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## **The Genre Sculpture of Graciano Nepomuceno**

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# The Genre Sculpture of Graciano Nepomuceno

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ALFREDO R. ROCES

**I**N the course of a conversation with a prominent Filipino painter and art scholar the subject turned to Filipino sculptors, and the name of Graciano Nepomuceno was mentioned. We were amused when our painter friend exclaimed wide-eyed that he thought "Nepomuceno dead these many years." Amusement turned to disbelief when further inquiries among other artists and art critics drew expressions either of total ignorance of the sculptor and his work, or the opinion that Nepomuceno is among the faithful departed.

The reason for this article is, therefore, two-fold. Our first and most important purpose is to reproduce in part a little known CATALOGO DE TIPOS FILIPINOS EN ESCULTURA, which consists of photographs of some of Nepomuceno's genre sculpture.<sup>1</sup> These figurines should delight any art lover and may be of some use to historians and sociologists as representing Filipino types of a bygone age. Our second reason is to bring about a juster appreciation of Nepomuceno and his art.

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<sup>1</sup> The full title as it appears on the cover is CATALOGO DE TIPOS FILIPINOS EN ESCULTURA TALLADA POR GRACIANO T. NEPOMUCENO ESCULTOR. Elizondo No. 88, Quiapo, Manila, I. F. It was published by L. Criebe of 101 San Sebastián. There is no text. The catalogue consists of mounted photographic prints. Our thanks are due to Dean Alejandro R. Roces, the owner of the catalogue, for permission to reproduce it in part and for his assistance and encouragement in the writing of this article.

Contemporary sculpture has a certain popularity here in the Philippines. There is a growing interest in Spanish colonial sculpture. But this leaves a middle ground forgotten or unknown. Mr. Nepomuceno's sculpture belongs to this middle ground. It is neither modern enough nor old enough for current tastes. Yet these figurines speak for themselves. It ought not to be difficult to develop a taste for them.

But there is no denying the fact that sculpture as a conscious art is in the doldrums among us. There is not much of an audience, few patrons and fewer sculptors. There are one or two artists—for instance, Mr. Napoleón Abueva—who are boldly experimenting in this art form. But it is enough to see the giant strides Philippine painting is making today to perceive what a poor relation sculpture has become by comparison.

There is no reason whatever for this lamentable state of affairs. We do lack good marble and adequate bronze-casting facilities. But we are rich in wood; we have no lack of talent; and a competent artist will always find in the things around him the appropriate medium to express himself. The Maranaos have developed in wood stylized forms of great distinction, such as the *sari manok* and the *kuda*.<sup>2</sup> The Ifugaos and Igorots carve figurines of their rice gods which are a delight to the eye. The colorful wooden masks called *moriones*, which the people of Marinduque fashion for use in their Lenten observances, have recently been called to the attention of the public.<sup>3</sup> The town of Paete in the province of Laguna is practically synonymous among us with wood-carving.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sari manok* is a stylized version of a cock, carved in wood. They are often seen on the roof tops of Lanao houses. They are brightly colored and sometimes reach a span of nine feet. *Kuda* is an abstract version of a chess piece, the knight; or, more accurately, a horse's head. It is carved in wood or carabao horn. The Muslim aversion to representational forms is probably the reason for the stylized quality of these figures.

<sup>3</sup> These masks, carved of *dapdap* wood, represent the Roman soldiers and Jews who played a part in Christ's passion and death. They are painted red and bearded. The etymology of the word is obscure; one possibility is that it comes from *morrión*, the Spanish word for helmet.

It is therefore in the (materially) more advanced regions that sculpture has fallen into disrepute. Why? One reason may be that in the past the biggest patron of sculpture in the Philippines was the Catholic Church. The most frequent commissions received by sculptors were for religious images. Many of these images were destroyed in the last war, but the void they have left is not being filled by new commissions. There seems to be little demand for religious images by local sculptors.

The only other important patron, the government, has done next to nothing for sculptors since the war. The patronage of educational institutions, business establishments and private persons is negligible. In a sense, the sculptors themselves have been to blame, for none of them has attempted any work of magnitude which will dramatize the importance of sculpture to our cultural life. They have devoted most of their time and energies to the easy and the clever.

But this is a digression. What I started out to do was to place Nepomuceno and his art in context—the dark and discouraging context of the present sad state of sculpture in the Philippines—in order to give the reader some idea of his strange and lonely position.

Graciano T. Nepomuceno is a bright-eyed, self-confident septuagenarian. His thin, wiry frame and greying hair belie his physical strength, acquired from years of wielding hammer and chisel. He is a small but sturdy-looking man who, however, walks with a marked limp. At 79, he has not lost any of his appetite for work.

“I was born in Trozo, Binondo,” he reminisced the other day, “in 1881. Trozo was one of the better residential sections of Manila then. It was the home of the more educated, and everyone spoke fluent Castillian. I studied at the Liceo de Manila. That’s where I took up painting under Miguel Zaragoza. I couldn’t agree with him on many points, and after a particularly exasperating argument, I left school and took up sculpture. I studied under Ciriaco Arévalo, the only Filipino sculptor to win a gold medal in Spain. His winning entry was

called 'El Baguio'. In the past I used to exhibit often. Oh yes, I have won many prizes and medals and such, but they are all gone—lost, or given away to friends who expressed an interest in them."

A pause; then: "These art judges are mostly incompetent." He waved towards a large wooden figure of Saint Michael Archangel trampling on the Devil, reminiscent of many of our *carroza* images. "I made that one some years ago because the Art Association sent representatives to my studio to get me to submit an entry for one of their exhibitions. But when I did submit it, they didn't want to exhibit it after all. There are no more good sculptors left. No one wants to do any real work. My business ventures haven't turned out so well either." The old gentleman went on in this vein, rather disconnectedly but with great vigor and emphasis.

Don Alfonso Ongpin, an art critic and historian of distinction,<sup>4</sup> has graciously supplemented the information we have been able to obtain from Mr. Nepomuceno himself. Don Alfonso distinguishes four periods in Nepomuceno's career as a sculptor. The first period covers the last years of the nineteenth century and the early 1900's, when Nepomuceno worked in collaboration with Bonifacio Arévalo, the sculptor and musician. In his second period he struck out on his own, working in wood and cement and producing chiefly ornamental pieces for building facades. The well-known architect, Arcadio Arellano, who was then remodelling a number of buildings in Manila, often employed him. In his third period he devoted himself to genre sculpture. The figurines of our CATALOGO belong to this period. Besides these pieces, which are in wood, he also worked in plaster-of-paris, his wife doing the painting. Portraiture characterizes his fourth and last period. Busts and bas-reliefs of distinguished personages figure among his most recent pieces, but he has also done miniatures and bas-relief reproductions of paintings.

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<sup>4</sup> Don Alfonso Ongpin has devoted a long and fruitful life to the study of Philippine art from its origins to Fernando Amorsolo. Like Nepomuceno, he deserves a great deal more credit and recognition than has hitherto been accorded him.

Nepomuceno's forte seems to be character delineation. Among his works the most remarkable in this regard are a miniature in bas-relief of President Quezon, a head of Christ now in Biñang, some characters from Rizal's *NOLI ME TANGERE* in wood, and the genre pieces. He has done some very fine pieces in ivory. When we last visited his studio, we found him hard at work on a high-relief portrait of Senator Recto in his favorite medium, molave.

We learned from the sculptor himself that the *tipos filipinos* photographically reproduced in the CATALOGO were commissioned by Mr. Bonifacio Arévalo. He took a year (1904) to carve the set. Governor-General Leonard Wood at one time offered five thousand pesos for the entire collection, but the offer was apparently refused. The pieces were eventually disposed of separately, with most of them being donated by Mr. Arévalo to a Belgian war relief fund during World War I.

All the figurines pictured in the CATALOGO are of *batikuling* wood, a material often used for religious images. It is among the whitest and softest of Philippine woods and has a grain quite easy to follow for carving. We have been able to examine a few of the original figurines. In some the wood is in its natural state; in others it has been coated with plaster-of-paris and then painted over.

The reproductions in the CATALOGO are actual photographic prints, not cuts. Four figurines appear on most of the plates. In the list below we number the figures from left to right as they appear on each plate, giving a brief description of each figure.

#### PLATE A

1. Woman carrying a cloth bundle. Height: 23 cm.
2. Woman with water jug. 27 cm.
3. Woman with garden rake. 25 cm.
4. Woman going to church. 23 cm.

#### PLATE B

5. Woman with basket. 23 cm.

6. Woman peddling candles. 25 cm. Note delicate features.
7. Woman peddler. 28 cm.
8. Woman coming home from market. 25 cm.

## PLATE C

9. Woman with milk jug. 28 cm.
10. Woman peddling fruit. 28 cm.
11. Woman peddling fruit. 28 cm.
12. Woman coming home from the harvest. 28 cm.

## PLATE D

13. Young dandy. 25 cm.
14. Chinese cloth peddler. 26 cm.
15. Woman after the bath. 23 cm. Note vinegar bottle.
16. Woman sweeping.

## PLATE E

17. Woman with large water jug. 28 cm.
18. Milkman. 26 cm.
19. Town policeman. 25 cm.
20. Farmer carrying sugar cane. 26 cm.

## PLATE F

21. Candy vendor. 26 cm.
22. Woman carrying breadfruit. 25 cm.
23. Young girl with jug. 25 cm.
24. Beggar 28 cm.

## PLATE G

25. Cockfighter. 16 cm.
26. Lady school teacher. 26 cm. Or student?
27. Seamstress. 19 cm.
28. Woman roasting corn. 14 cm.

## PLATE H

29. Fisherwoman. 25 cm.
30. Peasant woman. 27 cm.
31. Washerwoman. 28 cm.
32. Woman carrying flowers. 25 cm.

## PLATE I

33. *Tuba* vendor. 27 cm.
34. Water carrier. 26 cm.
35. Ditch digger. 26 cm.
36. Water carrier. 26 cm.

## PLATE J

37. Young man with books. 25 cm.
38. Ne'er-do-well with fruit. 26 cm.



PLATE D, No. 14





PLATE E, No. 18



PLATE M, No. 51





PLATE Q, No. 62

- 39. Boatman. 25 cm.
- 40. Hunter with dog. 27 cm.

PLATE K

- 41. American policeman. 26 cm
- 42. Cockfighter. 23 cm.
- 43. Cockfighter. 28 cm.
- 44. Cockfighter. 27 cm.

PLATE L

- 45. Man carrying firewood. 27 cm.
- 46. Milkman. 26 cm.
- 47. Chinese junkman. 28 cm.
- 48. Peddler of brooms. 29 cm.

PLATE M

- 49. Women pounding rice. 25 cm.
- 50. Chinese barber cleaning ears. 26 cm.
- 51. *Hermana de San Francisco*. 26 cm. The particular occupation of this woman was to announce a death by ringing a bell through the streets, and to offer prayers for the dead.
- 52. Washerwoman. 25 cm.

PLATE N

- 53. Children. 25 cm.
- 54. Cobbler. 19 cm.
- 55. Young student. 28 cm.
- 56. Woman carrying tobacco leaves. 19 cm.

PLATE O

- 57. Women playing *panguingue*. 19 cm.

PLATE P

- 58. Cockfighter. 25 cm.
- 59. Alpajol. 26 cm. Alpajol was a well known beggar-hermit of Manila in the early years of the century.
- 60. Fruit vendor. 28 cm.
- 61. Chinese *tajo* vendor. 27 cm. Note authentic paraphernalia.

PLATE Q

- 62. Town official, Spanish colonial period. 27 cm.
- 63. Peasant woman with child. 27 cm.
- 64. Cockfighter. 27 cm.
- 65. Policeman, American period. 27 cm.

PLATE R

- 66. Man roasting turkey (*lechón de pavo*). 16 cm.
- 67. Cockfighter. 16 cm.
- 68. Man with ice cream freezer. 16 cm.
- 69. *Guardia civil*. 28 cm.

## PLATE S

70. Man roasting pig. 16 cm.

## PLATE T

71. Bayard. 80 cm. Commissioned by an automobile company.

## PLATE U

72. Water carriers. High relief.  
73. Head of old woman. Bas-relief.  
74. Rural scene. High relief.

## PLATE V

75. Man with small boy. 30 cm.  
76. Woman with children. 26 cm.  
77. Old woman and child. 30 cm.  
78. Chinese barber with Chinese customer. 26 cm.

## PLATE W

79. Nipa house. Bas-relief.  
80. Head of old man. Bas-relief.  
81. Nipa house. Bas-relief.