

Lucy could join ranks of top museum draws

■ 940 daily visits on average tops predictions by nearly 200

By **ALLAN TURNER**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

With more than 53,000 tickets sold and the lucrative holiday season yet to come, Lucy — the 3.2 million-year-old skeletal remains of an early human ancestor — may prove to be one of the most popular exhibits ever mounted by the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

As of Monday morning, more than 43,200 visitors had viewed the exhibit, which opened Aug. 31, and an additional 10,045 had purchased advance tickets for later viewings. Museum spokeswoman Latha Thomas said average daily attendance stood at 940 — almost 200 more than museum officials had anticipated.

If such trends continue, Thomas said, Lucy may join last year's *Body Worlds 3: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies*, a creative presentation of polymer-infused cadavers created by German scientist Gunther von Hagens, in the golden circle of the museum's top attractions. The wildly popular exhibit drew more than 500,000 visitors, roughly doubling the attendance of the next-closest contender.

The Houston display of Lucy marks the first time the Australopithecus hominid fossil has been exhibited outside Ethiopia, where it was discovered 33 years ago. The exhibit brought acclaim for the Houston science museum, which is among the most visited museums in the nation, but also criticism.

Famed paleontologist Richard Leakey accused the museum of using Lucy as a "prostitute" to sell exhibit tickets, and others worried that the fossil might be damaged while on tour.

Museum officials have assured that special measures have been taken to safeguard the fossil.

"I do think it's affected attendance positively," Thomas said of the controversy. "Most people realize that this is their one chance to see the original fossil. This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Although no longer believed to be the world's oldest hominid fossil, Lucy, standing a mere 3 feet 8 inches tall, continues to fascinate the scientific world. Lucy, whose body likely resembled a chimpanzee, clearly walked upright. Her small brain cavity undercut the scientific belief that a large cranium would be the first truly human characteristic to appear in the fossil record.

"Lucy is a historic first," Thomas said of the exhibit. "Bringing Lucy to Houston was an accomplishment not just for the Houston Museum of Natural Science but for the city of Houston and the state of Texas."

Appearing through an agreement with the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Lucy is accompanied by about 100 artifacts of ancient Africa.

Thomas said visits during the coming holiday season likely will make Lucy one of the museum's top exhibits. Also contributing will be school tours, which have accounted for

up to 65 percent of attendance of some other exhibitions.

Last year, more than half a million people viewed the *Body Worlds* exhibit, which featured, among others, corpses posed as poker players and gymnasts. Six weeks into the exhibit, average daily attendance exceeded 2,300 — more than double the daily traffic for Lucy at the same point. *Body Worlds* closed in August 2006 with an around-the-clock showing.

Six weeks into its run, the second-ranking draw, *Titanic: The Artifact Exhibit*, drew an average of 1,390 people a day.

With more than 3 million paid admissions in 2006, the Houston museum was the nation's third-most-popular. For more than a decade, it has been among the nation's five-best-patronized museums.

BY THE NUMBERS

Houston Museum of Natural Science has been among the nation's most popular for the last decade. Here's why:

- **518,652:** Attendees at *Body Worlds 3* (2006)
- **259,132:** *Titanic: The Artifact Exhibit* (2002)
- **184,834:** *Saint Peter and the Vatican: The Legacy of the Popes* (2003)
- **160,003:** *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (2005)
- **152,360:** *Kremlin Gold: 1,000 Years of Russian Gems and Jewels* (2000)
- **106,760:** *Ben Franklin: In Search of a Better World* (2006)

