

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## **On A History of Philippine Art: Art in the Philippines**

Review Author: Fernando N. Zialcita

*Philippine Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (1965): 384–387

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

literature are only too well aware of. Professor Casper's volume of critical essays will be welcomed by them as a gem to be treasured.

One may sometimes differ with Professor Casper's views regarding particular authors or particular works. On the whole, however, Professor Casper's criticism is bound to exert a healthy influence on both the writer and the reader of Philippine literature. It is surely an encouraging sign that Professor Casper thinks highly enough of Philippine writers to apply to their works criticism of the most exacting kind. Relevance of subject matter, soundness of insight are factors that Professor Casper takes into consideration. But he refuses to accept content as a substitute for craft. It is Professor Casper's willingness to subject Philippine literature to close, formal analysis that makes discussion profitable and disagreement possible.

EDILBERTO DE JESUS, JR.

## ON A HISTORY OF PHILIPPINE ART

ART IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Dominador Castañeda. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Office of Research Coordination, 1964. 147 pp. Illustrations, 259 pp.

In a country that refuses to recognize its artistic heritage, one welcomes almost any book that attempts to shed some light on this neglected field. Dominador Castañeda's *Art in the Philippines* must certainly be the towering exception. To wander beyond the zealous praises of the Roces brothers and beyond the table of contents with its impressive classification of local architecture, painting, and sculpture into three periods: the Spanish, the American, the Modern, is to stray into a welter of grammatical errors, misspellings, lapses of thought, sloppily organized chapters, endless opinions and subjective criticism, unintended humor ("Destruction almost always is a direct result of war"), biographical chit-chat.

Castañeda's chapters on churches of the Spanish Era set the tone for the rest of the book. Though he discusses churches by regions, he leaves out as large and individual a geographical unit as Bicol. Or else, he designates a rather broad term, "Northern Churches", for a section that treats of Ilocos without the merest mention of Cagayan. He remains mysteriously silent on the reasons that prompted him to group churches of Pampanga and Bulacan under a single heading, though earlier he had at least mentioned characteristics common to Ilocano churches: nearly all of them are in "barn style" [sic], of large dimensions, and of a squat silhouette. Nor does he explain why he notes this church rather than that; San Miguel de

Mayumo rather than the ignored but more splendid Calumpit; San Jose, Batangas, rather than what was intended to have been the grandest of colonial churches: Taal.

More regrettable than this haphazard procedure and in fact the book's final failing is the author's refusal to lay hold on the art of a church facade or of any object. He drifts from church to altar ornament to genre carving to office building to a Joya abstraction without pinpointing the quality in an art-piece that would explain why he devotes to it only this paragraph or that number of pages. After enduring a description of the volutes, columns, cornices of a facade, one waits to know whether the facade with its volutes, columns, cornices is worth lingering over in the first place. Does the facade illustrate how the native sensibility has adapted foreign forms? Does it embody fully the traits of a regional style? Does it possess a grandeur that impresses in spite of the coarseness of execution? Does it have artistic unity? It surely is not unfair for a reader to ask an art historian why he should bother to look at this artifact of a dead society. After all art history was never meant to serve as an auctioneer's catalogue.

In a paragraph typical of the chapters on painting, Castañeda spends lines narrating the adventures of Amorsolo's portrait of his wife Salud: how Fabian de la Rosa would feast his eyes continually upon the portrait, how the national museum decided to keep custody of it during the war, how Alvero borrowed it for display in his downtown office where it finally perished during the liberation. As for the portrait's description, one almost bypasses it:

It was a profile, with the hands resting on a table partially shown. A vase of flowers lent a balance to the whole composition. This portrait showed delineation of character, likeness, rich color, and Amorsolo's own "vision of the moment" with a little more finish.

Equally ludicrous is the description of Amorsolo's first serious genre painting, *Rice Planters*:

The setting is the rice fields on the eastern side of the San Juan river. [At this point the author wanders off into a typical digression.] The historic Pinaglabanan church is within sight so much so that in the finished painting this church is silhouetted in the far background.

Castañeda goes on to note that the key interest of the painting is a female planter in the near central foreground and that the planters cast reflections on the irrigated paddies because the sun shines upon their backs. Fine, but the description could fit a hundred other paintings on the same theme. What would make the difference though would be Amorsolo's sensibility revealing itself through his technique, his handling of color, tone, shape, line or through his famous tropical

color. All these guideposts the author deftly ignores. Castañeda could at least have dwelled on the qualities of Amorsolo as perceived through his works. But of course as Alfredo Roces points out in the preface what is refreshing about this book is that it "avoids convoluted and high flung incursions into aesthetics." This is to praise a hurried draft for lacking the artificiality of certain well-finished novels since *Art in the Philippines* hardly even describes anything at all.

The chapters on sculpture are convincing proof that this history should be honored as a grade-school textbook. Castañeda pads his pages with sticky sweet anecdotes and skirts specifics with such platitudes as: "...artistic merit in the style could be achieved by putting just enough," "It is in his idealistic style," "All these lend dramatic appeal to the onlookers," "It evoked a very realistic impression." A warning, though: the intellectual future of our grade-school tots might be spoiled forever by his astonishing array of non-sequiturs:

...this hideousness of Igorot idols  
indicates they could have been of southeast  
Asian origin. Frightful-looking figures  
guarding the approaches of temples are  
still found in China, Japan, and other Asian countries.

The inexactness with which key words are used might result in drastic revisions of art history abroad. Describing Luna's *Spoliarium*, he comes up with this startling conclusion:

The piece has been referred to as both  
Romantic and impressionistic.... The conception  
is Romantic, but the execution borders on the  
early phase of Impressionism.

He leaves its "impressionism" at that, unless one were to consider the succeeding sentences as proof:

To give dramatic effect, Luna made use of  
strong contrast. Against the dark corners  
of the morgue are the prostrate bodies of  
gladiators.

—which they are not, of course. The modelling of forms through abrupt contrasts of light and shadow, which this description implies, as well as Luna's use of a brown base and his painting thereof from dark to light were the very techniques the academicians could not find in Monet's paintings. In his quest for an equivalent of natural light, Monet painted directly on the white canvas and with tiny, separate dabs of pure color. One hates to waste words on an obvious difference but so widespread is the childish urge to deify patriots by attributing almost miraculous powers to them, that perhaps this extravagance may be of use. When will they discover that Rizal had foreseen nuclear warfare?

Characteristically the account ends with a fellow painter exclaiming that he felt transported into the Colosseum of the old, Roman days.

A question that haunts the reader throughout is how the text could have passed the Office of Research Coordination, of the state university, no less—without any signs of editing. Fernando Zobel's name takes on a "Jr." Victor Oteyza assumes a dual guise: Oteyza on p. 135 and Oteyza in the index. The foreign terms continually flaunted are, alas, not recognizable: nouveau(x) riches, Academia de Debujos, aficionados, *Jugenstill* for *Jugendstijl*. The abundance of grammatical errors: "... things had left indelible scars to their sensibilities," (p. 131); "...a side street which intersect Calle Mabini," (p. 134) would make a high school student shudder for his academic standing. Frequently the prose soars to the heights of a wreath-laying speech: "Now when at last war ended, a particular class of people found therapeutic outlet to their repressions in art."

One mourns the amount of time both the reader and the author could have saved had the photographs been printed without the misguidance of the text.

Unfortunately the photographs do not provide much relief either. One could forgive the splotchy reproductions in view of the level of local printing. But why must one be forced to meet on a single spread, sights as unrelated as the Lyceum, the Baroque facade of Morong, a luscious pagan girl offering gifts to her *anitos*? (figs. 140, 141, 142). Why should the Jai-Alai night club keep an old mansion and a profusely decorated church portal company? (figs. 134, 135, 136).

A final question: how could a reputed critic like Alfredo Roces quote the "tiny feet characteristic of high class Chinese women" that Castañeda saw in a church panel as proof of the latter's observant eye?

FERNANDO N. ZIALCITA

## A CHALLENGE TO ECONOMIC DISCUSSION

**MONEY TO GROW ON.** By Stuart Chase. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964. 171 pp.

It is very seldom that a doctor prescribes medicine to a healthy person. But it becomes necessary if the person likes to stay healthy and strong. Such is this book, *Money To Grow On*; for indeed, this is a prescription for a healthy economy and an affluent society not only to maintain its health and affluence but to explore ways for the expansion of its growth and the optimal use of the social wealth.