

## Chapter 17

# Living in a material world: object biography and transnational lives

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In 1989, Mrs Guna Kinne wrote to the National Museum of Australia about her Latvian national dress. ‘As I have no female descendants,’ she explained, ‘I wish to donate the costume to an institution, preferably the National Museum.’<sup>1</sup> The museum, then actively pursuing the development of a migration heritage collection, gratefully accepted Mrs Kinne’s offer.

As part of the donation, curator Sally Fletcher wrote to Mrs Kinne asking for information about the object and its owner.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Kinne replied with a letter detailing how she had begun making the dress as a teenager in Riga in the late 1930s, had taken it as her ‘most important possession’ when she fled the Soviet invasion of Latvia, completed it while a Displaced Person in Germany and wore it at protests for Latvian independence in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

It was clear that for Mrs Kinne the dress’s life and her own were inextricably interwoven. The story of how the dress was made and worn was also her story, connecting Riga with Wangaratta and adolescence with old age. Further still, however, it was apparent how much the costume had shaped Mrs Kinne’s experiences. Its thick and bulky fabric made her only suitcase heavy as she ran to catch the last Red Cross train from Gdansk to Berlin, and, on the day she wore it proudly for the first time, she met the man who would become her husband. She went to great lengths to make and keep hold of the dress, and each time she put it on the feelings it gave her to wear it—physically, emotionally, culturally and politically—formed an integral part of how she experienced the events in her life.

During her lifetime, Mrs Kinne assembled the story of making, wearing, keeping and giving the dress as a form of mutual biography. This was not, however, a biography in the conventional sense; it did not employ a completely linear narrative, and it was made as much from materiality as it was by words. The dress was not just a trigger to memory, it was a rich source of embodied knowledge about personal experience. Touching and talking about the dress

collapsed space and time, bringing Riga in 1939, a Displaced Persons camp in Germany in 1945 and the streets of Melbourne in the 1970s together in a single moment.

From early 2009, Mrs Kinne's dress will be on display in the new *Australian Journeys* Gallery at the National Museum of Australia. *Australian Journeys* explores the transnational character of Australian experience. It traces the passage of people to, from and across the Australian continent and examines how migrants, sojourners, tourists and travellers have built and maintained connections between places in Australia and places overseas.

In developing the exhibition, the *Australian Journeys* Gallery Development Team has sought to better understand how objects participate in, shape and express transnational historical experience. We have explored how objects—understood broadly to include things, images, media and text—connect people, across time and space, with their own historical selves as well as with places here and abroad. Drawing on recent material culture scholarship, we have employed a method of 'object biography' to examine the historical agency of particular objects and collections in mediating transnational experience. We have also paid particular attention to the idea that objects generate what film-maker David Macdougall has called 'being knowledge' and what we call 'object knowledge'—embodied understandings of the world that constitute the foundation for any understanding of lived experience.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, we present two 'object biographies' that reflect complex intertwinings of the life histories of an object and a human subject. We reflect on what the process of exploring the agency of the material world through 'object biography' might reveal about the development of transnational selves and their examination through biography. We also suggest the value of attending more closely to the ways autobiography and biography might take material as well as written forms, particularly in relation to the development of museum collections and museum exhibitions.

## Object biography

A focus on the flow of people, things, ideas and practices across national boundaries defines transnational scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Rather than seeing these flows as distinct streams, a growing body of work argues that places, people, things, practices and ideas, constantly in motion, shape each other.<sup>6</sup> An effort to understand better how things participate in this interaction has led the curatorial team at the National Museum of Australia to employ object biography as a method for researching collections and developing the *Australian Journeys* Gallery.

Object biography is an analytical process that has emerged within material culture studies as a way to reveal and understand object agency. As Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall have described it, an object biography examines an

artefact's life history to 'address the way social interactions involving people and objects create meaning' and to understand how these meanings 'change and are renegotiated through the life of an object'.<sup>7</sup> Such a biography might include information about an object's genealogy, its manufacture, use, possession, exchange, alteration, movement and destruction or preservation, obtained from a wide variety of sources. Considering an object's life in a dynamic, active relationship with human lives raises questions about how people and things articulate in culturally and historically specific ways. One set of questions revolves around how object relationships form, form part of, perform or represent a sense of self.<sup>8</sup> A second set arises from arguments for the agency of objects in these processes.<sup>9</sup>

Object biography makes notions of self and agency more dynamic, more complex and more culturally specific. It also suggests the merits of an approach to the biography of people that engages with material culture and an individual's personal, social and cultural relationship with objects. '[E]mphasizing the manner in which things create people,' Gosden argues, 'is part of a rhetorical strategy to rebalance the relationship between people and things, so that artefacts are not always seen as passive and people as active.'<sup>10</sup> This is the way in which much biography, even in museums, is written. When objects feature in personal biography, they are often positioned as relics or illustrations. This diminishes or obscures objects' agency in shaping a life by restricting them to memorial or representational roles, and limiting the range of their effects to impressions on a somewhat disembodied mind, rather than a sensing and perceptual body.

Understandings of lives and events experienced across the boundaries of nations can be enriched particularly by a conversation with material culture studies, which are increasingly moving towards explorations across the boundaries of materiality and subjectivity. Gosden and Marshall, reflecting on Marilyn Strathern's study of ideas of a distributed self in Melanesia, argue that attending to the complex relationships between people and things 'has radical implications for the notion of biography. Material things are not external supports or measures of an internal life, but rather people and things have mutual biographies which unfold in culturally specific ways.'<sup>11</sup> Gosden's articulation of an 'object-centred approach to agency' draws our attention to 'the effects things have on people', particularly the way 'our senses and emotions [are] educated by the object world'.<sup>12</sup> By exploring how subjectivity is created by the material world, Gosden has shifted the debate from focusing, at least initially, on the 'meanings of objects' towards a closer reading of their effects.<sup>13</sup>

An understanding of how embodied experience is created by the material world opens significant possibilities for researchers exploring the lives of people and how things have moved between places that each represent substantially different material and cultural conditions. Indeed, much of the recent attention given to

object agency and object biography can trace its origins to 'a broadening of research paradigms to include transnational movement and connection'.<sup>14</sup> In their influential articles on the social life of things, Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff proposed biography as a means to understand the agency of objects that moved through space and time.<sup>15</sup> Gosden's further articulation of the approach has emerged from analysis of the flows of people and goods associated with colonialism and imperialism in Papua New Guinea and newly Romanised Britain.<sup>16</sup>

Gosden applied his ideas about the effects of objects to a reading of change and continuity in the material culture of the period surrounding Britain's incorporation into the Roman Empire (150 BC – 200 AD). What emerged was an 'overwhelming impression...of variety, fluidity and regional difference'. This, he admits, leads naturally to an emphasis on transformation: how 'one set of forms becomes another'. This suggests that there is merit in careful readings of the 'logic' behind the creation of hybrid objects and perhaps, by extension, a hybrid self. Gosden writes:

Overall, cultural forms always have two conflicting elements: they are often made up of bits and pieces taken from many places on the one hand, but these are quickly formed into a coherent whole on the other...We should not spend time trying to identify the original elements of a bipartite Romano-British culture, but rather look at the logics by which the pieces were combined.<sup>17</sup>

These comments have valuable resonances for biographers. Gosden suggests that rather than linear readings of the intersection of two worlds, we might more usefully engage with the non-linear logics that create a hybrid material world, and, in turn, how this hybridity shapes human subjectivity.

More importantly, however, he argues that we need to move beyond even that idea towards notions of transubstantiation, 'which can look at how substances, such as stone, bone, metal or clay, take on forms and qualities which transgress the boundaries between types of substance'. Gosden writes:

Of even greater interest is that basic alchemy of human being, whereby other substances effect the flesh and blood object of the human body, thereby transmuting a series of objective qualities into subjective ones. The world changes not just in its forms but in its feelings and we can acknowledge that these two dimensions are always linked.<sup>18</sup>

As the boundary between people and things is conceptualised as being more fluid, as well as more various and culturally defined, a useful field emerges for the exploration of the links between 'people, things and ideas' flowing beyond national boundaries.

## Object biography and *Australian Journeys*

It is from within this field that the new *Australian Journeys* Gallery will evolve. Object biography has been employed as part of the exhibition development process to make the exhibition truly object-centred, and begin exploring a material history of transnationalism in Australia.

Curators have developed object biographies that encompass the following.

- The physical form of an object and its status as an example of a style, locating the object in relation to its ancestors and exploring how it has inherited and perpetuates certain physical characteristics.
- The materials from which an object is made and the techniques used in its manufacture, and an analysis of how these embody ambitions, practices, skills and material and social conditions.
- The life history of an object, providing a diachronic account of its history that encompasses its production, circulation, use and destruction.
- The social contexts in which it has 'lived', perhaps taking the form of a synchronic slice in which an object is located within a complex of objects as a node of social relations.
- The values associated with an object and the meanings attached to it by people as they produce, use and engage with it. These might include significances, memories, identities and concepts of personhood, and might range from personal associations to broad cultural frameworks.
- The enactment or performance of an object's meaning, including those moments in an object's life when the meanings and social relationships it embodies are performed, elaborated, witnessed and reproduced within a community.

Each object biography has revealed a particular form of transnational object agency. Not all of the biographies were about artefacts with detailed provenance or things strongly linked to a particular personal biography. In some cases, however, the object biography has explored a direct relationship between a particular object and an individual.

Two of these biographies follow. Both form part of larger narratives of conflict, occupation, displacement and relocation. Both link objects and autobiography. Each, however, in its particularity, reveals something about the complex ways objects and people shape each other.

**Figure 17.1:** This Latvian national dress was made and worn by Guna Kinne (nee Klasons) in Latvia, Germany and Australia in the second half of the twentieth century.



Photo: Dean McNicoll, National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20051391-030-wm-vs1.tif.

## Object biography: Guna Kinne's Latvian national dress By Karen Schamberger

Guna Kinne was born Guna Klasons on 6 June 1923 in Riga, Latvia. Her father was a seagoing captain and accountant. Her mother was an archivist in Riga's Latvian State Archives. Guna was born and went to school during Latvia's brief period of independence between 1918 and 1939. Latvians had been oppressed by foreign rule for more than 700 years until independence was declared on 18 November 1918. As Guna was growing up, the Latvian Government emphasised the importance of Latvia's 1000-year-old heritage by teaching national dressmaking in schools.

The first part of the dress to be made was the white linen blouse, decorated with red and grey cotton cross-stitch embroidery. The material was purchased in Riga in 1937 and was cut, embroidered and sewn by Guna at high school in 1939 under the supervision of the handiwork teacher. As Guna told me in an oral history interview in 2007:

I made the blouse at school. I had no particular feelings. It was a task we had to do, so I did it. We could actually pick what type of blouse we wanted and from which national region. I picked a particular one from the district of Nīca. But later I was really emotionally involved...I think I was seventeen years old then...my father gave me the material for the skirt, the jacket and a ready-made crown...I thought, my God, this is very rich, great gift, a national dress! But because I was at that age, I also said, 'My God, all that work which has to go into it?'<sup>19</sup>

The honour of having a national dress ensured Guna soon began the process of assembling its different components. She also acquired the publication *Novadu Tērpi (District Gowns)*, which contained the patterns for the various national dresses, drawn from regional costume.<sup>20</sup>

By choosing the Nīca dress, Guna was continuing a regional and a national tradition. Guna made up the red wool skirt while still at high school in Riga in about 1941. The women of Nīca began making red skirts for their national dress in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The Nīca jacket fabric is believed to have originated during the reign of Duke Jacob of Kurzeme in the seventeenth century.<sup>22</sup> In this period, the creation of the costume was a way for Nīca to express its own identity. By the early twentieth century, the regional styles were established and documented during the period of independence as 'national dress' in publications such as *Novadu Tērpi*. As Guna Kinne reflected in her letter to the museum:

The keeping 'alive' of the National Heritage seemed to assure that our nation was important enough to have a place amongst other nations. In

this light the Latvian National dress became very important, and to own and wear one showed the owner's pride in our small, insignificant and struggling nation...It became the custom to wear the national dress at any important national function but also as an alternative to an evening dress. It was the dream of any Latvian woman, specially a young girl, to own a national dress. It was very complicated to make and costly to buy.<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between national dress and Latvian identity, founded during the country's brief period of independence, continued to evolve throughout the period in which Mrs Kinne made and wore her dress. In the 60 years since she chose it, the Nīca dress has become a symbol of the Latvian nation as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

Latvia's independence would not last long. It was invaded three times in the space of five years: the Soviet Union invaded in June 1940; the Germans invaded in June–July 1941; then, between July 1944 and May 1945, the Soviet Union forcibly reoccupied the country. By the end of World War II, Latvia had lost one-third of its population: executed, killed in war, murdered in the Holocaust, allowed to die by deprivation in prison camps, deported to the Soviet Union and Germany and scattered in prisoner-of-war and displaced persons camps across Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Many Latvians, including Guna Klasons, fled Latvia as the second Soviet invasion was coming. Fearing her country's destruction, she took with her the remnants not only of her personal life but what she knew as the Latvian nation. The unfinished dress, pattern book and some photographs were all she took when she fled Latvia in about 1945 with her mother and sister. As she wrote:

At that time the dress, including the Latvian jewellery, was my most important possession, sentimentally and materially, and I took the dress and the unfinished jacket with me in my suitcase on a ship to Germany [Gdansk, now in Poland] while fleeing the USSR army.<sup>26</sup>

Her way of preserving and continuing her nation was to preserve and continue to make her national dress. The jacket in particular was made at this time. When she had worn the unfinished dress in Latvia, she had borrowed a jacket. She was able to imagine the finished jacket and, despite her difficult circumstances, was able to draw the pattern onto the material from the pattern book and then embroider it. It was finished in 1945 in Germany in the Russian Zone, as she noted in her 1989 letter:

It was in the suitcase also when I ran to catch the last Red Cross train carrying wounded Latvian soldiers from Gdansk to Berlin. Neither the suitcase nor the dress was harmed in the Berlin bombardments, and later I took it to Parchim, in Mecklenburg which on the close of the war became part of the Russian zone. There, desperate to find my family,



always short of food, fearing deportation back to Latvia, obtaining false documentation, forced to find new lodgings because of a Russian officer's rape attempt, I finished the jacket.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 17.2: The front and back of the jacket made by Guna Kinne, and the pattern book illustrations used to trace the designs.**



National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20082088-076-vi-vs1.jpg and nma.img-ci20082088-055-vi-vs1.jpg. The jacket is especially significant to Mrs Kinne because of the difficult and unusual circumstances in which she made it. Possibly as an expression of her individual taste and circumstances, the embroidery is slightly different to the pattern. The coiled pattern is larger and more free-flowing than that shown in

the pattern book. She has also extended the pattern further up the left shoulder. Her 1989 letter continued:

I had the completed costume in my only suitcase when I fled the Russian Zone. I was then thrown off the train at the border by Russian soldiers but in the dark, rainy night I, still holding the suitcase, fell down the railway embankment and was able to crawl back up to reach the last freight wagons of the train before it started to move and thus escape to the English Zone.

I wore the dress with great pride for the first time there at the Geestacht (near Hamburg) Latvian Displaced Persons Camp dance in December 1945 and met my future husband on that day. The dress was worn at many other dances during that period in [displaced persons] camps in the English and American Zones.<sup>28</sup>

Performances of traditional dance and song were arranged in the displaced persons camps and in Australia as ways of continuing the traditions of the Latvian nation outside its occupied borders. The performative aspects of Mrs Kinne's national dress were to continue, albeit in a different form, in Australia.

Guna Klasons married Arturs Kinne in 1946 in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. She and her husband left the port of Bremerhafen in October 1948 and arrived in Sydney a month later. The dress was worn again in Wangaratta, mostly at Latvian gatherings.

It was in Wangaratta that Mrs Kinne made the last piece of the dress according to her pattern book, in about 1957, when she felt too old to wear the crown. In Latvian tradition, once a woman married, her head covering changed to a head cloth or bonnet, thus completing her passage from adolescent maiden to married woman. Mrs Kinne was able to make that cultural transition by making the bonnet in Australia.

In September 1959, Mrs Kinne was invited by a Good Neighbour Council to join other 'New Australians' in national dress greeting Princess Alexandra of Kent when she visited Wangaratta. In an interview, Kinne answered my question about the events of this day:

How did I feel when I wore my Latvian dress? Well, in a way I was proud to show off the dress, because it was unusual, being red and all. But otherwise the reception was rather boring...it was standing around for hours and waiting and waiting and then—in two minutes the princess drove past.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 17.3: Guna Kinne wearing her Lativan national dress in Wangaratta in 1955.**



Photo: Arturs Kinne, National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20061760-002-vi-vs1.jpg.

**Figure 17.4:** The bonnet from Guna Kinne's national dress.



Photo: George Serras. National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20082088-086\_to\_087.jpg.



**Figure 17.5: Good Neighbour Council group in their national costumes waiting to greet Princess Alexandra, in Wangaratta, 1959.**



National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20061760-001-vi-vs1.jpg.

Wearing the dress in Australia also enabled Mrs Kinne to be overtly politically active when she wore the dress in two Melbourne rallies. The first rally involved walking in a procession to St Paul's Cathedral in 1968 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Latvia's declaration of independence. The second rally was in the 1970s to protest against Australia recognising the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union:

[This occasion] was a lot more emotional. Again we grouped together in St. Kilda Road, but then we walked up Bourke Street. In Bourke Street there were lots of people and some cried out, 'You Nazis, you Nazis!' We were so angry. How could they call us Nazis? The Nazis occupied us as well as the Soviets.<sup>30</sup>

The rally was probably worthwhile because [Prime Minister Malcolm] Fraser cancelled [former Prime Minister Gough] Whitlam's decision. Usually we felt as second grade citizens in Australia, we all stood out only in a bad way. This was sort of standing out in a good way, even if only externally.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 17.6: Guna Kinne wearing her Latvian national dress in Melbourne in 1970.**



Photo: Arturs Kinne. National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20061760-003-vi-vs1.jpg.

In 1989, Mrs Kinne made the decision to finally part with her dress because 'I have no female descendants I wish to donate the costume to an institution, preferably the National Museum'. This was a poignant moment in her life and the life of the dress, given the significance she had placed on the 'putting aside of this important banner from the past'.<sup>32</sup>

Guna Kinne's dress connects Latvia and Australia, and the protests on the streets of Riga at the time of the Soviet invasion with protests on the streets of Melbourne 40 years later. Interwoven with her personal biography, the biography of her dress connects Riga, Gdansk and Geestacht with Wangaratta and Melbourne. Their shared biography offers insights into the relationships between occupied and displaced people, material culture and national and personal identities.

## ***Dàn tre* bamboo musical instrument created by Minh Tam Nguyen**

**By Jennifer Wilson**

The *dàn tre*, translated simply as 'bamboo musical instrument', is the invention of Minh Tam Nguyen. Made from available materials first in Vietnam, then in the Philippines and then in Australia, the instrument was developed into its current form over 16 years. The inventive, dynamic and flexible nature of the *dàn tre*'s hybrid musical organisation is a reflection of Minh's interest in and knowledge of a number of different musical traditions.

Minh Tam Nguyen was born in Binh Dinh Province of central Vietnam on 25 November 1947. He began learning to play guitar when he was about thirteen years old, studying the theory of modern and classical music. Minh then studied music with the Redemptionist Order, a Catholic order founded in Italy in 1732. He eventually left the order and taught music theory to high school students for a number of years.

During the 1970s, Minh fought as a lieutenant with the South Vietnamese forces, known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. He began his service in 1968, graduating from the Political Warfare College of Dalat. He was captured by communist forces on 20 March 1975 and placed in a North Vietnamese 're-education' camp in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

While in captivity, Minh created a musical instrument inspired by the traditional instruments of the Central Highlands, but with a greater number of strings.<sup>33</sup> As Minh states: 'The *dàn tre* was invented at the Tea Plantation KTK in Pleiku Province, during the time the Vietcong forced me to [do] hard labour with many other prisoners as well.' Minh later recognised the significance of making an original bamboo musical instrument in those conditions, with music being a central part of Vietnamese tradition. In his words: '[There is] a lot of music [and] folk song in Vietnam...the Communists like to make a different way...we turned back to our music.'<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 17.7: The *dàn tre*, a 23-stringed bamboo musical instrument.**



National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ci20082088-190.

A piece of bamboo, wire and a tin were used to create the first *dàn tre*. The strings of that instrument were the hard wire found inside black telephone cable used by the US Army. The instrument, as Minh explained, evolved from 18 to 21 and then finally to 23 strings. Minh was moved to a number of different camps during his time as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese. During that time,



Minh was able to make improvements to the instrument, mainly increasing the number of strings, and to teach one of his fellow prisoners how to play the *dàn tre*.

The instrument, as donated to the National Museum of Australia, features 23 strings attached to a bamboo tube, 800 mm long. A four-litre olive-oil tin acts as the resonator at the base. The number-one guitar strings are attached to metal tuning keys in the form of Australian-made stainless-steel screw assemblies. The length of bamboo is reinforced with Australian-made metal bracing (hose clamps commonly used in cars).

The *dàn tre* has been inscribed with details of the instrument's musical interpretation. Western notation is ascribed in lead pencil to each string, numbered one to 23. The complex arrangement of strings is organised into six groups and played in the C major scale.

There are many traditional and hybrid stringed instruments or chordophones in Vietnam and throughout Asia that exhibit similarities to Minh's *dàn tre*. These include the *dàn bầu*, a single-stringed instrument, and the *dàn tranh*, a 16-string zither. Minh's instrument is also similar to the *gu zheng*, a Chinese zither with 16–23 strings, reflecting the influence of Chinese forms and theory on Vietnamese music. Other possibly closely related instruments are found in Japan, Korea and Mongolia.

When speaking with the museum's curators about the *dàn tre*, Minh noted that he had made the instrument with the intention of playing Asian and European music, as he had been educated in both forms and their variations. He observed that the instruments of his reference from the Central Highlands had five knots, or strings, and the European scales had seven notes. The 23 strings of the *dàn tre* allowed Minh to cover a greater range of notes, and therefore a greater range of music, than if he had used less strings.

Interestingly, while Minh had not given a public musical performance as a student or teacher of music, during his imprisonment under the Vietcong, he performed before approximately 4500 prisoners with his *dàn tre*. When Minh was released after six years, he left that instrument behind.

In August 1981, Minh escaped from Vietnam by boat with his eldest son, Anton Nguyen, still fearing for his life under communist rule. In Minh's words: 'It was a miracle we escaped.' It was also a miracle that they made it to the Philippines by boat, as they encountered strong storms en route and the boat nearly sank twice.

Minh made his second *dàn tre* while in the Palawan refugee camp in the Philippines. He recreated the instrument from memory, again using the materials on hand: bamboo, an olive-oil tin and some electrical line. Minh initially used bamboo tuning keys in this instrument, making them from sharpened or shaped

pieces that were placed through holes in the body of the instrument. There was an abundance of bamboo available at Palawan, and it was a building material utilised for a number of different purposes.

Minh and Anton lived in difficult and overcrowded conditions at Palawan for 17 months. Minh recalled that there were 7000 refugees in the camp when he arrived, with numbers increasing to more than 10,000 during his stay. Minh recalled: 'All the people were lucky, we had enough food...but the situation was so bad because we didn't have any houses to live in...we had to build our houses ourselves...make something to live in—we used trees from the forest.'

Minh acted as an information officer and translator in the camp. His knowledge of English, and the fact that he had an uncle living in Australia, helped secure his transfer with his son to Australia in December 1982. Minh was able to bring the second *dàn tre* with him, although Australian quarantine authorities held it for three weeks.

In Australia, Minh struggled to find employment, at first unable to understand the difficult Australian English pronunciation. He worked for the Commonwealth Employment Service in Brisbane and then for a law firm in Sydney.

Minh began playing his *dàn tre* at public events, and appeared on Channel 7's *State Affair* program in 1984. In January that year, he explained the making of his *dàn tre* to a conference of the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland concerned with locating and fostering different and endangered art forms among migrant groups. Minh told his story in Vietnamese and English, commenting that he could play Vietnamese folk songs, European songs such as those by Chopin and Australian songs such as *Waltzing Matilda* on the instrument. He then performed a song from each musical style, concluding his performance with *Waltzing Matilda*.

Minh's story and his *dàn tre* earned him a certain amount of fame, and he attempted several times to patent his invention. During this period, he replaced the bamboo keys, which were prone to slipping, with Australian-made screw assemblies, also reinforcing the bamboo and replacing the tin. He was very pleased to finally place guitar strings on the instrument, believing the quality to be better than the wire he had been able to find in Palawan.

In 1985, Minh began working as an immigration consultant, assisting Vietnamese and Chinese families who were having difficulty coming to Australia. He took on a number of music students, but in order to support his family financially he was unable to concentrate on his own music.

Though Minh travelled to Australia with his eldest son, he could not be reunited with his wife and three other children for many years. Feeling loneliness and separation from his family, Minh did not wish to part with his *dàn tre*; through it, he remained connected to the life he had left behind in Vietnam. The

instrument was first loaned to the National Museum of Australia for a temporary exhibition. Shortly after this initial contact, however, Minh's family—his mother, wife and three children—were able to join him in Australia. Once they were reunited, he was happy to donate the *dàn tre* to the museum.

**Figure 17.8: Minh with the *dàn tre* at his home in Sydney, March 1990.**



Photo: Dr E. F. Kunz for the National Museum of Australia: nma.img-ex20082168-002.

Minh feels a strong emotional attachment to the instrument that has played such an important role in his life. The *dàn tre* was, for Minh, a potent means of expression. In the mountains of Vietnam, in the Philippines and in Australia, he was able to bridge the cultural differences he encountered by modifying and adapting the instrument and his use of it, and retelling his story as he played it.

The history and cultural significance of Vietnamese music is a large area of research, beyond the scope of this discussion. Much of my research into this aspect of the *dàn tre*'s history has been drawn from the work of Vietnamese

musicologist Le Tuan Hung. According to Hung, traditional Vietnamese music is based on the concept that music is 'a means for emotional expression'.<sup>35</sup> *Tài tử* music, the chamber music of southern Vietnam, features four modes of expression: happiness, sombreness, tranquillity and sadness.<sup>36</sup> Put simply, by applying certain sets of technical conventions to their music, Vietnamese musicians are able to evoke these recognisable emotions for their audience.

Originality is highly considered in the Vietnamese tradition, with performers elaborating from a given framework in their own style. According to Hung, 'Musical compositions in *Hue* and *Tài tử* traditions are flexible and dynamic entities...the act of composing a piece is a continuing process in which the performers add their final touches to the work.'<sup>37</sup> In the case of the *dàn tre*, this continuing process can be seen in the creation of the instrument and the performances undertaken by Minh.

There is a long history of adaptation and invention in Vietnamese music and instrument making. As Hung states, '[B]etween the 1920s and 1940s a number of *Tài tử* musicians began to experiment with [W]estern instruments in their search for new qualities and colours of sounds.'<sup>38</sup> Most prominent among those instruments were the acoustic guitar and the violin. Vietnamese musicians adapted the Western instruments to enable them to produce the ornaments typical of *Hue* and *Tài tử* musical compositions. Bamboo forms the basis of many of these instruments, in their historical and modern forms. In many places, the physical and musical qualities of the new instruments are explained as part of a broader cultural tradition. For example, the character of a half or flat zither is often attributed to the splitting of a tube or round zither through the act of a god or mystical being or a related event.

Of course, music itself is an active agent in the story of the *dàn tre*, be it of Vietnamese, European or Australian origin. When performing in Australia, Minh played compositions from various traditions to illustrate the musical range of the *dàn tre* and the story of the instrument that had evolved in places related to those traditions. Titles included in recordings of the *dàn tre* made by Minh are *Clementine*, *Waltzing Matilda* and various Vietnamese folk songs (including *Hòn Vọng Phu*).

When Minh made his valuable donation to the National Museum in 1990, he also provided recordings of his *dàn tre* music, an explanation of the instrument and its musical scales and an oral history outlining his story and the story of the *dàn tre*. The musical recordings chosen by Minh presented the range of the instrument and his own interests. He was proud to visit the National Museum at its temporary site at Yarramundi Reach and see his *dàn tre* on display.

As part of my research for the *Australian Journeys* Gallery, I re-established contact with Minh to learn more about the instrument and his life since the

donation. He has returned to Vietnam on several occasions, maintaining contact with friends and family. Poor health and a continuing commitment to support his family have meant that he has not been able to pursue many of his musical interests. It is clear that Minh retains a strong connection with the *dàn tre* and continues to think of ways in which he could improve the quality and range of the instrument. In fact, he is in the process of making another *dàn tre*, this time using a plastic pipe and wooden-box resonator. The tradition of innovation in Vietnamese music continues in Minh's Sydney home.

## **Conclusion: objects make a transnational life**

More than 50 object biographies have been written as part of the development of the *Australian Journeys* Gallery. Individually and together, they have revealed some of the complexities of researching, communicating and understanding the interrelated life journeys of people and things. What began in the two cases here as object biographies of a dress and a musical instrument quickly revealed themselves to be interwoven with autobiographies created by the individual donors, and then further entwined with biographies created by the museum's curators in acquiring and displaying the objects.

In both these examples, in which donors chose to part with their treasured object as part of marking a change in their lives, we had cause to consider the creation of collections as a form of autobiography. When Guna Kinne donated her Latvian national dress to the National Museum of Australia in 1989, she wrote:

To part with one's Latvian National dress is similar to putting aside an important banner from the past. It is really not a costume because to wear your own national dress at a costume ball would be in very low taste. It is a symbol of one's ancestry.<sup>39</sup>

When she donated the dress to the museum, Mrs Kinne established a strong link between her own autobiography, the material history of the dress and the larger and longer history of Latvian culture. In the narrative she wrote for the museum, her description of each part of the dress was interwoven with the story of her life history. This account contrasts with her published written autobiography, which focuses more on her Latvian heritage, her flight to Germany and migration to Australia and which mentions her national dress only once.<sup>40</sup> Through the different media of her book and her dress, she expresses who she is as a person, a Latvian and an Australian, in different ways.

Not all of the object biographies in the gallery weave an individual's story so closely with that of an object. Objects exert agency in diverse and often interconnected ways: as repositories of memories, mechanisms for the transfer of skills, as sites for negotiating cultural frameworks, as arenas for imaginative escape, modes of connecting with lost family, or metonyms for other places or things. In every case, however, objects work as conduits for simultaneous

experience, collapsing geographical, temporal and perceptual differences. As people engage with them, the objects enable them to simultaneously experience and mediate multiple times, places and modes of being.

This, we hope, will also be true for visitors to the gallery as they encounter the objects in the exhibits. The display of Guna Kinne's dress and Minh Tam Nguyen's *dàn tre* in the *Australian Journeys* Gallery will represent a very different kind of transnational biography to those conveyed here in words. Exhibition making can also be seen as a form of biography, one that is non-linear, associational and that actively involves the experiences of the visitor.<sup>41</sup> While preparing the text versions of object biographies, we noted how difficult it was to write so that the agency of people and objects—and the sensory and non-linear character of object knowledge—was retained within a biographical narrative. It will be instructive to compare these different biographies when the gallery opens.

The preparation of object biographies as part of the development of these and other exhibits in the *Australian Journeys* Gallery suggests that objects play a particularly important role in the shaping of transnational lives. Changes in a person's location necessarily generate new interactions between a person and a different material world. These interactions—and efforts to sustain previous interactions by continuing to use, make and treasure objects from another place—shape how a person experiences their life across multiple places. Paying close attention to how a person absorbs, rejects, accommodates and reinvents these forms reveals valuable information about the nature and meaning of those experiences.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Guna Kinne to Jerzy Zubrzycki, 1 February 1989, National Museum of Australia (hereafter NMA), File 89/63, f2.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Sally Fletcher to Guna Kinne, 7 March 1989, NMA, File 89/63, ff 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Guna Kinne to Sally Fletcher, 23 March 1989, NMA, File 89/63, ff 6–10.

<sup>4</sup> See Macdougall, David 2006, *The Corporeal Image: Film, ethnography and the senses*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, p. 6. We have explored this idea in detail in Wehner, Kirsten and Sear, Martha (forthcoming), 'Engaging the material world: object knowledge and *Australian Journeys*', in Sandra Dudley (ed.), *Museums and Materiality*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Curthoys, Ann and Lake, Marilyn 2004, *Connected Worlds: History in transnational perspective*, ANU E Press, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Sheller, Mimi and Urry, John 2006, 'The new mobilities paradigm', *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 38, pp. 207–26.

<sup>7</sup> Gosden, Chris and Marshall, Yvonne 1999, 'The cultural biography of objects', *World Archaeology*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 169–78; Kopytoff, Igor 1986, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 64–91.

<sup>8</sup> Gosden and Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> Gosden, C. 2005, 'What do objects want?' *Journal of Archeological Method and Theory*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 193–211, esp. 193.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

- <sup>11</sup> Gosden and Marshall, 'The cultural biography of objects', p. 173.
- <sup>12</sup> Gosden, 'What do objects want?', p. 197.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- <sup>14</sup> Hoskins, Janet 2006, 'Agency, biography and objects', in C. Tilley, W. Keane, S. Kuchler, M. Rowlands and P. Spitzer, *Handbook of Material Culture*, Sage Publications, London, p. 75.
- <sup>15</sup> Appadurai, Arjun 1986, 'Introduction', and Kopytoff, Igor 1986, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,' in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, pp. 3-63 and 64-91. See also Tilley, C. 2006, 'Objectification', in Tilley, Keane, Kuchler, Rowlands and Spitzer, *Handbook of Material Culture*, pp. 60-73.
- <sup>16</sup> See, for example, Gosden, C. and Knowles, C. 2001, *Collecting Colonialism: Material culture and colonial change in Papua New Guinea*, Berg, Oxford.
- <sup>17</sup> Gosden, 'What do objects want?', p. 209.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview by Karen Schamberger with Guna Kinne, Noble Park, 8 January 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> It was issued by the *Latvijas Lauksaimniecības Kamera* (Latvian Agricultural Camera) in 1939.
- <sup>21</sup> Apinis-Herman, A. 1993, *Latvian Weaving Techniques*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, p. 98. This book contains a detailed technical description of the material, techniques of manufacture and diagrams of the Nīca skirt (pp. 98-104).
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>23</sup> Letter from Guna Kinne to Sally Fletcher, 23 March 1989, NMA, File 89/63, p. 3.
- <sup>24</sup> *Latvian National Costumes. Volume 2: Kurzeme*, 1997, Museum of History of Latvia, Riga, p. 357.
- <sup>25</sup> [http://www.occupationmuseum.lv/lat/services/gramatu%20faili/3\\_okupacijas.pdf](http://www.occupationmuseum.lv/lat/services/gramatu%20faili/3_okupacijas.pdf), accessed 15 November 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> Letter from Guna Kinne to Sally Fletcher, 23 March 1989, NMA, File 89/63, p. 4.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Guna Kinne, 8 January 2007.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Letter from Guna Kinne to Sally Fletcher, 23 March 1989, NMA, File 89/63, p. 5.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Montagnard' was the French name assigned to the many ethnic groups occupying the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Minh based his instrument on the so-called 'zithers' of that region, especially of the *Gia Rai* group. Zithers in the region, such as the *din goong* (or 'new goong'), utilise local bamboo and wood, with a calabash, a type of gourd, as the resonator. Examples of the *din goong*, being of a similar size to the *dàn tre*, generally feature between nine and 13 strings. Minh also cited the 'old goong' (*goong kram*) as an influence.
- <sup>34</sup> Channel 7, *State Affair*, January 1984.
- <sup>35</sup> Hùng, Lê Tuấn n.d., *Hu and Tàì Tữ Music of Viet Nam: The concept of music and social organisation of musicians*, Australia Asia Foundation, ePapyrus, available from <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~aaf/ch2.html#note1#note1>
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Hùng, Lê Tuấn 1998, *Dan Tranh Music of Vietnam: Traditions and innovations*, Australia Asia Foundation, Melbourne, p. 54.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- <sup>39</sup> Guna Kinne, letter to Sally Fletcher, Acting Curator, Department of Social History, National Museum of Australia, 23 March 1989, p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup> Kinne, Guna 1993, 'Anug', in A. Markus and E. Sims, *Fourteen Lives: Paths to a multicultural community 14*, Monash Publications in History, no. 16, pp. 80-100.
- <sup>41</sup> See Trinca, Mat and Wehner, Kirsten 2006, 'Pluralism and exhibition practice at the National Museum of Australia', *South Pacific Museums: Experiments in culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, November, pp. 6.1-6.14.