Art institutions have long benefited from bequests, whether monetary or material. A single substantial donation or acquisition through the endowment of a philanthropist, usually a scholar or a known art collector, can set in motion the burgeoning of an art institution. This is true of premier universities like Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Yale, and Harvard. This is also mirrored in the Philippines, with the core of the Ateneo Art Gallery’s Permanent Collection being gifted to the Ateneo by Fernando Zobel; with the Jorge B. Vargas collection finding its way to the University of the Philippines; and the donation of Wili and Doreen Fernandez finding its way to The Museum of De La Salle University not too long ago.

Collections are largely personal in nature. A collection is in fact a curated assemblage put together by the personality behind it—a situation that recalls Macpherson’s notion of the “self as owner.” Looking at items in a collection is therefore like piecing together bits and pieces of the person that owned them, and attempting to make sense of what it was that he or she valued most: was it the name, the form, the skill, the subject matter, or even just the adrenaline that the hunt brings?

For a collection to be an amalgam of two distinct but seemingly inseparable individuals makes for a complex but stimulating point of departure, especially for someone putting together exhibitions in a space that has long enjoyed an institutional identity, and a privileged one besides. The Museum of the De La Salle University–Manila has been the home of the Wili and Doreen Fernandez Art Collection since the bequest in 2004. The Fernandez Collection was a rich trove of paintings, drawings, and sculptures, among other objects amassed through their seemingly unquenchable thirst for aesthetic wonders, their good taste.

*The closing of the exhibition was marked by the launch of the book Wili Fernandez: Designer, edited by Maya Besa-Roxas and published by the De La Salle University Publishing House. Images from the book, many also displayed at the exhibition, are reproduced in the folio.
Wili, as an architect and interior designer, and Doreen, as a scholar and writer on literature, drama, and food, found a way to complement each other’s individual interests. Of the two, Wili was the serious art collector. However, both of them ultimately benefitted from having works of art inflect a life anchored on heritage and culture, on music, travel, and gastronomy. But as all private collections cultivated inside a marriage go, theirs was invariably refined by each other’s preferences. This was evident in the 2012 exhibition of the collection (*Mga Obra Maestra: A Visual Feast from the Wili and Doreen Fernandez and De La Salle University Art Collections*). The works were a testament to a partnership that extended beyond the usual matrimonial concerns.

In 2013, to commemorate the fifteenth death anniversary of Wili Fernandez, The Museum brought together pieces that showed him not as a collector but as the artist. Entitled *Art and Space: A Collection of Design Concepts by Wili Fernandez*, the exhibition featured hand-drawn renderings made for his design firm’s local and international clients as well as his furniture studies. Some of those on display were in color, while others were in crisp black and white.

Early on, when Wili was still taking Architecture at the University of Santo Tomas, he was admired for how quickly he worked on plates that always turned out beautifully. After college (he graduated in 1951), his career took off. He established the Wili Fernandez Design Studio in 1956 and then the Wili Fernandez and Associates Inc. in 1964. As chief designer, he espoused an ethos that saw the aesthetic and the pragmatic not as opposing but as complementary. This direction was palpable in the studies he put on paper of spaces that are noticeably lived-in and are living. His experience in design furniture was manifest in ample, well-designed seating and the use of native Filipino motifs, colors, prints, and patterns.

Also included in the exhibition were personal items that he treasured: framed photographs, awards and recognitions, books about the artists he admired and collected, including the seminal *The Biggest Little Room*, a book on the Philippine Art Gallery by Purita Kalaw-Ledesma.

Here is a quote from Wili himself, taken from an article by Rodrigo D. Perez III, published in the 1998 issue of *Design and Architecture*:

The interior designer has to act as the memory for today’s world—remembering and retaining what is best, what was lasting in world’s past, then learning from it, using it and adapting it. . . . Not only does the interior designer have the duty to remember, he also has to have a sensitive awareness of today. . . . the interior designer is thus expected to be close to the Renaissance ideal of man—interested in and . . . quiveringly aware of all aspects of life.
In retrospect, the memorabilia and his creative works echo the previous exhibition that was premised on his persona as a benefactor. This exhibition proceeded to flesh out a narrative that spoke of how Fernandez’s contributions in his chosen artistic field amplified the value of the artworks that he collected. *Art and Space* is therefore a “tangential curation”: as a showcase of Fernandez’s own works, it is *off* tangent to *Mga Obra Maestra*, yet as evidence of Fernandez’s genius, it is also *of* tangent to it, a validation of the collection that made up *Mga Obra Maestra*. More often than not, one validates the collector, his eye and his taste, and somewhat gives a nod as well to the objects that were at the receiving end of his selection.

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