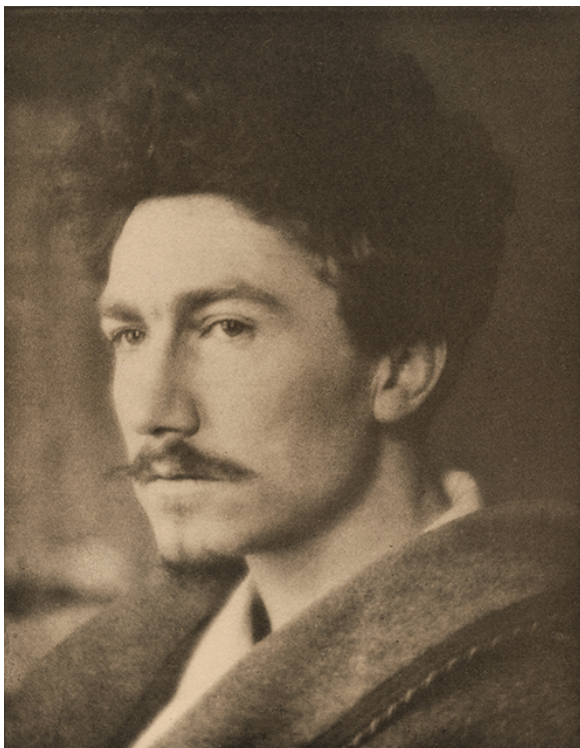


Visitor Responses to

**Poetic Likeness:
Modern American Poets**

*A Exhibition at
The National Portrait Gallery*



Office of Policy and Analysis
Smithsonian Institution
July 2013

Study Credits

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Photo credits

All installation photographs are by Mark Gulezian.

Cover page

Walt Whitman
Frank E. Pearsall
Albumen silver print, 1872
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Ezra Pound
Alvin Langdon Coburn
Collotype print, 1913
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

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INTRODUCTION

Between October 12, 2012 and April 28, 2013, the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) presented an exhibition featuring portraits of modernist poets along with excerpts of their poetry, and biographical and critical commentary. The 52 poets included in the exhibition ranged in time from Walt Whitman in the late 19th century to Yusef Komunyakaa in the 1970s. The exhibition was curated by NPG historian David C. Ward.

The Exhibition Presentation

Poetic Likeness was installed in a corridor and two large side galleries on either side of that corridor, on the second floor of the Reynolds Center.



The introductory text panel was in the corridor and there was no declared arrangement of poets, although some walls featured one-line quotations from poets – such as “Make it new” by Ezra Pound on the wall that featured Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound – that could be taken as subtle organizing elements.

At a lower level above the paintings, some poets’ signatures were reproduced. To the left of each image was a poetry excerpt, such as, for example, this quote from Ezra Pound:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
.....
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.
From “A Pact,” 1916



Below the poetry excerpt the design featured a brief, unsigned statement by the curator that combined literary history, biography and personal criticism. Here are two samples:

Robert Frost 1874–1963

Over his long, calculated, and prize-winning career as America's best-loved poet, Robert Frost became the epitome of the New England Yankee: a weathered, craggy, flinty, and plainspoken countryman who turned ordinary life into poetry. Ironies abound. He was born in San Francisco and named after Robert E. Lee. Stereotyped as a regionalist, Frost received a major boost from the rootless modernist Ezra Pound. Uniquely American, Frost's first two books were assembled and published in England before appearing in his homeland. Seemingly artless, because it is about artless subjects, Frost's verse was a complicated formalist response to modernism—and to democracy. Frost did the most difficult thing: he made the complex weave of his poems appear easy or natural, leading to their persistent underestimation. Seemingly straightforward and reverential, his poems are sly, subversive. There was no less-traveled road in "The Road Not Taken"; both paths are equally unworn, and the choice is false—or more terrifyingly, meaningless. As the years advanced, the Yankee persona won more often than not, and he tapped into a complacent, conservative populism, one that was not as benign or as avuncular as his audience sometimes assumed. Recovering that "lost past's / detail" was Frost's original task, one that cropped like granite through his most powerful work.

Carl Sandburg 1878–1967

Poor Carl Sandburg! Evidently he thought Robert Frost, his near-contemporary and fellow avatar of American folksiness, liked him and that they were comrades in their common purpose to celebrate America's common people. The canny and ultracompetitive Frost cast his gimlet eye on the mid-westerner and decided he was no threat and could be treated politely, at least in public. Sandburg's writing and his public persona suffer from an excess of ingenuous sincerity. His poems are all action, and like political slogans they overpower the reader in their didactic populist directness. Sandburg followed Whitman's poetic structures, yet in his eagerness to celebrate "genuine" America and the heroism of ordinary people, he lacked the emotional qualities of the older poet. Despite it all, Sandburg is a great poet, one who must be reckoned with simply because of his relentless drive to embody America in his writing.

When available, portraits included photographs, paintings, and sculptures, as in the grouping of images for Marianne Moore.



The installation overall was spare and traditional.



The Survey Study

The Smithsonian's Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) was asked by the NPG director, Kim Sajet, to conduct a visitor study of *Poetic Likeness*. After consulting with NPG staff about their needs and expectations, it was decided to conduct the survey online in order to allow for a longer, more complex set of questions and richer open-ended responses.

During interviewing sessions every visitor who stopped in the exhibition was asked to answer three questions as they exited: rating of their overall experience in the exhibition, residence, and email address for a follow-up survey. Those who provided an email address were then sent a link to an online survey.

Altogether 411 eligible visitors were intercepted, with 75% providing emails (267) (3% didn't have emails, 13% refused to give emails, 7% refused to participate, and 2% had language problems). Of the 267, 56% (149) completed the survey.¹ This means that 37% of all intercepted visitors provided a usable response.

In addition to asking about *Poetic Likeness*, the survey asked visitors which other museums they visited that day, and which of all the exhibitions, if any, they saw that day was their "WOW" exhibition. The survey asked open-ended questions about why someone should go to *Poetic Likeness*, why they liked their favorite exhibition of that day, how they would suggest improving *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 that might help to explain their responses and behaviors. Appendix A summarizes responses to the question of why they liked their favorite exhibition of the day. Appendix B presents the survey frequencies.

The open-ended responses quoted within the body of the report are complete, i.e., none have been left out, shortened, or repeated. As a result the report is rather lengthy, and it is suggested that the reader begin by reading the Table of Contents for an overview of findings, discussion, and recommendations and skim the quotations except in areas that are of particular interest.

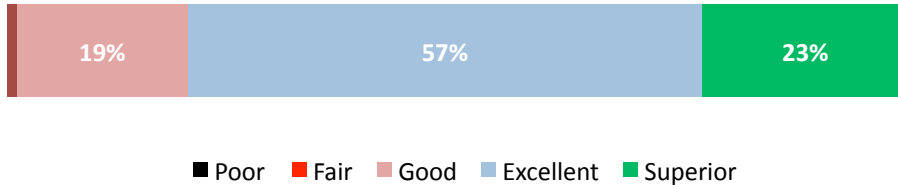
¹ Ninety percent of those who started the online survey finished it.

FINDINGS

Visitors to Poetic Likeness Were Very Pleased with the Exhibition

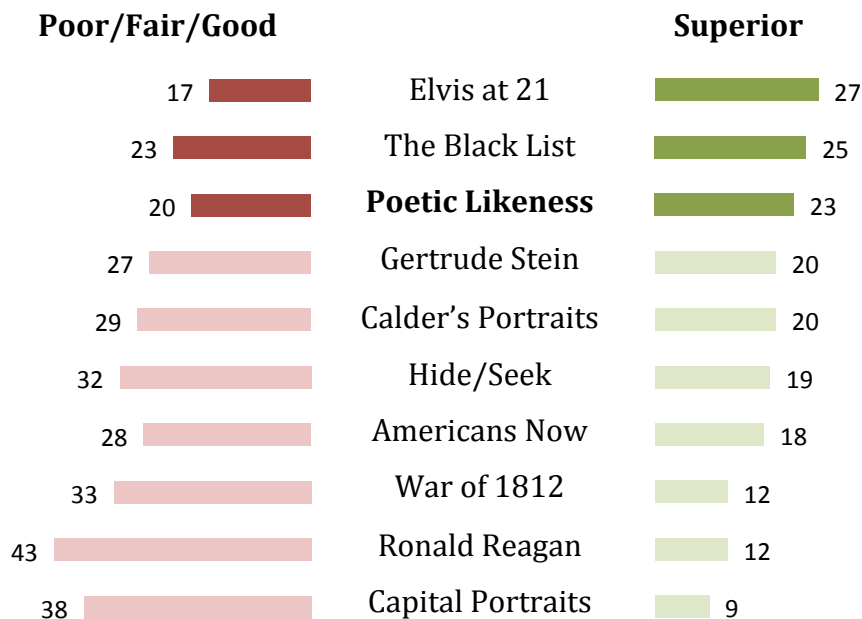
When asked to rate their overall experience in the exhibition, 23% rated it Superior, none rated it as Poor, and a mere 1% rated it as Fair.

One in Four Rated Their Overall Experience “Superior”



The Overall Experience Rating Was One of the Three Highest at NPG

The Overall Experience Rating was comparable to that of *Elvis at 21* and *The Black List*, making it one of the three highest-rated NPG exhibitions that have been studied.



One in Six Considered Poetic Likeness the Best Exhibition They Saw That Day

One in six visitors to *Poetic Likeness* reported it as the most engaging exhibit they saw that day; 54% of this group rated the Overall Experience Superior and none rated it less than Excellent.

Visitors Liked the Way Poetic Likeness Was Done

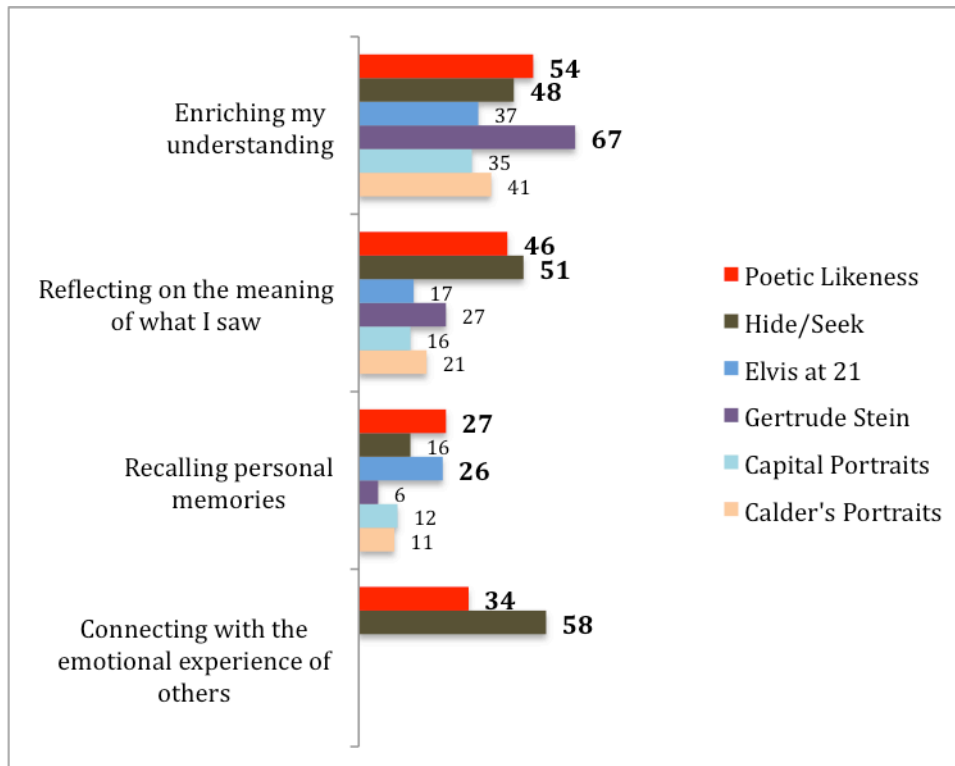
The topic was suitable, and the presentation effective.

Nearly all visitors felt that the topic was suitable (88%) and that the combination of portraits, poetry and historical information made it more engaging (89%). Some (27%) were surprised to see portraits of Americans who were not major historical figures.

The exhibition inspired understanding and reflection.

As in *Hide/Seek*, the exhibition encouraged understanding and reflection, although enriching understanding was even higher in *Gertrude Stein*. Comparable to *Elvis at 21*, the exhibition evoked memories for some. The exhibition was much less emotional than *Hide/Seek*.

Like *Hide/Seek* in Understanding and Reflection, But Less Emotional

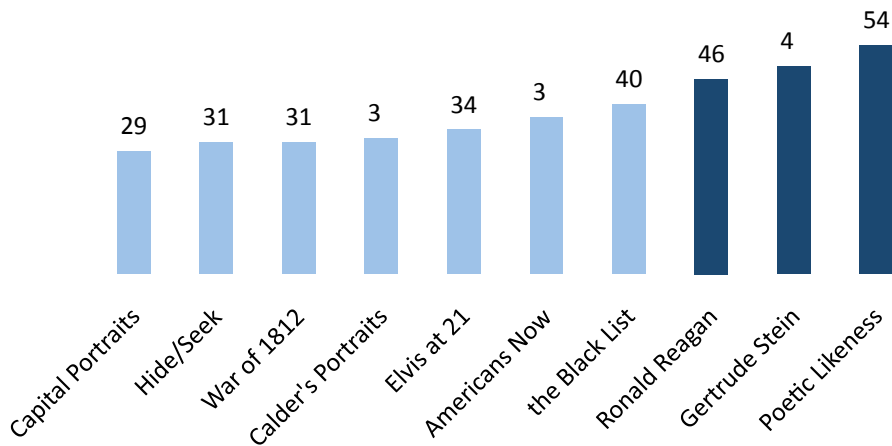


The Audience for the Exhibition Was Very Selective

They were older.

The most striking feature among the demographic data is the age of visitors. The adult visitors (i.e., those 18 and over) who chose to stop at *Poetic Likeness* were markedly older than at any other NPG exhibition studied by OP&A.

Median Ages of Adult Visitors: Half Were Over Age 54



There were fewer first-time visitors.

In line with their age, they included many fewer first-time visitors (32%, compared to 44%-74% for the other exhibitions studied to date).

They were very interested in poetry.

Most were drawn by their interest in poets, poetry or a combination of poets, poetry and American history (57% were very drawn by one of these, 34% were somewhat drawn by one of these, for 8% these were not important, and 1% were not interested in poets or poetry).

They were a small selection of the museum's visitors.

The survey interviewers were instructed to intercept all visitors who stopped anywhere in the corridor, or who entered either of the side galleries. It was their impression that only one in four or five museum visitors who passed through the space actually stopped in the exhibition. This impression is supported by the data – during the survey administration there was an average of 20 eligible intercepts (i.e., people who looked at the exhibition) per hour. By comparison, during the study of

Elvis at 21, in the same space at a much quieter time of year (mid-January), approximately half of those passing through the space stopped in the exhibition, and there was an average of nearly 40 eligible intercepts per hour.

They were relatively dedicated to the topic.

Nearly one-third of all visitors (30%) had heard about the exhibition before entering the museum, and 77% of them (30% of all visitors) came to the museum specifically to see it. Overall, this percentage of exhibition-specific visitors was only below *Hide/Seek*, *Gertrude Stein*, and *Elvis at 21*, among NPG exhibitions studied by OP&A.

They were serious art-museum goers.

The audience included a high percentage of serious museum visitors, especially to art museums or NPG. Most (84%) had visited art museums or the Gallery at least twice in the past year. Over one third (35%) visited at least four art/portrait museum AND at least four other types of museums in the past year.

They find museum visits very rewarding generally – 85% said that they normally expect to have a personally meaningful or engaging experience almost every time they visit a museum.

They were well-read.

Three out of four (75%) read novels or other literary works either frequently or constantly.

Why Go to See Poetic Likeness?

Visitors were asked what they would tell a friend who asked why they should see *Poetic Likeness*. Nearly every visitor responded, providing an in-depth expression of the exhibition's main features from their perspective.

Poetry and poets personally interested a number of them.

The collection of poets was wonderful.

It is a pleasure to see a focus on American poets who seldom get much attention.

The exhibition is a good representation of the poets who are firmly placed within the modern American canon.

You get to see the photos and read the words of some of your favorite poets.

If you like poetry it gives a great summary of the person as well as different photographs/portraits of the poet.

I am fond of Langston Hughes and Sylvia Plath. I had to walk through the exhibition quickly because of time constraints but I enjoyed the section on Langston Hughes.

You don't have to be an avid reader of poetry to enjoy this exhibit. I enjoy poetry but only occasionally but this show inspired me to revisit poets that I read years ago and to seek out some that are not familiar to me. The portraits in words and art were wonderful.

Because it [is] a great exhibit for those interested in Modern American Literature and [those] who are not [as interested]. It captures a great period of writing during American history, where men and women, alike were being progressive in both their writing and their lives.

For anyone who's a lover of poetry the exhibition offers a well-curated mix of photographs and other forms of portraiture of well-known figures. Some of the images are well-known but there are lots of surprises too.

Because you love poetry/are a poet.

I would strongly suggest that my friends see the exhibit if they care at all about American poetry. I would and did tell them that it is lovely to see paintings and photos of poets, along with a selection of poetry and a witty background about the poet. I saw images of poets I had never seen and read some poetry I had never read or had not read in years. And I'm an old English lit major...

If you have read and are interested in modern poetry it is nice to put faces with the names.

A few admitted to less interest in the topic.

I am really not very knowledgeable about poetry or poets, but it seemed like a good exhibit for someone who was.

Because it's interesting if you are into literature of famous writers

I'm not a big poetry fan, but I found several poets who "spoke" my language.

Many saw portraits of poets whom they knew from their words.

I would tell a friend that Poetic Likeness beautifully intersects poetry and art. A common, everyday phrase we hear and sometimes use is, "It is wonderful to connect a face with a name." And that is the first connection in this exhibit. "Oh... that is what Adrienne Rich looked like."

The exhibit combines insightful portraits of the poets profiled together with biography and something of their work. Just like you want to put a name to a face, you can put a portrait to a poem.

It is fascinating to see images - whether photographic, painted, or other media - of the poets juxtaposed to samples of their verse.

It was interesting to see picture of poets whose poetry I have enjoyed.

It's interesting to put quotes and faces to names

It brings the poets to life, allows one to see great photos of poets one might know only by name and poems and not visually, introduces the audience to poets unknown, includes sculpture as well as photos, sets poets in context, etc.!

It is quite revealing to see the portrait of a widely renowned poet along with a little excerpt from their works.

It was interesting to see photos etc. of famous poets[; for a] few I didn't know what they looked like.

I would tell them to absolutely go! I loved the layout of the exhibit and how the exhibit covered my favorite American authors. It is really great for people who love literature, but also provides a lot of information to engage those who are not familiar with American literature. While it may not be interesting for everyone, you should go and check it out anyways because you can learn so much about the evolution of literature and the influential figures that shaped Am. Lit.

The imagery adds a new voice to the writing.

It brings the poets to life, allows one to see great photos of poets one might know only by name and poems and not visually, introduces the audience to poets unknown, includes sculpture as well as photos, sets poets in context, etc.!

I love reading poetry and to see a photo of the poets that I like was interesting and [I] like looking into their eyes.

Anyone interested in the richness of American poetry should not miss it. It's always thrilling to put a face with beautiful words.

The poetry excerpts were well appreciated.

I found old favorites and new voices I hope to explore.

The mix of portraiture and poetry is really wonderfully done. If you don't know the poets, you get not only the typical bio, but also a nice sample of their poetry. It's really worth seeing, and reading!

To be able to put a face to their words brings the poets into our personal reality.

It provides a new perspective on familiar artists.

It's interesting to see the faces associated with the poetry. What I liked best about the exhibit was the inclusion of a bit of each writer's poetry with the image and wall labels.

Some of the art was interesting. Some of the descriptions of the poets were interesting. I really liked the excerpts of the poems.

So, too, were the texts by the curator.

A fairly compact exhibit that one can see in an hour, probably less, even reading all the captions. The poetic selections at the head of each caption were well-chosen, and the descriptions of each poet were insightful and gracefully written.

Fresh ideas.

I am a retired English teacher of 40 years and am familiar with all of the poets featured in the exhibit. The amount of printed information was just about the right size - reading on a wall isn't easy! :-) The exhibit is a perfect fit for someone familiar with American literature

Helped explain their notoriously complicated biographies

I loved the exhibit. I like the small sections of poetry and the story behind each portrait.

The poet's lives were interesting to read about and their portraits captured their personalities. Very interesting.

Together they made a complete package.

I think anybody would enjoy seeing the poetry adjacent to a portrait of the poet along with commentary of the work and the life of the poet. That makes it a COMPLETE portrait.

Interesting portraits, snippets, and one-paragraph career assessments! Good reminder of those who created what "men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."

Interesting because it gives snippets of poetry by modern poets, many of whom I have heard of but not read. Always interesting to match the face with the writer.

Some emphasized the portraiture.

Such a breadth of work represented.

I'd say it was exciting to see this selection of images.

Because it has some good stuff

The portraits are intimate and revealing.

You've seen many of those pictures of your favorite writers badly reproduced for decades, but the actual photographs and art works are really great.

There were some excellent portraits, as well.

The poet's portraits [and choice of visual language] are visual expressions derived from the artist's interpretation of the poet's work.

The exhibition was an opportunity for learning and understanding.

It is a great exhibit, really looks into the art of poetry. You can learn a lot.

Mini-survey of American poetry with compelling images.

Creative and insightful American literature from known and not so well known poets. Enjoyable to learn about. Entertainment for the inquisitive patient mind.

I found the exhibit to be very informative especially if one is unfamiliar with the later modern poets. Some of the earlier poets I remembered from college. It was an interesting comparison.

Will inform you and educate and give you a flavor of each poet.

You will read many familiar lines of poetry and see many familiar names - and you will want to know more.

I would say Poetic Likeness is a great exhibit in which one can be introduced to the poetry community. I thought the use of art medium in combination with the introduction of poets was a great way to entice an observer to learn more about a specific poet.

Some of the poets I had never heard of but most of the American poets that I have read were there.

I would say that if you are at all interested in American poets, the exhibit is interesting from the aspect of including likenesses, usually photographs but some paintings as well, of the poets along with usually a verse from one of their well-known poem. There were several poets included who I was not aware of, since I'm not a major poetry reader, but I found it interesting to "meet" lesser known poets. The Giants of American Poetry - Whitman, Frost, Sandburg, St. Vincent Millay, O'Hara, etc. were all there ... but I found the lesser poets to be very interesting....

A really interesting show; beautiful portraits of poets; we learned a lot about poetic movements and some important poets we were unfamiliar with.

It also evoked memories.

The excerpts from each poet were really interesting to look at in conjunction with their portraits. The collection of poets reminded me of how many great poets America can claim and continue to claim. And, probably like me, any viewer will be reminded of [a] favorite fragment or two of poetry and smile as it's remembered.

The poets and their poetry are quite familiar. Sometimes we have one or two iconic images of them but it's fascinating to see them in new ways.

I went to find my special favorite poets and found so much more. Now, I need to return to spend time with new friends like Audre Lorde.

It enables you to get grasp of the modern American cultural history through life stories of poets.

This exhibit will allow you to see the faces behind the words you have enjoyed. Sometimes you will be able to see the Poet at different stages of life - rather than the more common portrait that is normally seen. These poets and some of their works from the 1800s help us to understand events and sentiment of those times far better than history books.

And it encouraged reflection.

Reminds you how close we are to an art (poetry) that doesn't seem like a part of our (at least my) day to day life.

If you love poetry, the combination of the snatches of poetry, the background information, and the images is just great - and in some cases quite moving. It is a show that will stay with me a long while and gave me a lot to think about.

If you are interested in modern poetry, this is an excellent overview with remarkable photographs and thoughtful assessments re: each poet's contribution to the evolution of poetry. I was excited to see Denise Levertov among the selected poets and sad I missed the event in October 2012. Years ago, I heard Allen Ginsberg and Audre Lorde read their poetry. I have been moved by the work of so many of the poets represented in the exhibit. This exhibit helped me see each poet in the greater context and flow of poetry. Something about the combination of photographs, selections from poems, other artwork, the written summary for each poet...gave me an experience synthesis, of the whole being "greater than the sum of its parts."

Because it made an interesting context between visual and written art. Because often fans of one or the other type of art are disdainful of the other, but this exhibit shows how harmonious [it] can be. Especially the Frank O'Hara, Langston Hughes collections show how the artists in the packs of friends feed on each other, and support each other's creations.

It gives historical insight to an important written form.

The overall impact was very strong for some.

I went to the Portrait Gallery and got caught up in so many exhibits on my way to the Poetic Likeness exhibit, I was there for hours. I really liked the way Poetic Likeness was hung - each poet's portrait had a quote from one of their pieces (not necessarily a known piece) and then a description of their life and/or times. I found myself writing a few of the quotes down. Of course, seeing JEB's portraits of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde was especially wonderful - and then images by so many of the photographers I love from the 40s/50s was special, too.

This is a highly unique experience to examine the art, the poets, their work, and the basis for what motivated them as artists and writers.

The sounds of poetry are as important as its form or shape. We can see the poets through their words, which makes the conversation personal. Poetry is a personal

one-on-one experience with the poet. Poetic Likeness is similar in some respects to being an actual reading, even if the poet is dead. I was pleasantly surprised at how many of these poets I had heard reading their work, and how much of those readings had become a part of me, triggered here by the pictures of the poets. Seeing their picture adds an intimate dimension to their poetry and its effect.

I would say: "you ought to go, to be captured in a realm of words and images that simply shatters the boundaries of your soul. Words engulf you into a stream of emotional awareness and desires flares to know more and to see more." Go and be captured.

It will take you out of ordinary.

This exhibition was the first of its kind that I can remember seeing during the 26 years I have lived in the Washington area. It was visually and poetically colorful, inventive, rich in information, and would be great as a series of exhibitions.

There were a few critical remarks.

It's an interesting portrait study in 20th and early 21st century poets, although it was quite light on women poets and poets of color.

There are tens of dozens of brilliant American poets out there and you know three of them. Get on that.

Some really cool stuff, if lacking a bit of context.

Fantastic biographies and photographs. I've seen a number of the poets live, in readings. Just wish there were a book, reflecting this exhibit!

Why Was Poetic Likeness Not the Best Exhibition of the Day?

Visitors who did not select *Poetic Likeness* as their "WOW" exhibition of the day (i.e. most engaging), but who rated their experience in it as Excellent or Superior, were asked why it was not the best. Some changed their minds and decided that it was a WOW exhibition, after all. The other responses reveal more detailed criticisms than were given when describing the exhibition to an imaginary friend.

It was WOW!

I would call this a Wow! exhibit.

Again, on the whole, this was certainly a Wow! exhibit. I feel fortunate I happened to be in DC while it was available. Thank you.

The exhibition was superior and it was the WOW exhibition by antonomasia.

I rated "Superior" because I was not aware of Wow! Somehow I missed it. Now I correct my judgment and rate my experience as "Wow"

Whoops, it was the wow experience. What did I like/love about it? Well... seeing portraits of a number of poets that I knew back in my Berkeley, CA days (1960's) - Ginsberg, Creely, etc. Being reminded of what it is about poets and poetry that moves me so - when I saw the show I was very moved by the selection of "Hurt Hawks" to go along with the portrait of Robinson Jeffers. I had not thought of this poem in a long time, and had to go home, find it, print it out, and am still carrying it around with me. Just overpowering. And bringing to mind all of the poets that were missing from the show - Elinor Wylie, and William Everson (Brother Antoninus) come to mind. I think for every poet included I had another come to mind. And that is great in itself.

... well really... I should have chosen Poetic Likeness as Wow because of the surprise factor. . . I didn't plan on seeing this exhibit and I loved it; whereas The Civil War and American Art met my expectations.

I liked another one better.

Hard to answer - I came to the museum to see the Civil War exhibit at the Museum of American Art and found out about the poet exhibit at the information desk - I guess I'd have to say that the Civil War exhibit was the wow one although I'm not able to be more specific—sorry.

I was surprised that a few favorite poets weren't included. The exhibit was great but Nam's lifelong dramatic creations were more spectacular. Poets/poetry are not often represented in museums so it was great seeing them included.

There were so many wonderful things in my day I had a hard time choosing. I'm just really interested in science.

I had not visited the Museum with the intention of seeing the "Poetic Likeness" exhibit. Instead, it was a happily accidental discovery after visiting my originally planned exhibit.

That really just comes down to my personal interests - for me, right now, nothing tops the Civil War. I would recommend it just as highly as I would the Civil War exhibit, especially because I feel that poetry is so under-appreciated, and I include myself, and this was such a good reminder of why poetry is awesome.

I enjoyed the poets, but had come to the museum primarily to see the Civil War display. By the time I got to the poetry section, was frankly a little weary - had I come to the poetry display first, I probably would have had more energy to better appreciate what I was looking at.

I enjoyed seeing the portraits of poets I read in college but this could not compare with magnificent paintings in the Civil War exhibit.

I learned more in the other - but I had also made a special trip from Michigan to see the Civil War exhibit and had already spent a lot of time there. And, people were waiting for me while I was in there. Perhaps, though, it's also important to note that

I had a hard time finding it and got distracted going through the Portrait Competition to finally get there.

I liked the more personal experience of the adjacent portraits contest. It also was not a Wow! experience, but I usually set the bar pretty high and got my Wow! experience while running through Glover Park and Rock Creek.

Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge expanded my experience with Poetic Likeness, reflecting on new thoughts on poetry and portraiture!

Poetic Likeness was only one of the exhibits that interested me in my overall desire to see the museum.

It can't compete, for me, with the excitement of the OB portrait competition. I really wait for that show.

The art in Poetic Likeness was excellent, but it was tough to compete with the self-portrait competition exhibit that I had seen immediately prior.

I'm more interested in the history of photography than in the history of poetry.

It was excellent but for a WOW factor, it couldn't compete with Nam June Paik.

I came to see the Civil War exhibit. I found the collection to be very enlightening.

For me a couple of WOW worthy exhibits were the Asian American portraiture and the Annie Liebovitz show.

I liked the concept, but it wasn't such an original idea, and it did not have the impact and amplitude of the Civil War exhibit.

Well it was a very good exhibit, but I suppose everything is relative. I just found the American Presidents exhibit to be a Wow! and the Modern Poets to be something a bit less than that.

I really went for the presidential portraits and the Civil War exhibit

There was no iconic artwork; and it was small; and in a hallway.

I also really enjoyed the Amelia Earhart exhibit, esp. seeing her pilot's hat and videos of her. And I also really liked the Civil War exhibit, especially the large landscapes by Church and Bierstadt, which were also a Wow experience. I really liked the Poet exhibit, but there was no one object that struck me the way those landscapes or the Cyrus cylinder did. By the way, how were the poets chosen? For example, why was Robert Hass not included? Just asking...

Could have been the most Wow! but, as I said, I was most surprised by the contemporary portrait competition because I hadn't known of these artists. I would say that the Modern American poets would have been my second Wow! choice. However, the exhibit was smaller than the contemporary one, did not have giant works in different media (although there were paintings, photos, and sculpture), the images were smaller than the contemporary portraits. And, of course, each viewer has their own opinions about worthy poets and the amount of coverage they

receive. I love William Carlos Williams, for example, and he was only a small area in a side room, while Robert Frost (not my favorite) got more wall space. Again, I was inspired by the poets with whom I was not familiar because it opened my eyes to them. I know what I love in the poets with whom I am familiar. I was very happy to see quotes from poems, and I felt that the captions were especially quirky, personal, and unique, as opposed to boring bios.

The exhibit was smaller than I anticipated.

I like the fact that Poetic Likeness made excellent use of a relatively small space and portrayed the poets in more than one medium; however, if most of the exhibition could have been hung in a large room instead of a hallway, it would have added to the coherence. Also, I would have enjoyed additional touches, such as the display of a few writers' desks or favorite pens, notebooks, or reading glasses.

It was smaller and less significant, both in scale and placement, which I really actually liked (that I passed through it on my way to something else, and was pleased with what I saw). It did not feel like a grand destination-type exhibit, but more of a pleasant footnote to my overall visit. Kind of like stumbling upon a tiny, quietly beautiful chapel on your way home from the Notre Dame or something...

Criticism of the curator's commentary

I liked the scope of the chosen poets and, for the most part, the way they were depicted in their personal histories. I do have to say, I went back yesterday to revisit a few of the images knowing I was going to fill out this survey. Unfortunately, the exhibit was down; so I am going to write the following from memory. I read each poet's quote and history. I remember feeling the writing about Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath feeling a bit off - almost tongue-in-cheek around their suicides. It actually felt a bit disrespectful. I know I felt that about another one or two, but am not sure who or any specifics. FYI: I am 65, a woman, a feminist, and along with many of my generation, was aware of these poets in their/my era and informed by their lives/writing. And I feel I am not being overly serious in my thoughts about the Sexton/Plath histories, I truly was struck by the writing at the time of reading.

I enjoyed the textual commentary somewhat more than the portraiture - and was surprised by that. I guess I had expected something other than the larger percentage of photographs. Also the commentary felt oddly skewed against certain poets (although I understand that the opinion are widely shared).

It was the previously noted "snarky" commentary about several of the poets such as the ones made about Carl Sandburg that diminished the luster of the exhibition.

Problems with the selection of poets.

Too much about minor poets like Frank O'Hara. Not enough attention to Lowell or Stevens.

Oh, I thought the Poetic Likeness was fine; it just wasn't spectacular or have a WOW factor for me. (I was also hoping one of my favorite poets, Ernest Sandeen, might be included, but wasn't as I said earlier, not being a real student of American poetry there were several poets with whom I was unfamiliar - the exhibit is sending me back to my books on American poetry definitely a benefit from the exhibit

It wasn't suitable for children.

Poetic Likeness was a wonderful exhibit. I love poetry; I have studied poetry; I listen to poetry recordings. The photos were brilliant. I think because I was with my children (ages 7, 9, 11 and 13), and the exhibit wasn't kid friendly (which is very, very, very understandable), I was distracted by them. The photos and text were too high for them to see (a smart move because I wouldn't have wanted them to see some of the text), and on several occasions, they continued to interrupt my experience with the poets. (Lots of, 'Mom, are you done yet?') However, in the Civil War collection, they were engaged along with me, and we all were having an experience. I was able to have prolonged moments of silence, appreciation and reflection. It's late and I'm typing stream-of-consciousness.

There was no audio.

The Modern poets were limited by the medium of photography. There were no opportunities to hear the poets speak or see them further than the pictures. There were too many images of Alan Ginsburg when other poets might be represented.

There was not enough poetry

It's an exhibition of portraits of poets, with only little clips of poetry for each poet. Could've used more poetry, I suppose, perhaps with QR codes linking to the LOC should they have the poet's work on file?

I thought the excerpts of their poetry insufficient. A full poem beside their likenesses would have been better. 4 lines just don't do it.

I would have preferred to read the entire poem rather than a portion.

I think this show achieved what it set out to do. I wish at least one complete poem for each poet had been included. For the poets whose work was rather dismissed by the curator, it would have been nice to have an opposing viewpoint.

The art was not as compelling.

First - in order to get portraits - you will not have that much choice of the artists. So the portraitists were all in the same category with Durer, Winslow Homer, Frederick Church, etc. So who do I choose as the better artists - Durer, Winslow Homer and the like.

Heads are less compelling than a painting that tells a story.

The quality of the images and the range of subjects/poets included.

It wasn't visual enough for me.

The overall experience was out of the ordinary, and while there was not a single piece that caught my attention, I found the experience enriching all the same.

It was not surprising enough

I had seen a good number of the portraits before seeing the exhibit, so, there were no surprises. Although, seeing the work as a whole was pretty impressive. The curating of poet portraits by artists who were working during the same era, with the same mindset or same politics, etc. is really interesting, but, predictable. Maybe a little less predictability.

As an ex-English teacher, I was familiar with the poets in your exhibit and some of their poems, but, with the Wow, the material was almost all new to me.

Perhaps I didn't rate it Wow! because the poets and artists were more familiar to me. It was like coming home to be surrounded by poets whose work I find so meaningful. I would look at their portraits and think of favorite lines and poems and revel in the memory of those works. My Wow! exhibit was more of a surprise - I didn't come to see it, only passed through on my way from the Civil War exhibit to Poetic Likeness (my two targets for the day) - a serendipitous pleasure.

It was not consistently great.

There will be panels that are not interesting at all (not everyone is or should be wild about all the poets in the exhibit), interesting (find something new about someone you have some knowledge about /find a new poet), or, great (like the pictures of Ginsburg along with the printed poem which was a literary portrait). Wow is where every item in the exhibit gets your attention. This is not that kind of exhibit.

It was a modest exhibit. My WOW experience was over the top. One was a cleanly hit double, the other a home run.

It was an excellent exhibit, but I do not remember a specific WOW experience in the exhibit.

It was not emotional.

I didn't rate the experience "wow!" because I did not have an extreme emotional response to the experience during or after viewing it. However, I did think it was "excellent" because it was a great celebration of the most important American modern poets. The poets were well-contextualized, and I loved the use of quotes from other writers that were posted beside the poet's portraits. I very much enjoyed

the exhibit, probably due to my interest in writing, American modernism, and my desire to learn. The exhibit provided a very good opportunity for one to just spend time reflecting on poets. I was not bored at all during the exhibit-- I was quite interested the entire time, and looked at each portrait and read each piece of text thoroughly.

It was unexpected but enjoyable. Well put together composing great poets. But there was nothing to wow me.

It was the only exhibition seen that day.

I think it was all of the notes I was taking for my class that made me think introspectively about the life of a poet that made me put that it was a superior exhibit. However, I didn't attend any other exhibits, so I didn't think it was the most Wow! exhibition.

Just well done and different.

I only looked at that one exhibition that day.

I liked Poetic Likeness.

I was happy to see the images. I appreciated the choice of verses for the different poets. While I realize that photography is its own art form, and I am always happy to see paintings of people.

I loved seeing POETIC LIKENESS for the second (and final) time, plus sharing it with a poet/painter friend who had never been to either museum!!

I thought the collection was well thought out, and an interesting interdisciplinary approach

The simple way the exhibit focused on each of the poets represented.

Poetry is important in our lives. This exhibit brings that out. Putting a face on the poet brings us closer to their creations. How handsome Robert Frost was in his younger days!

I felt it was excellent because of the artist work that conveyed images of the poets. When I attended the exhibit it was by chance, I was mainly drawn to the art more than the poetry. Once I viewed the exhibit's specific information about the poets I learned a little more about the poetry community.

I read poetry to my grandchildren; thus the exhibit caught my interest.

Overall, I thought the exhibit was well done.

My wife and I visit the Portrait Gallery on a regular basis when we visit Washington DC. It is one of our favorite museums. We have come to expect wonderful exhibits like Poetic Likeness whenever we visit the museum.

I felt that the collection was excellent because it highlighted some poets that I hadn't heard of before and some that I have read and enjoyed their work. I thought it was an interesting experience and will look up some of the poets that I discovered through this collection.

I paused momentarily in the Poetic Likeness exhibit as I was going to another exhibit. The few things I looked at (and I couldn't resist stopping to look!) I found to be compelling, interesting, thoughtful. I didn't take the time, however, that I would've needed to do this survey analysis because I was en route to the other exhibit. Had I had more time I probably would've stopped at this one, too.

The exhibit was different from any other exhibit I have experienced. I thought the entire concept of such an exhibit is excellent and one that should be developed further in future exhibits. One of my favorite places to visit in Washington DC is not a museum - it is the Library of Congress. This would be a fabulous site for such an exhibit - even to repeat in some degree the same exhibit of Poetic Likeness. It would be absolutely PERFECT!

Simply enjoyed the information it provided and the way it was provided.

I thought the exhibit was very fresh and something unexpected. I like the art and photographs and I believe the way they were displayed showed great thought.

I thought all the exhibits were great, and this one was really interesting.

It was comprehensive

Actually, I liked the exhibit as much as the Cyrus Cylinder exhibit, but they are very different. Seeing the cylinder was a Wow experience, but the exhibit was just one room. On the other hand, I learned a lot about the poets, including many whom I did not know well or at all. The captions were the most elegantly written which I have seen in an exhibit.

I just happened into the museum while wandering around the city by bike. It was just a pleasant surprise to find the poetry exhibit as we originally thought we would just see the American presidents. That is what is so amazing about these museums in this city...they are free and one can just pop in and see what is happening. FANTASTIC!!!!

Suggestions

Excellent. I wish it would stay longer. I wish that sometimes a videography of exhibits was made so that when/if missed you can at least glimpse at what was present.

Wish the museum had published a BOOK encompassing this exhibit.

Problems with the term "WOW"

I don't like the expression 'most Wow!' And would never select it.

I'm not sure an exhibit of this kind can be a Wow.

It was a well-curated exhibit. I rarely think anything is "wow."

Poetry is not WOW. Poetry is reflective. So was the exhibit. It was extremely well done and I enjoyed it immensely as I have other exhibits - the Calder one, the Gertrude Stein one, and the Elvis at 21 show.

I am an artist. My most Wow! experience(s) are visual and tactile, Color, Form, Texture and so on. In creating art, there is a subsidiary flow that has what I can only call musical overtones, whether smooth, erratic, productive or otherwise. It is somewhat like poetry being read where that action reveals an underlying meaning simply by being read. The presence of the poet, photographic or physical, adds another dimension of another kind of artistry with a rhythmic component, and the experience become more than its elements. It is much the same in art where the parts become far greater and multi-dimensional than the statically viewed creation. So, for me the poetic experience on all its levels IS Excellent/Superior, but art with the simultaneous production of its multitude of sensory prompts/pathways IS the Wow! experience.

Other responses

The most "WOW" re Portraiture? Because I was seeing it for the first time!

Tired of seeing all the celebs and reality junk as important people in our media.

My general lack of knowledge regards modern American Poets and poetry.

We are not Americans so we are not connected to American poets and don't really know who they are. That's why it wasn't any wow experience.

I'm not much of a "poetry appreciator" but I liked seeing the portraits and reading the poetry.

WE saw so many different exhibits that day....I believe this exhibit was the last one and we were a bit tired....However, each exhibit we saw had unique qualities and we were glad we visited!

Suggestions for Improving the Exhibition

(in order of frequency)

Respondents offered a number of suggestions of how to improve the exhibition.

Audio or videos of poets reading their work

Perhaps video or audio of the poets reading their own works? But that would have made for a much more time-consuming exhibit.

You could have had some readings of the works by the poets especially in their own voice, when possible. Or maybe you did and I missed it.

Perhaps videos of poets reading their poetry or audio interviews with them.

One thing that would have enhanced the experience would have been some audio snippets of the poets reading their own work - indeed many of those represented have recorded their own work. Headphones perhaps placed at each poet's section might have worked!

Perhaps some of the poets' poetry could have been presented by a short recording of either the poet or a practiced reader.

I would have liked to see more media/audio mixed in the exhibit. Perhaps playing a recording of T.S. Eliot reading 'The Waste Land' on headphones for viewers to listen to. Part of experiencing poetry and understanding a 'portrait' of a person can also include how they sound and presented their work.

Audio of poems; a little more accessible for my father viewing from wheelchair.

Perhaps listening to the poems being read or having more samples available of each poet.

Museums are often inundated with visual images, and reading on top of that becomes exhausting. How about headphones attached to each portrait with someone (maybe even the poet herself) reading the poem!

Other than recordings of the poets reciting the poetry featured, none.

It might have been presented by adding videos (if available) next to information and photographs of poets, as you did at Gertrude Stein exhibit.

More multi-media, such as poets reading their work.

In my perfect show, there would have been listening stations where I could sit and select a poet and listen for a few minutes to someone (maybe the poet) reading their poems.

More poetry with the authors.

I would like to hear some of the poets reading selections of their poetry - in the way in which the "Gertrude Stein" exhibition utilized audio last year. It is more effective (I think) than the long texts and small-size quotes.

I don't know. Bigger pictures maybe. Audio. Snacks.

I think audio would have been fantastic - not in a blaring, public way, but maybe a private kiosk of sorts where you could listen to different poets reading their work,

or even an audio tour that was just poetry, no extra information. Sound is such an important part of their work that hearing their voices would have been excellent.

More poetry

More poetry would have been a nice addition.

Yet, the only thing I would have loved more to read larger poetical excerpts. Perhaps framing the paintings in multiple excerpts

The representation of women was quite conservative, particularly the contemporary and near-contemporary material. Where was Susan Howe, Harryette Mullen, Rae Armantrout, Lorine Niedecker, Muriel Rukeyser, Eileen Myles? Nonetheless I really enjoyed it.

Honestly, more quotes from the poets' work and portraits of women poets. Pieces of the poems should have been artistically incorporated near all the portraits, not just some. The Adrienne Rich quote near the ceiling by itself was the most moving aspect of the exhibit. Probably a little more history of schools of poets, as well. The power of portraiture for poets is only truly enhanced by their own words and poetry is easy to quote a line at a time.

Hmmm... perhaps more examples of their poetry. In a few instances the choices were very brief and, in my opinion, unrepresentative. Also perhaps some more examples of portraits for each poet. James Merrill, for instance, is depicted at a very young age while others were mostly single images of their old age. Something like what you did with Pound and Frost (and Hughes) would have been nice for many of the others.

I thought the presentation was fine, though maybe additional verses would have enhanced the experience; use of autographs above the portraits provided an additional interesting aspect, allowing one to move quickly to those of particular interest (though I experienced all of the portraits but didn't read all the verses)...

At least one complete poem per poet.

More lines from poems. I would have purchased a catalogue.

More of their poetry displayed.

A take-away

Once gone. A short video documenting the poetry and poets should be created and archived at least online, if not for display in the museum.

I would have enjoyed having the opportunity to purchase a catalog containing the complete photographs, selections of poetry and comments on each poet. If the National Portrait Gallery issues a catalog for this exhibit after it closes, I would still be interested in purchasing it.

I wanted a BOOK!!!

I would like to see to handouts with entire poems. Barring that, some recommendations of works of poetry or important works of each of the poets. Some of the photos were quite small and I think the gallery, despite its limited space, called for larger pictures.

A flyer or some direction as to who all was being presented

I wish there had been a booklet of poems by those people represented in each room.

A more complete handout to take home and read

Needs an informational brochure with more poetry by the poets that visitors can take home and read.

Was great as is but would have liked a catalogue

Improved commentary

I would have preferred a more objective printed commentary. Also I sorely missed an exhibit catalogue to purchase - there was none.

As a serious reader and writer of poetry myself, I found the comments accompanying the portraits of the poets and their verse segments extremely distracting and, often, annoying. While I was familiar with the poets represented and did not especially need a biographical note, someone who may have visited the exhibition to learn more about the poets would have benefited much more by a contextual note, rather than the curator's sarcastic opinions. For example, "Poor Carl Sandberg! [followed by an irrelevant statement about Robert Frost's dislike of him] yet he managed to become a major figure in modern poetry." A visitor to any exhibition does not enter the space to be bombarded by the curator's subjective criticism, which in this case, I found off-putting instead of informative and engaging.

The text besides the portraits was sometimes pretentious and poorly informed, and sometimes bitchy and distempered in its passing judgment on the writers, like the text on Gertrude Stein, which was awful. The excerpts from the poets work were mostly well chosen, however.

The summations of each author were the only drawbacks to a great show.

I would have appreciated knowing who was doing the commentary. Was one person presenting their opinions, what was their background, what kind of 'authority' was being represented? If that was explained somewhere I entirely missed it. I liked having another perspective but I would like to have known whose perspective it was.

I'd like to know more about the artists who did the portraits and their relationships with the poets. When were the portraits done vis-a-vis the poets' careers? I'm an expert on Wallace Stevens (Harvard PhD). The Wallace Stevens blurb was not good - in fact I'd say it distorted Stevens' work and significance to American poetry. The blurb for each poet should have been written by the top critic in the field (not me). This would have been easy to do.

I appreciated that the curator was not afraid to say something; however, occasionally the comments were a bit arch, and that was problematic in this context because if you're only picking a few dozen poets, why include them only to criticize them? (This may have been a question of sequencing - maybe instead of ending on the reservations some people have, maybe put that in the middle and end with the questions the poet raised that make the work so important. Though again, critical and biographical commentary presented in response to the IMAGE might avoid this problem by not trying to be comprehensive.)

I thought the descriptions of the poets and their work were very uneven. Some were almost purely factual. Some were more analytical, some personal, some had more or less social/historical context. The lack of consistency was jarring.

Improved design: hanging, order, color

The only thing I would have changed is to have the groups of images hung lower - the uppermost images were much too high for the average height/shorter person (often the case in galleries and museums to my mind).

There were a couple of awkward placements of portraits. I remember O'Hara specifically was represented by a number of works, one of which was on a different wall than the others. I really liked reading the excerpts of poetry above each label and I almost wish there were more.

More rhythm to the pacing of the pieces, not just groupings of each poet. Needed more spatial contrast.

From the perspective of poetry (rather than portraits), presenting the portraits in clear historical order would have heightened that sense of perspective.

Perhaps, in a more chronological order, as I reflected on who influenced who or not!

Gwendolyn Brooks should have been in the gallery. Hughes should have been featured with other renaissance authors. There should have been color on the walls and music or audio playing. It was not engaging enough

More color

Better location

It was very brief and seemed rather an afterthought, as it was located in that small hallway.

Poetic Likeness would have been enhanced by being displayed in a couple of the larger exhibition rooms that put one more in mind of a poet's preferred writing spaces.

Maybe moving it into a gallery, although I wonder if it wouldn't be missed by most visitors if that were the case - I probably would have passed by it myself.

I wasn't thrilled with the space...it was in a hallway and seemed like a walk-thru...honestly we didn't realize it was such a big exhibit. Maybe it needed a room...more light or just a different space.

Perhaps presented more fully in the side rooms rather than the corridor.

Lower floor.

More paintings

I think it could have used more pictures.

I really liked the paintings. I would have enjoyed more paintings of the poets. I particularly like the portrait of James Merrill by Larry Rivers. It would be interesting to see a painting of Robert Frost.

I loved the exhibit but the highlights were definitely the non-photo or mixed media works. More of those would have been great and some more less-well-known photographs.

When there were multiple images of poets, the results were sometimes more striking. The changes in Ezra Pound's face were memorable.

Add additional images of the poets to see them over time and from different perspectives. The few poets who were treated this way really enriched the experience. There were many that I wanted to see more images of.

More poets

Since I love poetry and appreciate many of the poets you chose, I would just say MORE poets, maybe a touch screen to access other poems and the work of other poets or reviews of the time. Also might have been nice to have headphones with the poets reading from their works - I have a number of collections of these and really enjoy them.

More poets!

More poets should have been included within this collection.

Have a book for sale with everything in this exhibition. 2. Added more poets. 3. Have future, perhaps more focused, similar exhibitions on poetry every April (National Poetry Month).

I don't know anything about museum design, so I can't speak on presentation, but although I was pleasantly surprised that the exhibit included a number of women poets and poets of color (before arriving at the exhibit, my friend and I joked "let's go learn about old white dudes"), I wish there would have been even MORE under-represented voices/poets.

More biography

Obviously it is not possible to put every detail of a person's life in a short bio, but Jean Toomer's bio - given his very unusual life - adding a one-liner that he joined the Quaker society would have been interesting.

I would have loved more examples of the poets' works or prose they may have written about themselves and their experiences.

Include a poem or two. Include more bio.

More context

For each poet I would have liked more context. While Frank O'Hara had several portraits by different artists, there was no such collection for Adrienne Rich. I understand this is probably due to Rich's lack of visual artist connections who drew or painted her at the time, or the ownership tying up possible art works of her. However, if you look at a portrait as not just a single piece, but as a small collection of each poet, then you could include hand written excerpts by that poet, drawings he/she did, other photos. The write ups are nice, and the bits of poetry on the upper walls are lovely (seriously great touch) but poets tend to be those highly individualistic sorts of people who, in order to best understand/appreciate them, a deeper focus on each is almost necessary. This is in contrast with the hall of daguerreotypes from the civil war, where part of the importance of the exhibit is to display the mass of people involved. These two exhibits were, at first glance, very similar. Walking through them, at second, and third glance, they were still set up very, very similarly. But they are expressing very different groups of people. Why is that not taken more into account, and further explored? Displaying art can and should be as important as the choice of art to display.

Reading area

A reading area with poetry books by all the portrait subjects, many of whom I didn't know or hadn't read in years.

Better selection

More attention to better poets. Better write ups.

Other suggestions

There was too much sameness in the portraits - or at least in how they seemed to be displayed in the main hallway. I felt more distinctiveness with the poets in the side rooms - but almost missed the poets in the side rooms. You could also cut the descriptive text about the poets and put more focus on their poetry because the three-fold direction for my attention was too much. If I hadn't known a lot of the

poets, I would have been more frustrated. As it was, I mostly skipped the background info.

The exhibit was so broad, it felt like a mini-survey course (with all the limitations that implies), and the connection with portraiture was not clear to me. Were these poets chosen because they're the ones to know, or because there are especially interesting images of them? I think, since you're inevitably going to leave important poets out, that it would have been better to have made the images the starting point. And then find contemporary poets who know the portrayed poets and/or their work intimately, and have them reflect on the images in light of what they know.

The titles above the pictures would have been more effective below them.

I don't use metro much (I bike or drive to work) and I don't get the Washington Post (just the Washingtonian). So, marketing to DC residents could be done better. I especially love the NPG's hours!!!

What Are Engaging and Meaningful Experiences in a Museum?

Respondents were asked, "What does the phrase 'personally meaningful and engaging experience' in a museum exhibition, mean to you?" Here are their replies, categorized by content.

Learning

Learning something I didn't previously know, seeing a painting/photograph/sculpture that is a familiar favorite.

Something that takes my understanding to a new level.

I find things of interest historically and fit it into my understanding of certain periods of time in certain places.

I get a window into life at earlier times from paintings. Learn about the aesthetics of different periods and/or places. Expand knowledge about other things - rocks and minerals, machines, textiles, pottery and other useful objects etc.

That I learn something new. That I experience something familiar in a great context.

That I am inspired to consider the presentation in a light of its time and ours.

Learn something new.

I learn something new or am inspired to learn more about a subject.

It means that I find the information interesting enough that I learn from what is presented.

That I'm interested in it and that I learn something from it.

I want to LEARN something when I go to a museum - or develop a deeper understanding of what I already know.

Feeling

Let's see: warm feeling flooding my being when inspired by art (and certainly music). Spiritual orgasm?

Absorbing, enlightening, thrilling.

Some paintings even make my mouth water.

I like to see something beautiful.

It means that I have experienced an emotional reaction to the exhibit.

The chill that runs up my spine when I encounter media which stirs me to create or marvel in the creation.

I see a work that is memorable and moving, which I will want to see again and recollect in the meanwhile.

Interesting, memorable, affecting.

That it touches me.

It means I enjoy the art or other exhibits.

Touches you.

It could be enlightening, fun, moving, serious, horrifying. It depends on the exhibit.

It means an emotional connection or revelation, i.e., seeing something new in a work you have seen maybe many times before.

Something I see moves me, either positively or negatively.

It means that the exhibits and even permanent collections touch you in some way. Whether connecting you to history or your love of art. The visit leaves you feeling inspired and invigorated in some way. That's usually how I feel after leaving a museum. Excited after seeing stunning works.

It means that one finds themselves in the position of "putting themselves into" the exhibition, meaning that their emotional state becomes directly contingent on the experience of the exhibition itself.

Touches me in a memorable way.

Seeing rare/exceptional things

A personally meaningful or engaging experience in a museum exhibition is one in which works of exquisite detail and workmanship are displayed, especially works which are rarely loaned or exhibited.

It means that a work will draw my attention enough for me to engage with it on more than a surface level. It will provoke my critical as well as my emotional powers. I feel like I want to talk with the work in question, talk with the artist who created it, and talk about it and share it with others. Museums are often visually overloaded, and it takes a very superlative or very personal work to stand above the others.

To be presented with engaging or compelling work.

Good stuff.

Find something fascinating that I would not otherwise come across.

To be inspired. To appreciate the original work of art, seen so often in books or online.

Learning and feeling

When I see or learn something that makes me think in a way I've never thought, or feel something I've never felt. Also things that trigger emotional responses.

Intellectually stimulating and/or emotionally moving.

The way an exhibit is set up and the works contained within speak to you on an intellectual and emotional level.

I hope it means - significant, moving, thought-provoking

To learn something new, to be inspired creatively or moved emotionally.

That I am affected emotionally by an image or idea presented and/or that I learn something new about the world.

When I view an exhibit or pieces within an exhibit that cause an intellectual (and sometimes emotional - ideally, both) response in me, and make me consider something in a new way, from a new perspective, or lead me to think of something I hadn't previously thought about before.

Learning and seeing

I learn something new or see something memorable.

I enjoy what I see and learn.

That you find something you enjoy and are able to learn about.

Enjoy intellectually or visually exhibits.

Existing interest

Something that I am interested in and will leave inspired by.

In the context of museum visiting: something that connects me with the artifacts of things I already love, thus connecting me more with the wider scope of human history, and those people who have already inspired me. Or introducing me to new such experiences. Visiting a museum is often like browsing the internet, except tactile, and way more positive.

I am most interested in history, and seeing how art, for example, both affects and is affected by the events surrounding its creation deepens both my sense of history and the significance of art.

It means that the exhibit captures my attention. Having lived in the northern VA area for 30 years, I usually go to the major art museums to see specific exhibits; I'll attend what I think will interest me or an artist whose work I find exceptionally meaningful ...

To be with things somewhat I've [been] interested in before and recall my memories.

Fascination and interest in the subject matter that's presented. Interesting exhibits, unique material, etc.

The exhibits touch on things that I am interested in and provide greater insight or a new perspective on these interests.

Personal change and expansion

It means that my personal life experience will broaden or deepen during my visit. I will come away changed if only in a small way. I will be moved to think, reflect, react. My life as I know it will be put on hold, and, if only for a moment or two, I will live in the experience being offered by the exhibition.

A personally meaningful or engaging experience can be gained by a brief or extended visit. It means you must enter with the desire to bring a fresh view to what each piece or exhibit brings.

It means that something speaks to me or I can relate to, question something that I have seen or felt.

An experience that enriches my life in some way - an experience that speaks to the mind and spirit. Something memorable or new to me.

This phrase means that I gain more insight into myself or the world and people around me and also feeling a sense of inspiration about the work that people have created. It means having an appreciation for not only the work that is displayed but how it is curated and presented to the audience as well. The curation and layout of

an exhibit is so integral to its success and this often inspires me more than the work that is displayed.

Personally meaningful or engaging museum experience - I never underestimate the power of quiet observation that is at the center of my art museum experience. Observing words or objects visually and silently is a deeply felt experience. At times I'm inspired, at times I'm hopeful, at times I'm humbled. Always, my thinking and sense of being is expanded...I am kinder and more compassionate (not in a social way, but in a quiet soulful way) when I've taken in the visual arts.

Adds to the way I am thinking, expands what I know, reminds me what I don't know, and/or encourages me to explore places I've been before and places I have not been.

Thought provoking; extending my experience, introducing me to new ideas or unexpected connections; giving me an idea for a poem to write...

That I will have learned something new or experienced something outside the norm; that I have expanded my horizons in some way.

How has the experience enriched me and what do I take away with me.

An event or interaction that makes me stop and consider or reconsider something that I thought I had known and understood.

Informs my previous experience or current opinion.

My mind/heart expands about the world, and I become a more aware, insightful person.

I walk away feeling I have gained something from the experience and that it was a good use of my time.

Engagement/connections

Do I and or did I enjoy and engage with what I saw and/or read.

Finding something in the exhibition that speaks to me in an evocative and/or inspiring way.

It catches my attention and holds it.

Been captured within a painting or poetry-and-painting to the extent of not wanting to move, because the need of understanding and expanding the emotional and intellectual experience is so vast that nothing else matters.

When you walk away and you feel connected or engaged personally and emotionally based on what you saw or heard.

If there's a common thread to these terms, it's the opportunity to engage with another person's creativity and to enter a contemplative state.

It's pretty self-explanatory. It's an engagement with the works presented, their creator, context and history with regard to my own consciousness

It means the exhibit "speaks to my condition."

That I really like or understand an artist.

I discover that the artists share something in common with me that I had not anticipated.

That I really connect with the exhibit and it is especially interesting to me.

I connect with the struggles and triumphs of the people on display.

Being able to feel engaged by the works that are presented.

Piques my interest

It means that I connect with the art - that it strikes a chord in me or speaks to my personal experiences.

Reflection

Experiencing a moment that I can later reflect on to learn more about myself, as well as the current social context that guides my understanding of life.

I get something out of it! to think about, to remember.

Visit inspires me to contemplate the importance of art in the human experience.

To me engaging experience means coming away inspired with new food for thought!

Something that I can reflect personally on, whether it be a portrait, non- traditional art, or something interactive.

Thought provoking, a reminder of something that has happened in my life.

Thought provoking and speaks to me in some way.

Thought provoking.

New insights and something to reflect on later.

Other after-effects

I want to come away from an exhibit inspired by what I learned, and I want to feel like I could go back and take friends or family members there to show them what I saw. I want to feel like the exhibit is something I could return to and still enjoy (and maybe even discover something new each time).

An experience that you remember long after.

One that draws an emotional historical feeling in that I would want to explore more on the subject matter that is being exhibited.

Challenges me, thrills me, spurs me to connect the content with other important things in my life, AND I want to engage with other people, to tell them about it. This time it was the Elizabeth Bishop portrait and her wonderful poem and the freshness

[of] Thom Gunn's rakish photo: he doesn't look 40 AND the portrait looks like it could have been taken last week.

Does the exhibit inspire me to drive my own work.

Something that inspires me. Something that I go home and tell people about excitedly. Something that sticks in my head and I want to go back and see.

I walk away with a lasting memory.

Personally meaningful/engaging experience means that I am motivated to go home and read about an artist or subject of art.

Seeing even one piece of art that lingers with you after you have left the museum. Or seeing a piece that brings memories to mind for you. An erotic piece. A piece that inspires. A piece that causes you to reflect at length. I supposed there are many different meanings for this. I just know an engaging art when I see it.

When I leave, I want to do more research. It's not only engaging inside the museum, but sparks an interest in the topic. When I left Poetic Likeness, I went home & looked into a few of the poets I'd never heard of. I love when that happens.

Multiple responses

This means that I am inspired by at least some of the things I see - either because they are exciting to the eye &/or heart &/or mind, they make me think, they show me something new and/or confirm something I believe/know. Sometimes it is the construction of a piece as much as anything else. Sometimes it is an old favorite I've sought out in that particular museum.

Something surprises me and helps me see things in a new way - a more enhanced and unexpected learning experience, with the joy of it being a communion between me and the stuff in the museum - on my own time schedule (usually) and by myself (usually).

Means it connected with me, brought to mind experiences that I might not have considered, or perhaps just brought me joy.

I leave feeling I have learned something interesting or amazing, have seen something that is memorable. Thought provoking.

It means that I emotionally connect to something in the museum or create memories that involve my experience at that museum.

An engaging experience to me is one where I feel satisfied - as if I'd had a wonderful meal, read a remarkable book or seen a thought-provoking movie. Almost everything is personally meaningful to me in some way. In the museum I always find things to look at, meanings to consider, or happy accidents where I see something that I wasn't expecting.

I like to learn something new, to see beautiful things, to feel connected to my community and expand my horizons.

Other

There are times that I visit familiar museums for the permanent collections, while other times I am drawn to special exhibits for a new experience.

It means some people are working very hard to bring me a good exhibit.

DISCUSSION

An Innovative Exhibition

Three features of the exhibition stand out – the inclusion of poetry, the personal voice of the curatorial text, and the overall unity of subject, image, and text. It was especially appropriate in a literary exhibition that some visitors admired the quality of the writing on the labels, even though a number of others objected to some of the subjective opinions expressed in them.

Valuable Open-ended Responses

The responses that these dedicated visitors gave to the question of what is meaningful in a museum exhibition provides source material for understanding the diversity among NPG visitors, appreciating what motivates them, and inspiring new exhibition ideas. The exact language that they used can also inform marketing and outreach efforts for relevant exhibitions.

A Specialized Exhibition

This exhibition drew an audience of those with a strong interest in poetry who are also deeply engaged with museums, and it satisfied them greatly. Small exhibitions targeted to narrow publics can be an important part of a museum's overall offering when they are well-done and creative, as this one was. They provide a sense of variety and depth and they delight the visitors who are most dedicated to that particular topic. Of course they need to be balanced with broadly targeted exhibitions that can draw and engage larger segments of the visiting population.

An Innovative Survey Study

This was the first time that an exhibition at the Smithsonian was studied with an online survey (although OP&A has used such surveys in museum marketing studies). This experiment demonstrated that such surveys provide reasonable samples (i.e., nearly as representative as in-person surveys) and, more importantly, generate much more detailed information in the words of visitors. While this method is not suitable for every exhibition, it is appropriate in cases where an exhibition is exceptional in some way, or particularly important to stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-test Text

Bold moves that break with expectations, such as the subjective curatorial text in *Poetic Likeness*, while they can risk alienating some visitors, are the key to increasing the number of Superior experiences. It is risky to aim high. It is easier and safer to be average. But some complaints are legitimate. There were a few texts in this exhibition that visitors felt were “annoying”, “arch,” “distempered,” “oddly skewed,” and even “snarky.” The discomfort these caused could easily have been avoided if draft texts had been shown in advance to a sample of visitors as part of the exhibition-creation process. Testing text with visitors has been shown to be an effective and efficient way to highlight problems with tone, improve the communication of important messages, and discover likely visitor responses to an exhibition’s themes and approaches. There is no downside to asking visitors to comment on draft text – if the exhibition-makers do not feel that the visitors’ responses are legitimate, they can ignore them. It would also be appropriate for the museum to identify the authorship of critical/interpretive exhibition texts when they are clearly subjective.

Be More Daring in Design

As many visitors noted, the exhibition begged for audio in some form, and the very spare, monochrome design, and the absence of a clear order or structure, limited the sense of variety that some visitors longed for.

Be More Personal and Emotional

Those who were most impressed by the exhibition depended heavily on their pre-existing levels of knowledge and interest. The survey and open-ended response suggest that the exhibition did not have a strong emotional impact, although it was about many very emotional, very interesting people. As this demonstrates, biographical and critical summaries alone are not necessarily adequate to communicate these human connections in a way that is viscerally compelling. In general museums tend to favor intellectual and aesthetic experiences over social and emotional ones. Many of these respondents highlighted the importance of emotional experiences in museums. Including audio, interviews with poets, autobiographical quotations, complete poems, objects owned or used by poets, and other materials that could convey a deeper, more intimate sense of the inner life of these exceptional men and women might have made the exhibition more accessible to those who are not so committed to poetry, but who are looking for ways to understand and emotionally connect with others.

APPENDIX A: WHAT MAKES A WOW EXHIBITION?

Respondents were asked which exhibition they liked best among those they saw on the same day they saw *Poetic Likeness*. The exhibitions most often cited were *Poetic Likeness*, *The Civil War and American Art*, *Portrait Competition*, *Portraiture Now*, and *American Presidents*. Analysis of their responses produced the following categories and sub-categories. Although these responses were influenced by the particular examples cited (nearly all were art exhibitions), they offer an interesting summary of the dimensions that matter to some NPG visitors. The following summary lists these categories and samples of the language used (in italics).

Content

Artistic quality

artistic abilities, proficiency, talent, excellent work, terrific, spectacular, creativity, gorgeous, intensity

Variety

variety of styles and artists, lots to see and study, different, combinations, range of styles and sizes, sheer number, wide variety, scope and size, plethora of works, varying portraits, phenomenal range, combination of old and new, wide-ranging, remarkable assortment

Old/rare/real

seeing the portrait in person, had only seen most of these in my textbooks, over 100 years old, brought over from England, viewing art in person, images I had seen in pictures but never the actual painting, wanted to see the paintings in person

Curation

Curation refers to the evident intelligence behind what was selected, how it was placed, and what was said about the art. There was appreciation, in particular, for the subjective (e.g., valuation of poets, interpretation of paintings).

Arrangement

arrangement, being able to see the paintings together

Exhibit design

respectful and almost sacred atmosphere, brilliant arrangement, beautifully laid out and thematically organized, nice arrangement of space and layout, attractive format, organized, not overwhelming size, display, generous space

Information/texts

well-researched, wall notes gave historic context, textual explanations, caption, stories, excerpts, recap of accomplishments, information, insightful, select lines of poetry, descriptions, biographic information, bios, mini-bios, narratives

Interpretation

insight not usually shared, candor and lucidity, references that...would otherwise have been inaccessible to me, new ideas and viewpoints, excellent commentary, brave exhibit, informative and highly opinionated labels

Overall curation

creativity and efforts of the curator to open up and join subjects in new ways, well put together, curation of works from artists driven by such diverse purpose is SUPER interesting to me, it was great to see these pictures together - smartly curated, love the content of the pictures and its connection to English literature, modern, topical, well-known, perfectly chosen, smartly curated

Engagement

Interaction

there were some interactive parts of exhibits too which I believe is engaging

Social experiences

made sure my friend accompanying me saw it too, heard about it from a poet friend who heard about it from someone on-line, surprised at number of people and care they seemed to take reading the comments and reviewing the photographs, was with a friend who could dialogue with me on the poets, I only went because my friend wanted to see it

Tour

curator discussed many of the pieces on display, commentary from the docent

Responses

Emotion

moving, REALLY inspires me, totally impressed, visceral emotion

Flow

I lost track of time, it drew me in when I was simply wandering for wandering's sake

New

for the first time, not familiar with, had never thought about, did not expect, never see elsewhere, never seen, non-traditional displays, unique in my experience

Reflection

appreciate, my understanding of the importance, it showed the injustice, had never really thought about, brought a very human perspective, expression of humanity, reminded of, intend to continue my self-education

Surprise

so much more than I expected, at every turn there was something surprising, unexpected ways

Topic

Personal connection

history major, painted with oils, as a person with interdisciplinary training, I have always loved the poets, I had a level of familiarity, as an English lit major, familiar, old friends, enjoy poetry and writing, amateur portrait painter, saw a program on the Civil War exhibit, have studied many of the artists featured

APPENDIX B: SURVEY FREQUENCIES FOR *POETIC LIKENESS: MODERN AMERICAN POETS*

Note: N= Number of respondents to each question.

Questions Asked at the Exhibition Exit

Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition, *Poetic Likeness* (N=149)

Poor	0
Fair	1
Good	19
Excellent	57
Superior	23

Where do you live? (N=149)

DC metro area	34	
Other US states	57	
Another country	9	(Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Russia, Sweden, UK)

Questions Asked in Follow-up Online Survey

Did you come to the National Portrait Gallery and the Donald W. Reynolds Center specifically to see *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? (N=146)

Yes	30
No	70

Was this your first visit to the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (NPG)? (N=149)

This was my first visit	32
I last visited in past month	17
I last visited in the last six months	17
I last visited in the last year	12
I last visited more than one year ago	22

Briefly, imagine that you are talking with a friend who asks, "Why should I see *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*?" What would you say? (N=135)

Open-ended question; see the body of the report.

Did you visit any other museums on the same day that you visited *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? Remember that both the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum are located in the Donald W. Reynolds Center. (N=149)

Yes 47

No 53

In addition to the Donald W. Reynolds Center, which includes the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which museums did you visit? (You must mark one or more.) (N=70)

National Gallery of Art	22
American History	11
Natural History	9
Hirshhorn	8
Air & Space	7
National Archives	7
American Indian	6
Freer & Sackler Galleries	5
Phillips Collection	4
African Art	3
Renwick Gallery	3
Spy Museum	2
Corcoran	1
Other	13

Thinking only about the museums that you visited [on the day you visited *Poetic Likeness*], was there ONE exhibition that you felt, "WOW! That was engaging and fabulous!?" (N=145)

Yes 76

No 24

[If yes]

In which museum was the exhibition? (N=110)

National Portrait Gallery	46
American Art	17
American History	4
National Gallery of Art	3
American Indian	1
Hirshhorn	1
Natural History	1

[If the exhibit was not at NPG]

What was the ONE most WOW! exhibition? (N=20)

Open-ended question; see the body of the report.

[If the exhibit was at NPG or SAAM]

What was the ONE most WOW! exhibition? (N=93)

Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets	25
The Civil War and American Art (20)	23
Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition 2013	12
Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge	12
America's Presidents	8
Nam June Paik: Global Visionary	8
Bound for Freedom's Light: African Americans and the Civil War	2
American Origins, 1600-1900	1
Contemporary Americans	1
Jo Davidson: Biographer in Bronze	1
Mathew Brady's Photographs of Union Generals	1
Pictures in the Parlor	1
The Struggle for Justice	0
Bravo!	0
Champions	0
Grand Salon Installation—Paintings from the Smithsonian American Art Museum	0
Inventing a Better Mousetrap: Patent Models from the Rothschild Collection	0
The Network: Group Portrait Presentation	0
One Life: Amelia Earhart	0
A Will of Their Own: Judith Sargent Murray and Women of Achievement in the Early Republic	0
Other (please specify)	7

In your own words, what made that a WOW! exhibition? (N=96)

Open-ended question; see Appendix A.

[If the respondent answered that there was ONE WOW! exhibition]

WHILE you were VIEWING the exhibition, did you text or use social media to share your experience with someone else ALSO VIEWING the exhibition? (N=110)

No	90
Yes	10

[If the respondent answered that there was ONE WOW! exhibition]
At some point, while in the exhibition or after leaving, did you text, call, talk with, or use social media to share your experience with friends or family who were not visiting with you? (Mark all that apply.) (N=110)

No	50
Talked	30
Text	10
Phone call	9
Social media	7

[If a response other than no was selected]

Did you suggest visiting the exhibition?

Recommended visiting that exhibition	66
Favorably commented on the exhibition but didn't recommend visiting	27
Commented unfavorably on the exhibition	2
Some favorable and some unfavorable comments	0

Did you see or hear any information about *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* before entering THIS building? (N=149)

Yes	92
No	8

[If Yes]

Where did you see or hear about *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* before you visited? (Mark one or more.) (N=46)

Museum website	44
Advertisement in media (Newspaper, TV, radio, etc.)	26
Word of mouth (Friend, family)	26
Previous museum visit	24
Sign, poster, etc.	11
Museum newsletter, mailing or other publication	11
An art, poetry, book, or other group	4
Mentioned on a social media site (Blog, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Facebook, etc.)	0
Other	17

How important was each of the following in your decision to visit *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? (N=149)

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important	I am not interested
Interest in poetry	44	37	17	1
Interest in poets	42	38	18	1
Interest in portraits	34	46	20	0
Interest in modern American history	33	45	21	1
A combined interest in modern American poetry, poets, and history	40	46	13	1

Which of the following experiences did you find especially satisfying in this exhibition, *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? (Mark one or more.) (N=146)

Connecting with emotional experiences of others	34
Enriching my understanding of poetry	54
Recalling memories	27
Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw	46
Feeling inspired	34
None of these	10

You did not choose *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* as your most Wow! experience, but you rated your overall experience in *Poetic Likeness* as "Excellent" or "Superior." In your own words, what about *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* made you feel that it was "Excellent" or "Superior" but not the most Wow! exhibition?

Open-ended question; see the body of the report.

[If respondent answered the previous question]

At some point, while in the exhibition or after leaving, did you share your experience in *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* with friends or family via text, social media, talking, or a phone call? (N=88)

No	44
Talked	43
Phone call	13
Text	8
Social media	5

[If a response option other than No was selected]

Did you suggest visiting the *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? (N=49)

Recommended visiting that exhibition	69
Commented favorably on the exhibition but didn't recommend visiting	25
Definitely recommended against visiting	4
Commented unfavorably on the exhibition	2
Some favorable and some unfavorable comments	0

WHILE you were VIEWING the exhibition, did you text or use social media to share your experience with someone else ALSO VIEWING the *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? (N=88)

No	97
Yes	3

***Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* used leading poets, and their portraits and poetry, to understand 20th century America. How do you feel about the combination of portraits, poetry, and historical information in *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*? Did the combination of these elements make the exhibition more engaging for you? (N=146)**

More engaging	89
No difference	10
Less engaging	1

Was this a fitting exhibition for a portrait gallery or would it have been better suited in another type of museum? (N=147)

Fits well in a portrait gallery	88
No difference	9
More suited in another type of museum	3

Were you surprised to see portraits of Americans who may not be major historical figures? (N=147)

No	73
Yes	27

How could *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* have been presented differently to enhance your experience? (N=115)

Open-ended question; see the body of the report.

There was no catalog for *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets*. Would you have been interested in buying a catalog for *Poetic Likeness: Modern American Poets* if one would have been available? (N=148)

I might	31
No, not at any price	28
Definitely would buy one	15
I do not know	14
Yes, but only at the right price	13 (Average price: \$15)

Including yourself, with whom were you visiting? (N=149)

Total number of adults (18 and over)	Average 2.2
Total number of teens (13 to 17)	Average 0.1
Total number of youth (6 to 12)	Average 0.0
Total number of kids (under 6)	Average 0.0

Group (Visit Group Composition)

Unaccompanied adult	37
Two adults	33
More than two adults	23
More than two adults with child(ren)	3
One adult with child(ren)	2
Two adults with child(ren)	2

Age

Average age	50.2
Median age	54

Generations

Leading boomers (born 1943-1954)	30
Generation X (born 1965-1981)	21
Generation Y & Digital Natives (born 1982-2012)	21
Trailing boomers (born 1955-1964)	19
Silent generation (born 1925-1942)	9
Lost generation (born before 1900)	1
GI generation (born 1901-1924)	0

Age in 5-year groups

18 through 20	3
21 through 25	3
26 through 30	14
31 through 35	5
36 through 40	4
41 through 45	9
46 through 50	7
51 through 55	8
56 through 60	15
61 through 65	12
66 through 70	11
71 through 75	9
75 through oldest	1

Are you a female or male? (N=142)

Female	64
Male	36

During the past year, about how often have you visited an art museum or portrait gallery? (N=144)

Never	6
Once	10
2 or 3 times	28
4 to 10 times	35
More than 10 times	21

During the past year, about how often have you visited other types of museums, zoos or aquariums? (N=143)

Never	6
Once	8
2 or 3 times	39
4 to 10 times	40
More than 10 times	7

Do you normally expect to have a personally meaningful or engaging experience when you go to a museum? (N=145)

Almost every time I visit a museum	85
Only in certain types of museums	8
<i>(please specify – did not produce usable responses)</i>	
Very rarely	7

[if Very rarely was NOT selected]

What does the phrase "personally meaningful or engaging experience" in a museum exhibition, mean to you? (N=113)

Open-ended question; see the body of the report.

How often do you read novels or other literary works? (N=144)

Constantly reading one or more	44
Frequently	31
Rarely	5
Occasionally	19
Rarely	5