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## ***Retablos & Santos: 'Altaring' The Life Of Philippine Heritage Through Future Generations***

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the role of living cultural heritage to materials conservation and restoration of *retablos* and *santos* at the National Museum of Fine Arts in the Philippines (NMP) and the Parish Church of La Purísima Concepción in Guiuan. In researching the restoration practices of cultural communities that *retablos* and *santos* hold significance to, this paper is framed by textual analysis, and interviews with heritage, ecclesiastic and conservation professionals. With ever-increasing cultural homogenisation, the importance of conservators working towards preventing cultural identities from being absorbed by universal discourses and popular cultures are argued in this paper. In reflecting upon knowledge systems and communication platforms that support conservation, the exchange of knowledge, its usability and wide audience possibilities as necessary pathways to preserving memory for living and future generations will be focused upon.

**Keywords:** *Communication; Conservation; Knowledge Exchange; Memory; Restoration; Retablo; Santos; Social Media*

### **Introduction:**

The value of *retablos* and *santos* lies in their historical beginnings as works of indigenous Filipino craftsmanship influenced by colonial and immigrant religious and stylistic practices, and how its continuation supports the ongoing Catholic belief system in the Philippines. *Retablos* consist of niches for *santos*, columns, bas-reliefs and paintings, with niches of the earliest *retablos* in Spain being simple in design and painted decorations.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, *anitos* woodcarving was an ancient craft in the Philippines prior Spanish colonisation and Miguel Legazpi's encounter with Paete carvers in Laguna in 1571.<sup>2</sup> This long-

established craft skill prompted the introduction of *retablo* and *santos*-making by missionaries to Filipino and Chinese workers.<sup>3</sup>

### **Living Practice Perceptions:**

In comparing Spanish and Philippine *retablo* and *santos*-making, differences in practice manifest in the number of stages included, and in stylistic influences and choices. Spanish production and installation of *retablo* was a project divided between multiple craftsmen, with polychrome artists needing to know how to paint, guild and engrave *retablos* and *santos*.<sup>4</sup> Chinese presence in the Philippines significantly came to outnumber the Spanish, from a few hundred prior colonisation to 20,000 by 1603 due to lucrative trade with Europeans in oriental goods as middle-men in Manila.<sup>5</sup> Though as mentioned, missionaries taught Chinese and Filipino workers *retablo* and *santos*-making processes, strong adherence to traditions by both cultures during the colonial period produced hybrid *retablo* and *santos* styles. Decorative motifs in *retablos* and the characterisation of *santos* figures reflect this with the depiction of round, expressive faces and deep-set eyes. With the exception of figures in attitudes of suffering, the Philippine *santos* have characteristically calm expressions with heavy, dreamy eyelids associated with Buddhist imagery, with tight, repeating pattern forms identified with Chinese styles.<sup>6</sup>

### **Church Perceptions:**

Fr. Casal discusses how Western art generally depicts a moment or historical action frozen in time, whereas early Christian and Asiatic art tends to represent an eternal play which reflects Buddhist imagery and ideology.<sup>7</sup> This

evaluation can be seen to allude to the duality of Buddhist principles and Christian values as grounded by the multiple nationalities, cultures and religions within the Philippines. Spanish conception of values in terms of capturing stationary moments from Catholic belief may consequently be considered difficult to compare to those in the Philippines, as a different spiritual aim through Buddhist styles of narration is used to convey and interpret Catholicism despite the adoption of Spanish craftsmanship.

Values in relation to cleanliness and aestheticism as an expression of respect is also explained in canonical texts. 1983 Canon Law asserts the repair of churches should involve principles and norms of the liturgy and sacred art once advice from experts has been sought, that cleanliness and beauty should be preserved as would befit God's house, and that fitting security is used to protect sacred and precious goods.<sup>8</sup> Beauty and cleanliness is thus described as expressing care and demonstrating veneration in Catholicism. To present an unclean or damaged work could arguably impact the spiritual message.

### **Conservation Perceptions:**

Cleanliness as impacting heritage meaning leads to the discussion of conservation methods and their potential implications for *retablos* and *santos*. Jaime Villafranca presents a 16-point methodology for intervening with polychromed wooden altarpieces, which lists conservation treatment steps in order of execution.<sup>9</sup> Though Villafranca stipulates the methodology is not universal,<sup>10</sup> an important list of considerations to be evaluated before, during and after material intervention is presented. Though churches will present their religious heritage within their sacred space according to their faith, museums providing spaces for objects of worship to

be viewed with the necessary evocative and respectful presentation of values is important to the significance and interpretation of religious heritage.



Figures 1 & 2.) (Left) Flaking column of 17<sup>th</sup> century *retablo* at San Agustin, (right) *santos* displayed at the National Museum of the Philippines (NMP). Photographed by Anastazja Harding, July 2018, natural light.

*Santos* and *retablos* have often been repainted throughout history, and it is popular discussion amongst conservators whether it is ethical to remove modern re-painting to reveal earlier colour applications.<sup>11</sup> Capes of *santos* often get repainted completely different colours throughout their history.<sup>12</sup> Removing re-paint may attempt to reinstate the original intention of the artist, commissioner and/or qualities sought to be conveyed by the spiritual leader of the era the *santos* or *retablo* belonged to. However, changing aesthetics or simply reconstructing missing

components of church heritage may correspond with Philippine approaches to Catholicism and be recognised as necessary or in-line with living practice.

Ageing processes can be triggered or accelerated by environmental conditions such as light, moisture, heat, atmospheric or internally generated pollutants, and by conservation treatment. A main environmental factor which contributes to heritage degradation in the Philippines is the country's tropical climate, which has an average humidity of 71-85%.<sup>13</sup> Indonesia similarly has an average of 70-90% humidity.<sup>14</sup> Humidity can be difficult to control within a museum or church context as both tend to be large, open spaces which are unsustainable and expensive to manage with humidifiers and air conditioning.

### **Personal Experience & Interviews:**

Nine interviews were undertaken, five churches and Manila Cathedral were visited in the time spent in Manila.<sup>15</sup> Four of the five churches contained *retablos* and all displayed *santos*. This opportunity gained insight into the current extent and form of *retablo* and *santos* production and use. The concept of the Filipino audience identifying with *retablos* and *santos* through attention to symbolism and realism was confirmed in visiting churches, museums and in the interviews undertaken in the Philippines. A priest interviewed at St. Pancratius appears to support Casal's previously discussed perspective of art and objects in Catholic churches. He clearly expressed pride in national craftsmanship as being of paramount importance to educating those about traditional skill used in exemplifying spiritual belief, and continues to reflect the educative purpose of a museum context.<sup>16</sup>

Museum displays of Church heritage, as previously mentioned, generate similar manners of respect associated with church setting by creating corresponding visual barriers. However, vast groups of teenage visitors were seen daily to be

posing, touching and embracing objects for photographs and selfies in all exhibition spaces at NMP. Their behaviour is a physical hazard to objects, impedes educative and personal experiences of the collections, and does not coincide with the touching of objects in reverence typically performed in Church settings. Matt Stromberg discusses contemporary exhibition models of interaction being increasingly designed to focus on commercial trade show-like spectacle.<sup>17</sup>



Figures 3 & 4.) (Left) Young visitors taking selfies at NMP, (right) young visitor posing by the Bohol *retablo* at NMP. Photographed by Anastazja Harding, July 2018, museum lighting.

Though popular spectacle may appeal to young visitors, this manner of interaction is problematic as it does not perpetuate the knowledge or appreciation of national or international cultural heritage. Considering the great number of youth at the NMP, having youth representatives engage young visitors on the objects and artworks displayed would be an investment in the future of cultural identities and their continued national relevance. Signs for the *retablo* on display at NMP provides a basic outline of the typhoon which caused the destruction of the Bohol church, and a list by which to identify the object, rather than insight into the purpose,

production and memories the object encompasses for those it had once been utilised by.

Three of four visitors interviewed discussed *retablos* as being significant due to their church and regional-specific designs.<sup>18</sup> When asked what would be the most important aspect of a *retablo* to conserve, two visitors believed significance and meaning was conveyed in the different details within *retablo* designs.<sup>19</sup> Laguna and Kapabaayan were regions renowned for *retablo* design.<sup>20</sup> Consequently a sense of spiritual purpose being given added value through regional, if not national, pride in reputed craftsmanship was expressed. A visitor from Bohol expressed a great sense of spiritual and local pride in the *retablo* on display at the NMP, and he discussed a church he knew of in Bohol which had been destroyed.<sup>21</sup> Church heritage as supporting those experiencing trauma or displacement as a result of disaster in regional areas is an important consideration in conservation for those who identify with living heritage, however in a museum context, the Bohol *retablo* clearly continued to support memory during the interview with the visitor from Bohol.

### **Conservation Insight From Staff At NMP**

Conservation was discussed with three NMP staff members in the Philippines. NMP Staff Member 1 discussed conservation work he undertook with a group called ACES in restoring a *retablo*.<sup>22</sup> Compromises were evident in his discussion of how learnt techniques had to be applied *in-situ* to the *retablo* conserved.<sup>23</sup> During this member's time with ACES, advanced testing was not possible and lack of material analysis was a recurring difficulty encountered in his conservation experience. With churches generally having a literal open door policy to ensure visitors feel welcome to enter, protecting painted or polychromed surfaces from dirt and pollution becomes particularly important to consider. Further

discussion with Staff Member 1 on the ACE's *retablo* treatment demonstrated how treatment decisions result in needing to balance further loss of material without compromising the originality and visual integrity of the heritage object, whilst simultaneously working to a deadline and budget. The feasibility of collaborative conservation may also need to be considered in terms of how open conservators are in sharing their approaches to treatments or restoration.

NMP Staff Member 2 discussed difficulties in finding documentation of conservation treatments,<sup>24</sup> which corroborated with personal experience of meeting conservators in the Philippines who at least initially lacked the confidence in their experience or judgements to share their treatment procedures. Moreover, the importance of handling clients and stakeholders was discussed with Staff Member 2. Stating 'no' without explanation to a request such as the installation of an air-conditioning unit can generate hostility without developing understanding about why such systems prove a risk to heritage objects.<sup>25</sup> Churches often feel they need to provide air-conditioning for parishioners, especially wealthy donors, and Staff Member 2 explained that she recommends using standing electric fans and inviting special guests into air-conditioned church offices.<sup>26</sup> In this way, a proper consideration of the site and its users is demonstrated, and explaining the consequences of actions promotes the dissemination of knowledge and a positive working relationship.

Three NMP staff members indicated a difficulty in communicating the need for inter-institutional collaboration with parish priests, with only a sense of shared jurisdiction over the conservation and restoration of churches and their objects becoming evident in recent co-operation.<sup>27</sup> Staff Member 1 discussed the problems of priests not being informed or passing on knowledge of the church and its heritage to new priests, and how it is only in recent history that priests are attending the

meetings held about their parish conservation-restoration projects.<sup>28</sup> With new generation priests seeming to be more willing to enlist and cooperate with conservators according to sources interviewed, focusing on developing this growing collaboration is important to bettering the perpetuation of knowledge and inter-institutional understanding.

### **Current Restoration And Analysis Of The Guiuan Retablo:**

La Purísima Concepción required restoration after the damage it sustained by Super Typhoon Haiyan in November, 2013.<sup>29</sup> The craftsman in charge of the *retablo* conservation at Guiuan explained *retablos* could be repainted every year if there was a sponsor who wished to change its colour.<sup>30</sup> 15 days was estimated for the total repainting of a *retablo*, and continued to explain that he would scrape back the old paint and wash the columns with paint thinner so that they may be polychromed and regilded.<sup>31</sup> The Guiuan craftsman also showed examples of carvings he restored with his own designs.

Little doors in the back of the *retablo* niches for cleaning the *santos* were discussed by NMP Staff Member 3, who explained priests dictate the cleaning rosters according to the condition of the *retablo*, but with parishioners constantly visiting the *santos*, any dust seen is cleaned with their handkerchiefs.<sup>32</sup> The reverence for the *santos* dictates quite an



Figure 5.) Example of Aligbot's restoration of carved *retablo* losses. Photographed by Anastazja Harding, July 2018, natural lighting.

effective preventive conservation treatment by parishioners and is indicative of the anticipated maintenance of the heritage in the future. As mentioned previously, the openness of the church and the wet humid Philippine environment increases likelihood of dust and dirt accumulating and attracting moisture to objects which may result in rot, pest infestation or mould growth. Therefore maintaining a consistent cleaning regime is important to preventing future *retablo* degradation, as well as being able to identify and treat any signs of damage before it becomes a major threat to the object.

### **Conclusion**

When placing importance on living heritage being the individualised interpretation of the beliefs and practices of communities, this primarily asks of conservators to suspend the generalised rules of conservation and restoration practice, and accept that uniqueness can result in what may be termed historical or material loss, but from which renewed value and meaning is encompassed through cultural practice. Sustainability of cultural practice should ultimately be deemed more significant if there must be a choice between conservation of object materiality or the conservation of object production and its use, as a cultural group's abilities to continue reproducing or using their heritage in its traditional manner perpetuates the original purpose, value and meaning of the works in question, and supports a defining way of life.

By creating records and dialogues *now* when we understand that oral history is currently the predominant source for information, this can help support this word-of-mouth practice with visual and written evidence in the future. Youth-to-youth floor-talks in the museum context will create a space for the communication of personal sentiments or concerns relevant to the future of the

heritage displayed, whilst incorporating the interactive focus which appeals to the new generation. Building awareness of the significance of record-keeping by the users and producers of *retablos* and *santos*, and encouraging the passing on of knowledge between leaders of communities will aid the decision-making processes of conservators when interviews or collaborative work is not possible. Generating awareness and openness about activities undertaken should be advocated strongly by NMP, as by experiencing first-hand how many museums and heritage sites NMP are responsible for, it is not possible for all sites and churches to be visited by NMP staff in all the Philippine regions.

By using popular wide-impact social networks, a integrated network may be established from which all those subscribed or following may learn from and contribute to. In 2017, the most popular social network used in the Philippines, as well as Indonesia, was Instagram.<sup>33</sup> In developing a greater social media profile, this will not only continue to reach out to youth and potentially expand their interests in cultural heritage, but this will assist in developing a much needed movement in which communities such as parishes may record knowledge of cultural heritage. Posting the craftsman's progress in Guiuan and the Bohol visitor's reflection upon the importance of local memory to the significance of their parish should instigate recording of such details by other parishes without the prompting of natural or man-made disaster.

Students at Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro are piecing together the history of Brazil's National Museum in an attempt to salvage memories of collections after the 2018 fire which destroyed much of the building and its collections.<sup>34</sup> This tragedy has both inspired the use of social media posting as a resource and aid to memory, whilst demonstrating the enormous amount of time and labour which such a project requires if such a platform is not in place before

disaster strikes. This approach may be considered within an Indonesian context, especially in areas of recent natural disaster where people's livelihoods and places of living memory have been destroyed. By creating an outreach through posting and publication, this will call for communities to invest in their community pride and creative identity, and assist stakeholders and institutions such as NMP in being able to conserve or restore on-site place of local or national significance in the future. By encouraging the concept of the community network into a national movement, this shared responsibility will better the future of living cultural heritage and the preservation of their respective identities.

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Introduction; Description of the work of art; Historic, aesthetic and functional antecedents; Techniques of manufacture; State of conservation; Previous interventions; Mechanisms and causes of alteration; Intervention proposal and development of the process; Theoretical justification of the intervention; Treatment of patina, missing elements and losses; Re-integrations, integration, protective layers, etc.; Presentation of the work of art; Maintenance recommendations; Budget: economic, human, technological resources, etc.; Schedule or work plan, and Bibliography.
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