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Fernando Zóbel de Ayala

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Fernando Zóbel de Ayala y Montojo (August 27, 1924 – June 2, 1984) was one of the principal actors in the post-war Philippine art scene. In commemoration of his birth centennial, the journal reprints three articles by him and an excerpt from an interview. “Art in the Philippines To-day” traces the roots of aesthetic tendencies in the Philippines. In “From Luna to Luz” Zóbel remarks on the contemporary art scene, including its economics, and stating that while the debate between the moderns and the conservatives has been settled in favor of the former, the painter can profit from studying the past masters. “The Contributions of F. Amorsolo” is Zóbel’s appreciation of his early mentor, even while he himself belonged to the modern movement. The interview excerpt has Zóbel explaining the creative process of his abstractions. —*The Editor*

Fernando Zóbel de Ayala

ART IN THE PHILIPPINES TO-DAY*

A distinguished visitor to the Philippines not so very long ago asked one of the local artists what was the basis for modern art in the Philippines. The artist answered: “Very simple: *Life* magazine.”

This probably apocryphal flippancy explains a good many things about art in the Philippines to-day, things that are both pleasant

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and unfortunate. Our country, of all countries that once lived under Spanish rule, had perhaps the weakest native artistic tradition on which to rely. Several centuries of Mohammedan rule had discouraged pictorial representation of any sort, and a brutally damp climate had determined an architectural style that was extremely functional in terms of comfort, but extremely fragile in construction. The demand for architectural permanence, which alone can create a conscious tradition and a sophisticated style, came with the Spanish friars who dotted the myriad islands with churches and convents and who demanded solidity for the House of God. The fashion in which this demand was met, and the way in which it resulted in an original and highly fascinating Philippine style, lies outside of the range of this article. Suffice it to say that it was primarily a church art, and that it was abandoned and almost forgotten with the wave of secularism that overcame the intellectual life of the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century.

The artistic vacuum left by this intellectual secularism was filled by importing taste directly from abroad. The Philippines, like America at the same period, saw its artists going to Paris, whether physically or spiritually, to learn "how to be artistic," and their canvasses either in the style of Bouguereau or of the lesser impressionists still exist as testimonials to the technical skill and spiritual barrenness of the period. The new nationalism of the land found its inadequate expression by dressing the Parisian models in Philippine costume and by translating the stock view of the Bois de Boulogne into a Philippine landscape through the rather mechanical substitution of palms for oak trees. The architects followed suit by building in a variety of imported and rather uncomfortable styles, though in their case climatic conditions and the whims of their clients led to a series of curious architectural developments that led to a sort of spurious originality, the most notable of which resulted in the eye-splitting masses of architectural frosting irreverently but accurately baptized "Sugar Baron Baroque" by a younger and more critical generation of builders.

This state of affairs was tolerated and even celebrated until the arrival of the US troops in 1945. A few lonely spirits had attempted to break away from the conventional art forms long before that date, and helped to break ground for to-day's new activity; but it was the arrival of the delivering citizen-army, with its numbers of artists in uniform, that provided the intellectual climate for a period of experiment that is still growing. I do not pretend to say that these unwilling soldiers taught Filipino painters how to paint. What they did was to provide, in some cases, an example, but even more importantly, they provided an audience: a sophisticated audience who searched for things they could call Filipino and who by-passed the rather tiresome productions of the neo-Parisian school. Of course, the average GI looking for souvenirs found his souvenirs, but his influence was negligible in comparison to the soul-searching provoked by the mere handful of his excited companions. American periodicals arrived in quantity, reflecting the growing interest of the US public in artistic expression, and these often crude, often silly, but invaluable reproductions were eagerly studied and analyzed as signposts pointing toward a means of Philippine self-development in the arts.

The usual drawbacks of a powerful artistic influence from abroad were soon evident; uncritical acceptance and even imitation, a lack of foundation for certain distortions and mannerisms, but on the whole its modern influence had one great beneficial effect in that its message pointed toward individual expression rather than toward a model to be followed. This lesson did come through, however shakily, and an amazingly short time elapsed before Filipino painters and architects searching themselves and their own country were producing works of real originality, determined by the life around them.

It is never easy to pin-point the nature of creativeness, or to tell in which way an original art form is original. I would hazard the guess that in the present school of painting in the Islands, what strikes the newcomer most strongly is the use of color in many pictures, the

blinding brilliance of which is likely to puzzle and even irritate the observer, especially the sophisticated observer, who is apt to object that these juxtapositions of maximum intensities only cancel each other out. In defense, I can only quote one of our painters who replied "look out of the window." There was the Philippine sky, not blue, but almost colorless in its brilliance (somewhat like taking a good look at a naked light bulb), and below a jungle and tangle of maximum greens, scarlets, oranges, purples, all jostling for attention and cancelling each other out much as described. Perhaps the boldest and most successful experimenter in this type of coloring is Hernando Ocampo. But, of course, color is not everything, nor is it used in the same manner by all our artists. The work of Arturo Luz, for instance, is painted within a somber and neutralized range of colors, but this limitation, paradoxically, only seems to reinforce the strength and very genuine brilliance of his compositions.

The architects, too, after their first burst of uncritical enthusiasm for everything that "looked modern," have calmed down a little and have begun to design in terms of their environment. The flat roof and the great expanse of glass, both modern mannerisms and highly unsuitable to the Philippine climate, are slowly being replaced by devices born of native ingenuity, and though it is hard to point at any single building as an embodiment of a new and functional Philippine style, there can be no doubt that such a style is being created little by little, with every passing day, and its elements scattered throughout the city can be counted even now.

At any rate, what strikes me as being the really interesting point concerning both architects and painters is their tremendous activity. The last weeks of the late war destroyed approximately four-fifths of the city of Manila. Hundreds of new buildings have been built and many hundreds more will be built in the near future. These buildings have been ordered in every style familiar to man, but many clients have had the good sense to let their architects do a good deal of the planning. And

these new buildings with their clean bare walls have invited the purchase of paintings. Original paintings in the Philippines are relatively cheap, and large reproductions almost non-existent, with the result that our local painters sell their works with a steadiness that might well draw envy from all but the most publicized American painters. Of course, as I have mentioned, the prices are low, and with a single exception, all the young Philippine painters make a living out of something besides painting, much as their American contemporaries do. In brief, what Mr. Lavanoux has, for many years, called “the discipline of a commission” certainly exists in the Philippines, though not to the striking extent demonstrated in Mexico and other Latin American countries.

One of the most engaging results of this activity is a deliberate exploration by architects and painters of the long-neglected native crafts and materials. This search has been made exceedingly difficult by the relatively small number and the perishable nature of these indigenous products, and by the fact that the National Museum, which owns a splendid collection of such articles, was demolished during the last war and is at present housed in totally inappropriate quarters, cramped and ill-lighted and burdened by a chronic lack of funds. The artists themselves have somewhat made up for this sad state of affairs by their mutual friendliness and the delightful freedom with which they share their discoveries and their criticism of each other’s work. The criticism, as I have witnessed it, can be pretty harsh at times, but it seems to be accepted with a minimum of ruffled feelings. This struck me as being both pleasant and unusual.

So much for the conscious artists. It would be a shame to write about Philippine art without mentioning the run-of-the-mill inhabitants of the country, all of whom seem to be fascinated by anything that looks like paint, and many of whom still construct their dwellings with their own bare hands, using bamboo, various grasses, wood, and tin as their basic construction materials. As I implied before, this popular art, because of the climate, is by nature impermanent. But

its impermanence does not detract from the whimsical and gorgeously-hued production of kites, bamboo triumphal arches, ice-cream wagons, horse-drawn carriages, and such. One of the most amusing of these forms of expression are the "jeepnies" that rattle around Manila's streets; converted jeeps blessed with a kind of Victorian superstructure designed to hold some eight uncomfortable passengers and painted with the gaudiest, most elaborate designs suggested by the ingenuity of the owner.

At this point, it might be well to pause and ask "how does the Church profit from all this?" My answer is likely to be embarrassed but hopeful silence.

The final single effort in religious art, as far as the Philippines are concerned, is unquestionably the Church of Saint Joseph in Victorias, Negros. Fortunately, its construction had private backing, or the experiment might never have been carried out. Many of the artists who executed this work are Americans, but the muralist, Alfonso Ossorio, belongs to a family long connected with the Philippines, and the Filipino painters consider him one of their own. Ossorio and Adé Béthune cleverly made use of local workmen to carve the rather imposing statuary of the Church. (Antonin Raymond was the architect. The church was described and illustrated in the August, 1951, issue of *Liturgical Arts*.) Unfortunately, the building is located on a relatively remote island, and its effect on our artists has been primarily one of morale, something to the effect of "See, it can be done!" The public, after the inevitable first shock wore off, have come to like the church, and though reservations of all kinds are still to be heard, the Victorias church is being increasingly photographed and discussed in Philippine periodicals, and many people who have never seen it, and probably never will, speak of it with pride and affection as something of their own. However, the experiment has not been repeated on the same scale, though I cannot help believing that its influence has struck deep and may lead to some interesting future developments. Most of our new

churches have been built in styles reminiscent, however inadequately, of the buildings that stood in their place before. In some, though too few, cases, the clients have allowed themselves a certain amount of freedom in design and have produced buildings that are simple and clean, if not overpoweringly imaginative. The most interesting project on the books is the building of a new church for the Jesuit Ateneo de Manila, preliminary plans for which appear in this issue. Construction has been considerably delayed by shortage of funds, but the plan is a bold one and the church promises to be very striking. Very little thought appears to have been given to the interior decoration of this church, as this is felt to be a little premature at present, but the younger painters are very excited over the possibility of having a chance to participate in this project.

Aside from this, there is little to report. It pains the local artist to see the expensive importation of third-rate items from Spain, Italy, and Belgium when they would be only too happy to supply original works of art at a roughly equivalent cost. I *mean* that last part about cost, which does not hold true in other parts of the world. Without question, art is relatively inexpensive in the Philippines, and duties are prohibitively expensive. What more can I say?

The next few years should see an astonishing artistic growth in our country. It would be hard to call it a renaissance because I honestly do not believe that anything approaching the present artistic exuberance has ever been seen here before. As a Catholic, I can only hope that at least a part of this splendid effort will go into enriching the House of God.