

Time keepers

A BYGONE ERA COMES TO LIFE IN A MUSEUM AND THREE OLD HOUSES TURNED B&B IN SAN PABLO, LAGUNA

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COLLECTING PHILIPPINE ANTIQUES was the hobby of Roy Empalmado and his friend Arthur Reyes while they imported and distributed wines and spirits from Barcelona.

After more than 25 years, they have amassed an extensive collection—thousands of pieces—from different eras of Philippine history and art. Roy now focuses his time on turning a small piece of land into a cultural heritage site of San Pablo City in Laguna Province.

In the middle of his family's land is a long, three-story building. Built in 1967, it used to be a school, then a hotel and government office, and later abandoned. Today, it houses Roy's extensive collection, with the whole first floor completely renovated into a museum. "Our collection is categorized into four main groups: Primitive, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Neo-classical," says Roy.

Sulyap Gallery

Upon entering the museum, visitors are presented with pieces

ABOVE: The Obando House—dismantled in Bulacan, transported by truck, and rebuilt in Laguna. Almost all its elements are original.

from the "primitive," or pre-colonial, era. There are wood basins used for gold panning, metal saws, and a wood cylinder at the end of a long pole. "It makes a loud noise when rotated, like a mechanical scarecrow."

The next room houses several *aparadores* (closets), all original and untouched. "Closets from Laguna look simple while the ones from the Visayas or Mindanao look extravagant," says Roy. There are also bed-

BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Old wooden stairs displaying antiques, including primitive pots and WWII mortar bomb shells; Bedroom vignette with a stand for wash basin and chamber pot and an elaborately carved dresser. Roy Empalmado in front of an old Chinese shop door from Binondo. A *habihan* or loom from Batangas is surrounded by old religious statues.



room vignettes, with canopy beds, *lavador* tabletop, a study. To have a room similarly furnished was a status symbol back then.

Another room displays the importance of religion in Philippine history. There are statues of saints, most especially the city's patron, St. Peter. The museum's main hall in the first-floor lobby has rows of old wood tables and chairs and an extravagant stage, where Sulyap Gallery conducts workshops and seminars on painting, poetry, photography and music, among others. The last room houses pieces made from a variety of wood—*narra*, *tindalo*, *balayong*, *molave*, *ipil*, *mangga*—as well as horses and people made from papier-mâché.

The museum is only half of what Roy offers. In front of the building are three old houses that are not of San Pablo but truly belong here in Sulyap. All the houses have gone through an extensive transformation.

Roy explains, "They were discovered, bought, dismantled, categorized piece by piece, transported to San Pablo by truck, and finally, rebuilt."

Homes from Cabay, Obando and Alitagtag

All the two-story houses are named after the place where it came from. The first, from Cabay, Quezon, has a steep wooden staircase and wide windows. It is now Sulyap Café, offering excellent Filipino cuisine.

The second, from Obando, Bulacan, has a concrete stairwell and a large triangular roof. It was transformed into a B&B with five rooms for couples.

The last one, from Alitagtag, Batangas, is big, with patios. It now offers lodging for groups. Fronting the houses is a dirt road with hundreds of cobblestones made from genuine European-made bricks.

These houses are a unique destination in San Pablo, a town that was burnt down in WWII—no house was left standing.

"I spent a lot of time in the café, pencil-sketching my dreams for this place. It feels great finally to see your dreams turn to reality," Roy says. "I want to create a place where visitors can experience reliving our old history, even in just feeling the touch of old wood, tasting good food, and creating art." ❶