

Make Believe

Encounters with Misinformation



STATE LIBRARY
VICTORIA



Misinformation filters our view of the world. Whether it arises from simple mistakes, misinterpretations or deliberate deception, it can profoundly influence our thoughts, opinions and actions. One of the most harmful examples in Australia's history is terra nullius, the false claim that the land was uninhabited, which was used to justify the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of their lands.

Despite having more access to information than ever before, we continue to be seduced and duped by mistruths. These falsehoods can completely deceive us or subtly draw us in, even when we know they are untrue. They appeal to our biases and beliefs, using beauty to beguile us and making it easier to ignore uncomfortable truths.

At the centre of this exhibition, a video explores the modern surge of false and misleading information. Academics, artists, librarians and subject specialists discuss the global scale of the problem, questioning its causes, consequences and possible remedies.

Surrounding this space, four rooms present case studies that open up the topic of misinformation in unexpected ways. Victorian-based artists and academics respond to objects and stories from State Library Victoria's collection. These encounters encourage us to look beyond contemporary forces, such as social media and AI, to reflect on the human choices and biases that have always played a part in distorting information.

Collectively, these case studies ask: how do our own perspectives and experiences influence what we accept to be 'true'? and why do we keep falling for misinformation? At the same time, they reveal how curiosity and thoughtful research can help us question, navigate and engage with information more critically and confidently.

CASE STUDY 1: Advertising, Australia and distorting reality

All my art is a response to colonisation. Land rights and creating works about our struggle is all-encompassing. Nothing exists outside it – it's all connected.

– Charlotte Allingham

Wiradjuri and Ngilyampaa artist Charlotte Allingham uses her art to challenge the myth of terra nullius – the colonial claim made by the British Crown that this land belonged to no one. This falsehood disregarded the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have lived on and cared for this land for more than 65,000 years.

In this commission, Charlotte's illustrations respond to 1960s advertising materials produced by Shell Petroleum and held in the Library's collection. One of its campaigns celebrated Australia's natural wonders and encouraged families to 'Discover Australia with Shell', promoting the idea of an empty, untouched land awaiting exploration. Using idyllic imagery and soft colours, the campaign painted a picture far removed from the impacts of Western industry, cars and fossil fuels. It proved highly effective, demonstrating the growing power of advertising in shaping perceptions and aspirations.

Charlotte's response addresses the environmental damage caused by oil companies and the absence of Aboriginal people in Shell's depictions of the landscape. Her imagery restores to Country the plant and animal life featured in the campaign, while her 'Blak Fairies' subvert traditional bush-fairy imagery, reinstating a First Nations presence and reaffirming Aboriginal culture's deep connection to the land. As we follow these intricate drawings around the room, another story emerges, exposing the ecological impact wrought by industrialisation and the enduring impacts of colonisation.

'It's very misleading to use Country to promote the destruction of Country. I think the campaign is designed to make you feel good. But if you know what Shell is doing to the land, it creates this strange middle ground where you're seeing something pretty but also feeling really uncomfortable.'

'I think this keeps people very complacent about the destruction of Country and global warming. It's easier and more comfortable to not know the truth, so we're more inclined to believe misinformation.'

– Charlotte Allingham

'The "Discover Australia with Shell" campaign was brand new in the world of advertising. You could almost describe it as more art than advertising, using recognised artists and beautiful illustrations of the flora and fauna of Australia.'

'They're romanticising. And romance is very powerful, as we all know – it lifts you. It lifts you away from, let's say, the "dirty secret" that is fuel and oil. Amazingly, it even makes you feel warm and connected to the brand – the brand that is Shell.'

– Russel Howcroft

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Ralph Malcolm Warner

Original artwork for 'Discover Australia with Shell' project cards: shells, fish, coral and wildflowers series 1959–62

Watercolour and gouache on cardboard

TOP Draught-board Helmut

MIDDLE Spiny Woodcock

BOTTOM Trochus shell

TOP Kangaroo Paw, Clematis

BOTTOM Common Heath, Geraldton Waxflower

TOP Fungia fungites, Black-lipped Pearl Shell

BOTTOM Pink Butterfly-shell, Ear Shell

TOP Flat-tail Mullet

MIDDLE Australian Pheasant Shell

BOTTOM Lung Fish

TOP Hammer Oyster

MIDDLE Tasmanian Scallop

BOTTOM Red-mouthed Stromb

TOP Cloth of Gold Cone, *Acropora pulchra*

BOTTOM *Acropora surculose*, Baler shell

TOP Saucer Scallop

MIDDLE Chambered Nautilus

BOTTOM Frilled Venus

TOP Variable Groundsel, Blue Gum

BOTTOM Blue Devil, Course Daisy

TOP Saucer Scallop

MIDDLE Chambered Nautilus

BOTTOM Frilled Venus

TOP Variable Groundsel, Blue Gum

BOTTOM Blue Devil, Course Daisy

The colourful paintings of flowers, sea life and shells were created for the 'Discover Australia with Shell' campaign, launched in 1959. Departing from earlier advertisements focused on the merits of oil and petrol, this campaign celebrated the beauty of nature, encouraging Australians to embark on road trips powered by Shell.

Featuring eye-catching materials such as maps, posters and collectable swap cards, the campaign aimed to inspire and educate Shell customers. It reflected Shell's growing efforts to engage Australian households, nurturing brand loyalty in women and children. The floral map framed on the wall was distributed through *The Australian Women's Weekly*, which regularly included Shell promotions. Other items from different periods, such as cookbooks, storybooks and board games, are displayed in the cases and are all drawn from the Library's collection.

Presented alongside these collection objects are quotes from commissioned artist Charlotte Allingham, as well as insights from advertising expert and broadcaster Russel Howcroft, who explains why Shell's campaign was so successful.

TOP, FROM LEFT

Herbert Peabody Dickins and Ellis Rowan

Australian Wild Flowers

Melbourne, Robertson and Mullens, 1944

Shell advertisement, 'Springtime in the Grampians'

The Australian Women's Weekly, 3 September 1959, p. 22

Shell advertisement, 'Wildflower Wonderland of the West'

The Australian Women's Weekly, 16 March 1960, p. 51

Cooking for Health

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, c. 1939

BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT

The Student's Guide Book to the Oil Industry

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, 1957

Edward Edgar Prescott

Wild Flowers of Australia

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, (c. 1920–29)

Shell House Journal: Australia and Pacific Islands

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, September 1959

The Story of Oil

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, (1947)

Charlotte Allingham

***What have you done* 2024–25**

Digital illustrations

This work is presented by artist Charlotte Allingham in response to items in the State Collection. Shell was not involved in and has not authorised or approved this artwork.

George Santos

Poster, map of Australia with decorative flowers c. 1957

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia

'When I was a child, I was obsessed with fairies. But all the fairies I saw were created by white people, for white people. In reality, the fairies here would be Blak. I wanted to re-Blakify fairies and our bush. They remind our kids that, actually, the Blak fairies are there for you.

'The Shell fairies are carrying petrol. If they were real fairies, I don't think they would ever touch petrol. Nature's fairy spirits wanting to destroy their home? Very weird!

'I think what makes it so disturbing when you look at the images is that they're really pretty. You want to like them. But then there's this uneasy darkness about them.

'I understand why people love them so much, but at the end of the day, it's just propaganda. And when you're a kid, you just take it at face value.'

- Charlotte Allingham

‘This advertising campaign ran in the post-Second World War period, so Shell was not thinking about distracting the consumer with regard to what the product may or may not be doing to the atmosphere. They were just in the business of building their brand, getting a sale and creating loyalty. I’m pretty certain that this campaign would have over-indexed when it came to creating loyalty. Households would have rewarded Shell on the basis that they were investing in their education.’

– Russel Howcroft

TOP ROW, FROM LEFT

Shell Project Card Album: Shells, Fish and Coral

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, 1960

Ida Rentoul Outhwaite

The Shell Fairy calendar 1924–25

(Melbourne, British Imperial Oil Company, 1923)

Shelia Hawkins

Jean and the Shell Fairy

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, 1930

Shell Project Card Album: Wildflowers

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, 1959

BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT

Shell Project Card Album: Butterflies and Moths

Melbourne, Shell Company of Australia, 1962

The Pennant Fairies

(Melbourne, British Imperial Oil Company, 1923)

'Shell wins' board game

Melbourne, British Imperial Oil Company, not after 1927

In 1954, Shell opened Victoria's first oil refinery in Geelong, commissioning renowned photographer Helmut Newton to document its construction. While his images celebrated the refinery as a feat of modern industry, they also expose its environmental impact on the land, sea and sky.

Newton's extensive series of black-and-white images, now preserved in the Library's collection, captures the refinery's early operations, its imposing presence on the landscape and the demanding labour of its workers. Although Newton left no recorded commentary on the project, some of his compositions are intriguing: are the tightly framed shots of the Shell signage that spell out 'HELL' alluding to the complexities of industrial progress?

Displayed alongside Newton's work is a photograph by Wolfgang Sievers, another prominent photographer of the modernist era. His image of a sleek, modern Shell service station perfectly captures the polished, consumer-facing marketing of the brand.

The contrast between Newton's photographs and the 'Discover Australia with Shell' campaign is stark, highlighting how persuasive visual messaging can subtly shape our perceptions of history and the environment – often without our awareness.

TOP, FROM LEFT

Helmut Newton

Unloading and Positioning of Absorber Tower Prior to Installation, Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1953–54

Construction of 36-mile oil pipeline, running underground from the Shell Oil Refinery at Corio to the Company's Newport installation c. 1953–54

Unloading and positioning of absorber tower prior to installation, Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1953–54

Construction of railway underpass, Refinery Road, Corio c. 1953–54

Construction of main tanker jetty, Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1953–54

Men working on construction of the Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1953–54

TOP, FROM LEFT

Helmut Newton

Worker climbing a chimney c. 1953–54

*Storage tanks and elevated pipes at Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong
c. 1956–61*

Pipe rack at the Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1954–61

*Electricians put finishing touches to the British Electric Transformer,
Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1953–54*

Wolfgang Sievers

Shell Refinery, Geelong, Victoria 1964

Helmut Newton

Butane Pressure Storage Towers c. 1953–54

TOP, FROM LEFT

Wolfgang Sievers

Shell service station at night 1957

Helmut Newton

Warehouse interior with cans of oil c. 1956–61

*Men working on oil transportation truck at Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong
c. 1953–61*

Shell Oil Refinery, viewed from Refinery Pier, Geelong c. 1953–54

TOP, FROM LEFT

Helmut Newton

Installation of flash tower D.1 at Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong c. 1953–54

*Man turning handwheel of the gate valve, Shell Oil Refinery, Geelong
c. 1953–61*

*Crude distilling unit and slope tank construction of Shell Oil Refinery,
Geelong c. 1953–54*

*Saltwater intake channel under construction, Shell Oil Refinery,
Geelong c. 1953–54*

CASE STUDY 2:

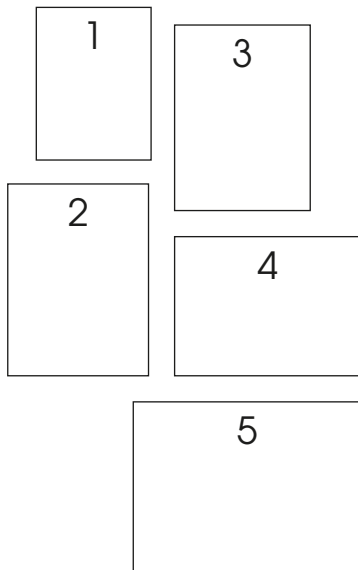
Photography, archives and falling for fakes

We often think of photographs as truthful records or evidence of moments in time. But ever since photography was invented, it has tricked the eye, influenced perceptions and even changed the way we understand history. Early photographers used techniques such as double exposure, photomontage, selective cropping and retouching to shape and frame a vision of the world. Today, with rapidly advancing technology, AI-generated images, filtered photos and deepfakes blur the line between fantasy and reality even further.

Artist Scotty So playfully explores the relationship between photography, beauty and authenticity, often within the context of his Chinese heritage. He is especially interested in the impact of photography on the reliability of historical archives, from institutional collections like the Library's, to vast online sources such as Wikipedia.

In this installation, Scotty presents photographs from the Library's collection alongside costumes and objects that appear to document a life – but whose life? Featuring figures from across eras, such as magicians and pageant queens, his chosen images examine themes of gender, queerness, race and beauty with irreverence and humour. Opposite these images, an array of objects challenges our sense of what counts as an authentic historical record.

Through beauty and intrigue, Scotty entices us to question the authority of archives and the power they have to assign authenticity and to compel belief. He also invites us to consider the misinformation woven into recorded histories and how future generations might interpret a past shaped by a world full of fakes.



1

Scotty So

Group of Ten Women and One Man, All in

Chinese-Style Costumes 2024

Knong Sue Duk c. 1900–30

2

Scotty So

A Manchurian Noble Lady in Her Backyard in the 1900s 2019

3

Scotty So

Hand-coloured Processed Double Exposure Image of a Woman in the Canton Region of Late Qing Dynasty, 1870 2019

4

Scotty So

Cantonese Woman with Bound Feet Wearing a Silk Mask During the Third Bubonic Plague, 1900 2020–24

Two women, full-length, seated on the floor, wearing Chinese clothing; Chinese banners on the wall in the background 1880–1920
Gift of Essendon Historical Society, 2002

Scotty So

Filles de Canton, Cantonese Noblewoman and Servants, c. 1870s
2019–24

Full-length portrait of a Chinese woman, seated c. 1855–82

Photo: Davies & Co., Melbourne

Scotty So

Pregnant Cantonese Woman with a Silk Embroidered Hand Fan
2020–24

5

The Small Foot of a Chinese Lady 1906–08

Photo: John Thomson

Chinese Lady's Small Foot (covered) 1906–08

Photo: John Thomson

Scotty So

Chinaman with Bound Feet 2024

Scotty So

Chinaman Sniffing a Snuff Bottle 2024

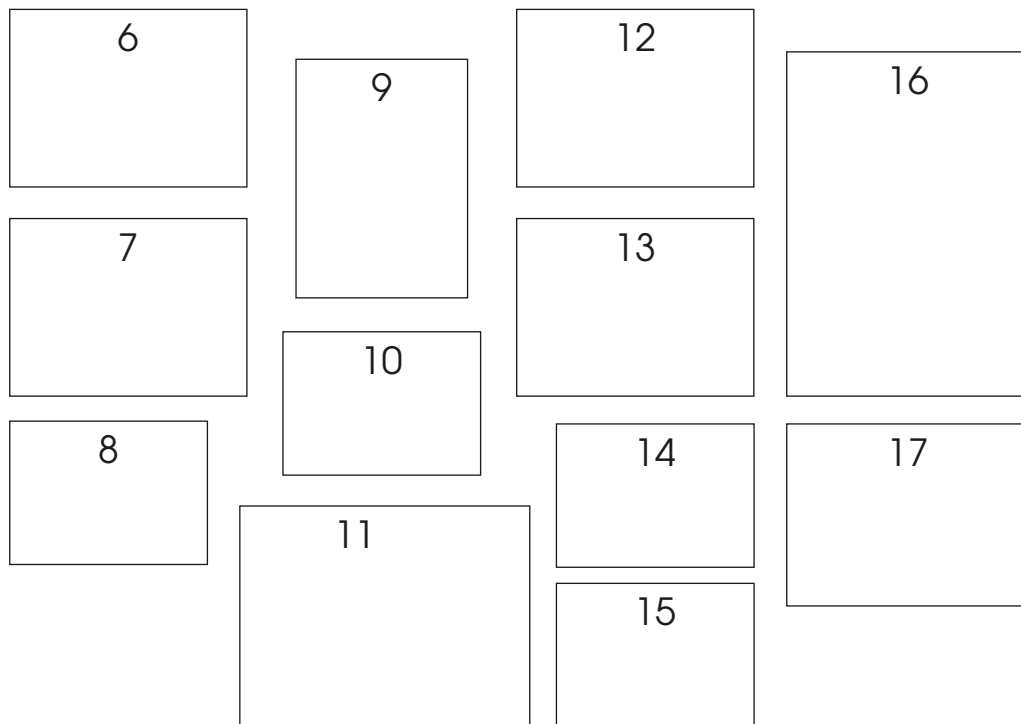
Chinese Lady's Small Foot (bare) 1906–08

Photo: John Thomson

Boat Girls 1906–08

Photo: John Thomson

All works by Scotty So are courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne.
All other works are from State Library Victoria's collection.



6

Maurice Rooklyn – cheating the gallows illusion c. 1940–59

Souvenir of Chinese troupe c. 1950s

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

7

Chung Ling Soo – a rare bit of old China 1916

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

8

Long Chang Troupe c. 1930–39

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

9

Scotty So

Hand-coloured Photo of a Cantonese Opera Male Dan Performer as Hau Mulan in 1927, Hong Kong 2019

10

Scotty So

Cantonese Woman Wearing a Cloth Mask During the Spanish Flu
2024

Scotty So

Chinese Girl Outside of the State Library Victoria, c. 1930s 2024

Scotty So

*A Chinese Woman Wearing Traditional Qipao Standing with Two
Borzois Dogs in the Bushland of Bendigo, Victoria, Australia, c. 1930s*
2024

11

Scotty So

Shanghai Girl with a Chinese Octagon Parasol, c. 1930 2024

Actress Thelma Raye c. 1910–40

Gift of Diedre Amos, 2010

12

Tan Kwai, the contortionist (Long Tack Sam) c. 1920–39

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

Scotty So

*Chinaman Who Was a Chinese Magician Holding a Snuff Bottle in His
Retirement* 2024

Scotty So

China Magician Performing Foot-Binding Act in Chinaman Costume
2024

Scotty So

*China Magician in Picasso's Chinese Conjuror Costume Performing
Head Removal Trick on His China Girl Assistant* 2024

Scotty So

China Magician as a Bearded China Girl with a Parasol 2024

13

Scotty So

China Magician in Oriental Costume 2024

Scotty So

China Magician in Western Costume 2024

Scotty So

China Girl Assistant of the China Magician Performing Levitation Act
2024

Scotty So

*China Magician Performing Gender Transformation in Oriental
Costume* 2024

Posters for Wong Toy Sun c. 1911

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

14

Jim Bennier and Emil Ruch c. 1929–39

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

Scotty So

Jim Bennier and Emil Ruch with Chinese Assistant 2024

15

Ray Murray c. 1950–59

W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection

Gift of W.G. Alma

16

Scotty So

*Poster of Home Ministry of Japan calling for infection prevention
of the Spanish Flu, 1919, 感染予防を求める1919年の内務省のポスター*
2020–24

17

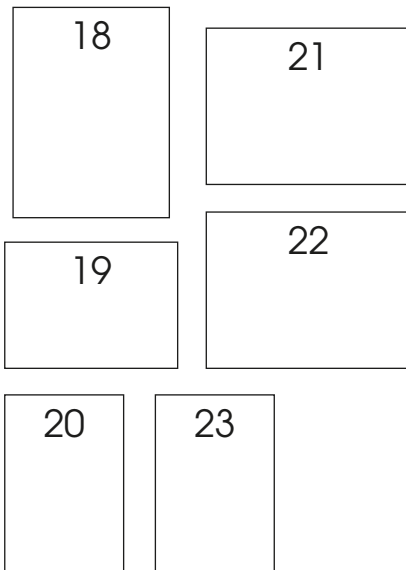
Scotty So

Chinatown Burlesque Performer in Melbourne, 1930s 2019–20

Scotty So

eBay Receipt for Purchase of Chinatown Burlesque Performer in Melbourne, 1930s 2019–20

All works by Scotty So are courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne.
All other works are from State Library Victoria's collection.



18

Scotty So

Four Finalists of the Miss Australia Competition 2024

19

Scotty So

Portrait of a Contestant from the Queen of Begonias in Ballarat, 1960s
2024

Scotty So

A Contestant of Queen of Begonias, Ballarat 2024

Scotty So

A Finalist of Queen of Begonias, Ballarat 2024

Scotty So

A Real Housewife of Box Hill 2024

Scotty So

Woman Wearing a Chanel Cheongsam with a Robe and a Feather Hat in 1950s 2021–24

20

Bert Newton with 'Queen of the Pacific' entrants Patsy Wu (China)
and Belinda Taubman of Australia c. 1969

Photo: The Herald & Weekly Times

21

Lindsay Murphy, Winner of the Miss Victoria Competition c. 1968

Photo: The Herald & Weekly Times

Scotty So

Unknown Finalist with Lindsay Murphy, Winner of the Miss Victoria Competition, circa 1968 2024

22

Miss Australia 1953 with the five other finalists, after the crowning ceremony c. 1953

Photo: The Herald & Weekly Times

Scotty So

Miss Australia 1953 with the Six Other Finalists, after the Crowning Ceremony 2024

23

Scotty So

Australasian Post, 1966 February Issue 2024

All works by Scotty So are courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne.
All other works are from State Library Victoria's collection.

'I was looking at the Alma Collection, which focuses a lot on magic and magic shows. And there were many "Chinese magicians" who weren't actually Chinese – they were played by white people who put on "yellow face" and Chinese costumes, using that identity to benefit their careers.

'I think there's beauty in the exoticism that attracts people to a culture that's entirely different from their own. When you use beauty and seduction, it makes people believe in these identities and images more. And that's the part I find interesting and where I see the misinformation coming from.'

– Scotty So

The Library's W.G. Alma Conjuring Collection offers fascinating insights into the history of magic and conjuring, but it also reveals problematic examples of cultural appropriation by Western magicians. A well-known case is William Ellsworth Robinson, an American who performed as 'Chung Ling Soo', adopting a fabricated Chinese persona to build his career.

Robinson's stage identity was based on the famous Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo. He wore silk robes that audiences assumed were traditional and styled his hair in a 'queue' – shaving the front part and braiding the rest into a long ponytail. His fictional backstory claimed he was orphaned and raised by a Chinese magician who taught him ancient magic. On stage, he pretended not to speak English, reinforcing harmful stereotypes for the audience's enjoyment.

This example highlights a wider issue in magic history: the misappropriation of cultural traditions – particularly those associated with the so-called 'mystic East' – without respect for their true significance or cultural context.

Scotty So

***As She Flies* 2022**

***Chinese Magician* 2021**

Videos on LED hologram device in acrylic display case, wood and velvet

Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne

'I am very interested in clothing and how it represents culture in history. When I was looking for images of Chinese clothing in the Library's collection, I found pictures of European people from historical times dressing up as Chinese people – as magicians or using Chinese clothing as stage costume. And a lot of the time they would be wearing the costume or clothing in the wrong way. It was like seeing a picture of someone wearing a Halloween costume that ended up in an historical archive.'

– Scotty So

DESK

Conical hat acquired in Victoria c. 1860

SHELVES

White feather hat with black velvet headband 1950s

1930s-style wig 2018

Silk opera gloves 2021

Replica of the Queen Mother's diamond Strathmore Rose tiara 2023

Seagull (上海海鸥照相机) 4B camera with leather case 1960s

Cloth facemask styled after Chanel 2021

Chinese-style lingerie 2019

Christian Dior hat, likely designed by Yves Saint Laurent 1960

Katsura wig with wooden case c. 1900s

Black paper fan 2019

Glass Snuff Bottle with Abalone Shell Decoration 2024

Nicotine Diffuser with Abalone Shell Decoration 2024

Replica Qing Dynasty fish-shaped earrings 2020

Replica 1930s pearl earrings from Shanghai 2021

Chinese opera embroidered foot-binding shoes 2021

Chinese opera headwear 2019

Chinese-style wedding crown 2019

Double-sided embroidered Chinese fan 2020

Manchurian platform shoes 2019

Replica Chinese octagon parasol from the 1930s 2023

Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne

Hong Kong Wedding Gua | 珠片裙褂 c. 1950–69

Replica of Picasso's Chinese conjuror costume from the ballet
Parade 2021

Chanel monogram cheongsam 2021

Cantonese long robe with embroidered 100 birds pattern |
白緞地廣繡百鳥紋對襟長氅衣 late 1800s – early 1900s

Imitation designer handbag 2018

Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery, Melbourne

'I think the institution has this power of authority – even before you walk into the building, you see this beautiful classical architecture, and then you walk into this big hall. And before you even look at the item, you have to book the item for viewing. And then you go into this little room. You have to wear gloves and be accompanied by a librarian to monitor how you use the item as well. I think this process and the archival space gives these objects their authority, so people do not question their authenticity, which can lead to misrepresentation of culture and history.'

– Scotty So

Please be advised that this room includes anatomical textbooks from the Library's collection that feature highly detailed illustrations of human dissections and sexual organs, including a printed engraving of a stillborn child.

CASE STUDY 3:

Anatomy, biases and understanding the clitoris

Anatomy is the study of how living things are structured, from tiny cells to intricate body systems. It is one of the oldest branches of medicine, yet it wasn't until 1998 that the full anatomy of a female organ – the clitoris – was accurately mapped. This breakthrough, led by Professor Helen O'Connell AO, Australia's first female urologist, corrected centuries of medical misinformation.

The books and objects in this room showcase the work of Helen O'Connell and other Melbourne-based members of the 'International Cliteratti': academic and anatomist Dr Jennifer Hayes and occupational therapist Anita Brown-Major. The Cliteratti is a network of scientists and healthcare professionals from around the world who are dedicated to advancing research and correcting misconceptions about the clitoris. Their work has had a global impact, dispelling longstanding inaccuracies about the clitoris and labia, which are often misrepresented in medical literature.

Displayed alongside their research are anatomy textbooks from the Library's collection. These books show how depictions of the female body have frequently reflected the social and political attitudes of the time, rather than scientific fact. They also highlight the influence of the anatomical artist in shaping these understandings, by prioritising clarity or beauty over accuracy in their illustrations.

While we tend to think of medical information as purely objective, this case study highlights how biases and social influences impact what we know and how we feel about our bodies. Through the internationally recognised work of these women, we see how research can challenge misinformation and ultimately change people's lives.

In Western anatomy, the male body has long been seen as the 'standard', with the female body treated as a 'variation'. Women's bodies are often described only in terms of how they differ from men's or in relation to reproduction. Generations of doctors have learned from inaccurate depictions of women's bodies, which have been reprinted and passed down over time.

The textbook on the left, compiled by French anatomist Jean Marc Bourguery, was published between 1831 and 1854; it is one of eight volumes, which feature a staggering 3750 images. The illustration on display is far from a clinical depiction of a surgical procedure. If we examine the model's pose, dress and expression, we can see how even in medical images the female body is objectified.

Beside this item sits a pioneering text on obstetrics by Scottish anatomist and obstetrician William Hunter, which includes 34 detailed engravings by Dutch artist Jan van Rymsdyk. Despite focusing on women and reproduction, the illustrations detail only the uterus, leaving out vulval and vaginal anatomy and completely omitting the clitoris.

Jean-Baptiste Marc Bourguery

Traité complet de l'anatomie de l'homme, vol. 7

Paris, C.-A. Delaunay, éditeur, 1831–54

William Hunter

Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus

London, Sydenham Society, 1851

'I became aware of the problem when I was studying to be a surgeon. And the more I looked at it, the more I thought, there's really a problem here ... it was very unscientific. There had to be something going on socially because female anatomy was so badly presented.'

'We do not have a shortage of information about the uterus ... We have a plethora of information devoted to the uterus. So, you could be forgiven for believing that a woman's reproductive purpose is the most important function, and other functions, such as sexual function, are really of very little importance.'

'You know, I could see that in men we were reverential about male sexual nerves. There was almost nothing written about female sexual nerves. If you look at surgical diagrams of a particular procedure, you won't see the clitoris in your picture. So surgeons have had to do the operations in this area without that knowledge.'

– Professor Helen O'Connell

While the complete anatomy of the clitoris remained undefined until 1998, parts of this organ have appeared, disappeared and reappeared in Western anatomical texts over the centuries.

The first published reference to the clitoris can be found in the oldest anatomical textbook in the Library's collection, written by French physician Charles Estienne in 1545. Estienne mistakenly claimed that the organ played a role in urination. This was a far less controversial view than that of his renowned contemporary, Belgian anatomist Andreas Vesalius. He dismissed the clitoris entirely, declaring it 'useless' and insisting that 'healthy' women did not have one.

Placed alongside Estienne's text is the work of French anatomist Jean Marc Bourgery, published 300 years later. The contrast between Estienne's simple woodcuts and Bourgery's detailed dissections highlights how advances in printing technologies transformed anatomical representation. As Professor Helen O'Connell explains:

It is noteworthy because it gives detail about the clitoris. It shows the bulbs, the clitoris, the connection between those components, which then took at least another 150 years to represent in much more detail, with photography and modern technology. But these were really stand-out anatomical diagrams compared to their contemporaries. So, go the French!

Charles Estienne

De dissectione partium corporis humani libri tres

Paris, Apud Simonem Colinaeum, 1545

Jean-Baptiste Marc Bourguery

Traité complet de l'anatomie de l'homme, vol. 5

Paris, C.-A. Delaunay, éditeur, 1831–54

'The only time females are really depicted is in the female genital chapter, where we can't use the male. And perhaps breasts. Gender bias is anatomy. Anatomy is really the most binary of disciplines ... Everything is male or female ... Now we have to consider almost a middle ground: the intersex vulva and the vulva that's undergone surgical or hormonal manipulation while transitioning between male and female or female and male ... Binarism is misinformation.'

– Dr Jennifer Hayes

'I deal with misinformation all the time. There's not one person who enters our therapy practice who understands their own genital anatomy or the anatomy of others.'

'One of the consequences of this misinformation is that people don't understand their own bodies, and they don't understand how pleasure is embodied in their bodies.'

'As an occupational therapist, I was really motivated to find some tools of the trade, which didn't exist, to help redress this. Previous models focused on reproductive anatomy – the uterus and the vagina – but didn't actually show where the clitoris sat; it was just not included at all.'

– Anita Brown-Major

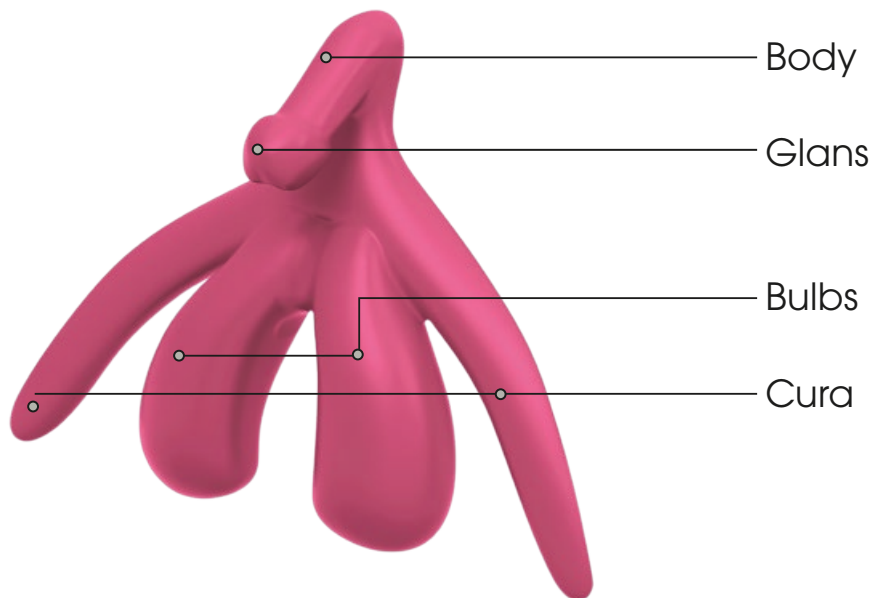
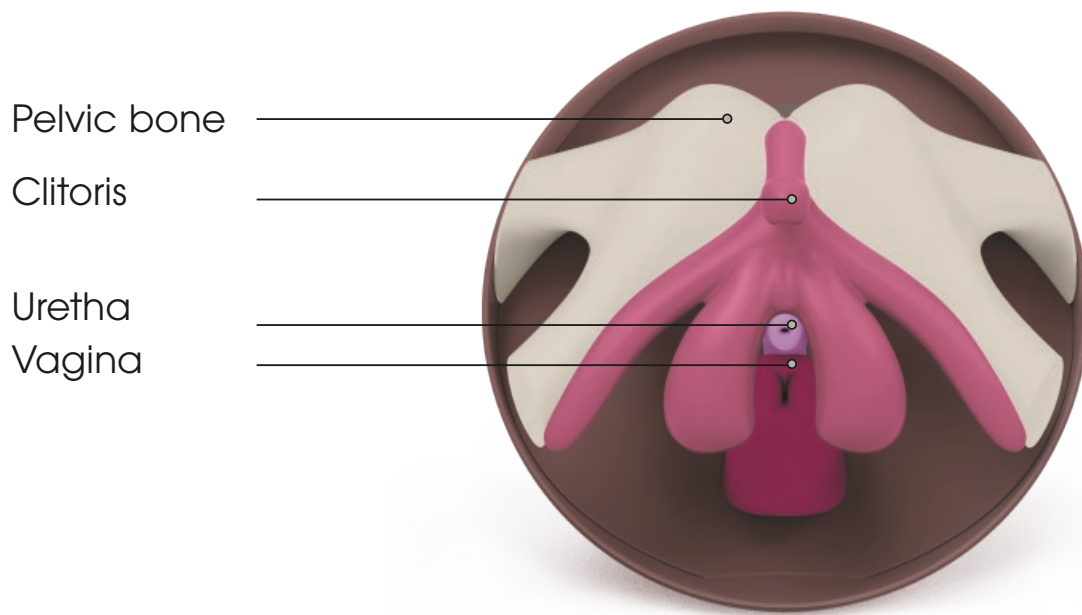
Thrive Rehab's *Cliterate* model is designed to help people 'overcome the awkward' and learn about their anatomy. It addresses longstanding gaps in the depiction of pelvic anatomy, featuring organs involved in sexual pleasure as well as reproduction.

This innovative model is based on the research of Professor Helen O'Connell and was designed and developed in collaboration with RMIT industrial designers Dr Judith Glover, Charlie Richardson, Cara Jordan-Miller and Pete Hvala.

In 2024, *Cliterate* received a Good Design award for Excellence in Design and Innovation at the Australian Design Awards. The judges noted:

Cliterate offers a groundbreaking approach to sexual health education with its spherical, pull-apart design. The ergonomic design enhances the educational experience, making complex anatomical relationships more accessible and understandable. This innovative approach not only supports educational efforts but also encourages meaningful conversations based on scientific knowledge.

Are you Cliterate?



***Cliterate* model 2023**

Thrive Rehab

Developed with RMIT Industrial Design Program: Dr Judith Glover, Charlie Richardson and Cara Jordan-Miller

Anatomical drawings are often simplified to help students learn, but artistic liberties taken by illustrators can inadvertently spread misinformation. Bodies 'neatened' for simplicity or aesthetic purposes can shape what doctors see as 'normal', and how we see our own bodies.

Displayed on the left is a bound series of anatomical plates by Irish-born Jones Quain and Scottish-born Erasmus Wilson, whose work inspired the widely used *Gray's Anatomy* textbook. While these illustrations aim to depict anatomy in 3D, they compromise anatomical accuracy in the process. This edition shows signs of repeated vandalism by those who have borrowed it, with the drawing and associated annotation of the 'Female organs of generation' frequently cut out.

The second folio, by prominent English anatomist George Viner Ellis, claims to represent 'the dissection of the human body'. However, of its 56 plates, only one depicts a female cadaver. This stylised image ignores the natural variations in labial anatomy, such as asymmetry and protrusion, which are common.

Today, misinformation about how a vulva 'should' look continues to spread through Hollywood movies, airbrushed pornography, plastic surgery ads and social media. Australian censorship laws even classify protruding labia as R18+, conflating normal anatomy with explicit content. The consequence of this stereotyping is significant: in 2016, 97 per cent of 433 Melbourne GPs reported patients seeking reassurance about 'normal' genital anatomy, with 50 per cent requesting referrals for labiaplasty.

Jones Quain and Erasmus Wilson

A Series of Anatomical Plates ..., vol. 1

Philadelphia, G.N. Loomis, 1842

George Viner Ellis and George Henry Ford

Illustrations of Dissections, 2nd edn

London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1876

'Lack of information is also misinformation.'

– Anita Brown-Major

Grassroots organisations, dating back to feminist movements of the 1960s, have a history of uniting women to challenge misinformation about their bodies and to demand better health care.

The poster and pamphlets in this case were produced by the Women's Health Resource Collective, founded in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick in 1982 and later based in Carlton. The collective pooled information on topics such as sexual health, contraception, abortion, menopause and endometriosis at a time when many women had little access to reliable knowledge about their bodies. Resources were made available in multiple languages, including Arabic, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese.

The shortcomings of mainstream medicine in addressing women's health concerns inspired the seminal texts *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (1971) and *A New View on a Woman's Body* (1982), both written by women in the USA. The latter was based on research for which the authors examined their own bodies and recorded observations on topics such as masturbation, menstruation and childbirth. Their reflections on the clitoral nerve system would influence Professor Helen O'Connell's groundbreaking research, conducted 16 years later, in which she used MRI and photographs of dissections to confirm the extent and complexity of the organ.

TOP ROW, FROM LEFT:

Boston Women's Health Course Collective

Our Bodies, Our Selves: A Course by and for Women

Boston, New England Free Press, 1972

Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centres

A New View of a Woman's Body: A Fully Illustrated Guide

New York, Simon & Schuster, 1981

Exhibition copy

'His solution to everything is a box of tranquilizers if you're a woman ...'

Poster

Brunswick, Vic., Women's Health Resource Collective, (c. 1982–86)

Side Effects: Shared Experiences of Women's Health Care

Brunswick, Vic., Women's Health Resource Collective, 1985

Side Effects: Shared Experiences of Women's Health Care (cover)

Brunswick, Vic., Women's Health Resource Collective, 1985

BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT:

The Collective – Who We Are

Brunswick, Vic., Women's Health Resource Collective, (c. 1982–86)

More than an Annual Report

North Carlton, Vic., Women's Health Resource Collective, (1987 or after)

'We must begin as women to reclaim our land and the most concrete place to begin is with our flesh'

Brunswick, Vic., Women's Health Resource Collective, (c. 1982–86)

'We believe we must challenge the ways the medical profession has been empowered to make judgements about the lives of women, including the right to decide what is "healthy and normal" for us.'

'We have increasingly lost control over our right to use our own experiences to shape our decisions. This is especially true if we are women who are poor, lesbian, migrant, black, very young or very old, or have a disability. Decisions about our lives – to give birth, to heal, to choose treatments – must be under our own control.'

– Women's Health Resource Collective pamphlet

'I was alarmed by the number of young girls having surgery on apparently normal vulva to achieve a look that was being propagated on social media as "normal".

'My aim for the PhD was to inform the medical students I would be teaching, because a significant number of them were young girls and possibly considering labiaplasty, but also because they would go on to become the next generation of general practitioners and be handling these requests for referral, or indeed questions about whether their labia was normal.

'There is no normal vulva. Vulvas are incredibly diverse, and that information just didn't seem to be out there.'

– Dr Jennifer Hayes

Displayed here are the doctoral theses of Helen O'Connell and Jennifer Hayes, whose research challenged longstanding inaccuracies in two foundational texts of modern medicine: *Last's Anatomy* and *Gray's Anatomy*. While we often accept the authority of medical and scientific literature without question, their research directly addressed the gender biases and insufficient depictions of female genital anatomy in these books.

Helen's copy of *Last's Anatomy* contains handwritten critiques from her student days in the 1980s, highlighting the text's problematic language. She later became Australia's first female urologist and the first person to fully map the anatomy of the clitoris. Her discoveries have revolutionised pelvic surgery and reshaped how women understand their bodies and experience pleasure.

For more than 150 years, *Gray's Anatomy* has included an image of a singular, stylised vulva, reflecting the outdated stereotypes that Jennifer's research is addressing. Her work on vulval diversity is now informing the book's latest edition, equipping medical students and doctors with a more accurate understanding of the variations in genital anatomy.

On display nearby, the anatomical model *Cliterate* demonstrates how this research is now informing medical practice. Created by occupational therapist Anita Brown-Major and the Thrive Rehab team, the model provides an interactive way to educate about the anatomy of the pelvis, vulva and clitoris. Early prototypes are featured in this case, including polymer clay renders of various labial shapes, some of which have been produced as 'clit and collect' additions to the model.

TOP ROW, FROM LEFT:

Helen O'Connell

'Review of the Anatomy of the Clitoris', PhD thesis, 2004

Courtesy of Professor Helen O'Connell AO

Notes for PhD research

Courtesy of Professor Helen O'Connell AO

Henry Gray

Gray's Anatomy

London, Churchill Livingstone, 1980

BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT:

R.J. Last

***Anatomy: Regional and Applied*, 7th edn**

London, Churchill Livingstone, 1984

Courtesy of Professor Helen O'Connell AO

***Cliterate* labia clit-and-collect prototypes 2023**

3D-printed model inserts

Thrive Rehab

Courtesy of Anita Brown-Major

Henry Gray

Gray's Anatomy

London, Green, 1877

Jennifer Hayes

'Labiaplasty – Mind the Gap: How the Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery has Exposed Gaps in Medical Anatomy Education', PhD thesis, 2023

Courtesy of Dr Jennifer Hayes

Charlie Richardson

Labia sculptures for clit-and-collect prototypes 2022

Heat-resistant modelling clay

Courtesy of Thrive Rehab

'So, we really exclusively used Last's Anatomy, which was written in a sort of blokey vernacular, right. Which I guess appealed to males becoming surgeons. And it did have this really poor version of female anatomy. And rather than being descriptive and dispassionate about female anatomy, it would actually say negative or pejorative things about female body parts.

'The clitoris was conspicuously absent, both in description and depiction ... it actually had almost nothing written or any pictures of an organ that I know is important to women – and preferably to men as well.

'Reading this as a young woman, I was very unimpressed. Not just a young woman, a young surgeon in training. We also had one to two and a half pages on the penis. And how many pages on the clitoris? Oh, nothing written about the clitoris.

'It just made sense, by the time I was at that more senior level, to start addressing these deficiencies.'

– Professor Helen O'Connell

CASE STUDY 4:

Art, poetry and resisting censorship

Censorship is a universal issue that fuels misinformation. When voices are silenced, a biased and distorted view of the world emerges.

The impact of erasing voices from history is central to the work of artist and academic Sofi Basseghi. Growing up in Tehran, Iran, Sofi experienced firsthand how knowledge can be controlled and obscured. In her exploration of the Library's collection, she uncovered the vital role that literature, art and poetry have played in her culture in preserving perspectives and experiences that had been deliberately suppressed, especially those of women.

On display are the Persian manuscripts and poetry books that Sofi studied. Nizami Ganjavi's Khamsa is shown alongside women's poetry from the past 1000 years. Through layered imagery and metaphor, these poems offer insights into Persian cultural life, reflecting traditions in painting, literature, music, architecture, clothing, ceremonies and culinary customs. Sofi's research also reveals how these depictions illuminate shifting gender dynamics and the evolving status of women, capturing their struggles, hopes and resilience over centuries. Symbols such as wine – forbidden in Islamic law – often feature in the manuscripts and poetry, representing freedoms that have been lost.

Expanding on these narratives, Sofi's video installation continues the tradition of storytelling as a form of resistance. Her work amplifies the voices of women across generations, while inviting us to reflect on the silences left by censorship. What truths might emerge if these voices were allowed to speak freely?

'I see these texts, these stories, and these illuminations as an antidote to misinformation. For me, they provide glimpses of truth.'

'When I looked at the depictions and stories of women in these illuminations, I had an epiphany about how these stories have been carried forward. Regardless of who was in power or the political situation, our history survives in poetry.'

'I'd love audiences to reflect on the fact that parts of history have been hidden, parts remain untold and parts have been censored. Through research and gaining more knowledge, you can move closer to uncovering certain truths.'

– Sofi Basseghi

Poetry and painting may not seem obvious tools for challenging misinformation, but in Persian culture they have been important in preserving perspectives often erased by censorship and the restrictions placed on women.

The 16th-century manuscripts on display show Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamasa*, a collection of five epic poems in which women's voices play an important role. They are open to *Haft Paykar*, or *Seven Portraits*, the story of King Bahram Gur's transformation into a discerning ruler through the guidance of his seven brides.

Anthologies of poetry by Persian women from as early as the 10th century are displayed alongside the manuscripts. These women used poetry to express their truths, conveying hardships and aspirations during oppressive times. Gardens and landscapes are recurring motifs, setting the stage for their stories. They also feature in the miniature paintings, or 'illuminations', that accompany *Haft Paykar*, providing the settings in which King Bahram gains wisdom from the princesses.

Artist Sofi Basseghi has drawn on these rich sources and their references to nature to create the video artwork in this room. She explores how the empowering messages of these poems continue to resonate with women today.

'After the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, many regressive laws were imposed on women, directly impacting their livelihoods. Key aspects of this were restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of voice and freedom of choice. When the voices of half a population are censored, it creates imbalance in society and biased information, leading to misinformation.'

'The takeaway message in this work is that information, in all its forms, cannot be taken at face value and that the liberties we do have come at a heavy price.'

– Sofi Basseghi

Written in Farsi script, the green neon sign reads 'Freedom is not free'. The Library acquired this artwork while it was on display in a Melbourne exhibition supporting the Women Life Freedom movement. This global movement was ignited by the death of Mahsa Amini in Tehran in 2022, who died while in custody for wearing 'improper' clothing. Protests erupted worldwide, with social media becoming a vital tool to keep the world informed and to challenge government control of information.

Sofi Basseghi and Ehsan Khoshnami

***Freedom is not free* 2021**

Neon and metal

Purchased 2022

'It is amazing to see how women's voices from the past 1000 years resonate with those of women today. Their struggles, frustrations and rebellion against social, cultural and political restrictions are mirrored.

'I think there is so much to learn from them. I don't use the word "heroic" lightly, but these women truly were heroic – especially when faced with the restrictions and dangers of expressing themselves in this way. Yet they did. They found poetry to be a catalyst for liberation.'

– Sofi Basseghi

Sofi Basseghi, in collaboration with actor and performer Salme Geransar

Seven Portraits – Unbound 2025

Multi-channel video installation

Duration: 15:30 mins

Sound composition by Ai Yamamoto

Commissioned by State Library Victoria

Supported by RMIT School of Art Staff Research Fund

'*Seven Portraits – Unbound* explores the concept of freedom expressed by Persian female poets over the past millennium. Created in collaboration with actor Salme Geransar, the work brings the words of these poets to life through a sequence of videos.

'Drawing inspiration from Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamisa*, the composition of screens and unfolding narrative also reflects the vibrant miniature illuminations that accompany these poems in the 16th-century manuscripts from the Library's collection, displayed nearby.

'The videos reimagine a story from the *Khamisa* called *Haft Paykar*, or *Seven Portraits*, about King Bahram Gur and his seven brides. Each bride resides in a uniquely coloured pavilion, associated with a day of the week. As he visits a different princess each day, their instructive tales transform him from a pleasure-seeking prince into a wise and just ruler. This reimagining, however, shifts the focus to the concerns of women, liberating the princesses from their role as advisors and empowering them to narrate their own stories.

'Starting with the black pavilion on Saturday, the first day of the week in Iran, the sequence concludes with the white pavilion on Friday, the holy day, or day of rest. Each day, the princess featured on the large screen narrates a poem drawn from the anthologies of Persian women's poetry on display. Its themes, symbolism and emotional resonance are reflected in the corresponding landscape scenes, which also evoke the colour of the princesses' pavilions.

'The atmospheric soundscape, created by Ai Yamamoto, features traditional Persian instruments, such as the *daf*, *setar*, *ney* and *kamanche*, which are often shown being played by women in the manuscript illuminations.

'Weaving fact and fiction, this work explores freedoms of voice, choice and expression through a feminist lens. It acknowledges and unearths women's renditions of history and their position within society over centuries.'

– Sofi Basseghi

Misinformation Research Guide

Libraries can support us to navigate today's relentless flow of information.

This comprehensive research guide, created by our librarians, offers tips and tools for evaluating information and finding credible sources. It includes links to reliable fact-checking resources and useful books and articles available through State Library Victoria's catalogue and collection, as well as up-to-date information on government legislation and organisations addressing the issue. You can also delve deeper into the case studies presented in this exhibition.

<https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/misinformation>



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A State Library Victoria exhibition

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