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# The Spanish Churches of Central Luzon (I)

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RICHARD AHLBORN

**T**HE purpose of these three articles is to describe the structure and related decoration of architecturally significant Spanish churches extant in central Luzon, that is, the area extending between Lingayen Gulf and Tayabas Bay. However, before examining the more important churches of the central Luzon region, we must study the effect of early missionary efforts on the physical distribution of these religious edifices. It seems to me that location, as well as time, strongly influenced the formal development of colonial churches. The articles will consecutively deal with the missionary centers of Pangasinan in the north, Laguna to the east, and Manila itself. In concluding, I will survey the vital problems of preservation, use of material, and character of regional church style.

In this introduction, my particular concern is to re-emphasize the historic and artistic importance of missionary centers, especially in regard to distribution of major churches and their stylistic reliance on Spain. The intensity of the missionary zeal of the early friars can not be doubted if we accept reports such as that of Antonio de Morga (1609). Priests set out with the stated intention of developing religious communities and achieved a fair amount of success. As far as art history is concerned, these missionary centers illustrate the pebble-in-a-pool theory of cultural influence: the further from

the center of impact that a form occurs, the weaker is the reflection of the original. This does not mean, however, that the peripheral form is necessarily of inferior quality.

Scarcely a decade after the Spaniards arrived at Cebu in 1565, they were making their way north through the Visayas to the shores of Luzon. The familiar story of the founding of Manila need not be repeated here. For three and a quarter centuries of Spanish rule, Manila remained the religious center of the Philippines as a whole and the missionary center of central Luzon in particular. As early as the final quarter of the sixteenth century small groups of priests were fanning out from Manila on missionary expeditions. In at least two areas of central Luzon, they founded large secondary missionary centers: along the south coast of Lingayen Gulf and around the east shore of the Lake of Bai. Hence, it is in these three centers of concentrated religious activity that we may expect to find major building projects.

The relative isolation of settlements is a factor to be taken into account. Not only were provincial populations small groups seldom exceeding a few hundred, but barrios and towns were separated by geographic barriers of hills, forests, and roadless plains. Well into the nineteenth century transportation and communication depended primarily on water routes. Seas and bays connected shore dwellers; rivers and lakes linked coastal and inland villages. We may reasonably expect that it was in these accessible riverine towns that the early missions began to flourish. Thus, most of the early churches rose near Manila Bay, along the Pasig River, and around the Lake of Bai and the Gulf of Lingayen. On the other hand, there is a definite lack of large early churches in mountainous and inland areas such as southern Pangasinan, Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, eastern Zambales, northern Pampanga, southern Cavite and the eastern portions of Bulacan and Rizal.

Since the purpose of this paper is to describe the most important extant churches of central Luzon, the last named areas will not enter into our discussion. Not only was their development delayed until the nineteenth century, but poverty

and lack of labor and materials severely restricted structure and decoration. Capable artisans, if they appeared in these areas, would go elsewhere. For instance, the theory has been advanced that the tradition of splendid wood carving established in Paete (Laguna) must be credited to craftsmen emigrating from Pampanga. Nor should we expect skilled Chinese carvers to locate where they could find no scope for their talents. Hence, I feel justified in restricting our attention to the three major missionary centers of Manila, Laguna, and Lingayen and to their spheres of influence.

A centripetal scheme will be used to organize our discussion. We will work in on each of the three major missionary centers in the order of increasing architectural activity: first Lingayen, then Laguna and finally Manila. Lingayen and northern Pangasinan will be approached through the province of Zambales; Laguna through Batangas; and Manila through Cavite, Pampanga, Bulacan, Bataan, and Rizal.

#### ZAMBALES

For several centuries the coast of Zambales served only as a convenient passageway to north central Luzon and Lingayen Gulf. Spanish missionaries did not work their way up the shoreline from San Antonio to Santa Cruz until the early nineteenth century, when a few large churches were built. But when they finally did build, it was solidly and on a large scale.

Of extant churches in Zambales two deserve study because of their characteristic frontal design. The facades of the churches at Iba and Botolan display a simple, somewhat attenuated classical scheme in which a bulky belfry rests heavily on the apex of the pediment (Plate 1). In particular, Botolan's facade suffers from ungracefully flattened arches and circular windows breaking the entablature. The curving cornice lines of Iba make a more successful transition from the columnar verticals of the facade to the horizontal mass of the belfry. A certain nervous quality is given its design by the 3-2-2-3 column grouping, the small niches and the compression of the upper level. On the whole, however, both facades display esthe-

tic weakness by classical standards. Stone blocks quarried from coastal layers make up the fabric of these two churches as well as that of the major church structure at Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz possesses what is probably the largest church in Zambales. Though not high, it achieves interior spaciousness by a single nave measuring 22 by 55 meters. The adjoining friary or *convento* is of comparable size. On the facade of the church stone blocks are massed in four square pilasters which boldly rise through the three traditional horizontal divisions of nave, clerestory and transept. Rigid frontal symmetry is further preserved by the balanced placement of six niches. The general impression is one of simple, massive classicism.

#### PANGASINAN

Turning now to the province of Pangasinan, the center of missionary activity in north central Luzon, we notice two differences from church building in Zambales. First, there are many more large churches still standing; secondly, building material is often brick instead of stone. For centuries the banks of the Agno and smaller streams in the area provided suitable clay for pottery and, since Spanish times, for brick. It is not surprising that the early padres—first Augustinian and, by the second decade of the eighteenth century, Dominican—made use of this clay in their churches. Brick was fired in the thin Spanish shape of Roman origin. Samples measured at Salasa average 28 by 14 by 3.5 centimeters, an 8:4:1 ratio. The two exceptions to this rule of the major churches being in brick are Santo Niño Jesús in Mabini and San José in Burgos, towns relatively far inland.

Mabini's stone religious edifice (Plate 2) may be stylistically credited to the late nineteenth century. Rounded pilasters extend up through the triangular pediment and in turn are flanked by round windows. Nineteenth-century classical revivals permitted such treatment of antique elements. Measuring eighteen and a half meters, the facade elements of design seem to crowd in toward the base of the pediment. Finally, the central portion of the front projects in a pseudo-

Baroque fashion. With its compound of related buildings to the right, Mabini may be considered an important church of the north central missions.

Other significant Pangasinan churches include brick structures in Burgos, Alaminos, Bugallon (Salasa), Lingayen, Binmaley, and Dagupan. The effort and time involved in missionary labor is typified by the facade of the Burgos church (Plate 3). Original designs for Burgos' San Isidro Labrador obviously called for a pediment and towers, all of which still await completion.

Setting the standard for the Lingayen-Dagupan diocese is the church of San José Patriarca in Alaminos. Three features found at Alaminos may be cited as common regional characteristics. We find 1) massive brick surfaces, 2) impressive multi-tiered bell towers or *campanarios*, and 3) simple facades accented with pairs of thin, round pilasters. Moreover, the total width of the Alaminos facade and tower is 26 meters—an average for Pangasinan churches. The interior presents two elements repeated elsewhere in the Philippines: 1) richly carved wooden corbels which support roof beams at the wall, and 2) a horseshoe-shaped choir which hugs the entry wall. The church at Alaminos further reveals two somewhat unique regional features: nave walls and salient buttresses which thicken half way down (see Plate 4), and pediment wings which swoop inward forming powerful scrolls.

Our Lady of Lourdes in what is now the small barrio of Bugallon-Salasa is one of the finest churches in Pangasinan. To the left stands the friary and an extensive brick-walled garden measuring over 75 by 150 meters. In the rear, low, oven-shaped buttresses press against the rear wall, a feature found repeated only at Labrador. Unfortunately only the lowest tier of the magnificent free-standing bell tower remains. Inside the church an inverted horseshoe-shaped choir loft projects into the nave forming a three-arched entry hall. Over the choir extend now functionless double corbels (Plate 5) measuring 116 by 74 by 23 centimeters in length, height, and width.

Deeply cut floral patterns make these Salasa corbels among the finest wood carving extant in Pangasinan.

In Dagupan the church, whose facade was remodeled in 1895, is flanked by a five-tier bell tower of the early nineteenth century. Men of similar taste seem to have designed this facade and that of Salasa described above. In neither are the three horizontal divisions clearly defined, and in both cases groups of pinnacles and scrolls climb along a diagonal of uninspired pediments.

More exciting than the preceding churches are those of Tres Reyes in Lingayen and of Our Lady of the Purification in Binmaley. Each church has a relatively simple, renovated facade which contrasts sharply with the sculptured, six-tier bell towers. Where the pagoda-like octagonal tower of Lingayen gains power by its multiple cornices and ribbed summit, the decorative strength of Binmaley's tower rises from an increasing elaboration of each storey, a complex grouping of classical designs, and the huge lion finials on the third tier. Of the two, Binmaley holds more architectural interest (Plate 6). The original church was begun around 1700<sup>1</sup> by Dominican priests. Today the body extends fully 90 meters and the masses of transept, apse, chapel, and vestry boldly adjoin.

In reviewing the churches of the Lingayen missionary center we do not find close stylistic grouping. But individually several of the buildings display esthetic value, and collectively they establish the persistence of missionary efforts in north central Luzon.

#### BATANGAS

A second and more important missionary center than that of Pangasinan lies to the southeast of Manila. This area is established by an arc around the eastern shore of the Lake of Bai whose southern tip joins an opposing arc on the southern shore

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<sup>1</sup> The church still possesses baptismal records going back to 1674-1698.

of Lake Taal, in short, the region of southern Quezon, Laguna, and Batangas.

Arriving about the same time as their brother missionaries in the north, Augustinian priests began their labors in Batangas in the early seventeenth century. No existing major churches, apparently, were erected before the middle of the nineteenth century, though small stone structures had certainly been built earlier. The mid-nineteenth century date, moreover, coincides with what was apparently a religious revival which prompted literally hundreds of rebuilding, renovating, and repainting jobs.<sup>2</sup> Studying two churches of this region will furnish ample evidence of the enthusiasm and building habits of the Augustinian missionaries in Batangas. Our two examples are the churches at Taal and Lipa.

The edifice of Taal (Plate 7) is rendered in a massive, simplified style of classic revival. Its architect, Luciano Oliver, finished the huge building except for the corner towers in 1858. Measuring over 90 by 43 meters, Taal is unquestionably one of the largest churches in the islands. The facade is divided into five vertical rectangles by two tiers of six pairs of Ionic and Corinthian columns. This design of bulky, squared symmetry, along with the continued absence of the corner towers, gives the church at Taal the appearance of an English government building. Inside, however, the spacious three-aisle nave whose six bays lead down to a wide, domed transept encourages a feeling of religious awe (Plate 8).

The second Batangas church, a cathedral now, was rebuilt late in the nineteenth century, from 1865 to 1894, by the Reverend Benito Varas. Though designed at a later date than Taal, the facade of Lipa is styled in the freedom of an indigenous classicism. Large semi-circular arches break through the clerestory and pediment cornices. To the left a bell tower of late Renaissance strength rises six storeys to balance the friary on the right. The tower design may be a re-

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<sup>2</sup> Félix Huerta, *ESTADO GEOGRAFICO, TOPOGRAFICO, ESTADISTICO, HISTORICO-RELIGIOSO DE LA SANTA Y APOSTOLICA PROVINCIA DE SAN GREGORIO MAGNO...* Manila, 1865.



miniscence of an earlier design when the church stood on the shore of Lake Bombon until the eruption of Taal Volcano in 1754. Today domed Lipa shares the extreme length of Taal but measures less than half her width.

#### CENTRAL QUEZON

Though now largely replaced by later structures, the churches in central Quezon have well-documented early histories. At the same time that Batangas was being developed by Augustinians, two Franciscan fathers, Juan de Plasencia and Diego de Oropesa, entered southern Quezon. This area, then known as Tayabas, therefore knew missionary effort as early as 1578 and saw the building of some very early churches. Four of Tayabas' most significant churches were stone structures erected before 1650. The town of Tayabas raised its first stone chapel in 1600, Lucban followed with a structure built between 1630 and 1640, Sariaya began to build from 1632 to 1640, and Atimonan completed her religious edifice in 1643. Unfortunately none of these churches stand today. Dutch and Moro raids, fire, and earthquakes necessitated the frequent rebuilding of churches and even the moving of the geographic site of towns. Sariaya, for example, was moved in 1631, and again in 1703, 1731, and 1743. But though no really early church is preserved, Father Huerta gives adequate descriptions of their history and design.

It has just been pointed out how churches suffered from man-made as well as natural calamities throughout the Spanish period. Yet, according to Father Huerta, the missionaries never ceased trying to preserve and strengthen their churches. In 1653 the nipa roof on Lucban's friary and church, a rather small building of only 180 by 26 Spanish feet,<sup>3</sup> was replaced with tile; and in 1738, after a fire five years earlier, all walls were raised an additional three feet. Similarly, after an earthquake the church of Atimonan was repaired so carefully be-

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<sup>3</sup> All measurements given in feet are taken from Father Huerta and indicate the Spanish foot of 10.96 inches. The *vara* or Spanish yard is proportionately shorter—32.9 inches. My measurements are in meters.

tween 1683 to 1696 that Huerta considered it to be the "most solid in the Philippines". Walls were rebuilt on twelve-foot-thick foundations of "proper stone" carried in for nearly 50 kilometers, and of lime washed for a year to remove all saltpetre. Atimonan's achievement is even more remarkable when we note that there were only 79 taxpayers at the time. Father Huerta was apparently describing the support for the choir immediately inside the entry when he recorded that "above [the portal] the cornice holds a strong beam of molave on which rest and are attached twenty-four spanners."<sup>4</sup> Of the church at Mauban, Huerta furnishes us with precise documentation. The first church was of rubble work, *mampostería*, but by 1773 construction was carried out in stone. Measuring 120 by 36 feet from portal to transept, this church had a facade which displayed Corinthian columns and a five-tier bell tower. Major repairs were undertaken between 1836 and 1845 primarily to mend split walls and the friary. The diligent Father José María del Frengal completed repairs, painting, and mortaring as well as a new choir, pulpit and three *retablos*.<sup>5</sup> Though further altered today, these churches remain symbols of perpetual missionary efforts.

#### LAGUNA

As early as 1578 Spanish religious introduced an intense missionary program in the easily accessible towns along the shore of the Lake of Bai. Though Augustinians came first, by the seventeenth century Franciscans dominated the area. Majayjay can trace its founding by Spaniards back to 1571. And by 1589 Lumbang, center of all Laguna missionary activity, could boast the first stone church built by the Franciscans in the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> All the other sixteen towns, Father Huerta states, had at least nipa and bamboo churches by the early 1600's. From this evidence Laguna is clearly one of the earliest and most highly developed missionary centers in the Philippines.

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<sup>4</sup> Huerta, p. 245.

<sup>5</sup> Huerta, p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> Huerta, p. 122.

Wherever used, impermanent building materials such as bamboo and nipa, mentioned above, or bamboo and wooden planks, did not long satisfy priest-designers. Building in stone was attempted at Lumbang before 1590, and the skill in masonry which Filipinos learned from the Spaniards was immediately exploited. In fact, a native named Burlon, who was called to the attention of the local priest by Governor de Vera, supervised construction of the Lumbang church. Besides stone, brick was employed, but to a much more limited extent. By 1690, however, Pagsanhan had a brick church. Here too construction was directed by a non-European, Miguel Guam-Co, a converted Chinese.<sup>7</sup> A governor's decree granted Pagsanhan tax exemption for four years in order to focus funds on her church-building program. Construction of the edifice actually lasted from 1711 to 1730 and costs mounted to 26,000 pesos.<sup>8</sup> A general preference for stone was established by the middle of the eighteenth century. At this time, for example, brick found only minor use in the building of the church at Nagcarlang. However, splendid hard woods were used in roofs and choirs throughout the Spanish era. Corrugated iron replaced wood on roofs by the mid-1800's. Thus materials, like style, suffered downgrading in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Building procedure common to all areas was practised in Laguna. Church construction in the Philippines was originally provided for by the 1579 royal decree which demanded of each town free labor and a church tax, known as *sanctorum*.<sup>9</sup> Permission to build a church was granted by government license from Manila on the request of each town. For Laguna Father Huerta cites existing licenses approved in 1586 to build a stone church at Majayjay, and in 1599, one at Mabitac and one at Pila. Construction was often carried out with the assistance of non-Spanish artisans and made possible by yearly tax exemptions. In short, churches in Laguna as elsewhere

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<sup>7</sup> Huerta, p. 161.

<sup>8</sup> PHILIPPINE HISTORICAL MARKERS (Manila, 1958), p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> Cited from Blair and Robertson by D. Villanueva in "Philippine Churches," COMMENT (1958), p. 77.

were the result of ecclesiastic motivation, government encouragement, and local participation.

Stylistically, Laguna churches present a simplified native classicism in their renovated facades which adjoin earlier bell towers of more dramatic European design. In the cases of Lumbang, Lilio, Mabitac, and Santa Cruz, a gigantic three-tier tower dominates verticals created on the facade by round pilasters. And except for Lilio, these churches possess a highly developed side entry, a feature found sporadically throughout the islands.

Sharing the side-entry feature is another Laguna church, that at Pakil (Plate 9). Here, however, the bell tower has been de-emphasized and closely integrated with the recently plastered facade, which is 20 meters wide (Plate 10). Father Huerta describes what was apparently an earlier tower of Corinthian columns supporting Ionic niches.<sup>10</sup> Differing from the four Laguna churches mentioned earlier, Pakil's frontispiece, less delicately designed, shows heavily articulated classical columns and cornices accented by shallow carving on the stone. Within, this floral bas-relief pattern is continued on the pillars of the sanctuary triumphal arch (Plate 11).

Among the Laguna churches described by Father Huerta that of San Pablo stands out most clearly.<sup>11</sup> In 1796 when the town was transferred from Augustinian to Franciscan jurisdiction, the latter built fine brick structures including church, friary, and parish house. At the same time the cemetery was provided with a "beautiful chapel with niches on every side" and with a stone entry porch or *varandillaje*. In 1840 all the woodwork was renovated.

No church in Laguna, however, excels Paete in carved ornament (Plate 12). As indicated by the Tagalog root, *paet* (chisel), of the name Paete, the town has a long tradition of skillful carving. Father Huerta states that "its inhabitants commonly take up cabinet-making [joining and carving] the

<sup>10</sup> Huerta, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Huerta, pp. 176-177.



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

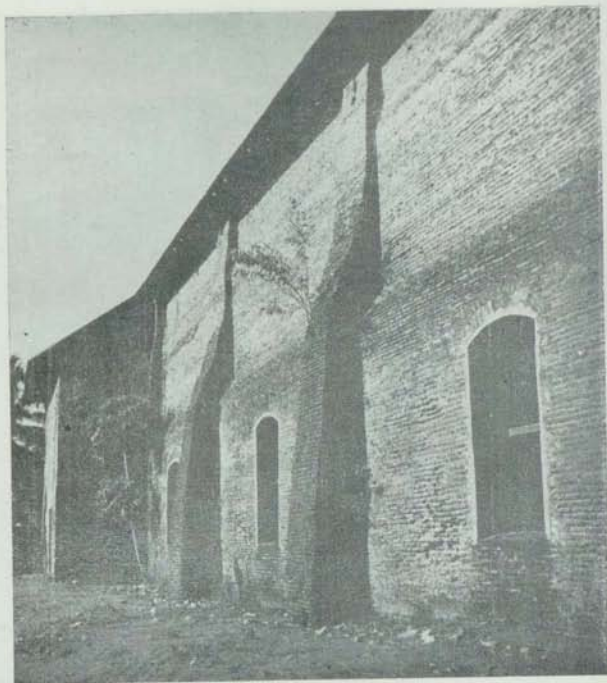


Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6

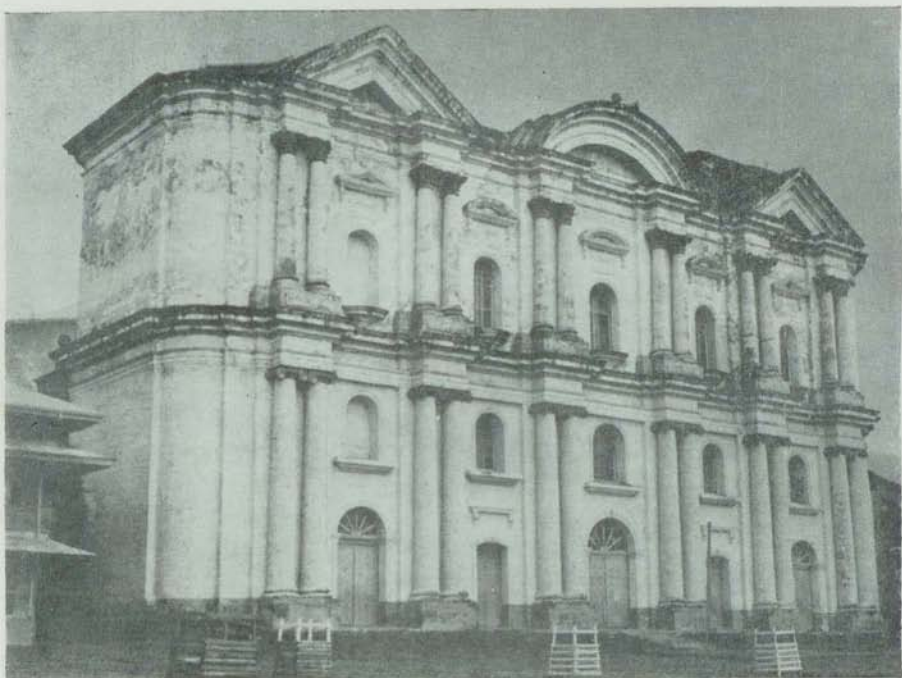


Plate 7



Plate 8





Plate 9

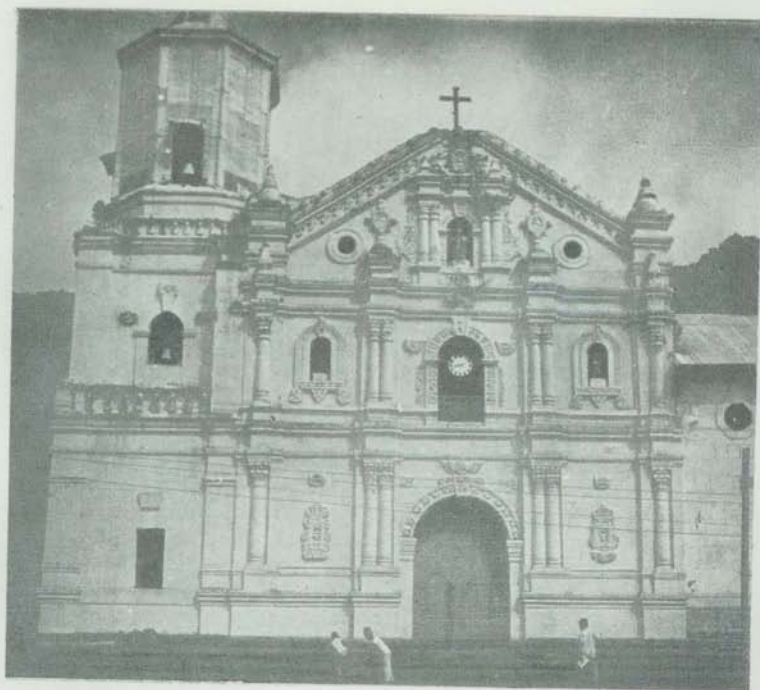


Plate 10



Plate 11



Plate 12

products of which supply the capital [Manila] and a large part of the provinces."<sup>12</sup> Throughout the history of the church the woodcarving skill of Paete's inhabitants was called on. Eugenio Quesada testifies that townspeople willingly worked on the original stone structure erected in 1717 under Fray Francisco de la Fuente. And he carefully points out that the large central Santiago panel in the facade was added in 1840.<sup>13</sup> This combining of elements at various dates has produced what classicists would consider a confused composition. Yet the carefully repeated scroll motifs on pediment and tower, the unique diagonal vine relief on the columns, and the fanciful handling of classical Renaissance designs, places Paete's Saint James among the most significant indigenous products of Spanish-Philippine art.

Two final elements are typical of Laguna churches. First, many churches—for example, those in Lumbang, Mabitac, Paete, Pakil and Santa Cruz—have elaborately designed entries on one side of the nave. This detail, noted earlier, may have been transplanted from Europe where the facade portal was often reserved for state occasions. Secondly, interior ceilings, which frequently called for repair by the mid-1800's, were wooden barrel-shaped forms. In fact, Father Huerta was sufficiently impressed by the unique stone vault put up at Pañgil in 1711 to record the fact carefully.<sup>14</sup> Wooden ceilings were common in Moorish Spain and were employed there after 1492 in Mudéjar construction. But the Philippine form is both structurally and decoratively different from any Spanish type, being a flatter, more simple arch. In short, both the side entry and the wooden ceiling seem to be native interpretations of European models.

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<sup>12</sup> Huerta, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> PAETE (Manila, 1956), p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Huerta, p. 133.