

# Art-Making and Place-Making Strategies of Elders



*In 2015, I was invited to serve on a panel for the National Center for Creative Aging's Leadership Exchange and Conference in Washington, D.C. I was excited to engage*

*with this important organization and their constituents. However, they put me on a panel that focused on "place making," a topic I felt confident in addressing as a folklorist, but not one that I had really considered in my work on creative aging. Upon reflection, however, I discovered that place making is a major goal in the creative activities of many elders. What follows is adapted from my presentation and panel discussion.*

Through telling stories, preparing food, playing music, and other creative activities, seniors serve as vital keepers of culture in their communities. While these expressive actions are significant to the strength and well-being of cultural groups, they also improve the quality of life for elders. In Brown County, Indiana, where I live, Otis Todd is the keeper of songs for his musical community. Each week, he hosts a bluegrass jam in an old garage behind his home, which attracts area musicians who come to play music, hear his stories, and

learn his repertoire. At the age when many in rural America start to feel isolated and alone, Otis has developed a strategy that has made him an important cultural hub. In this sense, he is truly an "elder" not because of his advanced years, but because of his role as a respected knowledge bearer within a specific community. Through his creative practice, place is made. While space is quantifiable and measurable (think acres or light-years), place is constructed through relationships. Otis doesn't just bring together his community for jam sessions. He serves as a link to past players, and his art will also live on in the memories and actions of his musical community.

While playing music and other expressive forms are essential for creating and maintaining local culture and the distinctiveness of place, elders, caregivers, and researchers recognize that these creative activities also support a senior's quality of life by helping him or her to engage socially and live independently. I could focus my observations on almost any genre of community-based art (music jams, ethnic dance, or inter-generational crafts), but I want to draw our attention to the creative practice of life-story art, which is a powerful

place-remembering and place-making strategy in the lives of some elders.

Life-story art, sometimes called “memory art,” is commonly referred to as a type of “folk art,” the genre of art that provoked geriatric psychiatrist Gene Cohen to rethink creativity in later life. He notes that unlike other genres of art where the elderly may be the exception, seniors play a prominent role in creating and maintaining many folk arts. Below, I briefly tell the stories of three seniors whose folk art not only shows the “inherent capacity for creative expression throughout the entire life cycle,” but also reveals some of the positive work the arts bring about in the lives of seniors (Cohen 2006:8). After they retired, these seniors each

cultivated a dynamic place-making and place-remembering artistic practice. Their art also has helped them to remain socially engaged and to live independently.

## MARIAN SYKES

A native of Chicago, Marian Sykes makes rugs that visually tell stories about her life and her family. As Robert Butler and Barbara Myerhoff observed, remembering and telling one's life story is a natural and important part of aging well (Butler 1963; Myerhoff 1986). Some recall and share their memories through storytelling, while others express them in handmade objects as a form of material life-review. Using a process known as rug hooking, Marian recycles wool into narrative rugs. In the same ways that she repurposes material, Marian reworks her memories into art that she uses to facilitate the reviewing and telling of stories about her family life in Chicago. Though she now lives in rural northern Indiana, her art allows her to recreate remembered places and tell others about who she is and where she is from.

Now in her nineties, Marian's health is declining and a local service organization was recently asked to help build ramps and replace windows in her old house. At first they were not convinced that this would be a good investment of their resources. But when they went into her home and saw her many memory rugs, and she shared the stories depicted in each rug with them, they recognized how Marian's well-being is inherently linked to her art and her home. It was through her place-making narrative rugs that Marian was able to maintain her independence and sustain connections with

family and friends. The organization decided to do what they could to help her stay in her home with her rugs.



*Marian Sykes holding a memory rug in her home in Chesterton, Indiana. (Image by Jon Kay.)*

## GUSTAV POTTHOFF

A former prisoner of war, Gustav Potthoff survived the death camps of Burma and Thailand during World War II. In the 1960s, the Dutch-Indonesian immigrant moved to Columbus, Indiana, where he worked as a diesel engine manufacturer. After he retired, the memories of his time of internment came flooding back. He began painting his stories, such as scenes of the atrocities he witnessed while helping to build the infamous bridge on the River Kwai. Around the same time, he began volunteering at a local veterans' museum. Being from Indonesia, his thick accent made it difficult for him to communicate his amazing stories of survival to the other veterans and visitors. Gus started taking his paintings to the museum, and through his words, images, and his gregarious smile, he was able to share his story.

Over the past thirty years, the Atterbury-Bakalar Museum has grown, and now has a large gallery to display Gus's paintings, which he still interprets for museumgoers. An immigrant senior with limited language skills, he has made himself and his story an integral part of his community, and has used his art to create a space for interacting with others and sharing his important life stories.



*Gus Potthoff in the Atterbury-Bakalar Museum in Columbus, Indiana.  
(Image by Greg Whitaker Photography.)*

## JOHN SCHOOLMAN

Similarly, John Schoolman lived to be 100 years old and devised a creative place-making strategy through the making of walking sticks. He always had hiked and carried a walking stick, but after his wife died, he started spending his alone time decorating the sticks he used to go walking with. He not only painted them with colorful paints and intricate designs, but he also inscribed them with memories, sayings, and stories. Stick-making not only helped to fill the hours when he was alone; it also helped to provide a tool for social interaction. As John walked around town with his colorful canes, strangers would comment on his creations, which opened up a space where he could engage with others and tell his story. In this way, his canes were not just a creative outlet, but also an interactional tool that summoned stories about people and places that were important to the elder. Through his art, John was able to live on his own until his death in 2009.



*John Schoolman in his home near North Webster, Indiana.  
(Image by Jon Kay.)*

## CONCLUSION

What can we take away from these three brief profiles?

First, art has the capacity to transform the interactional and living space of seniors. All three of the artists profiled used their art to attract others to them, which helped them to remain socially engaged. Each relished in sharing the stories embedded in his or her creations.

Second, life-story art allows seniors to fuse remembered places and events with current physical places and social settings, which is a form of *life integration*. Making life-story art can help elders make sense out of their past. Using developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of "ego integration," it seems that several seniors use their special art projects to cultivate a "meaningful interplay" between their earlier life and their senior years, and in doing so they develop a "sense of summary" for their lives through their memory art (Erikson 1997:63).

Third, art making gave each of the profiled seniors a strong sense of purpose in their lives and a reason to endure. Their art not only recalled the past, but helped redefine their future, giving each a new identity and new role in their lives: Marian the rug maker, Gustav the painter, and John the "cane man." While their art was rooted in past memories, it also anticipated future interactions when the seniors would share their art with others.

Finally, creative practice can help seniors retain control

over their own life situations and sometimes even elevate them to positions of social prominence within their community. Dr. Bill Thomas, founder of the *Eden Alternative*, identified "three plagues" that beset many seniors in the United States: loneliness, boredom, and helplessness. Through art, each of the profiled seniors was able to combat these "plagues." Their creative practice helped them to stay socially engaged, filled the quiet hours when they were alone, and aided them in maintaining their independence.

These brief profiles reveal how some elders use their art as an effective place-remembering and place-making strategy, which helps them cope with some of the ails that can accompany the aging process and ultimately achieve greater satisfaction with their lives. While most "creative aging" interventions are developed for elders in assisted-living facilities and nursing homes, this essay observes that some elders have a personal art practice that helps them craft their life story, cultivate and maintain relationships, and retain their independence. In a very real way, their creative practice has allowed many seniors to remain in their own homes, often preventing or greatly delaying their entry into elder care facilities. While we need to continue to encourage and develop new art therapies, we also should encourage art in everyday life, which will help seniors maintain their health and wellness. As the profiles presented herein demonstrate, the creative practices employed by some seniors can help them age in place, which often impacts an elder's quality of life.

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Jon is a Professor of Practice at Indiana University, where he teaches courses in public folklore and researches the uses of folk art in the lives of seniors. Since 2004, he has directed Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI), the official state folk arts program, which received the 2013 Governor's Arts Award. As TAI director, Jon conducts public programs and produces exhibitions about Indiana's traditional artists. His book *Folk Art and Aging: Life-Story Objects and Their Makers*, published by Indiana University Press in 2016, explores the memory art of five elders in Indiana. Jon's work stresses the importance and potential benefits traditional art may play in the emotional, physical, and social health of elders prior to their placement in elder care facilities.

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