

# Summary Notes of Randi Korn's Audience Research: 2009 Survey of Walk-in Visitors to Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

*Please note the information and data presented below was compiled from a visitor study conducted at Hillwood in 2009 by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A). If you are interesting in reviewing the complete report, please see Lisa Leyh, head of volunteer management (202.243.3938 or [LLeyh@HillwoodMuseum.org](mailto:LLeyh@HillwoodMuseum.org)).*

Periodically, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens conducts a visitor survey to track its visitors and understand their motivations and experiences. This report presents the findings of a survey of visitors to Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens conducted by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) from October to December 2009. In addition to asking questions about the demographic profile of Hillwood's visitors, this survey also asked visitors to rate a series of statements describing the types of experiences available at Hillwood according to what is important to them. We expect that these ratings will provide insight into what the visiting public values about Hillwood.

Specifically, the survey objectives were to:

- Describe demographic characteristics of Hillwood visitors;
- Identify visitors' visit patterns to other art museums, historic homes and gardens;
- Identify the resources Hillwood visitors use to decide how they will spend their leisure time;
- Describe visitors' experiences at Hillwood, including visit patterns, Hillwood membership, their primary reason for visiting that day, and the types of experiences at Hillwood they value most;
- Determine visitors' awareness of the Hillwood reservations policy and their evaluation of the reservations system; and,
- Explore visitors' opinions of Hillwood, including what Hillwood could do better, what would entice them to return, and what they would tell friends about a visit to Hillwood; and,
- Explore what visitors' value about Hillwood experiences

## Methodology

A standardized questionnaire was used because it is the most efficient method for gathering information from a large number of people. Moreover, the resulting data can be analyzed using a variety of statistical procedures. RK&A consulted with Hillwood staff to develop a four-page standardized questionnaire that uses a variety of question formats.

RK&A trained Hillwood staff members to administer the questionnaire. Using a continuous random sampling method, data collectors intercepted visitors<sup>1</sup> on the first floor of the visitor center (between the staircase and exit doors) and invited them to participate in the study.<sup>2</sup> If the visitor declined, the data collector logged the visitor's gender, estimated age, and reason for refusal. If the visitor agreed, the data collector administered the questionnaire as a face-to-face interview for the first three pages and then gave the visitor the fourth page (containing demographic and background information) to complete privately.

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<sup>1</sup>To be eligible to participate in the study, visitors must be (1) adult, (2) proficient in speaking and reading English, and (3) finished with the Museum visit.

<sup>2</sup>During the first few days of data collection, Hillwood staff intercepted visitors on the second floor of the visitor center, just past the Museum shop and at the top of the stairs. However, in this location, data collectors could not intercept visitors who took the elevator to the first floor. Thus, data collectors began intercepting visitors downstairs.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

This report presents the findings from a questionnaire administered to visitors at Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens from October to December 2009. The study was designed to collect demographic information about visitors and information about their attitudes and opinions about various aspects of Hillwood to better understand what visitors' value about Hillwood. Trained data collectors intercepted 517 visitors as they exited the visitor center and invited them to participate in the survey. A total of 386 visitors agreed to participate while 131 declined, for a participation rate of 75 percent, which is considered a very good response rate.

### **Principal Findings**

#### **Demographic characteristics**

Of respondents:

- 71 percent were female and 29 percent were male.
- 86 percent were college graduates.
- 63 percent were older (55+ years), 23 percent were middle-aged (35 – 54 years), and 14 percent were younger (18 – 34 years).
- Median age = 60 years.
- 88 percent identified themselves as Caucasian/White.
- 60 percent had a household income of \$100,000 or more, 26 percent had a household income of \$50,000 - \$99,000, and 13 percent had a household income of less than \$50,000 (note: 29 percent of respondents did not answer this question, so the validity of these results is uncertain).
- 42 percent were visiting with family, 34 percent were visiting with friends, 11 percent were visiting alone, 9 percent were visiting with a mixed group of family and friends, and 3 percent were visiting with a tour group.
- 14 percent of respondents were visiting Hillwood with children under 18 years of age.

#### **Background characteristics**

Of respondents:

- 93 percent had visited an art museum at least once in the past two years. The median number of visits in the past two years was five.
- 84 percent had visited an historic home at least once in the past two years. The median number of visits in the past two years was three.
- 83 percent had visited a garden, botanic garden, or arboretum in the past two years. The median number of visits in the past two years was two.

The top three resources that visitors mentioned using when planning leisure activities are:

- The Internet (61 percent);
- Newspapers (48 percent), more often the print version; and,
- Friends' recommendations (35 percent).

Web sites that visitors used most for planning leisure activities are:

- Google/Yahoo (39 percent);
- Washington, D.C. sites such as dcist.com (8 percent);

- Museum/arts/history sites such as nga.gov (8 percent);
- Travel/entertainment sites such as Yelp.com (7 percent);
- Hillwood Web site (5 percent); and,
- News sites such as WashingtonPost.com (2 percent).

### **Visitor characteristics**

- 66 percent of respondents were visiting Hillwood for the first time and 34 percent were repeat visitors.
- 7 percent of all respondents were Hillwood members.
- 18 percent of repeat visitors were Hillwood members.
- 20 percent of repeat visitors attended a public program at Hillwood in the past two years, most often to attend adult programs or festivals.
- 29 percent of first-time visitors said they thought reservations were required to visit Hillwood and 48 percent of repeat visitors said they thought reservations were required.
- 23 percent of first-time visitors made reservations to visit the day of their visit and 35 percent of repeat visitors made reservations to visit that day.
- Of visitors who had made a reservation, 75 percent made the reservation by phone and 25 percent made the reservation online.
- On the scale from 1 (“Complicated”) to 7 (“Very Easy”), visitors who made reservations gave the reservations system a mean rating = 6.5.

### **Reason(s) for visiting**

The top four reasons for visiting Hillwood were:

- To see the estate, collections, gardens/never visited before (29 percent);
- Keep hearing about Hillwood, so I wanted to visit (19 percent);
- Wanted to bring out-of-towners to see Hillwood (16 percent); and,
- Nice place to spend time with friends/family (13 percent).

### **Experiences at Hillwood**

Visitors rated 16 experiences at Hillwood on the scale from 1 (“Not important to me”) to 7 (“Very important to me”). In order of importance, the ratings are:

- Being in a beautiful place: mean = 6.6;
- Seeing art objects for my own visual pleasure: mean = 6.2;
- Feeling welcomed by Hillwood staff: mean = 6.1;
- Enjoying the variety of gardens: mean = 6.1;
- Seeing works of art from around the world: mean = 6.1;
- Spending time with friends/family in a cultural setting: mean = 5.7;
- Learning to see art objects in new ways: mean = 5.4;
- Learning what others know about a work of art: mean = 5.3;
- Hearing stories about the life of Mrs. Post: mean = 5.3;
- Seeing special exhibitions: mean = 5.2;
- Hearing stories about Mrs. Post’s collecting: mean = 5.2;

- Experiencing what it would be like to live an opulent lifestyle: mean = 4.7;
- Having lunch or tea in an historic setting: mean = 4.7;
- Learning about different plants in the garden: mean = 4.5;
- Purchasing unique items from a specialty shop: mean = 3.9; and,
- Attending Hillwood festivals/events: mean = 3.5.

## Opinions of Hillwood

- On the scale from 1 (“The value of my visit was not worth the cost”) to 7 (“The value of my visit was well worth the cost”) visitors gave the visit a mean rating = 6.6.

In response to the open-ended question “What will you tell your friends about your visit to Hillwood?” visitors’ main responses were:

- Visit Hillwood/highly recommended (31 percent);
- Hillwood has impressive arts and decorative arts collections and exhibitions (22 percent);
- Hillwood has extraordinary gardens/grounds (15 percent); and,
- Hillwood is a unique, “hidden treasure” in Washington, D.C. (15 percent).
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In response to the open-ended question “What could Hillwood do better?” visitors’ main responses were:

- Nothing/I have no suggestions (40 percent);
- Improve the café (9 percent);
- Clarify general information on hours, schedules, offerings, tour locations, and directions to Hillwood (8 percent); and,
- Clarify the reservations policy (8 percent).

In response to the open-ended question “What would entice you to visit Hillwood again?” visitors’ main responses were:

- Visit Hillwood in a different season (36 percent);
- Show Hillwood to friends, family, and out-of-town guests (22 percent);
- Attend special events/festivals (12 percent); and,
- Attend a special exhibition (11 percent).

## Discussion

### Introduction

This visitor study produced an impressive amount of information about visitors to Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens. We urge staff to mine the report for details, as there are numerous sections and bits of information about visitors’ experiences. We deliberately focus this discussion on five topics because our intent is to present only those findings that can most inform Hillwood’s operations. The topics discussed below are: demographic changes since the 2001 survey, the reservation experience, the museum experience and perceived value of Hillwood, the homogeneity of Hillwood’s audience, and considerations for Hillwood staff.

### Demographic changes since the 2001 visitor survey

Walk-in visitors to Hillwood have changed little since the previous survey in 2001 (RK&A, 2001). The audience is still primarily female (71 percent), Caucasian/White (88 percent), and highly educated (86

percent are college graduates). Further, visitors are still mostly local (62 percent of visitors who are U.S. residents live in Maryland, Virginia, or Washington, D.C.). There are a few noteworthy changes since 2001, however, including changes in visitors' age, visitors with children, and repeat visitation.

### **Visitors' age**

Since the 2001 survey, visitors' median age has increased by 7 years, from 53 to 60, suggesting that the same audience that came to Hillwood in 2001 is still coming to the Museum in 2009, although they have grayed. Hillwood is not the only institution experiencing this trend; for instance, data shows that other Washington, D.C. museums' audiences, including the National Gallery of Art, are also aging (RK&A, 2009).

While prevalent in the museum community, aging audiences are potentially problematic as the future of an institution relies on building new audiences. Hillwood recognizes the need to stay relevant and build participation among non-traditional audiences, as its current audience initiatives suggest, and we encourage staff to continue to do so.

### **Visitors with children**

The 2009 survey shows that more visitors are coming to the Museum with children (14 percent in 2009 versus 8 percent in 2001)—a finding that is very encouraging given Hillwood's family audience initiatives. Interestingly, visitors who are bringing children to the Museum are ethnically diverse (12 percent of Caucasian/White visitors were visiting with children, while 29 percent of non-Caucasian/White visitors were visiting with children).

### **Repeat visitation**

Repeat visitation is up from the 2001 survey (34 percent in 2009 versus 25 percent in 2001). This finding must be interpreted carefully, however, as the difference may be attributed to the season in which the surveys were administered. The 2001 survey was administered in August while the 2009 survey was administered between October and December. Typically, since the summer is a popular time for vacations, museums see a spike in first-time visitors, while in the fall, museums tend to see more local (and often) repeat visitors.

### **Reservations experience**

The neighborhood surrounding Hillwood requires that Hillwood carefully manage daily visitation flow into Hillwood. Thus, Hillwood has a system in place for those visitors who would like to reserve a space ahead of time. For Hillwood staff, the reservation system challenges Hillwood's concerted efforts to be a public-friendly institution since reservations often connote, and sometimes rightfully so, restricted public access. Hillwood has recently employed creative tactics, such as allowing visitors to make onsite reservations, in order to quell any negative experiences associated with the reservation system.

Since the reservation system is very much top-of-mind, Hillwood wanted to explore how visitors perceive the reservations system, and so the questionnaire posed to visitors, "Did you think reservations were required to visit Hillwood?" As it turns out, one-third of visitors thought reservations were required, while one-half did not; a few were unsure about the policy. Note that of the one-third that thought reservations were required, many were repeat visitors. One hypothesis is that repeat visitors are familiar with Hillwood's previously strict reservation-only policy or are accustomed to making reservations for their Hillwood visits, and thus, think reservations are required.

Also note that most visitors who were unsure of the reservations policy were first-time visitors. These were also visitors who suggested improving the reservation policy when asked what Hillwood could do better; in their responses, these visitors indicated confusion at the contradictory messages on the Web site/phone and the sign at the front gate. While RK&A is aware of the constraints in the neighborhood, we suggest trying to eradicate such conflicting messages by providing a clearer, more straightforward explanation of the reservation on the Web site and when visitors call for reservations.

### **The museum experience and perceived value of Hillwood**

RK&A used the questionnaire to solicit information about what visitors most value about the array of experiences available at Hillwood to better understand Hillwood's *unique* and personal value. To do so, RK&A presented visitors a series of 16 statements regarding a range of experiences that one might have at Hillwood, such as, "Spending time with friends/family in a cultural setting," and "Seeing art objects for my own visual pleasure." Visitors were then asked to rate each statement on a scale from 1 ("Not important to me") to 7 ("Very important to me").

Findings from the statement ratings indicate that aesthetic experiences and hospitality are most important to Hillwood visitors; learning is moderately important; and amenities such as the café and Museum shop and experiencing an opulent lifestyle are least important. These various experiences are discussed below in detail.

This study purposefully did not delve into the details of visitors' museum experience. Rather, it looked generally at visitors' feelings about their experience—which were mostly very positive. Visitors felt that their experience at Hillwood was well worth the cost of the visit, and they had many kind words for Hillwood, praising the collections and the gardens. Further, some visitors went on to describe Hillwood as unique and a "hidden treasure."

### **Aesthetic Experiences**

According to the statement ratings, visitors most value Hillwood because it is "a beautiful place" where visitors can "see art objects for [their] own visual pleasure" and "enjoy the variety of gardens." Interestingly, the aesthetic experiences are what one might call "pure." That is, they are not linked to learning experiences, such as learning about Mrs. Post, and they are not necessarily about experiencing opulence. Rather, visitors value aesthetic experiences that are about pure, visual enjoyment of beautiful art objects like those in the collections, and plant displays like those in the gardens.

### **Hospitality**

One rating statement addressed hospitality: "Feeling welcomed by Hillwood staff." This statement was rated, overall, as the third most important experience. That is, despite—or in spite of—the magnificence of the collections, estate, and gardens, experiences with staff must be equally or more wonderful.

These sentiments were expressed in the responses to open-ended questions that visitors were asked (e.g., what they would tell a friend about Hillwood and what suggestions they have for Hillwood). Frequently, docent experiences were mentioned as highlights of their experiences at Hillwood as were other general encounters with staff.

### **Learning**

Learning about works of art and the gardens is moderately important to visitors, suggesting that learning may not be the primary draw for Hillwood visitors, although it could be an enjoyable, secondary experience. Further, findings indicate that Mrs. Post is of moderate importance; that is, the aesthetically beautiful house and wonderful collections trumps Mrs. Post's role in collecting and displaying the collection and designing the gardens.

### **Café, shop, and experiencing an opulent lifestyle**

Of the variety of experiences rated, visitors indicated that the café and shop were of least importance to them. Also note that "attending Hillwood festivals/events" was of least value as well; this finding, however, must be considered within the context of the visitors surveyed. That is, RK&A surveyed walk-in visitors and not festival/event visitors. Thus, this rating would probably be higher if festival/event visitors—who are most likely different from typical walk-in visitors—were surveyed.

### **Homogeneity of Hillwood's audience**

The statement ratings discussed above were also used as part of a statistical procedure generally called cluster analysis. Clustering aims to find "natural" groups out of the given data, so in the case of this study, it aims to cluster like visitors into groups. Given that human diversity is so complex, the procedure has proven to be a useful way to look at visitors since it allows for the nuances of visitors to emerge, yet it also groups similar visitors according to a specific research question (Krantz, Korn & Menninger, 2009).

Further, the analysis generally supersedes demographics and groups visitors based on attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions.

In conducting a cluster analysis based on visitors' ratings of the 16 statements about Hillwood experiences, RK&A was surprised to find that there were *not* "natural" groups of visitors. Note that there are indeed subtle nuances in visitors' responses, although they were not great enough to formulate distinct groups of visitors that would be of practical use to Hillwood. This indicates that the audience is relatively homogeneous—both in terms of demographics *and* values.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, staff had been also working to diversify Hillwood's audience. Note though, that cultivating new audiences takes considerable time—a generation by some accounts. While audience changes may not be significant enough to emerge in the cluster analysis, the staff's hard work is evident in certain areas, such as in the increase in families visiting Hillwood.

### **Considerations for Hillwood staff**

This study has shown that visitors are very pleased with their experiences at Hillwood and speak well of the institution. While Hillwood's visitors are not as diverse as the staff may hope, there is something to be said about playing to an institution's strengths and serving one audience exceptionally well. In the words of Stephen Weil (2002):

“The individual museum that declares ‘denting the universe’ to be its bottom line may be setting itself up for failure unless and until it can produce a perceptibly dented universe to demonstrate its accomplishment. Museum workers need to remind themselves more forcefully than they generally do that museums can wonderfully enhance and enrich individual lives, even change them, and make communities better places in which to live” (p. 40).

That is, Hillwood does not need to be everything to everyone in order to be successful. Ultimately, however, it is up to Hillwood to determine a clear metric of success and clarify the impact it would like to achieve with the audience(s) it serves. Given that Hillwood has already cultivated a dedicated, homogenous audience, there is great opportunity to work towards achieving impact, in whatever way Hillwood should define it.

### **References**

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<sup>3</sup>There are a few factors that may confound this finding though. First, the survey was conducted during only one season; had the survey been conducted over a year, findings may reveal some garden enthusiasts. Additionally, the survey was not administered during festivals and special events; these visitors, too, might create another cluster. However, these are just conjectures that cannot be stated with certainty.