

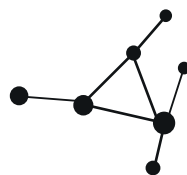
LEARNING UNIT

CHANGING PLACES

Working Group: Manila

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POSTCOLONIALITY
DECOLONIALIZATION
WORKING WITH IMAGES
COLONIALISM



intertwining hi/stories

ABSTRACT

Art's power to enable a reimagination of the present is behind the possibly utopic title of this Learning Unit. By inviting you to think about what could happen when visual relations are reshaped within a picture frame, we ask you to layer on a contrapuntal voice to a disempowered character now enplaced in a position to talk back. The visual peg for the exercise is Filipino painter Juan Luna's oil painting, *Espana y Filipinas* (c. 1888).

AUTHORS

The Manila research team is presently made up by members of the independent art platform, *Back to Square 1*: Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez (critic-historian-researcher from the University of the Philippines Department of Art Studies, Mary Ann Josette Pernia (Education specialist, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design and Lecturer, University of the Philippines Manila), and Iris Angela Ferrer, independent researcher and cultural worker. For this project, the team worked with graphic artist, Bon Henryk Corachea.

ADRESSEES

This Learning Unit is for tertiary students and young professionals.

CHANGING PLACES

Could we imagine a world where iconic images that ‘taught’ us how to see our past and ourselves might be remade? In the Philippines, almost all children herded through public schools will grow up being told that the 19th century Filipino painter, Juan Luna is a hero because his painting and that of compatriot Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo’s placed the Philippines on the same footing as its first colonial master, Spain¹. The tired script goes that the two painters’ triumphs in several international expositions upended the claim that the conquered were essentially inferior. This 350-year-inhibited desire for parity as well as visibility ran deep particularly in the moneyed intellectual classes who historically dominated the political and economic spheres of the Philippines. Such a largely unexamined stance toward upward mobility without much regard for confronting inequity has been at the heart of critique directed at elite liberal democracy conflated in the country’s colonial past and continuing present. Filipino critic and theorist Marian Pastor Roces, in her essay on the Lopez Museum Lunas and Hidalgo’s naughtily calls such episodes as materialized instances of “the indio out to learn white tricks.”²

The anxiety runs deep even more than a century after the Philippine wrestled free after being passed on from one colonial grip to another – American and Japanese (with a British interlude usually not factored in). Such instrumentalized narratives of the nation born of a race resiliently surfacing from privation then asserting its own globalized stature continues to be told through the school system, everyday visual culture, and currently, participation in the international artworld. Playing prominently in this story for instance are such canonical Luna and Hidalgo pieces as *Spoliarium*, *Battle of Lepanto*, *Damas Romanas*, *La Barca de Aqueronte*, *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* – just a few of several paintings variably demonstrating early Filipino deftness in European allegorical-classicist motifs and techniques often rendered in scale apropos of the grand project of nation. The subtext in such retellings has almost always been the fierce shaking off of a pictorialized myth of the eternal native, always beaten, always falling short.

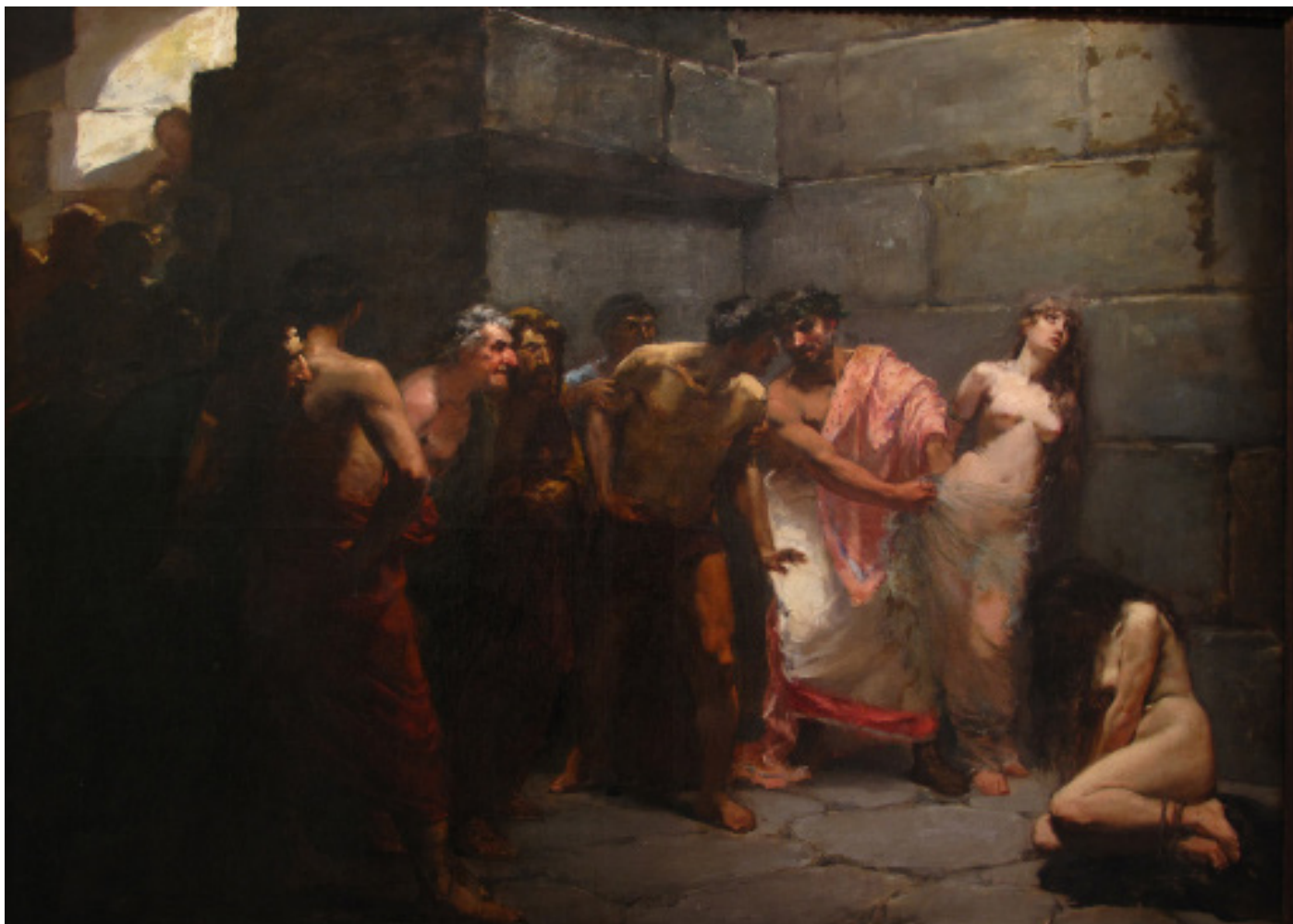
Elsewhere, Roces quips: “The nation for which Hidalgo and Luna provided epiphany is surviving miserably, if not self-destructing. The two artists and their interpreters figure in this disintegration, simply for having envisioned the nation.”³

For this Learning Unit, attention is focused on the Lopez Museum’s version of Luna’s painting *Espana y Filipinas* which we posit as ambiguous enough to be tinkered with semiotically. It is in that context that we present five altered versions of the work which presumably casts Mother Spain leading the fledgling Filipinas into the light of knowledge and away from her vaunted barbarianism. In urging a consideration of these repositionings, we ask, how might a conversation between these two stand-ins for conqueror and conquered take shape? If the imaging, specifically their spatial relationship in the image were loosened from the staid hierarchy in which this work has been almost interminably framed, what sort of untethered candor might we help surface? The prompt has to do with getting participants to pick two of the five images which might then help them craft a hypothetical exchange of words between these two women characters previously cast as frozen amidst Spain’s occupation of this Asian territory.

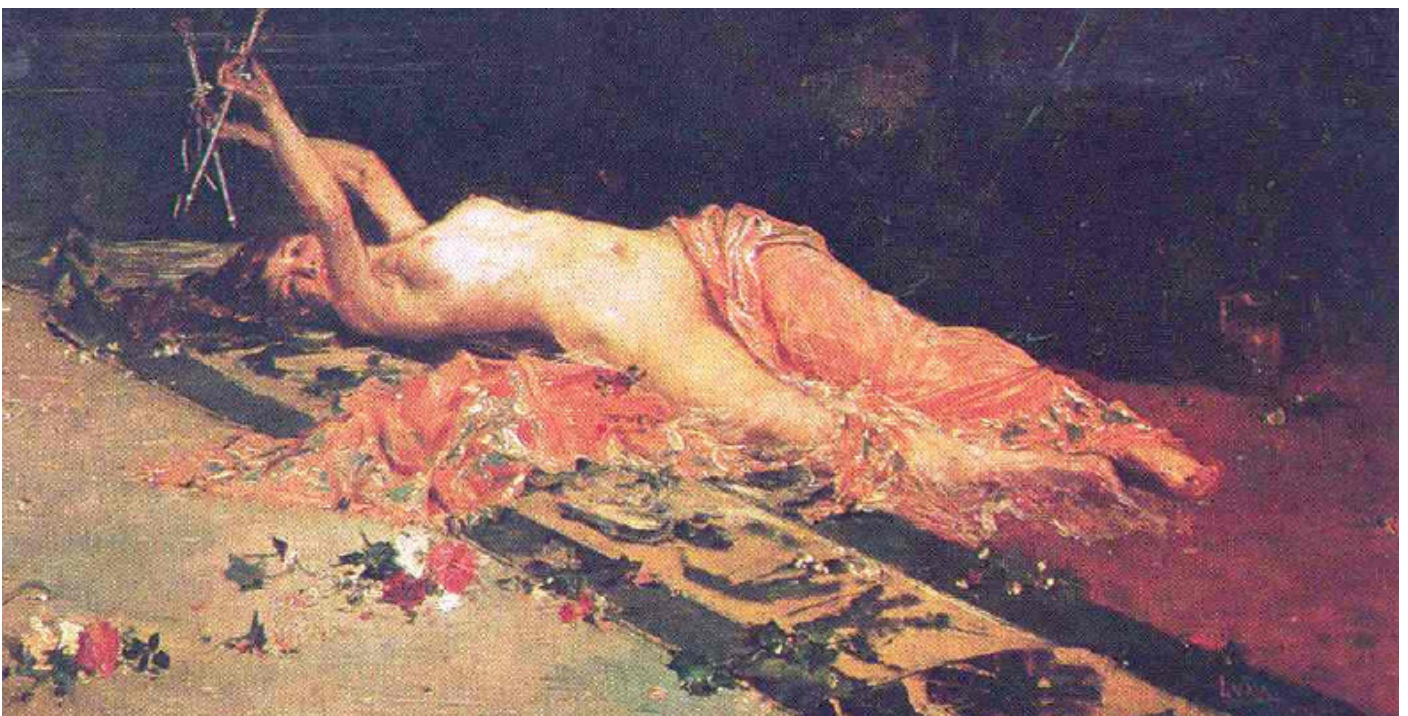
1 Luna and Hidalgo were awarded gold and silver medals respectively at the Madrid Exposition of 1884 and the passed on narrative in the Philippines is that Luna was not given the topmost citation as he was merely a colonial subject rather than citizen of Spain.

2 Roces, Marian Pastor. <https://lopez-museum.com/hidalgo-and-luna-vexed-modernity/> recently republished in an anthology of Roces’ writings produced by the DLSU School of Art and Design Museum of Contemporary Art and Design.

3 Ibid.







EXAMPLE

25 Abril 2018

Para mi Señora Española (SE),

For over a century now you clinched me at the waist, foisting me into a path others trod before me. I was young and far too trusting then so I eased into this place you said would lead me away from the darkness of my own faithlessness and ignorance. Yet neither of us are any younger now, and o it is high time you step back and let me be. Witness my passage. Filipinas navigates the light that I myself bring on.

Afectuosamente,

Filipinas (FI)

Mi Hija Filipinas (FI),

What you take as zealous stricture has indeed contained you. Stride and relish my disembrace.

Presentimiento,

Española (SE)

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REFERENCE TEXTS FOR FURTHER READING

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"Juan Luna's 'Spoliarium' on virtual display at National Gallery Singapore", *CNN Philippines*, accessed August 20th, 2018, <http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2018/01/05/juan-luna-national-gallery-singapore.html>

"Search: Juan Novicio Luna. Spoliarium. 1884.", *Filipinas Heritage Library Catalog*, accessed August 20th, 2018, http://opac.filipinaslibrary.org.ph/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=1439&shelfbrowse_itemnumber=805507

LINKS TO OTHER RELEVANT PROJECTS

"Back to Square Juan", *Back to Square Juan*, accessed August 20th, 2018, <http://www.backtosquarejuan.org>

