

Positionality and Power in the Archives: Women as Memory-Keepers of Three Art Archives in the Philippines¹

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Abstract

In the years immediately following World War II, the Philippines experienced the reconstruction of physical structures destroyed by the war and the construction of an identity of the newly independent Filipino nation-state emerging from colonial rule. Among the different efforts of identity-building from the various sectors of society was a newfound consciousness from the local art community to define what constituted a distinctly Filipino approach to art. Archives are key to building and strengthening the collective memory of a society. Various archives in the country serve as repositories of records that aid the formation of Filipino consciousness. Likewise, archives dedicated to art and its key figures also document “the struggle of Philippine art,” - as articulated by Purita Kalaw-Ledesma, a key Filipina art patron in the immediate post-war years. This paper examines three active archives in the Philippines that preserve records pertinent to Philippine Art History: the Purita Kalaw-Ledesma Library and Archive, the Ateneo Library of Women’s Writings, and the Roberto Chabet Archive. Using library, information, and archival studies methods, it explores how women who founded and cultivated these repositories became memory-keepers of Philippine art history. By comparing the vision and practices of these archives, it discusses how these memory keepers’ positionality as women influenced approaches to what these archives include and exclude in their collections. This paper contributes to the emerging discourse on a decolonized approach to Philippine archival studies.

Keywords: women, Philippine art history, archives, archives and memory, archives and power

INTRODUCTION

History, memory, and archives have long been inextricably linked in discussions about the identity of communities. The three have played a significant role in understanding the history and identity of nations. Nations, however, are composed of smaller units of a community, whether it be a clan, a province, or a group central to this paper: a community of artists.

Art tends to be seen as something constantly in flux and new, which, by its nature, it is. However, as certain members of the community have realized,

there is a past that the present has built on, which must be recognized. Additionally, there is a pressing need to preserve and document what is in flux at present, for it to be better understood by and in the future.

This paper discusses three art archives established by women from the latter half of the 20th century until the early 21st century. The collections of these three archives primarily document the key developments, movements, and figures in Philippine art history during the second half of the 20th century. Though there are plenty of studies about locating women within archives, there are few about women as

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archivists or as founders of archives, and this paper hopes to contribute to that growing conversation.

The inextricable connection of history, memory, and archives in identity-building was seen perhaps most strongly in the immediate years following the experience of World War II, which ended in 1945 (Osmeña, 1945). This period was primarily characterized by reconstruction and construction from the ground up. Such reconstruction applied not only to the heavily bombed physical structures but also to identities. At that point, the Philippines was only emerging as a new nation after centuries of colonial rule. There was a seemingly pressing need to establish markers of identity and to define what it means to be a Filipino (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017).

This search to define the Filipino identity is also reflected in a newfound consciousness coming from the art community, emerging as a search to define a distinctly Filipino approach to art: “What is Filipino art? What makes art Filipino?” The multi-faceted journey to articulate what is Philippine about Philippine art has been termed by Purita Kalaw-Ledesma as “the struggle for Philippine art.” This phrase is also the title of her book, co-authored with Amadis Ma. Guerrero (1974), which talks about developments in the post-war years. However, it should be noted that the struggle for Philippine art continues even beyond the coverage of her book.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the developments, movements, and figures have been captured in various archives dedicated to art across the country. The discussion in this paper will focus on three: the Purita Kalaw-Ledesma Art Archives, the Ateneo Library of Women’s Writings (ALiWW), and the Roberto Chabet Archive. Aside from the unique holdings of each repository, it is notable that all the archives to be discussed were founded by women, who, rather interestingly, do not have a background in archival or library science but have nevertheless opted to collect and record materials about Philippine art history over the years, thus cementing themselves—though not deliberately— not as archivists, but as memory keepers.

PURITA KALAW-LEDESMA ART ARCHIVES

It is perhaps impossible to talk about the development of Philippine art in the post-war years without mentioning Purita Kalaw-Ledesma. The daughter of then-senator and renowned historian Teodoro Kalaw and proponent of women’s suffrage in the Philippines, Pura Villanueva-Kalaw, Purita (PKL), was one of the

foremost art patrons of the immediate years following World War II.

Going beyond the stereotypical role of an art patron, PKL was an advocate of the arts in many ways. She established the Art Association of the Philippines (Benitez-Johannot, 2020), lobbied for representation of the arts in the government through her sister, then-senator Maria Kalaw-Katigbak (Kalaw-Ledesma Foundation Inc., 2021), and, as recently discovered, nominated Jose Garcia Villa for a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1973 (The Nobel Prize Organisation, 2024). Along with these activities, one of her most lasting legacies is the bundles upon bundles of carefully cut-out newspaper articles about art. The scrapbooks, as she refers to them, comprise the core of the Purita Kalaw-Ledesma archives. She began this pursuit in 1948, the same year she founded the Art Association of the Philippines, and ended in 2000 (Kalaw-Ledesma Foundation Inc., n.d.). While the clippings make up the core of the collection, it is notable that personal papers, correspondences, and even unpublished manuscripts can be found among the archive’s collections.

The physical archives in Makati City, Metro Manila, was inaugurated in 2015 (Kalaw-Ledesma Foundation Inc., n.d.). It is open to guests and researchers, but an appointment must be made prior to the visit. Access to personal papers is subject to approval, but the digitized scrapbooks can be accessed upon request. Interestingly, despite the many writings of Kalaw-Ledesma, there is very little text left behind to explain the motivations behind the scrapbook project.

ATENEO LIBRARY OF WOMEN’S WRITINGS (ALiWW)

The Ateneo Library of Women’s Writings (ALiWW) was the brainchild of Dr. Edna Zapanta Manlapaz and Dr. Soledad Reyes, professors of the Ateneo de Manila University. Aside from being esteemed and well-loved educators, the two were already formidable scholars in their own right for their examination and understanding of English and Filipino literature in the Philippines. Dr. Manlapaz and Dr. Reyes are considered advocates for the recognition of women in various fields through their respective writings and projects.

Dr. Edna Zapanta Manlapaz is most known for her contributions to understanding literature in English written by Filipino women. After earning her doctoral degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1972 (Graduate English Doctoral Alumni, n.d.), Manlapaz

addressed a gaping hole in the study of Filipino literature by writing about women writers. Over the years, she has authored several books on the topic, including *Songs of Ourselves: Writings by Filipino Women in English*, *Six Women Poets: Interviews with Angela Manalang-Gloria, Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido, Edith Tiempo, Virginia Moreno, Tita Lacambra-Ayala, Ophelia A. Dimalanta*.

On the other hand, Dr. Soledad Reyes is most known for her scholarly work on understanding Filipino literature and popular Filipino culture. As early as 1982, her prowess was already recognized by the Manila Critics Circle, conferring the Philippine National Book Award for her work, *Nobelang Tagalog 1905-1975: Tradisyon at Modernismo* (Alba, 2003). She was also conferred the title of Professor Emeritus in 2009 for her contributions to the university and her field (Faculty and Staff | Interdisciplinary Studies, n.d.).

ALiWW was intended to be an archive from the beginning (Oviedo, 2023). In its early days, it was envisioned to be a repository for women in literature, but later realized the need for a space to preserve the writing of women who have contributed to various fields (Ateneo Library of Women's Writings, n.d.). Since its establishment in 1994, ALiWW has grown to accept and preserve materials by women in other art forms and disciplines as well. The archive is located within the grounds of Ateneo de Manila University in Quezon City, Metro Manila. Its main holdings include personal papers of women from various fields, photographs, and unpublished manuscripts (Oviedo, 2023). Among the papers in their care are drafts by Angela Manalang-Gloria, known writer of poems and short stories; the journals of Anita Magsaysay-Ho (Ateneo Library of Women's Writings, n.d.), the only woman to be a part of the Thirteen Moderns, a group of artists that has influenced the growth of modern art in the country (Hernandez, n.d.); and the personal papers of Encarnacion Alzona (Oviedo, 2023), esteemed historian and considered to be the first Filipina to earn a PhD, when she graduated from Columbia University in 1923 (Politowski, 2011). ALiWW is open to guests and researchers from outside the university, and setting an appointment is highly encouraged.

ROBERTO CHABET ARCHIVE

Roberto Chabet is often referred to as the Father of Conceptual Art in the Philippines (Vicente, et al., 2021). His art technique pushed the limitations for

Philippine art at a time when society was still coming to terms with the modern art of the immediate post-war years. Dubbed “anti-museum art” by Purita Kalaw-Ledesma (Le, 2018), the works of Chabet and his contemporaries, such as Ray Albano, Joe Bautista, and Fernando Modesto, were often site-specific and ephemeral (Le, 2018). Conceptual art is grounded in questioning norms—whether in art or practiced in society—and Roberto Chabet was one of the figures who kept throwing questions.

However, beyond being known as the Father of Conceptual Art, Roberto Chabet's influence is most felt through his students at the University of the Philippines. Teaching for over 30 years at the College of Fine Arts, countless artists have passed through his classes. These artists have pushed the directions that Philippine art can take—and continue to do so until now. Some of Chabet's students with strong personal connections with him were labeled “Chabet babies” (Le, 2018, p. 23). Initially a contemptuous term, it meant to put down the young artists associated with him and his style while widening the divide between those who practice conceptual art and social realism (Le, 2018). Nevertheless, at present, his former students have been finding more familiarity with the title (Le, 2018). After Chabet's passing in 2013, his legacy continues to live on in the works he left behind and the students who have grown as respective artists. One in particular is ensuring that his legacy will be secured more concretely.

Ringo Bunoan wears many hats: she is an organizer of alternative spaces for art, an artist, researcher, curator, and co-owner of artbooks.ph (“Ringo Bunoan: Insight,” 2016). Most importantly, she spearheaded the efforts to archive personal papers, related paraphernalia, and documentation of the works of Roberto Chabet.

Unlike the first two archives that have been discussed, the Roberto Chabet Archive is primarily hosted online on the Asia Art Archive website (<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/roberto-chabet-archive>). Digital files of the archive are also available onsite at the Lopez Museum and Library. The archive primarily comprises photographs of artworks, letters from students, and exhibition notes (Vicente, et al., 2021). Some highlights include the “top secret document” and other papers on Angel Flores, an entire persona that Chabet created himself; handwritten exhibition notes of shows he curated; and documents from his time as director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. What started as a research project in 2008 has grown and continues to grow—as of writing,

there are already 4,502 records that are part of the archives, most of which are accessible to anyone with an internet connection across the world (Asia Art Archive, n.d.).

DISCUSSION

Each of the archives discussed is unique in its own right, from their respective collections to how they were founded. This paper adds to the discussion on how archives were founded and who established these, as such, deepening our understanding of their respective collections, how they came to be, and how we can utilize them better.

There are three key points to help discuss the unique positionality of the women who founded archives. First, how they are both memory keepers and participants; second, their possession of capital and their respective milieus; lastly, how these factors influence their positionality and ability to exercise power for and through the archive following the discussion of Cook and Schwartz's (2002) article, "Archives, Records, and Power."

For this discussion, positionality refers to how identities and subjectivities were constructed and shaped. Numerous factors contribute to this, referred to by Leora Farber (2015) as "the address of the address (home, site, space and/or place; relationships between particular historical, political, geographic, social and cultural circumstances and contexts)" (p. 2).

All four founders can be considered as both memory keepers and memory participants. For the discussion, the term "memory keeper" may fit the four women better, as they all collected materials and/or documented without consciously thinking of it as deliberate archiving. Additionally, unlike most archivists and collections managers who typically care for documents and objects that are quite separate from their experience, all four women were—and except for PKL, still are—active participants in the art scene that they respectively belong to. This means that they themselves are not passive observers but are participants and even catalysts in the industry as artists, researchers, writers, and even friends with the people who created the documents that they collected.

To pinpoint the exact impetus to begin the act of collecting for each of the four women would be difficult, but what would be of interest in the paper are the factors that allowed them to be the roles

mentioned above: memory keepers and memory participants.

In *The Forms of Capital*, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) articulated how possession of capital, as "accumulated labor (in its materialized form..)" (p. 241), allows its possessors to gain an advantage in society as the capital allows for certain transactions (not necessarily economic) to occur. As a highly simplified analogy, think of how concert tickets provide different experiences depending on the kind that one can purchase: those who can buy higher-tier tickets and are afforded the privilege to attend sound checks and see the performers up close have special merchandise, and in some cases even meet the acts that are performing. Such privileges are not given to those on upper box seats with a limited view of the performances and often rely on the big LED screens of the venue to see the performers up close. In this transaction, those with more economic capital are at an advantage, provided with opportunities and material goods, as opposed to those with less economic capital who are not.

Bourdieu (1986) goes on to posit that there are three key forms of capital: economic, societal, and cultural. Economic capital refers to assets that translate to purchasing power, as illustrated in the example earlier. Cultural capital pertains to certain social elements, such as how one carries oneself, having certain skills or knowledge, and even being affiliated with certain institutions. Social capital is grounded on the societal connections and obligations that one has and can be converted to economic capital in some situations. Holding capital, whether in one form or a combination of multiple ones, holds leverage and opens doors for more economic and societal transactions (Bourdieu, 1986).

From their short backgrounds, it is clear that each of the four women possesses a substantial form of combined capital. Additionally, their respective milieus either provided them with such capital or allowed them to accumulate it. The unique combination of their capital and milieu are the two key factors that influence and determine their positionality. This positionality, in turn, allowed them to start being memory keepers of the memories they also participated in. As positionality is a coming together of their respective capitals and milieus, it can also be argued that this consciously and unconsciously shaped how and why they collect—which can also be viewed as how they exercise power over the collection.

Schwartz and Cook (2002) provide an interesting discussion of archives as both power and non-power. They argue that archives as power consciously and unconsciously uphold almost monolithic narratives depending on the records chosen and kept as part of the collection. We have heard this argument before that what is kept in an archive's collections, deliberately or otherwise, highlights a particular vista—a specific narrative. However, with this consciousness, we are then able to highlight the gaps that allow us to question and even subvert the monolithic narratives of our archives (Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

Relating to the founders of the art archives in the Philippines, what is interesting about their greater context is that men dominated the art scene practically throughout the 20th century. To illustrate, in the group often referred to as the Thirteen Moderns that pioneered various techniques in modern art, only one of them is a woman—Anita Magsaysay-Ho (Hildawa, 2003). Since its first proclamation in 1972, out of the 81 National Artists across the different art forms, only 16 are women (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, n.d.). Despite the seemingly larger space occupied by men—despite the more substantial power that men seem to exercise to be in that space—there are women within those spaces and gaps that maintain the art scene in other ways: Purita Kalaw-Ledesma who established the Art Association of the Philippines which gave many young artists much-needed opportunities (Benitez-Johannot, 2020); Lyd Arguila, who established the Philippine Art Gallery, one of the first galleries in Manila that allowed artists to sell their works at a fair price (Kalaw-Ledesma, 1987); and even the wives of artists such as Tessie Luz, who managed the Luz Gallery (Caruncho, 2019), and Hilda Diaz, wife of National Artist, Vicente Manansala, who helped him in his art practice.

However, another important matter is that, despite operating in the gaps and spaces, these women possess various forms of capital that have allowed them to be in specific contexts as memory participants, which also, in turn, gave them the power to become memory keepers. For example, ALiWW and the Roberto Chabet Archive were formed mainly by their founders tapping into their networks to acquire materials to build the collection. PKL, as a member of the elite, was also able to tap into her network to encourage various members of the business communities to host competitions and

offer substantial cash prizes for artists to participate in.

Thus, we see how the various forms of capital and the milieu that shaped them gave the four women the power necessary to construct the archive. By studying the backgrounds that shaped the founders of the institutions at present, we can question them further. In the case of the art archives, we can grapple with more difficult questions, such as: where are the alternative groups, where are the narratives of queer artists, and where are the narratives of the art communities outside of Manila? Questions such as these echo the argument of Schwartz and Cook that emphasizes the need for self-reflexivity in archives (Schwartz & Cook, 2002). This self-reflexivity comes in different forms: from the need to recognize how various archives can privilege and marginalize narratives, coming to terms with the process of how the archive came to be, and even understanding (and perhaps grappling) with the backgrounds of the archives' founders (or funders). Exercising self-reflexivity is an activity that is easier said than done. Certain circumstances make this difficult even for archivists in senior positions. However, the two authors provide a needed reminder: “When power is denied, overlooked, or unchallenged, it is misleading at best and dangerous at worst” (Schwartz & Cook, 2002, p. 2).

The concept of looking into the positionality of memory keepers is also echoed in the discipline of history. Historiography is often defined as the study of history—understanding how the narratives came to be and the factors in play that may have influenced how it was formed. One of the texts that best explores this is “The Historian’s Task in the Philippines,” the first chapter in *The Making of a Nation: Essays on Nineteenth-century Filipino Nationalism* by Schumacher (1991). Although largely rooted in the Philippine context, he discusses a universal truth in the discipline: that while history is the coming together of narratives from reliable sources, these sources do not interpret themselves—at the core of this is the historian, who is shaped by his own biases and prejudices. Despite the efforts to maintain objectivity as demanded by the discipline, it is not always the case as our backgrounds form our respective points of view, and, as in the case of historians, such is reflected in the writing produced. That said, self-reflexivity in history is important as understanding the contexts of those who have written historical narratives helps understand why a particular material is handled in a confident manner.

The need for questioning and self-reflexivity in archives is echoed differently by a recent show mounted in the Ateneo Art Gallery: *Snare for Birds: Rereading the Colonial Archive*. Composed of works by Kiri Dalena, Lizza May David, and Jaclyn Reyes, the three artists rewrite the stories embedded in photographs of Dean C. Worcester (*Snare for Birds: Rereading the Colonial Archive*, 2023-2024; Constantino, M. & Ferrer, I., 2023-2024). At the turn of the century, Dean C. Worcester was appointed as chief of the Bureau of Ethnological Survey (previously called the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes). With the premise of collecting data for the bureau, Worcester began to extensively photograph and document various non-Christian communities across the archipelago (Salvador-Amores, 2016). However, the same collection of photographs was utilized by Dean Worcester to support his argument that the Philippines, at the time, was not capable of self-independence. Through the largely staged photographs, the non-Christian groups of the Philippines were belittled as primitive and savages, thus justifying the need for American colonial rule over the Philippine Islands (Rice, 2018). The photographs of Worcester have been revisited by various scholars, notably by Mark Rice and Analyn Salvador-Amores, to reclaim the narratives lost in the staged photographs and potentially misleading captions (Rice, 2018; Salvador-Amores, 2016). Kiri Dalena (2023) continues this pursuit of reclamation as she discovered for herself that certain aspects of the records need to be scrutinized further. In the Artists' Talk held at the Ateneo Art Gallery last September 16, 2023, she explains that one of the key moments that inspired her to pursue this project was encountering a photograph of a man with the caption "Felizardo, ladrone leader from Bacoor, Cavite, after postmortem, front view; showing bolo cuts." This prompted her to do further research into the possible identity of the man. A ladrone, after all, is a rebel or a thief. Dalena's research brought her to discover that the man—Cornelio Felizardo—was not merely a *ladrone* as labeled in the collection but a key figure in the resistance against the Americans, being referred to as a general in other historical accounts. The imbalance of the narratives deeply unsettled Dalena, prompting her to revisit the collection and attempt to take back the narratives through her works along with her fellow artists (Dalena, 2021; Dalena et al., personal communication, September 16, 2023). *Snare for Birds* presents how the dialogue between artists and archives further helps in the search for identity. By approaching archives and the narratives they hold differently, we can understand aspects of our identity more deeply. The show also further highlights the

need to revisit how archives came to be—in this case, a product of America's colonization of the Philippines. While conversations have shifted over time, and historians are now more mindful of the repercussions of the colonial experience on our historical narratives, self-reflexivity must also be exercised in our archives. This helps ensure that the narratives viewed with a colonial lens will not be carried over into the narratives written at present.

Through these examples, we find how the argument of Cook and Schwartz (2002) is translated in different contexts but nevertheless holds true: it is necessary to understand how institutions, such as archives, came to be to understand the narratives that they uphold and to identify the gaps to be explored further—what has fallen between the cracks.

CONCLUSION

It cannot be denied that, as a whole, these three archives—the Purita Kalaw-Ledesma Art Archives, ALiWW, and the Roberto Chabet Archive—have played an essential role in shaping collective memory concerning Philippine art history. While it should be recognized that the unique positionality of the founders may entail certain limitations in their respective collections, the totality of their work allows researchers and fellow artists in the present to have primary sources that cover key stages in the development of Philippine art history during the latter half of the 20th century. Through the letters, notes, sketches, and other documents they have kept and preserved over the years, we can understand our artists better beyond the art they have produced. Through these archives, we understand why Philippine art history—or even the place of art in the Philippines—is the way it is at present. Consequently, we can be better guided on what directions to take in the future, both for art and art archives. Nevertheless, we are reminded that though these archives are now established and reputable institutions, it is the responsibility of archives and archivists to be self-reflexive. We cannot rest in believing that our archives and their founders are without problems.

It is in the self-reflexivity of both the archive and its founders that we find spaces and opportunities to further examine our history and identity.

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