

Freer Gallery of Art
2015 Visitor Studies
Part Three:
Interview Study



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Introduction

In preparation for the closing of the Freer Gallery of Art (Freer) in 2016 for infrastructure work and its scheduled re-opening in 2017, the staff of the Freer requested that the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conduct a year-long survey study of Freer visitors. This included a year-long survey, an observation study and an in-depth interview study, the latter of which is reported below.

Methodology

The data for this study were gathered between April and October of 2015, and included seventy in-depth interviews with visitors to the Freer. These interviews were based on an unstructured grounded theory approach, meaning that visitors were asked broad, open-ended questions, and the conversation that unfolded was led, as much as possible, by the visitor themselves. Follow-up questions were all derived from the visitor's previous responses. As a result of this open-ended method, these interviews ranged from only a few minutes long to over an hour, with most lasting between seven and twenty minutes.

This open-ended, discursive method allowed the OP&A team to gather a broad range of perspectives from Freer visitors. Moreover, it allowed the interviewers to delve deeply into the thoughts and feelings of the visitors, who often revealed profoundly personal experiences with the art and the museum.

The purpose of qualitative research of this kind is to explore the breadth and range of experiences had by visitors in the museum, and gain a deeper understanding of what visiting the Freer means to those who do.

Summary of Key Points

- **Freer visitors are diverse.**
- **They have diverse backgrounds that inform their interests, such as:**
 - Art aficionados/professionals.
 - Art students.
 - Artists.
 - Travelers (to FSG countries).
 - Visitors (from FSG countries).
 - Immigrants (first, second, third-generation).
 - Museum Omnivores.
- **They come to do different things, including.**
 - To encounter Asia.
 - To encounter people from the past.
 - To understand themselves better.
 - To encounter extraordinary things, and understand how they were used and made.
 - To encounter something that will make them *feel*.
 - To improve their artistic ability.
 - To swim in their imaginations.
 - To visit certain objects they fell in love with.
 - To do their homework for Art History class.
 - To relax and escape the outside world.
 - To be surprised.

- To be inspired.
- And more....
- **At present, for some visitors the Freer is better at supporting some of those activities than others.**
 - It presents Asian art, but not Asia.
 - They encounter objects from the past, but not the people.
 - They see the art, but not how it is relevant to them.
 - They see how the art is, but not how it was used, or made, or looked originally.
 - They can visit old loves, but aren't introduced to ravishing new ones.
 - They are calmed, but not invigorated.
 - They are satisfied, but not surprised.

Key Suggestions

- **The Freer could offer more for its visitors by:**
 - Creating exhibitions—temporary, rotating—that speak to specific audiences.
 - Exploring the Asian-American experience through the art.
 - Offering a more immersive experience that gives a sense of place.
 - Telling the stories of the people who made, used, and loved the art. Including—but not just—Charles Freer.
 - Highlighting “showstopper” objects. Pick a “Mona Lisa” and proclaim forcefully why it is a must-see.
 - Show the objects in their original contexts whenever possible.
 - Translate inscriptions and object labels for wider audiences.
 - Pick out details for the visitor to discover.
 - Design some spaces to inspire other emotions beyond only placid contemplation.
 - Experiment with other media and with interactivity.

Findings

This study encountered a diverse range of Freer visitors, each with different origins, interests, and stories. Most of these people fit into at least one of seven categories—and some were in more than one. They were:

1. **Art aficionados/professionals.** “I’m an Art Journalist. I write about art, food, culture.”
2. **Art/Art History students.** “I’m here working on an assignment.”
3. **Artists.** “I like to paint.”
4. **Travelers (to FSG countries).** “I’ve been to Japan many, many times.”
5. **Visitors (from FSG countries).** “I’m from Indonesia.” “I’m here for a study abroad.” “It’s very interesting. It’s fun to see how museums are in different countries.”
6. **Immigrants (first, second, third-generation).** “My grandparents are from Korea.”
7. **Museum Omnivores.** “I’m seeing all the museums. This was the first one outside the metro.”

Each group had different needs that they used the Freer and its collection to satisfy.

Activities and Engagement

The word “engagement” is often used in museum context as a vague catch-all to describe any number of disparate activities that museum visitors do during their visit. For this study, we have closely examined the *activities these visitors were doing* while in the Freer, and developed categories for better understanding these activities. This tracks with a current trend in museum studies which aims for museums not to do things *to* their visitors, but to better understand what their visitors are doing—and support their efforts.

Some of these activities can be broken down along IPOP-preference lines, where the activity-done clearly correlates with (or is perhaps an expression of) a preference type. However, some activities resist such clear classification. Some may satisfy multiple preference types at the same time, or may fulfill differently for different people. For some others, their place within the IPOP taxonomy is less clear.

These activities roughly fall into five categories.

Physical/Experiential/Immersive

- **Escaping**—Escaping mundanity, escaping the outside world
- **Relaxing**—Unwinding in a calm and soothing environment, being among people, being alone
- **Finding Stimulation**—Being in a sensorial stimulating space, doing a pleasurable physical activity
- **Interacting**—Touching objects/art, using interactives
- **Photographing**—Taking photographs of the collection, of other visitors in the collection

Interpersonal/Social/Empathetic

- **Sharing Themselves**—Sharing a passion with a companion, sharing photos on social media
- **Touching Others**—Better understanding/appreciating those separated by time and space
- **Hearing New Stories**—Connecting empathetically with others through story
- **Feeling Connected**—Forging empathetic connections with individuals, feeling less alone by connecting with humanity

Internal/Emotional

- **Visiting a Favorite**—Performing the ritual of seeing something which moved them once again, enjoying a genre that they are drawn to, adding to a personal collection
- **Finding Inspiration**—Finding inspiration for their art or their life generally
- **Meditating**—Finding inner peace, making decisions
- **Making Sense of their Lives**—Better understanding their identity, their history, their emotions

Cerebral/Intellectual

- **Critiquing**—Judging the quality of the art and/or museum, comparing to other museums/collections
- **Honing their Skills**—Seeing the techniques of the old masters to help them achieve mastery themselves

- **Connecting Theory and Reality**—Enhancing their classroom learning, replacing the virtual with the actual, seeing the famous object
- **Encountering the Famous**—Seeing an object that they had heard was a “must-see”
- **Encountering New Ideas**—Understanding new ideas, adding to their personal knowledge-bank

Exploratory/Imaginative

- **Imagining**—Imagining visiting another time and place, imagining owning or using the objects
- **Playing with Detail**—Hunting down patterns and details, finding joy in intricacy and masterwork
- **Revelling in Beauty**—Opening themselves to an emotional experience with the art
- **Encountering Surprise**—Finding something unique, extraordinary, new, enthralling

Miscellaneous

- **Expressing their Identity**—Being a “museum person”, “art person”, or “cultured person” in the active tense
- **Completing a Mandatory Activity**—Completing schoolwork, visiting with a group

However, understanding these activity types is only so revelatory. In order to appreciate how visitors use these activities to make the Freer and its collection meaningful and useful for them—and what that means for the Freer going forward—the visitors must be regarded as the complex people that they are.

Case Studies

These visitors were complex individuals, with stories and experiences that resist classification and taxonomy. Taking their words out of context ultimately robs them of much of their power and complexity. As such, interview data is presented below in a series of case studies.

Each of these case studies offers a portrait of a person who fits into one (or, often more) of the visitor-categories outlined above, and who participates in several of the activities described above. For each of them, visiting the Freer is a deeply meaningful experience, but *why* it is meaningful, and *how* they made it meaningful for themselves is their own. But, that does not mean that their experience was wholly unique—and reflecting that, at the end of each case study is a series of quotes from other visitors who expressed ideas similar enough to this visitor to indicate that this may be a trend. Paradoxically, they were all unique individuals, but their experiences were not wholly unique.

Meet G.: Connecting with a Complex Heritage

“These partitions feel a little nostalgic, because my grandparents, they have paneling like this in their home too.”

The interviewer found G.,¹ a young woman, quietly sitting alone in front of the Japanese screens. She was writing in a notebook, taking notes for an art history class—but not on the screens’ provenance or iconography. She was writing about how they made her feel. G. appreciated the art in front of her through two distinct lenses—through the lens of her **personal, immigrant heritage** and through the lens of an **art student**.

G. was Korean-American—her grandparents emigrated to the United States. She saw objects like those in the Freer collection in her grandparents’ house, and also in her Art History classes.

“They [her grandparents] have a lot more Asian kind of furniture than my parents; it’s interesting to go over to their house because a lot of the things I see at their house I can see in my classes.”

Her Korean heritage is a complex hybrid of American/Western and Korean/Asian. Taking Asian Art History classes in college and coming to the Freer are part of a lifelong effort to better understand that complex identity. Her strongest connection to her heritage is through cultural celebrations with her grandparents, food, and customs in the home:

“[...] for New Years we go to our grandparents and bow and get money [...] There’s also clothing we wear on that day. Most of the food I eat is Korean, at home. [...] taking your shoes off in your house. [...] I like to sleep on the floor more than the bed. [...] I used to be interested in Korean music but I sort of lost that part of it. I’m not really interested in Korean pop-culture anymore.”

However, despite no longer being interested in Korean pop-culture, her interest in her culture manifested in a love of Asian—not just Korean—art, both traditional and contemporary:

“I just think the way they draw and they paint, it’s really pretty. I like the cartoonish look of it. I see beauty in western art and drawing realistic pictures, but I like the black outlines in Asian art for some reason.”

However, her interest in Asian art also inspired some shame, as she felt judged by her peers based upon unfair stereotypes of Asians.

“I usually don’t tell people that I’m interested in anime or manga, even though I’ve been interested in it since I was young. I never really like to tell people just because there’s that certain image as soon as people hear anime or manga that I don’t want to be associated with it [...] I feel that people judge from first impressions of the Asian culture that’s not really nice. There’s a Korean stereotype that people eat dogs [...] I guess I would like to get rid of those kind of stereotypes [...]”

¹ Random single letter pseudonyms have been given to the study participants in order to protect their anonymity.

Even positive stereotypes which paint Asian-Americans as the “model minority” create expectations to which she, as a young woman interested in art, doesn’t conform.

“That and, like, everybody’s good at math, or all Asians are good at math. I’m terrible at math, I can’t handle it.”

Nor does she conform to those “model” expectations she feels from her community, due to her interests that stretch beyond education.

“I think Asian people put too much emphasis on education that they neglect other things [...] my definition of well-rounded has more than just being education. It has social skills, athletic ability, personal interests.”

She felt occasionally at odds with her cultural heritage and community as well, particularly the sexism she felt within her culture.

“Even though I am Korean-American, I can pretty confidently say that I’m pretty white-washed with American cultures. So getting to learn more about my roots is interesting, because it’s totally different with what I grew up with. [...] A lot of the ideals that I grew up with might not be as important to older generations of Koreans. [...] Asian societies don’t seem to [...] have that sense of individual equality. I notice how males are preferred much, much more [...] that perpetuates women being a lower class than males, which I don’t really appreciate.”

So, together, the complexities of her heritage pulled at her in three directions.

1. She was **drawn towards** her cultural heritage, wanting to deepen the connection beyond just cultural festivals and grandparents’ furniture.
2. She felt **pushed by** unfair cultural stereotypes by the dominant culture which made her ashamed of her artistic preferences, and dismissed her interest in art.
3. She **pushed against** the expectations of her community, which dismissed her interest in the arts and disregarded her very value due to her gender.

Each of these informed her experience in the Freer.

Firstly, her exploration of this inspired her to take an Asian Art History course even though, or perhaps particularly because, “they [her college department] don’t have many options on Asian art.”

“I wanted to explore more about my ethnic background. I have cultural aspects that I’ve adopted from Korean culture but I’d like to learn more about it. I’d like to explore Asian art to see what exactly they use art for.”

Her experience with her culture also inspired a complex interest in Orientalist art, as a hybrid of Western and Asian styles, that can be seen in various pieces in the Freer—and that is reflective of her experience at the intersection of Western and Asian cultures.

“I like that period of Orientalism [...] the 1800s to 1900s, because that’s when the interactions between European and Asian countries really mixed. [...] I like to see the collaboration that they make. [...] it’s nice to see how two really different views and aspects come together and somehow still intermingle and still complement each other.”

Her exploration of Asian art at the Freer helped her to understand the origins of the stereotypes and prejudices she felt so keenly:

"I like to better understand where these ideas formed and why they think that. [...] even if they don't mean to, I think they reveal something about the culture that they're living in, or the kind of era that they're experiencing."

This, in the end, helped her to reach across the centuries and understand how artists and individuals had similar experiences grappling with their culture:

"I just like to see other individuals, how they conform to the social norms. [...] I guess their personal experience of it, as compared to mine."

G. also approached the art in the Freer not only through the lens of her cultural background but also as an art student. In terms of the IPOP typology, she placed herself very firmly as an object-oriented person, approaching the world through close study of aesthetics and the visual. She briefly discussed her perception of the Japanese screens before her from an art-historical context:

"I'm noticing the evanescence of the scenes. The nature reminds me of [...] post-impressionism"

But quickly lost herself in the imagery:

"It almost feels like I'm not in a museum, like I'm just looking at a scene in nature [...] I'm the type of person who likes to look out the window during car rides, or other times I'm outside. I like to look at the scenery."

This was a pleasurable experience for her—exploring the intricate details was an act of play and discovery.

"I like to notice little minute details that I didn't notice before. [...] If you see it in person it's more challenging... if you try hard enough, you can find it [the details]."

And also an act of meditation, exploring the details bringing her a sense of peace.

"It makes me feel calm and peaceful. Even though the scene itself seems really transient, it feels like I could sit here forever and just look at it, and find something in it that's interesting."

Exploring the details also helped her understand the painting technique used by the artist, and how it tricked her eyes.

"I like to see how the texture affects the overall painting. These flowers look more real to me... they come off the board a little. You can see the piling of color, so they look a little more real [...] Viewing the birds, they're just so flat, it's weird. It's a mixture of 2D and 3D to me."

This led her to imagine the artists, and marvel at their skill.

"It's really fascinating. I'm jealous that they could do this, I wish I was talented enough to do that. [...] I like how... I like the different dimensions you can explore... how you can

explore the third dimension just on a flat piece of paper.” “I find it fascinating and fun. I like visual illusions.”

As she meditated on the piece, she also began to imaginatively role-play, first experiencing how it would have been used by its original owners...

“I’m starting to see how they used this [...] I’m actually experiencing what the use of it was for. [...] I like how it’s portable, how you could take this anywhere, and feel like you’re in nature when you’re inside a house.”

...and then imagining owning and using it herself.

“You can take it anywhere. I’ve always had dreams of living in the city. But growing up I realized I’m not, I wouldn’t be so suited for the city because I like quiet and I like nature. If I ever did, I would consider buying a partition like this. Just so I could have it and still feel like there’s some kind of nature around.”

G.’s Activities in the Museum

So, to recap, her experience of the art at the Freer through the lens of an art student involved a series of interlocking activities:

- **Completing a school activity**
- **Better understanding her identity**
- **Visiting a favorite genre of art**
- **Playfully exploring artistic details**
- **Exploring artistic techniques**
- **Imagining the artist and their skill**
- **Imagining the original use of the objects**
- **Imagining owning the art**

These activities overlapped, with some (i.e. imagining owning the art) helping her to do others (i.e. understanding her identity). Ultimately, she was there to complete a school assignment, but that is only the very tip of her iceberg.

Similar Responses from Other Visitors

Cultural conflicts

“I’m from Indonesia, I’m here for a study abroad [...] [the museum] it’s a good way to spend time—‘waste time’ as my Dad calls it [...] I’m the artist of the family.”

Imagining their original use

“You could see them being used for not just sitting there in the corner; it’s not just a piece but it’s actually something that could be used. It has another purpose rather than for just sitting there. For eating, or for... the screens are to cover windows.” “It’s a sense of home.” “I like to envision how their homes would be.” “I don’t envision it in my own home, in someone else’s home.”

Exploring artistic techniques

"I like pottery pieces." "It seems like in some cases it might be harder to do when you're working in three dimensions." "The fact that it's very difficult to do, working on the curved plane." "Just more... interested in the skill that is required to do it."

Imagining the artist and their skill

"I appreciate that there are people who can do this sort of thing, to make it look so beautiful. I can't, and they can. [...] There are just a select few people throughout the ages who have been able to master this stuff."

Replacing the classroom/theoretical/virtual with the actual

"Our professor would pull up scrolls and paintings, but I'd never seen them before. [...] It's different from when you see a photograph."

"I've been studying Buddhism and it's really nice to see statues of people I've been reading about. It's a great connection to have here."

Meet R.: A Momentary, Meditative Escape

"I'm still searching. I'm still searching."

R. was also an art student. But his approach to, and use of the Freer was markedly different from G.'s. The interviewer found R. sitting alone in the central courtyard, in quiet contemplation. He was in the middle of his visit, and had taken some time in the courtyard to process what he had been seeing.

R. was a D.C. local. He hadn't set out to come to the Freer, but decided on a whim to come to the Smithsonian art museums after a doctor's appointment.

"I woke up this morning, went to the eye doctor and said "I'm going to go to the museum. [...] If it wasn't here, I'd probably just go home and paint or watch TED talks."

He came to the Freer not to seek out the art, but as the first in what were to be a series of visits to museums that day.

"I wanted to go to all of them [SI art museums]. This is the first one. I walked through the field of sculptures, and just went into this one first. This is my first time here [...] So it was good that I've been here. I'm going to keep coming here."

Overall, R. appreciated the art in an **introspective, meditative way**. Connecting to the past allowed him to feel as though he could **better understand himself**, and he sought **inspiration for his own art**.

"Taking all that in and then coming to a place like this, of rest. Going in there was kind of like an experience of the past, coming out here and taking it all in is kind of like "how can I take the past and bring it to the present."

The courtyard area was a pleasant surprise for him, one that he valued.

"I didn't know that museums had an area like this. It just feels like, so much you can take in in there and then bring it back out here and just let it dissect, let it settle in. Take it all in."

R. was troubled, and was seeking a momentary peace and calm—an oasis from a chaotic world. This was not unique to the Freer, but how he chose to use art museums to support his personal journey.

"Any time I come to an art museum, any time I experience something creative in any formal way, it's enlightening. It brings peace, which is kind of what I'm looking for. It's chaotic out there. It really is. It's chaotic. I don't want to say that. I don't know why I just thought— that I'm coming here to hide, but no, me I just come here to plan. Plan how to deal with the chaos."

And though he declined to elaborate, this peace seemed well-needed in his life, as he contemplated how to change course away from the destructive things he had seen and done in the past.

"I feel like I've been through a lot in my life. I've been through downs, I've been through ups. I've done things, I've seen things. And some people may have looked at those things and said "Okay, I'm going to keep on doing it." Me on the lines, I just want to stop doing

stuff that will taint my soul, will taint my body in any form or way, and taint anybody that's around me."

The religious art in the Freer helped him do that. He professed Christianity, but took an ecumenical, interfaith position.

"I'm Christian, I'm not going to exclude anybody else's religion, but I will say that there's a similarity to everybody else's teaching, everybody understands life, everybody wants to have some kind of contribution to the world."

Thus, the religious art inspired him, even though it was not Christian, because, for him, Christianity was not the only source of useful knowledge and understanding.

The bodhisattvas and the understanding of enlightenment, and reaching Nirvada [Nirvana]. They had a key to it. The Japanese had a key to it. Looking at work like the Jade figures, I get inspired by them. The structures alone, in so many forms or ways.

He also came to the Freer, in part, to appreciate two parts of premodern culture that, for him, stood in opposition to present-day technological ephemerality: craftsmanship, and durability. For him, this represents a sort of lost knowledge that he found valuable.

"I feel like they had so much knowledge back in the day, they had tools that we don't use now—because I feel like we're handicapped because we have technology to make everything for us. So when I see that these things are handmade, or materials such as ink on these specific types of paper, for them to even know these things, to know that it's going to last this long..."

He also found the Freer useful as an artist, using the objects to inspire his own work, and also as positive examples of how art can make a difference in the world.

"I still compare [the art here] to other people's work in the present time, contemporary art too. And most people that do contemporary art are influenced by the past art. What is that saying that people say—'Nothing is new under the sun?' So it's just on the lines of trying to get inspired by anything and everything, what's going to lead you."

He found the art in the Freer fed his artistic imagination, even though he did not work in the styles he saw in the Freer.

"A combination of realism and surrealism. I also do expressionist art. I'm dabbling in abstract art. I just study different types of art to feed myself. I won't stop with any kind of art."

When addressing historical art (and history generally) he focused on the concept of change—how the art, and the times and places they represent—helped him understand change.

"Things aren't the same as what they were in the past. That's why we constantly try to do research on history. How we understand history and the changes from history, how the impact from change on today. The right change."

This, again, he made personal—change in the art representing the change he wanted in his own life.

"I'm still getting directed about how I'm supposed to change."

R.'s experience with the space in the Freer and the art shows the therapeutic potential that such a place may have. Often art museums focus on promoting an aesthetic or intellectual experience that is fascinating and moving—but for R., having a freely available space where he could rest and contemplate seemed crucial.

It is difficult to know where R. fits on the IPOP typology—it is arguable that he may have had an idea preference considering how he examined his life. What is most important for him—and for those others like him—is that he comes to the museum in a deeply introspective mode, and that everything is seen through an inward-pointing lens. He is deeply spiritual as well, and furthering his understanding of other religions helps him on his quest for enlightenment.

Another significant takeaway from R.'s experience is the value of calming spaces within the museum context. Museums, at their best, enlighten, excite and inspire their visitors in a variety of ways. However, for visitors like R., it is equally important to provide calming spaces where these experiences can be processed.

R.'s Activities in the Museum

R.'s experience in the museum centered around a cluster of complementary activities:

- **Contemplating his own life**
- **Being in a calming space**
- **Escaping the outside world**
- **Understanding historical change**
- **Incorporating other ideas into your own worldview**
- **Taking inspiration from other artists**
- **Escaping: Appreciating positive aspects of pre-modern society**

However, each of these activities ultimately stood as a facet of his overall way of using the museum—of better understanding his own experience and making decisions for the future. Anything the museum could offer that might support that overarching goal—one of searching, introspection, and learning about himself—would be useful for R.

Similar Responses from Other Visitors

Escaping the outside world

“Washington D.C. is pretty crazy. So if you’re looking for a little peace and quiet, and there’s an open door that shows you a beautiful garden, there you go. And I just came from the gardens over by the castle and just enjoying the beauty. Welcome to spring.”

Appreciating positive aspects of pre-modern society

"Maybe it was a different time [...] We are more attached to phones, and technology [...] It was a different lifestyle [...] It appeals to me to look at it, not to live it. I must have been a hard life also."

Being in a calming space

"It just sucks me in. It's cool. Makes me happy. Puts me in a good place. [...] There's some bond. It's almost spiritual, even though I dislike that word."

Meet K.: Hope

*"I have hope,
I have peace,
I have joy."*

K. was also found in the central courtyard, alone, enjoying the day. To her, it was:

"Lovely, peaceful, serene."

Whereas F. used the art to explore his inner world, K. used the art to explore other places in the world...

"I've been a lot of places around the world, but I've not been to China or Egypt or any of the places that would be displayed here. So if I can't go there I can go here, and get a little bit of what it's like [...]"

... and other points of history.

"I can imagine myself there as well, and experience the time period."

Travel and place was very important to her. She clearly enjoyed listing the places she'd been, and remembering her time there. But as much as places interested her, people interested her even more. She had spent the afternoon watching people in the museum, and chatting with a couple from Finland. She discussed the people within the museum...

"I love to watch families and how they interact."

...the people behind the scenes...

"Whoever it is that are your gardeners, they're another aspect of your gallery... The people who come in and set up the displays—that's got to be a little nerve-wracking."

...and the people who made the art.

"[...]with the little bit of tools that they had, they were beautiful artisans."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, K.'s worked as a social worker. She worked, to her credit, in a dialysis clinic, and her job often involved end-of-life care.

"Many of them have made the choice to stop dialysis [...]"

Understandably, this was extremely taxing. For her, the museum helped.

"In the midst of all of that, this [the museum] is a regenerative place to be."

The rock that she relied upon in order to see her through her difficult career was religion. However, while she professed Christianity, she was also very interested in other religions as well—which she found in abundance at the Freer. She felt that this allowed her to better understand the people around her:

"I am a Christian. And I'm trying to understand the Buddhist and the Hindu aspect of it, very important part of culture all around the world. So just getting a better

understanding of things. It's much better if you go out into the world with a little more education about people."

Her approach to learning about other religions had little to do with the details of history or cosmology. Instead, she yearned to understand how their religion helped them in the same way that hers did for her:

"To determine, kind of perhaps where they develop their hope. We live in a world where there's a lot of destruction right now. A lot of angst. A lot of bitterness. And people need to have hope in the midst of that. And I want to know where the cultures get their hope. Is it just a graven image or an idol? In my case it's what I consider a living god. For the American Indians it was the spirits of the God of the wind and the rain and the sun and all that kind of stuff, but the bottom line is that we're all people. And there is something inherent within them that they want to love, they want to be loved, they want that hope, they want peace, they want to have joy. There are different cultures, but we are all the same."

She was interested in people, but not just as individuals—for her, her trip to the museum allowed her to feel more connected to humanity itself.

By connecting the dots between the art of the Freer, the people she encountered and imagined there, and her faith, she found the Freer to be a place where she could restore her hope.

K.'s Activities in the Museum

K's activities in the museum were similar to those of R.—though her introspection was restorative rather than contemplative.

- **Feeling connected to humanity**
- **Touching others**
- **Imagining other places**
- **Relaxing**
- **Escaping**
- **Hearing new stories**

The museum was, in many ways, therapeutic by offering a space where she could be among people and among stories but without the stressors that her people-oriented job offered. Even dyed-in-the-wool people-people need space to rejuvenate. For her, what the museum offered—that a park or meditation center would not—were diverse exemplars from the past that allowed her to feel connected to humanity, and that supported her ecumenical perceptions of faith and hope in the world.

Similar Responses from Other Visitors

Feeling connected to humanity

"I find all the world's religions very interesting. I love to learn about them. Being able to possibly see from a different person's perspective or a different time period perspective is always a new and good thing to see."

Imagining other places/Travel by proxy

[I came because of “A love for Japan [...] many, many travels over there. Very infatuated with them. [Japan] It’s home. [despite being a Swede living in New York]”

Hearing new stories

“I was learning from the Smithsonian Channel that there is a particular sword—I can’t remember the name of it—there was a man searching for it and after the end of WWII, the Japanese were forced to give up a lot of their weapons to the United States, but there is this one particular sword that was crafted, but the interesting thing was that they said it was a ‘good’ sword. Legend has it that it was only meant to bring down bad people. But it had a twin sword [story continues...].”

Meet F.: A Place to Imagine

*"[...] if I were to hit the lottery,
I probably would become a
collector of art and pottery
and sculptures."*

F. was not an art student, or artist but an art aficionado. He was visiting Washington from Miami, and had spent the previous day at the African Art Museum. His choice to visit the Freer was not an informed one:

"I ended up getting off the metro, and didn't feel like walking very far. So this was one of the first museums near the metro stop."

His approach makes him something of an art-aficionado as well as a museum omnivore, insofar as he seemed happy to explore whatever art he found. Moreover, though he appreciated the aesthetics in the Freer's art (and art in general), he admitted that he could not appreciate it as fully as others did:

"I can't see it very well because I'm colorblind. [...] I can't fully see all of it, but what I can see I do like."

However his free-spirited approach to visitation did not mean that he was less-fully engaged with the art. His appreciation of the Freer's collection revolved around two distinct activities: **meditating on the history of the art**, and **imagining owning and using the pieces**.

For F., meditating on the history of the art pieces in the Freer did not require a detailed understanding of the period and place that it came from. The very fact of the existence of these pieces, and his ability to appreciate them, was moving. To him, it represented permanence in an otherwise transient world—not just from the past, but into the future:

"I guess it's a form of permanence that no matter the changes in society, changes in history, that certain things—certain things will remain. [...] The fact that it's still here, even after I die it will still be here, quite likely. 200, 300 years, 400 years 1000 years. This museum will still quite likely be here."

He particularly enjoyed that these ancient objects represented a "conversation":

"...from the artist to the viewer, or maybe the artist to the person who was buying the artwork hundreds, thousands of years ago. But because it is in a language where the ideograms are still used today [...] people can still read this conversation from the artist, by the artist."

This "conversation" tapped into a strong interest in people, which was a prism through which he imagined the past that these objects represented.

"There are people—they had families, they had friends, they worked, they went home, they worked, they went home, and they probably didn't realize that the pieces that they made or the artwork that they made 1,500 years later that there would be visitors in the Freer at the Smithsonian looking at what they made."

The other primary way in which F. engaged with the collection was through imagining what it would be like to own and use it. He began by imagining what it might be like to live in the Freer:

“If I hit the lottery, I could see myself designing a home for myself, not as large [...] but certainly the ceilings, the curvature of the ceilings, maybe a bit brighter light for my own personal. The stonework for the floors, for me it’s very calming. Very calming. [...] It’s not austere, but just plain, simple, intimate.”

By contrast, however, he found the Peacock Room unappealing

“I went to the Peacock Room, the [gold] color[ed] birds and the darkness of it, I had to sit down. This is a lot going on. So I commented to the museum employee there, “Even if I was a billionaire, I would not have a peacock room in my house” [...] I just don’t think I would want a room with no windows like that. Although it was beautiful [...] I think I would want something brighter. [...] I’m not a vase person. I can appreciate it in a museum, maybe two or five of them in my home for flowers. But I wouldn’t need fifty to a hundred of them, in my personal home.”

His fantasy then continued—he would value living amongst so many precious historical pieces, but would not want to deny them from the public either:

“To be surrounded by so much history. I think for me personally I think it might be a little bit selfish for me to have so much historical treasure in my home where the public could not just randomly show up, knock on the door and say ‘Hey, can I see that scroll from China made 2000 years ago?’”

For him, displaying ancient art and making it available to the public is a social moral imperative for two reasons. First, it could inspire the next generation of great thinkers...

“You never know when you might have that one person who comes in here who happens to see that old piece of art, that one sculpture, that one pot or bowl from 3,000 years ago, and click. You have your next Ph.D. in Art History. You have your next PhD in Anthropology. You never know how it’s going to touch someone, to inspire someone.”

... and secondly, it has the power to help people, even to heal them.

“It can also work in terms of turning someone from a negative disposition into a more positive disposition. You can have someone who is planning on doing something horrible that day, and they just randomly walk in and then they see all this history, and they realize there are people who were here thousands of years ago and people who will still be here. And it does something to you spiritually and psychologically, and they leave here in a much better place.”

F.’s Activities in the Museum

F.’s activities in the Freer can be summed up as:

- **Fantasizing about ownership**
- **Meditation**
- **Contemplating permanence**
- **Encountering/appreciating historical people**

Similar Responses from Other Visitors

Fantasies about ownership/Visiting a favorite

This was a relatively common occurrence, but manifested in different ways. F. fantasized about living in the Freer and what it would mean to live surrounded by the artifacts.

"[...] this must have been nice to be an American in the 19th century and to collect all these nice things."

Others took different approaches—a few, for example, acting as though they did, in a way, own the pieces—using possessive pronouns and describing the act of choosing and visiting a favorite piece of art as a sort of ownership or the maintenance of a sort of relationship. This may drive repeat visitation.

"When I'm in Washington DC, this is one of the museums I always visit. [...] I get to see my old friends here."

"I have been to the National Gallery of Art the other day, and have been revisiting the paintings I am in love with."

Appreciation of historical people

"Because when you are looking at those objects, it's real objects, which—they were made 200, or 400 years ago. They are adorable. And they used to be the objects that their owners played with when they do work, or when they enjoy their tea time."

Meet Q.: Dissonance within the Profession

“I’m here is to look at what [the] Freer has.”

Q. had a rare perspective; she was a visitor from China, and worked as a professional in a major art museum in China. She found herself regarding her visit to the Freer in two ways: by **contrast with her own art museum**, and by contrast with **what she thinks an art museum should be**—a sort of Platonic ideal of the museum. However, perhaps paradoxically, she later revealed her favorite museum experiences—most of which do not at all closely align with either her experience in the Freer, her own museum, or even what she thinks a museum should be.

When comparing the Freer and Sackler to her own museum, she at first seemed unimpressed by the F|S.

“I think our museum is about the same size as the Freer and Sackler together. [...] Our museum is much busier, we have many more objects [...] We have much more people as well, you will never find an empty gallery.”

However, upon second glance she felt that the information given by the F|S was more comprehensive.

“I noticed because you offer so much information on these labels, I have to take a very careful look at that. And I found a lot of information that we never offer to our audience, is here on the label.”

The amount of information on the label became something of a sticking point. For her, in order to make the Freer experience better, she felt:

“I think there is too much on the label. According to my research [...] nobody reads them. People read the title, and that’s all.”

And felt the Freer should:

“Only offer the most important information [...] I think the audience might pay more attention to it if there is just one paragraph of introduction rather than two. And also because there are so many text, the font is a little small.”

This tracks with the White Cube design philosophy of contemporary art museums in much of the Western world, where labels are kept to an absolute minimum. However, when she was subsequently asked “what makes an art museum great?”, she reversed course completely.

“I personally prefer the art museum not just presenting art, but also give a lot of the historical cultural backgrounds. Our museum, a lot of visitors complain that we don’t have much information offered and you have to guess, and just look at the objects and admire it without knowing what it is. And our museum, the bosses’ answer is ‘well, we are an art museum.’ That’s different.”

This apparent cognitive dissonance did not seem to trouble her; on the one hand, she felt the Freer was admirable for the length of its contextual labels, on the other, she felt that visitors do not read labels and thus they should be cut. Finally, she felt that she personally—and many visitors to her

museum—wanted *even more extensive* contextual information. This was backed up by her description of one of their most popular exhibitions:

“In our museum, because we have a huge bronze collection, and because a lot of audience, they are curious about how the bronze[s] are made, we actually made a section of the gallery into a show room of how bronze is done step by step. [...] that section is very popular. People love that section.”

When asked how she would reconcile this difference—between contextual information and the pure aesthetic experience:

“I don’t think there’s a perfect resolution. Our museum, you need to tell the audience more. Your museum, some people might look very carefully, but most of them just—if you put too much things on the label, people wouldn’t read it.”

When the interviewer pivoted the conversation to her favorite experiences in art museums, however, a different picture emerged entirely. She became visibly excited discussing two exhibitions she had recently seen—one in Hong Kong and one here in D.C. In Hong Kong,

“I went to [Gallery] [...there is] a room right next to the gallery, it’s just an empty room but they can replace the content from time to time. In it, they told you about the techniques, how these potteries are made, what kind of clay they select and all of these techniques things. [...] And then there is my favorite station [...] you reach in, without knowing what’s inside, and there’s a small piece of the objects made of the same materials that you use for a teapot [...] the pottery little objects that Chinese scholars like to play with them. [...] So if you reach it in you feel something [...] you can feel it, and then there’s a plate right beneath that hole that you can flip it up and just see the answer to what it is, see a photograph of it. A ceramic peanut, or a sunflower seed [...] that part is quite impressive.”

This interactive touch-based experience excited her profoundly. She also visited a textile museum in Washington where:

“[...] you can actually touch the objects, the fabrics. And that there are people telling you how they are done, and you can touch them. I don’t think you can really touch the real collection, I guess that’s a replica [...] I think touching things is important for people.”

It is clear that Q. had at least a partial physical preference. This was not satisfied either in her professional experience or in her Freer visit—and was not part of her description of what makes an art museum great. However, after this revelation, her eyes opened to an important factor for her enjoyment of art through touch.

“I think right now the art museums are learning from the science museums, that art doesn’t need to be worshipped, they can be touched.”

Q.'s Activities in the Museum

In summary, Q. interacted with the museum through:

- **Critiquing the museum**
- **Interacting with objects**
- **Expressing her identity—museum visitor/professional**

As discussed above, Q.'s interaction with the objects was more of a desired activity than an actual one—a desire which could be better satisfied by the Freer in the future.

Similar Responses from Other Visitors

Critiquing the museum

Several visitors critiqued the museum—though not so thoroughly as Q., due to her background as a museum professional—by comparing the Freer with other museums they had visited. The Freer was generally regarded positively (though this may have been partially as a result of moderator affect—the interviews taking place in the Freer by a Smithsonian employee).

“I’ve been to art galleries in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Chicago. Tennessee doesn’t have anything like this. Neither does Louisville. I go all over and check out different museums – history and art.”

Meet E.: The Amateur

*“ART.
Art is important.”*

Calling E. an art aficionado is not quite right. She was an *amateur*—in the original sense: someone who *loves*, with all the passion that word implies. She was in the American art gallery at the Freer, and in our interview spoke with so much breathless enthusiasm that at times it felt as though she was speaking IN ALL CAPS.

She was a voracious museumgoer.

“whenever I can, wherever I go [on vacation] I pop into as many museums as I can fit in in one day, and try to learn at least one thing.”

For her, that one thing was:

“Today it’s Whistler. I’m just happy that I stumbled upon this.”

She was from Boston, and had encountered one of Whistler’s paintings at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Visiting D.C. she hadn’t originally intended to come to the Freer, but got sidetracked on her way to the Hirshhorn,

“[...] because the sign was up, ‘WHISTLER!’”

Despite describing herself as more of a “visual person” than a reader, she clearly had absorbed a trove of biographical information about him that she happily recounted:

“Whistler was an interesting character. From what I know, he was suing or had sued John Ruskin, and I think for defamation of character or something. I think Ruskin said he was a bad artist, and Whistler took exception [...]”

Her particular interest in Whistler stemmed, ostensibly, from the fact that he was a local artist for her:

“He grew up in Lowell, I’m from Boston. [...] For a local guy to travel all over the world and have a studio in London [...] for 1860s 70s and 80s, I think he met Freer ‘87, ‘86 about that time [...]”

That said, her artistic interests were not limited to Whistler, and she launched into lengthy descriptions of other paintings which had moved her. All of these descriptions had a similar theme—they were intense descriptions of the stories behind the art—the artists or the subjects:

“[...] in the painting it’s a breakup, she’s distant and he’s [breathing heavily] and there’s so much drama you could do a whole movie about it. So she breaks up with him! And takes up with [...]”

In IPOP terms, that focus on drama, story, and emotion places her soundly within the people experience preference category. However, she described with equal intensity the ways in which she engaged with the paintings themselves, requiring intense time and study:

"[...] you really have to LOOK at things because the artist is telling you what's happening you just have to take more than ten seconds. [...] I do like to spend at least more than 10 seconds looking at something."

This careful study led her to examine the objects in fine detail:

"I like to see how he layered the paint, I like to see the brushwork, I like to see—does he do an outline? What does he apply first? Then if I really get into it, I want to see how it's HUNG. You don't have any wires like the MFA does—is it nailed down? What happened to the original framing?"

She also explored the paintings on an aesthetic level, particularly their relationships with music:

"So you know, [Chopin's] nocturnes are just so beautiful—so once you hear that, and you look at whistler's nocturne in blue and silver at the MFA you go [GASP!] 'I get it.' It's an epiphany. Could anything be better?"

These epiphanies were not idea-based, but aesthetic—coming to understand, to feel the connection between art and music on a level that defies textual explanation. Her love for art came from the satisfying moments such as these—her epiphanies. That, for her, rested at the core of why she came to museums so avidly:

"Where else do you get such drama and education?"

E.'s Activities in the Museum

So, to recap, her experience in the museum entailed a cluster of activities:

- **Connecting with stories**
- **Connecting with home**
- **Visiting a favorite**
- **Hunting for artistic details**
- **Being moved by the arts**
- **Finding stimulation**

E.'s passion for all things ART makes her the platonic ideal of the intensely-involved visitor of art museums. However even though she fit this mold, the reasons why she was interested in the art had little to do with placid contemplation of aesthetic forms. She was deeply interested in biography and context, hungry for any detail she could find that would help her to understand better.

Another visitor—hungry for such contextual details—had a similar experience:

"I agree [that there isn't a lot of background information], but I don't think that's different from the National Gallery of Art. I bring my iPad when I go by myself and if I want to look something up, I'll do that and I'll think, 'Why isn't this...If it's a panel, why don't they tell you it's the panel of an altarpiece?"

The moments that moved E. the most were moments of surprise, of realization, of—as she put it—epiphany. Those were moments where connections and ideas snapped into clear focus and brought her understanding of something she loved deeply to a new level. The more that the Freer can do to offer such surprises to its visitors, the more people like E. will be enthralled by the collection, and inspired by their visit.

Similar Responses from Other Visitors

Connecting with the artist or subject's story

"Their personalities and what was involved, the wars that transpired, and why do people fight, the destruction that comes from wars, but then also the rebuilding, bringing people together. Again, people. You don't have a world without people. You'd have a world, but it would be way too quiet."

Discovering artistic details

"I like to notice little minute details that I didn't notice before."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the seventy interviews revealed a diverse group of visitors who engaged in a wide range of activities in the museum that satisfied a variety of needs. There are some needs that the Freer currently supports very well—having a calming experience where visitors and meditate on beautiful examples of Asian art. However, many of the activities done by visitors within the museum are less well supported. Moving forward, it may not be possible for the Freer to be everything for every visitor. However, when looking to improve the visitor experience within the Freer, and to create an extraordinary and memorable experience for a new generation of visitors, it should look to those areas where it can diversify the activities that it is supporting, without losing what it already does well.

Recommendations

Based upon the interviews with the visitors, there are a number of recommendations for the Freer to diversity the experience in the museum in ways that could offer more support to some visitors.

Creating exhibitions—temporary, rotating—that speak to specific audiences.

The minimalistic white-cube approach to art gallery design and interpretation attempts to be all things to all visitors by being nothing to anyone, allowing the visitor to have an unmediated experience alone with the art. However, this minimalistic approach left many of the interviewed visitors wanting more. One way to approach this might be to create galleries that have a specific audience or activity-type in mind. This could take the form of, perhaps, one gallery which was about looking for fine details, or where artists of all abilities could try their hand at the techniques used to make the art. Another could be a gallery that explored all the stories of the people who had touched—and been touched by—the art. Another might create an immersive environment where visitors felt transported into the past, and could imagine viewing, using, or owning the art as it originally stood. The possibilities are legion.

Exploring the Asian-American experience through the art.

D.C. is home to large communities of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and other Asian immigrants (and their descendants) for whom this art could be made very meaningful. This could involve collaboration with this community as part of what it means to have a blended Asian-American identity, and the difficulties inherent in this. This could result in Asian-American perspectives represented in the galleries, or in programs where the Asian-American experience is discussed in light of the art.

Offering a more immersive experience that gives a sense of place.

Many of the visitors came to the Freer as a kind of travel-by-proxy—whether they were people who had been to countries from which the art originated and wanted to remember their time there, people who were visiting or had immigrated from those countries, or people who knew they would never be able to go somewhere where they had dreamed of going. These people come looking for a

sense, not just of the art, but of the place itself. Utilizing multisensory experiences—integrating more sights, smells, sounds, or even tastes of the countries where the art originated could make this “travel by proxy” activity even more powerful.

Telling the stories of the people who made, used, and loved the art. Including—but not just—Charles Freer.

Many of the visitors interviewed were interested in people and stories. Some came with this knowledge already in hand—for example E. the “amateur” with her passion for all things Whistler. However integrating storytelling techniques into the collection could leave a stronger impression for these people. This should include Charles Freer, of course, but also the people who made, used, and loved the art. Often the specific person who made that specific piece is unknown, but with some creativity, stories can be told about people’s interaction with this specific art piece or with art of this type that may be as powerful (or even more so) than a dry, impersonal biography of the artist.

Highlighting “showstopper” objects. Pick a “Mona Lisa” and proclaim forcefully why it is a must-see.

William Noel, director of Director of Penn Libraries' Special Collections Center, said “People do not come to see the Mona Lisa because they don’t know what she looks like. They come because they *do* know what she looks like.”

This offered the motivation behind his aggressive plan of digitization as a curator at the Walters Art Museum—to make his objects famous, into things that people went out of their way to see. Currently, most visitors come to the Freer due to a general interest in art, in Asia, or in Whistler. The Peacock Room stands as a major emblem of the Freer—one which attracted a few visitors in this study—but there are many other objects that could be regarded as a must-see, not just for Asian art aficionados, but for everyone.

Showing the objects in their original contexts whenever possible.

Many, if not most of these objects are not only pieces of art, but pieces with a specific religious or practical function. And all of them would have been intended to be placed in a specific spot, and used in a specific way. Creating exhibitions that incorporate this larger context would help satisfy those visitors who like to imagine themselves in the original time/place that these objects were first made and used. This could be as simple as incorporating other images of temples, tea houses, or homes as appropriate, or as complex as creating an immersive experience where these objects are shown as they might have originally stood and been appreciated.

Sensitively addressing the problematic parts of the collection

One Indonesian visitor pointed out a potential issue with how the Buddha heads are displayed:

“There’s a lot of decapitated Buddha heads. That’s kind of disturbing, because back in the day, they weren’t decapitated.... Grave diggers, robbers, decapitated it because it’s

the easiest to carry. That's why most of the Buddha statues that you see nowadays with the heads because it's usually what they managed to sell to collectors." "That's why if you go to China you see a lot of decapitated bodies without the head. When I saw the heads, I just shook my head... they were stolen and sold to collectors and museum people... it's still better than sold on the black market, but still. It's bad to see stolen art. It bothers me a little, but what can you do. It would be nice to see a whole statue. At least I get to see part of it."

Rather than leave this difficult subject unaddressed, would it be possible for the new Freer to acknowledge this difficult history of their own collection? Perhaps, they might place a few of the Buddha heads on clear plastic frames/boxes with the outline of what the original might have looked like—or if the original body is known, show what the body looks like, or even what it might look like were the two pieces to be reunited.

This need not be limited to the headless Buddhas, but could stand as a wider program of discussing the sometimes problematic histories of art collecting.

Translating inscriptions and object labels for wider audiences.

One visitor tried to read the kanji/characters on the scrolls, but struggled. "I know some of these characters, but I eventually had to give up." Others wanted to know what was written there, but had no way of finding out. Translating these objects—not just in fine print on labels, but situated next to the objects themselves, would help visitors have a more authentic experience with the object.

Also, a few foreign visitors to the Freer had difficulty reading the labels. It could potentially be both interesting and helpful for visitors if translations of the labels could be provided not just in supplemental brochures but on the walls. This would embrace these objects as, themselves, visitors from another culture. Paying credence to the multicultural nature of FSG, these translations could reflect the piece's country of origin: the labels for the Japanese scrolls could be in English and Japanese, the Korean vases could be in English and Korean, etc.

Picking out details for the visitor to discover.

Discovery and surprise were two major factors for some visitors—and this often led them to look for minute details in the art. Some found this difficult or tiring when they did not know what was there to be found, wondering if they had "missed something". Offering, either in label text or in some other form, suggestions for details to look out for would help visitors to "feel smart," and enjoy these pieces in a deeper way.

Designing some spaces to inspire emotions beyond placid contemplation.

In its present iteration, the Freer is a relatively one-level experience. With the exception of the Peacock Room, the differences between each gallery, aside from the obvious differences between the objects, are very subtle. One way for the Freer to achieve richer engagement would be to experiment with different ways of displaying the objects, and offer a wider variety of experiences from gallery to gallery. These experiences can be explicitly designed to evoke different emotions—

joy, anger, sorrow—that help to tell the story behind the art, and offer deeper insights into its meanings.

Experimenting with other media and with interactivity.

One of the realms of experience that the Freer does not currently engage very well is the physical/immersive/experiential. Providing experiences that engage this mode of interaction is not limited to offering museum interactives or places where visitors can touch objects. It also could include the incorporation of music, or immersive experiences (like those described above) that provide a multisensory experience. Visitors could be encouraged to interact with the objects through their own bodies—mimicking the poses of the statues, for example—to get a better understanding of what it may have felt like to be someone who saw and used these pieces as they originally stood.