Developing networks and ongoing conservation programs in the Philippines

Since 1995, The University of Melbourne Conservation Service at the Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre has been actively seeking engagement in the Southeast Asia region with an aim to develop an increased client base for its services, and to promote and profile the organisation internationally.

A number of factors have encouraged the evolution of these activities, as well as the development of stronger cultural networks between Australia and Asia in general. Since the launch of the Australian Government's 'Creative Nation' program in 1994, international cultural linkages have been a key focus for developing closer relationships between Asia and Australia. The current government's International Cultural Council and launch of 'Promoting Australia's Culture Abroad' program in 1999, has continued this initial work and supports Australia's Asian policy interests of promoting a favourable image of Australia internationally. The Australian Government has provided infrastructure support for programs between Australia and Asia, including the establishment of AusHeritage and Asialink; at the State level, support has been forthcoming with the establishment of the International Export Touring Program under the 'Arts 21' Strategy Statement of Arts Victoria. In addition, this growing involvement has seen the importance of internationalism to the University of Melbourne and other major tertiary institutions in Australia. One of the six key agenda's of the University of Melbourne Strategic Plan is internationalisation and international networking.

The Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre (IPACC) has benefited as a result of this policy support and has been involved in a number of significant projects in Asia. IPACC’s international programs are one of its five areas of interest, which also include the conservation of the university collections, teaching, research and fee for service programs. As part of its strategic plan, a staff residency to support the Cultural Centre of the Philippine’s material conservation programs was organised for 1998. Asialink supported the residency. This paper examines the outcomes of the residency and the building of a regional skills base for the Philippines. The experience has culminated in ongoing programs and a strong dialogue between the Philippines and Australia.

Building an Australian skills base suited to the Region

In the past, heritage conservation management of tangible material in Southeast Asia had its origins in Western models, relying on conservation standards not always applicable to the values of the country (Sullivan 1993:16). Often there was a lack of consideration for the intangible values of the object, compared to its physical requirements (Pearson 1993:66). Today, it is necessary to have a cultural understanding of the country and knowledge of the behaviour of materials, in order to be more responsive and to develop mechanisms for the protection of cultural items.
Staff residencies are the best mechanism for developing cultural literacy of a country and a way of strengthening inter-institutional relationships. It is essential that people's culture is dealt with sensitively to make the Australian input relevant, but it is also critical to the profession as providers of cultural services and to the strengthening of Australia's cultural relations with Southeast Asia. Through longer-term involvement with a host country, our position can be better understood and broadened (Sloggett 1996:10).

In addition, it is only by experiencing the way cultural material behaves in tropical environments that a conservator can develop effective practical mechanisms for its protection. This is particularly important for training programs in Asia and the development of postgraduate conservation programs at the University of Melbourne. It is pointless teaching students about conservation in the region, without an understanding of the way items respond differently on a physical level. Further, it is important to understand the political and cultural environment from which students come in order to ensure the training programs are relevant.

Building an Australian skills base at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines

In 1998, I undertook a 4 month Asialink residency in Arts Management at Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas, commonly known as the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP). Residencies have been a core component of Asialink’s programs since 1990 and offer Australian cultural professionals the opportunity to expand the experiences available in Australia to the Asia region; to develop long term cultural relationships; and to further their professional development (Gantner 1997:74). All these aims were achieved during the CCP residency and were invaluable in developing networks at an early stage of career development. An awareness of the working environment was developed, as well as the way materials physically behave in tropical environments. Generally, the resolutions of conservation problems were unique and differed from previous experiences in Australia.

The cultural heritage and arts industry in the Philippines is vibrant and diverse, with layers of Spanish and American influences combined with indigenous Malay culture, Chinese, Indian and Arab influences (Siazon 1995:14). Since independence, the Philippines has promoted culture and the arts as a key to establishing its national identity and Filipino values (Lindsay 1994:41). A key focus of this is ‘To encourage the continuing and balanced development of a pluralistic culture by the people themselves’ (NCCA 1993:4). This is illustrated in the many local culture and arts centres in various regions and the supportive role the CCP plays in delivering their programs. Its attitude to culture is broad as described its policy documents. For example, in the Philippine Development Plan for Culture and Arts (1992:2), it argues that Filipino cultural heritage – such as languages and translation, cultural events, ethnic culture and traditional arts – should not only be promoted but also popularised.
In terms of government infrastructure for culture, the National Commission of Culture and the Arts (NCCA) is the coordinating agency in policy formulation, program implementation and administers the National Endowment Fund for Culture and Arts (NEFCA) (NCCA 1993:3). It is the umbrella organisation for 15 national cultural agencies, although each is administered independently and some agencies are governed by the Department of Education, Culture and Sport (NCCA 1993:8). The NCCA is an independent body and has a direct line of funding from Congress (ibid). The CCP, by contrast, is a government corporation and is controlled alongside the NCCA.

In the Philippines, there is a real sense of energy and commitment to the promotion of culture, reflected in an enormous amount of activity. Cultural events such as exhibition openings, talks, dance, theatre or musical performances, and provincial fiesta celebrations are high on the agenda. Many cultural heritage professionals also have a strong connection to the community and return to their province at fiesta time, illustrating the importance of regionalism in the Philippines. Further, the industry is integrated between the various disciplines and cultural professionals are not only knowledgeable about a range of cultural areas – ranging from visual arts to local history – but also activities in the remote parts of the Philippines. Specialist knowledge is highly regarded, but only if it can be placed within a wider context. This highlights the Filipino’s highly articulated, integrated view of culture and their ability to see beyond the boundaries of their individual professions. This differs significantly from the Australian context where the cultural heritage industry is more segregated.

Conservators in the Philippines have been mainly trained under apprenticeship schemes or short-term courses such as the 6-month course at the National Research Laboratory for Conservation in Lucknow, India. The profession is not coordinated as official standards of practice or codes of ethics are in their developmental stages and not established. Many conservators have either a background in science or the arts, but not both. The National Museum employs about thirteen conservators, and the National Historic Institute employs about six in their Materials Conservation Centre. Compared to other countries in the region, cultural organisations are well resourced with conservation staff, but facilities at the National Museum are in disrepair and the environment is difficult to work in. In the public institutions, conservators are generally poorly paid and do not enjoy a high position in the social hierarchy. By contrast, Western conservators currently working in the Philippines are quite the antitheses of this.

**Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas (Cultural Centre of the Philippines)**

The CCP was inaugurated in September 1969, to preserve and promote Filipino culture. It is a dynamic centre for culture and the arts located in Manila, integrating many diverse forms including indigenous and classical dance, music, theatre, visual arts, literary arts, outreach and exchange programs, a library and youth programs.
With such a diverse focus on culture, the CCP was a perfect venue to undertake a residency and broaden one’s knowledge. Cultural events and involvement in outreach programs also provided an opportunity to extend beyond the CCP and gain a better understanding of the overall status of culture within the Philippines.

Initially the CCP was a centre for all the seven art forms, but due to financial difficulties the CCP later downsized its programs to the performing arts. Now the role of the visual arts is principally to endorse and support the performing arts. However, the CCP has a significant visual arts collection of 1950s–1970s modern paintings, sculpture, drawings and prints, as well as a very large ethnographic collection comprised of textiles, jewellery, sculptures, wooden vessels, weapons and musical instruments. The collection is divided into two areas – the Visual Arts Department and the Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino – each with one staff member responsible for the materials collections management.

Residency projects at the CCP

The were four general objectives to the residency:

- participating in the life of the organisation by supporting the CCP in the Museums and Galleries Division and Outreach Programs
- disseminating information relating to cultural heritage management
- expanding one’s skills base to able to respond competently to conservation issues in the Philippines
- raising the profile of Australian heritage professionals for ongoing program development.

The primary task at the CCP was the development of a Collections Management Strategy for its vast collection, but with limited staff, financial and space resources. The development of a strategy identified mechanisms for the care of collections and created an awareness of the importance of conservation management among members of the board of management and the staff directly working with the collections. Another critical issue was to ensure staff participation in the project. It was pointless to develop a strategy without vested input and interest from the staff responsible for the long-term care of the collections. Therefore, CCP staff were encouraged to work consistently on the collections management plan in order to raise their skills base and improve their confidence for the implementation of the strategy. Generally, the priorities identified by the plan were straightforward, but the plan gave the CCP staff a framework for the measurement of achievements.

The implementation of preventive conservation principles in the Film Centre storage area is an example of a key strategy undertaken as recommended in the initial collections management plan. Some 1000 items are stored in this area from the Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino Collection. Despite the fact that the collection was no longer a key priority area of the CCP, and although the initial plan had declared this basement storage area to be unsuitable, emergency procedures were
nevertheless implemented. Expert historians from the National Museum were bought in to prioritise the significance of the collection. Two issues were critical: dealing with the collection at a policy level so the board could make some decision regarding its future care, and undertaking temporary measures to recover some of the collection from accelerated deterioration. The collection itself was no longer a key priority area of the CCP. This resulted in a document outlining the de-accessioning of parts of the collection. This was followed by the emergency recovery of the collection, which was achieved simply by placing items on platforms, creating some logical order to give psychological control over the collection, and isolating the items infected with mould and insects (see Figure 1). Finally, a simple, inexpensive procedure appropriate for current staff capacities was developed to deal with infected wooden items without the need of chemicals.

Disseminating information and promoting Australian expertise

It became clear that there were vast amounts of immediate work to be undertaken at the CCP, but also that longer-term benefits could be achieved through the dissemination of information. This would have the dual benefits of expanding the knowledge base of museum professionals, students and the wider community, as well as promoting Australian expertise. In addition, in 1998, conservation issues were very much to the fore in the Philippines due to the Centennial Celebrations of Independence from the Spanish that continued throughout the year.
Information was disseminated at training workshops, a conservation exhibition and other public events and in feature newspaper articles. As the conservation profession in the Philippines is not as solidly established as in Australia, a certain amount of positioning of the profession was required and it was critical to reach a broad mix of people. A diverse range of seminars and workshops was presented to 300 participants in total and included preventive conservation, the documentation of art works, sustainability of the arts, preparation of artists materials, issues surrounding the conservation of Australian Indigenous Art, and the science of conservation treatments (see Figure 2). In addition, a conservation exhibition was on display at the CCP. This highlighted the international exchange between Australia and the Philippines, and was important for the profile of the organisation. As part of the exhibition, conservation treatments demonstrations were carried out, which allowed the public to gain a direct insight into the processes of interventive conservation. The demonstrations showed that conservation is a profession in its own right and treatments are highly skilled. Public awareness of the high standards of practice and the seriousness of the profession creates real expectations, making it more difficult for unqualified persons to take advantage of the unregulated profession.

**Other program involvement**

It was critical professionally that the residency extended beyond the CCP, to establish relationships with other organisations influential in the region as well as
those committed to future partnerships. Input from credible organisations with local expertise and influence in the region also enhanced my knowledge base. For example, on two occasions conservation projects were undertaken on wall panel paintings at the Immaculate Conception Parish in Baclayon, one of the oldest churches in the Philippines, on the island of Bohol (see Figure 3). Introduction was through the National Museum and the pilot conservation projects were carried out in conjunction with the Episcopal Committee for the Cultural Heritage of the Church Catholic Bishops Conference in the Philippines (CBCP). The key value of the pilot projects was to demonstrate to the NCCA what the CBCP could achieve under its direction.

On a material conservation level, the panel paintings did not require extensive treatment work, which highlighted their history of care and the suitability of their current environment. An important personal challenge, however, was balancing the community involvement in the conservation treatment of the panel paintings. Having studied conservation in a formal university environment, I came from a background where standards of practice, ethics and a degree of scientific knowledge were attained before any treatment was undertaken. But in the Baclayon Parish this was not feasible and I was challenged by my code of ethics and the importance of community involvement in the conservation of the panel paintings. I knew it was critical for the community to develop skills in the care of the panel paintings and have the confidence to do so. In the long term, the ongoing

Figure 3 Detail of S. Juan Bautista panel painting at the Immaculate Conception Parish, Baclayon, Bohol. (N. Tse)
care of the cultural material rested with the community and not a short visit by a conservator.

**Lessons learnt and ongoing programs**

The initial training programs presented by IPACC have now expanded to staff exchanges, collaborative project developments and research. During delivery of these activities, important lessons have been learnt and significant issues highlighted to determine the direction of future programs. These issues are included in the following section.

**Networks**

A wide range of networks is critical to success in Asia. This is crucial in successful collaborative developing conservation programs, as trust is an intrinsic part of program development and implementation. In the Philippines, for example, following the collaborative research project undertaken with the CBCP on the island of Bohol, Angela Kerry from IPACC is undertaking a Youth Ambassadors for Development Project as a representative of AusHeritage. Angela will be involved in the implementation of the 'Bohol Arts and Cultural Heritage Code'. This integrated strategy is one of the first in the Philippines involving issues of the culture and the arts, the protection of cultural heritage, tourism and financial strengthening.

It is useful from the outset to write the business strategy on the assumption that the relationship with the collaborating country will be a long-term one. It is important to include ongoing contact in order to maintain a profile and to move negotiations forward. A strategy that enables as many repeat visits is critical, as well as one that considers the issues of cost. When IPACC delivers programs, visits to other partners in the region are also included and a number of programs are run consecutively to ensure efficient use of finances. This is important for relationships to stabilise, grow slowly and to gauge the partner’s attitude to a project.

**Targeting Peak Bodies**

It is important to assess our relationships with current partners. Aligning IPACC with peak organisations that have local expertise and knowledge, are influential in the region and are committed to the partnership, intellectually and financially contributes to the programs and enhances our knowledge base of what skills are in demand in the region. For example, a current IPACC research project on Filipino artists’ materials represents both a collaborative archival and analytical project. Father Ted Torralba, Executive Secretary of the CBCP’s Episcopal Committee for the Cultural Heritage of the Church CBCP, and Regalado Trota Jose who is an eminent Church Historian of Spanish Colonial Art, will provide the biblical and archival expertise, while IPACC is contributing the analytical component. These partners are well respected in the Philippines and are connected to the National
Commission of the Arts and Culture. Support from the NCCA has therefore been more direct and simple.

**Collaborative Projects**

As more Asian countries in the region are gaining momentum in the protection of their cultural heritage and looking more inwardly for the provision of conservation services, the most likely way Australian conservation professionals will find employment in the region is in projects formed on a collaborative basis. It is no longer viable for foreigners to provide a service in the region and then leave. This is not only for the cultural reasons already discussed, but also to ensure the training of local people. Reciprocity establishes a two-way dialogue, makes the relationship meaningful, and ensures vested interest in the project from both sides.

**Sustainability**

Arts Victoria and AusHeritage have supported most of the projects undertaken by IPACC. There is a need for the Australian and State governments to either keep subsidising projects or to move towards an increased contribution from the overseas partner. In Australia, it is difficult to sustain long-term government funding as the outcomes between cultural heritage and its funding are not measurable in the usual economic terms. Furthermore, policy directives of Australian and State governments often change.
Before an overseas partner will financially contribute to a project, the first consideration is whether the relationship is strong, the project is worthy and that IPACC skills are sought. Reciprocity is the key and IPACC is aware that a two-way dialogue is important for regional cooperation and cohesion to develop.

Obviously, partner contributions can only exist if the partners can bear the cost. The current Asian economic crisis has had an impact on partnerships, because many of the existing and potential fee paying clients were affected. Identification of the funding streams that can afford the programs is critical. For example, IPACC’s experience in the Philippines has found that funding streams from private foundations may be more sustainable and effective.

Research

An important mechanism for partnership sustainability in the region is to ensure the services provided are appropriate to the conservation needs of the local materials. Unfortunately, knowledge of the traditional craft practices has been lost and the only way of reinstating them is through scientific analysis (Sullivan 1993:24). IPACC’s strengths in materials analysis has now been extended to the materials analysis of Filipino panel paintings. This has also contributed to IPACC’s knowledge base of the way that organic materials behave in tropical environments. An outcome from this research extends to teaching programs in both Asia and within Australia. These enhanced skills and reputation will result in IPACC undertaking more projects in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Important lessons have been learnt since IPACC’s engagement with the Philippines. Strong professional links have been reinforced and IPACC has learnt to focus on its strengths. This means tackling, in an integrated manner, the issues of training, research, cultural literacy, collaboration and sustainability. Programs have provided financial benefits as well as given IPACC increased competence and capability, both internationally and nationally. Initial market research in the region indicated that Australia was not considered a primary target for the provision of conservation services, nor was Australia seen as a key training centre. This perception has now been turned around with the success of such programs and with government policy support.
references


