


**The Smithsonian Institution Council Report:
Barriers to Engagement at Smithsonian International Art Museums**

 Smithsonian Institution

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Barriers to Engagement at Smithsonian International Art Museums

The museums in the Smithsonian's International Art Museums Division (IAMD), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG), the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art (FSG), and the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA), face particular challenges in attracting and engaging audiences. The public views the Smithsonian as highlighting history and science, rather than art, and visitors to the Smithsonian are much more likely to know about the non-art museums, such as the National Air and Space Museum or objects like the Hope Diamond in the National Museum of Natural History. In addition, the primary subject matter areas of IAMD museums -- contemporary art, African art, and Asian art -- are generally unfamiliar to the American public.

This paper lists some of the obstacles that confront prospective visitors to these museums, using quotations and observations gathered from museum staff and visitors, and from directors and staff of non-Smithsonian art museums who are familiar with the IAMD institutions. It also lists suggestions for overcoming these barriers. With few exceptions, the barriers and the means for overcoming them are linked to visitor satisfaction. The majority of the suggestions were provided by interviewees. Staff at all three IAMD museums have good ideas about how to enhance the visitor experience. In some cases the lack of available resources has prevented these ideas from being implemented. In other cases institutional habits and policies stand in the way.

The relative importance of these barriers to either existing or potential audiences is not addressed in this paper. There may also be other barriers that are not identified here.

1. Unfamiliarity with the museums' subject matter is a primary barrier.

Art museums, in general, are difficult for many people.

One staff member expressed the problem by saying, "The objects in the history museum or the natural science, or air and space museums are very concrete, very recognizable, known to all, and authentic. They are the "real things." In the art museums the objects are very esoteric real things, and distant from everyday experience. At the IAMD museums they are very distant from everyday experience."

Some of that difficulty comes from the ways museums approach their subject.

Another staff person pointed out the ways that art museums make their art even less accessible than it naturally is. "Art museum experiences are perceived as intellectual. Making art is not necessarily intellectual, but at the art museum someone else is screening the art and has made it intellectual. The connection is less intimate when the art is presented in this formal atmosphere with 'don't touch' and all this information around it."

2. The buildings themselves present difficulties

The buildings are hard to identify from the outside

An outside museum manager, who is especially fond of African art, said that, "The first time I wanted to go to the African Art museum, I couldn't find it."

The buildings are not easily accessible from Mall

At HMSG there is no access from the Mall side, and, as one staff person pointed out, "at the Sackler Gallery and at the African Art museum the entrance doors are not visible."

Two of the museums are below ground

In the words of a non-Smithsonian museum director, "When you talk about attendance problems at African Art, Hirshhorn and Freer-Sackler, you are talking about three museums that are almost designed not to attract visitors... Subterranean buildings are a bad idea, even if you need to restrict light. In the Freer-Sackler and African Art you never know where you are."

The museums' names are not descriptive

According to some staff, "The Hirshhorn has an identity crisis... The museum is too discreet and does not tell people about what's inside. Nobody knows what a Hirshhorn is. People don't know what's in here and once you enter, you see no art. It could be a bank."

3. Internal arrangements present difficulties.

The entrance lobbies are not enticing

"The lobby displays are formal, rather than warm, inviting, and intriguing. They don't suggest what is inside the main museum," according to one visitor.

There is no central organizing principle or guide

There is no central, prominent directory of what is in the museum and where to find it.

Stores are hidden

Although the shops are attractive and interesting they are hard to find (except at HMSG).

4. Offerings are not as visitor-oriented as possible

The museums offer no food, and no evening hours

A staff member noted, "We make it grueling to visit, especially for local people. We are only open until 5:30 p.m. and there is no food to be had at the museums."

Exhibit design is not always engaging

"The way the art [in that exhibition] is presented is not engaging. It is an inside conversation, but even for insiders, it is dull," according to a staff member.

Labels are in English only

"An immigrant family feels cut off because the language it needs isn't there. Labels should be in multiple languages. Why doesn't this happen? It is considered an aesthetic problem," notes an insider.

There are few hands-on activities

A visitor pointed out that, "For kids this is a little dry. I'm being honest; I'm not trying to be dramatic. For kids, Air and Space and the American History museum are more interactive. This museum consists of just pictures on the wall."

There is no music (except in the shops)

The displays do not encourage an emotional connection with the places that are suggested by the art. One young visitor complained that, "The museum is plain. I would like more music, like they have in the bookstore."

The museums suggest an insider focus

In their consistency of display the museums project the belief that everything in the museum has to be presented the same way, that the museum is "only one thing," and that identity as a museum depends on a single, consistent experience. That, in turn, seems to be based on an assumption that everyone is "like us."

5. The museums also have some advantages

They are unique and unusual

A visitor pointed out that, "Because I live in Baltimore and come here quite a bit, I've seen a lot of the traditional tourist sites already, and I'm looking for something else."

They can provide alternative points of view

"I'm interested in basic ways of being a human being and trying not to mediate it too much with whatever you learned in school and society and perceived in advertisements. And so I'm interested in the basic human-ness and anything that is different from my normal way of looking," a visitor said.

6. What might help overcome some of the barriers

Fostering more varied ways of connecting with visitors

According to a staff member, "Lots of art museums convey the impression that you have to know a lot to get anything out of the experience in the museum. People expect that. Few art museums give other entry points for approaching art. You have to know how to have aesthetic experiences before you get here, because we won't tell you. And you have to have the knowledge and information. The museum offers some contextual information, but if the museum only offers contextual information as an entry point to the art, then that implies that information is the only way to approach it. This is a barrier. Visitors are not dying to pick up a ton of information. They're looking for many different kinds of experiences, far beyond just aesthetics and information."

An outside museum director pointed out that, "There are other ways to engage people. Sherman Lee [former director, Cleveland Museum of Art] used to hire artists to come into the museum and paint copies of things. Visitors would stand over their shoulders and look more closely at the art as a result. Calligraphy, for example, is wonderful to watch. Until you've seen it done you can't get it. So you need to see someone doing it, either live or on video."

Explaining technique or process

"With materials like this the public wants to know how it's made. You can engage people in the context of making art because it requires no theory," in the opinion of a museum director.

Instituting more design variety

" Visiting the African art museum needs to be an event. A restrained and tasteful sense of theater is very appropriate," according to a museum director.

Focusing on stories

A non-Smithsonian director also noted that, "Visitors are interested more by stories -- what's the story? But the museum gives few narratives for its objects, not even the narratives of how they were found. It's just not inviting to delve into a whole new territory. The stories are not easy to get to. They are embedded."

Identifying and promoting icon objects

By identifying and strongly promoting objects or images as icons of the museums, the museum staff would give visitors a shorthand way to reference their museum and a motivation for visiting. These icons would have to be chosen for their power in the public imagination, rather than for their art historical importance (in the same way that the ruby slippers and the First Ladies gowns draw substantial numbers of visitors to NMAH, although they are not the most important objects in the museum.)

Advertising the shops

Visitors seem very pleased with the shops at African art and Freer-Sackler, and the museums should not be shy about promoting them.