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## Filipino Artistic Expression

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# Filipino Artistic Expression

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FERNANDO ZOBEL

DURING A PERIOD OF INTENSE nationalism, such as the one that the Philippines are passing through at the present moment, it is natural and even healthy that a search be made in every direction to discover what can, with pride, be pointed at as being truly Filipino.

Similar explorations in other countries past and present have always wound up searching longest and most deeply into the arts, where the spirits of period and race remain preserved, to all appearances, with a clarity and purity seldom found in other fields.

And naturally, the arts in the Philippines are being searched for this element that can be called Filipino. Even the rules of our art competitions direct the judges to reserve so many points of their final score for "Filipino expression". The trouble is that, at this early stage of the search, we are not quite sure what we mean by the words. At least some of us are not, and we feel that it might be worth while to try and put our thoughts into some sort of focus. That is the purpose and the sole purpose of this essay. It is purely introductory.

In the first place we can decide where not to look at all, or at best only glance with haste. In my own case I shall have to glance with haste at music and literature. The visual arts are my field, and I fear the confusion that might arise if I take to wandering too far into less familiar territory.

There are other things I would like to strike out. I would like to strike out Philippine subject matter. This does not mean that I think it an undesirable thing. But here, I am not much concerned whether a painter paints a dish of apples or a carabao. That is precisely the point: not to care, not to be distracted by that which may be labelled, with too much ease, "Filipino". If the dish of apples is not more significant, *per se*, than the carabao, the reverse likewise follows. We should take time out to let this not-too-obvious truth sink in, because its absence leads to much of the bewilderment one senses in local artistic discussion.

I can give a reasonably concrete example of what I mean. Let us assume that two painters are equally skilled in the tools of their trade. The first, a Frenchman, paints a *dalaga* dressed in *Balintawak* costume and so forth. The second painter, a Filipino, paints a completely neutral subject; say, that dish of apples I mentioned before. The question arises: who showed Filipino expression? The cautious reader would immediately reply, "Show me the picture!" Not a bad answer, but we will have to ignore it, since our pictures are hypothetical. The point I am trying to make is that the Frenchman's picture, no matter how skilled, picturesque, accurate and observant, will most probably lack Filipino expression. Again the chances are that the Filipino, painting his apples—or *dalagas* in costume for that matter—probably does have this elusive quality that one calls Filipino. Why? Because he is one, of course.

Does it follow then that any Filipino wielding a brush has Filipino expression? I suppose that if he has expression, he has Filipino expression. It is as simple as all that, except that it doesn't answer what Filipino expression is; it just gives a hint as to where one might search for it. That is why I want to stay away from carabaos and *dalagas* and sunsets over Manila Bay. They confuse the issue. I grant that Filipino artists are bound to pick their subject matter from what surrounds them. That is good and proper, but we must suspect, for the purposes

of our search, anything that looks as if it might have "Souvenir of the Philippines" written on the back.

In the same manner we must be suspicious of the use of Philippine materials as a thing absolutely valuable in itself. *Piña* is no better and no worse than canvas. It is different. Used as the base for a painting it is not only different but unsound. The fact that we grow some of the most beautiful lumber in the world detracts nothing from the expressiveness of the Filipino who prefers to carve in Italian marble, if that medium is his medium. When it comes to Filipino expression it is the artist, not the medium, that must be "nepa".

The trouble with this picking and choosing is that it limits the field. Where does one search? The special difficulty of distinguishing subject matter from expression suggested above, makes it advisable to set aside for the moment the work of talented painters like Luna, Hidalgo and Amorsolo. Their Philippine themes may hamper the identification of Filipino expression. Where then shall we look and hope to find a better perspective?

One obvious answer would be to look into the primitive works of our past. Under ordinary circumstances this would be standard procedure. But circumstances in the Philippines are not ordinary. Our climate appears to be one of the most corrosive elements known to man. Its extreme heat and humidity, both alternately and combined, determine the accelerated decay of almost any material soft enough to be worked by man. This has had a curious effect on our folk arts: in brief, they are not built for permanence. I could cite example upon example—none more eloquent than the difficulty undergone by anyone who attempts to gather together a few such objects.

Another example may be useful for its symbolical import: the use of fern roots by our Mountain Tribes in carving their idols. Over most of the world primitive tribes have used the hardest materials they could find for their idols. Our own Igorots obviously gave up long ago. Instead of permanence they searched for, and found, maxi-

mum expressive impact. Fern roots have the lasting qualities, I suppose, of a bathroom sponge. But the mass of millions of tiny entwined rootlets makes for a texture that registers as blacker than the blackest of black pigments, and the terrifying intensity of these idols, relieved (or should we say underlined) by a few well-placed teeth, and by a living fern growing out of the top of the head, has to be experienced to be appreciated. Nobody would deny that much could be learned from this type of work, in quality second to none. But there are too few objects of this type left and we must be extremely cautious in judging the quality and output of primitive Filipino art by relying on the few and ill-preserved items that happen to have survived.

Of course, if we give up primitive art we must accept the fact that anything we find will have a more or less strong foreign influence. Not just a Spanish influence, but Balinese, Chinese, Mogul, Hindu and myriad others as well. This does not pose a real difficulty.

We can identify these influences and mentally withdraw them to arrive at our result. In fact the process I would like to follow can almost be expressed in a formula:

Object (minus) foreign influence/s (equals) residue, which is the Filipino expression we hope to find.

Except that we must find an artistic object, old (to give us perspective) and solid (to survive till our day), which we can use in our search.

Do we have any such? Naturally, we are surrounded by them.

When the first Catholic missionaries arrived in the Philippines they were faced with the immediate necessity of finding a place in which to worship. Camp altars were very well for the first few hectic years but those doughty men of God were not made of the stuff that would remain content with the open air or with flimsy materials whose beauty, we must fear, remained hidden to their busy brains. They wanted the best, which meant, of course, the same sort of thing they had left behind in Spain, or, to put it differently, churches built of stone.

And now comes the delightful part: those men were friars, not architects (with due allowance for the usual brilliant exceptions, like the younger Herrera who built San Agustín and Guadalupe). We suspect most strongly that they solved their problem with books, with copies of Vitruvius which, when found locally, attest by their deplorable condition to the avidity with which they were studied, and probably as well, they solved it with drawings and prints of Spanish and South American churches that suited their taste. After selecting their model they got hold of the best workmen they could find, Chinese and Filipino, and went ahead with the greatest of zeal and good intentions.

It was fortunate that this was the case, for it would appear that so long as their new churches looked somewhat like the models, and were strong enough to withstand earthquakes (a point that led to the development of a most original style of architecture), and so long, finally, as they were liturgically correct, the rest—decoration et al.—was obviously left to the builders. The builders in turn responded by interpreting their orders in their own terms with the result that we have before us a gorgeous and curiously satisfying combination of Spanish, Mexican, Chinese, Filipino and even Hindu all rolled into one. And since these works were rendered in stone, silver, ivory or the hardest wood obtainable, a good many of them have survived to our days.

Leaving aside the fact that this form of art is quite fascinating in itself, and almost virgin territory for the archaeologist and art historian, it brings to us an almost ideal field in which to search for our element of Filipino expression. Enough years have passed to permit us to discard, with almost scientific accuracy, the elements that are Spanish, Mexican, Chinese, etc. And the residuum, to paraphrase Gilbert and Sullivan, is exactly what we are looking for.

The next question is "what did you find?" To which I can only reply that I have barely started looking. Even a tentative listing of some of the findings that a group of us have made would require at least a short article in itself. It is best perhaps, for the scope of this one, to pose the question in the hopes that it may spur someone else into investigating what lies so near at hand.

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