

SPAFA AFFAIRS

REPORT:

Training on Preventive Conservation

by Marilou M. Dancel

Prolonging the lives of museum objects is a must. They are of great importance to men since they represent important events relating to their existence.

A museum curator, including the different personnel in charge of valuable and historical items, is obliged to ensure that these objects are handled properly and are not subjected to conditions that will cause their deterioration. It is for this purpose that the *Training Course on Preventive Conservation of Museum Objects* was offered by SPAFA to curators and other museum personnel of Southeast Asia.

The training course was held, from November 2 to December 31,

The author is a Research Assistant of the Philippine National Museum. She was also one of the SPAFA scholars in the Training Course on Preventive Conservation of Museum Objects.

This article is based on the required report submitted by the author as a trainee in the said course.

1987, in the Conservation Section of the National Museum of Bangkok, Thailand. It was attended by participants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Thailand. The training was divided into lectures, practical works, and visits to the different museums.



Top: A trainee diligently writes his observation during one of the museum visits.

Above: Posing for a group picture are participants of the Training Course on Preventive Conservation of Museum Objects during the Opening Ceremony at the Bangkok National Museum.

Theory and Practice

Lectures were given by experts and by a number of personnel from the National Museum of Bangkok. The series of lectures dealt with theories touching on the role of curators in the conservation or preservation of museum objects, guidelines for prolonging the lives of museum or art objects, different objects on display and their natures, precautions on their handling, storing, exhibition, and many others.

The trainees enjoyed the practicum best. They were divided into groups when performing activities. Among the many practical works done were chemical testing of conservation materials and mechanical cleaning of museum objects, measurement of relative humidity, temperature and light intensity of a specified gallery using different devices. Every participant in the training course was assigned a task. But as a member of a group, his work was conglomerated with those of others to form the group report.

Study Visits

Another interesting part of the training were the field trips to 21 different museums. Both government and privately owned museums in Bangkok and nearby provinces were visited and observed. This enabled the participants to acquaint themselves on the various conditions affecting museums.

Observation

There are various types of museums. To mention a few, they are historical, biological, scientific, and

archival. Organizers of the training course endeavoured to include in the field trips as many types of museums as possible. And as part of the course, the trainees were asked to make observations and comments on the museums visited.

Most of the scientific and biological museums seen were new and properly installed. And since most of their objects are inorganic, they are not usually faced with complicated problems of maintenance.

Many of the private historical museums visited were also new and, of course, still well-kept. However, it was observed that the lighting technique in these museums has seemingly been overlooked. Sunlight, which has a great amount of ultraviolet rays, was allowed in through widely opened windows and doors. In addition, strong spotlights were seen to illuminate museum objects. Some wooden and stone

museum objects were even used as decorations outside in the garden. As a result, they were not only grossly exposed to sunlight and the elements but also plants grew on them. In one private museum some exhibits were improperly mounted and could, as a result, cause stress and strain on the objects. In the same museum, skirts were seen hanging on unpadded and corroded metal rods. A tapestry was pinned directly on the wall. Metal objects were placed on top of textiles. Strong amount of light, improper mounting, and the very high humidity caused by plants surrounding the museums accelerate the deterioration of museum objects.

All the museums of the Thai Department of Fine Arts are generally properly maintained. However, some of the showcases in one of the regional museums were dusty and dirty. Woods used for showcases emitted acid and stained



Visiting Bangkok's Science Museum

the cloth lining as well as the museum objects inside.

The mounting and labelling techniques used in another regional museum could still be improved. Objects were labelled with scotch tape, paper tape and staple wires. Metal rods were noticeably used in the mounting of stone objects.

One of the most important museums visited in Bangkok seemed to have the greatest number of problems in terms of conservation. During our visit, most of its galleries were observed unsuitable for display especially for organic materials. It had wide open doors and windows wherein moisture and sunlight enter. The ceiling was noticed to be a breeding place for bats and birds. Some objects displayed needed treatment or repair. A number of showcases had so many objects on display they appeared crowded.

Recommendations and Future Plans

All museum personnel should be made aware of the importance of museum objects. Higher level museum authorities should endeavour to educate all their staffs by arranging orientation programmes for them. In addition, they should be taught on the proper handling, mounting, storing and transporting of these objects. Curators should work hand-in-hand with conservators. And to assist others, they should also extend their conservation services to both government and private museums.

As a result of this SPAFA training course, I have planned to do the following for the Philippine

National Museum:

1. Inform higher museum officials on the importance of *preventive conservation* in order to develop a sense of awareness on the value and security of museum objects.

2. Assist in the orientation of all museum personnel in order to awaken their curiosity and awareness on the proper handling of museum objects.

3. Prepare suggestions on the necessary improvements or changes for and a standard procedure on the handling of museum storage and exhibitions.

4. Emphasize the needs of personnel for training in courses such as *Preventive Conservation*

Conclusion

The *SPAFA Training on Preventive Conservation of Museum Objects* is an appropriate training for curators. It provided the Southeast Asian participants a sense of awareness for conservation of museum objects. With knowledge earned from this training, curators and other museum personnel will be better able to recognize early signs of deterioration and their necessary treatment. More importantly, through the SPAFA alumni, more museum staff members could learn a more systematic way of handling, storing, mounting and transporting museum objects.



Mrs. Suleiman passes away

Mrs. Satyawati Suleiman, former SPAFA Governing Board Member for Indonesia, passed away at the age of 68 on Friday, February 26, 1988, at 9:30 A.M. She is survived by her husband, Mr. Suleiman Djajamihardja and five children.

From March 1978 to February 1984, Mrs. Suleiman was a Governing Board Member of the SEAMEO Project for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) in her capacity as a

Senior Research Scientist at the National Research Centre of Archaeology in Jakarta Selatan, Indonesia.

Mrs. Suleiman was educated at the University of Indonesia. She has written a large number of articles in the field of archaeology and has participated in several national and international scientific meetings. Owing to the recognition she has earned, she has also become Indonesia's Cultural Attache in New Delhi and London.

