The First Ladies at the Smithsonian

A report based on a study of visitors at the National Museum of American History

![Smithsonian Institution] Smithsonian Institution

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Office of Policy and Analysis

PREFACE

The Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) was pleased to undertake this study of visitors to the current installation of the first ladies exhibition, *the First Ladies at the Smithsonian* at the National Museum of American History (NMAH). The permanent exhibition has been popular for more than half a century. It was the first time OP&A studied visitors to the first ladies exhibition since the Museum's 2006-2008 renovation.

At NMAH our contact was Howard Morrison, Director of Education and Interpretation, who saw the importance of the studies and supervised the data collection Special thanks are extended to staff and interns of NMAH. Invaluable assistance with data collection was provided, amidst their other duties, by the following colleagues: Peter Albritton, Shannon Dotso, Naomi Coquillan, Caitlin Donnelly, Tanya Garner, Kate Geiser, Camy Glomsh, Joycinna Groves, Kay Haberger, Heather Paisley-Jones, Cathy Keen, Beth Kline, Kate Lauricello, Andrea Lautner, Karen Lee, Jan Lilja, Erin Mack, Suzanne McLaughlin, Ben Miller, Amanda Murray, Erin Nielsen, Debbie Schafer-Jacobs, Kathy Sklar, Kimberley Tarr, Rosemary Phillips, Matt Ringelsletter, James Zimmerman.

Within OP&A, Zahava Doering and Andrew Pekarik were liaisons with NMAH and designed the study. Interns, Givi Khidesheli assisted with questionnaire preparation and Daniel Garcia conducted the data processing and initial data analysis. Ikuko Uetani was responsible for the complete analysis and report writing. Lance Costello also assisted with report review. I thank them all for their efforts.

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BACKGROUND

The first ladies exhibition at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) has been one of the most beloved exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution. The collection itself dates back to 1912, when the Smithsonian set a goal of collecting the historic gowns of the first ladies. Since then, as the public's interest in learning more about the first ladies has grown and the roles of first ladies have evolved, the collection has expanded to include artifacts related to the first ladies' social and political contributions and the exhibition has incorporated this expansion, consequently reflecting the history of American women.

Initially, the dresses were on display as part of the "*Collection of Period Costumes*" exhibition. A separate exhibition that focused on the first ladies' gowns was created in 1955 and installed in a new hall, the First Ladies Hall, in the Smithsonian's now closed Arts and Industries Building. The exhibition and the Hall moved into NMAH (then the Museum of History and Technology) in 1964 when it opened. This exhibition included first ladies' personal belongings and presidential china in addition to dresses. In 1992, "*First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image*," the immediate predecessor of the current exhibition, opened. As the title indicates, it featured not only the fashion but also the evolving roles of the first ladies and their contributions to the presidency and the society.

"*First Ladies at the Smithsonian*," the current first ladies exhibition, opened in December, 2008, a month after NMAH reopened after two years of architectural renovation. Although an additional new gallery opened in March, 2010, the size of this exhibition is smaller than its predecessors. The Museum plans an expanded first ladies exhibition in the west wing of the building which is yet to be renovated. The main gallery of the current "*First Ladies at the Smithsonian*" consists of three sections: "*The First Ladies Collection*" focuses on the development of the collection, "*The Tradition of the Gowns*" focuses on the inaugural gowns and "*A First Lady's Contribution*" focuses on the first ladies' social and political contributions. The artifacts on view include dresses, personal possessions and portraits, White House china and furnishings. "*A First Lady's Debut*" in the added gallery focuses on the first ladies introduction to the public and showcases inaugural gowns of 11 modern first ladies, from Mamie Eisenhower to Michelle Obama.

This report presents an analysis of data gathered from visitors to the current exhibition, "*First Ladies at the Smithsonian*."

Cover: Michelle Obama's Inaugural Gown, 2009. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.

METHOD

Data for the study were collected with a sample survey. A random sample of visitors were intercepted as they exited the exhibition and asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire (Appendix A). Data collection took place in the fall of 2010, between September 24 and November 4. Of the 419 selected visitors eligible[1] to participate, 298 completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 71 percent (Appendix B contains the frequencies of responses to the questions[2]).

Martha Washington's Silk Gown.
Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.

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[1] Only voluntary visitors to the exhibition, age 12 or older, were eligible to participate in this study, i.e., Smithsonian staff and contractors, members of organized tour or school visit groups were not interviewed.

[2] Based on the sample size, the results presented in this report are representative of the population visiting the exhibition during the period of the study with a 95% probability that the actual percentage for the population will be within plus or minus five percent of the survey percentage.

FINDINGS

The Audience Overall

A large majority of visitors interviewed were US residents (84%), including four percent of individuals from the Metropolitan Washington, DC region. Visitors from outside the United States make up the remainder (16%).

Three in four visitors were women (74%). In other studies of visitors to the Museum[3], the ratio of women to men was even or slightly in favor of women. Not surprisingly, based on the contents, visitors to *First Ladies at the Smithsonian* consisted predominantly of women.

Of those eligible to be interviewed, the average age was 43 and the median age was 44. Visitors can be divided into three approximately equal age clusters: ages 12 to 35 (36%), ages 36 to 55 (33%) and over the age of 55 (31%).

Learning about the Exhibition

From a list of possible five responses, respondents reported where they learned about the *First Ladies* exhibition. The data suggest that almost half or more of visitors had known about the exhibition prior to their visit to the Museum (36% heard about it and 23% saw it before, and few from the Museum's web site). The rest indicated that they learned about the exhibition during their visit to the museum (36% happened upon it and 10% learned about it at the information desk (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sources of Learning about the *First Ladies*
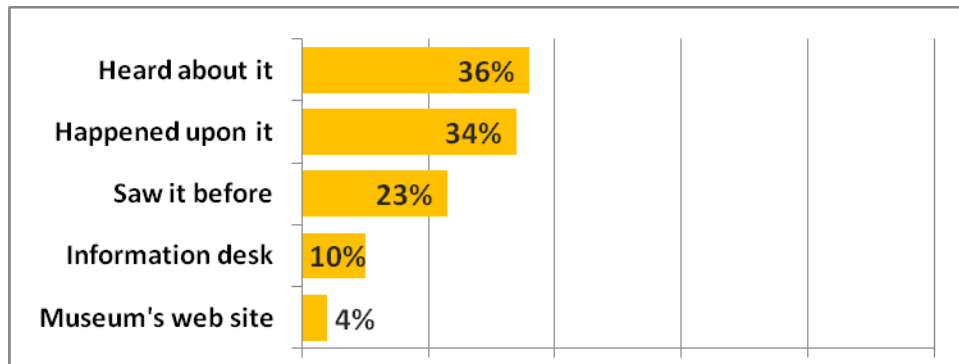
Compared to others, those ages 12 to 35 were more likely (44%) and those aged over 55 were less likely (21%) to say that they happened upon the exhibition. Not surprisingly, the younger visitors, ages 12 to 35, were less likely (11%) and the older visitors, ages over 55, were more likely (33%) than others to have seen the exhibition before.

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[3] Demographic Characteristics at the National Museum of American History 1994-2010, unpublished, OP&A

Satisfaction with the Visit

Respondents were asked to rate their overall experience in the exhibition on a five-point scale of Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent and Superior. From previous study results, OP&A has found that visitors tend to mark Good, Fair, or Poor when their experience was less than satisfactory. Visitors rate it Excellent when they are satisfied with the visit. If the visitor has an outstanding experience or feels that the visit was more than satisfactory, the individual would be likely to mark Superior.

The ratings for the *First Ladies* exhibition indicate that three in four were satisfied with their overall experience and the rest, one in four, were somewhat critical[4] of the exhibition. The results are broadly in line with those from a recent study of visitors to the Museum[5] and other Smithsonian exhibitions that OP&A has studied[6]. However, compared to the ratings collected in 2005[7], visitors appeared to find their 2010 experience in *First Ladies at the Smithsonian* less exceptional (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Comparisons of Ratings
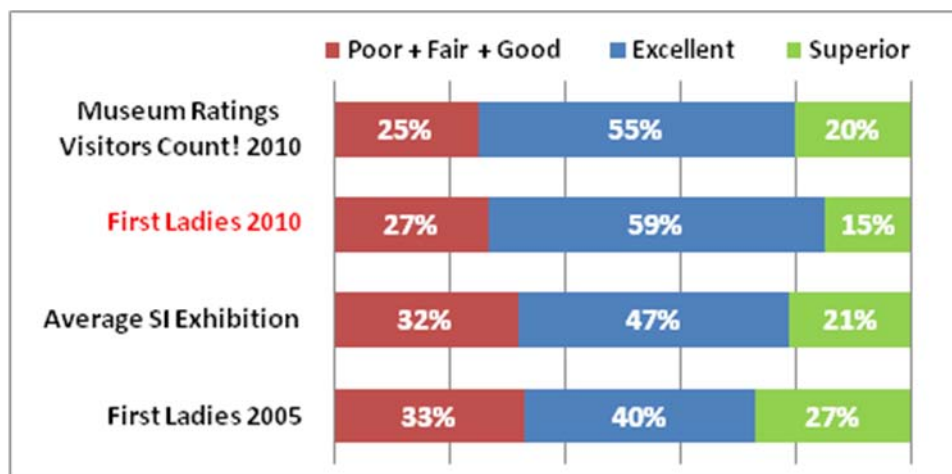
Women were markedly more likely than men to rate their overall experience Superior (19% of women vs. 6% of men). Those who happened upon the exhibition were more likely than others to rate their experience Poor, Fair or Good (36%).

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[4] The breakdown of the lower ratings is presented in Appendix B.

[5] *Visitors Count!—National Museum of American History Visitor Exit Survey*, OP&A, Summer 2010

[6] This rating scale is used by OP&A for museum or exhibition visitor surveys. The data are from OP&A unpublished tabulations.

[7] *Visitor Ratings of Exhibitions at the National Museum of American History*, OP&A, June 2005. "*First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image*," the immediate predecessor of the current exhibition was on view.
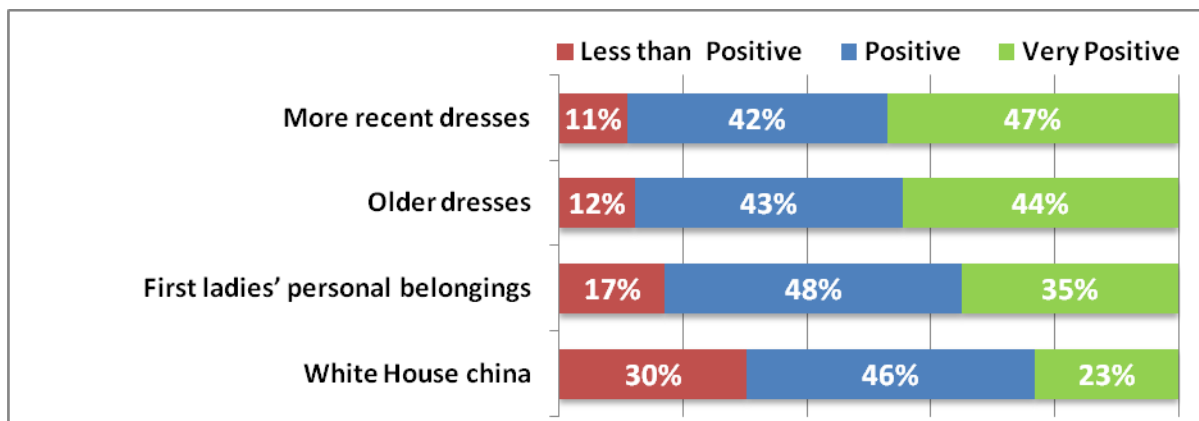
Exhibition Elements

Respondents were also asked to indicate how each of eleven listed elements of the exhibition contributed to their experience using a seven-point scale, where 1 = Very Negative, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Very Positive. The frequency distribution[8] shows that respondents rarely chose any of the categories from 1 to 3, and that the majority of responses overall were in the last two categories. The trend can be interpreted in terms of three larger categories, under the assumption that visitors marked 1, 2, 3 or 4, Very Negative through Neutral, when they felt less positive or somewhat critical with the item, marked 5 or 6 when they felt more positive than Neutral, and used the highest rating, Very Positive, when they were most pleased. Based on this interpretation, in the following charts (Figures 3, 4 and 5) we present the results[9] converted into a three point scale; i.e., Less than Positive, Positive and Very Positive.

Figure 3 shows how the four items about the collection objects contributed to visitors' experience in the exhibition. One-third to over two in five visitors indicated that three items, *Display of more recent dresses*, *Display of older dresses* and *Display of first ladies' personal belongings* made a Very Positive contribution. First ladies' dresses and personal belongings were clearly of strong interest for visitors.

Women were more likely to select Very Positive than men for *First ladies' personal belongings* (41% of women vs. 19% of men) and *White House china* (28% of women vs. 8% of men).

Figure 3[10]: Contribution of Objects in the *First Ladies*

Figure 4 shows four items related to stories surrounding the first ladies or the first ladies collection. Over one-third indicated that *Large photos of the first ladies*, had a Very Positive contribution and one-third or slightly fewer felt that *Video with stories about the first ladies, Text & photos about the history of the collection,* and *Text & photos about the first ladies' roles* had a Very Positive contribution.

Women were more likely to select Very Positive and less likely to select Less than Positive than men for *Video with stories about the first ladies* (38% of women vs. 22% of men, 11% of women vs. 25% of men, respectively).

Figure 4: Contribution of Information in the *First Ladies*
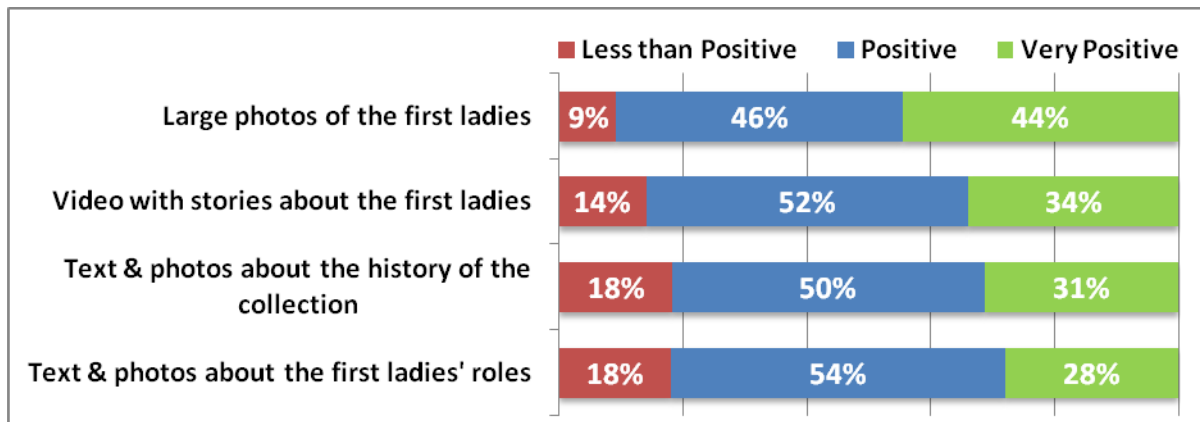
The contribution of the last three items in the list was reported as less positive, one in five to three in ten marked Very Positive and nearly half marked less than positive (See Figure 5). However, it should be noted that one-third of respondents marked Didn't See It in answering *Docent in gallery* and *Visiting what someone in my family had seen*, i.e., less than positive responses among all the respondents were between one in four and one in three.

Figure 5: Contribution of context
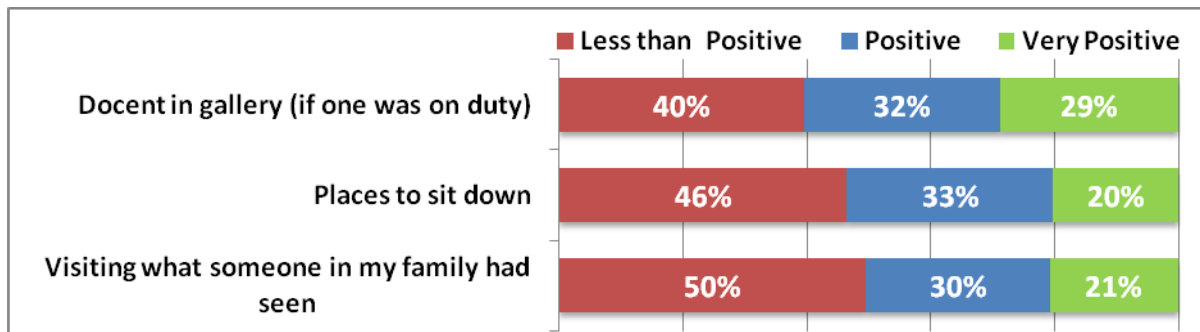
Except for the last item, *Visiting what someone in my family had seen,* all of the listed items showed strong positive associations with visitors' ratings of their overall experience in the exhibition.

Elements That Would Have Enhanced

Visitors showed only mild interest in elements that were suggested as possible enhancements. From a list of five possibilities, one-third chose *A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (written)* and *A way to access more information using a cell phone with Internet capability*. One in five expressed their interest in the other three elements (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Interest in Enhancements
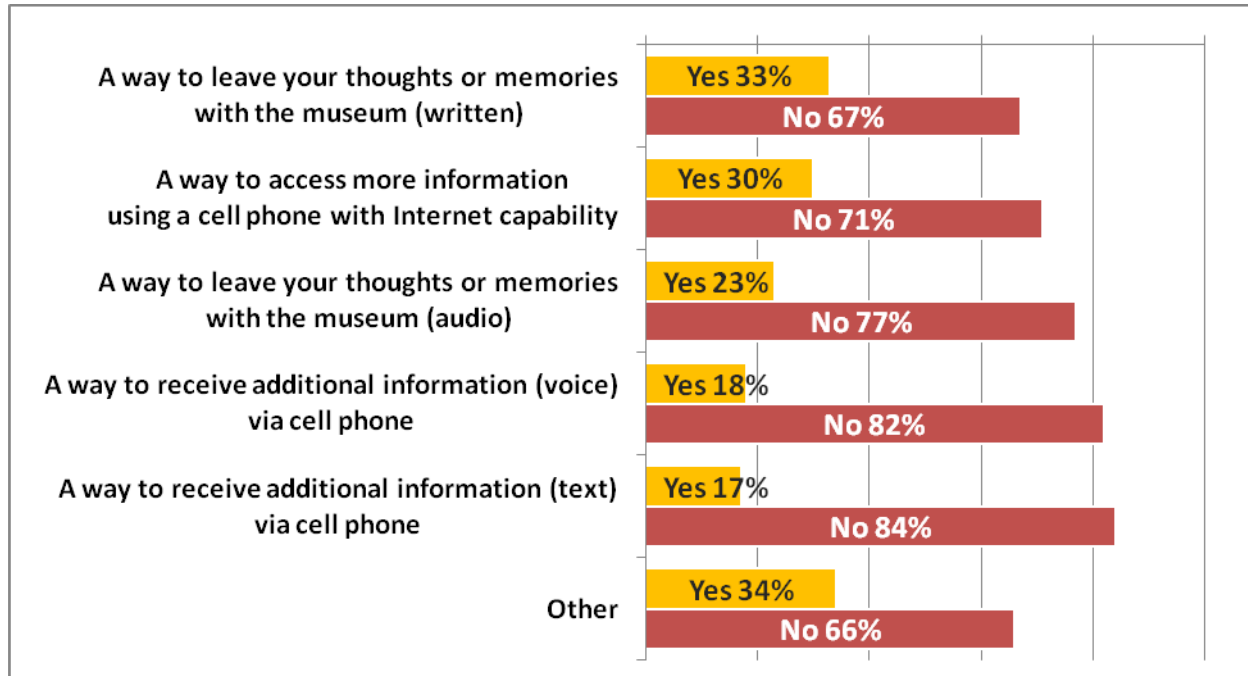
Two in five respondents said No to all the listed items (42%). The younger visitors, ages 12 to 35, were less likely (33%) and the older ones, those ages 36 to 55 and those aged over 55 were more likely (54% and 62%, respectively) to say No to all.

Those ages 12 to 35 were more likely than others to agree that *A way to access more information using a cell phone with Internet capability* would have enhanced their experience (46%).

Particular elements were associated with visitors' positive experiences in the exhibition.

Those who rated their experience Superior were more likely than others to indicate that the following would have enhanced their experience:
- *A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (written)* (54%)
- *A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (audio)* (40%)

Those who reported that Text & photos about the first ladies' roles contributed to their experience very positively were more likely than others to indicate that *A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (audio)* would have enhanced their experience (36%).

Those who reported that a docent in the gallery contributed to their experience very positively were more likely than others to indicate that *A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (written)* would have enhanced their experience (66%).

Suggestions by respondents of other possible enhancements can be sorted into three categories as follows[11]:

- New media technologies—smartphone apps, audio guide, interactive devices in the exhibition, emails, and website

- Exhibition contents—objects, information on the objects and the first ladies

- Exhibition design or presentation— lighting and presentation, exhibition size, and flow in the exhibition

OBSERVATIONS

Based on the combined ratings of Excellent and Superior, visitors to *First Ladies at the Smithsonian* came away quite satisfied. Predictably, visitors to the exhibition were predominantly women and they tended to have better experiences there, compared to men. However, this should not be a major problem for NMAH as long as the other exhibitions can set off the imbalance in interest and response.

The data suggest that the artifacts that belonged to the first ladies, dresses and personal possessions, are of foremost interest to visitors, and especially so for women. Although the stories that surround the first ladies and the collection also contribute to visitors' experiences in the exhibition, the major draw appears to be the objects, mainly the dresses.

The finding that those who rated the overall experience Superior more often would have liked a way to leave their thoughts or memories with the museum suggests that qualitative analysis of interviews or comment books could be a meaningful way to explore what makes the visit to this exhibition outstanding.

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[11] Responses to *Other* are presented in Appendix C.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

The First Ladies Visitor Survey

1. Where did you learn about <u>this</u> exhibition, *The First Ladies at the Smithsonian?* [Mark one or more]

   ☐ Happened upon it   ☐ Heard about it   ☐ Information desk   ☐ Museum's web site   ☐ Saw it before

2. How would you rate your overall experience in <u>this</u> *First Ladies* exhibition?

   ☐ Poor   ☐ Fair   ☐ Good   ☐ Excellent   ☐ Superior

3. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = Very Negative, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Very Positive
   How did EACH of the following contribute to your experience?

	Didn't See It	Very Negative 1	2	3	Neutral 4	5	6	Very Positive 7
Display of older dresses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Display of more recent dresses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Display of the first ladies' personal belongings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Display of White House china	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Text & photos about the first ladies' roles	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Text & photos about the history of the collection	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Video with stories about the first ladies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Large photos of the first ladies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Docent in gallery (if one was on duty)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Places to sit down	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Visiting what someone in my family had seen	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. Would any of the following have enhanced your experience in this exhibition?

A way to receive additional information (text) via cell phone	Yes ☐	No ☐
A way to receive additional information (voice) via cell phone	Yes ☐	No ☐
A way to access more information using a cell phone with Internet capability	Yes ☐	No ☐
A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (written)	Yes ☐	No ☐
A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (audio)	Yes ☐	No ☐
Other:_____	Yes ☐	No ☐

5. What is your age? |__|__|__|

6. What is your sex?   ☐ Female   ☐ Male

7. Where do you live? ☐ U.S.   ZIP Code: |__|__|__|__|__|
   ☐ Other country: _____

Thank You!

Appendix B: Response Frequencies [In Percent]

Note: the percentages of responses to the questions may not sum to 100 due to rounding and
the ability of respondents to mark more than one answer with some questions.

1. Where did you learn about <u>this</u> exhibition, *The First Ladies at the Smithsonian?* [Mark one or more]

34	Happened upon it
36	Heard about it
10	Information desk
4	Museum's web site
23	Saw it before

2. How would you rate your overall experience in <u>this</u> *First Ladies* exhibition?

0	Poor
3	Fair
24	Good
59	Excellent
15	Superior

3. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = Very Negative, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Very Positive
How did EACH of the following contribute to your experience?

Table 1	Didn't See It	Very Negative 1	2	3	Neutral 4	5	6	Very Positive 7
Display of older dresses	2	0	1	2	9	13	29	43
Display of more recent dresses	0	1	0	1	9	11	31	47
Display of first ladies' personal belongings	2	0	2	3	12	16	31	35
Display of White House china	11	1	1	6	20	16	25	21
Text & photos about the first ladies' roles	6	0	0	2	14	24	28	26
Text & photos about the history of the collection	6	0	1	4	12	22	26	29
Video with stories about the first ladies	16	0	0	3	10	18	26	28
Large photos of the first ladies	2	0	0	0	9	13	33	43
Docent in gallery (if one was on duty)	35	0	2	3	20	8	13	19
Places to sit down	16	2	5	7	25	11	17	17
Visiting what someone in my family had seen	34	0	1	3	29	7	12	14

Response Frequencies [In Percent]

3 [Continued]. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = Very Negative, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Very Positive How did EACH of the following contribute to your experience?

Table 2: Without "Didn't See It"	Very Negative 1	2	3	Neutral 4	5	6	Very Positive 7
Display of older dresses	0	1	2	9	13	30	44
Display of more recent dresses	1	0	1	9	11	31	47
Display of first ladies' personal belongings	0	2	3	12	16	32	35
Display of White House china	1	1	6	22	18	28	23
Text & photos about the first ladies' roles	0	0	3	15	25	29	28
Text & photos about the history of the collection	0	1	4	13	23	27	31
Video with stories about the first ladies	0	0	3	11	21	31	34
Large photos of the first ladies	0	0	0	9	13	33	44
Docent in gallery (if one was on duty)	1	3	5	31	13	19	29
Places to sit down	2	6	8	30	13	20	20
Visiting what someone in my family had seen	0	1	5	44	11	19	21

4. Would any of the following have enhanced your experience in this exhibition?

	Yes	No
A way to receive additional information (text) via cell phone	17	84
A way to receive additional information (voice) via cell phone	18	82
A way to access more information using a cell phone with Internet capability	30	71
A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (written)	33	67
A way to leave your thoughts or memories with the museum (audio)	23	77
Other	34	66

Response Frequencies [In Percent]

5. What is your age?

Average: 43 Median: 44

Ages 12 to 35	*36*
Ages 36 to 55	*33*
Ages 56 or older	*31*

6. What is your sex?

74	Female
26	Male

7. Where do you live?

84	U.S.
16	Other country

Metro Washington	*4*
Southeast	*20*
Mid Atlantic	*11*
Midwest	*15*
New England	*5*
Mountain Plains	*10*
West	*12*
Unspecified U.S.	*9*
Country other than U.S.	*16*

Appendix C: Open-ended Responses to Other in Question 4:
Would any of the following have enhanced your experience in this exhibition?

New media technologies

- Apps for Droid/iPhone
- Audio guide
- More info at displays on demand
- Interactive recordings (push a button to hear the first ladies)
- E-mail
- E-mails
- Web site w/other dresses, etc. from collection + info.

Exhibition contents

- More knick knacks, accessories, etc. that accompany the gowns
- More china and serving pieces
- New gowns-I thought Michelle Obama's gown would be on display

- More detail about designs
- Slightly more personal info on the first ladies would be of interest
- Add more about what each of these ladies did—Their campaigns, etc. not just their material possessions-alongside the dresses perhaps!
- Focus on their achievements, too!

- Add more gowns to 1st lady museum, like the video

Exhibition design/presentation

- Slightly better lighting (several corner exhibits were almost completely dark)
- Better lighting!
- Needs better lighting
- Glare in glass made it hard to read some of the signage.

- Mannequins needed to be more realistic or more dramatic, for example, like those use at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY-Nancy Reagan's dress didn't fully reveal bodice of dress.
- The display was confusing & could be more exciting
- more video/AV

- It is much to [sic] small
- More room in older section
- More places to sit

- Clearer intended flow of foot traffic