

# Results of the 2004 Smithsonian-wide Survey of Museum Visitors



Smithsonian Institution  
*Office of Policy and Analysis*

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## Results of the 2004 Smithsonian-wide Visitor Survey

### Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution (SI) includes 18 museums in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and New York City. These museums play a critical role in the Institution's mission to increase and diffuse knowledge. Smithsonian museums seek to provide visitors with opportunities to discover, be inspired, learn, contemplate, celebrate, have fun, socialize, and much more.

Just how well is the Institution doing with respect to this part of its mission?

Increasingly, organizations in the public and non-profit sectors are expected to demonstrate program results, both to the taxpaying public in general and to funding bodies and other stakeholders in particular.<sup>1</sup> For the Smithsonian, this means being able to show how its museum offerings are benefiting its visitors.



External accountability demands notwithstanding, satisfying visitors is simply good business. And understanding the experiences of visitors helps Smithsonian museums sharpen their focus and shape their exhibitions and other programs in ways that best meet visitors' needs and interests.

To this end, in the summer of 2004, the SI Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted an Institution-wide survey of visitor satisfaction and experiences at 14 Smithsonian museums.<sup>2</sup> During a two-month period (June 14 to August 15), survey staff intercepted 8,331 eligible visitors; of those, 6,082 visitors filled out self-administered questionnaires for a 73 percent rate of cooperation.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Smithsonian, a federal trust entity, complies with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) in submitting to the Office of Management and Budget and Congress performance plans and reports on program results.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the 2004 Visitor Survey, the National Museum of the American Indian Museum on the Mall was not yet open, although its George Gustav Heye Center in New York City was. The Patent Office Building—home to the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery—and the Arts and Industries Building were closed for renovation. The National Museum of African American History and Culture is in the early planning stage.

Because of the scope of the survey (14 different museums) and in deference to visitors' limited time, the questionnaire was kept to one legal size sheet and the questions to high-level museum-wide standards of performance (such as visitor satisfaction), public interest matters (such as accessibility and inclusiveness), visitor demographic characteristics, and those program results/experiences that museum directors most valued and sought to provide visitors. As such, the survey did not allow for in-depth examination of any particular program or service. For example, visitor satisfaction with "food service" was not separated into "food quality," "cost," "service quality," etc. However, the overall ratings for programs, experiences, and amenities resulting from the survey can alert the Smithsonian to areas where it needs more tailored visitor surveys.

The survey data reported here tell a story of who came to Smithsonian museums, what they experienced, and what did or did not satisfy them and to what extent. The data will help the Smithsonian determine how well it is carrying out its mission, meeting performance goals, and keeping pace with the interests and needs of the people who visit it.



## Smithsonian Visits

Smithsonian visitors come from all over the country and world, and range in age from infants to senior citizens. They explore SI museums alone, with family and friends, and in organized groups. They may glimpse only a few exhibits over a few hours, or they may explore a variety of museums over several days. The summer months attract peak visitation as the Smithsonian welcomes new and returning visitors by the millions. According to Office of Protection Services (OPS) data, there were 4.4 million visits<sup>3</sup> to all Smithsonian museums in June and July 2004.

### First-time and Repeat Visitors

According to the 2004 survey results, three in five visitors had been to the Smithsonian at least once before; for the remainder, it was their first visit.

Visitors to American subject matter and science museums<sup>4</sup> were more likely to be first-time Smithsonian visitors: more than two fifths (42%) of those who went to these types of museums were first-time SI visitors. By contrast, just over one quarter (27%) of visitors to Smithsonian art museums<sup>5</sup> were visiting the Smithsonian for the first time. Many visitors (47%) said they had previously visited the museum they were exiting when surveyed; the others said that it was their first visit to that museum.

First-time and Repeat Visitors  
(percent)



<sup>3</sup> OPS counts people visiting SI museums. The number of "visits" is distinguished from the number of "visitors" as one visitor could make multiple "visits" to different SI museums in a given day.

<sup>4</sup> The American subject matter museums are National Museum of American History, National Postal Museum, George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian, and Anacostia Museum. The science museums are National Air and Space Museum and its Udvar-Hazy Center, National Zoological Park, and National Museum of Natural History.

<sup>5</sup> National Museum of African Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Freer Gallery of Art, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.



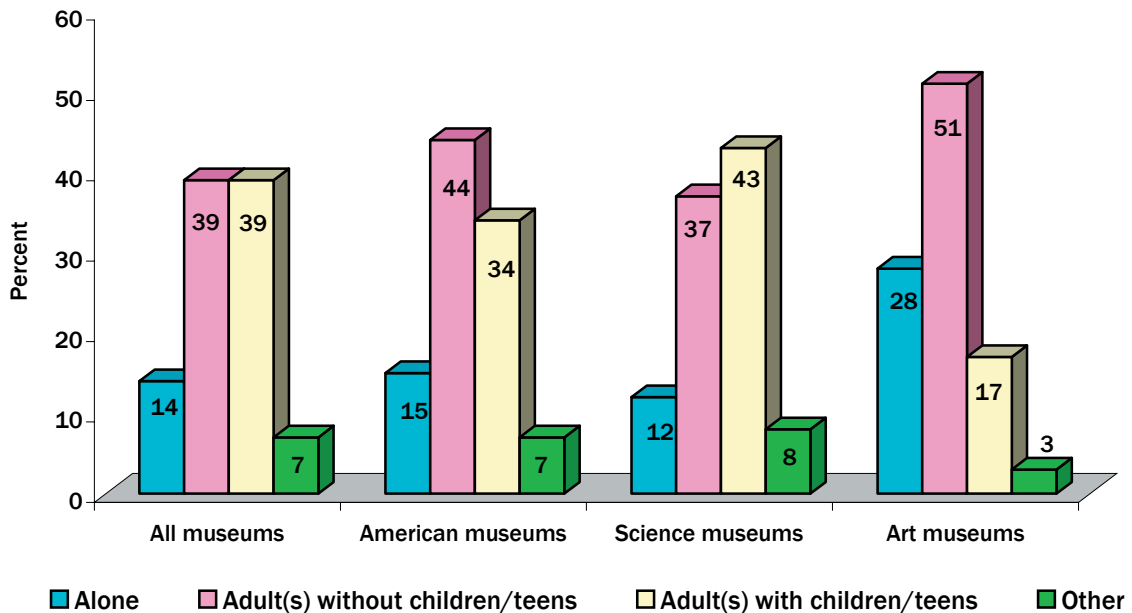
### Cross-generational Visits

Some Smithsonian managers were interested to know if the shared experience of visiting the SI by different generations of Americans provides an opportunity for intergenerational communication not offered by many other educational and recreational activities. The survey offered an opportunity to test the frequency of cross-generational visits. Among all adult visitors surveyed, approximately one third (32%) said they had visited the Smithsonian before age 18. Of those, one fifth (19%) had come with their parents or relatives; eight percent had been a part of a school group; and five percent had come with both their parents and a school group. Half of all adult repeat visitors who had visited with their family before age 18 were visiting now with children.

### Visiting Alone or with Others

Two fifths of visitor groups were comprised of adults with one or more other adults. Another two fifths came as a part of a group of adults and children/teens; 14 percent were alone; and seven percent were there in other social compositions such as members of a school group or a group of adolescents unaccompanied by adults.<sup>6</sup>

Social Composition of Visits



Whether a visitor was alone or with others varied by museum type. Visitors to art museums typically came alone or with other adults. Visitors to science museums and American subject matter museums were twice as likely to have come with children than was true for visitors to art museums (43% and 34%, respectively, compared with 17%).



## Demographics

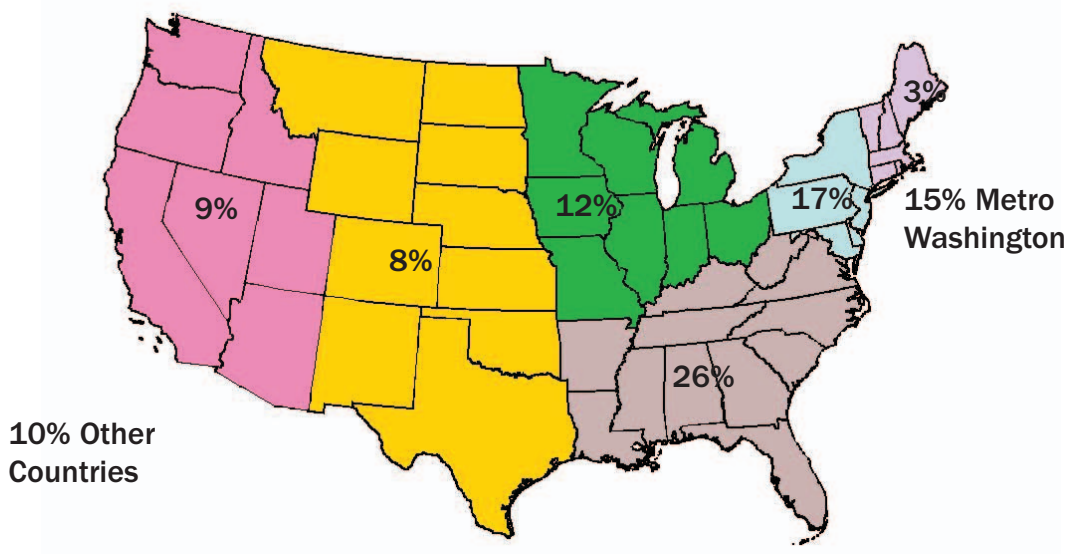
### Where Visitors Live

Smithsonian museums host visitors from all 50 US states and from countries around the globe. In June and July 2004, nine out of ten visitors (90%) resided in the United States. The George Gustav Heye Center (GGHC) of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in New York City hosted the highest percentage of visitors from other countries (33%). By contrast, almost all visitors at the National Zoological Park (NZIP) were US residents (98%).

Of visitors to all museums, 26 percent said they resided in the Southeast, 17 percent in the Mid Atlantic region, and about 15 percent in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Representation from other regions was: Midwest (12%), West (9%), Mountain Plains (8%), and New England (3%).<sup>7</sup> Ten percent resided in countries other than the United States.

Some museums attracted large numbers of visitors from the Washington, DC metropolitan area, while other museums got visitors from greater distances. For

Visitor Residences

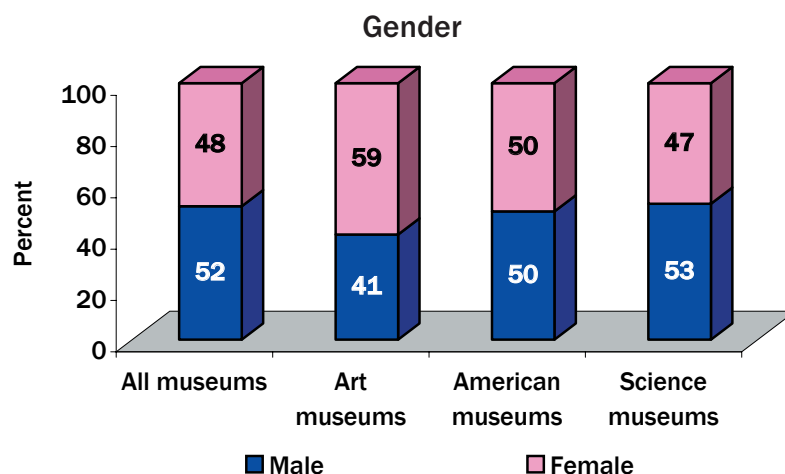


<sup>7</sup> These regions correspond to those used by the American Association of Museums plus the Washington, DC Metropolitan area, which includes suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. The other parts of Virginia and Maryland are included in the Southeast and Mid Atlantic regions. Alaska and Hawaii are included in the West region, while Puerto Rico is included in the Mid Atlantic.

example, art museums had a larger percentage of local visitors (23%) than science museums (16%) or American subject matter museums (9%). Somewhat more than two fifths (42%) of visitors to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art (AMSG) said they resided in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, while eight percent of visitors at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) lived in this area.

## Gender

Visitors to the Smithsonian were fairly equally divided by gender: 52 percent were male and 48 percent female. However, gender differences emerged across museums and by type of museum. For example, women were more likely to visit the art museums, while men were more likely to visit the science museums.



## Age

The average age of the visitors was 37 years; half the visitors were between 26 and 48 years of age.<sup>8</sup> In terms of generational cohorts—where visitors are grouped based on when they were born<sup>9</sup>—more than a third of visitors (37%) were between 39 and 58 years old (Baby Boom Generation); a quarter (24%) were between 28 and 38 years old (Generation X); one in three (30%) were between 12 and 27 years old (Generation Y); and one in 11 (9%) 59 years or older (pre-Baby Boom Generations).

<sup>8</sup> Only visitors aged 12 and over were eligible to answer the survey. Thus, the age distribution does not include children under 12.

<sup>9</sup> See Geoffrey E. Meredith and Charles D. Schewe with Janice Karlovich, *Defining Markets, Defining Moments: America's 7 Generational Cohorts, Their Shared Experiences, and Why Businesses Should Care*, New York: Hungry Minds, 2002. Different authors may use somewhat different ages to define generations.

## Ethnic and Racial Identity

Following Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines, United States residents were asked to state whether they were of Latino/Hispanic origin (their ethnicity), and to designate their race or races (their racial identity).<sup>10</sup>

Overall, about one in ten US residents (9%) said that they were of Latino/Hispanic origin. The percentage of Latino/Hispanic visitors varied among museums. For example, one in six (17%) at GGHC and one in eight (13%) at NZP were of Latino/Hispanic origin, compared with four percent at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (C-HNDM).

Combining the Latino/Hispanic ethnicity and racial identity questions provides the most complete picture of diversity in Smithsonian museum audiences. Of the nine percent of US resident visitors who said they were of Latino/Hispanic origin, four percent said they were white, one percent identified with other race(s), and four percent failed to mark a racial identity. Of those US resident visitors who said they were not of Latino/Hispanic origin (91%), three fourths (74%) said they were White, seven percent that they were African American/Black, and seven percent that they were Asian. Three percent marked another race or more than one race.

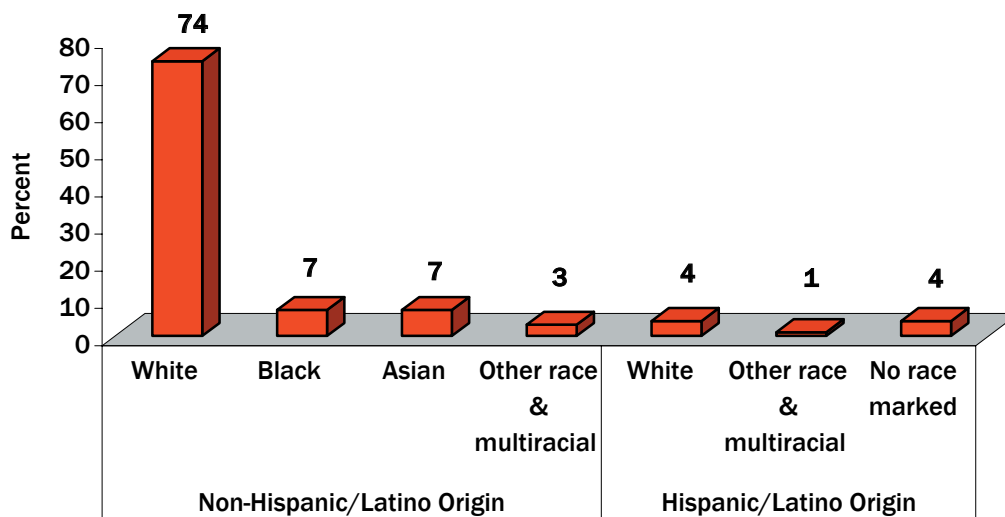


The racial identification of visitors varied by museum. For example, at C-HNDM, nine in ten (90%) said they were White, whereas 40 percent of National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) visitors said they were African American/Black.

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<sup>10</sup> Following the 1990 Census of Population, OMB, which regulates federal statistical standards, determined that the increasing diversity of the American population would be more accurately described with one question for Latino/Hispanic ethnicity and a separate question for racial identity that allowed a person to select more than one race. In a Federal Register Notice on October 30, 1997, OMB directed that federal programs should ask separate questions for ethnicity and race beginning no later than January 1, 2003.

### Latino/Hispanic Ethnicity and Race



### Levels of Education

Museums tend to draw educated visitors, and the Smithsonian's are no exception. Visitors over 25 years of age generally reported high levels of educational attainment: 31 percent reported completing a bachelor's degree and 42 percent held graduate or professional degrees. Twelve percent had completed one or more years of college but held no degree, and seven percent had completed an associate degree. Nine percent of visitors over the age of 25 marked high school as their highest level of formal education.

**Smithsonian museum visitors are racially and ethnically more diverse, younger, and more educated in 2004 than they were in 1994.\***

—74% non-Latino white visitors compared with 82% in 1994.

—36 years old compared with 38 (median age).

—73% with at least a four-year college degree compared with 67%.

\* Data include NMAH, NMNH, NASM, FGA, and AMSG. Source for 1994 data: Zahava D. Doering and Adam Bickford, *Visitors to the Smithsonian Institution: A Summary of Studies*, Smithsonian Institution, Institutional Studies Office, Report 97-3, April 1997.

## Visitor Satisfaction



An important indicator of how well Smithsonian museums are serving visitors is whether they leave satisfied. Are they finding what they want, and are Smithsonian museums delivering the program results that they believe all visitors should come away with, such as personal enjoyment and learning? The survey looked at visitor satisfaction in two ways. One asked visitors to select those experiences they had during their visit that were most satisfying. The experiences included some developed from research on satisfying museum experiences conducted by OP&A and its predecessor Office of Institutional Studies,<sup>11</sup> and some suggested by Smithsonian museum directors as outcomes they wanted for visitors. The second focused on how visitors scored well-known museum mission objectives and amenities.

### Overall Satisfaction

On the five-point scale used in the survey (poor, fair, good, excellent, and superior), a majority of visitors, 68 percent, rated their overall experience as superior (19%) or excellent (49%), and 29 percent marked it as good. Three percent had fair experiences, and less than one percent said poor. Overall satisfaction was uniformly high across Smithsonian museums, ranging from a low of 58 percent to a high of 81 percent superior or excellent.

Often the most important outcome of a satisfied visitor is a word of mouth recommendation—telling friends or relatives that the museum is a "must see."<sup>12</sup> Most visitors indicated they would tell friends and family to visit: eight out of ten (81%) said the museum they exited is a "must visit." A small fraction, 12 percent of visitors, was not sure, and less than one visitor in 12 (7%) would not tell friends and family that the museum is a "must visit."

Overall satisfaction affects visitors' interest in making subsequent visits, their

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Andrew Pekarik, Zahava D. Doering, and David A. Karns, "Exploring Satisfying Experiences in Museums," *Curator* 42 (2)(April 1999).

<sup>12</sup> The marketing literature often cites customer loyalty as a key indicator of growth in visitation. See, for example, Frederick F. Reichheld, "The One Number You Need to Grow," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2003): 46-54.

willingness to recommend that friends visit, and the likelihood that they buy products at museum shops, eat at museum food facilities, and become a museum member. Across all Smithsonian museums, visitors who rated certain visit results or museum amenities as superior or excellent or who selected certain experiences as most satisfying were also likely

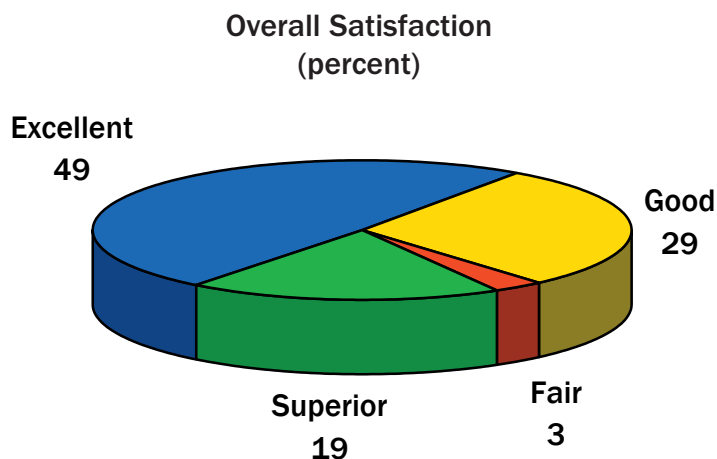
to rate their overall satisfaction as superior or excellent. The most significant predictors of overall visitor satisfaction in the 2004 visitor survey—all of which were rated positively—were, in order of statistical significance:

- Personal enjoyment
- Museum store
- Relevance of exhibits for me personally
- Accessibility in the museum and exhibits
- Helpfulness of museum staff
- Feeling awe and wonder
- Displays of rare and beautiful objects
- Cleanliness of the building
- Seeing "the real thing."

### Most Satisfying Experiences

Visitors typically marked several experiences that were most satisfying: on average they marked four of the 14 experiences listed on the questionnaire; four percent did not report any experience.

"Seeing 'the real thing'" was the most common experience: three in five visitors (60%) said it was most satisfying. Other prominent experiences were "gaining information or insight" (40%) and "spending time with friends/family" (35%). Across all Smithsonian museums, one fifth of visitors (20%) said they found themselves "reflecting on the meaning of what I saw." This occurred most frequently at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG) (contemporary art) (42% of visitors) and AMMSG (Asian art) (33%).







Some experiences emerged as more closely associated with particular museums or types of museums than with others. An example is "feeling pride in America." Over half (55%) of US resident visitors to NMAH—compared to ten percent for international visitors—reported that experience. At the two National Air and Space Museum (NASM) facilities—the Mall museum and the Udvar-Hazy Center

(UHC)—the figures were 38 percent and 44 percent, respectively, and 34 percent of visitors to the National Postal Museum (NPM) had that experience. On the other hand, relatively few visitors, national or international, to the Smithsonian art museums reported that experience (8%).

"Appreciating the need for scientific research" emerged as one of the more common experiences at Smithsonian science museums, with one third of visitors (33%) to those museums reporting it. The comparable figures at the art and American subject matter museums were seven percent and 14 percent, respectively. Visitors to some museums marked "realizing technology's impact on society" as a satisfying experience: more than a third of NASM visitors (39% at the Mall museum and 42% at UHC) and 34 percent at NPM. This experience was rare at the art museums (10% of visitors). The exception was C-HNDM, where a temporary exhibition, *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser*, one of the first industrial designers, was on display and where 34 percent of visitors reported realizing the effects of technology.

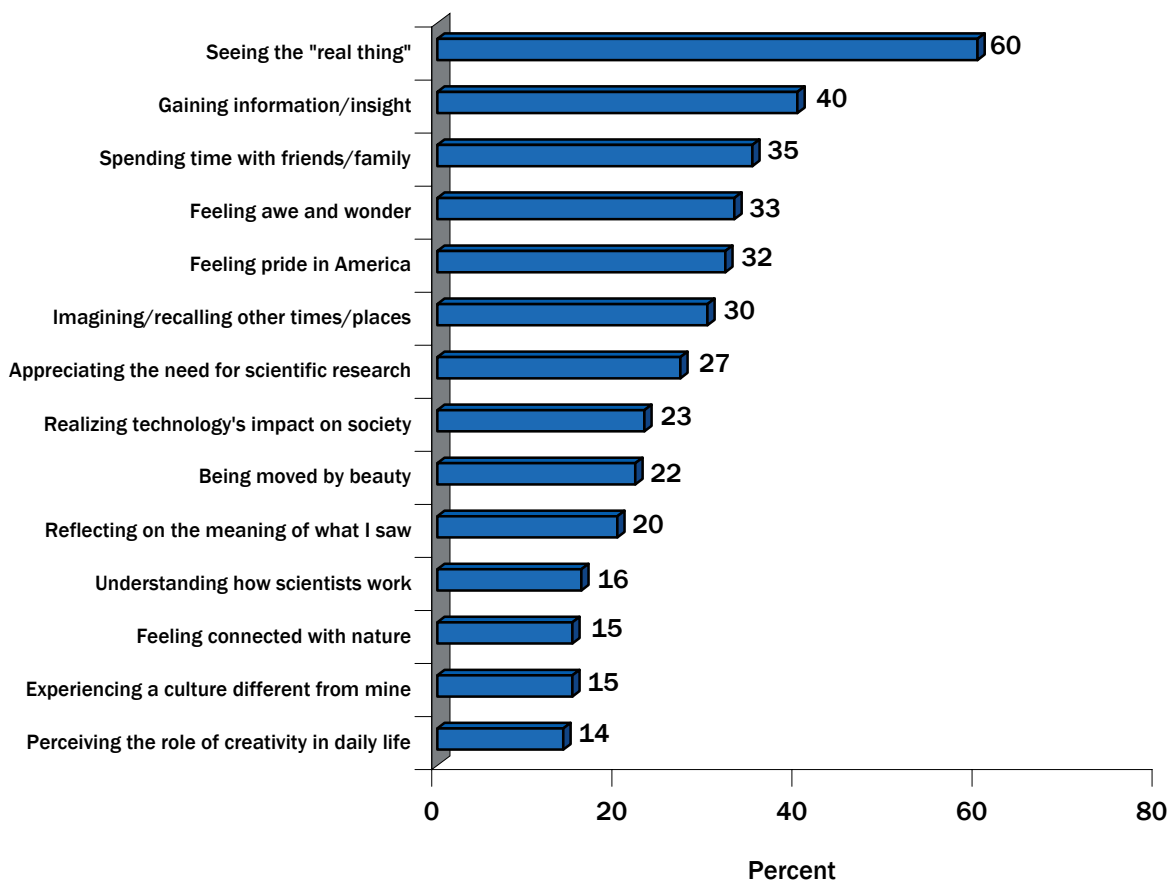
"Feeling connected with nature" was most often experienced by visitors at NZP (42%) and National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) (27%), while "understanding how scientists work" emerged primarily at science museums such as NASM (27% at the Mall museum and 13% at UHC), NMNH (17%), and NZP (10%).

Three experiences were principally found with art museum visitors. "Being moved by beauty" was the most common: more than half (51%) gave this response, as compared to 22% for all Smithsonian visitors. Over a third (36%) of visitors to the art museums, which include those devoted to Asian and African art, reported "experiencing a different culture than my own." Likewise, 37

percent of art museum visitors chose "perceiving the role of creativity in daily life" as an experience—more than twice the rate found at the other types of museums. Of the non-art museums, over half the visitors (55%) to GGHC reported "experiencing a different culture than my own."



Most Satisfying Experiences



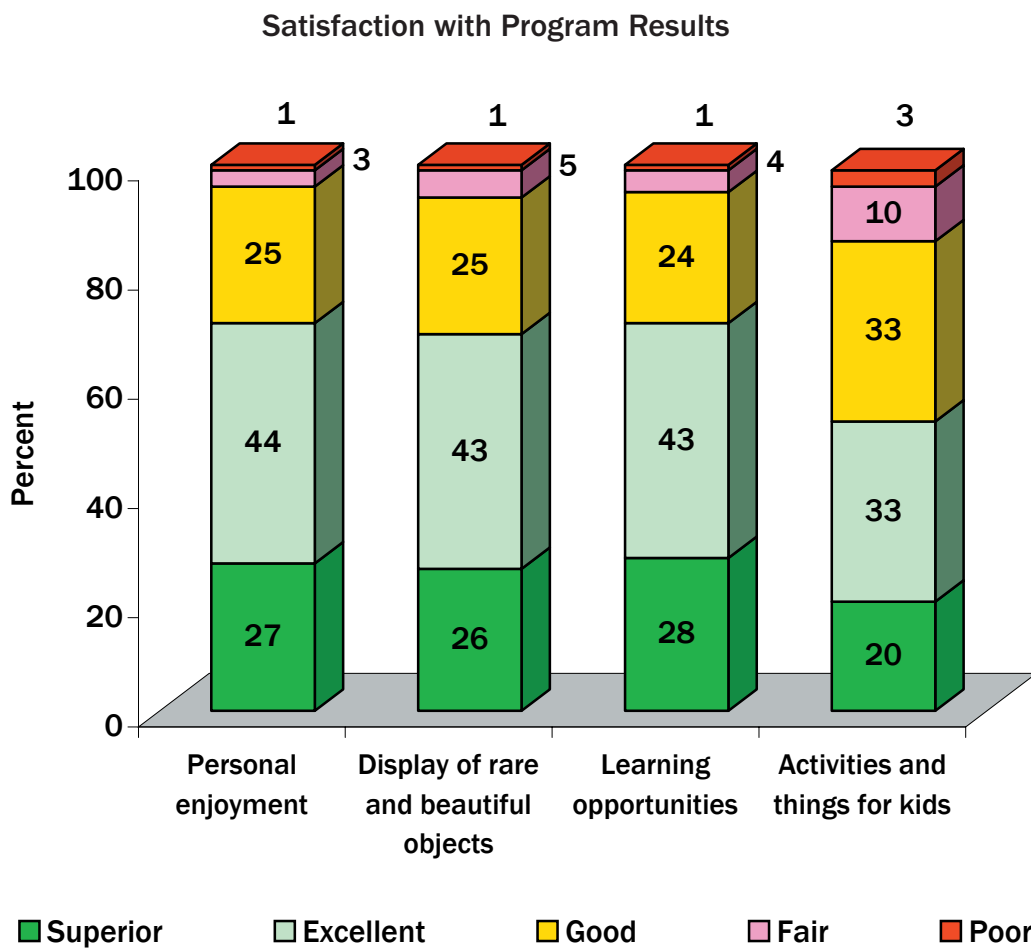
## Rating Program Results

The survey looked at whether the museums were achieving certain results that SI would want all visitors to come away with. Some results relate to the exhibition/program experience, among them inclusiveness, and others relate to certain key museum amenities, such as helpfulness of staff and cleanliness of the building.

### Exhibitions/Programs

Visitors were asked about four aspects of a museum's program offerings. All four received high ratings on the five-point scale of poor, fair, good, excellent, and superior:

- Learning opportunities (71% superior or excellent)
- Personal enjoyment (71% superior or excellent)
- Displays of rare or beautiful objects (69% superior or excellent)
- Activities and things for kids to do (53% superior or excellent)



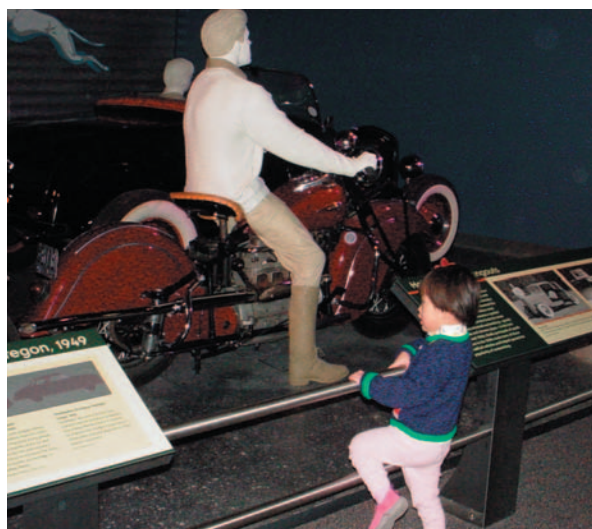
Three of these items—"learning opportunities," "personal enjoyment," and "displays of rare or beautiful objects"—received a superior or excellent rating from seven in ten visitors. The rating for "activities and things for kids to do" was slightly lower. Art museum visitors were significantly less likely to give a high rating to "activities and things for kids to do" than visitors to other Smithsonian museums. Art museum visitors were also more likely to say that activities and things for kids to do were not applicable to their museum visit (65% indicated not applicable or did not answer the question). As noted, fewer art museum visitors were accompanied by children.

A valuable indicator of exhibition success is if the experience is so engrossing that visitors almost lose track of time. Almost two thirds of visitors (64%) answered positively that some exhibits were so engaging that they almost lost track of time.

### Inclusiveness and Accessibility

The survey provided an opportunity to test, at an aggregate level, whether certain public interest matters were being met satisfactorily. Appealing to diverse audiences—inclusiveness—was assessed by cross-tabulating "relevance of exhibits for me personally" with visitors who identified themselves as belonging to an ethnic or racial minority. Accessibility was assessed by cross-tabulating ratings on "accessibility in the museum and exhibits" with visitors who identified themselves as deaf or having a temporary or permanent disability.

Non-white US residents were less likely to find personal relevance in museum exhibitions. Slightly over half (54%) of those visitors who identified themselves with a racial or ethnic minority rated "relevance of exhibits for me personally" as superior or excellent compared to 62% of US white visitors.<sup>13</sup> Eleven percent of minority visitors scored personal relevance as poor or fair.



<sup>13</sup> International visitors reported less personal relevance (50% superior or excellent) compared to US residents (61%).

Four percent of all visitors said they were deaf or had a temporary or permanent physical disability. Of that four percent, most (96%) found accessibility in the museum and exhibits to be at least good, and 65 percent rated it excellent or superior. For all visitors surveyed, two thirds rated accessibility in the museum and exhibits as superior (24%) or excellent (43%).

## **Amenities**

A Smithsonian visit begins with planning. It continues with arrival at a museum, including the security check (bag checks and/or magnetometers), followed by exhibitions and programs and use of restrooms, museum stores, and food services. How satisfied visitors are with each of the non-program aspects (amenities) may factor heavily in overall satisfaction. The survey included a number of questions that asked visitors to evaluate how well a museum did in these areas.

**Use of Websites for Planning.** One in six visitors (14%) reported using the museum's website to plan their visit; the lowest figure at any museum was eight percent. Visitors to science museums reported the greatest website use (16%), but the figure was inflated by the 30% of visitors who used the NASM website to get information about the new Udvar-Hazy Center.

**Entrance into the Museum.** Typically, visitors thought that the time they waited to enter a Smithsonian museum was reasonable. Only one out of 20 visitors (6%) commented that the wait to get through security was too long. Even at NASM and NMNH—the most visited museums—fewer than one visitor in 12 made that point. The longer waits during periods with unusually heavy visitation contributed to their higher figures at these two museums.

**Stores and Food Services.** All but one Smithsonian museum have a museum store; six have food services for visitors.<sup>14</sup> The percentage of visitors rating museum stores and food services as superior or excellent was 48 percent and 34 percent, respectively—lower than the ratings for exhibitions/programs. Many museum visitors did not rate stores and food service. For the museums that have stores or food services, 40 percent of visitors did not rate the stores and 56 percent did not rate the food facilities.

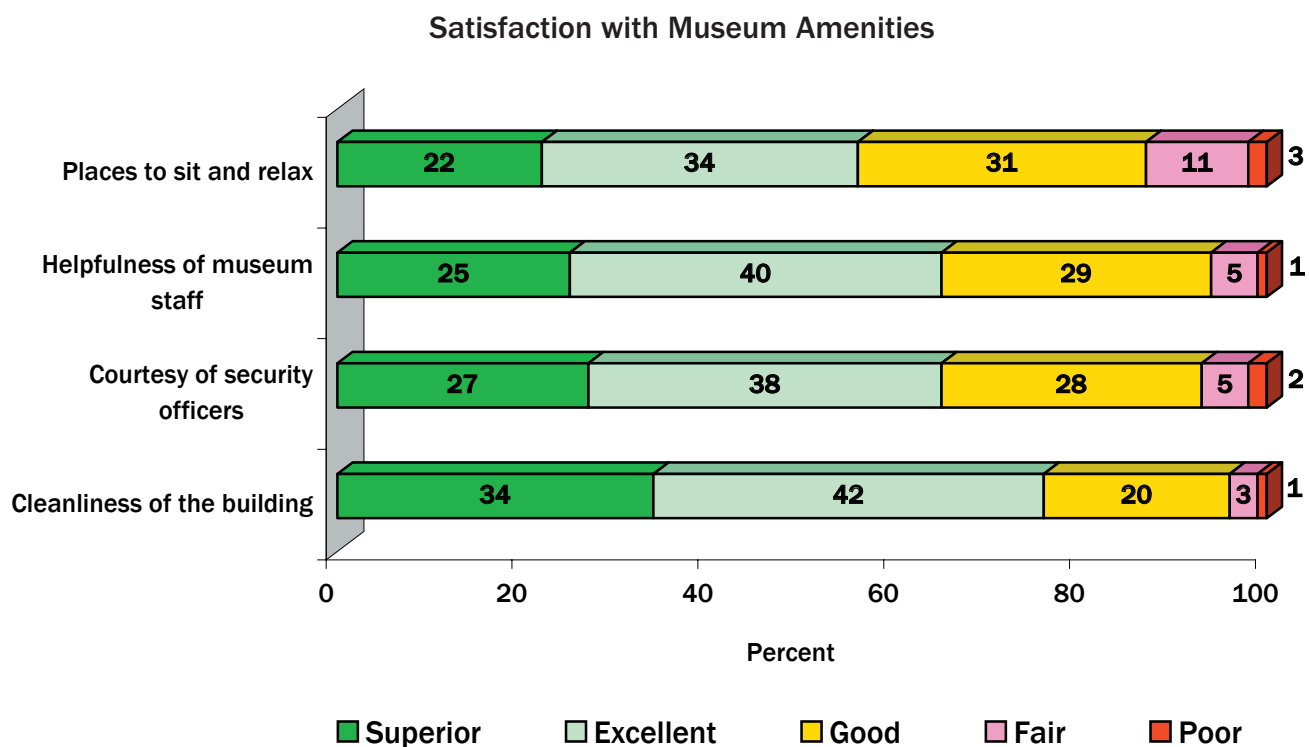
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<sup>14</sup> Anacostia Museum has no store; NASM (Mall and UHC), NMNH, NMAH, NZP, and C-HNDM have public food facilities.

**Other Amenities.** The survey looked at four other amenities, which visitors rated more or less similarly on average:

- Cleanliness of the building (76% superior or excellent)
- Courtesy of security officers (65% superior or excellent)
- Helpfulness of museum staff (65% superior or excellent)
- Places to sit and relax (56% superior or excellent)

Only the availability of places to sit and relax was rated fair or poor by more than ten percent of visitors.



## Conclusion

The survey data show that the vast majority of visitors are highly satisfied with their trips to the Smithsonian, but their satisfaction varies among museums. At



the same time, the survey data point to continuing challenges that the Smithsonian and the individual museums must continue to work on, such as finding innovative ways to meet the interests of minority and less educated audiences so that they may be better served. To measure future levels of satisfaction, targets need to be established and museum operations need to be monitored on a regular basis.

To achieve even greater visitor

satisfaction, the Smithsonian must continue to invest in the people, ideas, and systems that have contributed to the enduring success of the museums over the Institution's century and a half history.