



Manila, Philippines

Heritage, Science, and Resilience: A Week in the Philippines



By Kate Seymour | Founder, Art Conservation Education

What a whirlwind. I've just wrapped up my first-ever visit to the Philippines, and I'm leaving with a full heart and a deep respect for the vibrant conservation community here. From the humidity-controlled conservation labs of Manila to the historic stones of the "Walled City" (Intramuros) here is a look back at a week dedicated to the science of conservation, team building and connections. This trip has underscored a vital truth: *we don't just treat objects; we protect the physical embodiments of a nation's narrative.*

Corporate Stewardship: Lopez & Ayala Collections

The journey began with an exploration of how significant corporate entities act as vital custodians of Philippine heritage. At the **Lopez Museum and Library**, Margarita Villanueva and her team introduced me to the unique environmental challenges of the region. We spent our time diving into Preventive Conservation in the Tropics, discussing how to protect vital history against intense humidity—a crucial conversation given their care of pieces like the *Diccionario (Bisaya-Español, 1885)* and the works of Juan Luna and Fernando Amorsolo.

The theme of corporate leadership continued at the **Ayala Corporate Collection**. My thanks to Lourdes Po for a truly enlightening tour that demonstrated how art and heritage can be integrated into a professional environment to reflect institutional values and preserve national treasures. Discussing the stewardship required to maintain such an expansive collection within a corporate setting highlighted the unique "Visionary Management" that keeps these treasures accessible as part of the broader story of Philippine art.



STRENGTH IN COLLABORATION: LOPEZ & AYALA MUSEUMS *Exchanging technical insights and conservation strategies with the dedicated teams at the Lopez Museum and Library and the Ayala Museum.*

The Historical Anchor: National Museum of the Philippines

If the corporate visits provided the context, the **National Museum of the Philippines** served as the trip's true historical and technical anchor. Walking through the collection felt like a journey through time, tracing the soul of the country from the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule through to more recent American history and the enduring battle for Filipino freedom.

This historical grounding is vital for any conservator; it reminds us that we are not just treating objects, but the physical witnesses to a nation's struggle and triumph.

The experience was made even more profound by a "behind the scenes" look at their impressive conservation lab. Hosted by Nina Dueñas, I had the privilege of engaging with the team on advanced conservation strategies, specifically, Thread-by-Thread Tear Mending and Cleaning Strategies for sensitive paint surfaces.

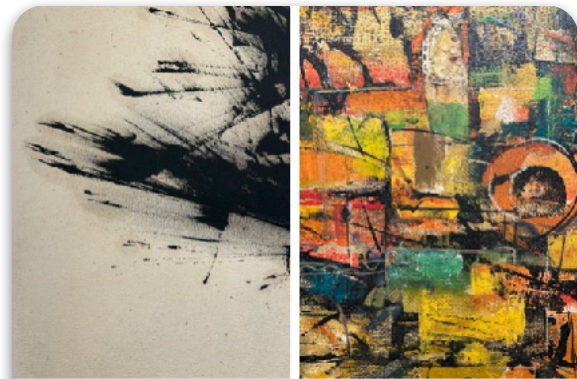


THE CUSTODIANS OF NATIONAL MEMORY Standing before Juan Luna's 'Spoliarium' and the sprawling narratives of the National Museum—where the scale of Philippine history meets the meticulous care of modern conservation.

Academic & Contemporary Spirits: Ateneo Art Gallery

At the **Ateneo Art Gallery**, Director Victoria "Boots" Herrera led an exploration of Philippine modernism. Housed in the contemporary Areté building, the gallery serves as a laboratory for both history and innovation, from Fernando Zóbel's foundational works to 1970s Social Realism.

We addressed the challenge of preserving "postmodern hybrid" materials, highlighting the role of university museums in specialised curation. A look into their storage facilities shifted the focus to logistics. Balancing high-level curation with the practicalities of future-proofing a diverse archive offered a masterclass in modern museum management.



CONTEMPORARY PAINTINGS AT THE ATENEJO ART GALLERY Exploring the material complexities of Philippine modernism—from the minimalist gestures of Fernando Zóbel to the challenging conservation needs of postmodern hybrid materials and mixed-media assemblages.

Walking Through Time: The Resilience of Intramuros

Fort Santiago exemplifies resilience; its volcanic ramparts and brick ruins—now integrated with nature—balance reconstruction with ruins. Living heritage flourished as re-enactors in traditional Barong Tagalog marched through the Plaza de Armas. At the **Rizal Shrine**, conservation meets the challenge of protecting artefacts in semi-open spaces. Balancing interactive display with strict environmental controls for light and humidity is a benchmark for site-integrated heritage science.

San Agustín Church, a UNESCO World Heritage site, provides a masterclass in survival. Its formidable Baroque architecture, characterised by massive lateral buttresses and a resilient barrel vault, famously endured the 1945 Battle of Manila while the surrounding city fell.

This living heritage extends to its extensive movable collection; the sacristy and auxiliary chapels hold breathtaking polychromed saints adorned in intricate, gold-embroidered decorative textiles.



THE DUAL ARC OF HERITAGE: FORT SANTIAGO & THE RIZAL SHRINE From the sympathetic reconstruction of the Spanish fortress and colonial ruins to the intimate museum environment of the Rizal Shrine, exploring the vital balance between structural resilience, historic display, and tropical collections care.



THE SAN AGUSTÍN LEGACY: MICRO-PRECISION IN A BAROQUE CITADEL The resilient 16th-century has survived earthquakes and battles.

Landmark Event: Heritage Without Borders 2026

It started with a bang. While the initial days in Manila allowed for an immersion into the city's historical atmosphere, the official programme ignited with the Heritage Without Borders 2026 Conference. Organised by **Sanfo101**, this wasn't just a meeting; it was a high-octane gathering of the nation's cultural brain trust.

Over 150 delegates—art lovers, curators, museum professionals, and conservators—poured in from every corner of the archipelago. The energy was electric, fuelled by a shared realisation that the challenges we face in the tropics require a unified, borderless strategy.



A UNIFIED FRONT AT THE QUEZON CITY M.I.C.E. CENTER *The official launch of Heritage Without Borders 2026 Conference—bringing together over 150 delegates for a high-energy programme of technical exchange and strategic networking. Supported by Bruynzeel / PrimeSales and the Museum Foundation of the Philippines, the event provided a critical platform for discussing the shared future of collections care across the archipelago.*

The Collaborative Core

The conference was distinguished by the presence of visionary leaders and organisations, whose support underscored the significance of our shared mission. We were honoured to be opened by and engage with:

- Hon. Tany Joel Calalay | Quezon City Councilor, District 1
- Welcoming words by Pearl Saprid | Sanfo 101
- Ms. Gemma Cruz Araneta | Vice President & Trustee, Museum Foundation of the Philippines
- Ms. Cecille Gelicame | Board Member, ICOM Philippines; Director, Museo Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas
- Atty. Evecar Peñas | Heritage advocate and Ateneo Law School professor.
- Ms. Giana Aira A. Barata | Acting Chief Operations Officer, Quezon City Tourism Department
- Ms. Sumaya Machrafi | Bruynzeels, The Netherlands

Art Conservation Education

On this first day of the official programme, I had the honour of presenting on **Risk Assessment and Management**. My presentation drew a deliberate parallel between two geographically distant but "water-bound" nations: the tropical archipelago of the Philippines and the water-influenced landscapes of The Netherlands.

Though their climates differ, both nations share a common destiny defined by their relationship with water. Whether facing the rising sea levels of the North Sea or the intensified typhoons of the Pacific, the threat to cultural heritage is universal. My key message was simple and urgent: **Be Prepared!**

I argued that "Resilience" is an active discipline. Drawing on international best practices, I outlined three non-negotiable strategies for safeguarding collections against water-based risks:

- **Disaster Planning as Living Protocol:** Static manuals are insufficient; we need dynamic Disaster Risk Management (DRM) integrated into daily museum operations.
- **The Power of the Drill:** Expertise is forged through repetition. Regular drills ensure responses are instinctive, technical, and calm during a crisis.
- **Connecting with Community:** Protection comes from "Borders of Solidarity" with local responders and neighbours. When water rises, our human network ultimately saves our cultural treasures.

The reception from the 150 delegates was profoundly encouraging. It confirmed that

while the science of conservation is vital, the management of risk is the shield that allows that science to endure. For Art Conservation Education, this was more than a conference; it was a powerful confirmation of our mission and a launchpad for the workshop that followed.



BRIDGING PERSPECTIVES: FROM AMSTERDAM TO MANILA Standing before the *Heritage Without Borders 2026* stage following my presentation on Risk Assessment and Management. The event provided a vital platform to share Dutch-Philippine parallels in hydrological heritage care and the "Be Prepared!" philosophy of disaster resilience

Conference Takeaways: A Movement in Motion

The sessions, supported by Bruynzeel / PrimeSales and the Museum Foundation of the Philippines, successfully bridged the gap between theory and 21st-century stewardship. Three core pillars emerged:

- **The Sanfo 101 Vision:** By breaking down institutional "silos," the programme fostered an unprecedented exchange of technical data and conservation ethics.
- **Storage as Strategy:** We explored how state-of-the-art systems serve as the first line of defence in preventive conservation, transforming static warehouses into "breathing" archives.
- **The Archipelago Network:** Seeing provincial professionals collaborate with Manila's top directors proved that "Heritage without Borders" is a collaborative reality, not a slogan.

Borders of Collaboration: Institutional Partners

The dialogue was enriched by a diverse assembly of representatives whose presence reflected the breadth of heritage stewardship in the Philippines:

National Library of the Philippines • Quezon City Tourism Department • Lalawigan ng Bulacan • PHACTO • Local Water Utilities Administration • Museo Diocesano de Pasig • Samahan Museo Bulacan • Bulacan State University (CAFA) • University of San Agustin Iloilo & Archives • ICOM Philippines • Art Conservation Education.



VOICES OF STEWARDSHIP: THE HERITAGE WITHOUT BORDERS PANEL A visual record of the distinguished speakers and organisers who shaped the 2026 conference. From local legislative support and institutional leadership to global conservation advocacy, these sessions facilitated a critical cross-pollination of ideas focused on the proactive protection of cultural property and the shared responsibilities of the heritage community.



A NATIONWIDE NETWORK: THE HERITAGE WITHOUT BORDERS DELEGATES The 2026 conference brought together a diverse spectrum of professionals from across the Philippines, representing national institutions, provincial museums, and academic archives. This collective presence underscored the conference's core takeaway: that heritage resilience is not achieved in isolation, but through a unified, collaborative community of practice.

Grateful Recognition to our Sponsors

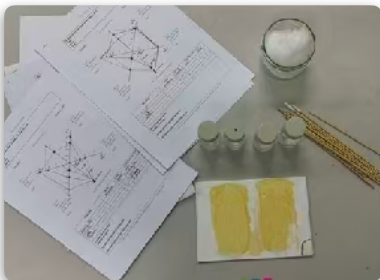
A sincere thank you to the organisations that made this exchange possible: The National Library of the Philippines • Quezon City Tourism Department • Prime Sales Inc. • Bruynzeel • Leon Gallery • Women of Bel-Air • Gallery Big.



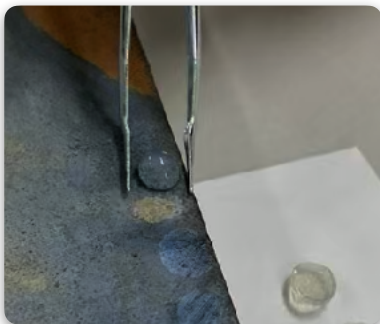
DRY CLEANING Systematic evaluation of dry cleaning materials on Melinex and primed dirt surfaces. These experiments facilitate comparative assessment of cleaning media on surface dirt, using digital microscopy to ensure the safety of the underlying paint layer.



AQUEOUS CLEANING Formulation of pH-buffered solutions and calibration of digital meters to ensure standardisation. These laboratory sessions utilised a case-study approach and simulated surface dirt to develop optimised cleaning strategies using buffers, chelators, and surfactants.



SOLUBILITY TESTING Using the Solvent Star to navigate solvent properties during varnish removal tests. This systematic approach map responses to select the safest, most effective solvent for removing aged coatings from paintings.



GELS Testing pH-buffered Agar-Agar rigid gels for the controlled delivery of aqueous cleaning systems to sensitive surfaces. This methodology limits moisture penetration, allowing for the precise, localised removal of soiling while minimising the risk of swelling or leaching in the underlying paint layers.

A Week of Heritage & Connection: Workshop Reflections

The remainder of the week marked a shift from the podium to the laboratory, focusing on the deep-dive technical skills required for the preservation of Philippine culture. The energy from the conference carried over into an intensive programme that balanced broad-scale theory with precision-based practice.

Surface Science at the National Library

Hosted by **Sanfo 101** at the **National Library of the Philippines**, our workshop on the cleaning of painted surfaces provided a comprehensive look at the chemistry and ethics of intervention. The programme was structured to ensure all participants shared a theoretical foundation before a smaller cohort engaged in advanced practical application:

- **Morning Theory (Collective Lecture):** Over 50 curators and conservators engaged in deep-dives into specialised cleaning methodologies. We covered the context of dirt, the mechanics of dry cleaning, and the complex chemistry of aqueous and solvent systems, including the use of buffers, chelators, and surfactants, as well as gels and thickeners.
- **Afternoon Practice (Advanced Lab):** 20 participants—all of whom attended the morning lectures—transitioned into intensive laboratory sessions. I demonstrated the preparation and application of these systems to bridge the gap between lab results and real-world application.
- **Practical Methodologies:** The afternoon sessions allowed the group to witness the use of dry, aqueous and solvent cleaning methodologies and systems.

We focused on materials and equipment that could be sourced locally, as purchasing conservation materials from Europe or the USA is not sustainable.

The Ethics of Intervention

A recurring theme throughout the week was the gravity of the cleaning process. Participants were cautioned that cleaning is inherently irreversible and potentially damaging. I emphasised that a comprehensive understanding of the original artwork, its conservation history as well as the chemical cleaning processes and the precise consequences of each step is the only way to safeguard the integrity of the object against ill-informed decisions. The mantra became '**Call a conservator!**'

The Power of Community in Quezon City

The final day in Quezon City featured an in-depth case study integrating painting history, structural analysis, and past restoration records. We demonstrated the use of a gel compress system to remove a century-old uppermost varnish, followed by the application of customised gels for targeted solubility. This comprehensive session synthesised four days of theoretical and practical training, culminating in a dynamic discussion of Filipino case studies and site-specific conservation challenges with the alumni.

As I conclude this visit, I am leaving with a deep appreciation for the vibrant conservation community here. **Our work is a journey that is better traveled together.**



With Sincere Gratitude

This landmark week would not have been possible without the steadfast support of our partners. My heartfelt thanks to:

- ICOM Philippines: For championing international cooperation and providing the structural support for this week-long event. Thank you to Audrey
- Our Hosts: The National Library of the Philippines and the City of Quezon City for providing spaces of growth and welcoming our community.
- The Participants: Your passion, curiosity, and dedication to the heritage of the Philippines are truly world-class.
- Our Partners: Sanfo 101—your vision and spirit are inspirational.

Special Thanks

We would like to express our deepest appreciation to Bruynzeel Storage Systems (The Netherlands), our main sponsor, for their invaluable support and commitment to this project.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Deffner & Johann (Germany) for their generous support of this workshop. By providing essential materials at cost, they significantly contributed to the feasibility and success of the programme.



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