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The Arts in the Philippines: I. Painting

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Survey

The Arts in the Philippines

I. PAINTING

If the early fifties are well-remembered for the rapid recognition of modern art in the Philippines, thanks to such militant and articulate exponents of the new abstract forms as Lyd Arguilla of the Philippine Art Gallery, Professor Victorio Edades, and Fernando Zobel, 1961 should be especially noted as the year which not only consolidated the gains of the past decade for modern abstraction but also set new standards in the promotion of art in this country. Largely responsible for both is the Luz Gallery in Ermita, which dominated the art scene in 1961 and has been widely acclaimed for a new professional outlook in exhibiting art works to the public.

Run by one of the country's topflight painters, the Luz Gallery is everything an art gallery should be: an air-conditioned, elegant, clean, well-lighted place where pictures are hung attractively amid uncluttered spaces, handsome furniture, lush flora, and decor that is not only pleasing in itself but also exactly correct for the paintings. It is easily the most attractive art gallery in the country. For one year now it has been operating with unprecedented success and has been able to present no less than twenty major exhibitions of Philippine and foreign works, impressive for their variety (paintings, prints, sculpture, porcelain, rubbings, and Philippine antique furniture) and more impressive still for

their consistently high quality. Much of the success is due to the careful, discriminate planning that goes into every exhibit, excellent framing of the pictures and spacing in the hanging, well-designed printed posters and well-designed invitation cards (both carrying a distinctive Luz typographical trademark), good press notices, and the effective word-of-mouth publicity that follows after every exhibit opening.

Since it first opened (with a memorable one-man show by Jose Joya Jr.) in December 1960, the Luz Gallery has become a strong cultural influence, dictating the taste of art-conscious Manila, attracting a new crop of young artists and collectors, and giving moral and material sustenance to several serious painters. The Gallery has virtually created a new climate for painters who are tired of the disorganized, hustling methods of most galleries and the almost grubby conditions of Bohemia-around-the-corner. It is a refreshing change to have someone around like Arturo Rogerio Luz, who is the closest thing there is at the moment to that heretofore mythical figure, the Professional Art Dealer who combines good taste and critical integrity with splendid showmanship and tact in selling art works. And because Luz happens to be also a painter of the first order, he commands the respect of his fellow-artists and inspires the deepest trust. It is hardly surprising to note that the most impressive art shows of the year took place in his gallery, many of them in the uncompromisingly abstract idiom.

The most *avant-garde* show of the year, a one-man exhibition by Fernando Zobel, was paradoxically a near-sell-out, considering that it drew some furious reactions. For Zobel in his newest phase has been pursuing abstraction to its logical conclusions and his January show consisted of nothing less than the boldest and purest statements in non-objective art shown in this country. The latest Zobel's are black-and-white calligraphies, gestures of the brush and hypodermic syringe that have the stark qualities of etching, vibrant with expressive linear and spatial tensions and dancelike rhythms. This austere style, reminiscent of Zen *sumi* paintings and rock gardens and typical of the Madrid school of

"gray" abstract expressionism to which Zobel belongs, puzzled many, including admirers of Zobel's early baroque figurative period. What many find particularly disconcerting is that Zobel used to be one of the most brilliant colorists around; his new colorless, "dry ice" phase, for many, is too cerebral for comfort. Be that as it may, these calligraphic paintings have a vitality and an amazing sense of order for those with a knowledge of fine drawing.

Luz is to be congratulated for discovering the most talented young painter to appear since Ang Kiukok, Roberto Chabet Rodriguez, still in his twenties, whose much-publicized first one-man exhibit in April was nothing short of phenomenal. Like Luz, from whom he has learned much, Rodriguez paints in a spare, flat style, using colors in the neutral ranges and favoring tight geometric forms and large areas of free space. His variations on houses and landscapes and seated figures have a subtlety of line and tone rare in a painter of his age. His draftsmanship, his strongest point, is admirably controlled and sure, qualities indicating a highly detached attitude toward his art.

Ang Kiukok's fifth one-man show at the Luz Gallery was a bit of a disappointment, although it was comparatively head and shoulders above the spate of one-man shows along A. Mabini this year. Perhaps the most striking thing about Ang's show was the sheer technical excellence of Ang's craftsmanship even when inspiration wasn't running very high. Like Luz and Rodriguez, Ang has detached ideas about art: he approaches his subject matter—bananas, bottles, crate-boxes, remnants of a meal—with a geometer's objectivity. His latest works revealed a synthesis of the lean styles Ang had been working with for the past several years and showed various indications that he is bored with them and that he might attempt newer, more ironic forms of expression. The influence of his former mentor, the exuberant colorist Vicente Manansala, is gone; the new influences seem to be Luz and Bernard Buffet in their grayer moments.

J. Elizalde Navarro is a painter who normally likes strong warm colors and there were many paintings that

glowed with strong warm colors in his one-man show at the Luz Gallery, but the best ones in that show were six or seven paintings dealing with machinelike forms and abstract arrangements that look like patchwork quilts, done in sooty grays and blacks. Like those of Chabet and Ang, Navarro's abstractions in gray emphasize flat linear forms, geometric designs, and spatial rhythms.

Navarro, Ang, and Chabet form an interesting trio whose works, different in many ways from one another, share a certain common element: the basis of their paintings is a firm, tight draftsmanship, directly inspired by architectural structures and the functionalist esthetic, square about the edges, with all sorts of "functional" devices like arrows and circles and dots used like punctuation marks all over their paintings. Theirs is an art devoid of emotional and literary adumbrations, an art of pure orderliness, neatness, and Apollonian balance which may be traced to Mondrian, Ben Nicholson, and Ben Shahn. It is an art easy to like, since it is highly decorative and generally serene, an art made familiar to us through the clean lines of the Japanese house and the Japanese esthetic of *shibui*, modern magazine layouts such as those of *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*, book-jacket designs by Lustig and Rand, Olivetti typewriters, slick motion-picture titles by Saul Bass, and of course the architectural forms of Le Corbusier, Niemeyer, and our own Lindy Locsin. What we should like to suggest with all this is that, at the moment, this unemotional, highly geometric-decorative style is the one widely copied by young painters who have identified it as sophisticated, urbane, and elegant. This interest has led fatally to amateurish works that are little more than lay-outs; its one salutary effect, however, is a reaction against wildly colorful overstatements, all that picturesque and highly rhetorical clutter that has been the worst aspect of our cornucopia-baroque tradition, and a renewed emphasis upon structure, design, and the solidity of good drawing. Some of the younger painters still engage in a dated impressionism exploding with bright colors without the faintest regard for the structural integrity of well-thought-out draftsmanship; a few of the really promising ones, like

Chabet and Ang, are wise enough not to be seduced by the simply picturesque qualities of color in order to strengthen their sense of linear and structural design.

Connoisseurs of fine draftsmanship found 1961 a blessed year for graphic arts or prints. The man directly responsible for making Manila aware of fine prints is Enrique Velasco, an enterprising young dealer in prints, who astonished all of us in April with an exhibit of the lithographs, aquatints, and woodcuts of one of the giants of twentieth-century art, the French visionary and expressionist, Georges Rouault, at the Contemporary Arts Gallery. Since then he has joined forces with the Luz Gallery in bringing in from Japan, France, England, and the United States, first-rate print exhibits by some of the biggest names in modern art: Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Kathe Kollwitz, Bernard Buffet, Paul Cezanne, Edouard Manet, Georges Braque, Pierre Bonnard, Gino Severini, Salvador Dali, Leonard Baskin, Stanley Hayter, Saito, Alexander Calder, and many others. Very early in the year, the Luz Gallery achieved a "first" in presenting a one-man show of prints by a contemporary American master, Bernard Childs, a highly admired artist of striking originality and force whose colorful, calligraphic prints are sought after by museums all over the world. In June, it featured about twenty black-and-white prints, mostly etchings, depicting bleak dramatic landscapes and satirical portraits, by Juvenal Sanso, who for the past seven years or so has been living in Paris. This show revealed a first-rate talent at the peak of its powers, a superb satirist working in the tradition of Goya and Daumier and the only young Filipino artist saying forceful things in the representational idiom.

Other noteworthy shows at the Luz Gallery featured Moro art, Philippine colonial sculpture (*santos* from the Luz and Locsin collections were stand-outs), Philippine antique furniture from Batangas (the one show that disproved any sweeping generalization that the Philippine style is nothing but baroque), Oriental porcelain (fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries), and, at year's end, for its first anniversary presentation, a group show of new works by Jose

Joya Jr., Lee Aguinaldo, Juvenal Sanso, Luz, Manansala, Ang Kiukok, Zobel, Chabet, Cesar Legaspi and Hernando Ocampo, a good cross-section of contemporary Philippine art, representing a variety of artistic persuasions right there.

The annual art exhibition of the Art Association of the Philippines (traditionally *the* big event of the year), held at the new Phil-Am Life Building last June, proved to be the shabbiest in the AAP's fourteen years of existence. The 14th AAP Annual Show also featured a retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Hernando Ocampo, a Republic Award winner and one of the significant forces in Philippine modern art. The plush surroundings of the multimillion Phil-Am Life Building only pointed up the unsightliness of the unwashed panels on which the paintings were hung in helter-skelter fashion. The Ocampo paintings, gathered with patience from various private collections, lost much of their fierce expressionist glare, color intensities, and textural effects in the sub-standard, lackluster lighting of the display area. Equally disconcerting was the mediocre, banal quality of ninety per cent of the entries. The top prizes went, deservedly, to relative newcomers: the first prize to Chabet for a low-keyed abstract landscape in gray and the second prize to Lee Aguinaldo for an abstract landscape in flake-whites. One of the handsomest entries, a delicately poised still-life with an open *aparador* and nondescript fruits, in coffee browns, grays, and sky blues, by Ang, did not receive any prize. First prize in sculpture went to a young student from the University of the Philippines, Ildefonso Marcelo, for his nonobjective grim piece made of rusty, beat-up scrap iron welded together, which caused minor consternation among the conservative elements.

Decidedly, 1961 was dominated by modern works and the modern painters dominated the art columns. From now on, each time the word "art" is mentioned, one need not qualify it with the word "modern". The conservatives have not only been betrayed by the tawdry commercial painters of the Mabini School but also have worn themselves out. Even the two universities which have long served, in postwar years, as the last bastions of conservatism, the University of

the Philippines and the University of Sto. Tomas, are now giving way to the vital new ideas of the moderns.

With the help of the press, which has been generous in allotting much space to art news, more and more laymen are getting used to the idea that what matters primarily in a picture is its design, its visual statement, not its literary "meaning", photographic realism, or illustrational values. Whether it uses the figure or discards it, modern art is no longer the subject of loud ridicule as it used to be ten years ago, nor is it the heap of completely incomprehensible ideograms or blobs which it used to be in the public mind, thanks to the growth of appreciation classes in colleges everywhere.

It is interesting to note that the big names of the fifties, Ocampo, Manansala, Legaspi, and Tabuena, for various reasons, dominate the art scene less and less. 1961 was definitely a year for relatively young artists like Aguinaldo, Chabet, Ang, and Jose Joya, who regularly exhibit new pieces at the Luz Gallery. Joya, the most dynamic and gifted of the lot, and certainly the most sophisticated, won this year's Outstanding Young Man Award in Painting from the Jaycees and the Manila Times Publishing Company and a Heritage Award for Painting. What is gratifying to see in all these young artists is their withdrawal from engaging in questions on Filipinism in the fine arts: their main concern is with their personal commitment to their vision and to their craft.

EMMANUEL TORRES

II. A THEATRE MISUNDERSTOOD

A friend of mine, historian by profession, asked me once how it was possible that people could still take the Theatre seriously in this age which is patently that of the Cinema. The argument was the obvious one: the almost infinite capacity of the motion picture camera to photograph life intimately or extensively, as you wish, cannot but show