Silver and gold and platinum have always attracted me. The way that precious metal artists are able to mould their medium into visually and tactually pleasing works of art have always been a source of wonder to me. I think it is the lyrical nature of their work that fascinates me most, the yearning to express and capture aspects of beauty. This interest enticed me over many years to collect local expressions of silversmith manufacturing, ranging from tableware to jewellery to medals and pins.

These brooches were manufactured in the early 1950’s in Pretoria by Joe Calafato, who was one of the most prolific manufacturing silversmiths of his time (1947–1982).

Being a social scientist, and somewhat obsessive-compulsive – a good trait for both researchers and collectors to have – I began discussing our silversmith legacy with antique dealers and fellow collectors. I was soon pointed in the direction of the precious metal artists themselves and the die sinkers and engravers who have helped to make their inspirations come to life. I decided to limit my interest in metal art manufacturing to the late 20th century in South Africa and began to record all the information I could get on the precious metal manufacturing work that was locally
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produced. Along with a fellow enthusiast, Istine Swart, I began to systematically record interviews with some metal artists and their families.

Aware that the South African Society for Cultural History will be holding their annual conference in mid June 2009 at the museum in George, was all the incentive I needed. My methodological background was well suited to systemise and collate the information we already collected. This included information on the lives of the artists and the artisans who worked with them, as well as cataloguing and dating their work and their trademarks, and then placing it within historical artistic and socio-cultural contexts. I was able to put together an initial impression of the South African silversmith work and climate over the past fifty years.

With a power point presentation in my pocket, I flew down to the gentle pastoral town of George. The crispness in the air and the soft early winter sun added to its enchantment. Having only attended Psychology conferences before (with their hard approaches, futuristic, predictive edges), it was refreshing to share thoughts with people who embrace a discipline that is almost exclusively founded on reflective or retrospective approaches to knowledge making. The presenters were from a range of backgrounds such as history, geography, archaeology, museum curation, tourism, information science, architecture, agriculture, conservation and restoration, as well as archival studies.

Fascinating themes were presented. I listened to topics such as church architecture in the Southern Cape (and was reminded of our historical connectedness to cultures in our past), oral testimonies as a source for community history (and gained more insight in the role that oral traditions play in engendering a sense of community), and the Chinese in the Cape Colony (a small but culturally-significant group, whose history I was unaware of). There was also an archaeological paper on the Albisini ruins in the Kruger Park, as well as a forensic archaeological investigation of a 19th century mine cemetery. And someone did and incisive analysis of early Afrikaans films and expressions of a social-conscience.

My presentation seems to have been well received. Afterwards, a number of queries and discussions made me realise that I have merely begun to scratch the surface in gaining a coherent understanding of our local silver manufacturing traditions.

One afternoon we were taken on a field trip to the local Transport Museum, where two conference delegates shared with us their knowledge on the historical development of the railways in the Southern Cape and the attendant socio-economic influences. The last day of the conference was concluded with a picnic and a presentation at the George Botanical Gardens.

At the end of this intellectual feast of socio-cultural-environmental legacies, I was an inspired convert. It was like having been on a whirlwind two-day tour of a few cultural facets of our country. As a novice in this field, even I could see that there is so much that should still be recorded, not only for our own enjoyment,
wonder and awareness, but also for posterity. The multitude of cultural legacies in this country and its inter-connectedness is certainly the envy of many socio-cultural historians the world over. I registered as the newest member of the South African Society of Cultural History. I am already looking forward to the 2010 conference.

Upon reflecting over the time I spent in George – a time that nurtured the intellect and fortified the senses I realised how rewarding it was to venture outside the confines of my sub-fields of specialisation in mainstream Psychology, and to taste what other social disciplines bring to the table of knowledge. It made me realise again that there is a whole extended family of Social Science disciplines out there, and they all try to understand life from their particular angles. And the insights that we generate, really do show affinity with each other, enhancing and informing each others’ understanding of the human condition in all its processes and expressions. The conference and its content matter also brought me under the impression of the central role that ‘time’ or temporality and its expressions in terms of change and continuity play in the lives of humans, be it during one lifetime or over the course of generations.

Next time, be daring and try something different on the conference circuit. Who knows, it may just give way to a long elusive understanding of the research contexts you’ve been grappling with...

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Fred van Staden is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. He has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in personology, research methodology and environmental psychology. He is a former Chair of the Department of Psychology as well as a former coordinator of the Master’s Degree in Research Consultation. He is presently on a long overdue sabbatical.