


## **An Exhibition Review of *Playful Performers* at the National Museum of African Art**



December 2004

 Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis  
Washington DC, 20560-0405

# Office of Policy and Analysis Study Team

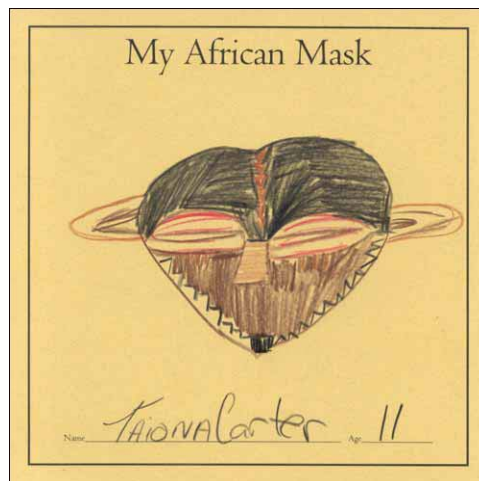
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## **Preface**

From May to December 2004, masks, costumes, film and music made the 2nd level of the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) a colorful and lively environment.

*Playful Performers* was the museum's first exhibition aimed at children and families.

NMAfA accompanied the exhibition with programs and activities geared for the multi-generational audience. NMAfA asked the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to study the exhibition to help guide future family-oriented programming at the museum.

We wish to thank the staff of the National Museum of African Art for their cooperation, in particular, Director Sharon Patton, Alan Knezevich, David Binkley and Veronika Jenke. We also would like to express our appreciation to Smithsonian personnel and visitors who contributed to this study. Finally, our colleagues read earlier drafts with care and provided excellent suggestions.

Carole M. P. Neves

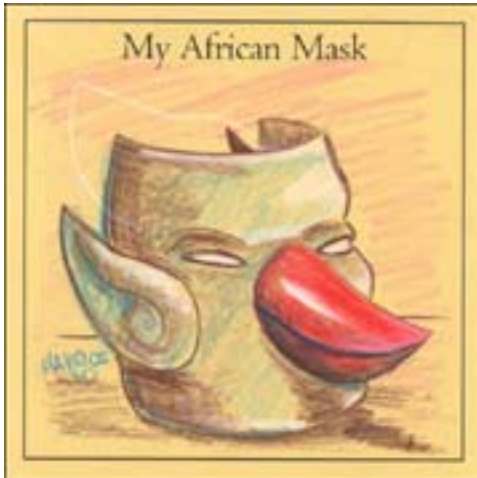
Director

Office of Policy and Analysis

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## Background

Each year, hundreds of thousands of families come to the Smithsonian Institution museums in Washington. They come as vacationers and cultural pilgrims to the nation's capital. Summer is the most popular season. This past summer about four out of every ten visitors' groups included children<sup>1</sup>.

Although the Smithsonian complex does not include a museum specifically designed for children, the exhibitions of several museums have traditionally attracted families – the National Zoological Park (NZP), the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), the National Museum of American History (NMAH), and the National Air and Space Museum (NASM). At NZP, families find the recently opened Kids' Farm, as well as its Amazonia Science Gallery, and Reptile Discovery Center. At NMNH, young people can visit the new Mammals Hall with its nearly 300 mammals, *Triceratops*, the Insect Zoo, and the African Voices Discovery Room. For twenty years, NMAH has operated the Hands On History Room where kids can climb on a high wheel bicycle and pedal or send a message by telegraph.<sup>2</sup> In the Hands on Science Center, they can use lasers, test water for pollutants, and try DNA fingerprinting techniques. Families may also attend child specific live performances at the Discovery Theater at the S. Dillon Ripley Center; view IMAX Theater large-format films at NMNH, NASM or the Udvar-Hazy Center; and experience the sensation of zooming through the cosmos in NASM's Einstein Planetarium.

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<sup>1</sup> "Results from the 2004 Smithsonian-wide Survey of Museum Visitors." Office of Policy and Analysis, October 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The first Hands on History Room opened in November 1985. The second room opened in December 1992.

In addition to special exhibitions and spaces, the Smithsonian science and history museums display objects of iconic interest to young people and their adult companions, such as, pandas, dinosaurs, the Hope diamond, the Star-Spangled banner, ruby slippers from the Wizard of Oz, Kermit the Frog, and the Wright Brothers airplane. Resourceful parents can also find special programs, films and other activities to engage youngsters.

Exhibitions for Children in Art Museums. The opportunities for family experiences in the Smithsonian art museums, as at most art museums, are more limited. Traditionally, programs for children have been presented in spaces adjacent to galleries and at limited times. At some non-Smithsonian art museums, children's spaces have become a more integral part of exhibitions. For example, in connection with the exhibition *Paradise Regained – German Expressionism*, the Arken museum in Denmark established a children's room. Since the German expressionists were inspired by objects in ethnographical museums, the Arken decorated the children's room with objects from Africa and Indonesia. This room and other presentations directed at children followed from the museum's philosophy:

*As a museum of art we are part of society's educational project for its citizens. Our task is to communicate research-based information about the interpretations of life that are found in art.*

...

*At ARKEN the pupils are presented with objects of artistic expression, and the actual, physical encounter with the work is essential, affording the pupils an authentic appreciation grounded in ways of expression that rouse their curiosity and make for a vivid experience.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Accessed on November 7, 2004 on the web site of the Arken Museum of Modern Art [<http://www.arken.dk/view.asp?ID=243>]

Another art museum that has more directly designed presentations for children is the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum (TFAM). *Explore the World of Art with Parents and Children* opened in July 2004. The exhibition introduces some 80 works in four sections: paintings, crafts, sculptures, and photographs from TFAM's private collection. Displays are set at children's eye level with detailed explanations in easy-to-understand language. Coinciding with the exhibition, TFAM holds hands-on craft workshops.

Another example is from LACMALab, the experimental research and development unit of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. LACMALab commissions artists to create new works for all ages in a collaborative process. A few elements of LACMALab's Manifesto are given below:

- Play, the forerunner of culture, is the laboratory in which the imaginary and the everyday are invoked, explored, and transformed. [3]<sup>4</sup>:
- Creativity is not, by any means, the exclusive province of art. There is great value, however, in art experiences that are self-defined, flexible, and engaging. Such experiences become translatable and transportable to other areas of life. [4]
- Viewers are stimulated by environments open to discovery. LACMALab is committed to raising questions about and eliciting responses to visual experience. Instruction through closed hierarchical systems that use control and intimidation shuts down thinking or produces boredom. [6]
- Children learn best through art experiences that engage them along with their parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives. [8]
- Museums are public spaces that should speak simultaneously to multiple generations. [9]

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<sup>4</sup> These statements are selected from the full document, with 12 statements, available at <http://www.lacmalab.org/seeing/index.html> and accessed on November 7, 2004. The numbers indicate placement in the document.

The goal of LACMA Lab's inaugural exhibition, *Made in California: NOW*, was to get kids, their families—and teachers—excited about art and to “encourage experiences that will spark learning.” Many of the artworks were designed so that kids could physically explore and interact with them.

Sometimes, in art museums around the world, handouts, worksheets or guides are available for parents to use in galleries. On the whole, however, introducing children to works of art, creating enthusiasm for art, and developing artistic taste have been left to the imagination of accompanying adults.

The *Playful Performers* Exhibition. Beginning this past spring, camp groups, families, and school classes coming to the Mall had the opportunity to visit an exhibition especially designed for children, *Playful Performers* at the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA). The exhibition closed in mid-December. In *Playful Performers*, further described below, “Masks, costumes, photographs, film and music help tell the story of how African children learn through playful inventiveness and creativity.”<sup>5</sup>

This Study. As part of its continuing efforts to learn from the experience of its visitors, NMAfA asked OP&A specifically to study visitors to *Playful Performers*.

As part of the study, OP&A observed and interviewed more than 30 children in July-August 2004 and more than 80 children in November 2004. Summer groups ranged from preschool age Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center participants to middle school age Girl Scouts; elementary school groups characterized the fall. Also throughout the summer and fall, nearly two dozen families and nine Smithsonian exhibition specialists unrelated to NMAfA had the opportunity to share their reactions to the exhibition. This report is based on the experiences of these different groups. The object of the report is to provide

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/playful/> accessed December 4, 2004.

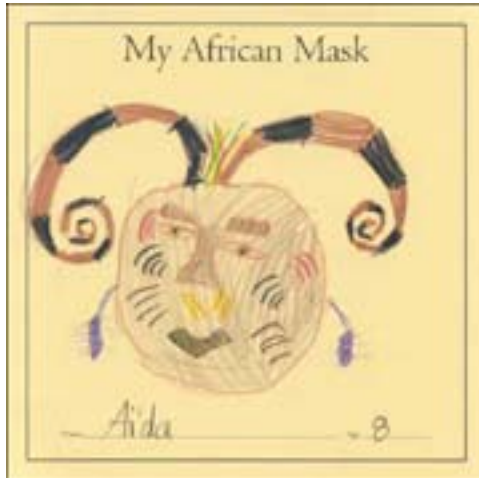


NMAfA with feedback about the exhibition for use in the development of future child- and family-oriented offerings.

So that the reader can distinguish the various voices, the quotes used in the report have been coded to reflect the background of the speaker:

- 1 Child
  - a. In an organized group of children
  - b. Accompanied by an adult
2. Teacher, parent or other adult
- 3 Smithsonian exhibition staff

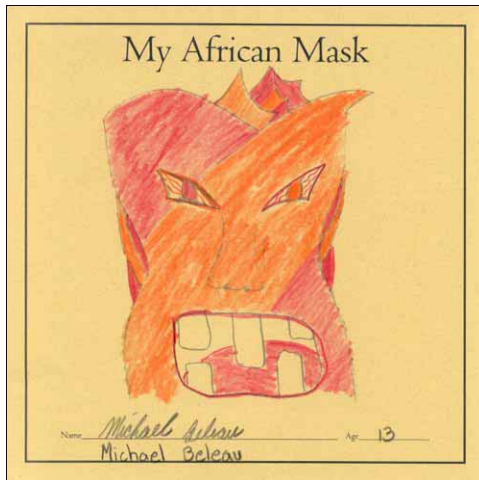
The details of the methods used in collecting the information presented here are provided in Appendix A.



### **The Exhibition: *Playful Performers***

In many parts of Africa children, especially boys, are accustomed to dancing in masks and costumes, imitating the performances of adults. *Playful Performers* is an exhibition that showcases the creativity of African children as they explore through playful activity the cultural practice of masquerade performance. The exhibition was intended to provide youngsters with an up-close, hands-on look at how they resemble their counterparts in Africa with respect to creativity, imagination and play. It celebrates African cultural traditions that are unfamiliar to most American children.

*Playful Performers* evolved from chief curator David A. Binkley's field research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). While studying adults' rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies and funerals, Binkley observed that young boys often created their own masks and costumes from natural and recycled materials in attempts to mimic the grown-ups' actions. He also found that masquerades are rehearsals for adulthood. They reinforce (for both kids and parents) strong social and moral values, such as courage, distinctions between right and wrong, and cooperation. Parents also use masks to raise children's curiosity and interest in their cultural heritage.



## A Walk through the Exhibition with Visitors

From the perspective of visitors to the museum, especially first-time visitors, the exhibition was easy to find. "There was clear wayfinding in the museum. "I had no idea where the exhibition was and I had no trouble finding it," said one Smithsonian staffer. In

fact, several parents commented that they were drawn to the exhibition from the first level, as they were able to see one of the exhibition video screens and hear the rhythmic music. Aside from groups, whose visits had been planned in advance, most of the adult and family groups encountered the exhibition after coming to the Mall. Some visitors stumbled upon the exhibition as they meandered through the museum; a few families did advance research and reading on the exhibition in particular.

*I don't think Washingtonians know about this place. Even though I'm new to the area, it seems that I'm the one introducing the other parents to these places and the activities available for kids. (2)*

The exhibition introduced new visitors to the NMAfA; it was their first visit to the museum, "The banners made it easy to find," said one parent. For the few families whose destination on the Mall was *Playful Performers*, they appreciated that children were the targeted audience and subject of the exhibition.

*Because of her [points to five-year-old daughter] we got up this morning and said let's go to the museum, got on the Internet and saw that they had this particular exhibition and thought it would be good for her to see. (2)*

The name of the exhibition, *Playful Performers*, disappointed a few visitors who expected live performances. Some expected them at fixed times, “When is the next performance?” inquired one parent intercepted in the Smithsonian Visitors’ Center. Others thought that actors would be in the gallery intermittently or permanently. One child was confused,

*I like the drawing and I like looking at masks, but I did want to see the parades. I don’t think they have one today. I thought they were going to have one, but I guess not. Is it outside? (1b: 3<sup>rd</sup> grade)*

NMAfA offered family programming to accompany the exhibition. In addition to a community day, four mask workshops, and five storytelling activities were presented. For adults, three films and five gallery talks were available. All of the activities were limited to the summer months; no program continued throughout the exhibition’s run.

As one approaches the exhibition, introductory text and photographs flank both sides of the elongated entry space. This is a low-ceilinged area that leads into the two-story space of the main hall. Some of the texts are directed primarily to children and are often in question form, such as, “Look at how these African children play together. What kinds of things do they play with?” Other texts are directed primarily to adults. The placement of the texts for children so close to the entrance poses challenges to parents whose youngsters are eager to move into the main exhibition space with its music and large moving images. Several professionals commended the clarity of the language on the adult texts, but expressed concerns about their length. There was also a video in this entry area. It was a significant draw for visitors, both entering and leaving – in fact, it usually outdrew everything else in the entry area.

Docents used this space as an opportunity to introduce the exhibition and point out some of the photographs in the entry area. Benefiting from the “advance

work” on the part of their teacher, several youngsters commented that they had seen one or more of the photographs in their classroom, as their teacher had either downloaded it or obtained it from the museum to foreshadow the trip. A few visitors appreciated this orientation area:

*This was really good [pointing at entrance] just walking in, seeing and asking questions like what do you see the children doing? We looked at all of these pictures, she said ‘oh they’re listening to the radio, they’re drawing in the sand, they’re building a house, she’s playing with her doll, they’re dancing ... (2)*

The attention of visitors, young and old alike, is immediately drawn to the music and drumming in the main space. At the center of the main exhibition space, a large screen displays continuous videotape presentations of authentic African masquerades, accompanied by percussive music. The screen, suspended from the high ceiling, is about 12 ft. by 26 ft. The actual video image is about 12 ft. by 8 ft. A second image with the words “When do you dance?” is visible from the floor above, where a balcony enables visitors to peer down into the main exhibition space. The glimpse of the screen and echoes of music entice onlookers to descend to the next level of the museum. The video itself captivated most visitors – adults, teens, even a toddler who lay down on the ground to watch the dancing. The open space around the screen, marked by four tiles imbedded in the floor with phrases such as “Come dance with us! Experience the magic of masquerade!” was designed to encourage children to imitate the dance steps of the video. Everyone from 4-year-olds to experienced aficionados of African art commented positively on the music. Some were delighted and amused to have music in an art museum; others wished for more variety and louder volume.

Public participation in the dancing was both encouraged and inhibited by group and peer pressure. In the case of several summertime visiting groups, the

accompanying adults encouraged dancing. For groups guided by a docent, time for dancing was not included in the visit, and in the case of pre-adolescents could only occur with strong encouragement. One 6<sup>th</sup> grade group was challenged by an adult to imitate the complex dance forms and rose to the bait. In the end, almost 20 youngsters were dancing on both sides of the screen.

Several youngsters wanted to be taught the dances, they suggested that – ideally a costumed performer – demonstrate the dance steps. In spite of the large open space, several children understood the inlaid tiles as the only spots on which they could dance.

Adult and child costumed mannequins are displayed symmetrically to the left and right behind the screen in the main exhibition area. To the right of the screen, mother and child mannequin figures wear the elaborately detailed, multi-colored Ancient Mother and Little One costumes of Nigeria's Okpella peoples. The mother figure wears an enormous headdress adorned with dolls, while the accompanying costumed youngster represents a child who has jumped off the hat. The label tells us that the costumes are worn to celebrate harvests and funerals. This masquerade is about opposites. Ancient Mother is wise and beautiful; her contrast is Igu, an evil and ugly bush monster. These two costumed figures, like the other three-dimensional elements, draw considerable attention in the space. Visitors, especially children, notice the figures as their attention strays from the videotape. Masqueraders dressed in these costumes appear in the video clip. At least one parent and the docents made the connection between the active two-dimensional screen and the static three-dimensional figures.

The center of the gallery features a cluster of huge colorful papier-mâché full masks worn during Guinea-Bissau's Carnival festival. The masks are positioned on poles on a platform without barriers or glass. One yellow character, with a wide-open purple mouth displaying dozens of teeth, wears the figure of a man

waving two flags (one American) and carrying a dove to represent peace. Another mask carries a person-like syringe as a reminder to get vaccinated. The text with the display promotes teamwork: "Boys from different neighborhoods put aside differences to form mask-making groups and work on a fun project for a common goal." Because of their placement behind the video screen they were not in the main axis of movement for some visitors; though for others, they were the most striking and memorable objects based upon sheer size.

On the left side of the room is another parent-child mannequin pair wearing costumes that completely cover their heads and bodies. These costumes are worn during the Egungun festival in Nigeria. Small fabric scraps are tied to the body and fly out when spinning to make the dancers appear much larger. The ornate actors act out stories about the ancestors of the Yoruba culture.

Throughout both rooms, the entry area and the main space are 11 vitrines with masks. The masks drew the attention of both young and old. Unfortunately, many younger children had to strain to peer into the vitrines or be lifted by a parent; all of the masks were at least three feet off the floor, and some were even higher. One practical parent noted that children get heavier and harder to lift as they get older, "If you had steps to climb up on and see inside the cases it would be better." She added, "Maybe if you had more talking things, things they could hear ... push a button and hear about something instead of having to read it."

On each side of the room there is an art station behind a low wall. The station is equipped with a table, chairs, paper and colored pencils. At one of these tables, "Design a Mask" instructions encourage kids to try to copy a mask of their choice from photographs. At the table on the other side of the room, identical in construction, "Draw a Mask" instructions ask kids to draw their own mask designs. However, one Smithsonian staff person visiting the exhibition commented, "The 'draw a mask' and 'design a mask' sign on the workstation -- 'Go to the other side of the gallery to draw a mask' -- made me confused."

Visitors can either leave their artistic creations behind or take them home. Drawings that are left are selectively posted above the art table or at an online gallery on the museum's Web site. Almost all of the children and many of the adults accepted the invitation to draw. In conversation, all felt that the art stations were just an introduction to more extensive experiences they wanted to share. While that museum setting may not be an appropriate place for a messy craft, many of the children were inspired to create their own mask in two or three-dimensions in a less constrained format. One adult noted that, "It might be a little bit messy, but it would nice if the kids could actually make a mask ... maybe out of a paper plate or something." Another parent was more critical, "I mean coloring? They can do that at home, so that's not going to do it."

They clamored for larger, more pliable and brighter art materials (e.g., magic markers, paints), paper plates or construction paper with which to make masks. A simple step-by-step worksheet available at the stations might have allowed the enthusiasm to be taken home. A parent who is also a teacher suggested removing the art stations from the exhibition space and developing a more extensive mask workshop in an adjacent area. A frequent comment was, "You should still keep the drawing thing but you should have an art room. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)" Some visitors planned their out-of-town visit to *Playful Performers* because they expected these activities,

*My brother-in-law is visiting from New York. He suggested we bring the kids today. [Four children in the group – ages 2, 4, 6 and 8.] He was expecting a more organized activity around the mask making as opposed to just drawing on paper. But I also sympathize and understand the resources required to staff that full-time. So maybe if you could have that available on a limited time basis, some specific hours? (2)*



Most parents found enough information to help them visit with their children, but often felt they had to hunt for it. For example, labels accompanying the large photographs were in small size print, and some labels were not near the objects they described. The lack of familiarity with African geography was a handicap for some visitors. They do not have a clear sense and familiarity with place names and several expected a map. “I would have liked a map of Africa ... (3)” was a common refrain. One father suggested that a map with photos of figures that inhabit the exhibition “in the right place” would have been of help. A family guide with both a map and ‘tips for parents’ in using the exhibition is another option. One parent, who accompanied four children under 10, summarized several of these issues when she said:

*I'm the one that's guided them through this, reading the text and asking questions. It's a lot of responsibility for me. I don't really know enough about Africa or masks. I don't feel very well prepared. I'd like them to know more than what I can read from the captions. Maybe if they had provided a guidebook or something to read before we came to the exhibition. (2)*

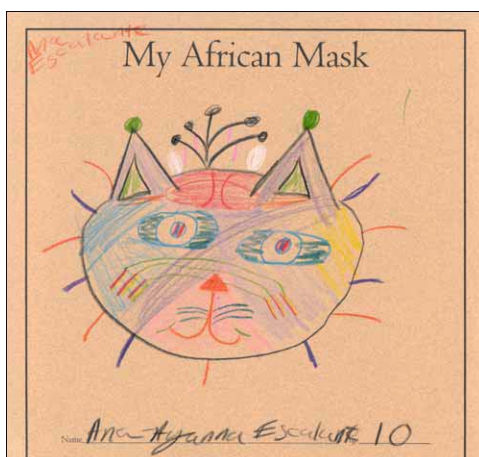
At the back of the space, another display lets visitors look through eyeholes to get a feel for how the crowd in the street looks to a masked performer. Eyeholes are at both adult and child levels. Another display, a clear photo opportunity, features three masks mounted on child-high poles, behind which kids can stand, look through the masks and pose.

Visitors who wanted a more interactive experience saw both of these activities as teasers. In addition to the problem of adjusting themselves to the limited heights, the street scene behind the eyeholes disappointed some visitors. They wanted to see themselves in the setting, and at least one family recalled exhibitions where entry into a diorama setting had been a high point. When children and adults peered through the three mounted masks they provoked laughter from onlookers.

The visitors behind the masks, however, were somewhat frustrated that they could not see themselves (e.g. in mirrors). Some small persons were uncomfortable with the height and at least one Smithsonian staff person expressed concern for visitors in wheel chairs,

*The masks for children and adults were all displayed at the same height ... Wheel-chair visitors or small children would have difficulty looking through the masks. (3)*

Questions decorating the orange walls of the main space were designed to provoke conversation between parents and children: "When do you dance?" "Do you belong to a club?" "What would you use to make a costume?" These questions did not get much attention. Some visitors felt that the lighting was too dim and hence the questions were too difficult to read. The dimness, it was noted, when paired with larger-than-life masks made the exhibition scary, certainly not playful, to some children. Additionally, OP&A observers also watched several children frightened by the security alarm that protected objects in the gallery. Several security officers noted that the detectors seemed to be far too sensitive around the masks and costumed figures. Parents pointing to the high masks or details on a costume easily set off alarms. The darkness, large masks, and loud unexpected beeps sent some children into the arms of their parents.



### Overarching Observations

While most visitors seemed to genuinely enjoy the exhibition, as indicated above, they offered a number of specific suggestions for improvement. Some of the comments pertain to the whole exhibition. First, there were reactions to the exhibition messages and

their communication, including discussions of the intended audience. Second, there was the overall design, as well as current and potential activities.

Messages and their Communication. *Playful Performers* highlights the innocent, creative and fun aspects of children's lives in Africa. For some visitors, the take-home message related to play, for other visitors the main point was masks and masquerade, still others were moved by the cultural comparison and everyday life in Africa.

*It was fun to see how they played and it was different from how we play and really cool ... Our toys are really detailed and their toys are different, they see life in a different perspective. (1b: 5<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*This isn't really for this group [4-year-olds]. They just see lots of faces. It gives us an opportunity to talk to them but it's still hard – it's a hard sell. (2)*

*I think it's meant to attract children. Also I think a lot of African art is so dark and dreary; I love this, the cheerfulness and playfulness ... it's lovely. (2)*

*Objects appeared static and the display was definitely not representative of their use. The full potential of communicating the basic themes (harvest, death, etc) could have been made more explicit. (3)*

*I would say, so what? There were some nice objects but I have no idea why I should care. It's exotic and odd. (3)*

*[It was missing] ... Quotes from actual kids, in the children's voice. (3)*

*Nothing grabbed me or held my attention. (3)*

*He loved it. [Gesturing to 6-year-old son.] He told me that in the future, if he could go to Africa he'd build some toys like that. He liked this culture. (2)*

Audience: An art exhibition or children's exhibition? Visitors and Smithsonian peers expressed appreciation for the exhibition's effort at addressing the interests of children. At the same time, the question of "audience" entered many conversations:

*I don't think it's really for kids. It's an art exhibit. (3)*

*Feels like a grown-up exhibition to me with dark rooms, long labels and "Do not touch." (3)*

*[I think] this is a design exhibit, livelier than usual and with some kid-friendly elements, but it is not a cohesive, powerful statement. It is an uncomfortable halfway between art and culture, better for not being all on one side, but worse for not bringing the two sides together in a more powerful way. (3)*

Several individuals felt that there was lack of clarity in the way the audience was addressed and that the presentation could have been more focused:

*The part for kids was often jumbled and longer than the part written for adults. (3)*

*Instead of it being for kids which it was and wasn't, if they [NMAfA] could have said it was for multi-generational groups. (3)*

*I was unsure of the level for children – for what age? Some vocabulary may need explanation. I'd prefer the emphasis that this is for adults and children to do together. (3)*

*The text blocks were too long for the intended audience. The audience is kids, but it speaks to parents. (3)*

Suggestions were offered however, for ways to further the focus on youngsters.

*Follow the questions as you roam around that were pertaining to the child's life ... How did you make a mask? There's one with a kid who made a mask with laundry detergent – it's all he had. I thought that was a good touch that all of them had things that related to the child. (2)*

*I like that the captions tell you about children ... my children appreciate that. But overall, the exhibit could be more interactive. (2)*

Visitors felt a tension between the emphasis on children and the behavioral restrictions in the space. For example, a boy in a school group was stopped from making hand shadows on the video screen. One adult observed, "We like to tell you about play, but don't try it." One parent was grateful that her youngest child was not with them,

*We do have a 3 year old and if she had been here she would probably stand in front of the screen and imitate them [the dancers on the large screen]. She likes fancy dresses and costumes ... but she'd want to touch everything. That would be a nightmare in here. (2)*

Comfort, Accessibility and Overall Design. Visitors and staff offered several comments on the design of the exhibition. There was general agreement that, “The layout provided for free choice in the exhibition. (3)”

The exhibition graphics evoked conflicting comments: “The graphics are fun! Tilted shapes and bright colors. (3)” and, “The graphics were wallpaper and not engaging physically as [were] the images themselves. (3)”

The mannequins appeared to be positive aspects of the design: “It is an all flat photo show except some masks in cases. The two or three mannequins helped but the space seemed stark. (3)” According to one visitor, “I like that the mannequins weren’t behind glass; you could see the fabric up close. (2)”

One staff member and several visitors were unhappy with the lighting, “The room is dark and uninviting. (2)”

*I don’t think this exhibition is really for children. It seems to be written for an eighth-grader. And there are other problems ... The little boy’s notebook ... that’s terrific and I wanted the kids to see that because my son does the same thing with notebooks. But they can’t see it. It’s too high. Unless I call their attention to it, and in Avery’s case [the smallest child] lift her up ... they would never see it. (2)*

*When I heard about the exhibit, I thought this might be one that would be good to recommend, but [not] now that I’ve seen it. To me, the places where they tried to be interactive were almost the worst. The masks – that was a great idea if you had a mirror – but just to look out and see nothing ... (3)*

Activities: To play or not to play? The drawing stations attracted young and old to sit down and express their creativity. For some, the music and dancing were

satisfying. Reflecting on their experiences in other museums, several interviewees desired more interactive options. As one visitor said, “The music and videos were very captivating ... more TO DO [speaker’s emphasis] would have made it more engaging for kids.” And a child commented, “The exhibit was cool but you should add some more interactive stuff.”

A third was more outspoken,

*I guess I expected something more interactive. I thought they might actually be doing something or that there would be a docent here to tell them about what they were seeing. (2)*

There was clear interest in expanding the dancing:

*I was thinking maybe as a special treat you could get someone to come who knows those dances and teach some kids. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*They have these things -- the pad has arrows on it – like a TV screen lights up and tells you where to put your feet. Some go faster than others. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*You should have dance contests. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*I’m frustrated because the exhibit says come dance but all the platforms say do not touch. (3)*

*It needs an actual stage where someone comes out and explains to them or demonstrates the dances. (2)*

*I’m going to just be honest ... I thought that we would come here and see not necessarily actual children dancing, but something active like that. Kind of*

*like the video but also maybe an art or a sculpture or something that moved or something like that. (2)*

Nearly all of the children and most of the parents with younger children were eager for masks or costumes that could be touched, worn or handled.

*They like to touch things ... the texture ... things they're not going to damage. Upstairs they were shaking maracas. Here, everything says 'Do Not Touch' so they're bored. (2)*

*I want to put on the costumes. We could do our own masquerade, like a play. (1b: 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)*

*You could have an African thing you could try on a mask thing and a shawl thing as well. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*With young guys, hands-on or any kind of interactive works well ... they love to touch. That would be the biggest thing I could think of, anything they could put on and touch. (2)*

*I think there could have been little hand puppets ... I would never have gotten her out of there. I know at some places they have trying on costumes. The general child would benefit from the exhibit being more interactive. (2)*

*I would have liked actual things ... costumes, masks ... hanging on a hook that you could try on and look in the mirror ... (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

The masks and costumes captured the imagination of many who wanted more elaborate activities:



*You could do what they did in Natural History with those photos – like digital – like if you want to pretend you're wearing the Hope diamond you pose in one of those pictures and they put a mask on you or something. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*Maybe you could have some more costumes and more of those dragonheads – they were cool. (1a: 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*I'm disappointed! I can look through a mask but I can't see myself in a mirror. (3)*

*I felt tricked when I looked through the holes in the wall. I expected to see myself in a mirror and not just look at another picture. (3)*

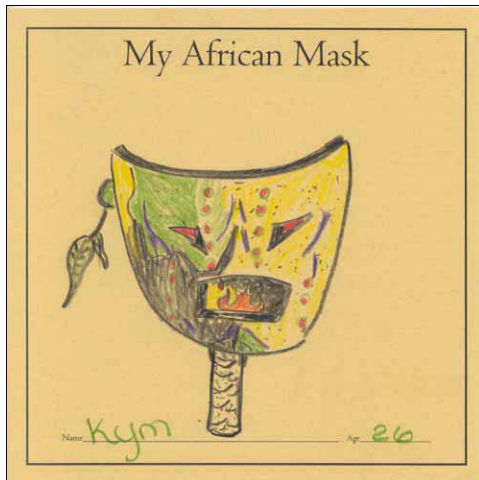
*It would be cool if we could make our own masks or if they had more masks that we could try on. I would like to make a mask. Maybe they could have supplies here for us to make masks. (1b: 4<sup>th</sup> grade)*

*I think it would be better if someone told us stories about the African kids. Or maybe we could dress up in the costumes and have our own masquerade. (1b: 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)*

Visitors were generally sympathetic, but several Smithsonian peers made more critical comments,

*Where are the interactive activities for kids? Hidden away behind the wall! (3)*

*I'm all for hands-on areas in exhibits, but I think the Smithsonian needs to think about staffing. It's like coming upon the last Christmas tree that wasn't bought ... a lonely hands-on station. (3)*



## Perspectives of Visitor Groups

Reactions to a museum visit are the result of personal characteristics and past experiences, expectations for the specific visit, events external to the visit as well as the structure, content and ambiance of the visit. With the exception of the professional staff that offered their observations a few days

after their visits, this paper is based on conversations conducted as visitors, youngsters and adults alike were about to leave NMAfA. The passage of time may well alter some of these reactions as they are put into the context of other visits, schoolwork, etc. With that in mind, it may be helpful to summarize responses to *Playful Performers* by audience type.

The groups interviewed during the summer came to NMAfA primarily in a leisure activity context. They went swimming, played, participated in craft and theatre activities and visited museums. As was noted earlier, their immediate reactions were that the exhibition was “really fun.” At the same time, as their interest was aroused, they felt the absence of attractive, relevant activities such as mask making, dancing, etc.

The school groups had similar reactions. For them, the visit was a break from the daily school routine and, for the few first-time museumgoers, an adventure. These youngsters, on the whole, have visited ‘museums’ that are more interactive and provide more unsupervised time than the NMAfA visit. Several had been to children’s museums, science centers, and child-oriented activity rooms in other museums. As such, their overall reactions were that the *visit* was, in the words of one 6th grader, “like a regular museum trip.” One of the accompanying teachers remarked, a few days after the trip, that the goal she [the

teacher] had for the trip – to give the students ideas for an art project – was met. At the same time, she had hoped for more free exploration time for the students.

In the case of families, reactions were more varied. Again, the children wanted more participatory activities and activities different from what they routinely do at home. The parents were willing to engage with their youngsters, but some felt constrained by not having the appropriate skills or information. In general, especially in dealing with unfamiliar subject matter, adults appreciate aids.

Not surprisingly, the reactions of the museum professionals were most detailed and contained the most constructive criticism. There was consensus about the lack of clarity in the intended audience for the exhibition and some of the communication and design challenges faces by NMAfA. There was also consensus that with more extensive prototyping and attention to some of the recommendations and criticisms made about *Playful Performers*, NMAfA has the basis for developing exciting programs for multi-generational audiences.

## **Summary Remarks**

*Playful Performers* was a pioneering effort for NMAfA. It was its first exhibition oriented especially towards children and families. The exhibition's focus is conveyed in a "letter" on the Web site for *Playful Performers*:

*To parents, relatives and adult friends:*

*Welcome to Playful Performers. This exhibition is especially for children, their friends and the playful at heart. We invite you to see how children in Africa learn through playful inventiveness and creativity.*

*Masquerades are fun for everyone--young and old alike. Masquerades, however, also pay tribute to the community's culture and identity, effect change within the community and play a role in the education of African children. They teach children life's lessons, respect, how to work well together and important skills that will help them succeed as adults. Just like a piano recital or a ballet presentation, performing in a masquerade helps children develop their talents and build confidence.*

*Please look at the photographs, masks and costumes, read the text, take part in the hands-on activities and discuss what you learn with your young companions.*

The above text, with its emphasis on both children and “the playful at heart” captures one of the threads in conversations about the exhibition. Yet, the design of multi-generational, interactive exhibitions in art museums poses real challenges of design and interpretation.

It is clear that visitors enjoyed the exhibition. Nearly two dozen families, several school groups and day camps were observed laughing, dancing, talking, drawing and generally interacting with the exhibition. Children, in particular, enjoyed their experience and depending on their age, came away with varying levels of understanding and affection for masking and masking traditions. The insight into the cultural traditions of African children also provided an opportunity for parent-child discourse.

This exhibition clearly had some of the basic elements for engaging children – photos of children, understandable text, and art stations. However, there were shortcomings in content, design, and educational activities.

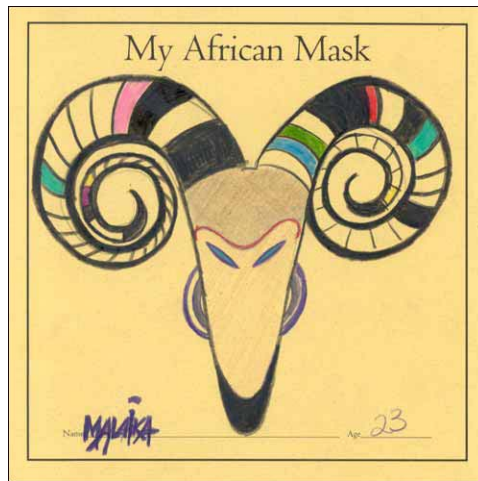
Content was an obstacle for some visitors because the exhibition assumed that adult visitors already know something about Africa. Interpretive aids were

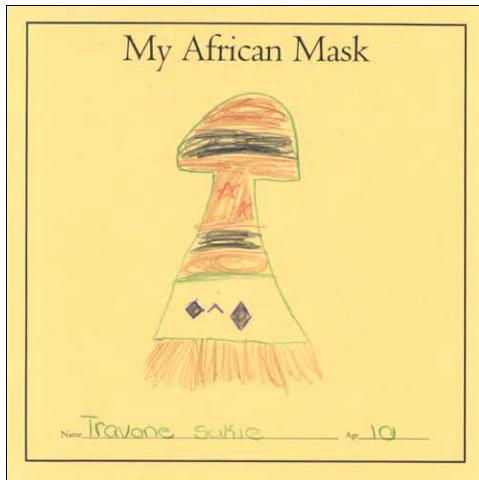
lacking for adults visiting with other adults and for adults as interpreters for children. Maps and other methods of orientation to African geography and the diversity of cultures, in addition to a handout or activity for take-home use, may have enhanced the overall effectiveness and enjoyment of the exhibition.

Designs, specific to younger audiences, could have been addressed by more prototyping. Mirrors, more interactive play areas, additional activities either in or adjacent to the exhibition space (more pliable art materials, costumes and mask to touch and try on) would have enhanced the overall experience of children within the exhibition.

A third area, education, relates to both design and content, but extends beyond these boundaries. An exhibition designed for children begs for accompanying educational activities and performances or, in this case, more activities. NMAfA missed an opportunity to truly appeal to this new audience by neglecting to include *in-gallery* African dance performances or instruction, storytelling, mask making or crafts. Anecdotally, OP&A heard that the several workshops that were offered were extremely successful. Two classrooms adjacent to the exhibition space could have been transformed into a lively children's educational space. Additionally, docents could have been more successful by stepping away from their traditional techniques and leaning farther into the creative world of children. It is clear that docents enrich the experience of visiting groups. However, the museum might consider diverse kinds of interpretative programs for use with an exhibition of this kind. The children's experience while visiting with a school group was different than visits by multi-generational groups. Organizing more than 30 children can be difficult for a docent, a few chaperones and teachers, but the result can be a stifled museum experience when children are told and expected to be on their best "field trip behavior." In an exhibition called *Playful Performers*, more playful experiences should be encouraged.

One sixth-grader illustrated this in a story about his semester's field trips. After visiting two outdoor locations for science-related labs, the boy was asked how his visit to *Playful Performers* compared. "Well, you don't get wet here." "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" the interviewer asked him. His responded, "That's definitely a bad thing. Museums are not as much fun."





## Appendix A: Methodology

Data for this study were collected by means of conversations, using discussion guides, with NMAfA museum staff, summer camp and school groups and their counselors or teachers, adults and children visiting as small groups, and Smithsonian museum staff not affiliated with NMAfA. Conversations with

museum staff took place away from the exhibition area. Visitors were interviewed either in the exhibition space, or in an adjacent classroom. A few brief conversations were held with visitors in the Smithsonian Institution Visitor Information and Reception Center.

OP&A observed and interviewed more than 100 children in July to November 2004. During the July and August 2004, participants in four summer camp groups were interviewed; a total of 33 youngsters and nine adults. In late fall 2004; three school groups accompanied by ten adults were involved in conversations. Two of the classes, a total of about 50 children were in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade; the third class consisted of 36 first-graders. Both in late summer and fall, nearly a dozen family groups were involved in conversations.

Four staff members at NMAfA discussed the exhibition with OP&A staff. In addition, OP&A convened a group of museum staff outside of NMAfA and engaged them in a professional development activity oriented around exhibition assessment. The group included curatorial, exhibit development and design and educational staff from five different Smithsonian units. The group followed a framework established in 2002 by Beverley Serrell and team with the support of a National Science Foundation grant – *Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions from a Visitor-Experience Perspective*. The staff met and discussed the exhibition review protocol to make sure that there was agreement on process and

definitions. Then these staff visited *Playful Performers* individually and recorded their observations. Finally, the group met again and discussed aspects of the exhibition based on their observations.