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The First Philippine Porcelain

FERNANDO ZOBEL DE AYALA

THE story of pottery in the Philippines reaches back into prehistory, but to the best of our knowledge porcelain, defined by Webster as "a fine ware differing from ordinary pottery in being translucent, and in its superior whiteness, hardness, and sonority" was not produced in this country until the early twentieth century. Due to World War II only one piece of the first Philippine porcelain seems to exist and the documents concerned have largely disappeared. It seems worthwhile to write down what little we know lest that also vanish, leaving a gap in Philippine ceramic and economic history.¹

In 1903 my father, Enrique Zóbel de Ayala, was forced by poor health to take a short vacation in Japan. While visiting a porcelain factory in Tokyo he met a young Filipino, Francisco Quintos, who had been working there for three years. Zóbel remembered that the land he administered in Makati had a long ceramic tradition and the idea came to him that Makati might hold interesting possibilities for the manufacture of porcelain. He brought Quintos back with him to Manila and the latter spent some time collecting kaolin and clay samples, mainly around Laguna. The samples were tested in Japan in April 1903 with encouraging results and by June of the same year a company called "La Porcelanica" was formed by various mem-

¹ The information that follows has been pieced together from a variety of documents in the Ayala y Compañía archives.

bers of the Zóbel, Roxas and Brias families with an initial capital of ₱6,000 which gradually increased to some ₱25,000. A small factory was erected in Makati on J. Bonifacio street and Francisco Quintos was appointed to direct it. Commissioner Shuster gave permission for the entry of Japanese experts to help this industry and by October 1903 the new factory had two Japanese master-potters, J. Kato and one Maikawa, and one painter-decorator, Hatsuiro Hasegawa. Another potter, Siantzu, joined them a month later.

Three Philippine apprentices were hired in January 1904 and they soon increased to the number of ten, eventually replacing all but one of the Japanese. After hours these apprentices were given free classes in Spanish, English and Arithmetic. Meanwhile, Quintos constructed a Japanese-style, wood-heated furnace entirely made of Philippine materials, and the first porcelains were produced between July and November 1904. These were principally plates, flower pots, jars, cups and tea sets, usually featuring elaborate multicolored and gilt decoration, including, in one case, the portrait of the purchaser. Eventually refractory bricks and porcelain insulators were also produced. The products of the factory were shown in the Carnival Exposition of 1909 and received a prize.

Various bits of equipment were brought in during 1905 from France as well as complete plans for an expanded and mechanized factory. The plans were never used. Some equipment was also brought in from China.

In the manufacture of porcelain, kaolins were used from Kalamba, Sokol, Mounts Pinaguilan and Makiling in Laguna, Bukala, and Bokawe, Bulakan. Clay from Bokawe was also used. The necessary silica was imported from Japan.

Despite high hopes the factory did not prosper. Production was small and apparently rather expensive. The luxury products of the kiln found no ready customers in a public perfectly satisfied with the equally gaudy and presumably cheaper Japanese imports. Some large orders for refractory bricks and electric insulators were satisfactorily filled, but such customers were few and far between, and the operation showed consistent losses.

In 1911 the factory was dismantled and its equipment sold to the Bureau of Education for ₱600.00.

To the best of our knowledge, only one piece of porcelain made by "La Porcelanica" has survived the destruction of World War II. It is a small dish generously presented to the Ayala y Compañia archives by Francisco M. Quintos Jr. son of the former director of the factory. Because of its extreme rarity we believe it worth illustrating and describing, as follows:

Molded dish of thin porcelain, translucent and sonant, with scalloped edge, undulant shoulders and raised foot. White body covered inside with a light grey slip and decorated with a design of iris blossoms and leaves executed in transparent mauve and blue enamels and heavy blue green and white enamels within a decorative border in the same. The outside is covered with a thick, glossy cold white overglaze. Base of the foot is unglazed. No potter's mark. Diameter: 13.2 cm. Height: 2.3 cm.

Stylistically, the piece described above comes firmly within the decorative taste of the "fin de siècle" style exsecrated by the purist critics of the first half of our century, and now rediscovered and found "amusing" by a new generation of critics willing to forgive a certain amount of confused design if given a little decorative exuberance in exchange. There is nothing about this piece that identifies it as a Philippine product. The motif is a woozy Europeanized adaptation of a traditional Japanese subject; it could have been done in France, England or Germany during the 1890's. The technique has the anonymity of competence without inspiration. For those who like to read between lines this small dish makes an interesting example of Philippine craft ideals during the first decades of the twentieth century.

