

Visitor Responses to Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets An Exhibition at The National Portrait Gallery of Art

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Abstract:

This survey study was conducted in April 2013 with 149 visitors to an exhibition of portraits of modernist poets at the National Portrait Gallery. Exiting visitors were asked to rate their overall experience, and to provide their email address for a follow-up survey, which was administered online. The overall cooperation rate was 56%. The study asked which other exhibitions visitors saw that day, and which of them, if any, were “WOW” exhibitions. They were also asked a series of open-ended questions, including why they liked their favorite exhibition(s), how they would improve Poetic Likeness, and what makes a museum visit meaningful and engaging. They were also asked questions about their interests, museum-going, reading, and other background factors. The report includes the full set of these open-ended responses.

These visitors were pleased with the exhibition, and gave it a rating that placed it as third highest among ten recent exhibitions at the Gallery. The audience that stopped in the exhibition was very selective and considerably older than the audience for other exhibitions in that museum. In general these visitors were very interested in poetry, enjoyed seeing portraits of poets they knew of, and appreciated the poetry selections and curatorial comments. For many visitors it was an occasion for learning, understanding, remembering, and reflecting. There was some criticism of the small size of the exhibition and other features.

The principal suggestion for improvement was the idea of including audio or video of poets reading their work. Some also wanted more poetry in the exhibition, something to take away (there was no catalogue), improved commentary, and better design and location. In the opinion of these visitors what is meaningful and engaging in a museum visit includes learning, feeling, seeing rare things, engaging an existing interest, personal change, connections and reflection.

Recommendations of the study team include pre-testing texts, being more daring in design, and incorporating more personal and emotional content.