

Research in Curating and Philippine History

A new exhibit will be opening in the Art Institute of Chicago which will serve as a love letter to one of the wonderful communities in Chicago: the Philippines in Painted Views: 19th century. My exhibition will celebrate Filipino artists in the 19th century, it will center on artworks that were produced by local painters and will be interwoven with the events and geopolitics of the era. As not a lot of people know about the Philippines' history, it was colonized for about 300 hundred years before becoming a fully independent country. From 1565 to 1898, Spain took hold of the Philippines, slowly erasing the culture cultivated by the different islands. Even the name of our country was to pay forward to the country of Spain, which the King at the time was King Philip II. Any defiance that was against the eradication of the Filipino culture was met with grueling punishments and death. The exhibition will delve into the utilization of art as a device to criticize and keep a record of history. I will be exploring the cultural impact and the emotions evoked in popular pieces from the 19th century such as *Spoliarium* by Juan Luna.

The arts have significance. In David Zayas' words, *Art has to be reflective of our society*. People are free to create art that has no meaning and just be completely for fun, but it's not limited to that stipulation. The biggest moments in our societal initiatives are through art commentary. My goal is to curate an exhibition that imparts knowledge about Filipino art and, by extension, its history. Victors usually have the platform to tell their own story while the underrepresented are forced to defend themselves upon history. There isn't a lot of Filipino art that's within reach currently, and I hope to be the bridge that can at least help people see that there is so much that the Philippines can offer in the art world.

I read in The Guardian, an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, that being a curator holds responsibility. As a curator, you are held responsible for guarding these art pieces and their history. I've come to find out that curating an exhibition is art within itself. I have to carefully piece together these unrelated fragments of artists' work and somehow see a story beneath the physical incongruence.

As I have visited different museums throughout the semesters and have talked with amazing curators who have experiences under their belt, I wanted to draw inspiration from their process. One of the reasons I chose Philippine art as a focus for my exhibit was through viewing the interesting books from the Archives. As I flipped through the pages from the Archives,

looking at what Chicago used to look like in other people's eyes in the 20th century, I felt a tinge of nostalgia. I also wanted to look over Philippine arts and books and learn about my history but I really couldn't. I want to see other Filipinos' perspectives on the Philippines as opposed to what I experienced in the 2000s, the last time I spent my time there.

The Art Institute was detrimental to my learning about space and purpose. Each section, wing, and each piece had a purpose and a meaning. It was like a game of chess, each artwork was strategically placed and moved. Dr. Lisa Ayla Çakmak of the Art Institute aided me in the world of curators, understanding the trick of the trade in its basic technicalities. But what she helped me the most is knowing what pieces to seek out for a specific purpose, and why it is important to display. When she talked about the history of Chicago and the importance of weaving that history in the very art that they display, it helped me think about the objective of my exhibition.

To understand the psyche behind 19th-century Philippine artists, we have to understand the cultural happenings of the time. Amid the Spanish occupation, the Philippines was a country that was confined within its own country. The Spanish colonized the Philippines from 1568 to 1898. Filipinos were forced to lose their identities and embrace the demanded assimilation of the Spanish. It is comprehensible that Filipinos would feel like there would be no incoming hope for independence; three centuries is a long time after all. Hope, or lack thereof, was prominent, which was reflected in the art landscape.

I want to center my exhibit around Juan Luna and Félix Resurrección Hidalgo. These two artists shared a similar style and thematic oeuvre. So much so that they were both praised as evidence that Filipinos can be just educated and artistically expressive like the Spaniards (to their dismay). *Spoliarium*, 1884 (Fig. 1) and *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho*, 1884 (Fig. 2) would be displayed amongst their other artworks. But these pieces would be essential in tying up the objective of my exhibit. *Spoliarium* depicts a scene from ancient Rome that highlights the gory destruction caused by gladiatorial combat. The term "spoliarium" comes from Latin and describes the area beneath the Roman Colosseum where the fallen and dead gladiators are disposed of, and stripped of all personal belongings. While *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* illustrates two young virgins who are Christians being harassed by lustful Roman soldiers.

Each painting depicts injustice and cruelty. It is to be noted that both paintings were created in the same year, and both were submitted to the *Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes* where both won their separate medals.

Both artists see the oppressive and inhumane way the Spaniards treated the locals in the Philippines. Man, woman, or child, there was no sparing anyone of pain. Both artists also utilize Roman and European subjects rather than fully depicting Spanish and Filipino subjects. We can interpret it as symbolic or the mere fact that the Spanish often punished people who criticized their governance.

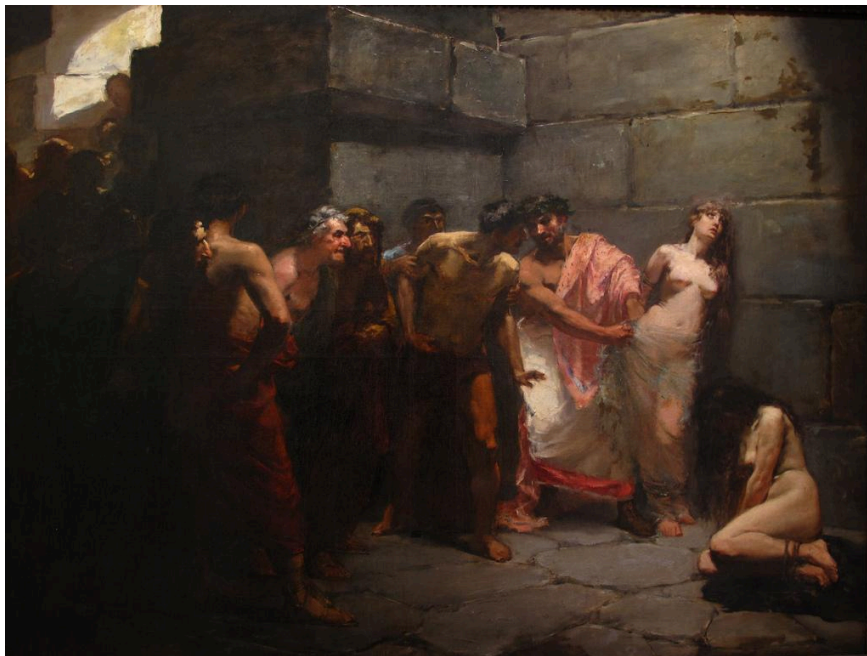
I would include other pieces such as textiles or cloth that are from around the same period. I would love to be able to find a woven chair and easel, just to see what the artists were seeing from their perspective.

Justiniano Asuncion pieces such as *Mestizos de Sangley y Chino Tipos del País Watercolor*, 1841 and *Illustration of a Filipino mestizo*, 1841 would be a great addition to the collection. Asuncion was a great history keeper with their rendering of what Filipinos looked like and what they wore as they were under Spanish rule.

Juan Luna would also be a great introduction to Philippine art in general as he is one of the most revered in the art community for his art style and his commentary. The director and founder of Leon Gallery, a very well-known auction house in the Philippines, Jaime Ponce de Leon commented, "We Filipinos know that Luna is the greatest Filipino artist. Perhaps not only from the 19th century but in our history. He gave us so much honor. He got so much acclaim for his virtuosity and mastery of painting that every Filipino is proud of his accomplishment. I think it is always an honor, a great privilege to own a Luna, and to see Luna in our museums is always something big." To expose Luna's artwork to a new audience and to a community that knows what it feels like to struggle under an oppressive system, would be an honor. I feel confident in saying that the Chicago community would empathize with the artwork and take an interest in the history which is full of perseverance and grit.



(Fig.1) *Spoliarium*, 1884, Juan Luna



(Fig. 2) *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho*, 1884, Félix Resurrección Hidalgo

It would benefit my exhibit if it was located on the first floor with Arts of Asia. As the current showcase of Southeast Asian art is scarce and fractionally lacking than any other continent, I think I would be doing it a service by putting my exhibit in there. Along with the art pieces, I would include their labels with brief descriptions, author, title, and year. An introductory composition about the history of the Philippines and the Spanish colonization will be provided for the context of the exhibit.

I also like the white walls in the Southeast Asia section because I don't want the walls to distract from the paintings themselves. I think the two main pieces (Fig. 1 & 2) have such great tone and great use of colors that they stand out by themselves. The compositions that I plan on borrowing all vary in size so I would prefer doing a salon style in terms of hanging them up. I think it would fill up the space quite nicely that way.

Social media will be the way to pique everyone's interest. As a lot of artists also use social media platforms to communicate and show their art, it'll be a good idea to join the conversation and introduce the exhibition. I would also like to use "old school" techniques of passing flyers and highly populated areas in the city or putting them up in high visibility areas. There are a lot of people from different walks of life who go through the city in a hurry or mindlessly, and those are the same people who I want to attend the exhibition.

The best way to educate someone is to sate their curiosity and the willingness to want to learn more. I want the space to be for everyone. I want the paintings to pull audiences' interest and make them curious about the painting and the history behind it.

In conclusion, the exhibit will be a learning space. It will represent a time in a life for people where they can't speak out which is not an uncommon idea nowadays. And even though the subjects of the matters and the anecdotes were morbid and bleak, people will always find a way to balance them with lighter brush strokes.

Work Cited

Santos, Romano. "This Long-Lost Masterpiece Was Unveiled for the First Time in 134 Years." *Vice*, 7 July 2023, www.vice.com/en/article/v7b7nm/juan-luna-lost-painting-philippines-art. Accessed 19 Oct. 2023.

Carpio, Audrey. "We Need to Talk about Juan Luna | Art." *Vogue.ph*, 12 July 2023, [vogue.ph/lifestyle/art/juan-luna-martin-arnaldo-film-hymen-oh-hymenee/](https://vogue.ph/lifestyle/art/juan-luna-martin-arnaldo-film-hymen-oh-hymene/). Accessed 19 Oct. 2023.

Lance Spencer Yu. "'Painter as Hero': How Juan Luna First Awakened the Filipino Spirit." *Rappler*, 12 June 2023, www.rappler.com/life-and-style/arts-culture/painter-hero-how-juan-luna-first-awakened-filipino-spirit/.

Staff, ANCX. "National Artists Pay Homage to Rizal in Leon Auction." *ABS-CBN News*, ABS-CBN News, 27 Aug. 2023, news.abs-cbn.com/ancx/culture/art/08/27/23/national-artists-pay-homage-to-rizal-in-leon-auction. Accessed 19 Oct. 2023.

Interviews with Artists

I. Introduction: The purpose of this interview is to understand the connection between art and the historical system of the Philippines. I want to understand the connection between artists and their process and what it is like finding purpose in each composition. Today, you've been selected as a Filipino artist to express your point of view.

II. Interview: Vina

What kind of art medium do you do?

- Graphite/Pencil

How did you start being an artist?

- I started my journey by imitating graphics, objects, and portraits of people. Until I improved a bit, but I found myself constantly drawn back to imitation. It felt safe, familiar. Developing my own style felt daunting, a leap into the unknown.

Where do you take inspiration for your art?

- I don't have a particular person to take inspiration from, but I admire all people who draw. I always take a look at their works and appreciate all of it, finding inspiration in the diverse techniques and perspectives they offer. Nature, music, and everyday life also fuel my creativity; a fleeting glimpse of light, a captivating melody, or a meaningful moment. I draw inspiration from the world around me, constantly seeking new sights and experiences.

Are there Filipino artists that you follow? (Can be also music or any other medium that tie in for your inspiration)

- Geloy Maligaya Concepcion, he's a photographer, artists, author, and illustrator. He's also a father and a husband of Bea from going bulilit!

How does Philippine history influence your art?

- My art reflects not only the historical struggles of the Philippines but also the current events shaping the nation. It's a way for me to connect with fellow Filipinos, to give voice to our shared experiences, and to process the complexities of our present reality. I aspire to use my art as a platform to explore issues of social justice, environmental concerns, and the ongoing fight for progress in the Philippines.

Do you feel a responsibility to represent Filipino culture or history through your art? Why or why not?

- Yes, I feel a responsibility to share Filipino stories, because art connects us and helps keep our culture alive.

What themes or issues do you often explore in your pieces?

- I'm constantly amazed by the depth, beauty, and sheer power of the graphics I find on Pinterest.

Can you share a specific work you've done that was deeply tied to Philippine history or social issues? What was your process behind it?

- I haven't yet created artwork specifically addressing Philippine history or social issues; my college studies currently consume most of my time.

How does your personal background or community influence your work?

- My art classes have broadened my artistic horizons, exposing me to various styles like pointillism, geographic art, line art, and tattoo design; influencing my own work through assignments and explorations of these techniques.

Do you believe art can create change in society? How have you seen that in your experience?

- I believe art absolutely can effect change in society. We've studied examples in class of art's power to inspire protest and raise awareness of important issues. My own artistic experiences have shown me how art can powerfully express emotions and ideas, shaping perspectives and potentially motivating action, even if that change isn't always immediate or dramatic.

What does "purpose" mean to you when creating art?

- I don't always aim for a grand message in my art. Sometimes, it's about emotional release. Other times, it's about experimentation and discovery, as with my texture project. And sometimes, it's purely the satisfaction of creating something beautiful. It's all about the creative process, the exploration, and the connection it fosters.

How do you navigate the balance between self-expression and audience impact in your creations?

- It's a constant juggling act. I begin with my own authentic expression, then consider how to best connect with my audience. This isn't about compromising my message, but making it accessible and engaging; the goal is to share my art authentically while inviting others in.

III. Interview: Oli

What kind of art medium do you do?

I do different types of styles using different mediums. I normally do portraiture with colored pencils, oil paint, and graphite.

How did you start being an artist?

I have been drawing since I can remember. My mom would always tell a story of me as a kid, where I use all the bond paper she bought so I could draw on it.

Where do you take inspiration for your art? I normally take inspiration with other artists work. Whenever I want to do a piece, I would visit a museum or would scroll through social media. I also take inspiration on things I saw randomly. Whether it's on TV or outside/nature.

Are there Filipino artists that you follow? (Can be also music or any other medium that tie in for your inspiration)

I have been following Fernando Amorsolo lately particularly with his portrait paintings since I do the same pieces right now.

How does Philippine history influence your art?

I think it has a big influence in my craft since I took pride with our national artists who shown the world what Filipinos can do. I also relate how they use their platform and craft to show our history, and to connect with people through their works.

Do you feel a responsibility to represent Filipino culture or history through your art? Why or why not?

I don't personally feel the urge of creating a piece that shows or represent our history. I think for me, art is not an obligation to represent something. For me, Art is an expression of oneself and that's the beauty of it.

What themes or issues do you often explore in your pieces?

I normally do portraitures. But I also do some arts that shows social issues.

Can you share a specific work you've done that was deeply tied to Philippine history or social issues? What was your process behind it?

When I was in highschool, we were asked to do a social realism where me and my team worked on the topic of war. I created this painting of a child holding a gun with the Philippine flag on the background

split into 2, where the blue part was changed into the ISIS flag. It was mainly about what happened in Marawi but also tapped an issue about war, where childrens are the one whose being affected by it. They either die or hold a gun to fight for their life and their freedom.

How does your personal background or community influence your work?

Growing up, i'm glad that I was put on a school where my talents and ideas were welcomed. My teachers guided me on honing my talents and skills.

Do you believe art can create change in society? How have you seen that in your experience?

I believe art is a great tool to make a change in our society. You can use art to express yourself. To show the world what's going on and to inspire others to do good things.

What does “purpose” mean to you when creating art?

I think purpose for me is how you will be able to express yourself through your craft and inspire others. How you'd be able to connect with others through your art.

How do you navigate the balance between self-expression and audience impact in your creations?

I do believe that you don't work to impress a lot of audience. Just create and continue to do your craft that is authentic to you and you'll surely get the right audience with your craft and make an impact to them.

IV. Summary

Both artists are deeply passionate about their craft, but they approach art with different motivations and influences. Vina sees art as a personal journey, starting with imitation, now slowly exploring her own style. She draws inspiration from everything around her: people's art, music, nature, and everyday moments. Though she hasn't created many pieces tied to Philippine history yet, she feels a strong responsibility to represent Filipino culture and hopes to use art as a tool to connect and inspire.

Oli, on the other hand, has been immersed in art since he was little. He leans heavily into portraiture and works with a variety of mediums. He's inspired by fellow artists, especially national icons like Fernando Amorsolo, and is comfortable using art to explore social issues. He doesn't feel pressured to represent culture or history in every piece, his focus is on genuine self-expression. But when the moment calls for it, like in his painting about the Marawi conflict, he doesn't shy away from powerful themes.

Both believe in art's ability to spark change and connection. For Vina, it's about emotional expression and experimentation; for Oli, it's about being true to yourself and letting the right audience find you. In the end, their stories show that there's no one way to be an artist, just the importance of creating from the heart.