

The world from a different angle

Visitor responses to *The Past from Above: through the lens of Georg Gerster* at the British Museum

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**The world from a different angle – Visitor responses to *The Past From Above:*
Through the lens of Georg Gerster at the British Museum**

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The Past From Above **11,000 new visitors** to the British Museum – the highest proportion of any recent temporary exhibition.

It was an overwhelmingly **enjoyable experience** for visitors, who also felt they had **gained new knowledge** of other world cultures through *The Past From Above*.

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1 Summary

1.1 The exhibition attracted a very high proportion of New Intenders

The Past From Above attracted 11,004 newcomers to the British Museum. This is an extremely high percentage and is a considerably greater proportion than at any other temporary exhibition.

1.2 The audience was different to the British Museums temporary exhibition core audience

The exhibition attracted a large number of new visitors – many of whom had a specialist interest in photography. It also attracted the British Museum’s social visitors – i.e. those who just pop in to have a look round the museum.

1.3 The exhibition had a big impact on visitor behaviour

Visitors to the exhibition were largely socially motivated, with ‘to see, to do’ as the main motivation for their visit. However, nearly half of exhibition visitors left with spiritual outcomes, meaning that they were able to move up the hierarchy during their visit.

Half of visitors expecting to enter the exhibition and browse around until something caught their attention were converted to searchers/researchers, meaning that they became much more engaged through the course of the exhibition.

1.4 *The Past From Above* was an enjoyable informative experience

95% of visitors to *The Past From Above* had an enjoyable experience in the exhibition, with 84% of visitors feeling they had gained some knowledge or understanding of other world cultures during their visit. Just over half of visitors said they felt inspired by the exhibition.

1.5 The exhibition content was visually stunning

Many visitors commented on the beauty of the photography and praised Georg Gerster for his dedication to a project that has spanned 40 years of his life. There was also praise for the use of artefacts alongside the photography.

The layout of the exhibition provoked mixed responses, with some visitors claiming the high positioning of photographs caused glare from the lights, whilst others felt this was a good feature for when the exhibition was busy.

2 *The Past From Above*

The Past From Above: through the lens of Georg Gerster was a paying exhibition featuring over 40 years of the Swiss photographer's work in capturing aerial images of the world's greatest archaeological and heritage sites.

Featuring stunning photographs of locations across the globe, the exhibition also displayed relevant objects from the museum's permanent collection, including a Buddhist goddess and a stone hand axe, to give further insight into the ways of past civilisations.

The exhibition ran from 16 November 2006 until 11 February 2007 in Room 35 at the British Museum.

3 What we did

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre was commissioned to carry out a summative evaluation of *The Past From Above*. The research objectives were:

- Who visited the exhibition?
- What were their motivations for visiting?
- Why did people not attend?
- What did visitors get out of the exhibition?
- How aware were visitors of the accompanying programme?
- Who used the accompanying programme?
- Did visitors use and like the exhibition guide?
- How effective was the marketing and communications?

The following research techniques were used in this evaluation:

3.1 Visitor surveys

Surveys were conducted as people left the exhibition in order to ascertain visitor profile demographics, motivations for visiting, levels of awareness and reaction to the exhibition. 126 surveys were carried out with visitors to the exhibition.

3.2 Rolling research

Questions were added to the visitor surveys we are currently carrying out as part of the British Museum's rolling research. These questions helped to ascertain why some British Museum attenders did not go to *The Past From Above*, and to what extent museum visitors were aware of the exhibition.

3.3 Mystery visits

Qualitative research was carried out through a series of mystery visits involving people who have attended other photography exhibitions in London but are not current attenders at the British Museum.

These people were encouraged to visit *The Past From Above* exhibition and then take part in a depth interview. This enabled us to establish their reasons for not attending in the first place, their awareness of any publicity, and their subsequent thoughts about the museum as a whole and more specifically *The Past From Above* exhibition.

4 Visitor Profile

Visitor Profile

	The Past From Above	Word Into Art	Michelangelo	British Museum
Base	126	251	183	2517
Knowledge of subject areas				
Specialist	13%	15%	14%	14%
General	52%	45%	59%	69%
Little/ none	34%	40%	27%	17%
Origin				
London	31%	39%	38%	12%
Elsewhere in UK	22%	15%	27%	15%
Overseas	47%	45%	35%	73%

There was a high number of first time visitors

The Past From Above exhibition attracted a high proportion of first time visitors compared to other exhibitions at the British Museum

A large proportion of these first time visitors can be split into two groups – tourists who came to see the British Museum as a whole and ended up being attracted by *The Past From Above* publicity, and people with a specialist knowledge of photography who live in the UK but are not usually interested in what the British Museum has to offer.

Most visitors had general knowledge of the subject areas covered

52% of visitors described themselves as having some general knowledge of the subject in the exhibition, with a further 34% having little or no knowledge. Only 13% professed to possessing a specialist knowledge – a figure that is consistent with past exhibitions and the British Museum as a whole.

Over half of exhibition visitors were from the UK

22% of visitors to this exhibition came from rest of the UK outside. 31% of visitors lived in London – considerably higher than the British Museum norm.

Unsurprisingly, overseas visitors generally did not consider *The Past From Above* a reason for visiting the museum.

The ethnic origin of visitors matched the whole museum

The ethnic origin of visitors to *The Past From Above* was extremely similar to the British Museum as a whole.

***The Past From Above* visitors were older than usual**

There was a high proportion of older visitors than is usually expected at the British Museum and its temporary exhibitions.

The age demographic for *The Past From Above* was more similar to those found at the paying *Michelangelo Drawings* than the free *Word Into Art* exhibition.

5 Motivations for visiting

5.1 Hierarchy of motivation

We have identified four key drivers for visiting museums:

See museum as a...	Have this driver...	And they seek this from a visit..
CHURCH	SPIRITUAL	Creative stimulation and quiet contemplation, they see museums as an opportunity to escape and recharge their batteries, food for the soul
SPA	EMOTIONAL	May have a personal connection to the subject matter, want to see facinating objects in an inspiring setting, seek ambience, deep sensory and intellectual experience
ARCHIVE	INTELLECTUAL	Keen to encourage their children's or their own interest and knowledge, may have professional interest in the subject, seek a journey of discovery, to find out new things
ATTRACTION	SOCIAL	See museums as an enjoyable place to spend time with friends and family, seek ease of access and orientation, good facilities and services, welcoming staff

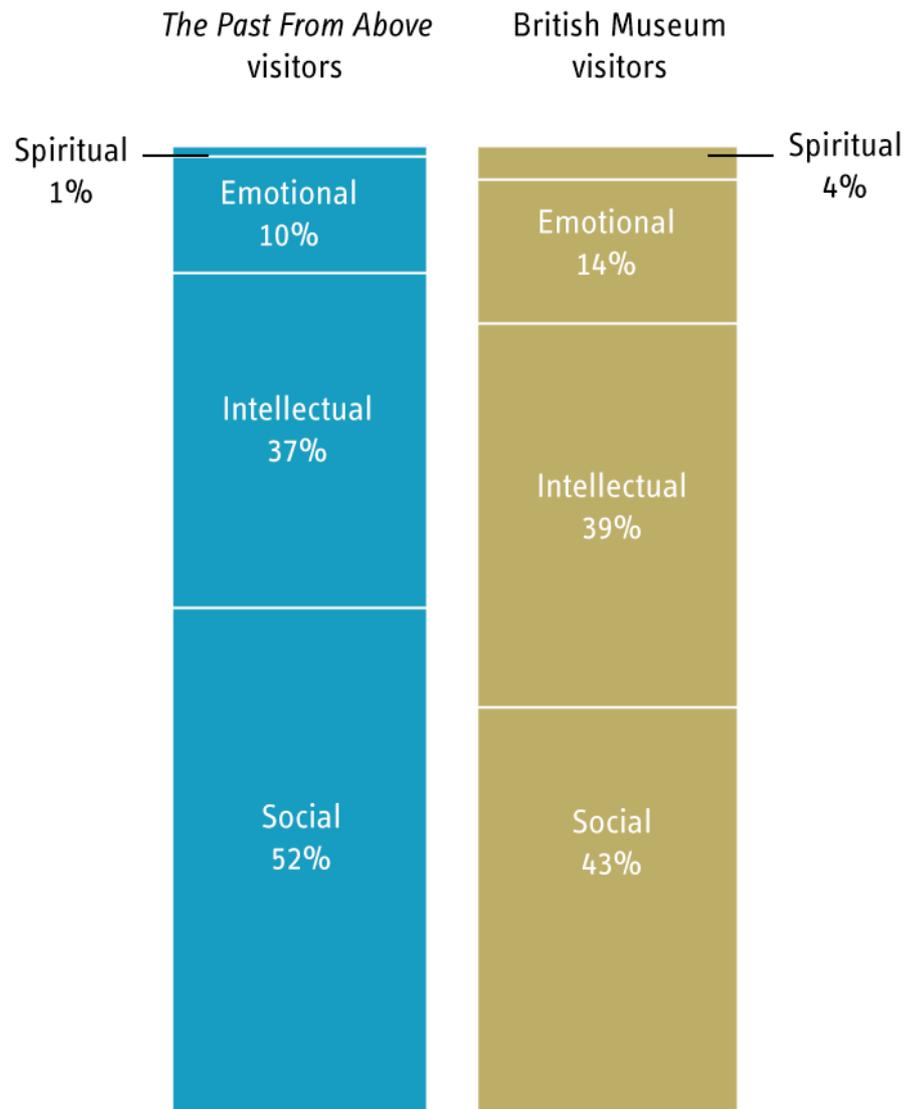
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These motives form a hierarchy: as visitors move up from Social through to Spiritual motivations they become more increasingly engaged with the museum and its collections. The further up the hierarchy they reach, the more fulfilling and rewarding visitors report their visit to be. That doesn't mean that Social visits should be any less valued, it simply means that they result in lower levels of engagement with the content of the museum.

At each level of the hierarchy visitors have different needs and they are only able to move up the hierarchy if their needs at the previous level have been met. The suggestion is not that visitors are forced or even led up this hierarchy, but that they get the opportunity to engage at the deepest level they wish to.

5.2 Main motivation

Using a series of statements on the exit survey we asked *The Past From Above* visitors to identify the main motivation for their visit to the British Museum that day. The diagram below shows the main motivation of visitors to *The Past From Above* compared to all visitors to the British Museum.



This model shows that *The Past From Above* visitors were more socially motivated than British Museum visitors, with slightly less spiritual, emotional and intellectual motivations. These visitors may have come to the whole museum with social motivations – i.e. they wanted to just pop in and have a look round, and then they were attracted and converted by *The Past From Above* publicity.

The key element to understanding *The Past From Above* visitors may not be in the high numbers of socially motivated visitors, but rather the low numbers of spiritual, emotional and intellectually motivated visitors. These groups help make up the core temporary exhibition audience at the British Museum, but were conspicuous by their absence from *The Past From Above*, thereby helping to explain why the exhibition did not reach its targets.

The motivations of *The Past From Above* visitors are very different from those attending other temporary exhibitions at the British Museum. Only 34% of visitors to *Word Into Art* were socially motivated, with 47% being intellectually motivated to visit. The previous paying exhibition – *Michelangelo Drawings* – had 60% intellectually motivated visitors and only 19% socially motivated.

Intentional visitors to the museum were much more likely to be intellectually motivated than incidental visitors. 40% of intentional visitors stated intellectual motivations as their main reason for visiting, compared to just 23% amongst incidental visitors, who were overwhelmingly socially motivated.

5.3 Specific motivations

The chart below shows the top five specific motivations for visitors to *The Past From Above* and compares them with the same statements for all British Museum visitors.

	The Past From Above	British Museum	% Difference
To see, to do	59%	44%	+15%
Self-improvement	53%	58%	-5%
Architecture	49%	31%	+18%
One of the major attractions in London	48%	57%	-9%
Personal interest in the subject	39%	39%	0%

Three of the top five motivators for *The Past From Above* are the top three motivators for British Museum visitors (To see, to do, major attraction and self-improvement). However, the percentage differences between the two visitor groups are significant, with ‘to see, to do’ and ‘architecture’ much more popular motivators for *The Past From Above* visitors.

This represents the high number of incidental visitors who attended the exhibition after being converted on site. In many cases they visited the museum with mainly social motivations, but were attracted by the themes of *The Past From Above*.

5.4 Reasons for making a visit

From a series of options provided, visitors were asked to identify the main reason for their visit to the exhibition. The most popular reason was 'To see beautiful photographs', which was chosen by 60% of visitors. Other popular responses were as follows:

- To find out more about archaeology 18%
- To find out more about ancient civilisations 12%

6 Visitor Engagement

6.1 Meaning making

Through our qualitative work into how visitors select and engage with objects in the museum environment, we have identified four modes of visitor behaviour. These modes classify how the visitor selects objects to explore and what kind of interpretation they need to make meaning from objects.

Hierarchy of Meaning making

Mode	Object selection	Needs
RESEARCHER	Specific objects/ collections	Focused, specialist museum visitors, select objects themselves based on their in-depth knowledge of the subject area, want access to expert information
SEARCHER	Classification/ collection	Have good general understanding of the topic, consume all the information available in the museum on that subject, want museum to select and present objects
FOLLOWER	Narrative theme	Require a narrative explanation, want the museum to select and present objects which illustrate themes to follow
BROWSER	Random objects	Select objects by browsing the exhibition, will wander until they find a 'gateway' object that catches their attention, require explanation of their selected objects

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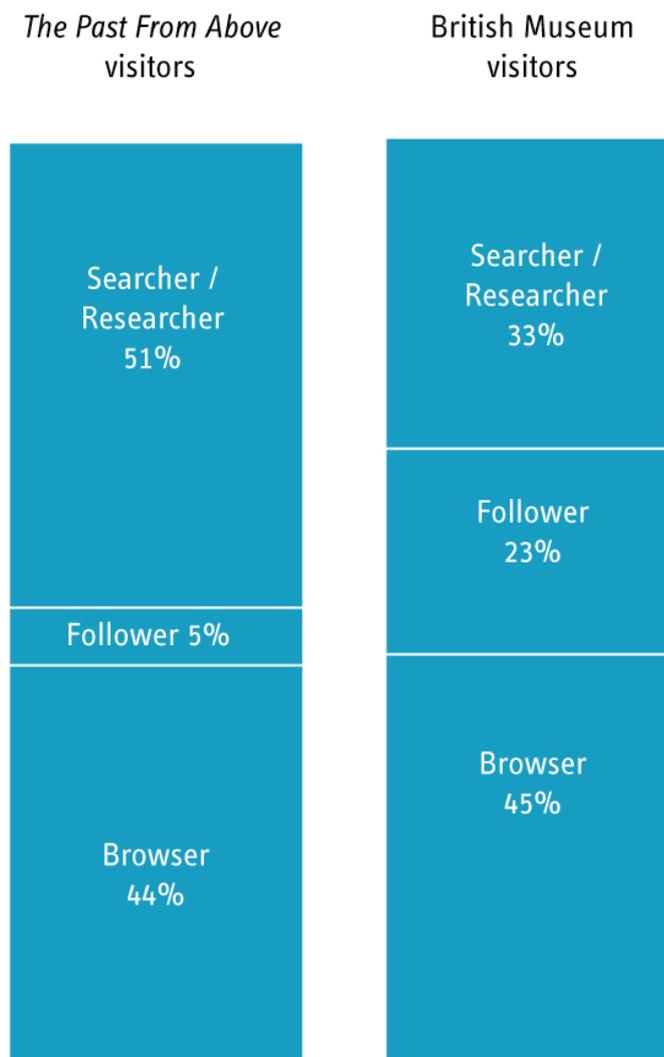
The four modes form a hierarchy, with each level of the hierarchy representing an increased level of engagement with objects. It is possible for visitors to move upwards through the modes of behaviour – the modes can be seen as stages in the development of a visitor’s meaning making skills.

Visitors who are continually Browsing an exhibition can only making fleeting connections with a limited number of objects. If the museum is committed to developing visitors’ levels of engagement it should seek to encourage visitors to develop their meaning making skills by selecting objects and offering interpretation that propels visitors up the hierarchy and engages them pro-actively.

6.2 Entry to the exhibition

Visitors were asked a question on the exit survey to identify their entry mode; that is how they behaved on entry to *The Past From Above* exhibition. The results are illustrated below and compared with all British Museum visitors.

Entry mode



This model shows that visitors entered the exhibition in a far more motivated way than normal British Museum visitors, whilst there were a significantly lower percentage of followers than usual.

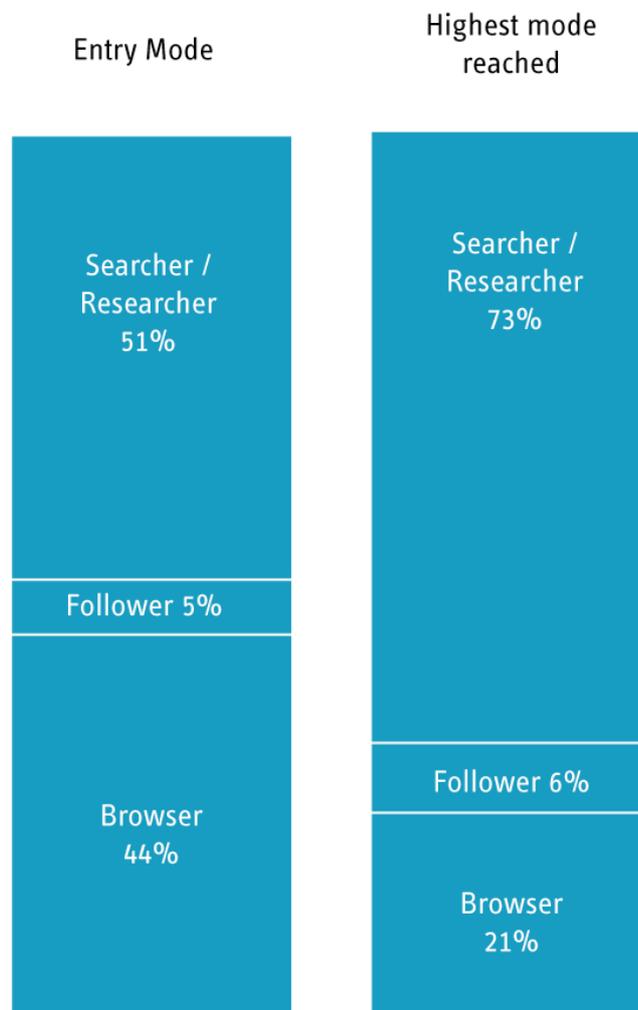
Those who intended to visit the exhibition were much more motivated on entry with 61% being searchers or researchers, whilst 58% of people who stated that the exhibition wasn't the reason behind their visit were browsers.

This shows that there was a clear split between incidental and intentional visitors – people who came to the museum with social motivations were then converted on site and attended the exhibition expecting to browse around and look at a few objects. Conversely, intentional visitors came to the museum wanting to see the exhibition with emotional and intellectual motivations and were keen to look at every object in a searcher/researcher mode.

6.3 In the exhibition

Visitors were then asked what their behaviour actually was in the exhibition. The chart below compares their behaviour at the start of the exhibition and the highest mode visitors engaged at.

Entry mode and highest mode reached:



This model shows that a large proportion of visitors who entered the exhibition expecting to browse around, actually became much more engaged through the course of the exhibition.

This is a high proportion of visitors reaching the searcher/researcher mode – 62% of visitors to *Michelangelo Drawings* reached this mode, and 58% at *Power & Taboo*.

We spent a lot of time in there reading Mystery Visitor

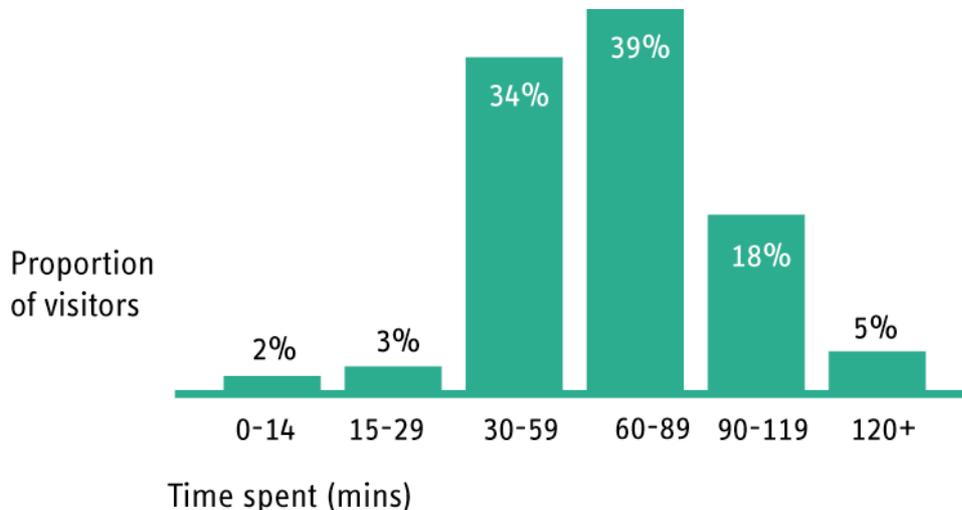
Usually when I go to an exhibition I don't read for that long but I was really interested in what was going on so I read quite a lot Mystery Visitor

6.4 Dwell

Time spent in the exhibition

The graph below shows the length of time visitors spent in *The Past From Above* exhibition. Analysing time spent is a useful indicator of engagement as the more engaged a visitor becomes, the longer a visitor is likely to spend in an exhibition.

Time spent



Only 5% of visitors spent less than half an hour in the exhibition, with the majority of visitors (79%) spending between 30 and 90 minutes there. Almost a quarter of visitors spent more than an hour and a half in *The Past From Above*.

The majority of visitors (78%) stayed in the exhibition as long as they expected, with 15% spending longer than they thought. Only 7% of visitors spent less time in the exhibition than they had originally expected.

The maximum time spent in the exhibition was 2 hours, with 5% of visitors taking this amount of time. The least time spent was just 3 minutes. The average for exhibition visitors was just over an hour at 62 minutes. This is considerably more than the average time visitors spent at the *Word Into Art* exhibition (38 minutes), but less than the 86 minutes visitors spent at *Michelangelo Drawings*. Visitors at another paying exhibition - *Forgotten Empire* - spent an average of 64 minutes, showing that an hour or more is a typical amount of time for visitors to spend at a paying temporary exhibition.

7 Reactions to Interpretation and Display

7.1 Interpretation

Visitors were satisfied with the amount of information

93% of visitors said that they were either very or quite satisfied with the amount of information in the exhibition. Only 2% of all visitors were not very satisfied, and no one was not at all satisfied.

Right amount of info for the photographs, not too much or too little Visitor survey

The tone of information and the language used was at the right level

48% of visitors were very satisfied and 47% quite satisfied with the tone of the information and the language used in *The Past From Above*. Levels of satisfaction were highest amongst intentional visitors, with 97% very or quite satisfied, whilst incidental visitors to the museum were slightly less enthused, with only 87% very or quite satisfied.

Very accessible – no prior knowledge of archaeology needed Visitor survey

The themes and narrative of the exhibition were presented in the right way

92% of visitors were very or quite satisfied with the themes or narrative of the exhibition, with only 2% declaring themselves not very satisfied.

I was quite impressed actually ... with the way it was set out ... and it was quite easy to find your way round Mystery Visitor

Excellent layout Visitor survey

7.2 Display

Visitors appreciated the use of artefacts

The use of artefacts from the British Museum's permanent collection helped give context to some of the images and were generally appreciated by visitors.

Delightful the way it is laid out – the combination of quotations and facts and also artefacts Visitor survey

I took my 12 year old daughter with me and she was quite fascinated by some of [the artefacts] as well **Mystery Visitor**

Nice mix of artefacts and pictures **Visitor survey**

The images themselves were visually stunning

Many exhibition visitors commented upon the actual photography itself with much praise directed towards the photographer, and the lengths he went to in order to capture these images.

The photos themselves were of a stunningly high quality **Visitor survey**

Fantastic photography **Visitor survey**

The photographer's dedication is amazing **Visitor survey**

I'm amazed at the photographer's achievement, working on a project that took so long to achieve **Visitor survey**

I was just struck by the imagery ... sometimes it is like looking at a piece of art **Mystery Visitor**

The height of the photographs divided opinion

Some visitors felt that the photographs were positioned too high in the exhibition and were therefore subject to adverse lighting conditions.

The pictures were high and occasionally badly lit **Visitor survey**

Some pictures too high up - some of the light reflected badly on pictures **Visitor survey**

Other visitors appreciated the high positioning of the photographs as it meant the images were easy to view at all times.

Height of photos was good as you could see them when it was busy **Visitor survey**

The exhibition was often crowded

When the space was crowded some visitors felt that there was not enough room to fully appreciate every aspect of the exhibition. This was a sentiment that was also voiced at the *Michelangelo Drawings* exhibition.

It was too crowded with people **Visitor survey**

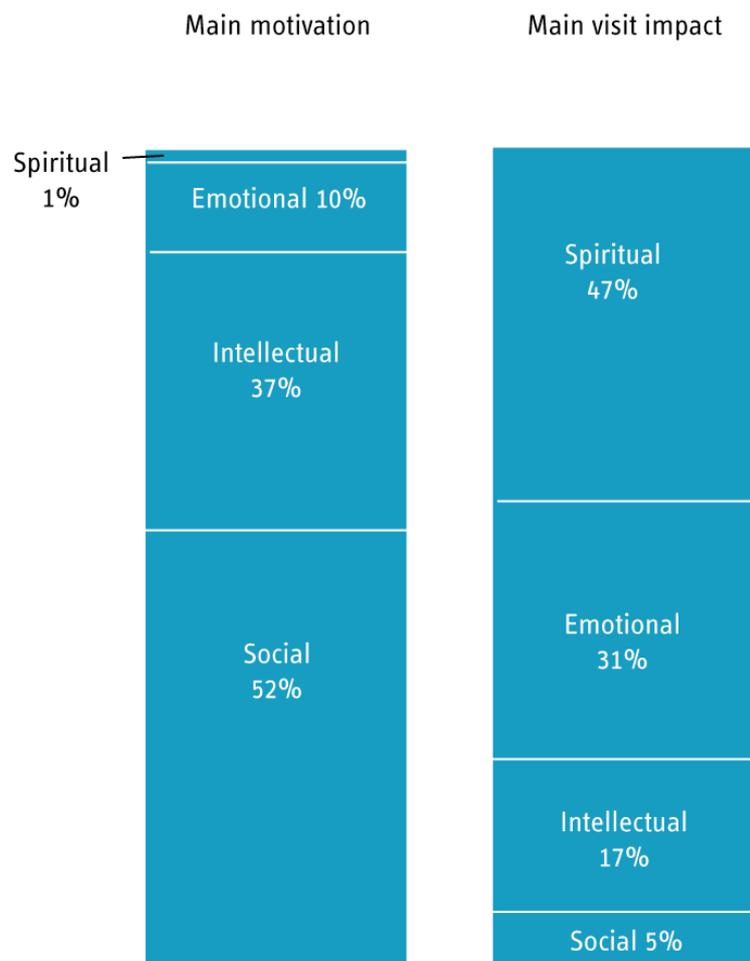
It was a bit crowded in there **Visitor survey**

8 Visit Impact

8.1 Impact

Visitors were asked to identify a series of statements to say what they felt they had got out of their visit to *The Past From Above*. The model below compares the main motivation of visitors attending the exhibition with what they actually felt they had got out of the visit, through the highest level of engagement they reached. This gives us a measure of to what extent expectations were met.

Overall impact



Although visitors' social and intellectual motivations were met in this exhibition, *The Past From Above* then went on to have a huge unexpected emotional and spiritual impact on its visitors as they moved up the hierarchy of needs and motivations.

I wasn't really sure if I'd be interested, but in fact I actually was **Mystery Visitor**

8.2 Impact on specific motivations

It is possible to measure the impact of a visit by looking at the specific motivations of a visit. This can be seen in the chart below which compares pre-visit expectations and post-visit outcomes – thereby showing which motivators had the largest impact on a visit.

	Pre-visit	Post-visit	% Difference
To see, to do	59%	66%	+7%
Self-improvement	53%	55%	+2%
Architecture	49%	54%	+5%
One of the major attractions in London	48%	59%	+11%
Personal interest in the subject	39%	46%	+7%
To visit the shop / café	30%	56%	+26%
To gain insight into the past	25%	32%	+7%
Nice place to spend time with friends and family	21%	24%	+3%
To see fascinating, awe-inspiring things	19%	28%	+9%
To see beautiful things in an attractive setting	17%	32%	+15%
Better understanding of other people / cultures	16%	23%	+7%
Peaceful contemplation	13%	27%	+14%
Academic / professional interest	11%	12%	+1%
To experience what the past was like	10%	28%	+18%
Stimulate creativity	9%	17%	+8%
Encourage children's interest in art/history/culture	7%	10%	+3%
Emotionally moving experience	4%	11%	+7%
Escape / recharge batteries	3%	20%	+17%
Personal connection or identity	2%	5%	+3%

8.3 Impact on future behaviour

Survey respondents were also asked if *The Past From Above* had affected the way they would use the British Museum in the future. Visitors said they would be more likely to:

- Visit the British Museum in general 38%
- Visit British Museum special exhibitions 38%
- Use the British Museum website 30%
- Find out more about the British Museum 29%
- Use the British Museum study room 17%
- Use the internet 16%

The highest responses were for visiting special exhibitions and the Museum generally, but these percentages are lower than would be expected. At the *Word Into Art* exhibition, 45% of attenders said they were more likely to go and find out more about the Museum in general, with 42% more likely to go to find out about special exhibitions. The *Michelangelo Drawings* exhibition's percentages for these questions were 70% and 63% respectively.

These results could be due to the British Museum's permanent and other temporary collections differing hugely from *The Past From Above* exhibition. Therefore, many visitors who enjoyed this exhibition may have felt that this was the only opportunity in the British Museum to see photography.

However, the mystery visitors were impressed with both the exhibition and the British Museum as a whole and said they were likely to make a return visit.

When I next have a day off I will probably go [back] Mystery Visitor

I definitely would go back there. Afterwards myself and my daughter had a quick look round [the Museum] and we said we would definitely go back there and have a look Mystery Visitor

I will certainly be open to going back again to see an exhibition like this or something similar Mystery Visitor

9 Outcomes

Most visitors gained new knowledge

84% of visitors to *The Past From Above* slightly or strongly agreed that they had gained new knowledge and understanding of other world cultures from their visit. 34% of first time visitors to the British Museum strongly agreed with the statement, compared with 27% of repeat visitors.

Drawing attention to things I was not aware of before Visitor survey

The British Museum represents world cultures

Over half of visitors felt that the exhibition had helped them understand more about the British Museum representing world cultures.

Visitors were curious about the things they saw

The vast majority of people felt curious about the photographs and artefacts in the exhibition, and although the percentage dropped amongst incidental visitors and London-based visitors, neither had less than 70% who agreed with the statement.

***The Past From Above* visitors had an overwhelmingly enjoyable experience**

Over half of exhibition visitors strongly agreed that they had had an enjoyable visit that day, with a further 38% slightly agreeing. No one even slightly or strongly disagreed with the statement, with once again the strongest agreement coming from UK visitors from outside London.

I really enjoyed it Mystery Visitor

It was fantastic – really, really worth going to Mystery Visitor

Half of visitors were inspired

53% of visitors felt inspired after their visit. Only 5% of visitors actively disagreed with this statement.

Creativity levels were not so high

Less than half of visitors felt more creative as a result of their visit, with the majority (43%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This may be due to the specialised nature of the photographic techniques used in the exhibition.

Tolerance towards other people and their cultures remained unchanged

64% of *The Past From Above* visitors neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt more tolerant towards other people and other people's culture and ideas. Only 26% agreed with the statement, compared to 8% who disagreed with this. Disagreement was highest amongst overseas visitors, 14% of whom slightly disagreed.

A sense of huge respect for what civilisations can achieve and the amazing projects that were undertaken many millennia ago Visitor survey

The exhibition motivated people

Almost half of attendees said that they felt motivated to take up archaeology, history or photography as a result of the exhibition. 45% of first time visitors slightly agreed with the statement, compared to 29% of repeat visitors. Almost three quarters of UK visitors outside of London felt motivated - nearly treble the percentage of London visitors. 40% of people neither agreed nor disagreed. This is mirrored by the high numbers of visitors who left the exhibition with spiritual outcomes.

Made me want to visit these places Visitor survey

People were moved by *The Past From Above*

There was an equal percentage (45%) of people who felt moved by the exhibition, as those who neither agreed nor disagreed. Over half of repeat visitors confessed to feeling moved. Once again this matches the high levels of spiritual outcomes highlighted earlier in this report.

Superb to see the world from a different angle - humbling Visitor survey

Half of visitors feel differently about the subjects covered

Exactly 50% of survey respondents agreed to feeling differently about the subjects covered in *The Past From Above* - a figure that rises to 67% amongst first time visitors.

Made me realise the accomplishments of previous civilisations Visitor survey

It changed the way I think about the world Visitor survey

I never thought of archaeology as being so awesome Visitor survey

10 Conclusions

Visitor profile

The exhibition attracted a slighter older profile than usual, with over a quarter of attenders over the age of 55. The ethnic profile however was consistent with the whole museum. More than half of the visitors to *The Past From Above* were from the UK

Understanding the visitor profile for this exhibition relies on not only identifying who attended *The Past From Above*, but more importantly who did not. The exhibition successfully attracted a specialist group of people interested in photography who had largely not visited the museum before. This is seen in the high numbers of New Intenders. The exhibition also attracted socially motivated visitors to the British Museum who were unaware of *The Past From Above* before their visit, and went to have a look around the museum and see what caught their attention. The on site publicity was crucial in converting these visitors to attend the exhibition.

Conspicuous by their absence were the spiritual, intellectual and emotionally motivated audiences that make up the core temporary exhibition audience. These visitors were not attracted to the themes of the exhibition – they do not attend temporary exhibitions at the British Museum to view photography.

Why did people not attend?

The mystery visitors for this exhibition had not attended the British Museum in the last two years, and were generally unaware of the museum and its exhibitions. They were surprised to see photography exhibitions there as they held negative preconceptions that the British Museum was not so contemporary.

Some British Museum visitors who did not attend the exhibition felt that the exhibition was not really directed at them.

The exhibition motivated and engaged people

Over half of visitors entered the exhibition with social motivations, 37% had intellectual motivations, 10% had emotional motivations and only 1% were spiritually motivated. Comparable exhibitions attracted fewer socially motivated visitors: 34% at *Word Into Art* and only 19% at *Michelangelo Drawings*.

The majority of socially and intellectually motivated visitors left the exhibition with emotional and spiritual outcomes. Visitors were also converted from browsing around the exhibition on entry, to becoming searchers and researchers by the end.

Visitors enjoyed the exhibition and gained new knowledge

There was an extremely positive response to the exhibition from its attenders. The overwhelming majority agreed that it had been an enjoyable experience with 84% claiming they had gained new knowledge of other world cultures.



Morris Hargreaves McIntyre is a creative and intelligent arts management consultancy working in the interests of audience and organisational development.

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