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As the academic year draws to a close, it is fitting to reflect on a busy year at the Writers' Centre.

Indeed, for the leadership team of the Centre (Jenika, Karin, and myself), this so-dubbed ‘interim year’ has been all about reflecting, stepping back, and asking people what they want. We are here to support both students in their writing endeavours and Faculty in their endeavours to teach students writing. But what does this actually mean in the context of Yale-NUS in 2018-19? The response – overwhelming – spoke to the enthusiasm, ambition, and complex nature of writers at the college. It would be impossible to detail all our activities – Jenika has the full list if you want to enquire further! – but to highlight just a few:

• We have developed support for curricular student writing in the common curriculum (from first semester to capstone) with a series of dedicated sessions led by our Writing Lecturers, Carissa, Ilia, and Larry, and aided this semester by our visiting research scientist, Isabella;

• We have released additional funds to Peer Writing Tutors to enable them to work with Faculty to produce disciplinary writing study aids. As ever, we are very grateful to our Peer Tutors who have, for example, produced writing handouts on subjects from creative writing, to art history, to economics, or have run workshops on LaTeX and the science research proposal;

• We have released funds for student extra-curricular writing activities, particularly via the student groups (e.g. the Lit Collective and the Octant), to help them bring in a range of speakers to offer insider advice on journalism and publishing with external companies. And let’s not forget Larry’s creative writing breakfast club or Isa’s exciting revamp of The Haacker!

I am amazed by what we have achieved this year, and I am so grateful to all in the Writers’ Centre for their passion and dedication in making so many things happen. There is plenty for the new Director to work with and build on, and I wish everyone very happy writing in the years ahead! ✶

Steven James Green
Director of the Writers’ Centre
Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose; the more things change, the more they stay the same, wrote French critic Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr in 1849. Yet often history is told only through the lens of change; broad sweeping macrohistories and social science theories portray global processes through a series of causal pathways leading to observable outcomes, drawing a line from what was to what is.

Microhistories - historical analyses centered on an individual person or community during a narrowly specified period of time - challenge these linear conceptions of history. Some microhistories focus on places and times of little macrohistorical significance. However, many also analyze otherwise unknown communities experiencing a well-known change or event, such as World War II, the Protestant Reformation, or the slave trade. Through narrative-style, self-reflexive analysis, and connections to threads of macro-level change, microhistorians are able to explicate the human experience of common people living through macrohistorical events.
Countering the conventional narrative that historical events of global significance caused widespread and drastic upheavals that rippled through communities, microhistory shows that as much changed, much also stayed the same. By drawing out the specific forces acting on a community, microhistory sheds light on the traditions that were upheld, the bonds that remained unbroken, and the prejudices that persevered throughout times of change.

Microhistory offers a means of analyzing the myriad of nuanced forces shaping a single individual’s or community’s response to national, continental, or global changes and events. Retrospective theorizing in history and social science may capture the changes and outcomes that occurred on a macro scale, but such generalized explanations do not capture the pace of change, the pressures involved or the points of continuity. This is not to say that macrohistorical approaches to understanding processes of change are without value; rather, just as macrohistory has methodological value for illustrating trends and generalizable causal mechanisms, microhistory has methodological value for in-depth, nuanced analyses of macro changes on a micro scale.

While larger historical accounts or social science theories may be able to account for the institutions and leaders that determined generalizable and observable outcomes, microhistory sheds light on the multitude of microscale actions and reactions, uncertainties and contingencies, doubts and fears which shaped the process of reaching those outcomes at the level of the individual.

In that sense, history may even be thought of as a kind of aesthetic project. Like artists, musical composers and novelists, we ruthlessly attempt to make meaning out of seemingly disparate and meaningless material. We synthesize human lives – lived experiences – with our knowledge of broader social, political, economic, and spiritual factors to produce a larger truth. If that is the case, then history should no longer be thought of as a collection of dead and inconsequential facts, of times long past without any relation to the present moment. It morphs into a task of tremendous importance. What kind of truth are we fashioning? How do we become better at making use of the past – which includes real experiences of real individuals – in an adept and constructive fashion? How do we amplify the truth concealed within these events?

It may be all too true that we construct the histories of other peoples, cultures, and ideas, as a preparatory task for the real goal: to make sense of our lives. We are embedded within larger forces, which we amalgamate into ourselves, and transfigure our lives into a work of art.
At an exhibition in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum titled *Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and Other Treasures*, there are no labels nor explanations for the objects on display – some of which crowd the walls from floor to ceiling. Curated by Wes Anderson and Juman Malouf, the exhibition’s visual style echoes that of Anderson’s films with its highly organised yet random arrangements of paintings, sketches and eclectic objects. A contemporary museumgoer would likely find this mode of display fresh and intriguing, for it seems to stray far from the conventional public art museum, for which we may look to the Louvre as a model. Yet if we consider the history of the cabinets of curiosities – whose modes of display the *Spitzmaus Mummy* exhibition seems to emulate – there appears to be more similarities between curiosity cabinets and the public art museum than it seems. Through considering the contexts in which cabinets of curiosities were created and used, this essay will present the public art museum as a direct development from the notion of curiosity cabinets.

**Cabinet of Curiosities**

*BY KATHY POH, CLASS OF 2020*

The following paper was written for Professor Samar Faruqi’s course *Exhibitions and Sites of Display*
Cabinets of curiosities were prominent in elite society during the mid-sixteenth century, and perhaps this can be used as a starting point to examine the history of these rooms. [1] Arthur MacGregor suggests that royalty, religious leaders, scholars and other individuals “responded to an ideal that had been given its essential form in embryo two centuries earlier by Petrarch in his De vita solitaria... (which extolled) the virtues of a life dedicated to solitary scholarship.” [2] It may be inferred that these curiosity cabinets began essentially as private spaces, created by educated individuals for themselves to further pursue knowledge. This knowledge tended to be diverse – for example, the cabinet of Francesco I de’ Medici (r. 1564–87) housed rare stones, metals, weapons, writings and medicines, among other objects. [3] In this sense, it seems completely different to the notion of a contemporary museum which functions as a public space accessible to a broader spectrum of society of varying levels of understandings of exhibited artworks, often of a specific field.

But I would like to propose this: with regard to displayed objects, the contemporary public art museum is a distillation of early cabinets of curiosities. Gabriel Kaltemarckt, writing in 1587, prescribed the cabinet of curiosities as necessarily containing “sculptures... paintings... [and] curious items from abroad”, yet goes on to explain that since items from abroad were “regularly obtainable in large quantities in Germany and Italy”, he prioritised the collection of sculptures and paintings.[4] Items in cabinets of curiosities were prized for their difficulty of procurement, and perhaps the demise of the importance of foreign items was a result of the increase of trade. In contrast to functional objects or items from nature, paintings and sculptures were necessarily rare because styles and subject matter would have been specific to individual artists. Moving from then into the present, the rarity of such art – especially those preserved over centuries – has perhaps further amplified in relation to curious objects, given the increasing ease of travel and trade.

Kaltemarckt’s prescription of an ideal cabinet of curiosities may have been a notion either widely held or influential, for in the seventeenth century, picture galleries became spaces in which members of European aristocracy honed their knowledge and asserted their social rank through the appreciation of art. [5] We may still consider these picture galleries to be cabinets of curiosities, given that they tended to reflect similar forms of excess or clutter in their organisation, as well as variety – for picture galleries, the latter was reflected in the intermingling of “works of different artists”, as well as manners and schools. [6] Citing Jan I Brueghel’s Allegory of Sight and Smell as an example, Gage also writes about how the gallery is an “overly full space... in which all objects cannot be readily observed without some being moved”. I suggest that this implies how despite paintings and sculptures being visual media, picture galleries still had a sense of physicality that was present in earlier cabinets of curiosities where objects were meant to be studied and closely examined. Yet while public art museums gradually cordoned artworks off from being touched and also opened access beyond members of the aristocracy, at least one aspect of the audience experience remained – the practice of judgement.

Explaining art connoisseurship in the seventeenth century, Carlo Ginzburg argued that animal hunting – a hobby familiar with aristocrats – and art connoisseurship both “entailed the close observation of signs before one might speculate with confidence upon that which could not be

[2] Ibid.
perceived directly by means of the senses."[7] As such, the perusing of works in a gallery was more about interpretation than merely being in physical contact with art. At this point we should perhaps distinguish knowledge and judgement as separate terms: while knowledge can be said to be more based in facts and direct experience, judgement had more to do with taste which can only come with a – in Gage’s words – “a well-stocked mental collection.”[8] Picture galleries and public art museums, the latter whose collections often originated from princely cabinets, were ideal places to build up this mental collection because of the variety of works that they contained. Gage speculates that painted pictures of collections may have served as training grounds of “would-be connoisseurs”[9] – perhaps amateurs who were not yet able to gain access picture galleries – and in this way, there may already have been some motivation to widen audiences of art, which eventually blossomed with the advent of public art museums where the presence of museum labels and guided tours, so common today, emerged as additional forms of support for aspiring connoisseurs.

The notion of picture galleries serving the socially-attuned activity of connoisseurship may seem to contradict that of cabinets of curiosities being spaces for solitary scholarship, but in the seventeenth century, the cabinets of curiosity seemed to primarily serve social functions, and as such had already been distanced from Renaissance ideals. As MacGregor writes:

When Count Guidobald Thun, Archbishop of Salzburg from 1654 to 1668, decided to establish a Kunstkammer in his official residence, it seems to have been with the intention of diverting his many diplomatic and clerical visitors rather than with any more purposeful programme. [10]

Cabinets of curiosities and picture galleries were thus spaces for collectors to impress their audiences – this comes across especially clearly when we consider how scholarly and princely cabinets personified their owners, indicating a level of social standing and even, through published catalogues, “perpetuating the collector’s achievements after his death by merging for all time his identity with that of the collection.” [11]

MacGregor emphasises the contribution of self-interest towards the presentation of cabinets, citing Francesco I de’ Medici’s shifting of his private stanzino into the public alberia of the Uffizi as aimed at “(glorifying) the Medici, celebrating the dynasty’s past achievements and underpinning the legitimacy of its rule.” [12] This example is fascinating because it may perhaps be seen as a precursor to how princely collections when converted into state collections in public art museums continued to serve national interests. Carol Duncan, in explaining the features of the Louvre, notes that ruling governments and monarchs often “resorted to traditional princely iconography, images and insignia… (to identify themselves) as the nation’s cultural benefactor.” [13] Since many princely and scholarly cabinet collections seem to have been converted into public museum collections without the need for much alterations of content,[14] it might even be construed that the biggest mark of difference between private cabinets and public museum collections was merely ownership and audience, but the contents, modes of display and function as a self-interested space (for individuals and the state respectively) remain similar.

In conclusion, there are multiple aspects of cabinets of curiosities from the sixteenth to seventeenth century that we may identify in early public art museums – and as such we may consider public art museums to have been a direct development from these cabinets. Yet while this is a plausible claim as shown through this essay, caution has to be taken to avoid essentialising the history of cabinets of curiosities and the public art museum as a linear development. While many of the early cabinets functioned as private spaces for individuals and their aristocratic or scholarly social circles, there were also cabinets of curiosities that were open to wider audiences such as that of Albrecht V of Bavaria (r. 1528-1579) in Munich, which was easily accessible to visitors and was “devised to proclaim and to celebrate Bavaria’s wealth, self-confidence and stability”.[1] With this example, we might also say that the model of a princely cabinet as an expression of the strength of an electorate already existed far before public art museums came into being; but nonetheless there are close links between the public art museum and cabinets of curiosities.

[1] Ibid, pp. 139.
[10] Ibid, pp. 139.
[12] Ibid, pp. 139.
[14] Ibid, pp. 139.

Find the full bibliography at https://writerscentre.yule-nus.edu.sg/newsletters/
INDIVIDUALITY AS RENAISSANCE ITALY: BURCKHARDT’S MULTIPLE CONFIGURATIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

BY NICHOLAS LUA SWEE YANG, CLASS OF 2019

The following excerpt is from a paper written for Professor Taran Kang’s course The History of History

At first glance, a paradox lies at the heart of Jacob Burckhardt’s The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy (hereafter Civilisation). Burckhardt claims that the individual first develops in Renaissance Italy, a claim so important that he makes “The Development of the Individual” the title of a whole part of Civilisation. [1] Yet this focus on the individual, each with their unique genii at particular moments in time, appears to sit uneasily beside Burckhardt’s synchronic approach. Rather than crafting a chronological narrative that privileges questions of causation, like other 19th-century historians of his time, [2] Burckhardt emphasizes description to convey the Renaissance spirit, seemingly compressing difference and novelty over an admittedly-long period in favor of a broader cultural unity.

Why would Burckhardt write a synchronic history about an age that was particularly interested in individual development? [3] How do we square the synchronic approach’s potential to efface complexity with the singular idiosyncrasies of Civilisation’s individuals? A close examination of Burckhardt’s configurations of the individual in Civilisation offers us a way out of this interpretive paradox. [...]
Burckhardt’s Dante: The Individual as Renaissance Microcosm

In addition to peppering Civilisation with kernels of incandescent individuality, Burckhardt discusses individuals who encompass the Renaissance. To establish how certain individuals are microcosms of the Renaissance, I discuss Dante, arguably the quintessential example of the Renaissance microcosm. His unique genius dominates Civilisation, for he appears so powerfully and repeatedly in the text as to be representative of Burckhardt’s Renaissance. Other individuals who are Renaissance microcosms may not recur in quite so protracted a manner, but the reader encounters them frequently and memorably enough to recognize their representative status.

On a textual level, Dante emerges so often in Civilisation that his individual presence occurs on a vastly different scale from earlier individuals like Filippo Maria. Where they are kernels, Dante is a dominating presence. West astutely notes that Burckhardt “cites Dante more than any other figure” in Civilisation. [4] A glance at Civilisation’s contents page reveals that Dante, like no one else, is referenced in seven whole subsections, “The ‘Divine Comedy’” or “Dante as politician” for example. [5] Even when he does not make it into a title, he appears as a prominent, often even the first, example in the text. When Burckhardt discusses “Natural Science in Italy,” the first example invoked concerns how The Divine Comedy contains “the hints and proofs of Dante’s scientific interest in nature.” [6] When Burckhardt traces how Renaissance Italy began to appreciate natural beauty, he references Dante’s poetry, claiming the first “unmistakable proofs of a deepening effect of nature on the human spirit began with Dante.” [7] Dante’s presence permeates the text so much that he becomes coterminous with the Renaissance.

Dante’s individual genius also shines through in Civilisation, his uniqueness amplified even more than that of the embedded individuals. Like them, he is a polymath interested in many fields – I have already mentioned his scientific and aesthetic appreciation of nature. Dante is even a linguist who writes “the first complete treatise on any modern language.” [8] Dante’s highest accomplishment, unsurprisingly, is as a poet. For in his poetry ‘[t]he human spirit had taken a mighty step towards the consciousness of its own secret life.’ The revelations in this matter which are contained in the ‘Divine Comedy’ itself are simply immeasurable: and it would be necessary to go through the whole poem, one canto after another, in order to do justice to its value [...] [9]

His poetry embodies the interiority so crucial to individuality and The Divine Comedy, his magnum opus, constitutes an encyclopedia [10] that contains within it the entirety of human complexity. Towering above all individuals, Dante’s incomparable genius becomes the archetype of Renaissance individuality.

Burckhardt develops Dante’s profound status even further, crowning him not just as representative, but herald, of the Renaissance. Dante becomes the first Renaissance individual, both presaging and engendering the flourishing individuality to come: “[f]or Italy the august poet, through the wealth of individuality which he set forth, was the most national herald of his time.” [11] The achievements of his genius make possible other aspects of the Renaissance. He is “the first who had trod this path,” [12] the path of the post-Classical political thinker – in writing De Monarchia, [13] Dante made the political thought of later men like Machiavelli possible. As poet, Dante was the “first artist [...] to consciously cast immortal matter into an immortal form,” speaking of divine transcendence in a language and style suited to it. [14] Rather hyperbolically, Burckhardt considers Dante the progenitor of Italian as a language, as “[t]he Tuscan dialect became the basis of the new national speech” because of “the great poem of Dante.” [15] Without Dante, who contained the Renaissance’s qualities in microcosm, the Renaissance in Italy could not have happened.

Primary Sources

Secondary Sources

Find the full bibliography at https://writerscentre.yale-nus.edu.sg/newsletters/
YALE-NUS LITERARY AWARDS
2018-2019 WINNERS

FICTION
1st: Erika Loh '22 - "House-hunting"
2nd: Gem Tan '19 - "Bogeying with a Singaporean Bogeyman"
3rd: Myle Yan Tay '19 - "In Case of Emergency Open
Otherwise Do Not"

NONFICTION
1st: Chrystal Ho Jia Min '19 - "prayer cranes"
2nd: Adeline Loh '21 - "Green with Guilt, Green with Grief"
3rd: Chia Yaim Chong '20 - "family"

PLAYWRITING
1st: Myle Yan Tay '19 - "Shells"
2nd: Anthea Julia Chua '20 & Jirasiri Techalapanarasme '19 - "Flamingos"
3rd: Cheang Chu Ying '21: "Bree Won't Talk About Her Baby"

POETRY
1st: See Wern Hao '20 - "flaring & recurring"
2nd: Al Lim '19 - "Imprint (iii, iv)"
3rd: Syafiqah Nabilah '20 - "If I Could Hold The World In My Hands I Would Probably Squish It"
3rd: Cheang Chu Ying '21: "Bree Won't Talk About Her Baby"
Honourable Mention: Adeline Loh '21 - "Fruits as a Love Language"
Honourable Mention: Jonathan Lee '20 - "If Self is a Location"
When we first started house-hunting we made several false assumptions. The first of which was that there would be enough land in the city state to accommodate the two of us. But you really can’t blame us for our ignorance. We grew up on pirated films through which we were fed picturesque images of the sea and desert landscapes, and subsequently formed ideals of setting up home in scenic wilderness by the time we came of age. Why not? We thought. We were part of nature after all. However, at 7909 people per square kilometer and counting, it was an impossible dream, no matter how sick we were of being shoved, abused, and walked in on during our love making by intruders. At 21, we were gasping for air in the crowd, and naturally, our immediate recourse, though naïve, was to seek a secret place of our own.

We lived apart in identical square boxes at the top of our separate buildings. As rehearsed, Guy and I navigated the serpentine maze of our apartment complexes, meeting each other somewhere down the center, among the falsely cheery orange and red paint jobs, the crater-like construction sites and the infrequent tiny windows. I looked around at the dust, the soot and the shipwreck of cast-aside shoes on doorsteps, then gazed at our touching hands. He said, assuringly, “I know, I know.” I knew of a woman in my German class who still lived with her father, despite being 35 and engaged due to the severe land scarcity. He said, “Don’t get your hopes down, we aren’t even there yet.” I said, “I know, I know.”

We boarded an outlying island-bound ferry, along with various daytrippers and tourists. Departing the main island, we watched as our spliced and partitioned city coagulated into one large shadow under a tropical sky. Two Indian men sitting adjacent to us spoke in hushed tones. The younger
of the two was distracted, fiddling with his Nintendo Switch. The other man was a professor type, too old to be his lover, too young to be his father. He gazed at us placidly, but he might have been looking at the diminishing city through the window over our heads. Oxygen levels were reduced in planes. Did they do this in ferries as well? The passengers were rocked to sleep, but Guy and I remained wide awake, impervious to the underhanded tactics of our captain.

He said, “Look, there.”

He was pointing in the direction of a cluster of clownish, garish buildings. “That’s my house.” It was funny he referred to his home as his house, rather than the more accurate terms of flat or apartment. It reminded me of the universal way children had of drawing their homes: a triangular roof, a rectangular body and square windows, whether they lived in shoeboxes or terraces. Thus a home denoted a house. In a way this was the reason we were on that boat, together, seeking a long-forgotten childhood sketch of a love nest.

As we gazed through the plexiglass, the older man next to us interjected with a mild comment on the weather. It looked like it would rain any moment now, he said. We turned to him, and he introduced himself as Andrew. He said he taught science at the local university.

“Are you house-hunting, too?” I asked, when a survey of his belongings revealed no fishing net or picnic basket, no evidence typical of pleasure-seekers. He wore plain sandals and practical cotton clothes.

“No,” he responded in faint amusement. “I’m tagging kingfishers.”

“It’s only February,” I said. “Is it breeding season already?”

“Yes,” he answered, smiling. “There’s a kingfisher pair Nat and I track yearly by the gorges. It’s likely they will return to the same place, like a recurring dream. We hope to spot them again.”

It would have been uncomfortable to talk to a complete stranger if Andrew hadn’t had a melodic, sonorous voice that I found myself captivated by. He had the power of a snakecharmer. While he spoke, I hardly noticed the sea outside as it lapped against the ferry. He said, “I watched the pair as they built their nest for the first time, tunnelling into the bank with such fierce determination. The sturdiness of the nest wasn’t what struck me, though it was certainly an impressive piece of architecture by kingfisher standards. It was how inseparable the two were, building with their heads together. Later the male stayed close to the female while fulfilling his fishing duties. They had a territory of up to a kilometer, but he stayed near their breeding ground. They communicated throughout the day, singing to each other.

“I would be guilty of anthropomorphism if I said they were driven less by the biologically coded need to construct, mate, and breed, than their devotion for each other, but I can’t help wondering.”

Nat’s controller buzzed in the silence of the cabin. Our eyes fell on the diffident student. Andrew affectionately mentioned Nat’s tendency to flush out colonies of birds. As the professor spoke, Guy’s attention drifted to the student’s video game, offering to help him. I heard him whisper conspiratorially, “That’s a boss fight.” Nat must have grinned.

“Where are you getting off?” Andrew asked.

“Pulau Hantu” — Ghost island, named after its low population number in stark contrast to the density of the city. They said by nightfall, you could hear crickets along with your heartbeats.

I added, “And I assume you’re getting off at the gorges.”

“Yes, we’ll wave at the two of you from across,” he smiled.

“Andrew,” I began. “I can’t help but ask, what if you don’t find them this time?”

He thought about this for a moment.

“I’ll be glad to have seen them in the height of their season,” he answered simply. “This is all I could’ve asked for.”

As they disembarked, Guy whispered to Nat, “Good luck with your quest.”

Nat glanced up from his game, and nodded. “With yours, too.”

Afterwards, Guy and I alighted at Pulau Hantu, inhaling the salt air with pleasure. We leaned over the gangplank and watched seabirds glide across the water as the wind whipped, sticky and humid against our skin. On the lip of the island was the lighthouse and its connecting dome-shaped house.

Something stirred within me, believing that I was setting sight on our future home for the first time. Our home, our house, these interchangeable terms.
an excerpt from
flaring and recurring

by see wern hao, class of 2020

Ahma Sings Her Elegy

After David Wong’s

“For The End Comes Reaching”

i wish for the end
within these walls, concrete
as my husband’s hand
no longer aches for mine, complete
devotion to the stove as altar, i stand beside
offerings of pork,
five-spice, shallots fried
tossing the well-oiled wok

a process repeated
until the nerves in my wrists were spliced
as the ends of joss sticks, depleted
smoke escaping, my body is only the price
of nourishing the child of my child, concealed
in tissue, packed in tupperware, conceded.
Often work rushes headfirst into sight and I am dizzied with the myopia of routine, but then at times clarity dawns in slivers; sobriety takes over, and I realise with some unease, and always a deep wonder, at how absurd it is that I am here at all. The history not just of myself but of humanity, the Earth, the Cosmos, is so incomprehensibly vast that it is tiring to try to conceive of it all - hence the transition, in this comic, from the familiar Yale-NUS suite into the unfamiliar; the sun rises, you are elsewhere; you are everywhere. This culminates into a ‘book’ of places and times where the lottery of birth might have otherwise deposited you - each as removed from Singapore as I could muster. Each book contains a multitude, and multitudes of books cascade into a cosmic lake, reflecting an even larger history - that of the Universe. It’s all very romantic, and on that note, if I could make an improved version of this comic, I’d draw plainer scenes from real life, instead of grand, picturesque stills. Nonetheless the overarching message, if not overly optimistic, stands: I would hope to take nothing (in the present) for granted. The tension between large and small I should never hope to reconcile.

Vanessa Thien Tshi Shu was a participant of the creative writing workshop on “Graphic Storytelling” by Sonny Liew on March 21, which was part of a series of events around the theme “Writing History Creatively.”