

Blending Science & A Sense of History

By Ricky Francisco

Have you noticed that when you pay attention to something long enough, your perspective changes? That's what my internship did for me.

Two months with conservators have left me with a deeper respect, approximating awe, for them. They are chemists, physicists, and cultural historians all in one. They measure the barely perceptible cumulative degrading effects of light, both the visible and invisible kinds, on an object. They know how different materials react to minute changes in humidity and temperature and how these "microforces": the push and pull of individual fibers in a sheet of paper, for example - would react collectively to create creases, undulations and cracks on its surface - and how these damages can be avoided or repaired. They know what pigments in a painting of a specific period of time or country should be and in what manner it would be applied if it were really from that time, place or by a particular artist. Their knowledge is highly specialized, almost arcane. *And yet, this is not all it takes to be a conservator.*

To be a conservator, one must be all these and more. One must have a lot of heart. One must have the protectiveness of a mother to her child, the patience to test all options first before choosing one to treat an object, the humility to make one's intervention unseen and always with the intent of being able to remove it when a better option is found. A conservator must have the creativity to choose between materials one will find in a supermarket or something that can only be bought from a pharmaceutical company at the other side of the world. He or she must have genuine curiosity, an elephantine memory, and most importantly, profound respect for the intrinsic qualities of the object and all the materials that comprise it and the culture of the people who made it.

To be a conservator, one must also have steady, skilful and strong hands; eyes that notice all the hundred thousand variations in each colour; ears to listen and value the specialist knowledge when it comes from either a colleague, a written historical text or even from an illiterate weaver or craftsman who has a lifetime of experience on the object and knows the damage in question; and the skill and control of a brain surgeon to wield a brush, a scalpel, a chisel, a laser beam or a heavy mallet when the opportunity demands it - to save an object from oblivion for the enjoyment and education of this generation and the generations to come.

To be a conservator is to keep the environment and time at bay without resorting to techniques that will alter the object or the intentions of the object's maker.

These are just a few of the things that I have witnessed by spending time with conservators at the Heritage Conservation Centre of Singapore.

Two months at the Heritage Conservation Centre gave me knowledge, skills and new perspectives on how to care for the objects under my care, in my country, and more importantly, the reassurance that I am not alone. I leave not only with my head full of new ideas, and my heart full of renewed passion, but with new friendships and the comfort that when I am faced with something so perplexing, I can count on them for advice and help. I look forward to the time that this network will grow across Southeast Asia, where there is still much to learn about the diverse cultures, histories, materials and environments in our region. I am most grateful for this unique opportunity to be an intern at the HCC.

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