

Museums as Spaces for Well-Being

Suene Megan Tan

Senior Director, Museum Planning and Audience Engagement
National Gallery Singapore

Beyond their primary role as keepers of memories, museums play an important social role as well. Research increasingly shows that there is a link between cultural consumption and mental well-being. In an ageing population, museums are particularly well-placed to provide opportunities to enhance the health, well-being, and lifelong learning of visitors, as this essay demonstrates using the experience of National Gallery Singapore.

The role of museums in enhancing well-being and improving health through social intervention is one of the foremost topics of importance in the museum sector today. With an ageing population and evolving expectations on the social responsibilities of museums, the sector is facing an unprecedented challenge in how museums can better meet the needs of its communities in a more holistic and inclusive way.

Internationally, there is increasing data showing the link between cultural consumption and well-being, with more conclusive evidence finding that challenging one's mind aids cognitive health. An ageing population presents museums with both challenges of retention and access, and opportunities for enhancing visitors' health, well-being, and lifelong learning. This has led to a critical shift in thinking about international museum policy and practice.

Recognising the impact that the arts have on different dimensions of well-being, both in terms of feeling good (i.e. the experience of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity, and engagement), as well as functioning well (i.e. the experience of positive relationships in which we have some control over our lives, and a sense of purpose), this essay outlines the different modes in which the National Gallery Singapore

(the Gallery), has been able to contribute to the growing evidence base on the potential of the arts in improving health and well-being of individuals and communities, and bringing about positive change in society.

Project #1: art therapy for seniors at risk of dementia

In 2016, the Gallery embraced the opportunity to use art from the National Collection to engage seniors at risk of dementia, when Professor Kua Ee Heok of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and his team, co-led a nine-month study to find out if art can improve the overall well-being and cognition of seniors at risk of dementia (Boh 2016).

This evidence-based study, which was funded by a donation to NUS, and carried out using the Gallery's art, was an extension of a larger 10-year longitudinal Jurong Ageing Study that NUS Medicine started in 2013, in a bid to reduce depression and dementia in the elderly residents of Jurong.

For nine months, 24 elderly participants came down to the Gallery for art and reminiscence therapy. This was followed by an art-making workshop which was conducted offsite. Each 45-minute session at the Gallery started with a short mindfulness practice, where participants were asked to focus on their thoughts, breathing, and body sensations. Participants would then be invited to gather around the selected art piece and engage in meaningful conversations by sharing their perspectives, experiences, and feelings about

the artwork in the museum, facilitated by specially trained guides from the Gallery and NUS.

For each artwork, participants would be introduced to the title of the artwork, its artist, and provided with a brief description of the artwork. Guiding questions were then asked based on the theme of the artwork (e.g., “If you can give this painting a title, what would it be?”), visual observations (e.g., “Which part of this painting captures your attention?”), feelings (e.g., “What do you feel when you look at this painting?”), and specific details of the artwork (e.g., “Why do you think the character of this painting was drawn this way?”). Freedom of expression was encouraged throughout all sessions.

The Gallery, in consultation with art therapists and psychiatrists involved in the project, selected art pieces which were relevant to these older adults, whereby the themes or events portrayed in each art piece was linked to Singapore’s past and held cultural and social significance, with the intention that these might provide stimuli for recall and discussion among the participants.

To prepare for the programme, the Gallery’s volunteer guides, who were committed to facilitating the sessions at the Gallery, also underwent training to understand group dynamics and different approaches that could be adopted to elicit emotions and use art to relate to the memories and life experiences of the participants.

Brain scans and readings of anxiety levels, as well as memory and cognitive functions, were taken before the start of the programme, three months later, and at the end of the nine-month project. The findings of this pilot holds promise, as results from this initial study indicated that the combination of art viewing with art making has been effective in

improving memory and attention in persons with dementia. The results have since been published as a research article in *The Arts in Psychotherapy Journal*, and the Gallery is glad to have contributed in some way towards this exploratory study (Lee et al. 2019).

The Gallery is currently partnering social service agency, Dementia Singapore, to pilot a toolkit that aims to reduce barriers of access for persons with dementia and their caregivers, and increase more regular access and use of the Gallery and its collection.

Solidarity in times of the pandemic

2020 was an incredibly challenging year, and many front-line workers, particularly our healthcare workers, had worked tirelessly to keep the virus at bay as Singapore battled COVID-19.

In February 2020, the Gallery partnered the Singapore Medical Society in a public campaign to rally the public to post various works of art with hashtags #SGArtforHCW and #NationalGallerySG to encourage and provide psychological support for our healthcare workers. Gallery staff, volunteers, the artist community, students, and members of the public contributed over 300 artworks via social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Some of these artworks are permanently displayed at the Ng Teng Fong General Hospital today so that healthcare workers can continue to view these messages of support as they go about their daily responsibilities.

Project #2: *The Care Collection*: caring through the arts by National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum

It was also during this time that the opportunity to use art to support the mental well-being of our healthcare workers arose, and National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum (SAM) came together to develop *The Care Collection* (National Gallery Singapore 2021c) which can be used by professional art therapists and counsellors as content for their art therapy practices, as demonstrated by *SingHealth's iTHRIVE ARTpreciate* art therapy pilot for healthcare workers (Ho 2020).

Recognising that art can be a powerful tool that can bring comfort and relief from the everyday, both museums partnered a resident art therapist within the SingHealth Group who used *The Care Collection* to design an art therapy programme aimed at supporting healthcare workers and preventing burnout. *The Care Collection* features a selection of artworks from the National Collection specially curated around seven themes: Courage, Connection/Disconnection, Resilience, Hope, Growth, Self-Love/Self-Compassion and Being in the Present.

Between June 2020 to May 2021, the programme supported close to 160 healthcare workers from 12 institutions within the SingHealth Group. Through the assessment done with the participants, findings showed an improvement in the stress levels of participants, where those with moderate stress levels prior to the programme, indicated lower stress levels after attending the programme. Over 70% of the participants surveyed indicated that the programme was critical in supporting the relief of their stress levels and enhancing their individual well-being.

Project #3: art x wellness at National Gallery Singapore: *Slow Art*

Following the positive reception of the Care Collection for art therapy for healthcare workers, the Gallery designed a public programme to support the mental well-being of individuals and communities through art using artworks from the collection.

Launched in July 2020 at the height of the pandemic as a new public programme initiative, *Slow Art* was inspired by the principles of slow looking and mindfulness (National Gallery Singapore 2021b). The 60-min programme takes participants on a deep-dive into one artwork from *The Care Collection*. Participants follow a series of creative observation exercises which engage their different senses to explore the intersection of visual art and emotional wellness. Through facilitated group conversation, participants freely share their thoughts and engage with one another. Key words

gathered from the post-programme survey saw participants describing their slow art experience as “inspiring”, “calming”, “reflective”, and “encouraging”. These words reflect the therapeutic aspects of the programme.

Among the 200 participants who participated in *Slow Art* since its launch in 2020 were a group of foreign domestic workers. This outreach effort was made possible with the help of our Sister Guides—foreign domestic workers who were trained as guides to lead art tours in their respective home languages (Burmese, Tagalog, and Bahasa Indonesia) under an initiative launched in 2019 by the Gallery (Dumlao 2020). The Sister Guides offered *Slow Art* to their fellow domestic worker communities during a time when social gatherings were not allowed.

As of December 2020, *Slow Art* has been offered as a free on-demand programme to support staff and clients from the social service sector as well as other healthcare workers. Participants of *Slow Art* have cited that the programme has improved their overall emotional well-being. Many shared that they left the programme with a sense of community and support, with a deeper level of connection both with themselves and with others through the sharing of personal experiences using art.

Museums as part of a larger ecosystem

Internationally, there is considerable practice and innovation in museums around health and well-being (MuseumNext n.d.). There is growing literature suggesting that regularly visiting museums contributes to emotional well-being, by “providing a sense of connection, optimism and hope, self-esteem and resilience, support, quiet, rest and sanctuary, social capital and relationships, meaningful pursuits and by providing a safe, rich environment with access to arts and culture” (Gan 2019).

Responding to health and well-being needs means museums have to look outside the institution and start with the needs of their communities (National Gallery Singapore 2021a). Being aware of community needs helps museums to focus their attention on how best they can use their collections, programmes, exhibitions, and collective experience to meet those needs. However, museums cannot do this work alone. To be sustainable, every museum needs to understand the role that it can play within its ecosystem and embrace the right partnerships to create sustainable outcomes for the communities they serve.

We hope that the sharing of these case studies contributes to the growing body of museum practice addressing community health and well-being and inspires different ways of using collections. □

About the Author



Suenne Megan Tan is the Senior Director of Museum Planning and Audience Engagement at National Gallery Singapore where she supports the Gallery's vision of inspiring a thoughtful, creative, and inclusive society through innovative and accessible exhibitions and programmes that generate positive societal impact, and pave a new way of thinking about the present and future role of museums and cultural institutions in cities. A member of the Gallery's senior leadership team, Tan currently oversees the Gallery's planning, governance, legal, research, programmes, and learning portfolio cluster. Suenne brings over 20 years of museum experience, having been with the Gallery since its inception as an independent entity in 2009, and prior to that, served as the Deputy Director of Communications, Programmes and Development at the Singapore Art Museum.

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