

SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONNECTIONS + COLLECTIONS AT THE BURKE MUSEUM

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Context

The history of museums extends far beyond the twentieth century but only in the last few decades has the idea of community engagement, inclusivity, or collaboration in museums been given serious thought. As a part toward decolonizing museums, inviting members of communities whose pieces are displayed or kept in the museum yet have none of the cultural context associated with these collections has become increasingly important. For many individuals, museums come off as imposing and exclusive, only belonging to and of a certain people: the rich and the “educated.”

My parents expressed this same sentiment as I applied for the UW Museology program until they were able to visit the Burke Museum where I was a Collections Assistant. For many of the pieces from the Philippines alone, they could recognize their significance through their eyes and through what they already knew. The cultural pieces could ignite thoughts and ideas, memories and stories. The collections are a resource and places such as the Burke, which does extensive work with Native communities, was a space to use and occupy.

Collections often sit as mere, static objects when in reality, they have the potential for stories and connection only if folks are given the opportunity. In considering that community engagement looks and works very different at other institutions, this project serves as just one framework to demonstrate one of the many ways in which members of diasporic communities can use collections to learn about their own heritage, which can often feel disjointed or missing.

The Southeast Asian American diaspora in the Pacific Northwest is widely represented in the Burke Museum’s Heritage: Arts & Cultures Collections, with cultural pieces from the Cordilleras of Luzon to the hills of Northern Thailand. Presented in the zine are projects of different modalities that illustrate how participating members have used the collections to connect to their roots.

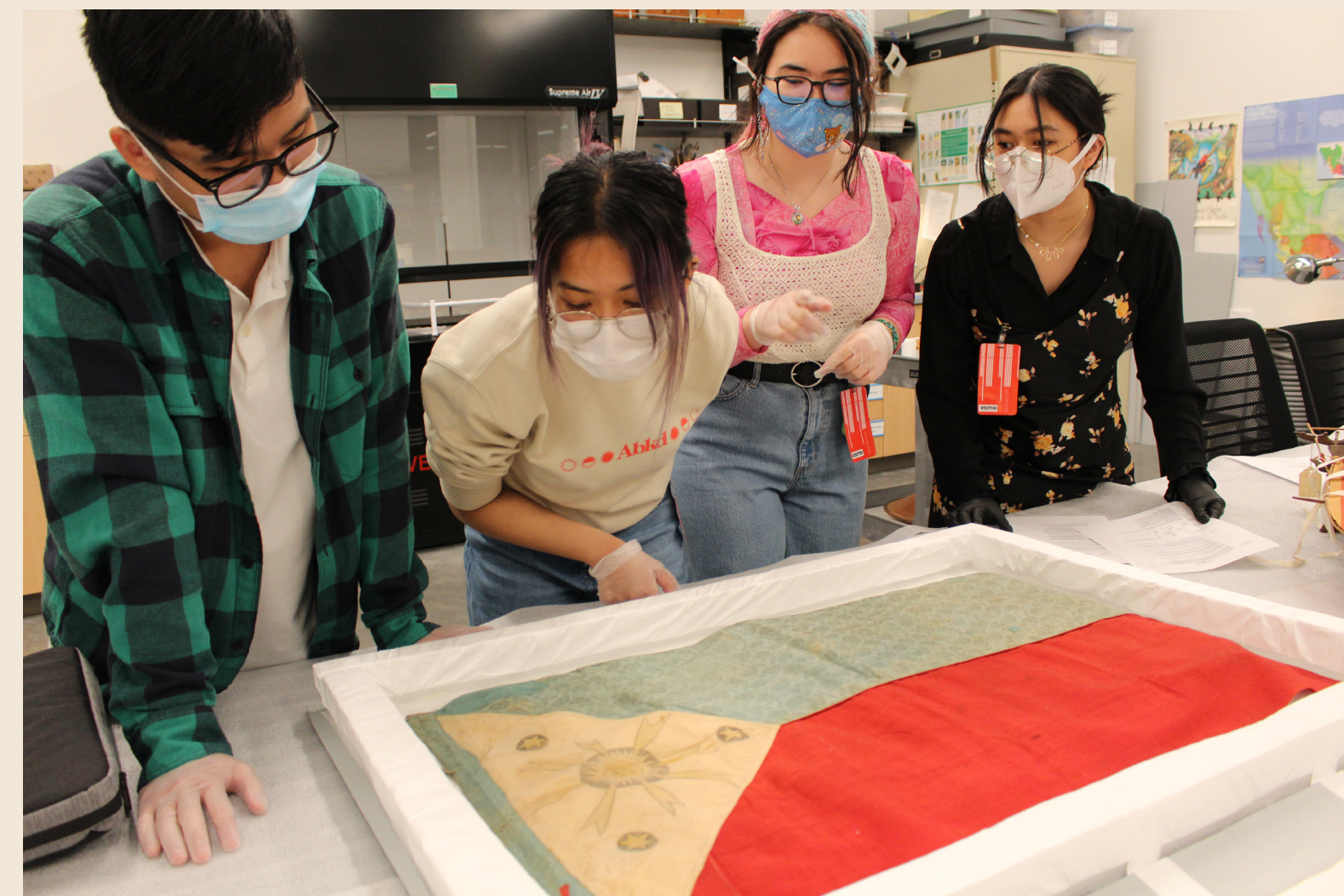
Purpose

This project is a framework that invites Southeast Asian students and affiliates to connect with their cultural heritage through the Southeast Asian Collections at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, by choosing pieces they feel drawn to or want to learn more about. Participants can then create their own multimodal personal project by using available spaces around the museum, which will all culminate in a final zine.



Product

From this project came a framework of how the Burke Museum could be used as a space and resource for members of a community. This resulted in a culminating zine which shows how participants were able to use the collections to learn about themselves and their heritage.



Members of the Filipino-American Student Association (FASA sa UW) viewing one of their chosen pieces, a Philippine revolutionary flag. Photo by Gabbie Mangaser.

Reflections

The original intention of this project was to create a framework of connections to heritage through collections with activation specific to the Burke Museum’s Artist Studio, in order to engage more communities. Over the duration of the project, it morphed into a project where beyond the studio could be a space for artists, researchers, and other individuals.

In addition, this project was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic where classes were hybrid during the Fall 2021 and Winter 2022 academic quarters. Recruitment of participants in a more socializing project was more difficult than intended, but I am hopeful that with future iterations, project managers will have more time and less public gathering restrictions.

This project’s success was only possible because of the Burke Museum’s commitment to sharing collections with communities, not only as mentioned in their mission statement, but also through action especially on part of the Heritage department. In this case, the Burke Museum was ready to handle more community engagement based on the participants’ freedom to resources and spaces, whereas other organizations may not be ready.

This project illustrated a pilot in engagement, but there is even more opportunity for collaboration. There was an attempt to build relationships between participants but with time unpermitting, this was not possible. This was also a learning experience which demonstrates how practices involving community take time for building trust.

Process

Recruitment

Identified key organizations and entities on campus to reach Southeast Asian individuals and groups, such as the Southeast Asia Center through the Jackson School of International Studies, FASA sa UW, ThaiSA UW, BMSA-UW, and others. Presented project during RSO meetings, posted informational flyers, and emailed SEA content-related course faculty, and listservs.

Participants were asked to fill out a form to state why they were interested in the project, their availabilities and contact information. There was no particular selection process; folks who identified as Southeast Asian and wanted to learn more about their heritage were more than welcome.

Project Brainstorming

Sitting with the initial interaction with the collections pieces, participants were encouraged to think about their interests and what they would like to learn from the collections. Many were able to contribute to a virtual, shared brainstorm board and asked to think about their experience in the museum, and the pieces they were interested in. Initially, participants had the option to meet weekly with others to discuss their projects and begin thinking about connections between what they were learning.

Initial Collections Visit

Invited participants into the collections space to view pieces related to their backgrounds. They were given brief object handling procedures, introduced to the storage space, workroom, and the studio, and asked to think about what it meant to be in the storage, what they know and don’t know about their heritage, provenance, and museum ethics (especially related to colonialism).

Museum as a space

Participants scheduled times to use various spaces in the museum including the Artist Studio, Collections Storage, and the Heritage Workroom. Also available for use was the Arts & Culture Library.

Culminating zine

With initial pieces chosen and research space in the museum, participants were asked to create a personal project of any modality to contribute to the zine. Submissions were formatted based upon cohesive templates, and sent back to the researchers for any further edits and approval. Any editing of projects on my part was kept to grammar so as not to dramatically change the meaning of a project as intended by the participant. When all projects were submitted, a zine draft was sent to participants for a final review and approved for submission. With final revisions, the zine is published online and posted through the museum’s blog.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture for supporting this work which I hope will only add to the continuing community-engaged efforts; my super supportive thesis committee which includes the spectacular Collections Manager of Oceania and Asia, Kathy Dougherty; always encouraging Meena Selvakumar; and Rick Bonus, whose previous work with the course Critical Filipinx American Histories inspired this project; all of the magnificent researchers who took time out of their schedules to visit the collections and create beautiful submissions for this zine; all the Museology homies for their input and reassurance that this project is cool; woof woof bark ily to Nymeria; Tyler (you’ve peripherally earned your MA at this point too); my sister, I guess; and last but not least, my mom and dad, whose labor and sacrifices got me to where I am today!

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