

# ***A Song for the Horse Nation***

*A Study of Visitors to the Exhibition*

*Smithsonian Institution  
Office of Policy & Analysis*

## ***Background***

After their return to the Americas during the colonization of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, horses quickly transformed the lives of Native peoples across the continent, especially in the Great Plains, and became a central part of Native American life. Horses affected travel, hunting, and defense; were honored by Native peoples; and were incorporated into their cultural and spiritual lives through various traditions and forms of artwork.

This critical role of the horse in shaping the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual foundations of American Indian life was the focus of *A Song for the Horse Nation*, an exhibition on display at the George Gustav Heye Center (GGHC) in New York from November 14, 2009 to July 7, 2011. The exhibition incorporated a diverse mix of artifacts, including riding equipment, cultural and spiritual items, artwork, clothing, and household items that depict the cultural importance of horses. The wide-ranging exhibition also contained documentary photographs, information-based written descriptions and interactive displays, vivid personal accounts, and contemporary artwork, all of which illustrated the continued intricate relationship of Native peoples and horses.

## ***Methodology***

The focus of this questionnaire was to determine basic demographic characteristics of visitors to *A Song for the Horse Nation* and their ratings of the exhibition. A brief nine-question survey was administered on Sunday, June 27, 2010 using a census sample of all visitors exiting the exhibition during specific time periods. A total of 218 visitors were intercepted, and 196 surveys were completed, yielding a high response rate of 90%. (See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire and Appendix B for frequencies of responses.)

This study was modeled on that of a similar survey of visitors conducted on April 7-9, 2009 by the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) for *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian* and includes comparisons of responses to that survey. *Scholder* featured the work of a contemporary artist, Fritz Scholder, and was presented at the George Gustav Heye Center (GGHC) in New York City from November 1, 2008 to May 17, 2009.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Data was collected by Lance Costello, OP&A. Alexis VanZalen, an intern in OP&A, supervised by Lance Costello, completed the analysis and report preparation. Andrew Pekarik, OP&A, reviewed the analysis and made additional suggestions.

## Findings

### Visitor Demographics

The majority of visitors to *A Song for the Horse Nation* were women (60%). About one in six visitors identified themselves as Native American (16%), and only a handful were charter members of NMAI (4%).

More than half of all visitors were 45 years old or younger (55%) and one in three was 28 or younger (33%). Visitor age divided by generation is shown in Figure 1.

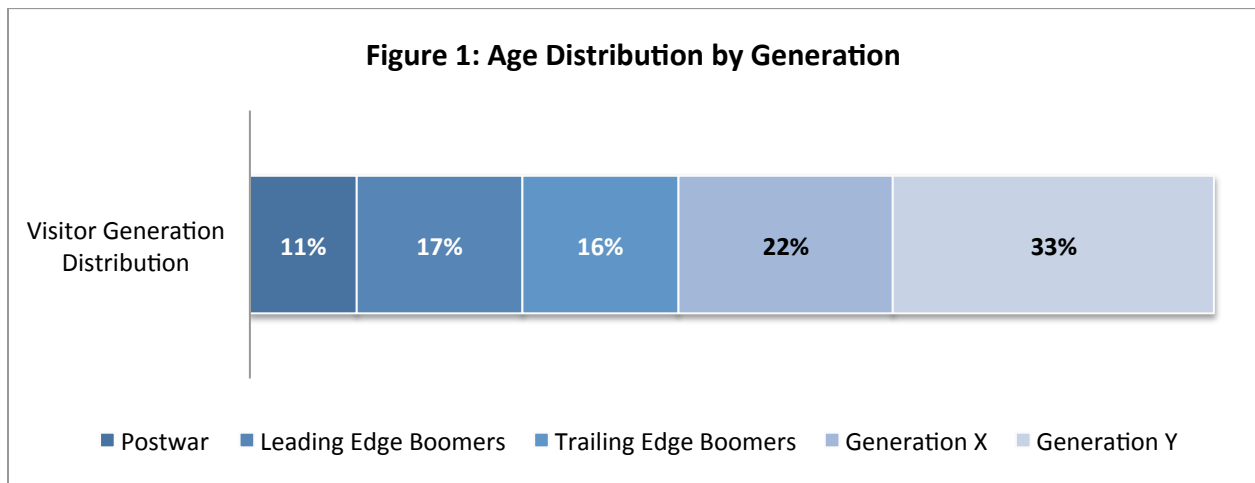


Figure 1 – Source: Appendix B, Question 6

Slightly more than one in three visitors came from a country other than the United States (36%) and about one in four were local visitors from within a twenty-mile radius of the museum (26%).

On the whole, three out of four visitors came in groups of adults only (76%). Fewer visited alone (11%) or came with one or more children under the age of twelve (13%). Notably, non-local visitors were more likely to visit in adult-only groups (80% vs. 66%).

### Visitor Characteristics

The majority of visitors, about five in six, were visiting GGHC for the first time on the day of the survey (85%). Not surprisingly, local visitors were more likely to be making a repeat visit (34% vs. 9% of non-local visitors).

Slightly more than half of all visitors found out about *A Song for the Horse Nation* while visiting the museum that day (55%). One in five had heard about it from their friends, family, or colleagues (19%) and fewer found out from reading a review (6%). Another one in five learned about the exhibition from an “other” source (20%), which visitors were asked to specify. These

other sources included: the museum’s website, a bus tour guide, signs in the area or the subway, university professors, museum membership, and TV. International visitors were less likely to have found out about *A Song for the Horse Nation* in these other ways (9% vs. 23% of visitors from the United States). Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of visitors that marked each of the four choices given on the questionnaire.

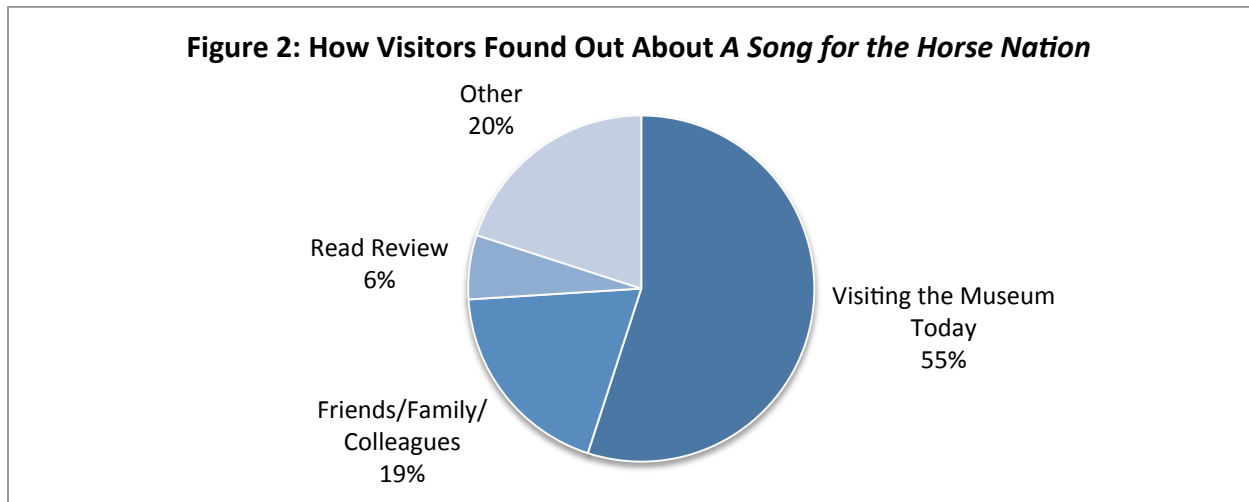


Figure 2 – Source: Appendix B, Question 2

### Ratings

Visitors were asked to rate their overall experiences in *A Song for the Horse Nation* on the standard five-point scale used by OP&A across Smithsonian exhibitions: Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent, Superior. Overall, the ratings show a positive reaction of visitors to the exhibit. One in six visitors marked Superior (15%) and half marked Excellent (51%). About one in three marked a rating lower than Excellent (Good, 29%; Fair, 5%; or Poor, 0%). This skew towards higher ratings corresponds with the average ratings collected by OP&A across Smithsonian exhibition studies, as shown in Figure 3.

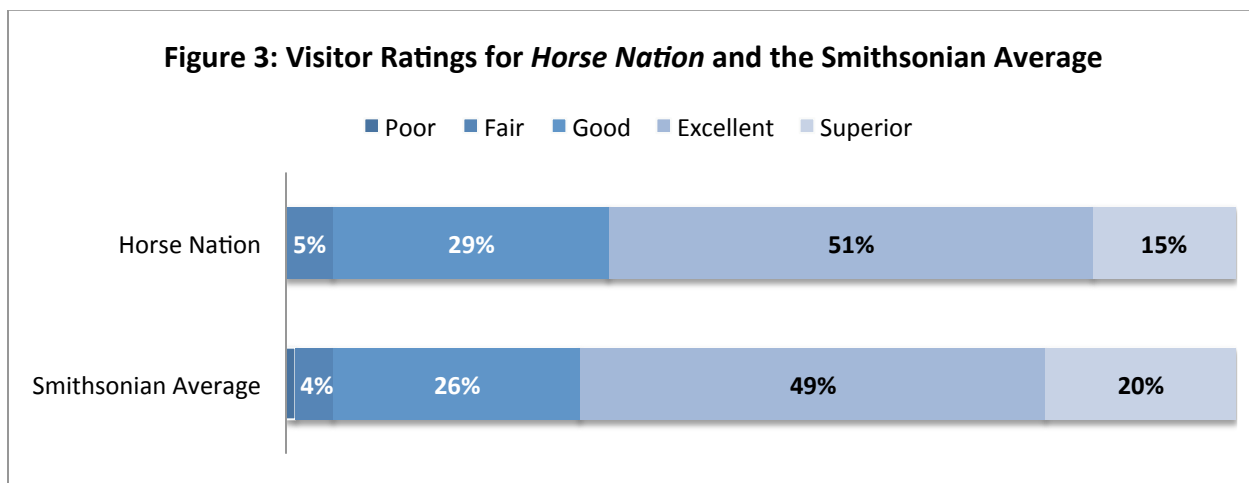


Figure 3 – Source: Appendix B, Question3

Visitors' ratings were affected, to some degree, by their demographic characteristics:

- Women were more likely to rate the exhibit Superior (20% vs. 7% of men) and men were more likely to rate it Poor, Fair, or Good (43% vs. 28% of women).
- International visitors tended to be more strict graders and were less likely than visitors from the United States to rate the exhibit Superior (8% vs. 18% from the United States) and more likely to rate it Poor, Fair, or Good (45% vs. 29% from the United States). This tendency has been documented in other Smithsonian studies.
- Visitors who found out about the exhibition during their visit to the museum that day were also more likely to rate it Poor, Fair, or Good than those who found out about *A Song for the Horse Nation* through any other source (43% vs. 24%).

### Horse Nation Compared to Scholder

For the most part, the demographic composition of visitors to *A Song for the Horse Nation* and *Fritz Scholder: Indian / Not Indian* was comparable. One major difference, however, was a much smaller percentage of international visitors to *Horse Nation* (36% vs. 70% of visitors to *Scholder*). Visitors to *Horse Nation* were also more likely to have visited the museum previously (15% vs. 7% for *Scholder*). Additionally, the visitor population of *Horse Nation* contained a higher percentage of visitors who identified themselves as Native Americans (16% vs. 7%).

Overall, visitors rated *A Song for the Horse Nation* higher than they rated *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian*. Visitors to *Horse Nation* were more likely than visitors to *Scholder* to rate the exhibit they visited as Excellent or Superior (66% vs. 45%). Figure 4 illustrates this.

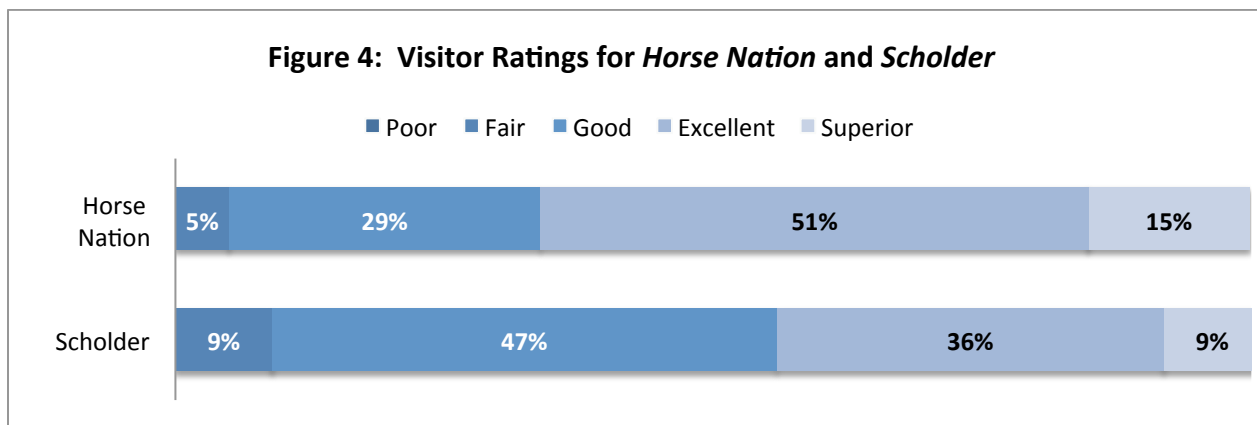


Figure 4 – Source: Appendix B, Question 3

## ***Discussion***

Visitors overall experience ratings for *A Song for the Horse Nation* were on par with the Smithsonian average. Visitors tended to rate this exhibit higher than they rated *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian*. In part this was affected by the *Scholder* exhibition's higher percentage of international visitors—visitors who tended to give lower ratings. But US visitors also were more critical of *Scholder* and of *Horse Nation*, giving it lower Superior ratings (13% vs. 18% for *Horse Nation*) and higher Poor-Fair-Good ratings (53% vs. 29% for *Horse Nation*).

The higher number of US visitors to *Horse Nation* also accounts for *Horse Nation*'s higher percentage of repeat visitors. The higher percentage of people who identified themselves as Native American in *Horse Nation* is due to the higher number of international visitors who identified themselves as Native American (2% of international visitors in *Scholder*; 10% of international visitors in *Horse Nation*).

One possible reason for the higher proportion of visitors from the United States to *Horse Nation* than to *Scholder* was when the two surveys were collected—the surveys for *Horse Nation* were collected on a Sunday in June, a time of year when there are more domestic tourists because school is not in session and a day of the week when locals are more likely to visit, whereas the surveys for *Scholder* were collected on weekdays in April.

Another noteworthy finding is the difference between the composition of local and non-local visitor groups. Local visitors were more likely to visit alone or visit with children, while non-local visitors were more likely to visit in adult only groups. Considering that locals were more likely to be repeat visitors, they may be an audience the museum wishes to gather more information about to inform their decisions on advertising for future exhibits.

This study also points to another topic for further study: why international visitors are more likely to rate exhibition lower than visitors from the United States, as this and several other Smithsonian studies have shown. This is especially important for GGHC because, as the *Scholder* study demonstrated, international visitors can make up a very large portion of the visitor population to exhibits at this museum.

**Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire**

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**National Museum of the American Indian**  
**A Song for Horse Nation**

1. Is this your first visit to this museum,  
the National Museum of the American Indian?

Yes  No

2. How did you find out about this exhibition,  
*A Song for Horse Nation*?

Visiting the Museum today  Read review  
 Friends / Family / Colleagues  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please rate your experience in this exhibition today:

Poor  Fair  Good  Excellent  Superior

4. Do you live in the United States or another country?

United States, Zip Code:        
 Another country, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Are you male or female?

Male  Female

6. What is your age?

7. With whom did you visit this exhibition?

[Choose one]

I am alone  
 With adults only  
 With one or more children age 12 or under

If your children are with you,  
how do they rate this exhibition?

Poor  Fair  Good  Excellent  Superior

8. Do you identify as a Native American?

Yes  No

9. Are you a Charter Member of NMAI?

Yes  No

**Thank You!**

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## Appendix B: Frequencies of Responses

1. Is this your first visit to this museum, the National Museum of the American Indian?	Yes	85%
	No	15%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
2. How did you find out about this exhibition, <i>A Song for the Horse Nation</i> ?	Visiting Museum Today	55%
	Read Review	6%
	Friends/Family/Colleagues	19%
	Other	20%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
3. Please rate your experience in this exhibition today:	Poor	0%
	Fair	5%
	Good	29%
	Excellent	51%
	Superior	15%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
4. Do you live in the United States, or another country?	United States	64%
	Another Country	36%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
5. Are you male or female?	Male	40%
	Female	60%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
6. What is your age?	Postwar	11%
	Leading Edge Boomers	17%
	Trailing Edge Boomers	16%
	Generation X	22%
	Generation Y	33%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>99%</i>
7. With whom did you visit this exhibition? [Choose One]	I am alone	11%
	With adults only	76%
	With one or more children	13%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
8. Do you identify as a Native American?	Yes	16%
	No	84%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
9. Are you a charter member of NMAI?	Yes	4%
	No	96%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>