 2005).

In the National Museum of American History’s (NMAH) 1999 exhibition, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present*, a section near the end titled “Dialogue” had six large scale photographs of people in or associated with the garment industry along with their points of view on the question: “What should Americans know about sweatshop production in the United States?” Two large tables in the middle of this space had red comment books that asked visitors to share their own viewpoints and to respond to the six spokespersons’ views. As one curator described, “Here the museum admitted that it did not know the answer, perhaps that there was no single answer... These discussions—visitors responded to the material in the exhibit, and to each other—were remarkably interesting. Visitors were

participating in teaching and learning.” (Lubar, 2004). Alexander describes how, upon reviewing 1,600 visitor comments captured in spiral notebooks in the Dialogue section, she was startled to find the quality of the visitor comments “intelligent, articulate, sophisticated, and sometimes vehement.” She concludes that these types of comment books elicit more than the prosaic “thank you for this exhibit” – they constitute visitor “commentaries” that, similar to focus groups, can prove invaluable to planning. (Alexander, 2000).

Worts writes about a comment system approach used in the early 1990s by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) to increase its understanding of how visitors’ personal meanings relate to viewing an art work. In its newly designed Canadian Historical Collection galleries, AGO placed binders that contained questions about, for example, the importance of a particular artist’s work, along with responses from different and often conflicting perspectives, with the aim of making visitors feel there was no one right or wrong answer. It then asked visitors to reflect on what the art work(s) meant to them and to write or draw responses on “Share Your Reaction” cards that were located in two dozen locations throughout the new museum wing. Over a period of nine months, 5,000 of the cards were left in drop-off bins. The returned cards were “quite remarkable for their diversity of form and content ... not superficial judgments such as ‘loved it’ or ‘hated it’ which often characterize comment cards ... Many provide insight into how visitors are interacting with particular objects or groups of art works. Often there is great sensitivity and intensity in the responses. A large number of visitors who use the card choose to draw imagery of one kind or another.” (Worts, 1995).

Methods of analysis of visitor comments in the literature ranged from intelligent critical reading and generation of categories and sub-categories (Macdonald, 2005) to Pekarik’s method in analyzing the *Flight Time Barbie* comment cards of creating a database with statements and demographic and background data, and then coding according to content using qualitative research software that allows text segments to be assigned freely to codes, with extensive searching and indexing functions. Pekarik notes that such analysis – over 1,700 forms in this case – is labor intensive and beyond the technical sophistication of many museums’ staff. He recommends using a sample of around 200 forms, which testing showed would capture all major code categories and not seriously affect overall results. To preserve more of the minority, negative comments – as visitor comments tend to favor approval – he devised a sampling procedure whereby an entire set of comments is first divided into Positive, Negative, and Neutral; at least 50 forms are then randomly selected from each. These are then coded for meaning to reveal a structure of visitor attitudes. (Pekarik, 1997).

What about eliciting feedback from the youth audience that FSG is interested in? The younger generations – twenty-something Generation Ys and today’s teens (often referred to as Generation M or Millennials) have a special relationship

to technology that sets them apart from older generations and represents a fundamental paradigm shift in how one gathers, works with, translates, and shares information. These generations live in a world of media and gadgets and mobile technology. They stay in constant contact with friends using text messaging, instant messaging, and email. They read blogs, download music and video, and communicate on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and My Yearbook. As Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet & American Life Project describes, “the way they approach learning and research tasks will be shaped by their new techno-world – more self directed and less dependent on top-down instruction, better arrayed to capture new information inputs, more reliant on feedback and response, more tied to group knowledge, and more open to cross-discipline insights, creating its own ‘tagged’ taxonomies.” (Rainie, 2006). Museums have taken steps to appeal to the younger generations by utilizing more of their media of preference – cell phones, iPods and other MP3 players – and relying more on participatory media, such as blogs, wikis, and personal “tagging” of text.

Nina Simon’s blog *Museum 2* (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>) recently reviewed a new book of essays edited by Kathleen McLean and Wendy Pollock, *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions*, that surveys ways museums are incorporating user-contributed content in exhibitions and other media. Different platforms for visitor contribution – comment books, comment cards, video kiosks, and other discussion forums such as comment boards and “talk-back walls” are discussed in the book, though, as Simon comments, the verdict is still out on their relative merits: “the unique properties of different implementations have yet to be defined.” In her review, Simon says the best examples in the book are where visitor comments were not only displayed but integrated back into the exhibitions themselves to make the “museum voice” more inclusive. An example is the New York Historical Society’s exhibition *Slavery in New York*, where 3% (6,000 of 175,000 visitors) offered their own video commentary about the exhibition and the museum itself. The videos made staff aware of the Society’s perceived image, particularly in the eyes of (non-traditional) African-American visitors, and proved to be an instructive resource about current and potential visitors. Simon concludes that, “the key to any respectful solicitation for visitor input is to think of them as part of us, rather than a class or group to be pandered to and dealt with.” (Simon, 2007).

FSG Visitor Comment Books

FSG provided OP&A with visitor comment books from six special exhibitions on display in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery between April 2004 and September

2007. Four of the six sets of visitor comment books had been previously data-entered and reviewed by an FSG intern, Sarah Oakman, in summer 2006:10

- *Perspectives: Mei-ling Hom* (9/27/05 to 3/5/06) [N = 295]
- *Dream Worlds: Modern Japanese Prints and Paintings from the Robert O. Muller Collection* (11/6/04 to 1/2/05) [N = 56]
- *Cai Guo-Qiang: "Traveller: Reflection"* (10/30/04 to 4/24/05) [N = 499]
- *Iraq and China: Ceramics, Trade and Innovation* (4/4/04 to 7/17/05) [N = 209]

OP&A data entered and analyzed two additional sets of comment books:

- *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (6/24/07 to 9/16/07) [N = 1,469]
- *Perspectives: Simryn Gill* (9/2/06 to 4/29/07) [N = 61]

Oakman, looking across gallery comment books for eight Sackler exhibitions, notes an abundance of short complimentary remarks such as “stunning,” “gorgeous,” and “amazing.” She offers examples of longer, more reflective positive and negative comments, and specific examples regarding certain aspects of exhibitions: objects; information (labels, maps, and translations); presentation; and noise. One common theme that Oakman sees recurring throughout the surveys and gallery comment books is the desire for more information, including more contextual information, and she recommends several ways that the museums might address this need. (Oakman, 2006).

OP&A’s analysis of the six sets of Sackler exhibition comment books builds on Oakman’s work. Comments from visitor comment books were coded by themes and sub-themes according to their chief focus – what was at the forefront of visitors’ minds when they wrote in the comment books? The overarching thematic categories and sub-categories indicate ways in which visitors derive meaning from the exhibition or “make meaning,” as well as areas of common dissatisfaction or suggestions for improvement. A cautionary note is reiterated throughout this paper against drawing any conclusions about the population visiting an exhibition based on frequencies observed in visitor comments.

Comprehensive breakdowns of all substantive visitor book comments by themes and sub-themes for the six FSG exhibitions listed above are contained in the companion report *Coding of Themes and Sub-themes in Visitor Comment Books from Six Exhibitions at the Sackler Gallery*. An abbreviated list and

10 Sarah Oakman paper provided by FSG – “An Analysis of Professional Surveys and Visitor Comment Books” – reviews four other exhibition comment book sets as well as FSG survey data.

discussion of the thematic analysis of one exhibition – *Encompassing the Globe (ETG)* is discussed below.

Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries (ETG)

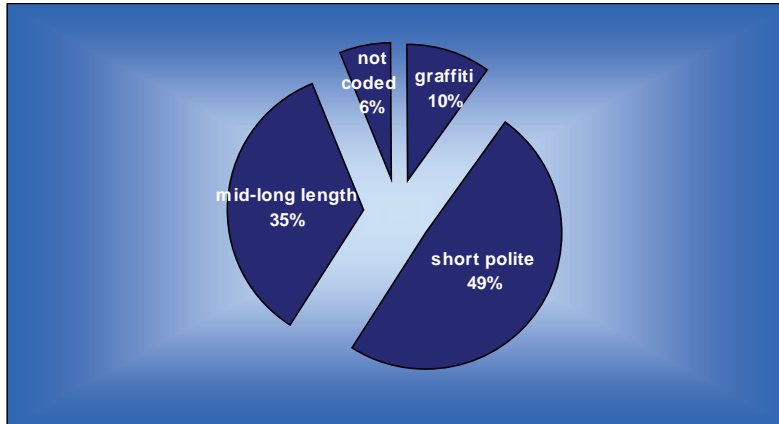
As discussed in the conclusions section below, unless the purpose of analysis is to determine what context, i.e., format and placement, of visitor comment system will elicit the most useful visitor input, it may not be a cost effective exercise to data enter and code every comment book entry, as many are short “polite guest” comments or what can be characterized as student graffiti, neither of which is particularly useful to improve exhibitions or better understand visitors. However, to see what proportion of styles might be expected in visitors books placed in the exit area of a large special exhibition, OP&A data entered and coded every entry from the three *ETG* visitor comment books – a total of 1,469 entries. Nearly half of all comments fell into the category of short, often one-word, usually complimentary, comments:

- *Amazing exhibit! Thanks!*
- *Awesome*
- *Beautiful show!*
- *Breathtaking! Wonderful!*
- *Excellent – especially the maps and globes*
- *Fabulous exhibit – beautiful and informative*
- *Maravelhosa exibicua*

Another approximate tenth of the comments were coded as graffiti. These included short phrases that had no bearing on the exhibition at hand, “strings” of short comments appearing to be by youths or school groups, visitors merely signing their name, and longer comments with some personal agenda and also having no bearing on the exhibition:

- *Bethany Lutheran Church, Palmyra, NJ, I need a hug*
- *Boss!!*
- *Obama '08!*
- *Portugal rules*
- *Rock on Dudes!!*

Figure 8: ETG: Styles of Comment Book Entries



A small percentage of the comments were not coded due to illegibility or a foreign language not translated.

The remaining comments were longer in length and were, for the most part, serious, thoughtful entries. So, for this exhibition's comment books, slightly over one-third – more than 500 comments – go beyond the polite “guest book” style of comment

or graffiti and prove most fruitful for purposes of getting useful feedback on any problems visitors are encountering in the exhibition and gaining deeper insight into how visitors are interpreting the exhibition for themselves. Museum resources are best spent in further coding and analyzing these more reflective visitor comments.

OP&A coded the visitor comments according to the three overarching experience categories (see Table 2). Fully one-half of the comments indicated that visitors who wrote in the books were having cognitive experiences in the exhibition – they were learning something new, having prior knowledge reinforced, and enriching their understanding. About one-quarter of the comments indicated that visitors who wrote were having aesthetic experiences, i.e., being moved by the beauty of the objects and more often by their rarity or uniqueness, especially the maps and “naturalia.” The remaining one quarter of the comments were introspective in nature, such as memories evoked by the exhibition or reflections on how what they were seeing related to something in the present.

The experience breakdowns are borne out in the coding for major themes and sub-themes in the comments. Many, many comments fall in a major theme of *education* about that period in history and Portugal's role and impact. Common phrases found in these comments include “I didn't know...,” “I hadn't realized...,” “I learned that...,” “the exhibit taught me...,” and “greatly contributed to my knowledge of...”

- *I am learning SO much. Portugal has never been a country that I would associate with ALL of these explorations. Fascinating.*
- *I hadn't realized that Portugal was competing with Venice over the spice trade. And that they contributed with visual knowledge of the world rather than just considering how they upped their own riches.*

- *I did not realize the extent of Portugal's global reach and their influence on so many cultures. I never knew they were in Sierra Leone and Japan.*
- *It refreshed my memory of the prominence of Portugal in navigation and exploration, especially their function as the "trail blazer" of ocean exploration.*

Table 2: Six Core Museum Experiences

cognitive	Gaining information/knowledge (Information)
	Enriching my understanding (Understanding)
aesthetic	Being moved by beauty (Beauty)
	Seeing rare/valuable/uncommon things (See rare things)
reflective	Imagining other times/places (Imagine)
	Reflecting on the meaning of what I'm looking at (Reflect)

- *It is easier to see that Portugal was just as important as Spain in re-directing the European view towards accepting new ideas.*

As a subset of these comments, many visitors wrote that the exhibition made **history come alive** for them. Some teachers saw the exhibition as a history lesson and wished that it could be available during the school year.

- *An amazingly exotic exhibit. It really awakens one's imagination regarding 15th and 16th maritime history, shipbuilders, adventurers, ideas...*
- *It was an enjoyable experience! I have studied the history of Portugal before with consideration and so, to come to this exhibit was like seeing part of history come alive again. A great pleasure.*
- *Why on earth is this amazing "teaching opportunity" only available during the summer months when students will never see it along with instruction? Too bad because it is perfect for everyone who must teach world history. Couldn't this be extended into the school year?*

A major theme related to education about Portugal's role in that chapter of history was a **tribute to Portugal** – the feeling on the part of many who wrote in the books that it was about time Portugal got the attention it deserves.

- *Fantastic exhibit. I'm very happy to see Portugal contribution to world history and civilization finally put on display in the U.S. In such a well depicted manner.*
- *Good job - I think that Portugal is often left out of our knowledge of the exploration of the New World chapter.*

- *One of the finest exhibitions in many years! A well merited tribute to Portugal in the age of Discovery. A sheer delight.*
- *Portugal and its contributions are often left out of our history classes, it was nice to learn more about that fascinating country and its impact.*
- *Wonderful! The exhibit offered a fresh- and too often overlooked- image of the scope of Portuguese exploration and its cultural impact. Thank you!*
- *About time someone showed that the Portuguese really did “Rule the Waves!” For a period of time!!! Very good.*

Another major theme that surfaced in many of the comments was the ***cultural exchange*** and cross-fertilization that was depicted in the exhibition. Many commenters related what they saw to globalization today.

- *The intermingling of the various cultures and interpretation of religious, indigenous, simple, and ornate is so impressive.*
- *This exhibit truly shows the connections between different parts of the world in this period, and shows us that learning and cultural exchanges, very positive things, came along with the colonialism and mercantilism which are so stigmatized today. Thank you.*
- *A spectacular exhibition. I learned that globalization started way back in the 16th century, not by the Internet and the U.S. economy in the 20th century.*
- *I was fascinated by the Chinese style Madonna. It’s interesting how similar Catholic and Oriental styles are.*
- *It is nice to see the cross pollination of culture between India and Portugal. Enjoyed very much. Good Show.*
- *Excellent exhibit. Especially enlightening in the era of global connectedness we currently experience – Portugal, so tiny a nation, had such a vast impact.*

As a subset of this theme, a number of commenters discussed the ***linkage of trade and art***.

- *Trade can easily promote foreign cultures and understanding of different ways of life on earth. Pace e bene.*

- *The exhibition beautifully illustrates the links between the practical nature of trade and the objects of art which it produces. I am continually being astounded by the craftsmanship as I walk through!*
- *How interesting to note the economic/trade influence as a driving force of cultural exchange. A lesson for us?*
- *Wow – this exhibit reminds me that travel and knowledge always have been part of the human quest. I loved the painting of the marketplace in Lisbon with people of different races and social standing depicted.*

On the flip side of cultural exchange, many who wrote in the books discussed another major theme – the treatment in the exhibition of **colonialism and the slave trade**. Quite a few felt that the exhibition failed to address this subject at all or at least did not face it squarely.

- *Beautifully planned, researched and executed. Unlike many exhibits that only display beautiful objects, this one made clear the cultural context. The exhibit did, however, slight the very dark side of Portugal's legacy, especially in Africa.*
- *Beautiful artifacts, very rich and informative. But, no references to the ugly side of European expansion -- slavery, disease, death, colonization. The history's whitewashed.*
- *The exhibition highlighted the trade of goods and missionary work accomplished during this period, but negative impact of Portuguese colonization continues today, in particular in Africa – Mozambique, Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea Bissan, and Sao Tome. Let's not forget.*
- *One sided and distorted, does not touch on the brutality, exploitation, forcible conversions, colonialism, destruction of Hindu temples and Jesuit collaboration with the colonialists.*
- *Exhibition soft pedaled the vicious nature of the Vasco de Gama contact with India and Ceylon. The Europeans were brutal. The motivation was wealth. These voyages were not peace missions.*

A small subset of these comments viewed **Portuguese conquest in a favorable light**.

- *It was nice to see the positive influence of Christianity. Usually all you get is a simplistic negative view. Overall the Catholic faith enhanced other cultures. That isn't a pc view, but it is true.*
- *Long and rich history. Thank you Portugal for showing humanity how to conquer the world in a 'peaceful' way.*

- *The Portuguese did not place religion over science - that was their wisdom.*

A prominent theme in the comments was **information** – requests for more information in the way of explanation and context, and inclusion of different kinds of information. Many of the writers referenced different **countries or peoples** that they felt were excluded or that should have figured more prominently in the exhibition.

- *Not enough on the Azores Islands or Madeira Archipelago, none on South Africa, such as Mozambique, Angola, or Western African nations of Sao Tome or Principe, Cape Verde, Guinea, etc. Otherwise an excellent collaboration and display of the first European country to navigate the globe of the Portuguese diaspora.*
- *Excellent exhibit... would have liked to read more about the contributions of Jews, and the 1497 expulsion or forced conversion. Very tragic event which should not be overshadowed by beautiful objects!*
- *I am astonished at the low visibility and profile given to Portuguese India. This is a topsided view of Portuguese colonies. Disappointing. That's what I as Bengali came to learn more about.*
- *Nice exhibition but wish to see more of their trail/artifacts from being in Indonesia and Malaysia (Malacca). The Krts on display is not even from the right timeframe.*

A very common comment was on the need for greater explanation and more **contextual information**. In addition, there were many expressions of interest in learning more about certain areas and for answers to detailed questions.

- *Am I missing something? Where is the history of the objects related to Portugal? The objects are stunning BUT you get very little sense of how these tie to Portugal!*
- *Oui I think the above is quite correct- there is something missing in how the history behind the artifacts is explained and then developed throughout the exhibit. In many ways, the artifacts feel divorced from history, even though, ostensibly the entire exhibit is designed to illuminate said history.*
- *An exceptional and exquisite exhibit. It is a legacy of geographical developments and cultural objects and the spread of religion. I would have enjoyed more information on almost everything! The Grecian kingdoms, the black ship, and especially the demise of Portuguese influence.*

- *Would like more context for the objects. For example, the gilt silver castle - what is it made for, a wedding? Is the inscription in Greek letters?*
- *Great pieces, great exhibition - ridiculously insufficient signs - most individual signs did not explain anything, to the point that one had no idea why some pieces were included at all - because of their decoration? What they were? Where were they made? Where were they collected? As examples for other items? etc. etc. etc.*
- *I agree. I wish there were more explanations connected with the large, detailed paintings such as the one of Lisbon and the harbor.*

Notably, the comments asking for more contextual information specifically requested more *maps*.

- *Very nice objects but no sense of historical context. A. Not even an introductory map of the world showing where the places mentioned in the exhibit are. No maps of de Gama' route etc. B. No mention of how the era of discovery started or ended. C. No mention of what impact the new wealth of Portugal had on the country or Europe.*
- *Wonderful exhibit but maps would have been helpful in providing orientation to places that some of us are not so familiar with.*
- *Great exhibit but MAP would have enhanced it greatly! I had no clue where Goa, Muscat or a lot of the other Portuguese ports in the Indian Ocean were. I finally stumbled over the fold out map in the catalog which was VERY HELPFUL. When this show goes to Europe put that map at the entrance to each gallery!*

Another type of comment questioned the *accuracy of factual information* presented in the exhibition or the interpretation of historical events.

- *Reference to astrolabe and azimuth omits saying that the Islamic scientists developed them before the Portuguese used them.*
- *Very Eurocentric, what does it mean 'discovery' of India? Chinese/ Indian explorers crossed the oceans throughout SE Asia long before the Portuguese who after used Chinese maps. World trade older than the entry of Portuguese travelers.*
- *Are the curators aware that Gavin Menzies' book 1421: The Year the Chinese Discovered America? contends that the Chinese circumnavigated the globe between 1421-1423, and that the Portuguese and Spanish used Chinese maps. He contends that Portuguese settled Puerto Rico before Columbus 'discovered' America...*

- *Don't forget why the Portuguese made a treaty with Colchin - to demand all Muslims leave Calicut - please no history by elimination of some unpleasant facts.*
- *Great display! The Chinese may challenge some of the map making claims!*

Another theme running throughout the comment books was assessment of the **exhibition presentation**, with sub-themes including the scope of the exhibition, the variety of the objects, and the exhibition's design and layout. One area of comment was the **size and breadth** of the exhibition:

- *Absolutely amazing display of objects, cultural history, and breadth of technical and artistic skill. I came especially from Chicago for this exhibit and was not disappointed!*
- *This exhibition is so vast and encompassing – one visit is not enough. We wish the length of it could be extended significantly!*
- *Very broad in scope so it requires several visits to appreciate it. Broad appeal to many groups as well.*

Another sub-set of comments addressed the **variety of objects** in the exhibition:

- *I like the variety of items in the exhibit, particularly the Durer prints that showed how the Europeans viewed the “exotic” animals of the Far East. Very interesting perceptions of them.*
- *The original knick-knack collections! Thanks so much for inclusion of the website—very helpful.*
- *I liked the blend of globes, cups, paintings, maps, books, and other interesting things. I never knew how cool a country could be! Thanks.*
- *Quite an astonishing collection of such a variety of art forms from so long ago. Amazing that one little nation went to such distant corners of the globe.*

Comment book writers were particularly taken with two types of objects: the **“naturalia”** and the **maps and globes**:

- *Yes, most interesting so far are the examples from the Chamber of Wonders – especially the “naturalia” turned “artificialia,” a genre created by the collectors’ demand? Would love more detail on how these colonial art markets were related to the Portuguese.*

- *I thought it was beautiful. I adore the mother of pearl casket, so shiny.*
- *Relics of animal pieces (rhinoceros horn, mother of pearl, ivory, nautilus) were particularly impressive*

- *The maps and navigational instruments were most informative about the courage, greed? Intrepidness of these early explorers.*
- *I so loved the maps, and the depictions of peoples encountered in the many travels of the Portuguese explorers. Also given the state of navigation at the time, and the huge dangers and risks they encountered, how brave and adventurous they were! And of course greedy, and sure they were spreading superior knowledge and religion and culture. Yet what riches they brought back and what a wealth of art and artifacts resulted from their encounters with the wider world. There's so much here – it merits another visit.*
- *I really liked the maps shown of the world. It's interesting to notice the accuracy of their maps almost 400 years ago. Also to see the influence the Portuguese had on many of the world cultures.*

In writing about the scope of ETG, some comment book writers drew comparisons with ***other museums and exhibitions***.

- *This is certainly the most wide ranging exhibition I've seen since the Circa 1492 exhibition at the National Gallery of Art back in '92.*
- *Great exhibition! Came here especially from the Netherlands to see it! Looks like TEFAF MAASTRICHT, Terrific display—top!*
- *Outstanding exhibit—enjoyed objects from Museo de Arte Antique and Tura where I had been on recent trip to Portugal. But so much more than can be seen there is displayed in this exhibit. Bravo!*

A significant sub-theme of exhibition presentation had to do with the exhibition's ***design and layout***. A number of comments were very positive and complimentary:

- *A wonderful exhibition – everything was well displayed, lit and labeled. A thoughtful and thoughtfully displayed exhibition.*
- *Fascinating! Beautifully mounted, researched and described, and very educational.*

- *This is a wonderful collection of maps and artifacts. The division of the exhibit gave a brief yet comprehensive picture of the world “discovered” in the 14th and 15th centuries by the Portuguese explorers.*
- *Magnificent collection and exhibit. Nicely ties the many Portuguese expeditions and discoveries into an understanding whole. Makes one want to take the next flight to Lisbon!*

However, many comments criticized the layout of the exhibition and said it ***lacked coherence***.

- *Great concept and beautiful objects but confusing layout. Would have been nice to have a bit more introduction at the beginning. It was also hard to find this exhibition since we came in the Freer gallery entrance. Need more signage at that end. Overall though, interesting show that was very beautiful.*
- *Exhibit is very interesting – objects are fascinating. However, the organization is confusing, and the signage is lacking and poor.*
- *The set up of the exhibits was confusing. I couldn't tell where one country's art started and where it finished. It seemed like it was all meshed in together. I suggest more informative signs, and exhibits organized by time periods.*
- *We enjoyed the exhibit. However the sequencing (or lack thereof) was confusing. While there is certainly overlapping chronology, it would have been helpful to have a suggested start and flow at each of the possible entry points. We came in from the Sackler side and ended up beginning the exhibit with China. If we had known the start was in African art we would have headed there.*

Other comments concerned other logistical areas of the exhibition and made suggestions for ***improvements***.

- *I am American, but I believe you should have included plates in another language – Portuguese, perhaps? I was here for a class at Georgetown and I find it very useful.*
- *Great exhibit - needs audiotape. It's a shame to collect all this and provide so little commentary on the objects and paintings – who bought/ owned them, what they show (painting of central Lisbon, for example) how they got to the museums. Labels inadequate to put it nicely. Where is the perspective of the Brazilians, Africans, Asian countries?*

- *The exhibit was great! As a teacher, I'd have to agree with several comments regarding availability at summer only. I'd love to see a video or teach a lesson with transparencies available.*

A distinct set of comments were written by people who were Portuguese or of Portuguese descent, expressing thanks for the exhibition and ***national pride***.¹¹

- *Born in Columbia, Portugal. This exhibit made me appreciate my own legacy. My mother forced me and my sister to come, but am grateful we did!*
- *Thank you. Helped show my family their Portuguese heritage and to be proud of it.*
- *All four of my grandparents came from the Azores islands of Santa Maria in the early 1900's. Both my mother and I were crowned as queens of the Feast of the Holy Spirit (Spirito Sanco) in the Portuguese Americans Heritage procession held annually in the Catholic Church in Redlands, California sponsored by the Portuguese American Club. It was gratifying to observe these exquisite artifacts which you have displayed to learn a little of my heritage. Thank you so much!*
- *Thank you so much for brining my family history to life. My great grandfather was in the import export grade from Portugal and Brazil and my great grandmother was the dressmaker for the last Empress of Brazil. I am in your debt.*

A subset of these introspective comments were memories and ***personal reflections*** of others.

- *I find it very exciting. Being Jewish, the idea that Manuel I couldn't marry the Spanish princess unless he threw the Jews out or made them Christians is appalling as making blacks slaves.*
- *I am from South Africa - Portuguese colonization is a large part of our history - fascinating exhibit! Thank you*
- *This brought pleasant memories of my life in Lisbon and Terceirs, Cizo So, in the 1950s.*
- *Wonderful exhibit. A delight to see. Grew up knowing a Portuguese family, they were very proud of their heritage.*

¹¹ Approximately ten percent of the entries were written in Portuguese, with many other comments written in English but alluding to Portuguese citizenship. In fact, per ETG survey results, 3% of visitors had lived in Portugal or Brazil and 8% were of Portuguese or Brazilian descent.

Finally, a less frequent but interesting theme found in the comments was visitors taking what they saw in the exhibition and *relating it to contemporary life*. Some younger comment writers made the connection between bezoars in the exhibition and the *Harry Potter* books.

- *I did not know how wide-ranging was the scope of Portuguese trade and settlement. The connection of precious materials with exotic objects sometimes shows that tasteless extravagance is not wholly a modern accomplishment.*
- *The docent was great! I learned much from her about how the Europeans of the time, at least the wealthy, embellished the natural items brought back with gold and silver to impress their neighbors. Kind of like how we buy cars! Thx.*
- *The exhibition pays appropriate tribute to the pioneering spirit of the Portuguese explorers and leaders who broadened the western world's vision of the rest of the world; this version could justly be compared with space exploration today.*

- *This exhibition made me find out that “bezoar” isn’t a stone invented by J.K. Rowling in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s stone! Thank you!*
- *I never knew so much about Portugal! My friend Joanna has told me a lot about it, but it was fascinating to see it up close. I know that J.K. Rowling married a Portuguese man and lived in Portugal, so now I understand all the connections. Thanks!*

Table 3: Guestimate of Proportion of Youth and Adult Comment Book Writers

Exhibition	N	Adult (%)	Youth (%)
<i>ETG: Portugal</i>	1,395*	70	30
<i>Perspectives: Mei-ling Hom</i>	299	70	30
<i>Dream Worlds</i>	56	63	37
<i>Traveller: Reflection</i>	500	54	46
<i>Iraq and China</i>	210	65	35

*Does not include uncoded entries, i.e., illegible or foreign language not translated.

A note on relative numbers of adults and youth entering comments. Sarah Oakman coded the four datasets she constructed for adults and youth (under 18 years); however, it is not known what criteria she used (beyond those that listed their age) to differentiate youth from adults. In coding Portugal, OP&A used a highly subjective method to identify youth based on the size and style of writing and content of the comment.

Bearing in mind that the data is clearly unreliable, given FSG's interest in the youth audience, such coding can be used to separate out comments that appear to be made by young visitors for further examination for issues or insights of interest to the museum.

Visitor Comment Forms (VIARC)

Visitor Comment Forms¹² are available at the VIARC visitor information desks located in the entrance lobbies of the Freer and Sackler galleries. VIARC volunteer information specialists are trained to suggest that visitors fill out a form if they have a complaint, with the representation that it will go to the appropriate person in the museum. They also encourage visitors to fill out a form if they have a laudatory comment; for example, if someone wants to compliment a docent tour they can fill out a form and it will be sent to the docent supervisor. A third use, established when the Freer reopened after renovation in 1993, is as an educational tool. Visitors can use the forms to ask esoteric or specialized questions and an FSG staff person will respond to them. The VIARC building coordinator forwards the forms to the appropriate person(s) inside and outside of the museum.

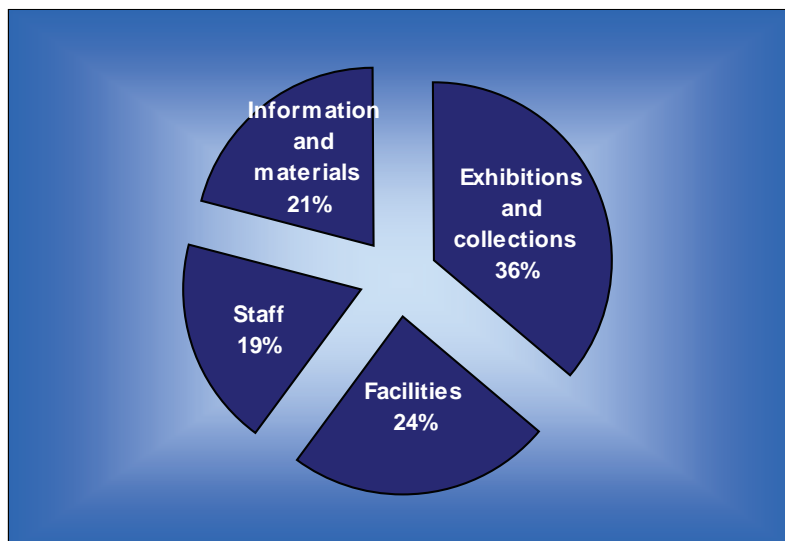
Comment Forms include the following:

- Check-off boxes for the museum to which the comment refers
- Check-off boxes for six comment categories: Facility (e.g., cafeteria, Museum Shop, theater, rest room); Exhibition/Hall (e.g., lighting, signage); Staff/Volunteer; Information Services; Printed Materials; Other
- Space for comments
- Demographic/background information (e.g., name, address; telephone, email, membership category)

FSG provided OP&A with a total of 583 Visitor Comment Forms – 265 from the Freer and 318 from the Sackler. Dates of completion ranged from January 15, 2002 to August 11, 2007. Even though the comment forms contain more demographic and background information than comment books, OP&A did not “quantify” these items – as discussed above, they are not representative of the visiting population and can be misconstrued. For example, the proportion of men and women filling out comment forms was 36% and 64%, respectively – far different than the actual gender breakdown of 45% male and 55% female visitors (as averaged over 14 survey studies.)

¹² The Visitors Information and Associates' Reception Center (VIARC) is a central Smithsonian office that staffs visitor information desks in 11 Smithsonian museums.

Figure 9: Visitor Comment Form Categories



The context in which these forms are completed must be the starting point of analysis. By their location and purpose they naturally draw more negative comments than the gallery books. The building coordinator, when asked, said his sense of the breakdown is that “hands down” the forms are used mostly for negative comments and “utopian suggestions.” After that they are used to send questions to museum staff, with positive comments

coming in third. This is borne out after coding the comments – approximately 50% were either complaints or suggestions for improvement; one-quarter were questions or requests for materials; and one-quarter were praises.

Another stark difference from the gallery books was the relative infrequency of entries about specific exhibitions on the VIARC comment forms. Out of the 583 forms reviewed, only 129 referred to an exhibition by name. Fifty-seven different exhibitions appeared as mostly ones and twos. Just three – *Chola Bronzes*, *Return of the Buddha*, and *Style and Status*, were mentioned ten times or more. And the comments were not always about the exhibition per se, but about a considerate guard or impressive docent tour.

The check-off boxes did not serve well for categorizing comments as 164 out of the total 583 forms (28%) had no boxes checked and about one-fourth of those that did have boxes checked used the “Other” category. According to OP&A’s coding scheme, slightly over one-third of the comments had to do with some aspect of the *exhibitions, programs, or collections*; about one-fourth related to the museums’ *facilities*; close to one-fifth addressed *staff and volunteers*; and the remaining one-fifth had to do with *printed materials or information services* (see Figure 7.) Each category was further coded into sub-categories.

Exhibitions, Programs, and Collections.

- The largest sub-category of this group of comments – close to two-fifths – cited some type of information as incorrect or sought to change something about a display. A few of these comments concerned text or programs deemed culturally inappropriate.

- The next largest sub-category of around one-fifth of the comments was specific inquiries – about objects, label information, how pieces were made, etc.
- Somewhat less than one-fifth of the comments were laudatory in nature.
- Smaller sub-categories comprising ten percent or less of the comments included:
 - Requests for the museum to provide something *more*, e.g., certain objects to be displayed, longer hours, different types of programming, more information in an exhibition, and suggestions for future exhibitions;
 - Negative assessments of a program or exhibition;
 - Personal requests (i.e., regarding appraisals, translation, or donations) or personal stories;
 - Criticism of the legibility, color, or placement of text panels.

Facilities.

- Two-fifths of the facilities-related comments fell into the subcategory of complaints about systems and calls for repairs: poor lighting, too cold, unstable floor, unkempt, messy, or dirty appearance, lax security, etc. Notable areas of this subcategory were:
 - Accessibility, including need for automatic doors, ramps, handicap parking, and more wheelchairs.
 - Better signage, including more directional signs and signs in foreign languages
 - Complaints about disruptive cell phones
- The other three-fifths of facilities-related comments were distributed across four subcategories:
 - Laudatory comments praising the museums in general and all contained therein along with more specific comments about the architecture, cleanliness, and beautiful gardens and grounds.
 - Comments about the gift shop. A few of these were requests for certain items to be sold and a few praised the shop, but the majority was negative, criticizing the selection, quality, and service.

- Requests regarding storage facilities – most of these asked that the lockers be fixed and some wanted a coat room.
- Inquiries directed to the museum about wall paint colors, flower arrangements, names and care of plants, designers of museum furniture and fountain, etc.

Information services and print materials.

- The major sub-category – approximately two-fifths of the comments – comprised requests to be sent materials or to purchase materials. A majority of these requests were for brochures that the museum was out of, teachers’ guides and other educator resources, and press kits. Purchase requests were most often for a catalogue.
- The remaining comments fell into three sub-categories:
 - Visitors who did not expressly ask to be sent or purchase materials, but who expressed disappointed that brochures/publications/catalogues/other materials were not available when they were in the museum or otherwise wanted more print information.
 - Comments criticizing the [new] calendar (e.g., format, design, colors, legibility/typesize)
 - Complaints or suggestions regarding other information services including the ticketing process, phone system, website, and audio guides.

Staff and volunteers.

- Slightly over half of the comments concerned the guided tours. While a couple of comments complained about noise or the failure of a docent to show up, the overwhelming majority was very complimentary, e.g., “great docent and tour” and “marvelous tour and guide.”
- And slightly less than half of the comments concerned the security officers. Here, the negative comments somewhat outweighed the positive ones. While some visitors praised guards as knowledgeable, helpful, and polite, others complained that guards were loud or rude.

Docents and Desk Volunteers

FSG’s corp of 88 docents – over one-third of whom have been leading tours at the galleries for 15 or more years – and the VIARC volunteers who operate the visitor information desks, are a font of knowledge about what visitors are

looking for in an exhibition and what problems they might be experiencing in the museums based on the questions visitors ask them and from observing visitors' behavior. This knowledge has traditionally not been tapped into in any systematic way.

OP&A has held conversations with docents prior to designing survey questionnaires. For example, a discussion with FSG docents before doing a visitor survey of *Style and Status* revealed that:

Visitors were interested not only in the objects but in the background of the exhibition and the Ottoman culture, and they asked a lot of questions about the practical issues around the clothing.

- *This question came up over and over again... to what use were these kaftans put other than regally outfitting somebody sitting in a chair? Were they used in war? ... People had difficulty seeing them astride a horse, for example. I would have like to have seen more done to round out their use and impact.*
- *People kept asking me how tall these people were. Did they drag on the ground, whether they went to the ground... The suggestion of a mannequin is an excellent one.*
- *One thing people on tours generally want to know about is the meaning in designs and motifs. That's not particularly well addressed in this show... Another thing is that these clothes were all for men, and there's really very little that deals with women. And people are curious about what the women wore.*
- *I had a group of fifth graders... They asked what do they wear everyday, when they're hanging around the house... or palace?*
- *It would have been wonderful if we could have had a recreation of a turban. I thought I was being very clear about what that pointy thing was, but then people would say, well, how did they hold [turban] on?*

Visitors wanted better orientation.

- *If you had a video of some kind that would show the context... if you showed the Topkapi Palace where the things came from, sort of scanned it.*
- *It would be nice to have a map to show where Turkey is.*
- *We've said it before and we'll say it again—MAPS. People need to know where they are in terms of time and geography.*

- *And the identification of localities on the map for the exhibitions very often have different names than those today.*

OP&A had a similar conversation with the FSG docent corps prior to this study to talk generally about their impressions about who is coming to the two museums and why, and how visitors relate the two museums to each other. What came out of the discussion was that, in the docents' opinion, it is not important to make a distinction between the two museums. It just does not really matter to visitors. Rather, they see the need to have better linkages between the offerings of the two:

- *The Freer has fantastic bronzes, the Sackler has fantastic bronzes. Once I had a woman who wanted to see the bronzes. So I took her to the Freer and then I took her to the Sackler and that was a really good tour. You could do that with Indian art...*
- *It seems to me that rather than an important difference between the museums, what visitors don't grasp is how the museums are connected and relate. We deal with that physically, when we say 'take this path over there,' but there is really no integrated information that tells the visitor: Japanese art – here's the strength in the Freer, here's what's in the Sackler. Chinese bronzes... If you want the visitor to understand these as the museums of Asian art, there ought to be some way of integrating that experience for visitors, so that then they want to go see the other half.*
- *At any point in time where you can make some sort of synergistic relationship, make it obvious.*
- *I'm wondering if there's some sort of color coded way to link the Chinese bronzes or the South Asian art in both museums...*

The docents see wayfinding as a real stumbling block to better integrating the two museums; as one docent said, "signage, signage, signage." And they emphasized the benefits of human contact in making for a more directed and pleasurable museum experience.

- *The signage is so poor they don't know which way to go to get to the Freer.*
- *A lot of people come from out of town and they have no idea and they get utterly lost ...*
- *I think over the course of time a number of us have noticed the predominance of people going down the steps having no idea why they're going down the steps at the Freer instead of going up the steps*

to the museum... there's nothing that emotionally pulls you up the stairs except these windows that look out onto improbably a garden.

- *The information desk plays a very important role... they are the ones that should actually come out from behind [the desk]...*
- *There was a time when the VIARC desk was in the center of the hallway coming into the Freer. When you have the information desk the first thing that people see, that's where they're going to go.*
- *I've done a few Spotlight [tours] recently – it was fabulous because people want somebody in there. They want to learn a little bit more about the Peacock Room and the Japanese screens...*

In terms of communicating what they know to the museum, one docent suggested an online site where they could enter comments after a tour: “[You] really have things you see and you want to share them. We share this with each other but there is no formal system. When I am at home I would just go to an Internet site and I would put it in.” Another suggested that docents participate beforehand, as part of the exhibition design process: “Little things that docents find that don’t work with the group...Maybe it’s the space, but the design factors... we’re always sort of clustering and pushing. Maybe a little input with design.”

Observations

VIARC Visitor Comment Forms. These seem to work quite well in accomplishing their purpose of (1) a mechanism for visitors to relay complaints or suggestions for improvement to someone in the museum; (2) a conduit for visitors to send commendations about staff (mainly docents and security officers) to their supervisors; and (3) a way for visitors to get answers to esoteric questions. These are not an appropriate tool for eliciting deep visitor meaning-making about their time in the museum or particular exhibitions.

Docents and Volunteers. Based on OP&A’s conversations with docent groups to get insights for visitor surveys at FSG and elsewhere, docents can be depended upon to “nail” what is going on with visitors in an exhibition. The museums could take better advantage of the knowledge of docents and desk volunteers in some more systematic fashion.

Visitor Comment Books. In reading through over one thousand comments written by visitors to the six FSG exhibitions under review, OP&A was struck by the great number of powerful, insightful, knowledgeable, and instructive comments. Visitors took the time to write lengthy reviews; they were inspired to compose or recite poetry; they associated what they saw with personal experiences, historical events, and exhibitions they had seen elsewhere.

However, this incredible “wheat” was accompanied by a very large amount of “chaff” – for example the many “thank you” and short evaluative comments typical of visitor guest books, as well as non-substantive comments characterized as “student graffiti.” While there is an abundance of rich information, it can be a very labor intensive process to extract that information. The amount of resources given to analysis of visitor comment books should be commensurate with how the information is to be used:

- For certain purposes such as culling strong visitor quotes for promotional material, a careful scan of the books is enough.
- The museum can gather insights about problems experienced in the exhibition and suggestions for improvements from a close critical reading.
- Likewise, a close critical reading can be used to complement other audience research, i.e., for insights to be tested in interview and survey studies and to cross-check themes or ideas picked up in interviews.
- Data input and thematic coding of mid- to long length entries – leaving out all short exclamations and “graffiti” – can yield rich anecdotal information about how visitors are experiencing an exhibition. Patterns of use and experience are also important indicators of whether explicit exhibition objectives have been met. For comment book sets like *ETG* that have substantive comments in the mid to high hundreds, a sample of the comments is likely to capture all major themes (see Pekarik, 1997).
- One important consideration is context – the literature suggests that form and placement of visitor comment systems influences the nature of the comments received. Depending on what kind of input the museum wants from the visitor, it may be useful to experiment with different visitor comment methods such as making visitor comments a more interactive and explicit part of the exhibition, using cards with directed questions and fill-in demographics, or exploring ways to interact via the Internet.
- If the museum’s intent is to connect better with the younger tech-savvy generations, i.e., Generation Y and Generation M (Millennials; teens) it may need to utilize more of their media of preference – cell phones, iPods and other MP3 players, game consoles – and rely more on participatory media such as blogs, wikis, and personal “tagging” of text .

References

- Alexander, Mary. 2000. "Do Visitors Get It? A Sweatshop Exhibit and Visitors' Comments," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer 2000), pp. 85-94.
- Lubar, Steven. 2004. "The Museum as Public Sphere." Paper presented at "Public Spheres and American Cultures" Conference, Brown University, June 4-6, 2004.
- Macdonald, Sharon. 2005. "Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books," *Museum and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (November 2005), pp. 119-136.
- McLean, Kathleen and Wendy Pollock, editors. 2007. *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions*. Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC).
- Oakman, Sarah. 2006. "An Analysis of Professional Surveys and Visitor Comment Books." Paper prepared for FSG during internship, summer 2006.
- Pekarik, A. J. 1997. "Understanding visitor comments: The case of *Flight Time Barbie*," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 40(1), 56-68.
- Rainie, Lee. 2006. "Life Online: Teens and technology and the world to come." Speech to annual conference of Public Library Association, Boston. October 23, 2006.
- Simon, Nina. 2007. "Visitor Voices Book Club: Talking Back," blogpost dated October 30, 2007 on *Museum 2* <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2007/10/visitor-voices-book-club-talking-back.html>. Accessed 11/6/2007.
- Worts, Douglas. 1995. "Extending the frame: forging a new partnership with the public," in S. Pearce (ed.) *Art in Museums* (New Research in Museum Studies, Vol. 5) London: Athlone.

Appendix A: FSG Survey Studies, 1994-2007

Museum	Survey date	Location	Type	Study	Number of Respondents						Total
					AMSG		FGA		Exhibit		
					Entr	Exit	Entr	Exit	Entr	Exit	
Freer & Sackler	Oct 94-Sep 95	All Exits	Museum	Year-long		1232		1233			2465
Sackler	Sep 97	Sackler Entr	Museum	Puja	76						76
Freer	Sep 97	Freer Entr	Museum	Puja			72				72
Sackler	Sep 97	Exh exit	Exhibit	Puja						98	98
Sackler	Feb-Mar 98	Sackler Entr	Museum	12 Centuries	151						151
Sackler	Feb-Mar 98	Exh Entr	Exhibit	12 Centuries					166		166
Sackler	Feb-Mar 98	Exh Exit	Exhibit	12 Centuries						163	163
Sackler	Aug 00	Sackler Entr	Museum	Confucius	145						145
Sackler	Aug 00	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Confucius						245	245
Sackler	Jun-Jul 04	Exh Exit	Exhibit	ROB						574	574
Sackler	Jun-Aug 04	Sackler Exit	Museum	AMS-AMSG		354					354
Freer	Jun-Aug 04	Freer Exit	Museum	AMS-FGA				469			469
Sackler	Feb 05	Exh Exit	Exhibit	IMA ceramics						88	88
Sackler	Aug-Sep 05	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Yemen						362	362
Sackler	Jan 06	Exh Entr	Exhibit	Style & Status					508		508
Sackler	Jan 06	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Style & Status						606	606
Sackler	Apr 06	Sackler Entr	Museum	Hokusai	90						90
Sackler	Apr 06	Sackler Exit	Museum	Hokusai		138					138
Sackler	Apr 06	Exh Entr	Exhibit	Hokusai					517		517
Sackler	Apr 06	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Hokusai						567	567
Sackler	Aug 06	Exh Entr	Exhibit	Facing East					249		249
Sackler	Aug 06	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Facing East						247	247
Sackler	Nov-Dec 06	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Bibles						278	278
Sackler	Aug 07	Exh Exit	Exhibit	Portugal						302	302
Totals					462	1724	72	1702	1440	3530	8930

Appendix B: Summary of Demographic Characteristics

	Sackler Gallery				Freer and Sackler
	1997-2007				Oct 94 to Sept 95
	Exhibition Exit Surveys				Museum Exit
	MINIMUM	AVERAGE	MEDIAN	MAXIMUM	Year-long
Sex					
Male	35	45	46	53	48
Female	47	55	54	65	53
Total		100			101
Residence					
US Residents	82	91	92	98	89
Foreign Residents	2	9	8	18	11
Total		100			100
Metro Washington	19	42	40	60	40
Other US	36	49	49	68	50
Foreign	2	9	8	18	11
Total		100			101
Washington DC	5	14	14	22	11
Md/Va Suburbs	14	28	30	43	29
Other US	36	49	49	68	50
Foreign	2	9	8	18	11
Total		100			101
Distance from Mall					
5 miles or less	9	17	16	26	
5-10 miles	9	15	16	27	
10-20 miles	3	12	13	19	
20-40 miles	4	7	7	9	
40-100 miles	0	3	3	5	
100-250 miles	4	10	10	15	
Other U.S.	19	29	29	46	
International	2	8	8	13	
Total		101			

	Exhibition				Museum
	MINIMUM	AVERAGE	MEDIAN	MAXIMUM	Year-long
Age					
Ages 12-29	17	24	25	32	
Ages 30-54	33	42	44	48	
Ages 55+	22	34	37	43	
Total		100			
Ages 12-19	2	5	4	9	6
Ages 20-24	3	7	7	12	9
Ages 25-34	14	19	18	24	15
Ages 35-44	8	16	17	21	20
Ages 45-54	16	22	21	32	25
Ages 55-64	13	19	18	26	16
65 or older	4	12	12	23	10
Total		100			101
Ages 12-19	2	5	4	9	
Ages 20-24	4	8	7	12	
Ages 25-29	9	11	11	15	
Ages 30-34	6	9	9	11	
Ages 35-39	3	7	7	9	
Ages 40-44	5	7	8	10	
Ages 45-49	6	9	9	10	
Ages 50-54	10	11	12	12	
Ages 55-59	9	11	11	13	
Ages 60-64	5	10	11	14	
Ages 65-69	3	6	6	10	
Ages 70 & over	1	7	7	15	
Total		101			
Average age	40	45	46	49	42
Median age	40	47	47	52	44
Generations	0			0	
WWII (Born 1901-24)	0	1	1	2	
Postwar (Born 1925-45)	11	20	20	30	
Leading Edge Boomers (Born 1946-55)	20	23	22	25	
Trailing Edge Boomers (Born 1956-1964)	12	15	15	17	
Gen X (Born 1965-1981)	19	31	32	44	
Gen Y (Born 1982-2001)	7	12	13	16	
Total		100			

	Exhibition				Museum
	MINIMUM	AVERAGE	MEDIAN	MAXIMUM	Year-long
Ethnic Identity					
(US Residents only)					
White	50	73	78	84	88
Asian American	8	15	17	22	8
Visit Group					
Visiting Alone	12	28	26	44	43
Two adults (age 12+)	12	40	43	54	37
Group (age 12+)	14	24	18	61	12
Adult(s) & child(ren) under 12	3	8	8	15	9
Total		100			101
Education					
(Age 25 or Older only)					
Graduate degree	49	55	53	64	51
BA degree	27	33	35	37	32
AA degree	4	7	8	9	10
HS graduate or less	4	5	5	6	7
Total		100			100
Visit history					
First Visit	31	45	49	62	52
Repeat Visit	38	55	51	69	48
Total		100			100
Information Sources					
Heard about exhibition through:					
Word of Mouth	12	24	25	34	
Print media	14	30	29	45	
Wandered by/Banner	5	36	26	48	
Internet/website	3	7	5	5	
Motivation					
Came to see this exhibition	4	50	56	87	24
Other reason	13	51	45	96	76
Total					100
Interests					
Very interested in:					
Asian Art	29	44	41	60	



Smithsonian Institution
Office of Policy and Analysis
Washington, DC 20560-0502
www.si.edu/opanda