

FOUR STUDIES ON VISITOR RESPONSES TO PHOTOGRAPHY

Prepared for the
International Art Museums Division
Smithsonian Institution

September 2001



**Smithsonian Institution
Office of Policy & Analysis
Washington, D.C. 20560-0405**

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the results of four studies conducted at the request of Tom Lentz, Director, International Art Museums, to help with planning for an exhibition of photographs from Smithsonian collections. The initial study, an *Interview Study*, consisted of focused conversations with visitors about their general experience with photographs and photography. In the *Favorites Study*, Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) staff showed visitors a set of 19 representative photographs from the collections and asked them to select their three favorites, to say why they liked them, and to rate the quality of the whole set on a scale from one to five. For the *Card Sort Study*, OP&A staff gave visitors a set of 22 photographs (mostly the images in the *Favorites Study*), and asked them to sort the photos into categories of their own choosing. OP&A staff recorded the names the visitors gave the categories, their favorites, the reasons they liked them, and the overall rating of the set on the one to five scale. For the *Telephone Study*, OP&A staff called museums that regularly showed photographs and asked them about visitor response to photo exhibitions they had mounted.

The discussion of the summary of the findings and the recommendations are provided below. It is followed by presentations of the findings from the four studies.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A HUMAN STORY

The findings from the four studies are remarkably consistent in one regard: they indicate that visitors are most attracted to photographs that appeal to their personal interests, especially in history and the natural world, or that have an emotional story to tell, particularly one that sheds some light on America. Visitors are looking for a human connection. Exhibitions of well-known photographers have been successful at art and photography museums, but the Smithsonian visitors OP&A staff spoke with approached the photographs primarily from a content perspective. They seemed to be relatively uninterested in photography as an art form distinguished by formal, aesthetic qualities or by self-reflective linkages. They showed some discomfort with a set of photographs that was not unified by some idea or main theme.

***Recommendation:* The exhibition should have a single theme that connects to visitors' emotions and/or reveals something compelling about America or American history.**

COMPELLING SELECTION

Visitors, particularly those participating in the *Card Sort*, did not rate the set of photographs as a whole as particularly interesting. While they considered some

photographs to be very engaging, others were not. Because visitors at the Smithsonian tend to give high scores in studies such as this, OP&A staff consider their ratings of level of interest to be relatively low. Moreover, staff believe that the score from the *Favorites Study* is higher than that from the *Card Sort Study* because respondents in the former were focused on their favorites more than on the group of photos as a whole and were viewing better, larger prints of the photos, while the visitors involved in the *Card Sort* worked with the entire set of photos for much longer and had more of a sense of the totality of the set. OP&A staff also observed that only a few of the photographs gave people pause to stop and wonder.

Although OP&A staff could not have predicted which would be most popular in advance of this study, it should now be possible, using the results of this study, to make a stronger selection.

***Recommendation:* The selection should be determined more by the suitability of the subject matter to the theme and by the ability of the photograph to communicate emotional content, than by the aesthetic quality of the images or their role in the history of photography. At the same time, there should be a core of highly compelling photographs.**

FURTHER RESEARCH

As the search for a theme continues, it would be useful to gather visitor opinions on the relative power of proposed alternative themes. Although OP&A staff can identify guiding principles, it is impossible to predict how people will react to a particular title or image without asking them.

***Recommendation:* Proposed themes should be tested against one another in small studies, using titles and images. Such testing could be designed to distinguish between the effectiveness of the title and the effectiveness of the accompanying image.**

FINDINGS FROM THE FOUR STUDIES

THE INTERVIEW STUDY

OP&A staff spoke at length with 15 visitor groups about their experiences with photography exhibitions, books, and magazines on photography, with photography workshops and classes, and with collecting photographs. Staff also discussed visitors' preferences and responses to photographs. An underlying structure of ideas emerged from the interviews on the types of photographs and subject matter that people found attractive, and on their own experiences as photographers.

Types of photographs

The types of photos that visitors most often recalled as compelling can be classified into five areas: history, recent events, nature, people and art. The historical photographs mentioned were often of wars or cities; visitors described them as "meaningful." Recent events photographs included the more common news events, as well as extraordinary photographs, what one visitor called "Pulitzer Prize pictures." Nature photographs encompassed the sea, animals, flowers, and landscapes. The landscape examples that visitors gave were all from the American West and Southwest. They described these outstanding nature photos as "realistic" and "beautiful." When discussing photographs of people, the visitor groups spoke of action, stories, emotion and different cultures. Visitors mentioned art photography the least. A few thought that film and video deserved a place in a Smithsonian exhibition on photography, especially newsreels and silent films.

The attraction of photographs

Visitors' descriptions of photographs they recalled strongly involved two overlapping characteristics: visitors had a personal interest in the subject matter or could connect strongly with it, and the photos evoked an emotional response. Photographs that moved them caused them "to sit and look for a while," or made them feel "like almost being there." In general, as one visitor said, they are photographs where "you can get the emotion."

Experience as photographers

Most of the visitors took photos of their family or as tourists. Only a few identified themselves as serious photographers, some of whom had exhibited publicly and some who had not.

THE FAVORITES STUDY

OP&A staff interviewed 95 people for the *Favorites Study*. They conducted the interviews at the Arts and Industries Building, Smithsonian Castle, Air and Space Museum, American History, Hirshhorn, and Natural History.

Favorite photos

Each visitor was asked to pick three favorites out of the 19 photographs in the album. The photos they most liked were:

- *View of the Grand Canyon* (a favorite for 29% of respondents)
- *Portrait of Chief Na-Sa-Wa-Kwut* (27%)
- *Untitled (Five Young Girls)* (26%)
- *Jupiter and the Galilean Satellites* (25%)
- *Hitting the Wall* (23%)
- *Rochas Mermaid Dress* (21%).

Visitors demonstrated very diverse preferences. Each photograph in the book was picked as a favorite at least once. The top favorite was picked five times as often as the least favored photo, *Jean and Louis, Race at the Chateau*. Table 1 lists all of the photos and the percentage of respondents who chose that photo as a favorite.

Reasons for favorites

The *Grand Canyon* photograph attracted respondents primarily because of its impressive scenery and its evocative power (recalling memories, engendering emotions, noting the figure of the solitary man). *Portrait of Chief Na-Sa-Wa-Kwut* was described as “emotional,” “sensitive,” “authentic” and “expressive” and inspired thoughts of heritage and history. He reminded one respondent of her grandfather; another visitor said, “there is something about him that shines through.” *Untitled (Five Young Girls)* seemed to suggest a story to visitors and a social context, and they emphasized the girls as happy, smiling and innocent. People admired *Jupiter and the Galilean Satellites* for its color and clarity, and because of their personal interest in space. *Hitting the Wall*, a photograph of President Kennedy interacting with a crowd, recalled visitors’ memories of President Kennedy and his times.

Ratings

On a scale of one to five, where one is very boring and five is very interesting, the visitors as a whole rated their level of interest in the photos in the Favorites study as 4.1.

TABLE 1: THE PERCENTAGE OF VISITORS WHO CHOSE PARTICULAR PHOTOS AS FAVORITES IN THE FAVORITE STUDY

<i>Favorites</i>	<i>%</i>
Grand Canyon	29
Portrait of Chief Na-Sa-Wa-Kwut	27
Untitled (Five Young Girls)	26
Jupiter and the Galilean Satellites	25
Hitting the Wall	23
Rochas Mermaid Dress	21
Cyanotype of the Moon	18
Crashed Curtiss JN-4HT	18
Untitled (Family on Street)	16
In Winter, Kiowa	15
Swimmers Dive from Submerged Temples, Banaras	14
Bumper Project Launch In Florida, July 24, 1950	13
Untitled, from the series Cowboys and Western Landscapes	11
Man Sneezing	9
P.T. Barnum and "Tom Thumb"	8
Puerto Rican Flag	7
Danjiro in Samurai Warrior Costume	7
Branch of Leaves of <i>Mercurialis Perennis</i>	7
Jean and Louis, Race at the Chateau, Rouzat, September, 1911	6

Differences by Gender and Residence

In terms of the top favorites, there were no differences by gender. Among the other photos, *Cyanotype of the Moon* and *Untitled (Family on Street)* were more attractive to men and *In Winter, Kiowa* was more attractive to women, but overall these photos were only of average interest.

In terms of level of interest, women and local visitors consistently rated the photographs higher than men and out-of-town visitors.

THE CARD SORT STUDY

Frequency of topics

Fifty-nine visitors participated in the *Card Sort Study*. OP&A staff began by asking the visitors to group the 22 photographs in whatever ways occurred to them, and those ways proved very diverse. On average, the visitors created six categories, with a range from

two to 10. Staff next asked the visitors to label each of the categories they had created. Visitors came up with a very large number of labels, examples being “memorable persons,” “science,” “ethnic groups,” “old photos” and “don’t know.” Because there were so many categories, for purposes of analysis OP&A staff established 12 topics that encompassed all the categories and assigned each of the categories which visitors mentioned to one or more of the related topics.

The leading topic was Nature/Landscape, with three out of four visitors (75%) creating at least one category that OP&A staff identified as relating to nature or landscape. The next most prominent topic was American History (69%). A number of visitors found that they could not easily categorize some photographs and ended up using labels such as “don’t know,” “miscellaneous,” and “other.” Those responses, as well as a few categories mentioned by a small number of people that did not fit into the specific OP&A topics, made up a fairly sizable “Other” topic. Table 2 shows the 12 topics and the percentage of respondents who created a category under that topic at least once.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF VISITORS WHO CREATED A CATEGORY IN ONE OF THE 12 TOPICS

<i>Topic</i>	<i>%</i>
Nature/ Landscape	75
American History	69
Ethnic/ Cultural	62
People	52
Other	51
Photo	43
Science	36
Space	34
Transportation/ Exploration	28
Fashion/ Entertainment	26
City	18
Art	16

Favorite topics

After people labeled their categories, OP&A staff asked them to identify which three of the categories they would most like to see in an exhibit (their “favorite categories”). Staff used this information to identify which topics these visitors would most like to see in an exhibition. Once again, America/American History and Nature/Landscape were the most popular topics. Three out of four visitors who created a category relating to America or American History also identified that category as a favorite. Three out of five visitors who created a category relating to Nature/Landscape also identified that category as a favorite. Art was the least popular topic, both in terms of the percentage of visitors who created a category that referred to art and in terms of the percentage of visitors who identified an art category and then designated it as a favorite. Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents who identified a topic as their favorite.

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF VISITORS WHO IDENTIFIED A CATEGORY WITHIN ONE OF THE 12 TOPICS AS THEIR FAVORITE

<i>Topic</i>	<i>%</i>
American History	74
Nature/ Landscape	63
Photo	62
Science	59
Transport/Exploration	59
Ethnic/ Cultural	55
People	53
Space	38
Fashion/Entertainment	38
City	27
Other	23
Art	20

Reasons for favorites

Each time visitors indicated a category they would like to see as an exhibition, OP&A staff asked them why they had made that choice. The categories related to American History were most often chosen as favorites because visitors felt a personal interest in history and wanted to learn about it through looking at the photographs. Categories relating to nature and landscape were chosen primarily because nature and the outdoors were a personal interest.

Level of quality

The visitors were asked how they would rate the level of interest of the photos in the *Card Sort* as a group, using the same scale of one to five. The visitors gave the photos a quality rating of 3.6.

Gender differences

There was no difference in the interest rating based on gender, but out-of-town visitors scored the set of photographs higher than did local visitors.

THE TELEPHONE STUDY

OP&A staff called 15 museums and photography centers around the country, asking several questions: what photography shows have been the most popular and why; what programs they offered in conjunction with the shows; what visitor studies they have done, if any; and how they market their shows. Because the sample is small, OP&A cannot draw any definitive conclusions, but some potentially useful themes emerged:

- Popular shows had definite themes or focus: they involved particular photographers, both nationally and locally known, and realistic photography that told a story or to which people could connect emotionally (history/photojournalism, the inside scoop, or compelling photos of people). Art photography was rarely mentioned.
- The location of the show was important—it needed to be accessible and visible.
- Most museums have a core of photography enthusiasts who come to every photography show.
- Most museums do not do visitor studies, and they do little advertising.