

## **Suitcases, Keys, and Handkerchiefs: How are objects being used to collect and tell migrant stories in Australian museums?**

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This article examines the challenges associated with collecting and exhibiting objects to represent immigration history. We consider a range of Australian museums, from large federal institutions, for example, the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM), to state-based organisations such as the Immigration Museum (IM, Victoria) and the Migration Heritage Centre (MHC, New South Wales), as well as smaller community-based and council-run museums like Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery and Fairfield City Museum and Gallery (New South Wales). We analyse and compare various strategies at play in museums dealing with immigration in order to consider the ways that contemporary Australian museums are approaching this important part of national history, taking as a particular focus different models of collecting (traditional collecting, temporary loans and leaving objects in situ). Our research is informed by a study of the existing literature about objects in migration museums and exhibitions together with site visits. It offers an original approach by comparing museums at national, state and local levels in Australia and exploring future directions, such as artistic works and the digital model, which would in our opinion benefit exhibitions in this area. It has been complemented by interviews with key staff in these institutions in order to consider critically the approach and challenges the industry currently sees for itself. First, we consider the role and function of objects within the museum space generally before focussing on their effective contribution to the representation of diverse migrant stories.

Objects are fundamental to the role of museums as storehouses of material culture. The act of placing an object in a museum confers value and legitimacy on it, transporting it from the private realm to the public sphere where it can be used to engage with collective memory. Objects cannot speak for themselves and, for this reason, their representational capacity within the museum space presents a challenge. They do, however, offer an evocative physical presence.<sup>1</sup> When on display, objects have the power to humanise the facts and events of history; they open up possibilities to tell and explore individual stories by forging connections with the past and the experiences of others. Susan Pearce praises their function, suggesting that: 'Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise' (1992, 47). The emphasis on the imaginary potential of objects has grown because of changes in museology and a growing understanding of the value of narrative as a tool to engage increasingly diverse audiences (Vergo, 1989; Dudley 2009). It may also be seen as a result of the rise of new ways of doing history, using a bottom-up rather than top-down approach. This interest in storytelling in museums has been accompanied by a movement away from chronological to thematic displays.

Everyday objects play a crucial role in migration history and curators have to capitalise on the representational possibilities offered by the objects of daily life when conceiving exhibitions in this field. Migration exhibitions have often been accused of being

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Pearce's *Objects in Museums – Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (1992) and her work on material culture have influenced much of the literature on objects in museums. Recent studies have continued to examine the function of objects in museums, see, in particular, *Museum Materialities. Objects, Engagement, Interpretations*, ed. by Sandra H Dudley (2009).

unreflective and stereotypical in terms of which objects are chosen and how they are displayed, but we argue that this can be a reductive view and agree to a certain extent with Eureka Henrich when she argues: 'Curators have been constantly aware and wary of reducing migration history to merely food, folk dance and costume, or a series of success stories' (2011: 81). The curators of the *Journeys* Gallery at the National Museum of Australia (NMA, Canberra) highlight the significance of object biography in using material culture to address socio-historical concerns such as immigration. They make reference to Gosden and Marshall's work on the cultural biography of objects and confirm its influence on their approach to choosing and creating narratives for the objects exhibited in the *Journeys* Gallery. According to Gosden and Marshall, analysing the social interactions that an artefact has had with people throughout its existence can reveal multiple meanings. The fluidity of meaning, dependent on interaction with the exterior at different moments and with different audiences, is key to understanding an object's representational value. (Shamberger, Sear, Wehner et al., 2008: 276-277). In the following discussion, this object-biography approach informs our understanding of how objects tell migration stories within the museum space.

### **A key and a handkerchief at the Australian National Maritime Museum**

The ANMM opened in 1991 in Sydney with a mission '[t]o promote a broad interpretation of maritime heritage and culture; to preserve it and to bring it to life'. (ANMM, 2013, 5) Since its early planning, the museum has concentrated a section of its collection development on immigration and settlement, and in 2011 it identified immigration as one of ten focus areas for collecting (ANMM, 2011, 4, 10). Its collection

is diverse and broad in scope including over 10,000 items.<sup>2</sup> One migration story the ANMM chose to display is that of the Lederer family which is represented through a variety of objects: a receipt from a meal on the ship which brought the Austrian-Jewish family to Australia from Europe; a handwritten poem; a passport issued to their son, Walter; and other small items including a key.<sup>3</sup> These objects allow the museum to tell the story of a specific family and their journey from Nazi-occupied Vienna just before the outbreak of the Second World War to Australia. Through the reconstruction of this family's experience via the objects on display, visitors to the ANMM learn not only about the Second World War and the Holocaust but are able to engage with the emotional resonance of such events. The key, in particular, is enriched by object biography. It is a familiar object to which every museum visitor can relate and they learn, through text labels, that this key opened the front door to the Lederer family home in Vienna. They can also learn that Mrs Lederer chose to keep it in her purse for the rest of her life in Australia. This decision to keep the key, which no longer served its original purpose, is a poignant reminder of loss and the importance of home and belonging; it also foregrounds the emotive potential of objects in the museum space. Individual objects therefore trigger story-telling and take on broader social and political relevance.

Another collection of seemingly banal objects - the handkerchief and ring donated to the ANMM by Hazar Afghani, Hedayat Osyan - also sparks responses that combine contemporary political and social concerns, this time around forced movement, with individual emotions. The biographies of these objects gave Kim Tao, Curator of Post-

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Kim Tao, ANMM (17/07/2012).

<sup>3</sup> The story and objects of the Lederer family are featured in the ANMM celebration of its 20-year anniversary. Kim Tao, 'Door to freedom', in *100 Stories from the Australian National Maritime Museum*, 73-74.

Federation Immigration at the ANMM, goosebumps and made her tremble when she first heard them.<sup>4</sup> Osyan left Afghanistan in 2009 and carried his mother's ring and a handkerchief as his only tokens of home and family. The decision to give these objects to the museum is generous, as they are such powerful personal reminders of family but they are also able to symbolise the risks Osyan took to find safety on a broader level and to a wider audience. At the ANMM, these mementoes let us glimpse the current, topical experiences of refugees as well as engaging with historical migration and settlement narratives. They give an insight behind the history books, the attention-grabbing headlines and contemporary political debates, and they make these narratives accessible through the invitation to focus on one personal story.

Object biography emphasises that it is the compelling stories surrounding these objects which make them relevant to the museum rather than their financial value or notions of rarity. The ANMM's Collection Development Policy states that objects will be used to allow the museum to 'focus on immigration policy and the personal experiences of migrants within it'. (ANMM, 2011: 23) They are not solely collection objects but tools for story-telling, as shown very effectively by their use in the spectacular *Waves of Migration* light display on the museum's roof.<sup>5</sup> Tao, the curator of this display, emphasises that the ANMM is set apart from many other museums of its type internationally by its focus on social history. (Tao, 2013: 4) She stresses that this particular focus allows the ANMM to 'explore Australian links with the sea through the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Tao (17/07/2012).

<sup>5</sup> *Waves of Migration*, designed by Electric Canvas, Australian National Maritime Museum, ran for three years: 26 Jan - 28 Feb 2013; 26 Jan - 13 Feb 2014 and 26 Jan - 8 Feb 2015. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiuR-oDvxeE> (last accessed 11/10/2016).

lens of people's experiences, an approach that creates a powerful emotional engagement with our audiences.' (Tao, 2013: 4) This is clear from the emotional hook of objects such as the key and the handkerchief. Combined with their biography, these objects can invite an engagement, an interaction even, which is often underestimated. It is this dimension that allows spectators to focus on the human aspect and begin a conversation of shared experiences and values. Through their very familiarity, objects can act to 'stimulate conversations'; they gain meaning in museums via the 'context of human thought, feelings, fantasies and memories,' and in the way that audience 'responses are also *provoked by* objects.' (Black, 2012: 145-146, his italics)

### **Official records, everyday objects, interviews and class: the challenges of exhibiting migrant history**

The tension between official history and individual memory, that is, the official record versus the weight of personal experience, has an impact on the way in which migration stories are represented or, indeed, are ignored.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary examples are further complicated by the context of Australian politics where debates around immigration, refugees and asylum seekers continue to be heated (Marr and Wilkinson, 2004; Mondon, 2013). Government documents represent an essential aspect of the history of migration but offer limited insight into individual stories. Evidence of migration is highlighted, for example, in the National Archives of Australia's collections of official documents and records of government policy, but there is little scope to document the material culture of migration or its individual stories in this type of institution. These

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<sup>6</sup> M. Anderson (1991), 'Selling the Past: History in Museums in the 1990s', *Australian Historical Studies*, 24 (130-141). For a broader understanding of the particular tensions in the Australian context, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (2004).

types of official document are difficult to display in a way that will catch and retain the museum visitor's interest. At the Immigration Museum, this official history is valued primarily for its ability to develop 'a critical bridge between the personal narratives and the narratives of nations'. (McFadzean, 2012, np) In their permanent gallery entitled 'Getting in', this museum has incorporated a variety of different techniques, including an interactive computer display, in order to encourage visitors to engage with notoriously dry documentation concerning policy.

The collection of oral histories also contributes to the development of compelling object biographies, which, we argue, are central to the long-term value of these objects for cultural institutions. Oral history can make seemingly boring paperwork come alive by foregrounding human, personal elements. Museums, which collect objects relating to migration, use oral history to bring previously untold stories into the public sphere. These interviews are a source which can provide vital context to objects and are crucial in allowing visitors a first-hand account, a sense of witnessing, of being present. Hearing different voices in soundscapes or via headphones in these exhibitions reveals and underscores the heterogeneous nature of human existences and history rather than the homogenous identity often offered by accounts of official history. The interview transcripts and their reporting in articles in museum publications such as *Signals* (Tao, 2013: 5-9) record first-person stories, thereby offering vital human context to the objects. This broader context 'taps into information, knowledge and ideas that are not always part of formal collection documentation practice' (Russell and Winkworth, 2009: 32). For example, Hedayat Osyhan's interview gives a clear sense of the stages in his journey and the risks he took: 'Although I was responsible for looking after my family I had to leave everything, I had no choice. I was 16. It was 2009' (Tao, 2013: 9). Without

this interview, Osyan's donated objects are just a handkerchief and a ring that could belong to anybody. The oral history attached to the objects given by Osyan is vital to their value for the museum and for the museum's ability to use them as evocative story-telling tools. Furthermore, this oral history directly inspired scenes in the *Waves of Migration* digital projections.

Oral history, however, is resource intensive in terms both of time and technology, and the training that is required to ensure that these stories are gathered effectively can add to the difficulty. In our interviews, we found that most organisations at all levels concentrate their capturing of oral history on specific projects; any systematic collection is too difficult financially. Further challenges are posed by dominant language use in a multicultural and thus multilingual environment. Many Australians, be they indigenous or first, second and third generation immigrants, live in bilingual, if not trilingual, environments. Recording stories in a common language can mask tensions and nuanced moments. We found little evidence of Australian museums collecting in languages other than English. This language issue is perhaps more easily addressed in a community museum which, thanks to its focus, is better equipped to deal with different languages and their subtleties. The Museo Italiano in Melbourne, for example, uses bilingual English-Italian text labels in its permanent exhibition, thereby catering for its community audience. Indeed, conventional museology suggests that it is good practice to exhibit text labels in different languages depending on the audience. However, this practice can potentially lead to very text-heavy exhibitions and using English has the advantage of making material accessible to the widest possible audience in the Australian context. Further research addressing the following questions would be beneficial: How can we best ensure that oral history is a useful resource not only for a

specific project but for a museum as a whole and as a document of history? How are larger museums communicating with their diverse multilingual communities? How can new technologies help museums move beyond wall labels to digital devices that allow for greater flexibility and inclusion of multiple languages as well as more information about the objects on display?

A further challenge for exhibiting migration narratives is that, although every story is unique to an individual, there are inevitable similarities: they are essentially journeys of risk and movements from one place to another. In terms of collection objects, this has often meant a degree of sameness. The standard narratives of migration history in Australian museums have been identified by Ian McShane (2001). In this much-cited research, he singles out the stories of rebirth or redemption, enrichment, the journey and the barrier as all fundamental to how museums tell and explore migration history often on account of the material associations that can help to situate the story and engage audiences (McShane, 2001: 128-129). McShane's various strands are typical not only of the Australian experience but of the broad narratives of immigration told in museums across the world and he underlines the difficulties for curators conceiving and producing these types of exhibitions as they must continually negotiate and balance 'between the conventional and the challenging' (McShane, 2001: 123).

The suitcase is one of the tropes most used in telling migration stories. Every museum or gallery dealing with this subject seems to have one – be it a prop to evoke the story of a journey or an authentic suitcase complete with stamps and marks of travel. The suitcase 'moment' has been widely discussed (Witcombe, 2012: 38; Henrich, 2011: 71) and McShane seems to dismiss it largely as a 'design gesture' (2001: 129). However,

John Petersen, the former director of the MHC, is less dismissive, commenting on the preponderance of suitcases in migration exhibitions as follows:

And the suitcases, the suitcases, the suitcases. And of course as it happened the sector was more sophisticated than I thought it was. But sometimes you fall back into suitcases because they're good visually or communities like them. [...] And suitcases take on a different resonance now because they're what people put things in. And they had to make choices about what to pack and what to leave behind. So as we've looked at different items and different objects and different memories, the suitcases are really vessels that, but they're objects in their own right. But it's kind of what people put in them and what they had to make selections about. Or if they had a suitcase. Because with a refugee history they didn't have little suitcases necessarily.<sup>7</sup>

Petersen's comments affirm the role of suitcases and their ongoing value as symbols of immigration that are strongly evocative of the story of a journey in their function as vessels as well as carrying many layers of meaning through their contents (or lack of them).

The suitcase of Mrs Chu Lam, in Museum Victoria's collection, is a compelling example of how suitcases can be used as powerful storytelling objects. An asylum seeker from Vietnam in 1978, Lam sold her wedding ring to buy a suitcase so that she would not arrive in Australia empty-handed. Even if, on arrival, the suitcase was almost empty

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with John Petersen, Migration Heritage Centre (19/07/2012).

Lam's story is full of symbolic resonance.<sup>8</sup> Through object biography, an empty suitcase is able to represent a sense of hope and promise in this context. The suitcase functions in this story as a temporary home: clasped during the journey, it represents possibility and, in displays, its role is again one of affinity, calling on the museum visitors' familiarity with this object from their own travels. In the same way that the key is able to give access to ideas of home, the suitcase reinforces ideas of journey and is, in our opinion, a successful trope of migrant narratives. As mentioned previously in relation to the key and the handkerchief, it is the very familiarity of these objects that makes them have a powerful impact. Hooper-Greenhill states that 'objects are always targets for feelings and actions; their interpretation is embedded in already existing experience and knowledge' (2000: 104). Her articulation of this interpretative aspect is also supported in the work of Leinhardt and Knutson who suggest that as the exhibition space is designed to 'operate on a visual level', it creates and needs to establish 'an affective experience for visitors' (2004: 125).

The received idea is that often migrants do not come with objects and certainly nothing of value institutionally, which has in turn led to a certain mythology around the scarcity of objects that they bring with them. In our interview, Petersen continues the above statement as follows: 'Although we were told, they wouldn't have anything but we're finding they do.'<sup>9</sup> It is important, however, to tease out the diversity and difference of experience in this context. European migrants who arrived in Australia during the 1950s often travelled with trunks and suitcases of material from home on large ocean liners. More recent migrants have been forced to travel light with negligible luggage

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Dr Moya McFadzean, Museum Victoria (26/07/2013).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Petersen, MHC (19/07/2012).

because they have come by airplane or, in the more extreme example of refugees, by boat. A further distinction to make is the impact of class within migrant groups which has often also determined the availability and types of objects on offer. In our research, we have rarely come across wealthy migrants associated with migrant stories as their wealth appears to give them direct access to mainstream culture and a legitimate voice within the museum space. In 2011, for example, Tim Bonyhady, the prominent Australian art historian, published a history of his Viennese family, *Good Living Street: The Fortunes of My Viennese Family*, in which he discusses the objects they brought to Australia, some of which featured in the exhibition he co-curated at the National Gallery of Victoria, 'Vienna Art and Design - Klimt, Schiele, Hoffman, Loos'. The objects on display ranged from invaluable paintings to household goods brought from Vienna, but the migration narrative was mainly sidelined by their aesthetic value. Migrants are not supposed to bring priceless objects with them; these objects do not belong to the standard tropes of migration identified by McShane (2001). Examples of fine art and high culture tend to be donated to museums and galleries with different focuses and here the migration story can be ignored or consciously downplayed either by the donor or by the institution. Many tensions exist between which objects have been and are being collected as representative of migration stories, how they are displayed, for whom and by whom, and how they are allowed to tell their story. It needs to be remembered that collecting in this area frequently shifts the mundane object into the world of museum objects and this change in status entails responsibility. What is collected now and what is excluded together with, most importantly, how it is documented will profoundly shape the history that is told now and in the future.

### **Using objects to exhibit migration history: different models of collecting**

The National Standards for Australia Museums and Galleries (Version 1.4) propose that two fundamental principles are central to the development of a significant collection:

PRINCIPLE C1: The museum's collection represents the significant stories and interests of its diverse and changing communities

PRINCIPLE C2: The museum preserves its significant collections for future generations

*(National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries V. 1.4, 2014: 56; 63)*

Museums today should collect in a systematic and organised way driven by these key principles and keeping in line with carefully formulated collection policies (Matassa, 2011). Representing Australia's multicultural society, to which immigration is a key contributor, is without doubt a demanding area for museum collections. Viv Szekeres, the former director of the Migration Museum in Adelaide, suggested as early as 1989 that in Australia 'the major institutions have not really addressed the collection of cultural material that can present the experience and reality of Australia's multicultural society. This bias has meant that the history and cultural experiences of four out of every ten Australians have just been ignored' (1989: 74). The challenges were also highlighted in the 1975 and 1982 reports for a planned 'National Museum of Australia that could tell the story of migration and settlement as a vital component of Australia's history' with the Chairman of the Council of the NMA noting significant 'constraints of knowledge and cultural awareness, of existing collecting practices, interpretation and communication' and that the '[...] commitment to represent cultural diversity in museums can proceed only by challenging traditional museum practices.' (Edwards, cited in Zubrzycki, 1992: 5) Since these comments made in December 1991, the process

of collecting the diversity of Australian history particularly as it relates to themes of migration and population movement remains difficult in the museum sector and requires constant critical evaluation.

Collections relating to immigration in Australian museums are dispersed across national, state and local levels with profound differences between each state. There are two dedicated museums in this area: the Migration Museum in Adelaide which started collecting in the years before its opening in 1986, while the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (Museum Victoria) established a migration collection in 1990. At the national level, collecting in the area of migration is concentrated across three institutions: the ANMM, the NMA and the National Archives of Australia. The NMA started appealing for material in the 1980s and its 2014 Collection Development Plan stipulates that:

The Museum builds collections that are nationally significant, in line with its legislative responsibilities. It seeks objects, documents, images and other materials that have rich historical associations and communicative power and that represent the thematic and geographic breadth of Australia's history. Collection materials gain emblematic or iconic value through their connection with key figures, events, places, organisations or themes in the national past. Hence the Museum's collecting is necessarily selective and representative, rather than comprehensive. (NMA, 2014:4-5)

The National Archives of Australia recognise on their website that their holdings in this area are one of the most important parts of their collection, which is listed on UNESCO's Australian Memory of the World register.<sup>10</sup>

Many state-based institutions do not have a dedicated focus in this area and collecting is carried out on a more ad hoc basis. A case in point is the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) in New South Wales which does not collect migrant objects per se, but might consider objects from migrants if they relate to the museum's core themes of design and technology.<sup>11</sup> Our research, primarily in NSW, shows that smaller institutions tend to focus on the history of immigration in relation to the local geographic area and its population, past and present. Hurstville Library Museum and Gallery and Fairfield City Museum and Gallery, both based in the suburbs of Sydney, are typical of many local museums which have strong collections in the areas of settlement and immediate post-Second World War migration because of their history of establishment. Both institutions grew from community-based history groups established during the 1980s. Today they are managed by their local councils and are trying to develop new collections that relate more closely to the changing demographics of the suburb in which they are located. Fairfield, for example, in its Rationale and Collection Management Policy, has recognised that the diversity of its community is starkly underrepresented in its collections and that expanding in these areas is 'significant and integral to representing the diversity of Fairfield's history and culture' (Fairfield, 2010: 8). Importantly, it is not simply about collecting objects of historical

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://naa.gov.au/collection/explore/migration/index.aspx> (last accessed 11/10/2016)

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Anni Turnbull, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (the former Powerhouse Museum) (19/07/2012).

value and documenting change. As they note in this policy, this expansion is needed to ensure that the museum maintains its place as 'a living heritage site and meeting place' (Fairfield, 2010: 8), that is, its relevance and survival in a changing world.

From our study of a cross-section of Australian museums, cultural organisations were collecting material related to migration history, but with little clear direction or purpose until the end of the twentieth century. From then on, there is evidence of an effective continuity of engaged collecting practice, but our research and interviews also show development of and experimentation with new trends. These practices centre around three coexisting structures: traditional in-house collecting and preservation; the use of short-term and long-term loans for a particular project; and a decentralised model where objects remain in situ but museums work with communities to document and make these objects accessible to a broader audience, often using the Internet. In combination, these strategies allow institutions to consider their collection development from a sustainable perspective.

Traditional in-house collecting is a well-established area where typically there is a dominance of authentic objects seen as being significant to the story of migration. Collecting in this area is heavily influenced by provenance and significance, which can be difficult to locate and define in the field of social history. For this reason, many Australian museums have adopted the model developed by Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth: *Significance 2.0: A guide to assessing the significance of collections* (2009) to document objects in their collections. This guide to the interpretation of collections has developed a useful framework for good practice that stresses notions of memory and

the importance of interpretation supported by careful documentation. Its use is evident in the 'Statement of Significance' recorded for objects like Mrs Lam's suitcase:

This collection demonstrates the risk and desperation involved in the refugee experience. It is extremely rare to acquire objects from refugees, as by the very nature of the experience, people carry little if anything with them, and what they do is usually lost or thrown away. It helps tell the story of Vietnamese immigration, which has played a significant part in the history of immigration to Australia, and assists in representing the period post 1975, when Australia's new political and social policies of multiculturalism were being implemented. This collection also provides further insights into life in one of Melbourne's principal migrant hostels - Midway in Maribyrnong.<sup>12</sup>

This statement offers more contextual information than the details recorded in either the 'Summary of the object' or the dry and factual 'Description', also recommended by *Significance 2.0*. Moreover, as part of a group of objects from Mrs Lam, the museum is able to draw together a more complete story of immigration which represents her dangerous journey to Australia, and also documents her identity, stages in her travel, photographs and clothing as well as her story of settlement. The on-line collection catalogue for the items from Mrs Lam includes details of her life in Australia, recording landmarks in her and her husband's life story since leaving Vietnam. The objects' biography supported by the 'Statement of Significance' is thus completed by her own biography. Museums have to collect and document objects effectively in order to tell

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections/items/247157/suitcase-red-vinyl-vietnam-1978> (last accessed 11/10/2016)

significant stories of movement and cultural exchange; not only do individual journeys need to be presented and understood, but also the significance of migration more generally, be it in a national, state or local context.

Loan objects have always been an important way for museums to showcase new areas, a point recognised throughout our research and visits to exhibitions and displays which make extensive use of them.<sup>13</sup> From a museum's perspective, loan objects can represent a significant cost-saving as the institution does not have responsibility for preservation or ongoing storage. These loans allow museums to obtain access to objects that families wish to keep or are hesitating to donate; they are an opportunity to cement relationships and build bridges between communities and museums, which may lead to future collection development. Successful collecting depends on the establishment of trust between the museum and the individual donating an object and this may require a significant amount of time to ensure a meaningful relationship. In our interviews, curators from national, state and local museums have all emphasised the need to invest time in maintaining these relationships. Tao (ANMM) states on this subject:

And that is the challenge of the stories that we're trying to tell, is that you need that face to face. And because often I just ring people up out of the blue, you know, I managed to track down contacts, and they have no expectation (laughs). They don't tell me everything, and it's very hard to, when you're just a voice on the phone. [...] And that is the big challenge for us, as a national museum, is how do we represent the nation when a lot of the times I mean on a practical level it's

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<sup>13</sup> This is an aspect recognised by Viv Szekeres in 'The Problems of Collecting and Interpreting our Multicultural Heritage' (1989).

about travel and funding for travel and that often stops you [...] And it is so much easier to go and physically be with someone, face to face, you search through their cupboards and find things. Because that's what you get, is when you ring up someone on the phone and do you have any objects from when you migrated and they [...] say no I don't have anything [...], don't remember anything, but it's through continuous conversation that it sort of tips...<sup>14</sup>

Dr Moya McFadzean from Museum Victoria corroborates this view: 'And it does take time. And it takes also, again it's all that building kind of trust and your legitimacy within the broader community.'<sup>15</sup> Migrants may not want to part with their objects because of their personal importance or sentimental value, but more importantly for the purpose of our study, and as suggested in the above quotations, there is a risk that they do not see themselves or their objects as valuable to museums.

Gemma Beswick, the Historical and Cultural Services Coordinator at Hurstville City Library Museum and Gallery, makes the following points about volunteers from the Chinese community, a significant proportion of the current population of Hurstville, at her institution:

And we've found, because, I think about 25% or 26% of the CBD in Hurstville are Chinese speaking. And we have a few Chinese volunteers that do tours and things for us in Mandarin. And we've sort of asked them why, they say oh people really love to come and learn about the history of their area so it's a chance for them to connect with their new home, all those sorts of things. And then we say why

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Tao (17/07/2012).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with McFadzean (26/07/2013).

don't they donate us objects and they say because they don't think they're part of the story. They're not important. So we realised that that is quite a big barrier, that we have to somehow connect.<sup>16</sup>

Beswick's comments highlight a number of contradictions at play in this process. Firstly, on a practical level, if time is not invested in building and nurturing these relationships, members of the public will not donate or loan objects to a cultural institution or even realise their value in establishing narratives about contemporary identity and society. Secondly, as curators have to take an active role in encouraging communities to donate objects and participate in exhibitions, the narratives are being directed (curated) by museum professionals. Finally, it is worth noting that although some migrants may hesitate to engage with the formal environment of the museum, some community groups choose to set up their own museum or archive collection. Some examples in Sydney are the Sydney Jewish Museum (opened in 1992), the Portuguese Ethnographic Museum (opened in 1997) and the Estonian Archives in Australia (founded in 1952 and housed in Estonia House in Sydney since 1994). These organisations, often completely volunteer-run, are valuable in terms of migrant visibility, but are frequently relegated to the peripheries in mainstream discourse about Australian identity and society.

The capacity for loan objects to develop stories which go beyond mainstream narratives is well established and is at the centre of the use of community galleries in Australian

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Gemma Beswick, Hurstville City Museum Library and Gallery, NSW (18/07/2012).

museums.<sup>17</sup> For the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the development of exhibitions for its former community gallery allowed the museum to relate the experiences of diverse groups, including stories of migration. Exhibitions, such as 'Our new home Meie uus kodu: Estonian-Australia's stories', were developed in close partnership with the community and the objects were sourced via loans. Following the exhibition, some objects, which met the museum's collection criteria with its focus on design, entered the permanent collection: a hand-knitted wool shawl (Registration number 2007/128/1) and a series of ceramic forms by Maiju Altpere-Woodhead (registration number 2012/12/1).

NSW has also experimented with a different model of documenting migration history, using the online environment to allow objects to remain in situ, thus keeping objects with their owners in their community. This was in many respects an expansion of the long-held role of state organisations in Australia to advise community and local groups about how to care most effectively for their objects. This policy was shaped by the centralisation of cultural organisation, particularly in NSW, in Sydney with minimal investment in the regions. The strongest example of this strategy in relation to representing migrant narratives was the MHC, established in 1998 as part of a NSW government initiative and housed in the then Powerhouse Museum (now MAAS) (Petersen, 2010). This 'virtual museum' aimed to: 'give new perspectives on Australian history, ensure a more representative heritage [wa]s preserved for future generations

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the relevance of the community gallery, see O'Reilly, C. & Parish, N. (2015), 'Telling Migrant Stories in Museums in Australia: Does the community gallery still have a role to play?', in: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 30 (4), 296-313.

and also to validate migrants' experiences and challenge myths and prejudices'.<sup>18</sup> It had no collection and no permanent display space and instead worked with community groups throughout NSW to document and tell their stories. Objects remained in the communities, where they were able to retain their cultural significance, but they were photographed and displayed on the Internet and sometimes used in small local exhibitions or in publications.

The focus of the MHC was on the history of migrants with a strong emphasis on heritage and documenting and telling older migrant stories. Much of its work was dedicated to establishing relationships with communities and encouraging an awareness of these histories, particularly in the regions. It collaborated with the cities of Albury and Wodonga and Charles Stuart University to document the history of the Bonegilla Migrant hostels, with the city of Griffith to work on an Italian Heritage Trail and with the Museum of the Riverina to trace the history of the Chinese in this region.<sup>19</sup> These collaborations started documenting what was available and were carried out with the aim of empowering community groups to develop the necessary skills to preserve and tell their own history.

In our opinion, the demise of this initiative is significant and represents a loss to the migration story of NSW, which is now without focus in any of its cultural institutions. In part its disappearance could be attributed to its small size, for much of its history a team

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<sup>18</sup> 'About us, Migration Heritage Centre, New South Wales, <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/uncategorized/about/> (last accessed 11/10/2016)

<sup>19</sup> For listings of the engagement, see <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/homepage/> (last accessed 11/10/2016).

of three staff, and its low profile, compounded by its lack of actual physical presence. The MAAS Annual Report 2013/2014 describes the significant restructuring at the museum as a move away from a dedicated MHC, which is termed as 'a specific public program', that was to be embedded in its 'new Cultural Diversity Strategy' (2014: 15). The MHC, hindered by its limited resources, lacked the scale to embrace the changing environment of the Internet and never developed to respond to the potentials of interactivity in web 2.0. Without this significant change and investment, it in effect became increasingly irrelevant as an online space.

The challenge of remaining relevant and inclusive is one faced by all institutions in either the virtual or physical space. Collections, just like audiences and communities, are far from static and they need to grow and develop. A clear policy that identifies gaps will help to move beyond the self-identification of dominant groups which already realise the importance and value of their history. In the review of the migration collection at Museum Victoria, the collection name has been changed to *Migration and Cultural Diversity*. This plan was issued in late 2012 and recognises several shifts that need to be addressed in the museum's collecting and focus. These include an expansion into actively collecting documents relating to policy and the need to develop a collection that is capable of responding to 'the changing impact of migration in Australia' as well as 'themes relating to transnationalism, return and temporary migration and off-shore experiences' (McFadzean, 2011; np).

### **Future directions: art and the digital model**

Artistic works can be invaluable in both communicating and reflecting on the questions raised and the emotions experienced around immigration. A pertinent example relating

to multilingualism is Zenib Sedira's *Mother Tongue* (2002), part of the permanent exhibition at the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration (Immigration Museum) in Paris. This autobiographical video triptych explores the challenges of communication over three generations (grandmother-mother-daughter) in three different countries (Algeria-France-United Kingdom) and how the ability to understand one another with words quickly evaporates. Watching the confusion on the faces in the final section when the Arabic-speaking grandmother is not understood by her English-speaking granddaughter as they struggle to communicate verbally is particularly affecting and the spectator quickly realises that language is not the only form of communication at play here. Within the context of an immigration museum, this work evokes the themes of multilingualism and what it means to be brought up and live in different cultural contexts, but its meaning can shift. Sedira's video is also exhibited in the Elizabeth A Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where it is able to focus on questions around female roles, identities and voice across the generations.

*Edge of Elsewhere* (2012) exhibited at the Campbelltown Arts Centre by the Thai, Sydney-based artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt is another case of artistic engagement with community and themes of migration. Her *Home away from home* is a collaborative work for which she held workshops with community members who donated items of clothing and their stories. She then made a large-scale collage from these items, evoking layers of stories, place and memory. The ANMM has also developed this aspect in their collection including, for example, *Displaced Persons*, by Anne Zahalka and Sue Saxon (2003), a series of twenty black and white images printed on handkerchiefs, 'traditionally used to wave farewell and wipe away tears' (Lawton and Tao, 2012: 75).

These are examples of the possibility of art to offer another way of telling stories which moves beyond objects and text labels, and drive a different type of emotional engagement in the museum space. These works are evidence of a growing trend of artists interested in migration, some exploring their own stories of displacement and others using it as a political space to comment on and engage with contemporary debates. A further example at the ANMM is the series of 14 paintings by Gina Sinozich, painted in Sydney when she was in her 70s, which document the journey she made from Croatia as a young woman. Kimberley O'Sullivan Steward, who commissioned the series, explains that Gina chose to make these paintings because she believed that 'she couldn't write well enough in English' and instead 'decided to paint her life' (O'Sullivan Steward, 2005: 11). Instead of memoirs in Croatian or in English, paintings are able to recreate Gina's journey for herself and her viewers. In a discussion of the growing role of art in the ANMM collection and in accordance with the ideas outlined here, Kim Tao states that artistic pieces are able to open up new evocative possibilities which shift the experience and understanding of migration history. She suggests that these works in the collection negotiate:

the challenging emotional landscape of homelands lost and found. Shaped by broader discourses of transnational migration and displacement across cultures and generations, their work gives tangible, material presence to the elusive concept of memory in a museum environment. (Tao, 2016: 339)

In a similar way to the everyday objects discussed earlier, art has the advantage of inviting another perspective into the museum space. This is not a recent phenomenon: the exhibition *A Twist of Fate, An Experience of War, Pain, Torture and Survival: Refugees*

*in Australia* at the Migration Museum in Adelaide in 1998 displayed very few objects and instead used art and theatre-like sets to create a more immediate, visceral experience.<sup>20</sup> A criticism of this approach is that it induces a voyeuristic thrill rather than encouraging the museum visitor to engage with the subject matter in a serious, critical manner. It can also add another barrier to access as the languages of art bring their own challenges of interpretation particularly if they are unfamiliar to visitors.

Along with the potential of artistic pieces to offer multiple perspectives and different viewpoints, we believe that digital models and technologies offer important opportunities in this area, particularly in conjunction with actual physical displays. Although the MHC no longer exists, the MHC website, for example, had two substantial threads: 'Belongings' and 'Objects through time'. The content for 'Belongings: Post-WW2 migration, memories and journeys' comes from individuals and communities to tell the story of migration through personal mementoes, photographs and memories.<sup>21</sup> Some are treasured objects brought from the 'old country'; others are souvenirs of the journey out to Australia; or treasured keepsakes from first homes or jobs. All help us understand how migration changed the lives of those migrating and, through the cultures and traditions brought with them, the lives of all Australians. A second thread takes a more conventional form telling a chronological story of migration (from 50,000 years ago to 1990 and beyond) via its 'Objects through time: Migration history

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Viv Szekeres, the former Director of the Migration Museum, SA (18/07/2013). See Viv Szekeres (October 2011), 'The Past is a Dangerous Place', in *Curating Difficult Knowledge*, pp.41–54.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/belongings-home/> (last accessed 11/10/2016).

timeline'.<sup>22</sup> This part of the website made use of museum collections of all sizes and scales. Smaller parts of the website represented their more focussed work on collaborative projects with specific groups.

The most impressive aspect of the MHC website was the depth of information, the Internet allowing for much more text than would be available in a museum display. The pages are a mine of information for a diverse audience; it was a well-used resource particularly by school children, as demonstrated by the significant drop in numbers visiting the website during school holidays in NSW.<sup>23</sup> Lack of resourcing was a problem for this virtual presence and, although it was certainly an interesting test of technology, it appeared a rather poor cousin to the dedicated museums in South Australia and Victoria.

André Malraux could never had imagined the possibilities of the Internet to move the museum outside its walls. The digital model, through 3-D modelling for example, offers an ability to engage with collections and communities poorly represented in museums. It can create possibilities for collaboration and intersections between collections moving from archives to libraries to museums (as is the ambition of the Commons project on flickr or Europeana<sup>24</sup>) and this diversity of sources allows for the successful representation of complex, multi-layered stories. The Internet also provides significant opportunities for multiple and longer texts, different voices and diversity of languages

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/objectsthroughtime-history/about-objects-through-time/> (last accessed 11/10/2016).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Petersen (19/07/2012).

<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.flickr.com/commons> and <http://www.europeana.eu/portal/> (last accessed 11/10/2016).

as well as allowing for collections to be seen as a collaborative resource. It can also provide a step towards a more meaningful idea of a distributed collection, curated by those inside and outside institutions. The digital model enables a transnational engagement: it becomes a resource not only for communities at home, but for global diasporas too. However, like physical museums and as shown by the demise of the MHC, it has limitations. For digital technologies to be successfully used within the museum space, museum professionals need to be fully conversant with and up-to-date on developments in technology and these digital projects require adequate funding and resourcing.

Collecting and exhibiting migrant narratives is and will remain a challenging area for museum professionals, visitors and those being represented because of the nature of the subject matter and the differing views on it. As generations age or move on, we need to ensure that objects are collected and their biographies carefully elaborated.

Collection practices also need to keep pace with broader patterns of cultural change, forever mindful of the distorting lens of media and political discourse in Australia and beyond, dominated by negative language around refugees in particular.<sup>25</sup> Object biographies and oral histories are essential to understanding the broader significance of individual objects. We must preserve these stories and be more open to developing resources in source languages. Museum collections at all levels, national, state and local, will increasingly need to reflect and recognise the multilingual context of a globalised world.

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<sup>25</sup> We are writing this article at a time when immigration is certainly a contentious topic in Australia and Europe.

Andrea Witcomb has suggested that ‘The object needs enough space to work its wonder, to affect people in a visceral, physical way.’ (2009: 51) Although here she is referring to a model of a camp built by a Holocaust survivor, the challenge is true for all objects. How do we find the space in a display to allow people to take in the symbolic significance of a handkerchief clutched across the dangerous and uncertain route of a Hazara refugee? Different objects will function in different ways for different people and age groups and the issue for exhibitions and thus collecting, and increasingly for online platforms that showcase collections to a global audience, is how can we continue to offer the space to an object and its story? How can we ensure that the objects are not dismissed but are tools to bridge time and place, thereby stimulating reflection and critical engagement? In this article, we have argued that the further use of art and the development of the digital model will help museum professionals tell migrant narratives effectively. The difficulty remains in ensuring accessibility and finding the balance between offering an individual experience and a generic idea of migration.

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Dr Moya McFadzean, Museums Victoria (25/07/2013)

John Petersen, Migration Heritage Centre, NSW (19/07/2012)

Viv Szekeres, Migration Museum, SA (18/07/2013)

Kim Tao, Australian National Maritime Museum (17/07/2012)

Anni Turnbull, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (the former Powerhouse Museum), NSW (19/07/2012)