

**Eaters of the Smithsonian Sun:  
Characteristics of Visitors to Smithsonian Museums  
Office of Policy & Analysis  
Smithsonian Institution**

- “World Class”—The Smithsonian Institution ranked #1 in quality among all brands (automotive, retail, financial services, telecommunications, and other brands such as the Discovery Channel) in 2003. (Source: Harris Interactive news release August 28, 2003. Harris has not included the Smithsonian in subsequent surveys.)
- More persons were aware of the Smithsonian and could rate it than Mercedes-Benz, Harley Davidson, or Diehard batteries, but fewer than Hershey’s Kisses or M&M’s. Seventy-three percent rated the Smithsonian brand.
- Smithsonian museums drew 24 million visits in FY 2005 composed of three groups: local residents, American visitors living outside the local area, and visitors from other countries.
  - ... Twenty-three percent of the visits in 2004 were made by local residents living within 40 miles of a museum although the local visits shares of total visits ranged from 44 percent at the National Zoo to 8 percent at American History and Air and Space.<sup>1</sup>
  - ... Ten percent of Smithsonian visits are made by persons who live in countries other than the United States.
  - ... Two-thirds are made by United States residents living outside the local area.
  - ... Three out of five visits are made by persons who had visited the Smithsonian at an earlier time in their lives; one-fourth of the repeat Smithsonian visitors are making their first visit to the specific Smithsonian museum visited on the survey day(13% of all visits).
  - ... Seven out of eight local visitors are making a repeat Smithsonian visit.
  - ... More than seven million tourists (international visitors and Americans living out-



Joan Miró, Sun Eater, 1955.  
© Successió Miró, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2005

1 Unless indicated otherwise, statistics about visits and visitors come from the 2004 Smithsonian-wide Survey of Museum Visitors available from the Office of Policy and Analysis’s website at [http://www.si.edu/opanda/Reports/Reports/SI2004\\_Survey\\_Booklet.pdf](http://www.si.edu/opanda/Reports/Reports/SI2004_Survey_Booklet.pdf). American Indian visitors were surveyed in March 2005., and the data are included in this report.

side the local area came to Washington to visit the Smithsonian, at least as part of their trip<sup>2</sup>.

- Demographically, Smithsonian museum audiences provide a good representation of the American population—except for education and, consequently, for race and ethnicity.
  - ... A typical Smithsonian museum visitor is very highly educated compared with other Americans. Three-quarters of Smithsonian visitors are graduates of four-year colleges compared with more than one-quarter of all Americans over 25 years old.
  - ... Diversity in terms of race and ethnicity closely mirrors diversity within the college educated population of the United States (Source: NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2003). Latinos and African Americans are less represented in the overall Smithsonian visitorship (each is 9% of visitors 12 and older) compared to all Americans over 14 (each is 12% in the 2000 Census). Asians are slightly over represented (8% compared with 5% nationally).
  - ... Diversity varies substantially between Smithsonian museums.
  - ... Smithsonian museum visitorship over represents Americans who are educated and able to afford the time and money to travel to Washington, especially the six million Americans who include the Smithsonian in a trip to Washington.
  - ... There are slightly larger percentage of visitors between 30 and 49 years old than in the general American population; the percentage of visitors over 65 in Smithsonian museums is lower than in the general population.
  - ... A typical visitor to a Smithsonian art museum or the Zoo is significantly more likely to be a woman (59%) than a man (41%), while a visitor to one of the Air and Space facilities is more likely to be a man than a woman.
- Smithsonian museum visitors generally leave with pleasant memories. More than two out of three Smithsonian museum visitors rate their visit as “Superior” or “Excellent.”
  - ... Four out of five report that they will tell their friends that the museum they were visiting is a “Must Visit.”
  - ... Visiting a Smithsonian museum is a social activity for many visitors. More than three out of four visitors is visiting with someone else. Visit groups are equally

---

<sup>2</sup> The 24 million visits include all persons who make a visit to a Smithsonian facility. A typical visitor visits more than one facility on a given visit to the National Mall. In addition, some persons visit Smithsonian museums more than once during a year. The seven million is an estimate of the number of unique persons who visited the Smithsonian museum complex during 2005.

- divided between all adult groups (39%) and adults accompanied by children (39%) with adult-children groups more common in Smithsonian science museums and less common in art museums. Nearly two-thirds of Zoo visitors report that spending time with friends/family was one of their satisfying visit experiences.
- ... Local visitors, especially repeat local visitors, are much more likely to report that they had the satisfying experience of spending time with friends/family while visiting a Smithsonian museum, especially the Zoo, than tourists.
  - ... Activities and things for kids to do in science museums are rated somewhat less favorably than their overall visit experience (56% “Excellent” or “Superior” compared with 70% for overall experience).
  - ... Visitors generally consider Smithsonian museums to be clean (76% “Excellent” or “Superior”), security officers to be courteous (65%), and museum staff to be helpful (65%).
- Visitors exit Smithsonian museums having had a variety of experiences.
    - ... “Seeing the real thing” is the single most frequently reported visit experience and extends across all types of Smithsonian museums (60% overall).
    - ... “Gaining information or insight” and “Spending time with friends/family” are also reported by visitors across the institution (40% overall).
    - ... Other experiences are more frequent in specific museums
      - “Being moved by beauty” and “Perceiving the role of creativity in daily life” is primarily in art museums.
      - “Experiencing a culture different from mine” is a more frequent experience at the Freer/Sackler Gallery and African Art.
      - “Feeling pride in America” occurs primarily at American History and both Air and Space facilities.
      - “Feeling connected with nature” is experienced most frequently at the National Zoo.
  - The Smithsonian Worldwide Web address—si.edu—is accessed more frequently than any other museum address according to web tracking statistics on Alexa.com (March 7, 2006). Its rank among all addresses is 3804. The New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art are ranked as 6012 and 9106 respectively. Of course, Yahoo at number 1, Disney at 25, The New York Times at 49, NASCAR at 1667, and American Girl at 3429, all are accessed more frequently than the Smithsonian Institution.