

The Return of the Buddha

Two Studies of Visitor Responses to the Exhibition



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**Office of Policy and Analysis
Study Team**

Carole M. P. Neves, *Director*

Ioana Munteanu

Andrew Pekarik

James Smith

Introduction

From March 20 to August 8, 2004, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art (AMSG) of the Smithsonian Institution hosted the traveling exhibition, *Return of the Buddha: The Qingzhou Discoveries*. The sculptures presented in this exhibition rank among the most significant archeological discoveries of the 20th century.

In 1996, workers leveling a school sports field in Qingzhou, China, unearthed a trove of extraordinary sixth-century Chinese Buddhist statues. The statues were crafted during a 50-year period spanning the Northern Wei (386–534), Eastern Wei (534–550), and Northern Qi (550–577) dynasties, and illustrate the dramatic stylistic changes that occurred during that time. Their discovery has advanced scholarship of Chinese Buddhist art and renewed popular interest in Buddhist sculpture.¹

In the spring and summer of 2004, the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted a two-part study of the *Return of the Buddha* exhibition, to determine visitors' reactions to the exhibition design and their level of satisfaction. The first part consisted of open-ended interviews with a convenience sample of visitors in April, 2004. The second part involved the administration of a written survey to a representative sample of visitors during June and July, 2004. This report summarizes the principal findings from both studies.

I. Face-to-Face Interviews

Between April 14 and April 28, 2004, four OP&A staff members conducted 24 interviews with visitors to the *Return of the Buddha* exhibition. The interviews were conducted on both weekdays and weekends, for the most part in the hallways immediately outside the exhibition. They ranged in length from less than 2 minutes to about 25 minutes, and averaged about 11 minutes. The purpose of these short interviews was to get a sense of visitors' reactions to the exhibition, in part to identify relevant issues for inclusion in the formal visitor survey discussed below. Interviewees were not asked to answer any specific set of questions. Rather, the interviewers attempted to learn visitors' responses to the exhibition.

The Visitors

Several reasons for visiting the *Return of the Buddha* were mentioned. Interviewees who had previously visited FSG typically mentioned their high regard for the Freer and

¹ <http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/past.htm>

Sackler Galleries (FSG) based on previous visits. By contrast, first-time visitors mentioned the following reasons for deciding to visit FSG and the *Buddha*:

- An interest in Asian art;
- An interest in Asian culture;
- A desire for a relaxing experience; and
- A desire to see something different, unique, real.

Several visitors indicated that they had seen the exhibition before, or planned to return: *“I’ll bring my husband back here.” “I’ll take a zeitgeist blast and then absorb it and perhaps come back later.” “One visit would not be enough. Twice is about right.” “My second visit was more impressive than the first.”*

The Artifacts and the Presentation

In general, visitors were strongly drawn to the statues, often offering comments that suggested they had examined them in considerable detail. Features of the figures that were specifically noted included the hands and gestures; faces and expressions; clothing and robes; jewelry; postures (standing, as opposed to seated in meditation); and the androgynous appearance of some of them (*“The Buddha is a man, but many of the statues resemble women”*).

“I was surprised at the richness and quality...”

Other aspects of the sculptures that were mentioned by visitors included their styles (generally in terms of dynastic differences); materials; sizes; painting and gilding; condition; and workmanship (*“I was surprised at the richness and quality possible at that time. They are perfectly carved”*). One viewer, however, commented critically on the similarity of the statues: *“I hate to say it, but it is sort of monotonous... because of the similarity of the artifacts.”*

The design of the exhibition also drew many comments, most of them positive.

- Visitors who noted the lighting were uniformly impressed, sometimes rapturous (*“incredible,” “luminous”*).
- The dark wall color was noted by several visitors, who attached a range of symbolic interpretations to it (ignorance, preciousness); they generally approved of its aesthetic effect: *“The fact that it was a black backdrop let the art speak for itself... you did not get caught up in exterior color.”*

- Visitors approvingly mentioned the simplicity and quietness of the exhibition—the fact that the surroundings did not compete for attention with the art: *“It was wonderful that they did not pipe in music; that they left it quiet.”*
- The arrangement (*“It flows from one thing to another”*), positioning (*“I liked that you could walk behind them”*), and number of statues (*“The largest collection of Buddhas I’ve ever seen together”*) also drew favorable comments.

“It flows from one thing to another.”
- The mounts were praised by those who mentioned them, and one visitor noted that the absence of glass barriers between visitors and the statues enhanced her experience.
- Critical comments included complaints about missing letters on the silkscreened labels; the temperature in the exhibition space; and the difficulty of navigating around areas congested by large groups in such a small space.
- One visitor new to FSG, a self-described Christian, also mentioned that the darkness of the exhibition made it feel “evil” and uncomfortable.

The Intellectual Dimension

Visitors appreciated the information provided about the gilding, coloration, and ornamentation of the statues; the different dynasties and artistic styles; and the serendipitous discovery of the artifacts.

Nevertheless, the informational side of the exhibition drew a number of critical comments, most of them focusing on errors of omission. One visitor suggested *“[The information] was sufficient in terms of the story of unearthing the artifacts, and how the excavation took place, but I think these need to be presented in a larger context.”* Other critical comments included the following:

- Visitors mentioned that they would have liked to have seen more information on the pronunciation of key Chinese words; basic Buddhist religious concepts; the history of Chinese Buddhism; the symbolism of various gestures and features; the material out of which the statues were carved; the difference between Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; the androgyny of many of the figures; and the religious use of the statues.

- One visitor was unimpressed with the published materials available at the entrance of the exhibition: *“The booklet is not nearly as good as the one at the [National Gallery of Art’s] Mayan exhibit.”*
- Other visitors suggested that their experience might have been enhanced by additional informational materials and tools (*“A video would be nice, showing how they were excavated, how they look when fully painted.”*); that the docents might have been better informed; and that more contextual information would be necessary to make such an exhibition accessible to younger visitors (*“If I brought kids, I would have preferred more context. This is abstract for kids.”*)

In general, the interviewed visitors seemed to tend toward the view that, while the information provided was good as far as it went, more information might have helped to answer a number of lingering questions about the art and culture represented in the *Buddha*.

“If I brought kids, I would have preferred more context.”

The *Buddha* evoked a deep sense of historical perspective in some of the visitors interviewed. One noted succinctly, *“The exhibition does a*

good job of conveying the history, even without a lot of words on the wall—the ebbs and flows of history, civilization, culture.” Several visitors also mentioned how gratified they were to see China honoring its past—in contrast to earlier efforts to suppress Chinese history, and to some other nations’ destructive impulses toward elements of their heritage. The Taliban’s destruction of Buddhas in Afghanistan was mentioned by two interviewees in this context: *“The theme is the ‘return’ of the Buddha, and we were just talking about the site in Afghanistan where they destroyed the Buddhas recently... about that contrast: how people were finding new Buddhas in one place while others were being destroyed.”* Another interviewee stressed how the artifacts conjured up images of a different life and time, when great care was lavished on ceremonial art—in contrast to our disposable, commercialized modern culture.

The Experiential Dimension

Many of the interviewed visitors stressed the experiential component of their visit to the *Buddha* above the informational component, talking at length and sometimes forcefully about how they had *felt* in the exhibition, rather than what they had learned. Visitors noted a range of experiences:

- **Reflective** (*“...so powerful and with so much meaning.”* *“[It] gives you a perspective on humanity.”*)
- **Emotional** (*“Some FSG shows are factually informative, but this one is breathtaking.”* *“Very forceful—all of the Buddhas standing there in the*

room.” *“I like smaller galleries like this one or the Hirshhorn that create a space in each room and typify an emotion, rather than just showing the art.”*)

- **Aesthetic** (*“The visual display was great, and the lighting was incredible.”*
“A beautiful experience.”)
- **Spiritual** (*“I was feeling a sense of awe, as if in the presence of something sacred.”* *“When you go in there it is almost like you are praying to them.”* *“There is a peaceful and holy feeling in the exhibition.”*)
- **Relaxing** (*“It’s simple but has a good taste. It makes you feel good.”* *“You need the arts, because they relax you.”*)
- **Serene** (*“It moved me, because there is a serenity there that I don’t feel when I go to the other galleries.”* *“It’s almost visceral when you walk into the room—and peaceful, like a church.”* *“We have to be peaceful, at peace with ourselves. These statues—they are at peace with themselves.”*)
- **Surprising** (*“I didn’t know how wonderful this would be. Inside is really amazing.”*)

“I was feeling a sense of awe.”

Some visitors mentioned the powerful impact of getting close to the ancient artworks, as opposed to the more intellectual appreciation one might get from second-hand sources: *“Exhibitions like this are truly unique.”* *“Knowing about the Buddha is not the same as seeing [these statues] in person.”* *“This is much more than a picture in a magazine or an article in a book. This is real history—seeing the three-dimensional object.”*

Encounters with the original artifacts seemed to be heightened for some visitors by the information on the discovery and excavation of the statues: *“They were doing an excavation and just came across it. Amazing!”* *“They were discovered so recently—only in 1996—and they are already here. That’s cool.”* *“It’s incredible to me that archaeologists could excavate and reassemble them.”*

Miscellaneous Observations

Several visitors noted that the exhibition affected their views of Buddhist images: *“All the Buddhas I have seen are sitting down [in lotus position]. Nothing else! These ones here, some of them, they have clothing, they have ornaments, jewelry—I noticed that.”* *“I think the mass perception of Buddhism is of a jolly man sitting Indian style, and these artifacts are very contrary to that idea.”*

A few visitors spoke effusively about the larger significance in the exhibition as a kind of ambassador of international goodwill and a medium for bringing cultures together: “*This is multicultural, this is for everybody.*” “*It gives you a perspective on humanity in*

“It gives you a perspective on humanity in general.”

general.” “I think all this art and culture should belong to the whole world... People can see and learn so many things, even from a little museum... It helps to build up people’s beautiful hearts and kindness. It is very good for the world and for peace... Even if you don’t understand a country’s language, that doesn’t matter. I think human beings’ hearts are the same.”

Finally, the Sackler Building itself was positively commented upon by several visitors: “*This building is stunningly beautiful, minimalist and beautifully done.*” “*The Sackler building is intimate—almost a sacred space.*” “*The whole experience of the building is stunning.*” However, more than one visitor did suggest that without a map it can be hard to find one’s way around the museum.

II. The Written Questionnaire

In June and July of 2004, the OP&A study team administered a written questionnaire to visitors to *Return of the Buddha*. The one-page questionnaire was designed to (1) assess visitor satisfaction with the exhibition; (2) determine if satisfaction was influenced by specific exhibition features, by visitors’ backgrounds, or by visitors’ activities in the exhibition; and (3) answer questions raised by FSG management.

The study team asked 670 eligible visitors, ages 12 and older, to complete the questionnaire as they were exiting the exhibition. Nearly nine out of ten (86%) of the selected visitors did so (574). The primary reason stated by the visitors who refused was insufficient time (8%).

Demographically, the audience was very similar in most respects to audiences in previous studies at the Freer and Sackler. (See Appendix B.) However, unlike previous audiences, which were dominated by visitors coming alone, close to half of the visitors (46%) surveyed outside of *Return of the Buddha* came to see the exhibition accompanied by one other adult, slightly more than one-fourth (26%) by themselves, 14% with several adults, and 10% with children.

Major Findings

Visitors Were Very Interested in Art, Asian Art, Asian Culture, and Buddhism. At least half of all responding visitors indicated they were “very interested” in Asian art, art in general, and/or Asian culture. Nearly as many (39%) indicated that they were “very

interested” in Buddhism (see Table 1), and 43% came to the museum specifically to see *Return of the Buddha*.

Table 1. Interests of Visitors to *Return of the Buddha* Exhibition

	Very Interested	Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested	Not Applicable
Art in general	57%	31%	9%	1%	1%
Asian art	48%	34%	17%	1%	1%
Asian culture	47%	37%	15%	1%	0%
Buddhism	39%	34%	23%	3%	2%

Visitors heard about the exhibition from multiple sources. Banners (23%), word of mouth (20%), and newspapers (18%) were the most cited sources of information about the exhibition. Word of mouth was especially effective for DC residents. One-third of the responding visitors who reside in DC heard about the exhibition by word of mouth. Newspapers were effective for those “very interested” in art in general—70% of those who heard about the exhibition in the newspaper said they were “very interested” in art in general.

The reading area was missed by many visitors. 21% of visitors did not notice the reading area; 27% read materials there.

Learning, object, and emotional experiences were equally prominent. Among the ten possible satisfying experiences listed on the questionnaire, the experiences mentioned most frequently by surveyed visitors were:

- Being moved by the beauty of the statues (68%)
- Feeling relaxed/tranquil/calm (67%)
- Gaining information or knowledge (66%)
- Seeing old, rare statues (61%)

The design was effective. About nine out of ten responding visitors felt that lighting and placement of the statues enhanced their experience; about seven out of ten felt that wall color enhanced their experience.

There may have been too little introductory information. When asked their opinions on specific features of the exhibition, large majorities of surveyed visitors (between 70% and 89%) felt the number of statues, exhibition size, label information, number of visitors,

temperature, and background sound were “just right.” The only feature of the exhibition that was criticized by a relatively large percentage of respondents was the introductory information; although 65% of respondents felt it was “just right,” 17% felt that it was “too little.” (See Table 2.)

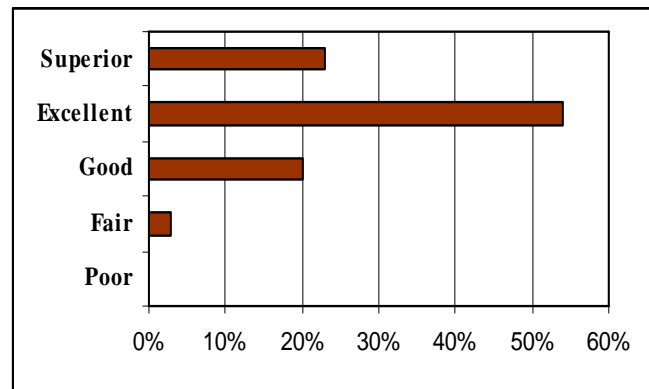
Table 2. Visitor Opinions Regarding Return of the Buddha Exhibition Features

	Too little	Too much	Just right	No opinion
Temperature	4%	3%	89%	4%
Number of statues	6%	4%	84%	6%
Exhibition size	10%	1%	82%	7%
Label information	8%	3%	80%	9%
Number of visitors	3%	5%	76%	16%
Background sound	4%	4%	70%	22%
Introductory information	17%	1%	65%	17%

Overall, the exhibition was favorably rated. Over three out of four responding visitors were very pleased with the exhibition, rating it either “excellent” or “superior.” (Almost one quarter rated the exhibition at the top of the scale as “superior,” while more than half rated it as “excellent.”) One out of five rated the exhibition as “good.” Only 3% rated the exhibition as “fair,” and no one rated it as “poor.” (See Figure 1.)

90% of the most satisfied visitors—those who rated the exhibition as “superior”—indicated they were moved by the beauty of the statues and felt that their experience was enhanced by the placement of the statues.

Figure 1. Rating of Return of the Buddha Visit



Other Results

Visitors to *Return of the Buddha* were asked whether they visited or planned to visit the Gallery shop. More than half (51%) answered the question affirmatively, while one third said they did not visit or plan to visit the museum shop, and about one sixth said they did not know.

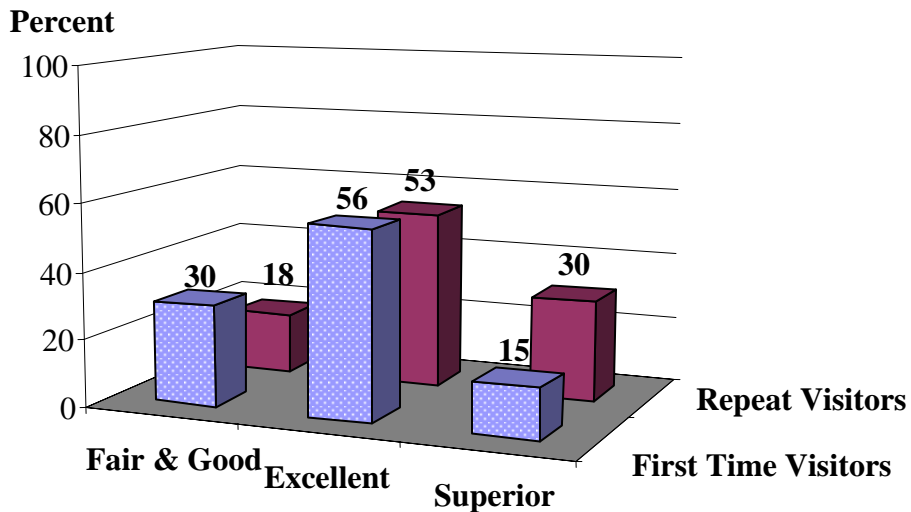
When asked whether the Gallery would benefit from adding a food service, half of all responding visitors said “no” (50%), compared with only about one-fourth each who said “yes” (26%) or did not offer a firm opinion (24%).

Analysis

The OP&A study team noticed some interesting differences between the 52% of *Buddha* visitors who were coming to FSG for the first time, and the FSG repeat visitors.

- In comparison with repeat visitors, new visitors were generally younger.
- New visitors rated the exhibition considerably lower than repeat visitors. They were only half as likely as repeat visitor to rate the *Buddha* as “superior,” and over one-and-a-half times as likely to rate it as “good” or “fair.” (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Rating of *Return of the Buddha*, Repeat Visitors vs. First Time Visitors



- New visitors were not as well-informed about the exhibition as repeat visitors. Repeat visitors were more likely than new visitors to have heard about the exhibition through newspapers, word of mouth, or *Smithsonian Magazine*. (For example, among repeat visitors, 26% heard about the exhibition in the newspaper, while among new visitors, only 8% heard about it in the newspaper.) New visitors were more likely to have heard about the exhibition by seeing the banners, or just by wandering in.

- Repeat visitors were more likely to be coming to the museum to see *Return of the Buddha*. Among repeat visitors, 59% had come to the museum specifically to see the *Buddha*; among new visitors, this figure was only 23%.
- New visitors behaved differently in the exhibition than repeat visitors. They were less likely to indicate that they compared dynastic styles (27% vs. 45%), examined the details of the statues (60% vs. 78%), or read labels and text panels (78% vs. 85%). New visitors were also less likely to have examined sculptural techniques of the statues (31% vs. 51%). In comparison with repeat visitors, new visitors were less likely to have felt that statue placement enhanced their experience (77% vs. 92%).
- In comparison to repeat visitors, new visitors were less likely to report the following satisfying experiences: being moved by beauty (60% vs. 76%), reflecting on meaning (32% vs. 48%), and gaining information or knowledge (61% vs. 71%).

The differences between new and repeat visitors can be interpreted as reflecting different levels of involvement with art. New visitors were less likely to be “very interested” in Asian art (37% vs. 55%), and art in general (45% vs. 67%). In addition, the results suggest that new visitors were less likely to demonstrate the behaviors typical of seasoned art museum visitors. However, new visitors were just as interested in Asian culture and Buddhism as repeat visitors, and were just as educated.

Appendix A

Face-to-face Interviews

Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees

- **Group composition:** Of the 24 interviews conducted, 8 were with pairs of visitors; therefore, the OP&A study team interviewed a total of 32 visitors.
- **Gender:** 22 of the interviewees (69 percent) were female, and 10 (31 percent) were male.
- **Age:** Interviewees varied from 11 to over 60 years of age.
- **Residence:** 7 interviewees (22 percent) resided in Washington D.C. or its metropolitan area; 20 (62 percent) resided in other U.S. states; and 5 (16 percent) lived outside the United States.
- **Ethnicity:** 27 interviewees (84 percent) were Caucasian/white and the remaining 5 (16 percent) were Hispanic or Asian.²

² Three potential interviewees of Asian ethnicity declined to talk to the OP&A study team because of language difficulties.

Appendix B

Return of the Buddha *Survey Results*

1. Is this your first visit to this museum (the Freer and Sackler Galleries)?

52% Yes

48% No. **About how many times have you been here before?**

39% 1 to 3

28 % 4 to 10

33% More than 10

2. Did you use this museum's website to plan your visit?

87% No

13% Yes

3. What led you to visit this museum today? [Mark ALL that apply]

43% Came to see *Return of the Buddha* exhibition

34% Came for a general museum visit

23% Wandered by

11% Came to see *Caliphs and Kings* exhibition

3% Came to visit this museum's shop

3% Came to see a program or performance

2% Came to see *Whistler in Paris* exhibition

1% Came to see *Do Ho-Suh* exhibition

8% Other

4. Where did you hear about the *Return of the Buddha* exhibition?

[Mark ALL that apply]

23% Banner on building

22% Wandered by

20% Word of mouth

18% Newspaper

10% Smithsonian magazine

8% Other

7% Previous visit

4% Information desk

4% Freer/Sackler events calendar

4% Freer/Sackler website

3% Metro/bus shelter poster

2% Freer/Sackler e-newsletter

5. In general, how interested are you in the following? (Percent)

	Not Interested	Somewhat Interested	Interested	Very Interested	N/A
Art in general	1%	9%	31%	57%	1%
Asian art	1%	17%	34%	48%	1%
Asian culture	1%	15%	37%	47%	0%
Buddhism	3%	23%	34%	39%	2%

6. On your visit to this exhibition today, which of the following did you do?

[Mark ALL that apply]

- 81% Read labels and text panels
- 69% Examined the clothing/ornaments of the statues
- 68% Examined the postures of the statues
- 64% Examined the painting/gilding of statues
- 41% Examined the sculptural techniques of the statues
- 41% Talked to companion(s)
- 37% Compared different dynastic styles
- 27% Read materials in the reading area
- 23% Relaxed/sat
- 5% Listened to a tour guide
- 10% Other
- 1% None of the above

7. How did the following elements contribute to your experience in the exhibition? (Percent)

Lighting	91% Enhanced	3% Detracted	3% No effect	3% Didn't notice
Statue placement	85% Enhanced	2% Detracted	9% No effect	4% Didn't notice
Wall color	72% Enhanced	3 % Detracted	11% No effect	14% Didn't notice
Reading alcove	41% Enhanced	2 % Detracted	36% No effect	21% Didn't notice

8. How would you rate the following features of this exhibition? (Percent)

Temperature	3% Too hot	4% Too cold	89% Just right	4% N/A
Number of statues	4% Too many	6% Too few	84% Just right	6% N/A
Exhibition size	1% Too large	10% Too small	82% Just right	7% N/A
Label info	3% Too much	8% Too little	80% Just right	9% N/A
Number of visitors	5% Too many	3% Too few	76% Just right	16% N/A
Background sound	4% Too many	4% Too few	70% Just right	22% N/A
Introduction info	1% Too much	17% Too little	65% Just right	17% N/A

9. Which of the following experiences did you find most satisfying in this exhibition today? [Mark ALL that apply]

- 68% Being moved by the beauty of the statues
- 67% Feeling relaxed/tranquil/calm
- 66% Gaining information or knowledge
- 61% Seeing old, rare statues
- 49% Experiencing a culture different from my own
- 41% Reflecting upon the meaning of what I saw
- 33% Spending time with friends/family
- 26% Feeling a spiritual connection
- 21% Recalling travels or other memories
- 21% Imagining myself in other times or places

10. What was most interesting for you in this exhibition today? [open-ended question]

- 39% No answer
- 33% External focus (mentioned an element/experience related to the display or statues)
- 26% Internal focus (mentioned experiences such as learning, reflective or spiritual)
- 3% Other

11. Overall, how would you rate this exhibition, *Return of the Buddha*?

- 0% Poor 3% Fair 20% Good 54% Excellent 23% Superior

12. Did you visit (or do you plan to visit) the museum shop during your visit today?

- 51% Yes
- 33% No
- 16% I don't know

13. In your opinion, would this museum benefit from adding a food court/cafeteria?

- 50% No
- 26% Yes
- 24% I don't know

14. Where do you live?

- 58% US, outside DC metro area
- 13% Washington DC
- 11% VA suburbs
- 10% MD suburbs
- 8% Other countries

15. With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]

- 46 % One other adult
- 26% I am alone
- 14% Several adults
- 10% Other adults with children and teenagers
- 4% Other groups

16. Are you of Latino/Hispanic origin?

- 93% No
- 7% Yes

17. What race do you consider yourself to be? [Mark one or more]

- 70% White, non-Latino
- 19% Asian, non -Latino
- 6% Other, non-Latino
- 4% White, Latino

18. Your gender: 55% Female 45% Male

19. Your age:

- 19% 12 to 25 years of age
- 20% 26 to 35 years of age
- 18% 36 to 45 years of age
- 21% 46 to 55 years of age
- 15% 56 to 65 years of age
- 7% 66 and over years of age

20. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- 54% Graduate/professional degree
- 27% Bachelor's degree
- 7% High school graduate or less
- 7% One or more years of college, no degree
- 4% Associate degree