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Silver Ex-Votos in Ilocos

FERNANDO ZOBEL DE AYALA

ABOUT a year ago I went on a tour of the Northern Luzon coast with some friends. It was an easy-going trip. We stopped in every town on the way, photographing and sketching all the remains of colonial architecture we could find.

In a sense it was a voyage of discovery. Of course there is nothing really mysterious about these coastal towns of La Union and Ilocos. Transportation facilities are excellent, the towns have been in existence for centuries and are the very reverse of primitive. Physical excitement boiled down to the remote possibility of a flat tire. On the other hand the older buildings in these towns have been looked at but not seen; much less have they been described. We didn't quite know what to expect. As it turned out, the trip was full of pleasant surprises. No part of Luzon is richer in memories of Spanish culture; almost everywhere we found ancient artwork combining Spanish ideas with Oriental craft.

At first glance the town of Santa Lucia in Ilocos Sur promised neither more nor less than the others. It was siesta time and the town looked almost deserted. The plaza was quite large, always a good sign indicating importance in Spanish days and therefore holding a promise of interesting architecture.

Across the plaza stood the church, a fine and rather large structure. Like so many Ilocano churches it was made of

brick and finished with a thick coating of mortar. The usual "earthquake Baroque" buttresses were much in evidence. The facade had been recently re-plastered and painted white and yellow. The exterior offered little of interest except a few discreet architectural ornaments based on plant forms.

The interior did not seem much more exciting. The ornamentation was somewhat bolder and could be of real interest to someone willing to study the influence of XVIIth and XVIIIth century book ornaments on Philippine architecture.

The church being rather dark, it took us some time to notice a glittering image standing by itself, inside a glass box, left of the main altar. I say "glittering" advisedly. The entire image and even its shrine seemed covered with a multitude of small and sparkling silver plaques.

A closer look showed us that the image represented St. Lucy, patron of the town. It looked quite old. Stylistically it belonged to the sixteenth century, although stylistic analysis is still, at this early stage, of little use in dating old Philippine art. Spanish styles had a way of surviving for centuries in the Philippines. My guess would make it an eighteenth century statue of indifferent artistic merit. It was clearly apparent, though, that it was held in great affection by the townspeople.

The silver plaques all over the image were ex-votos. Naturally, this being an image of St. Lucy, most of the ex-votos were formalized representations of eyes. Some hundred of these were strung together forming multiple necklaces. Others were pinned on the robe of the image. Others were scattered on the base of the shrine or hung from its framework. Not all the ex-votos represented eyes. Almost every organ of the human body, more or less formalized and abstracted, was included. There were even a great many figurines representing entire human bodies. All the ex-votos were cut out of thin sheets of silver with designs engraved on them. I saw no etched designs.

Personally, I found the ex-votos of eyes the most fascinating. There being so many of them, it was possible to make

comparisons of style and skill. The basic design and its size remained constant throughout. It consists of two formalized eyes connected by a very abstract nose. The whole is about three inches long and at first glance looks very much like a silver butterfly.

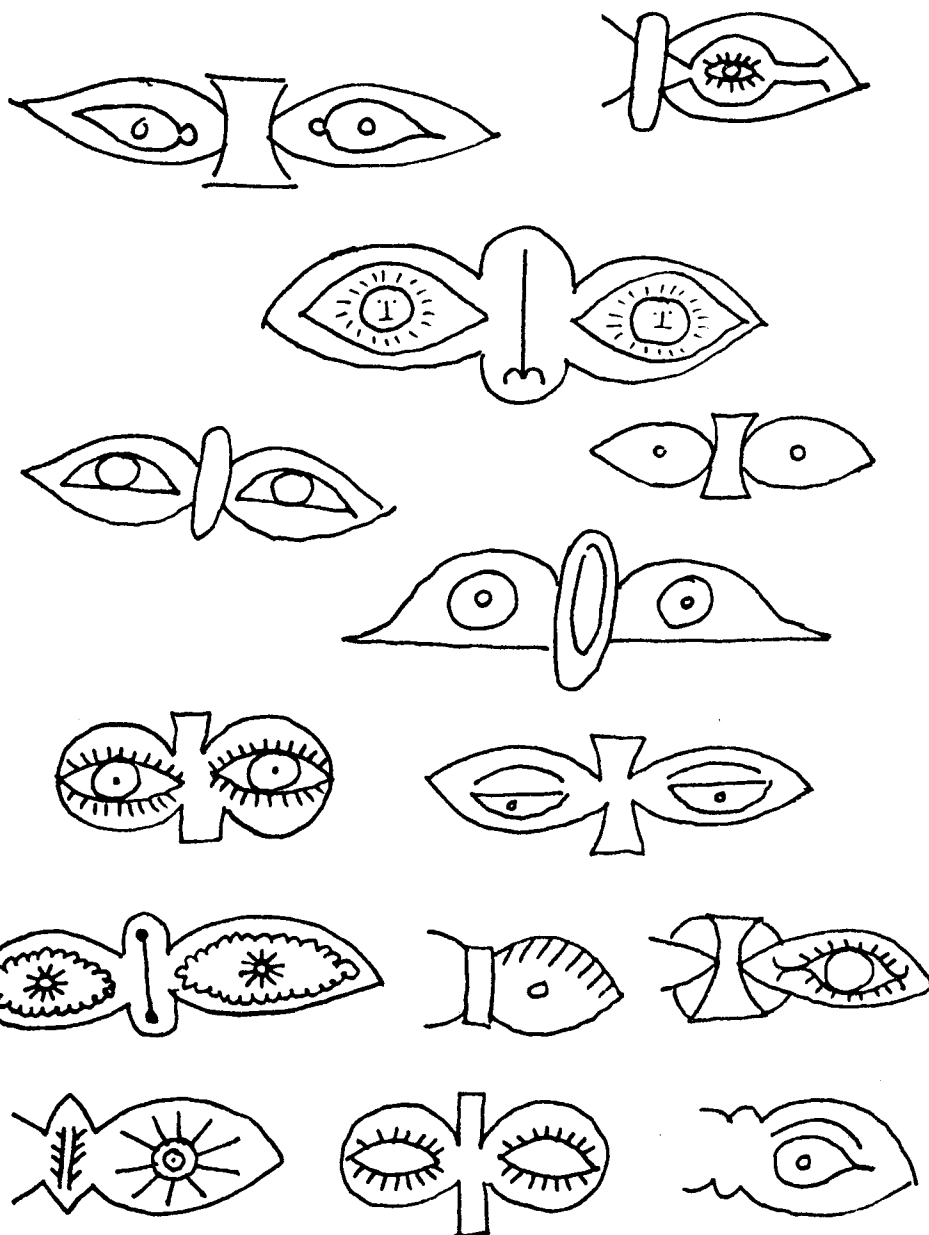
Within this basic pattern great variety exists. Apparently, nobody wanted his ex-voto to look exactly like anyone else's. The demands this made on the ingenuity of the craftsmen can be imagined. They produced every conceivable kind of eye, from the most naturalistic to the most abstract, going as far as the surrealistic substitution of a face or a sun for the iris. I sketched a few of the most striking designs. The sketches are more illuminating than any amount of description can hope to be. (Figures 1 to 14).

The ex-votos which represented limbs or human organs showed a similar ingenuity in stylization. I was particularly struck by one, apparently donated by somebody reprieved from a tubercular death. Its iconographical directness and economy demand, at the very least, a nod of admiration. (Figure 15).

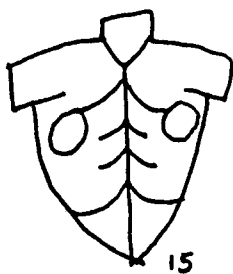
Of course, the human shapes drew the greatest comment from our group. Unfortunately, they were relatively scarce and it is impossible to generalize intelligently about them.

They included the primitive (Figs. 16, 21, 24), the stylized, with strange overtones of a possible forgotten native tradition (Figs. 18, 19), the elegantly abstract (Fig. 22) and a few examples where the artist had made an attempt to represent local costume with some accuracy (Figs. 17, 20, 23). The time range among costumes was quite remarkable, going all the way from the old "salakot" to the latest Polo shirt. We were particularly astonished to see a figurine, crudely executed and considerably tarnished, of a kneeling gentleman in curly wig, cassock and knee-breeches (Fig. 20). The only Oriental touch is the absence of shoes. Aside from this his costume is straight XVIIIth century and I based myself on the existence of this figurine, and others similarly archaic, in estimating the probable age of the Santa Lucia image.

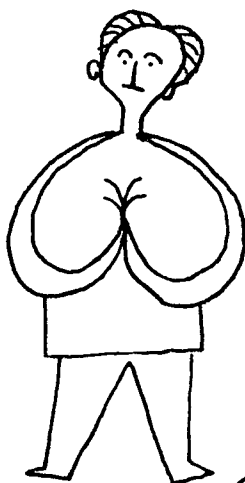
Santa Lucia - Ex votos



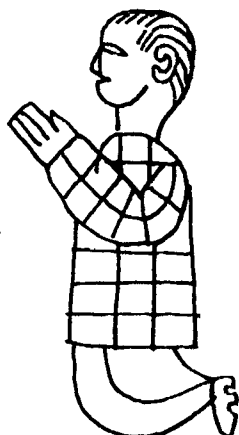
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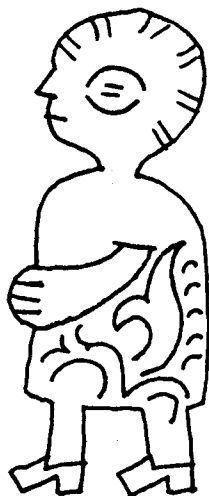
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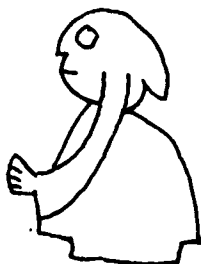
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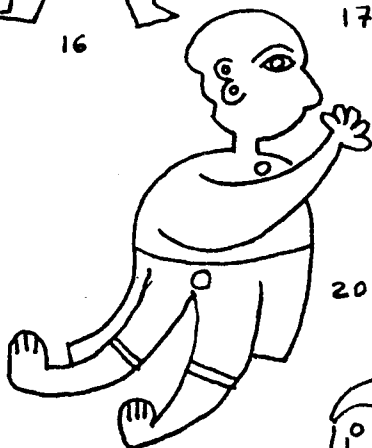
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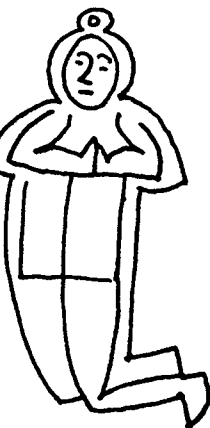
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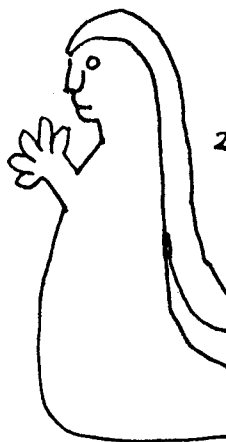
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Metal ex-votos are anything but rare in Spain and Latin America. This, however, is the first time I saw any in the Philippines. I do not know to what extent, if at all, they have been influenced by possible Latin American prototypes. The possibility of such an influence can never be discounted in the Philippines. At any rate, they certainly do not look like the Spanish metal ex-votos I have seen. To try and pinpoint where the difference lies is, for the present, beyond my powers.

I do not know if similar ex-votos exist in the Visayas or anywhere except in Northern Luzon. If they exist I would enjoy hearing about them. We found that they are not rare in Ilocos. We saw smaller collections in many other Ilocano churches. None compared in size or quality with the accumulation in Santa Lucia.

Apparently, the art of the ex-voto is still very much alive. We were told that two silversmiths in Vigan still make them. Naturally, we paid these silversmiths a visit. One was out on a trip. The other was quite surprised when I ordered a set of ex-votos. I asked him to do the usual subjects, principally to see what would come of it. The results, I regret to say, were disappointing. My batch of ex-votos had the timidly realistic appearance and generally weak design that characterizes "tourist art" everywhere. I suspect the silversmith was merely trying to comply with what he assumed I would like. I saw no designs quite as bad as these in any of the churches I visited. Some of the ex-votos in those churches must have been made by the same man. I can only conclude that artificially produced ex-votos tend to be as silly-looking as any other kind of functional object when artificially produced. I should never have ordered them in the first place. The whole affair, unimportant as it is, makes a good lesson in applied aesthetics.

I would like to make a quick final remark about the sketches that accompany this article. They are as accurate as I could make them under the circumstances. The circumstances included stifling heat, mosquitoes, copious perspiration, a very dark church and a crowd of small children who apparently found our group as fascinating as we found the ex-votos. I

would have preferred photographs to drawings but the church was too dark for that. Therefore, I offer these sketches with diffidence. They are not very accurate. They do not indicate relative size. They probably contain healthy doses of my own imagination. I can only hope, in self-defense, that they convey some of the excitement that I felt when I first saw the originals.