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Glitter, Gold, God

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Review Articles

Glitter, Gold, God

RAMON VICENTE C. SUNICO

DAMIAN DOMINGO: FILIPINO MASTER. By Stephen Ongpin. Manila: Intramuros Administration, 1983. 35 pages.

PHILIPPINE RELIGIOUS CARVINGS IN IVORY. By Esperanza Bunag Gatbonton. Manila: Intramuros Administration, 1983. 78 pages.

PHILIPPINE RELIGIOUS IMAGERY IN IVORY: MUSEUM EXHIBITS II. Introduction by E.B. Gatbonton. Captions by Martin I. Tinio, Jr. Design by Ileta Catedral. Manila: Intramuros Administration, 1982. 75 pages.

SANCTUARY SILVER: MUSEUM EXHIBITS I. Text by Martin I. Tinio and design by Ileta Catedral. Manila: The Intramuros Administration, 1982. 82 pages.

VENERATED VIRGINS OF INTRAMUROS. Text by Carlos G. Manabat with an Introduction by Esperanza B. Gatbonton. Design by Ileta Catedral. Manila: The Intramuros Administration, 1982. 48 pages.

In one of his more popular poems, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," the German poet Rainier Maria Rilke manages, in one line, to capture the paradoxical, manifold quality of the aesthetic moment. His rapt, lyric contemplation of a mutilated, sculpted torso ends with a sudden, if soberingly moral, epiphany: "You must change your life." Such is the poet's craft, however, that rather than be offended or repelled by such a bald and didactic conclusion, the reader is ineluctably drawn (perhaps provoked) into an almost guilty reflection on the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic — even further — between the spiritual and the material values of human life.

Indeed, the ability of the beautiful to trigger in the participant/observer an intensity of absorption capable of dissolving other elements (e.g., a sense of time elapsing) not pertinent to the aesthetic object threatens the regulatory

authority characteristic of morality and religion. Thus Plato defends the state against artists and poets. Pater, on the other hand, dismisses the merely moral and translates Gautier's *L'art pour l'art* into the shibboleth, *Art for art's sake*. Even now, terms used to describe the beautiful or the sublime evoke, all too easily, the mystical (e.g., rapture, ecstatic transport) and its apparent antipode, the sexual (e.g., orgasm, climax). This is so because Art represents the common ground (or if one wishes), the battle ground of spirit, mind and matter.

It is to the credit of these five monographs that reflection and puzzlement over the value of art, art history and art books against the imperative of national and international cultural perspectives are stimulated again and again. At the very least, inasmuch as one is predisposed to accept them as serious art books, they represent a catalogue of part of our artistic wealth shrouded as this already is by the secrecy of greed and "collecto-mania."

After all, an art book is a peculiar creature. At best, it represents the attempt to preserve, through reproduction and classification, i.e., through facsimile and critical text, the remnants of past and even present artistic activity. Obviously, the ambience of actual time, once gone, remains irretrievable, the disciples of *zeitgeist* notwithstanding. With due respect to nostalgia buffs, set designers and antique dealers, history is not news. The purpose of the art scholar is not to sentimentalise or to indulge in the escape provided by *time-exoticism*. It is, instead, to contribute to a more permanent remembrance of beautiful objects which, unfortunately, by their very materiality are subject to the corruptive powers of time, climate and humanity. At best, a good art book is the amber in which the prehistoric rose is set — rendering the past both present and inaccessible.

On a more pragmatic level, this conscious, explicit preservation of what Filipino eyes have seen will serve to protect the future lovers of our art. So many of our current problems in authentication and the detection of forgery may, at bottom, be traced back to the obsessive privacy of private and public collections. The fear of theft, expropriation and even simple greed all have conspired against the honest accumulation and the proper organization of a comprehensive but common *corpus* of knowledge about our past. Without such knowledge, all artists are at risk. The circle of art lovers can only remain petty, suspicious and mean — not lovers of Art, to be sure, but its jailers.

A mediocre art book, on the other hand, is, at best, a frivolity — a *luho* (luxury) which makes money from a sympathetic gentry who proclaim themselves in the celebration of purchasing power. The glossy but insubstantial art book is, then, nothing but the worship of Narcissus. This pinnacle of the hawker's art serves nothing but to flatter one's admiration for one's own taste. It is the expert packaging of lovely nothings.

At first glance, these monographs seem to be appropriate vessels of art history, promising — and for the most part, fulfilling this promise — a feast

for the eyes. Citations must be made of the rich textures reproduced in the *Niño Dormido* of *Imagery in Ivory* (p. 19, also reproduced in *Carvings in Ivory*, p. 64) and in the St. Jerome of *Carvings in Ivory* (pp. 56-57). Other memorable pieces are the San Jose/Christ the King and San Antonio de Padua heads with their almost surreal presentation (*Imagery in Ivory*, p. 75) as well as the *La Purisima Concepcion* (*Imagery in Ivory*, p. 32) with its evocation of Buddhist statuary.

The laminated covers of these monographs with their finely reproduced photographs (see especially those of *Damian Domingo* and *Imagery in Ivory*) and Journal Roman typefaces evoke memories of textures of antique lacquerwork and *fin-de-siecle* chapbooks. Fortunately, pretty covers invite closer scrutiny. Glitter and gloss require more assiduous reading. Once again, the imported typefaces and the coated pages of the body retain the effect of the slick, chic and well-crafted art book. Against these sophisticated and exquisite backgrounds, however, the titles (*supra*) in all their cloying alliterativeness sound a discordant note bordering on the facile and the sophomoric.

Further study reveals further minor inconsistencies. In the review copies received, the ink tones of some pages of text vary — some showing lighter or darker than others (see especially *Damian Domingo*, pp. 7 and 9; *Carvings in Ivory*, pp. 26-27). Inexplicable diagonal creases which ruin otherwise expert reproductions hint at basic folding and binding problems (*Carvings in Ivory*, pp. 35, 36, 45, 46). In the smallest work, *Venerated Virgins of Intramuros* (a curiously ambiguous title for non-Marians), the dominant tints of the full-page reproductions themselves undermine the pictorial coherence of the whole. Compare, for example, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (p. 31) with Nuestra Señora del Carmen (p. 29). This monograph, in fact, begins to look like an expensive potboiler when one notices a number of virgins pathetically out of focus (e.g. p. 11 — the first reproduction — p. 17, p. 31, p. 33, p. 35, p. 43 and p. 45). All told, the photographs of eighteen virgins are reproduced; thirty percent of which are far from passable.

The texts of these monographs are even more inconsistent. It must be remembered, at this point, that the Intramuros Administration has taken on the responsibility of recording Philippine art treasures. In so doing, it is bound, necessarily, by both pictorial and scholarly standards of quality. If indeed, these works are meant to be acts of service to posterity, the people involved have no choice but to ensure not only recognizable reproductions but equally illuminating written records of the objects and genres they aim to chronicle.

Of all those responsible for the textual aspects of these monographs, only Mrs. E. B. Gatbonton attains a level of writing which signifies professional expertise, solid research, and intellectual integrity. Her preface to *Carvings in Ivory* bears this out:

The development of any art tradition takes a long time and involves deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs. Then, also, we must reckon with the individuality which sets off the craftsman from the production line. The great number of . . . carvings being turned up here and abroad has made it urgent for us to come to terms with their "reality": to try and abstract from them generalizations that would enable us to establish certain facts about style, dating and provenance. Such deductions should also allow us to gain insights into the larger historical period of which these carvings are part. This is what I have tried to do in this monograph (p. 5).

She provides the only sign of an attempt to articulate a methodology, and it appears that she is the only one of those responsible for the texts of these monographs who is sensitive to the need of a critic to win the confidence of his or her readers. Her *Carvings in Ivory* is, in fact, the fruit of further development from and investigation into the seminal ideas, interests and theories of the earlier *Images in Ivory*. The result of comparing these two books with each other, then, is not a monotony caused by redundancy, but a serendipitous pleasure at being able to trace the growth of one scholar's knowledge about her field of interest— all to the benefit of Philippine art history.

The two other writers are not as good. In *Sanctuary Silver*, Mr. M. I. Tinio Jr., perhaps inadvertently, lets slip the vulgarity (from the Latin, *vulgus* — the crowd) incipient in every *objet d'art*:

Modern altars simply do not look good sheathed in silver, and elaborate vessels seem out of place amidst the sleek lines of glass and chrome.

For years Philippine priests and churches had been disposing of such pieces, mostly for melting. Beautiful pieces came into the hands of antique collectors who bought them by the kilo regardless of design. The more elaborate pieces were cherished by collectors who willingly paid more per kilo (p. 5).

The weight measure of silver of course, is a common consideration, especially among metallurgists, numismatists, metals traders, et al. Yet, Mr. Tinio's almost obsessive references to weight only serve to highlight the monetary value of silver. They contribute little to an understanding of the beauty of the metal. In his seven-page introduction, there are about fifteen references to metal weight as well as around thirteen references to equivalent monetary values. After some time, the monograph begins to sound like a cross (an alloy?) between an essay on silversmithing and a bulletin from the London Metals Exchange. It is such confusion between the treatment of silver as a medium for religious art and its monetary value as a commodity that triggers an almost Marxist contemplation on the morality of art, religion and expensive art books *vis-a-vis* the present background of general poverty. The sensitive reader might notice, after all, that despite this particular monograph's

title, no attempt is made to investigate the history of ideas involved in the use of well-crafted silver i.e., matter, to influence the *indio's* religious life i.e., spirit. Commerce seems to have succeeded in this art book, at the expense of art.

Is art, as a Chinese poet implies, built on the backs of the poor? While the two tensions of spirit and matter remain innate problems of all art, as critic and writer, Mr. Tinio's apparent ignorance of this dialectic, his disinclination to distinguish between the two modalities of the life of silver, leave the reader with an unpleasant and strictly metallic taste. The catalogue of silver, with its almost monotonous procession of black and white photographs (the metal is not photogenic, even if it is photosensitive), for all its filigree and glitter tastes neither of religion nor even of beauty – instead, it tastes of lucre, plain, simple and ubiquitous.

Tinio's essay, however, at least contains the fruit of some research. Mr. Stephen Ongpin's reverie on his ancestor Damian Domingo, despite the rare courtesy of providing the reader with a bibliography of sorts, proves to be the weakest of the five monographs. To be fair, the well-made pictorial design of the book actually does away with the need for an essay. Still, it is Mr. Ongpin's name that appears on the title page, not Ms. Ileta Catedral's.

Occasionally, the reader's curiosity is piqued by a few gossipy allusions to "inside information" – more accurately, to informal conversations shared with other descendants of the obviously creative master:

It is also in some ways a very personal work; an attempt on my part to come to terms with an ancestor I knew little about. Writing this monograph has certainly taught me much about the artist and the man, and I hope others may share this appreciation with me (p. 6).

Unfortunately, the reader's curiosity is never quite satisfied, and Mr. Ongpin hopes in vain.

Even with the bibliography, the article is skimpy. One gets the impression that one is reading a *Reader's Digest* eulogy on an unforgettable but unknown ancestor, an undergraduate essay on art appreciation and an encyclopedia entry all at the same time. Indeed, any term paper teacher will eye this essay suspiciously. *The World of Bernini*, for example, does not merit its impressive citation in the bibliography (p. 35), and would be dismissed in a Methods of Research course as so much padding. A four-sentence paragraph comparing Domingo to Bernini should not require a bibliographical entry (p. 12ff.). Contrary to the author's claim, a comparison between an Italian Baroque "sculptural and architectural monument" and a nineteenth century Philippine oil painting on a copper sheet is not interesting; worse, it has the unfortunate effect of trivialising the works of two masters. After all, similarity of subject matter is not sufficient as a sole basis of critical comparison. Would

not Giotto or Cimabue or even Grandma Moses have initiated a more dynamic discussion?

Secrecy, of course, is one of the greatest hobgoblins of Philippine art history— the private collections of families not excepted. Perhaps, this is why the title page which serves to “twin-bill” ancestor and descendant tantalises. Yet, no new knowledge is added; no significant questions answered; no secrets revealed. At the height of his frustration, the reader can only add other questions: why set diamonds in tin? The preface admits the mild aims of its author (who, by the way, is an undergraduate of the University of Manchester ca. 1983): neither “straightforward biography” nor “in-depth critical study.” What is it then? Why publish it?

Again, morality rears its ugly head. The art book, mirroring the *objet d'art* reveals its other self. It is just another commodity. And, given the difficulty of these times, when the forty odd pesos spent on a monograph could just as well be spent on a kilo of meat, even the most frivolous of readers deserves his or her money's worth.

In sum, then, the Intramuros Administration has taken upon itself, through bookcraft, the responsibility of restoring and preserving the remnants of our rich artistic past. Perhaps, it has also accepted the task of trying to “sell” national art history to the rich but xenophilic patrons in and beyond our islands. With these monographs, as with all commercial and artistic endeavors, there is partial success.

To strive for perfection only defines the adamance of our imperfection.