

Evocative research in art history and beyond: imagining possible pasts in the *Ways to Heaven* project

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Abstract

This article discusses a particular project that attempted to make art-historical research evocative as well as analytical by employing rich, interactive multi-media. This reliance on evocative material extended techniques practised by television drama-documentaries and considered their legitimacy and potential within academic art history.

Keywords: art history, world history, microhistory, new historicism, interactive storytelling, interactive narrative, new media, evocative research, practice-based research, Christian Orient, Renaissance, Armenia, Ethiopia

1 Introduction: interlinked histories

The *Ways of Heaven* project began with an interest in the four fifteenth-century pilgrim hostels (Armenian, Ethiopian, Hungarian and German) at the southern side of the Basilica of Old St Peter's in Rome. The initial project proposal envisaged these compounds, now mostly lost, and the relevant parts of the surrounding Borgo, reconstructed as a navigable 3-D model. The reconstruction was to allow for a better understanding of the environments in which the communication and cultural exchange between different groups of foreigners took place. However, when the creative team began looking at the project's materials, it became apparent that diverse traces collected from books, manuscripts and on locations (in Rome, Armenia, Ethiopia, etc.) could not converge into one 3-D model. Such a model would foreground the speculation about the hostels' appearances instead of highlighting their roles as places of diverse cultural encounters. We felt that with our subject matter another—more pluralist—approach could be of benefit.

Our personal inclination to develop more inclusive research approaches to art history is further justified by the field's recent attempts to

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reevaluate its preconceptions and consider art within extended, multi-focal and contested historical, political, social and geographical environments (cf., Jenkins 1995, Thompson 2000, Munslow 2001). One of art history's relevant recent initiatives is 'world art studies' (Summers 2003, Kaufmann 2004, Kaufmann and Pilliod 2005, Elkins 2007, Carrier 2008). An inclusive, polyphonic vision of history promoted by world-history approaches can help to develop worldviews that do not separate human activities into major or minor cultures, high or low arts, centres and peripheries.

In accordance with this conceptual context, the *Ways to Heaven* project is a component of a larger research undertaking that investigates the arts of the Christian Orient. Research in this underexplored area can help to uncover interactions between Oriental Christians and Europeans, creating a better balanced understanding of the world in the fifteenth century. Commonly, this time of the Renaissance is discussed as one of the most significant periods in art history. However, until recently, the Renaissance studies privileged Western worldviews and adhered to common storylines (on the influence of Vasari, e.g. on the formation of 'Renaissance' as a concept, see Didi-Huberman [2005] and Campbell [2008, p.49]). An inclusive study of the fifteenth-century Christian Orient can help to enrich the concept of the Renaissance by showing the involvement of other cultures in its formation.

For example, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, considered to be the 'dark ages' of Armenia, are particularly under-explored (Kouymjian 2004, p. 1). And yet, this period is important because 'just as these years witnessed the annihilation of the Armenia of kings, they prepared the way for a cosmopolitan, mercantile nation ready to compete in a modern world dominated by the West' (Kouymjian 2004, p. 2). What approach might one take in order to contribute an Armenian viewpoint to the study of this unevenly explored period in the history of arts? What strategy can one adopt to problematise the strong influence of existing Western preconceptions conditioning our reading of history and appreciation of that

period's arts? The subsequent sections illustrate the emergence of one possible approach.

2 Evocative enquiry

This approach is aligned with the agenda of broadening the study of art works to include the surrounding worlds. While such worlds can be studied in various ways, we see distinct value in focusing on the particulars of specific encounters where 'the task of understanding ... depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual' (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, p. 6; also cf. their book on new historicism, Geertz [1983] on local knowledge, Gray [2001] and Brown [2003] on microhistories). Consequently, the questions we began asking were close to those proposed by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Herder: 'What? Where? Under what circumstances? From what sources ...?' (Herder 1993).

To illustrate, among the visual sources available to the project were the drawings by Marten Jacobszoon Heemskerck van Veen, a Dutch artist who drew a series of sketches depicting the Basilica of Old St Peter's and the surrounding areas in 1532 (e.g. see Figure 20 and Figure 21). Originally, we planned to use these drawings as references for the construction of 3-D models. However, considering them, we realised that, in addition to the landscapes and buildings, the drawings show intriguing human figures (Figure 1). Some of them could be cardinals on horseback, peasants, pilgrims, guards, mothers and more. Who were these people? What were they doing in the Vatican? What were their stories? Seeking a historically appropriate way to address these questions, we decided to base our approach not on the reconstructions of appearances but on the events experienced (or possible) in these places.

2.1 Art as stories

Our chosen device for accessing the local and individual was the journey narrative. Journey narratives are not only common, they are, literally or meta-



Figure 1. Figures in Heemskerck's drawings. Far left: a procession moving towards the entrance to the Papal palace, passing the Old St Peter's; left: a woman with a child; right: a rider of status with a servant; far right: a worker with a basket.
Source: Fragments of drawings by Marten van Heemskerck, about 1535. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett.

phorically, central to many human experiences, perceptions and communications (cf. Lakoff 1980). In their many incarnations, stories have always been fundamental to human engagement, communication, learning and understanding (Bruner 1999). Recently, narrative inquiry emerged as a qualitative research method that utilises storytelling to help researchers to understand a phenomenon or an experience rather than to provide a logical or scientific explanation. The object of narrative inquiry is to understand through interpretation. Accordingly, it changes the central epistemological question from 'how to know the truth[?]' to 'how we come to endow experience with meaning[?]' (Bruner 1986, p. 12, for a similar argument, see Kramp 2004).

Approaches relying on journey narratives have been recently attempted in largely textual works where they proved useful for narration and comparative analysis (e.g. see Dalrymple 1998, Davis 2007). These works also demonstrate how diverse contextual material can be organised into stories that help the reader to relate to the protagonists' lives.

Our project—called *Ways to Heaven*—focused on two fifteenth-century voyages. One of these journeys began in Armenia (Figure 3) and another in Ethiopia (Figure 2). They both led to Rome where, it is likely, the travellers resided in the Armenian and Ethiopian compounds next to the Basilica of Old St Peter's. This article focuses on one of these journeys, the one that began in Armenia. We know about this journey of pilgrimage from the fifteenth-century chronicle written by Martiros Erznkatsi, an Armenian bishop and pilgrim from Erznka in Central Anato-

lia, who between 1489 and 1496 travelled from Armenia to many European destinations including Rome, Venice, Paris and Santiago da Compostella before returning to the Near East. The only existing French translation and the Armenian original can be found in Mardiros and Saint-Martin (1827). In this document, Martiros describes his travels along the major pilgrim routes, mentioning the architecture and art he encounters on the way. He explains the hardships of his undertaking and talks about his fatigues, sorrows and elations.



Figure 2. An Ethiopian character puppet, photographed as if in the midst of action. It is modelled after depictions on the bronze doors of St Peter's done by the Italian artist Filarete, finished 1445. He showed Ethiopians as men with long beards and turbans, wrapped into plain cloths. To contemporary Italians they seemed poor. Figurine by Christopher Hobbs.



Figure 3. Armenian character puppet, photographed against the blue background for further extraction and integration with other content. The Armenian cone-shaped monk's headdress, 'veggar', is typical. The cross on the headdress is worn only by the Catholicos (head of church), not bishops like Martiros. Figurine by Christopher Hobbs.

Martiros's journey provoked us to reconstruct his cultural background and juxtapose it with the cultural environments he experienced in Europe. His chronicle provides an opportunity to contribute to the world-art-history project because it includes unique personal impressions of the Christian Middle Easterner. The fact that he mentions some of Europe's famous art works, such as the quadriga on St Mark's in Venice or the bronze doors of St Peter's in Rome make this chronicle particularly fascinating. And yet, when read in isolation, the chronicle's narrative is often dry and abstract. For example, on Rome, Martiros writes:

then we embarked and for 13 days travelled to Ancona, and from there in 30 days we reached Rome, which God may guard. There are the saintly and very glorious bodies of the Princes of the Apostles, Saint Peter and Saint Paul. We went to pray to them and to ask them for the remission of our sins, those of our parents and of our benefactors. We stayed in Rome for 5 months, and we visited all of the holy sites. The relics of the holy Apostles are outside the city, to the north. In the east

is a small town, very close to the city; the river flows between the two. It is called Sant'Angelo. The portico of the church of the Holy Apostle is turned towards east; it has five magnificent great doors. The one in the middle is of heavy metal; and on one of the panels is Saint Paul and on the other panel Saint Peter. West of Rome and opposite the palace of Nero is the place where St. Peter was crucified (Mardiros and Saint-Martin 1827; translation from French by Christiane Esche-Ramshorn).

And so on, enumerating important locations in and around the city. This pilgrimage account is unsentimental and concentrates on the main attractions, presumably because their catalogue can be useful for other Armenian pilgrims. Even as a catalogue, a narrative structure can be useful because it exemplifies a pilgrim route and illustrates how the attention of the protagonists switched from one object or situation to another. If a narrative in question follows an extended journey, the log of encounters provides a pattern that incorporates diverse cultural artefacts into an overarching structure.

2.2 The value of emotions

Furthermore, even when the narratives do not provide ready-to-use and detailed descriptions, the focus on personal, small-scale and story-specific contexts can emphasise the emotional potential of historical encounters. For example, Martiros's chronicle includes fragments that can suggest his experiences and feelings. Thus, he writes:

I took the blessing of St. James and I left for the extremity of the world, that is to say the extremity at the river of the Virgin, where there is a church which was constructed by St. Paul's own hands, and the Franks call it Sainte-Marie-de-Finisterre. I suffered fatigue and many pains during this trip; and I met a great number of vicious wild beasts. We encountered the 'vakner' (meaning unclear: perhaps a bear or a bull), a wild and very dangerous beast. How, I was asked, could you save yourselves when even a company of 25 cannot pass them? I then went to Llanes,

where the inhabitants also eat fish, and where I did not understand the language. They treated me with the greatest distinction, and took me from house to house, and wondered how I have been able to escape the 'vakner'. I then passed many cities at the border of the Universal Sea; and even if I did not understand the language, the pope's letter was of great service. ... I saw a great ship ... and so I went to see the priest of the place to ask to be invited on this ship. I cannot any longer walk, I said, I have no strength left. Those people were very surprised to hear from which far-away country I came. ... We embarked on Tuesday of Quasimodo and travelled the world for sixty-eight days until we reached the extremity of the world [Sainte-Marie-de-Finisterre] (Mardiros and Saint-Martin 1827; translation from French by Christiane Esche-Ramshorn).

This passage emphasizes that architectural or artistic works the Martiros encountered on the way were not perceived by a generic person but by a particular traveller experiencing particular events. Narratives that consider interactions between cultures can benefit from taking the ever-present reality of such circumstances into account. Cultural performances, dramatic social events, everyday experiences, preconceptions and changing perceptions can contribute to the tasks of historical representation that understands artworks to be integral to their dynamic and subjective contexts.

2.3 Art as art

When particular people in particular circumstances encounter particular cultural artefacts, how can one partake in their subjective versions of reality? What research strategies can convert suggestions emanating from surviving sources (such as the Martiros's chronicle) and artefacts into reconstructions able to frame the researchers' experience in reference to the perceptions of historical protagonists?

Contemporary art-history practice accepts that historical sources can be enriched with contemporary or near-contemporary visual material or

descriptive prose and poetry. Our discussion aims to contribute to this practice by emphasising the value of emotional and dramatic content as an important context to learning. Didi-Huberman writes:

the efficacy of ... images is not due solely to the transmission of knowledge—visible, legible, or invisible—but that, on the contrary, their efficacy operates constantly in the intertwinings, even the imbroglio, of transmitted and dismantled knowledges, of produced and transformed not-knowledges. It requires, then, a gaze that would not draw close only to discern and recognize, to name what it grasps at any cost—but would, first, distance itself a bit and abstain from clarifying everything immediately. ... There would also be, in this alternative, a dialectical moment—surely unthinkable in positivist terms—consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of letting go of one's knowledge about it (Didi-Huberman 2005, p. 16).

Didi-Huberman's answer to the art history's preoccupation with explainable signs was an advice to employ Freud's concept of 'dreamwork'. His own readings of historical images are largely textual, hermeneutic endeavours. We suggest that this line of thinking can be usefully extended if artistic potentials of interactive multimedia are employed as valid and productive methods of research.

As, Herder argued:

in poetry's gallery of diverse ways of thinking, diverse aspirations and diverse desires, we come to know periods and nations far more intimately than we can through the misleading and pathetic method of studying their political and military history. From this latter kind of history, we rarely learn more about a people than how it was ruled and how it was wiped out. From its poetry, we learn about its way of thinking, its desires and wants, the ways it rejoiced, and the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations (Herder 1993, p. 143; also see a parallel discussion in Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000)).

In the contemporary context where, on one hand, the possibility of objective reporting has been refuted and, on another, new types of media have become accessible, this emphasis on art's power to tell stories about art sounds particularly suggestive. In response, this article exposes the principles of research employed during the *Ways to Heaven* project and reflects on whether such projects can contribute to the emergence of a more evocative art history.

2.4 Towards an evocative art history?

The *Ways to Heaven* project shares many characteristics with other forms of representations, such as TV documentaries, feature films using historical materials, educational multimedia, interactive museum expositions, as well as with fictional accounts in literature, theatre or film. Our approach is distinguished from these endeavours by its focus on enquiry rather than on representation or entertainment. It employs poetic, dramatic, interactive, experiential and immersive techniques to create evocative reconstructions of historical encounters with art and architecture. It does rely on rich representations but seeks to utilise them as devices for reflection that can trigger discussion and analysis within collaborative research teams.

In its emphasis on the context, this approach is different from 'evocative criticism', of Heinrich Wölfflin, John Ruskin and Johan Winckelmann, that was characterised by the 'reductive focus on compositional "facts" internal to the artworks and often amounted to invention of arbitrary and authority-seeking interpretations (Deamer 1991, p. 31). Instead, our stance can be described as quasi-ethnographic—a characteristic attitude of participant observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarised cultural reality' (Clifford 1988, p. 121). While true participation in the historical events is impossible, an evocative reconstruction of the historical lifeworlds can highlight otherwise unobvious meanings or restage forgotten controversies.

While different from 'evocative criticism', our approach is compatible with the efforts to develop evocative enquiries in a variety of fields (e.g. see

Goodall 2000a, 2000b, Richardson and Adams St Pierre 2000, Woods 2006). To date, such efforts have largely been confined to the development of writing as a method of enquiry, even though there is a growing recognition of other forms that include performances, museum displays, exhibitions, designs or hypertexts (e.g. see Prosser 1998, Banks 2001, Hockings 2003, El Guindi 2004, Pole 2004, Sullivan 2005, Pink 2007).

In this context, an important motivation for our work is a desire to develop approaches that could contribute to the development of equivalent evocative enquiries in art history.

3 Evocative computing

With this motivation in mind, our practical implementation integrates a number of existing techniques and is innovative not because of its technical achievement but as an experiment in historical research.

The recent proliferation of digital technologies has led to an increasing utilisation of computers in the humanities. However, as Alhoven and Droon observe, as yet 'historians and IT specialists have not established a fruitful communication, and therefore do not exchange views, problems and solutions' (Alkhoven and Doorn 2007, p. 42). Similarly, Boonstra *et al.* (2004, p. 100) argue that the current usage of computers in historical studies does not reflect the complexity of prevalent research questions and that true collaboration between these disciplines should result in new integrated approaches and not only in exchanges of concepts.

Many current discussions of history and computing focus on 'historical information science'. (e.g. see Schreibman *et al.* 2004) The tools and applications of such science include, for example, digitisation, database creation, issues in archiving, metadata creation, searching, etc. We suggest that in addition to the above approaches, art history can benefit from a closer reliance on a growing body of creative practice that utilises digital technologies to explore the experiential, performative, dynamic, place-specific, tactile, visual, interactive, affective, emotional, dramatic

and narrative capabilities of computer-supported environments. Within this domain, non-linear and interactive forms of narrative have emerged as a particularly promising field of practice. These new narrative structures have the potential to extend and diversify the powers of traditional narratives (Murray 1997, Ryan 2001).

Commonly, these innovative approaches to narrative, especially in the domain of art history, focus on education, tourism or entertainment. This article seeks to emphasise the usefulness of interactive narrative not only in representation but also in research. Exploring this challenge during our work on the *Ways to Heaven* project, we developed a research workflow structured around non-linear narrative and a proof-of-concept prototype of an interactive environment for analysis and reflection through evocative representations. The subsequent sections discuss two examples drawn from this project.

3.1 Interactive narrative as the structure of enquiry

Ways to Heaven embeds Martiros's chronicle into an interpretative framework that links historical visual art, maps, poetry and music with artistic reconstructions, contemporary photography and critical analyses. Exhibited side by side and integrated into sequences, these sources can amplify and make obvious dramatic tensions and aesthetic contrasts that could otherwise stay unnoticed. They help to construct multimedia sequences that expose how the historical artefacts were encountered by historical personae. The interface of this interactive environment affords varying modes of access. Freedom to explore, interpret and reconfigure the sources exposes the interpretative process of the authored narratives and allows for comparative analyses potentially leading to alternative interpretations.

We experimented with several technical implementations but settled on an environment run in Flash on a typical desktop computer. This interactive environment is capable of displaying text, images, audio and movies in multiple layered and parallel combinations. In principle, the resulting system can be formatted for the deliv-

ery on a CD or via the web and, if deemed useful, more mature versions of it might take these forms. However, the prototypes that motivated this article were developed in support of research deliberations rather than for broad dissemination in some finite state. As such, they were designed to extend existing research practices. These practices involve multiple types of digital and non-digital media and present research experiments to small audiences potentially coming from different fields but sharing a vested interest in some aspects of the project (see Roudavski [2010] for the discussion on the social context and meaning of interactive environments). The most common audience in this case is the research team itself and a primary goal of the interactive system was to support productive deliberations among its participants.

To support construction and comparative analysis of alternative narratives, the interface of the *Way to Heaven* prototype can work in three modes: (1) the one-window mode focuses on *experience* by presenting the content as a continuing narrative that can be redirected in response to interactive actions; (2) the three-window mode focuses on comparative *exploration* by providing simultaneous access to distinct interactive-narrative lines; and (3) the multi-window mode focuses on *analysis* by allowing fully flexible access to all types of content.

The rough assembly in Figure 4 demonstrates possibilities given by this approach. Collage-making, resulting in assemblies like the one shown in this image, is a technique of rapid experimentation with spatial arrangements, relative scales, framings, perspectives, lighting alternatives and colouring options. It supports flexible, exploratory analysis of the inherent qualities of the sources as well as of their narrative and expressive potentials. An image in Figure 4 can serve as a preliminary composition for a more completed sequence (evidencing an idea) or be used in its raw state with the process of its assembly visible and the original sources used in the collage identifiable (when the object is to trigger a substantiated speculation or test out an argument).

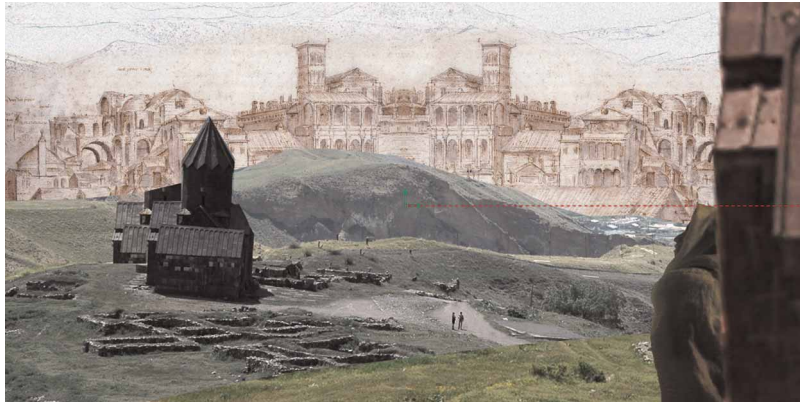


Figure 4. The interface in its continuous-narrative, single-window state. The image is a rough montage combining fragments of retouched contemporary photographs, a photograph of a figurine, and a mirrored perspective of the medieval Rome by van Heemskerck for the background. The background drawing is by Anonymous (sixteenth century), Hermann Egger, *Römische Veduten, Handzeichnungen aus dem XV. bis XVIII. Jahrhundert zur Topographie der Stadt Rom* (Wien: Verlag Schroll&Co. 1932), Figure 20. Image assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.

The three-window mode of the prototype (Figure 5) allows the users to follow three lines of narrative at the same time. For example, one window can be dedicated to the Armenian story, the other to the Ethiopian story and the third to the meta-narrative that includes commentary and generic information such as maps. Each of the narratives is interactive and can be advanced indepen-

dently. This mode emphasises the similarities and differences between multiple possible worldviews by simultaneously exposing the relevant cultural artefacts in the context of two different journeys.

In the multi-window mode (Figure 6), users can choose the number of windows to display. They can control the windows' positions/dimensions and choose which type of content each

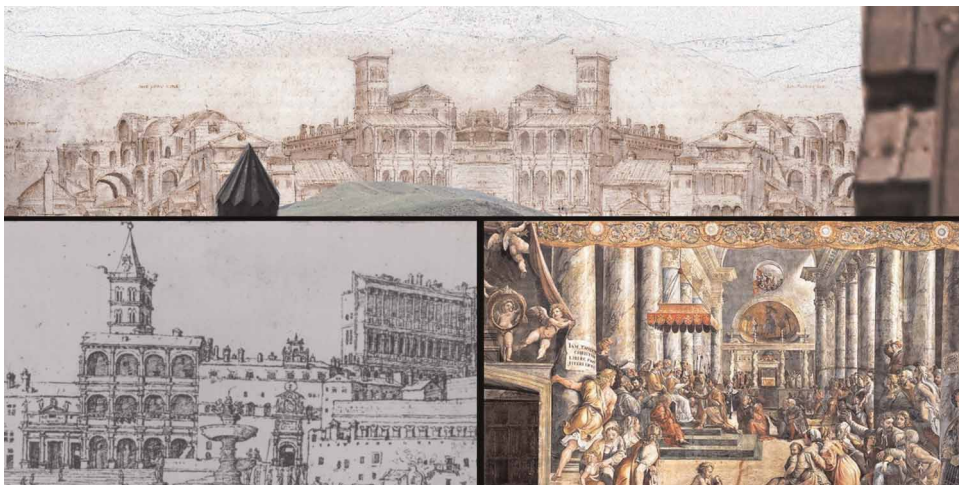


Figure 5. The interface in its three-windows state. Top: see Figure 4; bottom left: van Heemskerck, Chatsworth, about 1535, Coll. Duke of Devonshire; bottom right: Raphael's workshop, *Donation of Constantine*, 1523–1524. Fresco, north wall. Sala di Costantino, Vatican. Image assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.



Figure 6. The interface in the multi-window state. Top left: text fragment; bottom left: see Figure 5. middle: manuscript fragment, Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, in Latin, copied by Girolamo di Matteo de Tauris for Sixtus IV; top right: see Figure 4; bottom right: see Figure 5. Image assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.

window displays, with no restrictions. As dictated by the circumstances of their research situations, users can follow the integrated narratives, inspect the logic of the available scenes or see the unprocessed original sources and their metadata. This mode supports flexible rearrangement of content, integration of expert analyses, curated artists' interpretations, users' notes and so on.

The opportunities offered by interactive narrative are, of course, not limited by the particulars of our implementation. The brief description of our prototype included above is not intended as a framework or even as a particularly successful example. Instead, we hope readers will find it inspiring as a creative provocation for further work into structuring research interactions as 'what-if' interactive narrative. In our experience, the very task of considering the order and logic of these narratives can trigger collaborative relationships and elicit creative discoveries that seem unattainable in any other way.

3.2 Heterogeneous assemblies as a way of thinking

To illustrate the productive considerations that come together through the effort of telling a coherent and plausible (visual) story, this section

includes conceptual storyboard images prepared during the development of an interactive sequence concerned with the Martiros's departure from Armenia. These images exemplify our approach to the selection and integration of sources.

The description of Martiros's homeland at the moment of his departure foregrounds landscapes, art and architecture that surrounded him at home.

For example, Aghtamar Island is an important site that would have been familiar to Martiros (Figure 7). The island served as a residence for the Armenian King Gagik (908–943/944) and the surviving church was built between 915 and 921. From 1116 and until 1895 Akdamar Island was the location of the Armenian Catholicosate of Aghtamar. In 1915 many resident monks were killed, buildings destroyed and the church looted. Martiros would have likely visited the Catholicos prior to embarking on his journey.

The citadel of Van would be another spectacular site familiar to Martiros and integral to his notion of Armenia. Discovery of these images and their integration into the story situate Martiros's personality within concrete and suggestive environments.

The collaborative task of storyboarding can lead to surprising discoveries. For example,

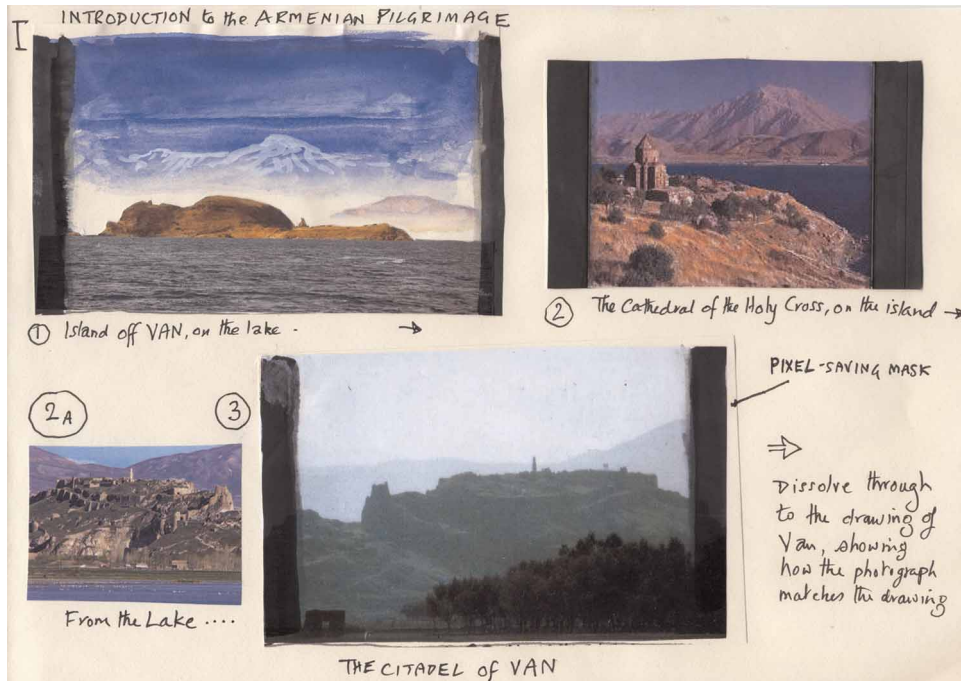


Figure 7. Departure from Armenia sequence. Top left: Aghtamar Island, lake Van, and the church of Holy Cross (Surp Haç), a collage of photographic and painted elements; top right: as top right, a contemporary photograph; bottom: views of the citadel of Van (on the mainland and in sight of the island), from the lake and from inland. Image assembly and original drawings by Christopher Hobbs.

Figure 8 revealed that a historical drawing that did not seem to seek accurate proportions matched with an unexpected precision a contemporary photograph of the same site. In a similar way, the plausibility of towers shown in the drawing is confirmed through an integration of a fragment extracted from a contemporary photograph, as shown on the foreground of the collage.

Figure 9 exposes our reflection on the Martiros's journey from the island, to the citadel of Van and onwards. The images introduce and contextualise examples of Armenian architecture and art. For example, the carvings of Biblical scenes and Armenian legends shown here are aesthetically distinct from all of the art he will have seen in Europe. Subsequent sequences, such as those set in Rome, position these images next to the Western artworks utilising the tension between the traditions for comparative and dramatic purposes.

Figure 10 shows how a contemporary photograph of a looted church can be suggestive, both

during research and in representation as a dramatic and symbolic portrayal of a war-torn country. Rather than depicting an actual event, this image functions as a symbolic shortcut that emphasises the feelings likely to be shared by many Armenians during the time of Martiros's journey.

We took the decision to support the interactive navigation with the maps available at the time (Figure 11). Historical maps derived from several cultural traditions were integrated into narrative sequences and extended with interactive elements. Contemporary, custom-made maps were used in the meta-narrative to negotiate the ambiguities. Constraining in-story navigation to the historical maps and using their rich and suggestive imagery within dramatic scenes can help to suggest an experiential environment of the historical travellers such as Martiros because these maps embody boundaries and controversies of the geographical knowledge of the time, show the subjectivities of their authors and make an

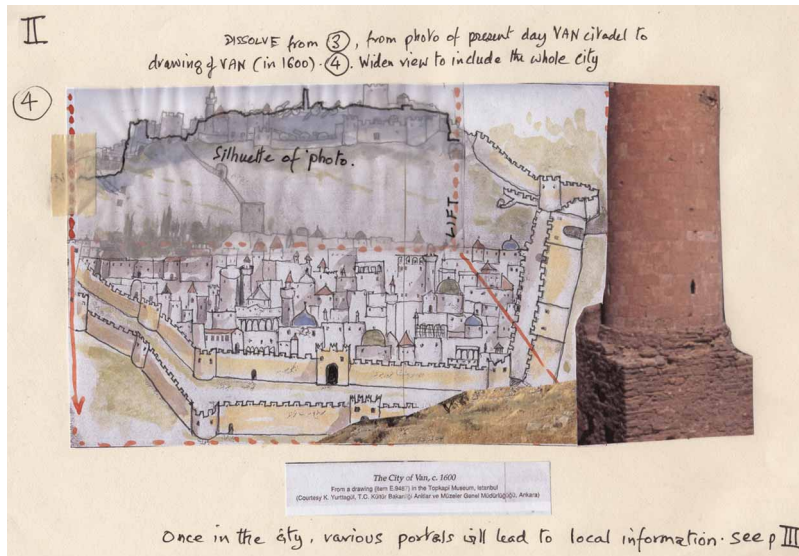


Figure 8. Departure from Armenia sequence. A storyboard image produced to consider an interactive sequence uniting several elements. The background is derived from a historical drawing showing the city of Van c. 1600 (from a drawing E.9487 in the Topkapi Museum, Istanbul), hand-painted. The transparent overlay on the top right is the outline of the citadel derived from the photograph in Figure 7. The foreground column is a contemporary photograph of a surviving architectural element in the old town of Van (see Figure 9). Image assembly and original drawings by Christopher Hobbs.

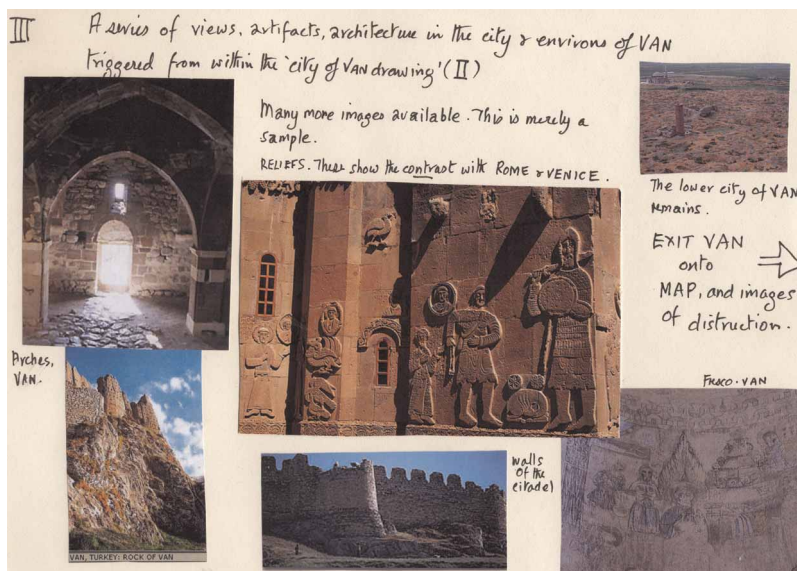


Figure 9. Departure from Armenia sequence. Top right: vaults in Van, a contemporary photograph; top middle: low-relief sculptures on the walls of the church of Holy Cross on Aghtamar Island; top right: a surviving tower in the old city of Van; bottom left and middle: views of the citadel, contemporary photographs; bottom right: a surviving fresco in the church. Image assembly and original drawings by Christopher Hobbs.

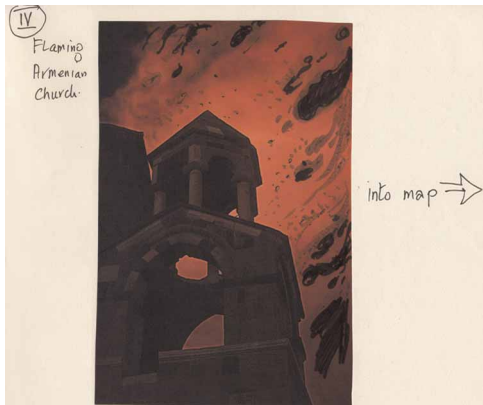


Figure 10. Departure from Armenia sequence. The bell tower of Aghtamar at sunset, a contemporary photograph extended with painted elements. Image assembly and original drawings by Christopher Hobbs.

aesthetic, emotional contribution to the evocative purposes of the exercise.

At the time of Martiros's departure, Armenia suffered from prolonged warfare and it was important to research and construct a visual reflection on the effects such ruination could cause. We found a possible parallel to such devastation in the

conditions of the surviving Armenian architectural structures in several regions of contemporary Turkey. The architecture and art shown in the images of Figure 12 are of the period preceding Martiros's journey and could have been familiar to him.

To conclude, our strategy of assembling available sources into provocative heterogeneous storyboards proved effective and thought-provoking. An ability to establish and exhibit major visual relationships between, for example, typical cultural backgrounds or contrasting geographical locations can be used as a structuring device that motivates further reading, consultations with experts, field trips or practical re-enactments. We feel that our prototypes only scratch the surface of what is possible. Can one move from visual thinking in heterogeneous collages to performative, game-like re-enactments? From one-team interpretations to a curated plurality of enacted scenarios? From desktop interactivity to situated performances? Many tempting possibilities come to mind if one modifies the design-thinking objective of *imagining possible futures* to an art-historical challenge of *imagining possible pasts*.



Figure 11. Ebstorf Mappa Mundi, detail, probably from 1232, Ebstorf in Lower Saxony, destroyed in 1943 during an Allied air raid. Rouben Galichian, Countries south of the Caucasus in medieval maps. Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, Printinfo Art Books, Yerevan and Gomidas Institute, London. 2007, Fig. 70a. Image assembly and original drawings by Christopher Hobbs.



Figure 12. Departure from Armenia sequence. Contemporary photographs showing scenes of neglect and destruction of traditional Armenian architecture. Image assembly by Christopher Hobbs.

3.3 Place-events as dramatic experiments

Returning to our modest achievements to date, this section illustrates our approach to scene construction. In the *Ways to Heaven's* interactive-narrative structure each navigable place-event was introduced by a pre-scripted prelude (cf. machinimas, e.g. in Lowood and Nitsche [2011])—a moving-image sequence reflecting on the emotional atmosphere of the place.

Following Martiros's story we arrive to Rome, where this Armenian resided close to the Old St Peter's. The sunrise scene discussed below begins with a shot of Martiros in the darkness. He is seen looking at the cityscape before him (Figure 13), preparing for his daily journey to St Peter's. This depiction reinterprets the original drawing used as the basis for this image (Figure 20). The framing invites reflection on the type of modest buildings that used to surround St Peter's in that period and on the daily rituals that

would be necessary when attending morning services in the Basilica.

As the moving-image sequence unfolds, an Armenian narrator recites an English translation of an Armenian poem that is likely to have been familiar to Martiros (translation from van Lint [1996]). The poem's author, Kostandin Erzknac'I, was a contemporary of Dante and lived from 1250s/60s to around 1330. Martiros and Konstandin were from the same hometown of Erzknka. Here is a fragment:

If ever God looks down benevolently and lovingly on his creatures,

It is at that moment, when the sign of the morning light appears;

If he listens to supplications and the reading of many prayers,

Whoever desires to receive gifts quickly, he will get them in the morning.

If ever a sweet scent spreads itself and turns the door of death towards life,



Figure 13. Rome prelude sequence. Early morning before sunrise. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 20. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.

*Then many a soul will be drunk with the
sweet scent of the morning.*

*If undying love exists, which inspires each
soul,*

*Then my measure of love and soul is mingled
with the love of the morning.*

*If ever I receive my share of life and joy at
the door of love,*

*One moment of heartfelt love, let it be given
to me in the morning.*

*If a man would have to give his soul or to
suffer greatly,*

*Then I am prepared with all my soul to give
my soul in exchange for love.*

Our scene and the poem share the theme of arrival to the Doors of Heaven. In the scene these take material form of the bronze doors of St Peter's, still in situ today (a contemporary photograph of these doors appears after the moving-image

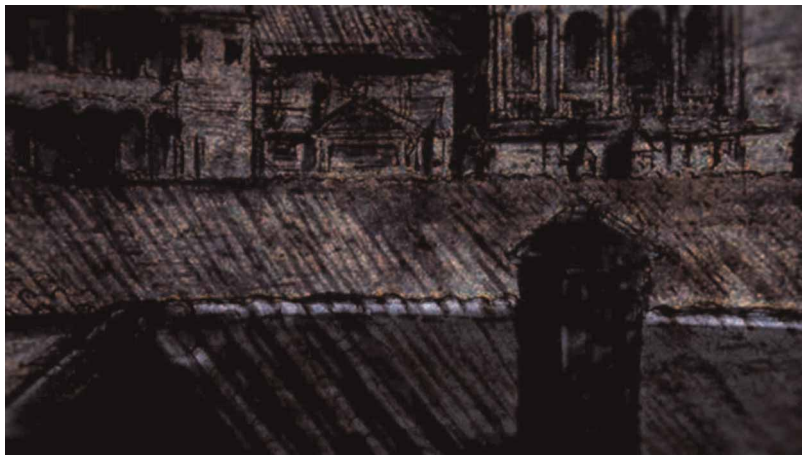


Figure 14. Rome prelude sequence. The virtual camera tracks up towards the St Peter's tower. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 20. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.



Figure 15. Rome prelude sequence. The tower is revealed. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 20. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.

prelude completes with the frame showing the Basilica's entrance arches up close, Figure 19).

Integration of the poem with the other material into one evocative scene exposes the contrast between Martiros's cultural background and his surroundings in Rome. The Eastern musical theme is an Armenian folk song that employs instruments that would be familiar to Martiros. The adjacent Western theme is European church music that was composed in the same period as Martiros's journey and played in St Peter's. Armenian and Latin cultural artefacts, juxtaposed within

one dramatic scene, contribute to an evocation of the impression that Martiros could have when encountering St Peter's for the first time. Although we cannot know his thoughts or feelings, with the help of this rich context we can more readily reflect on (and possibly share, even if partially) his mental landscape.

The virtual camera moves up emphasising the cluttered and complex visual character of the medieval Borgo (Figures 14, 15, 16, 17).

Having risen above the roofs, it continues towards the tower barely visible in the dark and



Figure 16. Rome prelude sequence. The sun hits the bell tower. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 21. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.



Figure 17. Rome prelude sequence. The Basilica is revealed. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 21. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.

the sequence imperceptibly shifts to another source drawing (Figure 21).

The sequence reaches its climax when the first light reaches the top of the bell tower as the narrator declaims ‘the sky was lit up when the light of the sun rose’.

As the sky brightens, the camera pulls out (see Figure 18) revealing the expanse of the magnificent square in front of St Peter’s with a cardinal’s cavalcade moving through and an elaborate fountain on the foreground.

This image contrasts greatly with the initial frame of the sequence that showed Martiros’s quarters (Figure 13). While the source imagery for these two frames are present in the originals (Figure 20 and Figure 21), our framing, movement and lighting make this contrast apparent in a unified aesthetic experience.

Having shown the extents of the square, the camera pulls in to focus on the entrance to the Basilica in preparation for the subsequent sequence about the bronze doors installed there.



Figure 18. Rome prelude sequence. The square in front of the Basilica is revealed. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 21. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.



Figure 19. Rome prelude sequence. The camera approaches the entrance to the Basilica is revealed. This frame is based on a fragment of the drawing shown in Figure 21. Video sequence design and assembly by Stanislav Roudavski.

This moving-image sequence is only one of many possible variations on the theme. The historical visual sources provide a world in which the protagonist moves. Animated digital colour-grading and lighting of black and white originals creates atmosphere, mood and the sense of passing time. The poem contributes to the mood and refers to the spiritual world of the pilgrim.

His report closes the section about Rome with a remark about the bronze doors at the entrance into St Peter's and the movie does the same.

This sequence presents an individual's encounter with a cultural context (Rome) that is familiar and influential to us but was—likely—relatively unknown and surprising to our Armenian protagonist. By employing a narrative theme and crea-

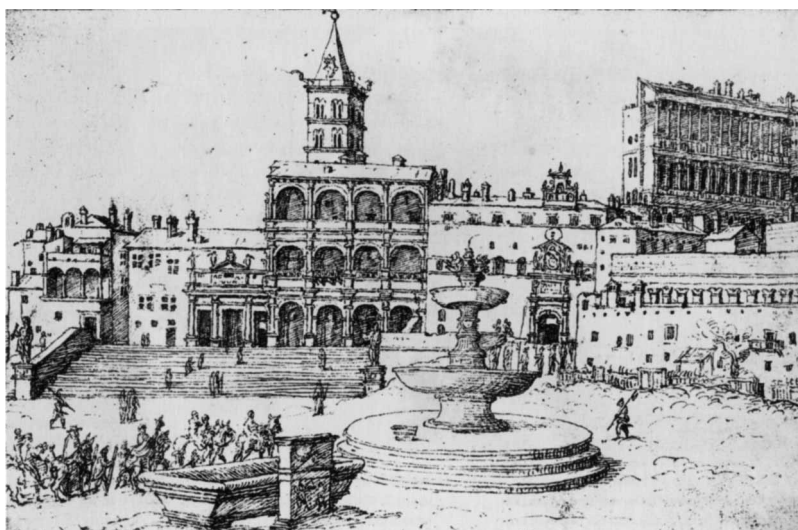


Figure 20. View from the end of the Borgo Nuovo to St Peter's, showing the entrances to the Basilica and the papal palace. The original drawing by Anonymous (16th c.), after Marten van Heemskerck.



Figure 21. View towards the Basilica of Old St Peter's. The original drawing by Marten van Heemskerck, about 1535. Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett.

tively reinterpreting the relevant sources, this sequence emphasises the human circumstances of a historical person framing his encounters with places, architecture and art.

4 Conclusion: imagination and research

The established techniques permit historians to enrich the information already available in the source texts with (near-)contemporary art, including, for example, paintings or poetry. Our approach goes further by speculating about thoughts, feelings, impressions and experiences of historical figures even when the surviving written materials does not provide such detail. This imaginative interpretation of sources is more unusual and—within academic art history—typically happens in text. The work discussed in this article seeks to extend this approach by employing rich interactive media for the purposes of *imagining the past*.

Creatively, we found this tactic productive and rewarding but conceptually and practically, it generates many difficult questions. To mention some issues: approaches utilising evocative speculation do not follow typical guidelines on academic rigour; cannot be useful without hard-to-initiate and -sustain conversations between remarkably dissimilar participants; can inspire creative aspirations well beyond available skills and budgets, etc.

A comprehensive discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it sought to demonstrate our initial impressions, discoveries and concerns, hoping that this material will be useful and thought-provoking for subsequent research and experimentation.

To achieve this, the article discussed a particular project as a case for reflection on the evocative characteristics of art history. This project aimed to: (1) retain the richness of the original sources; (2) expose sources in diverse spatial, temporal and cultural context; (3) allow for flexible comparisons between sources; (4) allow for the integration of sources into evocative reconstructions of environments and events; (5) disclose the interpretations suggested by the historians; and (6) provide for alternative interpretations. Our approach (or rather initial sketches of it) proposes that a strategy that prioritises small-scale, personal and experiential engagements of people with art and architecture can be productive when trying to understand the cultures of the past. To support the reconstruction of probable meanings, our workflow utilised an inclusive integration of heterogeneous, multimedia sources into navigable, interactive narratives. The primary use of these narratives was as provocations for reflection, discussion and further research. As provocations of this kind, these narratives should not be thought of as questionable and ill-sustained evidence but, rather, as strong evocations that can trigger disagreement as usefully as recognition.

These creative tensions can be especially productive in diverse creative environments and the *Ways to Heaven* project strongly relied on interdisciplinary collaborations that innovatively juxtaposed unforeseen sources and interpretations. Creative exchanges between art historians, artists, film-set designers, architects, programmers and musicians encouraged deeper reflections on historical events and promoted broad-ranging critical analysis of the sources.

By amplifying textual narratives, multimedia storytelling makes tangible references to places, events and artefacts that can otherwise be imagined only in general and abstract terms. Sensory

experiences provided by new media do not purely decorate the existing narratives but—almost invariably—expose qualities and characteristics available in the sources but not obvious without access to the broader experiential context.

As Richardson and Adams St Pierre observe (about texts):

Evocative representations are a striking way of seeing through and beyond social scientific naturalisms. Casting social science into evocative forms reveals the rhetoric and the underlying labor of the production, as well as social science's potential as a human endeavor, because evocative writing touches us where we live, in our bodies. Through it we can experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation. Trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences and so on; we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties (Richardson and Adams St Pierre 2000, p. 512).

We see opportunities for further development in closer collaboration with the fields that have already accumulated expertise in evocative methods. For example, in social studies, autoethnographies and ethnographic memoirs are by now among common approaches that utilise evocative qualities of representations. The authors of these texts rely on their own experiences to gain insights into cultures or explore social issues (e.g. see Ronai 1995, Bochner 1997, Tillmann-Healy 2001, Anderson 2007). The integration of such autoethnographic work conducted in the contemporary climate with research into historical events and artefacts can prove to be useful in the task of evoking the meanings of cultural phenomena. While some meanings, usages and symbolisms associated with cultural artefacts change with time, others are more persistent and can often still be experienced, especially where the cultures that authored the artefacts have not disappeared.

A further development of this thinking can take research from evocations to transformations. Here,

integration of art-historical and ethnographic research with transformative action research (e.g., Wadsworth 1998) or investigative designing (e.g. Rust 2004, 2007, Haseman 2006) can help to stage research encounters that can generate unique insights while contributing to the instigation of positive change in the contemporary world. This change can be achieved, for example, through evocative explorations of the arts of disadvantaged traditions or by resurrection of interesting techniques of making.

In conclusion, we would be happy to receive any form of feedback on this article and will be glad to provide further information or share experiences and content with interested parties.

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