

Narratives of ageing and ‘the telling of life stories’

Using the University of Melbourne’s cultural collections
in pedagogy and research on ageing

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I’ve become more and more interested in history as I’ve got older, which is, I think a very common attribute of older people. (70+ visitor to the Ian Potter Museum of Art)¹

[I go to museums] generally wanting to know about things, wanting to know about what other people have done, how they did it, when they did it, why they did it, and the evidence of what they’ve done. (80+ visitor to the Ian Potter Museum of Art)²

We have stories and we are stories. ... Using a narrative lens gives us a glimpse of the ‘inside’ of ageing—the subjective experience of life and time, of how it feels. (Lena Gan, program director, Master of Ageing, University of Melbourne)³

Introduction: narratives, ageing, and visual and material culture

In this article I report on my recent experience in three interlocking areas of interest: cultural objects and museums, health humanities and narrative medicine, and older people as museum visitors and healthcare recipients. I explore some pedagogical and research opportunities that

have arisen at this nexus, in the specific context of the University of Melbourne’s cultural collections.

The first area of interest is the incorporation of the university’s art collections, using object-based learning strategies, into three subjects in the university’s new, fully online, Master of Ageing program. Course materials were created over a period of 18 months through 2015–16, and are now delivered to online cohorts. The second involves a multidisciplinary research project that emerged from these pedagogical contexts and from a growing interest in the opportunities for museums to become involved in questions of ageing. This project—The Role of Cultural Institutions in Facilitating an Age-Integrated Society—seed-funded through the university’s Hallmark Ageing Research Initiative (HARI),⁴ examines how far museums around the world have come in working with older populations and attracting them as visitors—whether through programming, physical settings, co-creation, active participation or research—and proposes some specific steps towards better harnessing the opportunities of cultural institutions to help meet the challenges posed by ageing populations. The third of the interlocking areas of interest is

the experiences of older people in the art museum, which we explored by interviewing older visitors to some of the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne, Shepparton Art Museum in regional Victoria, and Melbourne Museum. In this article I present the discussion chronologically, as I experienced it, using a storytelling approach that follows the narrative principles that underlie the health humanities.

Visual and material culture have long played a powerful role in allowing us to explore, articulate and reinterpret our life experiences—whether we are artists or makers, museum-goers or online viewers, curators or educators. These forms of culture help to shape our collective and personal values and social understandings. Objects of visual and material culture can open a door to a vast range of intellectual and emotional sources, including social relations, political power, and cultural beliefs and practices, through time. When we encounter artworks and artefacts, we may be led, via the processes of observation and interpretation, to form new and possibly unexpected ways of conceptualising our own life experiences.⁵ We encounter stimuli that can confirm the validity of old narratives, or prompt the creation

of new ones, both personal and social. The hugely successful BBC radio series and British Museum book and exhibition *A history of the world in 100 objects*, whose international touring itinerary included the Western Australian Museum and the National Museum of Australia in 2016–17, is an outstanding example of how museums can capitalise on audiences' fascination with material culture as a way to unlock the past and understand the present. *A history of the world in 100 objects* has captured the attention of millions of people in audio, literary and physical environments since its launch in 2010.⁶ The concept celebrates the distinctive power of the things that we invent and make (whether they are utilitarian or aesthetic objects), and the stories they tell.

The close association between cultural artefacts and storytelling is a core tenet of the object-based learning that has become increasingly common in many disciplines at the University of Melbourne. At the Ian Potter Museum of Art ('the Potter'), the power of visual and material culture to prompt narrative thinking by linking internal and external stories has been usefully harnessed across a variety of disciplines, including information technology, veterinary science, environmental science, and

business studies. A particularly successful program, Visual Arts in Health Education (VAHE), has emerged through collaboration between Potter staff and a number of academics in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. The program includes pedagogical engagement with visual and material culture by students enrolled in courses in population health, mental health nursing, medicine, dentistry, optometry, audiology, physiotherapy, and ageing.⁷

These pedagogical strategies can be grouped under the heading 'health humanities', which has been defined as 'an inter- and multidisciplinary field that explores contexts, experiences and critical and conceptual issues in medicine and health care'.⁸ Methods that originated in the humanities are applied to problems in biomedicine, which are thus seen from a psychosocial perspective. Narrative medicine is a subset of health humanities that places stories and storytelling at the centre of human experience, creating a context in which to explore and support the health and wellbeing of individuals, and of society more broadly. In health education, narratives can be a useful tool for stimulating students' moral imagination, increasing their awareness of their

emotional reactions to ethical issues, and improving their capacity to recognise the moral dimensions of clinical experiences.⁹ The transfer that allows learners to extrapolate from narratives explored in visual art contexts to other disciplinary ways of thinking comes naturally to programs formulated in the framework of the health humanities and narrative medicine. Pedagogical encounters with visual and material culture can facilitate moral reflection, providing new opportunities for students to gain insights into broader and more complex contexts. Rebecca Garden writes that experiencing narratives through the arts establishes 'foundations for empathetic understanding, as well as a respect for patients' authority, by raising questions about assumptions, stereotypes, language, and the nature of representation itself'.¹⁰

My research in the VAHE program, undertaken over three years (2014–16) in collaboration with Associate Professor Clare Delany (whose work focuses on clinical education pedagogy and practice, and clinical ethics) has demonstrated the success of a narrative approach framed by an encounter with visual and material culture. In the final year of the ethics curriculum in the graduate-entry Doctor of

Physiotherapy program, students were encouraged to visit exhibitions at the Potter and choose an artwork as a focus, in order to stimulate a more active and engaged exploration of ethics in healthcare. Students wrote essay-based assignments to demonstrate their understanding of ethics, including reflections on the experience of using artworks as a trigger. The success of the approach was demonstrated through our thematic and content analysis of the resulting essays. We found that this use of visual and material culture led to imaginative, emotional and conceptual thinking about ethics and clinical experience (both past and future).¹¹

Integrating arts and cultural materials into online subjects in the Master of Ageing

It was clear in our work in physiotherapy, as well as in other programs running in VAHE, that exposure to the university's cultural collections and exhibitions opened up a unique opportunity for many students. Given the success of the VAHE program, I was approached in 2015 by the designers of the new, fully online Master of Ageing degree, to find ways to integrate the university's cultural collections into some of the subjects, in order to

enrich the students' experience in a health humanities approach.

The Master of Ageing is an innovative course that brings together leading experts from many disciplines, schools and faculties for a creative and proactive analysis of the economic, social and political dimensions of ageing. It was officially launched in early 2016 as one of the first fully online postgraduate courses at the University of Melbourne. It has been designed to produce leaders and creative thinkers who can develop new approaches and policies that take a more positive and holistic view of ageing than has traditionally been the case. Created in response to global ageing populations, it is targeted at policy and planning professionals, entrepreneurs, managers, healthcare professionals and those working with ageing populations and workforces. It seeks to provide new lenses through which to view both the problems and the opportunities that this trend of ageing will bring. This includes embracing ideas and methods originating outside the typical healthcare or gerontology contexts.

Through 2015 I worked with academics who were creating subjects in the Master of Ageing, to integrate learning and research opportunities using the University of Melbourne's cultural collections

into three subjects: Ethics of Ageing, End of Life Issues, and Shifting Paradigms in Ageing. One of the main difficulties (which was also an opportunity) afforded by the Ageing subjects was the method of delivery: a shift from a face-to-face encounter in a real museum to a fully online format. The opportunity was to make material culture-based experiences available to students who were not physically on campus, simultaneously exposing the university's cultural resources to a wider audience. The difficulty was to replicate the original museum experience effectively in the digital environment, but also to exploit the additional potential of online delivery. Working with the digital production team at Graduate Online Melbourne, we tried different approaches in each of the subjects, building on our growing knowledge of the best delivery methods as we went. These three subjects have been progressively offered to students since mid-2015.

Ethics of Ageing

Ethics of Ageing, created by Dr Dominique Martin (then a lecturer in health ethics), was the first Ageing subject to integrate visual and material culture. The core content that linked students to the art museum comprised two



Artist unknown (Anishinaabe, Wisconsin, USA),
Moccasins, late 19th century, deerskin, cloth,
braid, glass beads; each moccasin
9.5 × 9.5 × 26.0 cm approx. 1960.0543,
the Leonhard Adam Collection of
International Indigenous Culture, University
of Melbourne Art Collection.

videos. The first documented an enquiry-based learning encounter with *The queen* (1988), a painting by prominent Australian artist John Brack, in a small group discussion among professionals, including ethicists. This attempted to replicate in a digital medium the experience that many students have shared in small groups at the Potter, where they observe the visual content, describe it in detail, and debate interpretations with their colleagues.¹² A second video was created for students to watch after they had closely examined the painting online and watched the first video. This second video acted as the 'answer' to questions posed during the first video, and asked students to explicitly consider the parallels between exploration, interpretation and shared understanding in a group analysis of a complex artwork, and the process of ethical investigation in the world of healthcare. In the video, Dominique described to students how:

... to examine and address ethical dilemmas effectively, we need to understand human lives and values. Fortunately, doing ethics is not just about learning ethical theory and reading philosophical papers.

Particularly in the field of applied ethics, we can draw on our existing understanding and personal experience of human life and decision-making and on our existing skills in observing, investigating, and evaluating human lives and decisions, as we strive to examine and evaluate ethical issues more formally. Creating and experiencing art and various other forms of human culture like music, games, sport, and dance, are all ways in which humans have long sought to make sense of their lives and to express their values.¹³

Through the videos, we wanted students to discover for themselves how the skills used in observing and interpreting art can resemble those used in ethical analysis and, further, how exploring visual and material culture may directly assist in analysing ethical issues.

Assessment involved a thematic exploration of ethics through art. Students were directed to choose one artwork or object reproduced by a digital image in the course materials. These represented a variety of cultures and materials: they included a photograph of a Wik Elder by Australian Indigenous artist Ricky Maynard, and a pair of moccasins

made in the 19th century by a member of the Anishinaabe tribe, USA, now held in the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture (illustrated above). Each object presented the students with different contexts and lenses through which to consider the ethics of ageing. As in the physiotherapy ethics program, the students' essays were of a high standard.

End of Life Issues

For the next Master of Ageing subject, End of Life Issues (created by bioethicist Dr Julian Koplin), we explored alternative means of digital delivery. These included the online webinar program Zoom, used by Graduate Online Melbourne, and use of both the university's digitised cultural resources and the online database *Artstor*, available through the University Library.¹⁴ As students progressed through three webinars over a number of weeks, we helped them build up their confidence in using the digitised cultural resources, concluding with an assignment. The first webinar took the form of an online, real-time group analysis and critique of the highly detailed photograph *Star City Casino (after Breughel)* (1998) by Anne Zahalka (illustrated opposite).¹⁵

Anne Zahalka, *Star City Casino (after Breughel)*, 1998, type C photograph, 123.0 × 152.7 cm. The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, acquired 2000. On loan to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne. © Copyright the artist.

The online discussion encouraged students to practise a number of skills and thinking strategies, including observation and description, self-reflexivity, group discussion, and discussing and analysing cross-cultural perspectives. Prompted by the photograph, students discussed ageing and agency in the context of gambling. They made comparisons with working or leisure environments that they had experienced in end-

of-life contexts. Ideas canvassed included addictive behaviours, poverty, disadvantage, public policy, architecture and commerce, environmental influences on behaviour, and demographics.

The second and third webinars used examples of visual and material culture in digital format, sourced from *Artstor*. This introduced students to art and material heritage from cultures around the world, and

throughout human history, while considering the ethics of end of life. Feedback from the students was positive, particularly in regard to their increased confidence in using digital content such as *Artstor*. We discussed how cultural resources such as these, easily accessible online, could be used in the workplace to communicate more effectively with other professionals or with clients, including older people.



Shifting Paradigms in Ageing

The third subject to integrate the university's cultural collections was the overtly interdisciplinary Shifting Paradigms in Ageing, created and led by Lena Gan, program director of the Master of Ageing. This subject also aimed to foster productive and innovative thinking, specifically the lateral and creative thinking that produces societal change. Students were introduced in the first week to the concepts of narrative gerontology. Lena described how this framework:

can help us move beyond viewing a person as a case, a client, a patient or a set of symptoms as the biomedical model would have us do. Every person has a rich and intricate life story and biographical ageing is just as complex as biological ageing. The condition of people's bodies is inseparable from their life stories. A person's behaviour and biological problems cannot be understood in a clinical vacuum but must be considered in tandem with their lives.¹⁶

The narrative underpinnings of Shifting Paradigms in Ageing fitted perfectly with our earlier experiences in integrating encounters with art and material culture into academic programs. However, the subject

content prompted us to take this a step further, and integrate real experiences and stories of older people encountering art and culture into the core content. This approach was supported by recent research into the value of museum-based encounters with objects for older people.¹⁷ To support the development of this approach, the University of Melbourne provided Lena with a Cultural and Public Engagement Initiative Grant in 2016.

One activity was called Postcards from the Potter. Each week, students examined a different artwork from the Potter's collections, and then digitally 'flipped' the image to read a matched quote that related to ageing, innovation, creativity, or life in general. Students wrote down their responses in reflective journals, or commented on the discussion board.

An important aspect of this subject was the creation of content by recording informal interviews with older visitors to museums, focusing on their interest in museums, art and creativity, and connections between these things and ageing. An edited version of these conversations formed a listening activity for students, called 'Potter conversationscape'. Using a portion of the Engagement Grant funds, I was able to visit cultural institutions in the UK that are

responding to the challenges and opportunities of ageing in society through innovative programming and public engagement. Interviews with staff at the Whitworth Art Gallery and at Manchester Museum, both part of the University of Manchester, were included in the final module of Shifting Paradigms, which explores the topic of creativity and ageing. Through specific examples of museums such as the Whitworth, or the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the module introduced students to the newly emerging role of leading museums around the world in promoting social inclusion and wellbeing for older people. Making social connections, and opportunities for exploring life stories, were frequent themes in the interviews with international museum staff about the value of museums for ageing populations. As Andrea Winn from Manchester Museum observed:

I think [you should see] ... Museums and galleries ... as social spaces. And they're great places for conversations. So whether it's using a new piece of artwork or an object from the collection ... you will always find something where there's a common interest or a point for discussion and dialogue.¹⁸

Research for Shifting Paradigms content revealed a new and growing area of research on the opportunities for museums presented by ageing populations. This includes Hamish Robertson's ground-breaking book *The caring museum: New models of engagement with ageing*, published in 2015, which brought together from around the world leading examples of museums that are proactively overcoming the hurdles and benefiting from the opportunities created by an ageing population and the particular needs of older visitors.¹⁹ Their responses range from volunteer programs for older citizens, co-production of exhibition content with communities of seniors, and outreach programs that take museum artefacts to hospitals and nursing homes, to in-house art-making workshops and dementia-specific programming.

Cultural institutions and an age-integrated society

As a direct result of our work integrating the university's cultural collections into aspects of the Master of Ageing, discussions led by Lena Gan with colleagues interested in the field of ageing and museums consolidated into a multidisciplinary research concept in early 2016. A small research team was formed, bringing together experts in

cultural artefacts, archaeology and curation, architecture and urban planning, cultural studies and history, gerontology and social policy, education, visual communication and design, cultural institutions, and not-for-profit arts organisations, to explore the role of cultural institutions in fostering an age-integrated society. Led by archaeologist and curator Dr Andrew Jamieson, the team was granted seed funding by HARI to launch the research in mid-2016, in a proof-of-concept project that aims to explore how cultural institutions can play a stronger role in responding to the phenomenon of ageing populations.²⁰ The longer-term aim is to seek Australian Research Council funding for more extensive research that will provide cultural institutions with the data and tools to better cater to *all* generations, and encourage intergenerational communication through their activities, programs, exhibitions and physical environments.

Focus group research with older people has been undertaken at three different institutions: the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, Shepparton Art Museum in rural Victoria, and Melbourne Museum. In responding to questions about not only the exhibition content, but also the physical and social

attributes of the whole museum, participants shared rich insights into the ways older people experience cultural institutions. Questions focused on which exhibitions participants particularly enjoyed, and why; visitors' perceptions of the relative 'age-friendliness' of the environment (including everything from label size, to air temperature, to the accessibility of lifts and restrooms); and the co-creation and participation of older people in the activities and exhibitions of a museum.

At the Potter, the exhibition *The dead don't bury themselves*, which showcased a group of Early Bronze Age vessels from the University of Melbourne's Middle Eastern Studies Collection, was among the cultural materials and contemporary exhibitions explored in a focus group conducted in January 2017. Participants listened to a floor talk by the exhibition's curator, Andrew Jamieson, about the role of objects in burials and the mortuary traditions of the ancient Near East. The exhibition prompted consideration of the ways in which these rituals and objects reinforced the social structures and belief systems of the living, even as they were enacted on behalf of the deceased. Research demonstrates that most older people would welcome

the chance to discuss end-of-life issues,²¹ while media coverage such as *The Conversation* article 'Here's what people in their 90s really think about death' is encouraging more open and productive discussions about end of life.²² *The dead don't bury themselves* was an excellent example of the opportunities that museums can provide to stimulate conversation on important cross-generational topics, prompted by cultural materials that demonstrate that humans have been asking the same existential questions for thousands of years.

Focus group participants were very positive about their visit to the Potter, commenting particularly on the manageable size of the museum, the diversity of exhibitions across cultures and historical periods, and the beauty of the architectural surrounds. Suggestions for attracting older audiences and encouraging repeat visits focused on the learning and social opportunities of the museum, with participants saying that they were most likely to visit if they could participate in an organised group activity such as a floor talk, or in creative activities. Discussions covered aspects such as physical comfort and the availability of suitable seating, reinforcing the importance of supporting older visitors with ageing bodies; one age 80+ research

participant observed that it was important that 'you know that you're going to be able to have a sit-down when you need to'. The need for clear and accessible information about a museum's physical structure and current exhibitions also emerged as a common theme, one participant observing that 'as you get older you need to plan ahead' to ensure a safe and successful visit.²³ It was clear that active involvement that gives older visitors agency and a strong sense of ownership and belonging are important. As one 80+ participant observed, museums that were most valued were those in which a visitor could encounter 'anything that keys in to your own life experience'.

Conclusion

There is a fruitful nexus between culture and the creation and re-creation of narratives; a number of pedagogical and social opportunities arise at the intersection of stories and storytelling, related to ageing and cultural objects, with museum environments as a locus for this activity. It is becoming clear that cultural institutions and cultural collections can help societies cope with ageing populations, and can also benefit from the involvement of older people, in many different ways.

Cultural institutions can potentially play a great role in fostering a healthy, age-integrated society. My work in this area over the past few years has confirmed to me that our relationships with objects can allow us to create and enrich our relationships with other people, whether we are the person who is 'curating' those relationships for students or viewers, or whether we are a visitor to a museum, creating our own relationships with artefacts. I believe that university museums have a particularly strong role to play in adapting to the various changes that will occur as populations age, because they possess such rich visual and material cultural resources, and operate in a community whose very purpose is learning and research. We thus have an invaluable opportunity to respond to this important area of political and social need.

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- 2 Interview with HARI research participant, Bright, Victoria, July 2016.
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- 11 The research on this program has been written up and is currently in press: Clare Delany and Heather Gaunt, "I left the museum somewhat changed": Visual arts and health ethics education', *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, forthcoming, 2017.
- 12 See a description of this pedagogical process with dental students in Gelsomina L. Borromeo et al., 'Investigating the effect of a visual arts–based intervention on the cultivation of empathy within dental students', forthcoming, 2017; Mina Borromeo et al., 'The arts and visual thinking in education at the Melbourne Dental School', in Cheryl L. McLean (ed.), *Creative arts in humane medicine*, Calgary: Brush Education, 2013, pp. 40–54; and with medical students in Heather Gaunt, 'Medicine and the arts: Using visual art to develop observation skills and empathy in medical and dental students', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 11, December 2012, pp. 37–9.
- 13 Dominique Martin et al., 'Ian Potter Gallery intro and painting discussion', 2016, POPH90260 2015 T4 W2, University of Melbourne, <https://gomelb.unimelb.edu.au>.
- 14 www.artstor.org.
- 15 The students were given a link to *Trove* (National Library of Australia, Canberra), where they could see a zoomable image of the photograph: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-150880157/view>.
- 16 Gan, quoted in Module 1 of Shifting Paradigms in Ageing.
- 17 Helen J. Chatterjee and Guy Noble (eds), *Museums, health and well-being*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013.
- 18 Andrea Winn, in Heather Gaunt, *Group interview Whitworth Art Gallery*, 2016 (video file), University of Melbourne, <https://gomelb.unimelb.edu.au>.
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- 20 The team consists of Dr Andrew Jamieson (chief investigator), Lena Gan, Dr Heather Gaunt, Associate Professor Alan March, Associate Professor Clare Newton, Professor Alan Pert, Professor Kate Darian-Smith, Associate Professor Wes Imms and Professor Simon Biggs. (University of Melbourne, 'Successful HARI seed funding research projects', 6 July 2016, <http://mispgh.unimelb.edu.au/ageing-industry-network/newsletter-issue-3-july-2016/successful-hari-seed-funding-research-projects>.)
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