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Letanía: *Architectural Documentation of the Retablos of San Agustin Church in Manila*

Letanía: *Documentación arquitectónica de los retablos de la iglesia de San Agustín de Manila*

Litania: *Documentação arquitectónica dos retábulos da Igreja de San Agustin em Manila*

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The San Agustin Convent, located in Intramuros, the historic core of Manila, hosts a rich collection of 19 altarpieces (*retablos*). These retablos are an important heritage which was recorded in full detail for its better future conservation and knowledge. This article presents the outcome of this process and it is ultimately aimed at promoting and giving greater visibility to this art, which is still alive today in the Philippines and where it has evolved to produce its own local tradition, while remaining linked to its early Spanish precedents.

El convento de San Agustín, situado en la zona de Intramuros, el centro histórico de Manila, alberga una rica colección de 19 retablos. Estos retablos constituyen un importante patrimonio del que se ha hecho un registro detallado para contribuir a su mejor conocimiento y conservación en el futuro. En este artículo se presenta el resultado de este proceso con el objetivo último de promocionar y dar visibilidad a esta manifestación artística que sigue viva en Filipinas, donde ha evolucionado dando lugar a una tradición local propia vinculada todavía a sus orígenes españoles.

O Convento de San Agustin, localizado em Intramuros, o núcleo histórico de Manila, acolhe uma rica coleção de 19 retábulos. Estes retábulos são um património importante que foi registado em pormenor para a sua melhor conservação e conhecimento futuro. Este artigo apresenta o resultado deste processo e tem como objectivo final promover e dar visibilidade a esta arte, que ainda hoje está viva nas Filipinas, onde evoluiu, dando origem à sua própria tradição local, ainda ligada aos seus precedentes Espanhóis iniciais.

Introduction: San Agustin Complex

The San Agustin Convent is located in the historic walled city of Intramuros, in Manila. It was built following Mexican precedents such as the San Agustín church in Mexico City. The early Augustinians were known for their excellence as church builders, which dates back all the way to their mission in Mexico. They were able to apply their knowledge of South American Monastic Architecture to the building of churches in the Philippines, adapting their models to the available local stone and other materials and, most importantly, to the local weather conditions, sacrificing some refinements in favour of durability. Thus, the early Augustinians left a *firmiter aedificata* (strongly built) house to their descendants as a manifestation of their faith.

The church was built with hewn stone, cut from quarries in Guadalupe, Meycauayan, and San Mateo. The church measures 67.15 meters in length by 24.93 meters in width; and its massive walls rise about 16.68 meters from the floor up to the cornice and the building reaches a height of 28 meters at the top of the dome.

There were originally fourteen chapels in the church, seven on each side, connected to each other by a narrow passage near the wall. In 1945, the church was bombed by the Americans, damaging the Chapel of Legazpi. Fortunately the church has not been greatly damaged by earthquakes. Twelve chapels have remained, 6 on each side, after the last two were filled with stone and rubble due to the earthquake of 1880. The style of the chapels changed with each new dedicatee or patron. However, the most characteristic style of these chapels is Baroque.

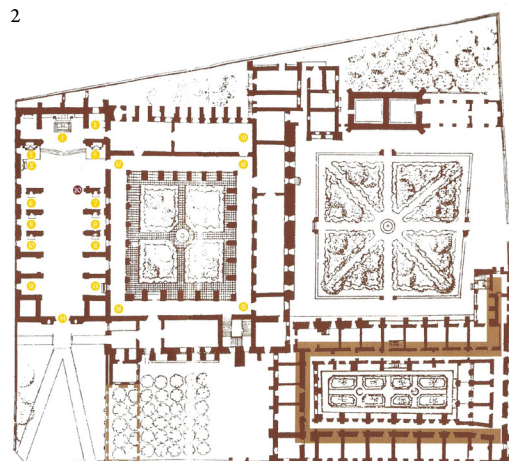
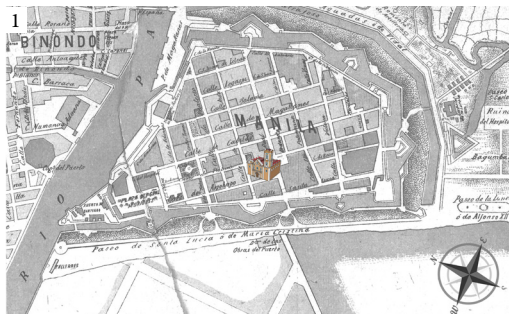
The array of chapels in both the church and cloister were decorated with beautifully detailed *retablos* (altarpieces) in various styles: namely Baroque and Neoclassical, with hints of Rococo. These styles are what San Agustin Church can offer as part of its continuing History.

The Augustinians also focused on painting the interior of the church after the tapestries and chandeliers were installed. In 1875, two Italian scenographers were contracted by Fr. Jose Ibeas. These two Italian scenographers, named Giovanni Alberoni and Cesare Dibella, arrived in Manila to paint the church interiors.

1: Location of the San Agustín Convent in Manila

2: Plan of the Convent

3: Exterior of the Convent

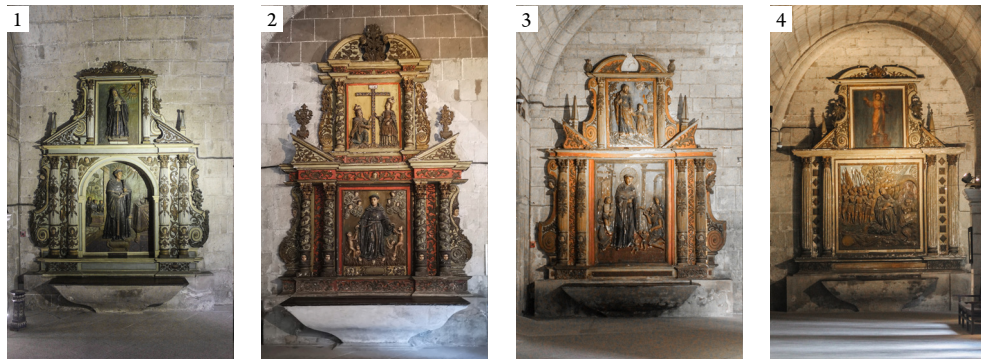


As pointed out by Billy Ray Malacura, Curator of San Agustin Museum (Galende 2000: 30):

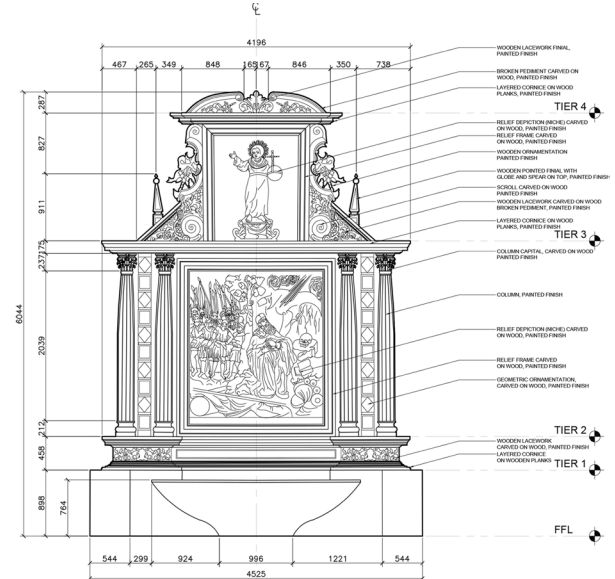
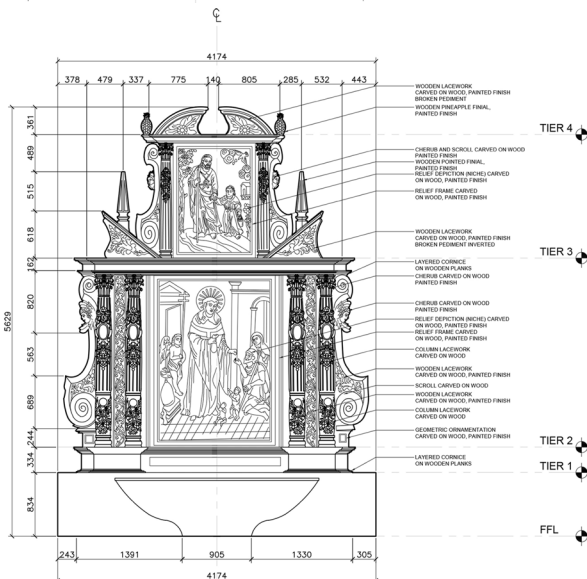
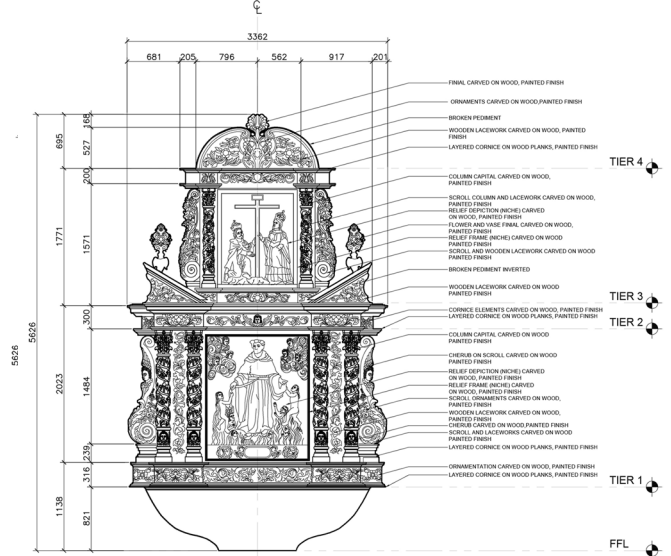
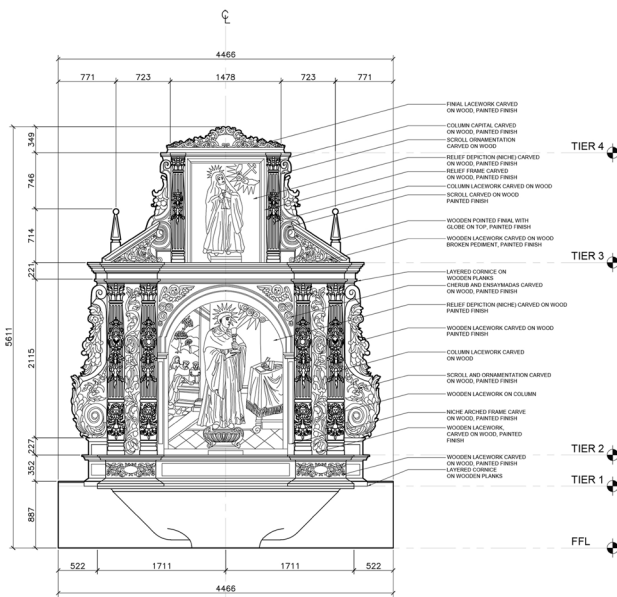
San Agustin Church is a treasure of the Filipino people. Beyond the recognition and pride it brings, the structure and its intertwined narratives collectively describe episodes of our country's history. Within its hallowed walls are expressions of artistry and piety. It represents every Filipino (regardless of creed), our aspirations and the height of our potentials.

The San Agustin Convent *retablos*

The word *retablo* is derived from the Latin *retaulus*, formed by the merging of the words *retro*, which means “behind”, and *tabula*, which means “pane”. The *retablo* serves as the backdrop for



- 1: Retablo de San Juan de Sahagún
- 2: Retablo de San Nicolás de Tolentino (Cloister)
- 3: Retablo de Santo Tomás de Villanueva (Cloister)
- 4: Retablo de San Guillermo de Aquitania



any celebration in a church. Its main functions are to provide a splendid setting and, through the contents it displays, to elucidate the liturgy performed in front of it. It has a holy purpose: aside from being an aid for personal devotion, many of the sacred images within it are considered to have healing potential as well. As explained by the Director of San Agustín Museum, Rev. Fr. Ricky Villar (Galende 2000: 120):

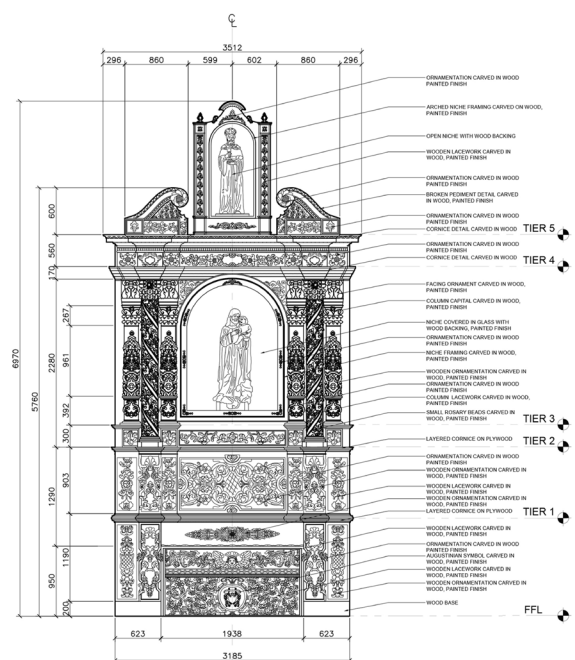
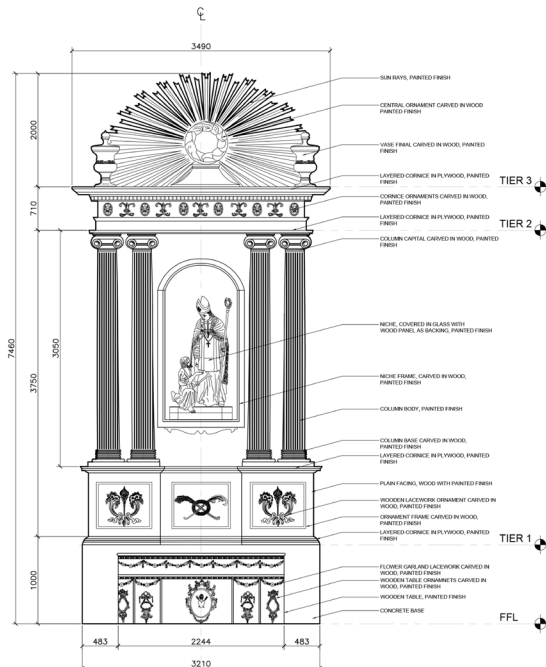
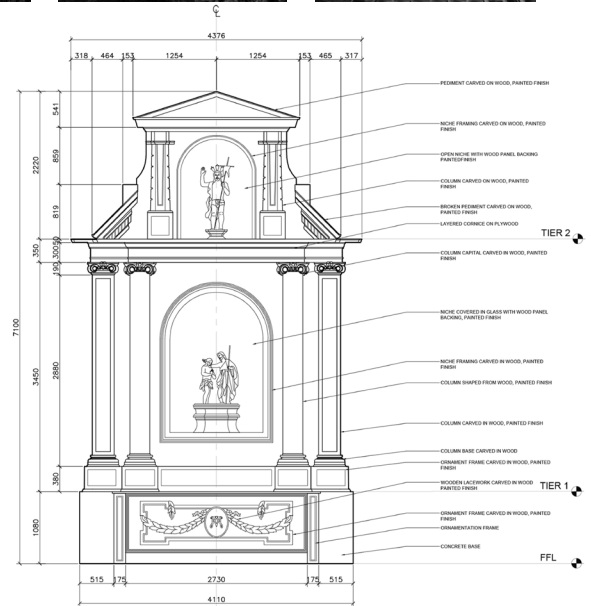
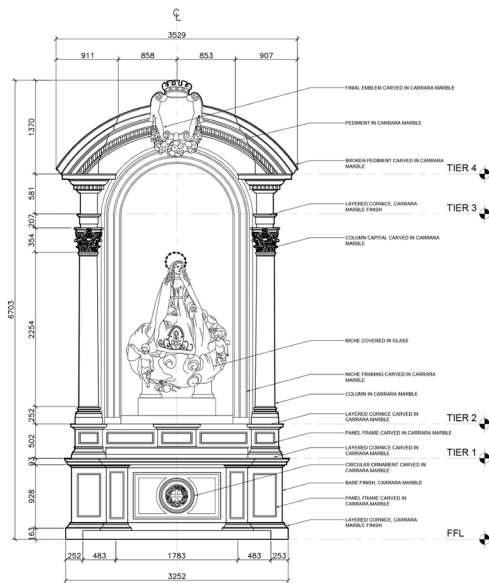
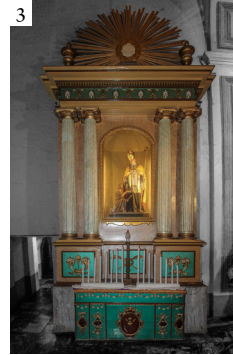
The Church Retablos are a manifestation of glorified symbols that represents the San Agustín Church as whole. Each retablo is interconnected through Heavenly Jerusalem Symbols that define the passion, philosophy, and view of the Icon on each niche. The conscious effort to apply

1: Retablo de la Asunción de Maria

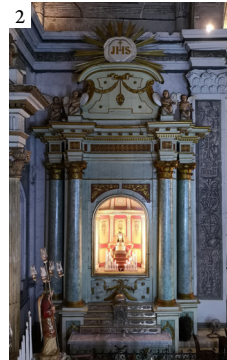
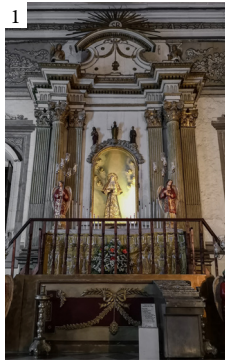
2: Retablo del Baptisterio

3: Retablo de Santo Tomás de Villanueva (Church)

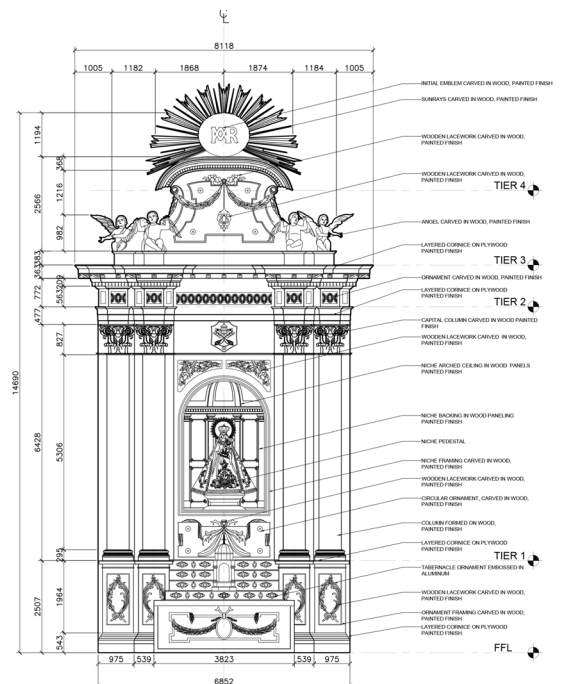
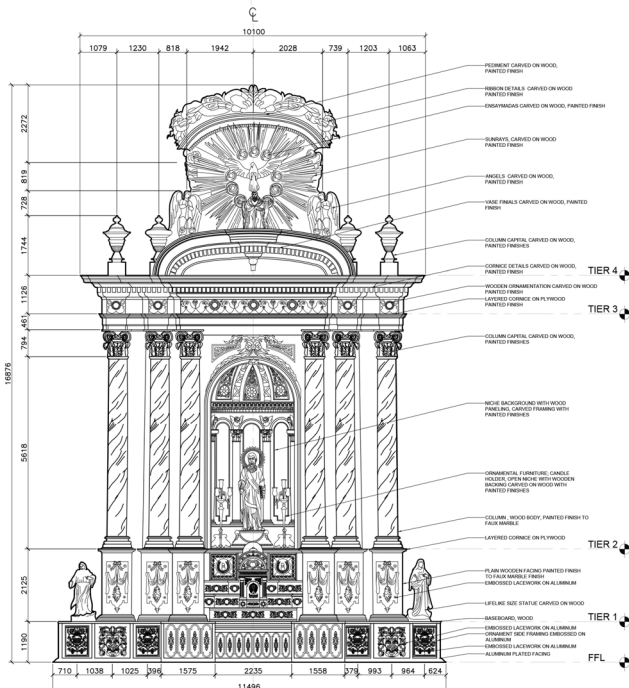
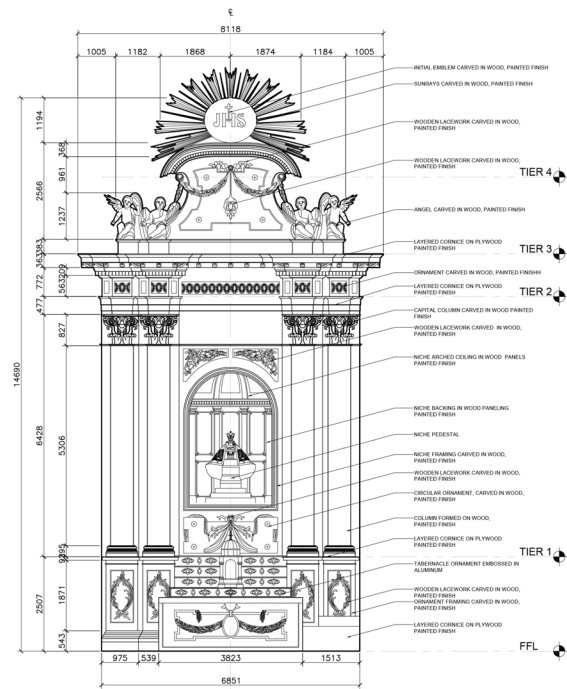
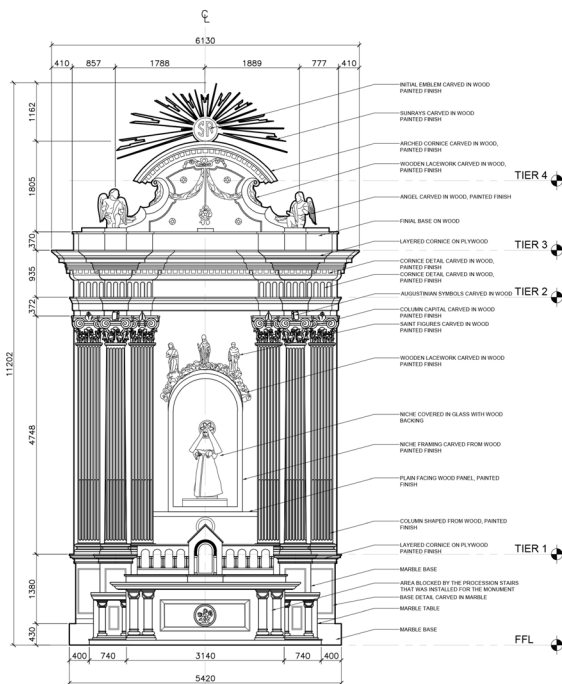
4: Retablo de San José



and review the ornamentation and style of each Retablo, relieves the idea of immersing oneself through culture and history. San Agustin Church defines the Art of Love in different aspects and views that gives the audience the meaning of evangelization.



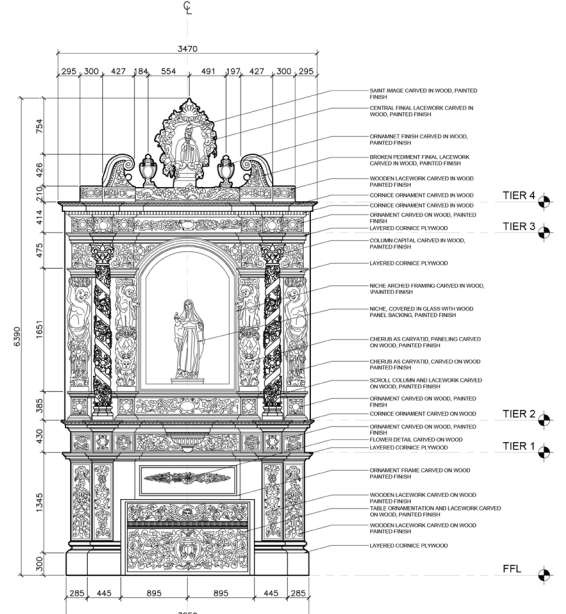
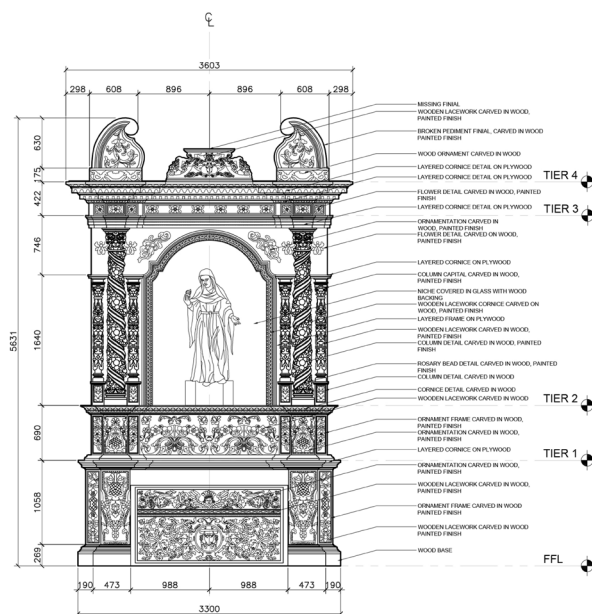
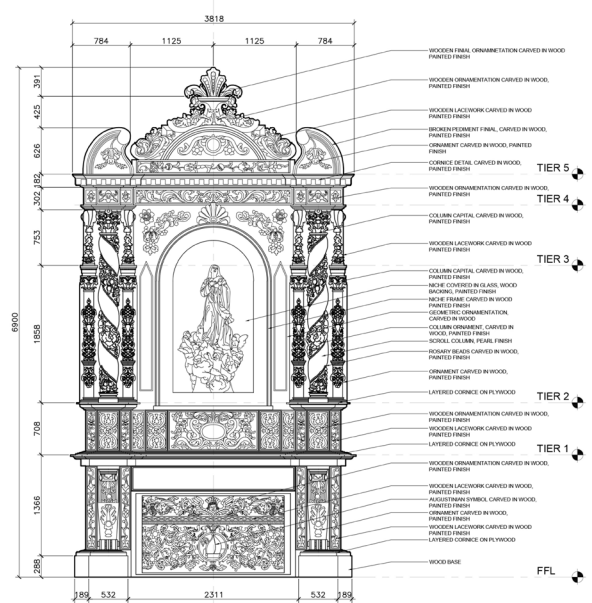
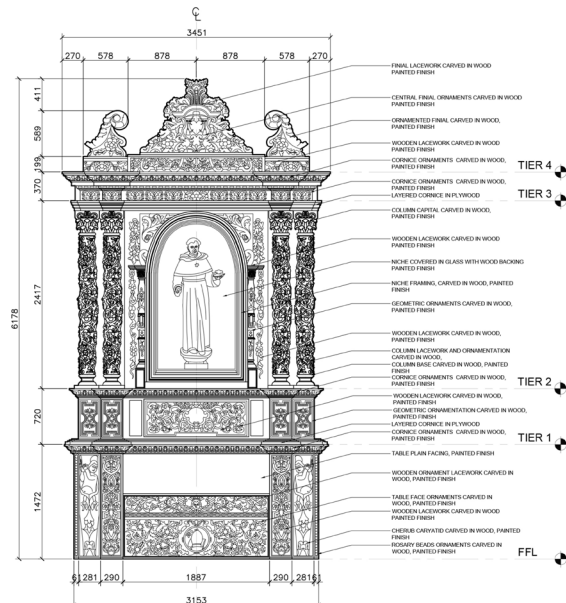
- 1: Retablo de Santa Rita
- 2: Retablo del Santo Niño
- 3: Retablo Mayor de San Pablo
- 4: Retablo de la Virgen Coronada, Nuestra Señora de la Consolación y Correa



And, according to Billy Ray Malacura (Galende 2000: 123):

The retablos or altar pieces of the San Agustin Church and Convent are tangible traces of the monastic community from our distant colonial past. They allow us to step into the realm of cloistered discipline and enclosed mystic encounters. Their architectural styles, ornamentations, and distinct features introduce us to several layers of dialogues. The conscious efforts in rediscovering their stories along with the technical modes of documentation and interpretation ensure the material culture of its profound valuation.

- 1: Retablo de San Nicolás de Tolentino (Church)
- 2: Retablo de la Inmaculada Concepción
- 3: Retablo de Santa Mónica
- 4: Retablo de Santa Clara de Montefalco



Research methodology

A systematic method was used to record these finely detailed *retablos*, designed to produce refined translations of the studied pieces.

The first phase consisted of a familiarization with the retablos by studying Church History and Morphology, initial interviews with Fray Ricky Villar and Sir Billy Malacura, mapping the location and the vicinity, and finally, the tasks and team assignments (research, sketches, measuring and cad teams, etc.).

The second phase was the arduous task of documenting the 19 existing *retablos*: specifically 4 on the ground level hallway of the cloister, 1 in the *antigua sacristía* (former sacristy), 1 in the antechoir, 2 in the narthex, 6 in the nave, 3 in the transept, 1 in the choir and lastly 1 in the *sacristía* (sacristy). Every *retablo* was identified, measured and projected, with the use of laser meters, measuring tapes, distant photography for rectified photos and observation for identifying details.

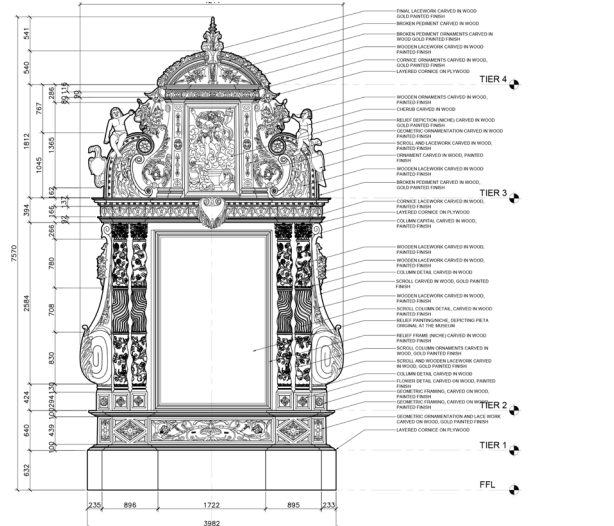
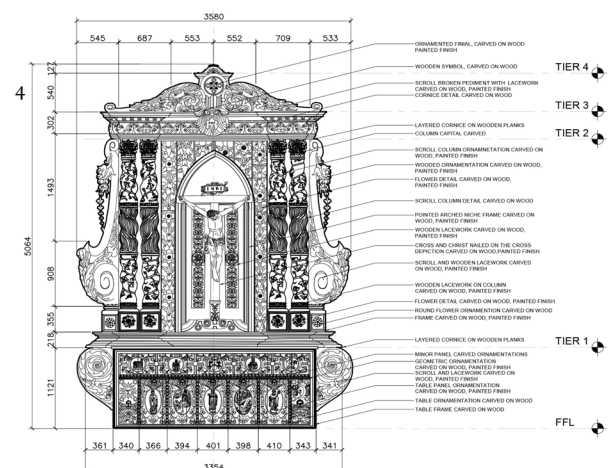
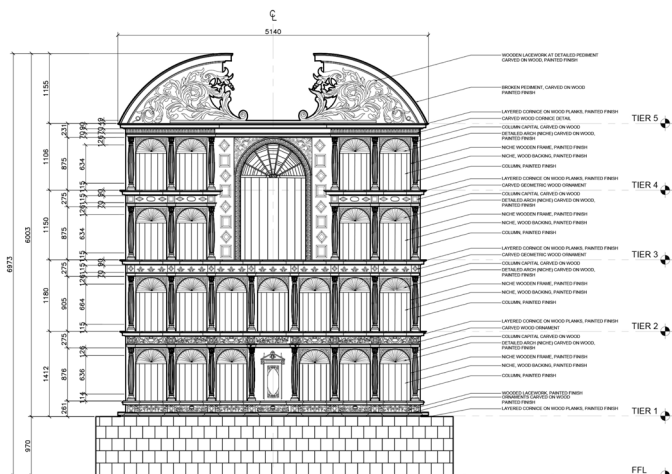
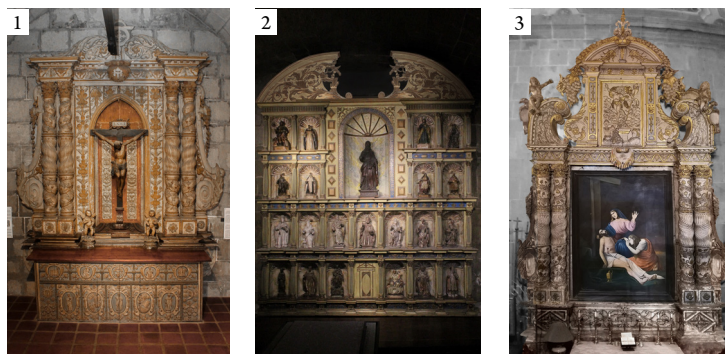
The third phase of the process was translating these documents into drawings assisted by digital sketching, rectified photographs, and the identification of details. This included analysing each *retablo*: its style, ornamentation and depiction.

Finally, once all documents were translated, we initiated the fourth and last phase: compiling data and presenting this work to the San Agustin Church and Museum.

Retablos in the Philippine context

Among other traditions brought here by the Spaniards to promote Christianity, such as the building of churches and cathedrals, the *retablo* was also used by the colonisers for this purpose.

- 1: Retablo de San Juan de los Santos
- 2: Retablo del Antecoro
- 3: Retablo de la Sacristía



The images contained within the *retablos* were used to assist in the evangelization of the local people, showing the life that the faithful should aspire to. Its towering height, like the frescoes up in the church's ceilings, requires the faithful to look up when gazing at the figures, poetically indicating how the locals should look up to the lives of these people. Mimicking the layout of the church, the exhibition hangs the works at a height, expecting reverence and respect from the viewers, and inspiring them with the ideals the images promote. "Similar to the other art and furniture in the church, the retablo is packed with Christian iconography, and accordingly, with implied meaning" (Galende 2000: 146).

The craft of *retablo* design and production in the Philippines became a cultural movement which also embraced the local art of wood carving. The Philippine *retablos* show similarities to other international examples within the Spanish tradition as regards their philosophy and principles, but also present local singularities linked to local traditions.

Nowadays, the design of new *retablos* is still an important activity for companies working in the area of Ecclesiastical and Liturgical Architecture.

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Biographies | Biografías | Biografias

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He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the Far Eastern University, and is studying an MS in Architectural Heritage Conservation at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. He is the head of RDG Ecclesiastical Architecture, an architectural and consulting office specialized in Liturgical Architecture and Design. He is also an international speaker, was acknowledged as Outstanding Young Architect of the Year in Professional Practice, Liturgical category, in the 43rd United Architects of the Philippines National Convention and was the National University Teaching Excellence Awardee in the 2016- 2017 academic year. He is a Lecturer in Architectural History, Theory & Criticism, as well as in Filipino Architecture, and has been studying Advanced & Formal Religious Iconography at the Prosopon School of Iconology of New York since 2017.

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