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A Happy Beginning: The Art of the Philippines

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tedious. Nevertheless, these blemishes, if such they could be called, are definitely minor and certainly overshadowed by the genuine value of the work.

NICHOLAS P. CUSHNER

A HAPPY BEGINNING

THE ART OF THE PHILIPPINES 1521-1957. Edited by Winfield Scott Smith III. Manila: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1958. vii, 94 p. quarto. 19 reproductions in full color, incl. 7 foldouts; 135 figs. in black and white. P17.50.

It is not often that a serious volume on art is published in the Philippines; but when this does happen, there is almost always cause for immediate jubilation. We say jubilation because any sincere attempt at writing is commendable—doubly so when the subject partakes of what Matthew Arnold calls “high culture”; and when local writers succeed in turning out a well-written series of essays on the art of the country, the only type of bliss that can result is Elysian.

Such is the case with the book under review: the fact that it has appeared at all is perhaps *happy* enough. But it is certainly more than merely gratifying to discover that what the book contains, no matter how modest, can generate lines of thought which, when pursued far enough, should make for clearer and easier discrimination between well founded and gratuitous assumptions regarding Philippine cultural history.

The book claims to embody the “first attempt to present the facts of Philippine art in thought-out consecutive form”. It is a layman’s book, and therefore more or less free from the mystifying jargon that art enthusiasts use when they volleyball ideas among themselves. This combination of ambition and simplicity has resulted in a *straight-forward* and valuable Baedeker to Philippine art through four centuries. To our mind, this is what the authors of the book meant it to be: they would “arouse some curiosity in students of the arts in the background of the arts in the Philippines” and, more important to the researcher, they have built “a kind of framework on which to base future studies”.

The framework will probably lend itself to some amount of debating, but the seven who propose it (Fernando Zóbel and Galo B. Ocampo are among them) are so immersed in the cultural life of the country that one will at least find difficulty contesting their right to set the limits of Philippine art. Nevertheless, it is to their credit that they take pains to point out how the book makes no pretense whatever at speaking the last word on anything: if at all, it suggests

tentative divisions delineating different periods of local painting. In doing this, they dedicate the major portion of the book to essays on painting. Fully six chapters out of ten are therefore about painters and their works. The other arts, in effect relegated to minor niches, include religious art and architecture, sculpture, secular architecture (chiefly modern), and "the minor arts of the Spanish period"—this last being a dainty collage of miscellaneous information about Filipino costumes, scapulars, pottery, and household-shrine images.

Disarmed from the very outset by the candid admission of the book's limitations, the contentious reader may find that he cannot argue at length with this book. But he will have much to think about.

The first thought that may come to him will not be perhaps the most important although the reason for it is certainly the most obvious. It will be about the quality of Philippine printing today: here is a project worthy of the finest craftsmanship in the country, and though some will say that it did get that, a cursory examination of the black and white plates will not exactly elicit admiring comments even from the most generous. It is a fortunate thing, on the other hand, that what these illustrations lack in clarity is somewhat made up for by the well-defined brilliance of the color plates. These plates were done by off-set printing but we are told that the transparencies for these pictures come from the morgue of *Mobilways*, a company publication which has built up an enviable reputation as an excellent source for articles on Philippine art.

There are, happily, ponderables in the text itself upon which the student of local culture can spend his time more profitably. For instance, there are the divisions in the history of Philippine painting. The chapters of this section dismiss in hardly more than a paragraph the paintings of the period marking Spain's first two hundred years in the Philippines. Perhaps there was little painting done during the time; or perhaps there is little material available today that would justify a protracted discussion. Basically, therefore, there should be no objection to the treatment given the period—if nothing more is implied. But the terminology chosen to mark off the transition from the more anemic (it would seem from the text) earlier period to the next bears re-examination.

The earlier period is bracketed under the heading of Religious Painting, while the relatively vigorous, productive years that follow are identified as the era of Secular Painting. Furthermore, the implication is made that artistic talents were limited to some extent by tight ecclesiastical control during the earlier period, i.e. before 1785.

This may or may not have been the case. But if it is not for us to pursue a study of these possibilities in this review, we can at least say that limited or not, Philippine painting had its beginnings in religious art (this the book admits) just as painting in France and

Flanders began with the richly colored miniatures for the decoration of religious books. The French and the Flemish do not disparage these beginnings: many, in fact, have made it their special field of study, and the result has been a fortunate enrichment of the culture of both peoples.

To be fair, we must mention that the book devotes some space—indeed, its first pages—to a chapter shared by Church architecture and religious art, although not religious painting specifically.

As to the charge of Church limitation, one need only recall with Maritain that "Sacred art is in a state of absolute dependence upon theological wisdom", and that since "the sovereign interests of the Faith are at stake in the matter, the Church exercises its authority and magistracy over sacred art."

But perhaps a more fertile area for thought is the question posed by the very idea that has brought the book into existence: "Just what is Filipino art?"

There will be no attempt here to answer so formidable a question. On the contrary, we aim to ask several questions in the hope—shared, we believe, with the authors of the book under review—that someone somewhere will eventually find the time and the interest and the patience to answer them.

The first question: Is a "national art" built exclusively upon the artifacts of *citizens* of a particular nation? The stand affirming this has been taken by a humanities professor in a local university. If this were so, we could not call Zóbel a Filipino painter in spite of the fact that in his own country (never his official residence), his very successful exhibits have been regarded by critics as representing some of the best in contemporary Filipino art. Nor could we include in the story of our art the *peninsulares* and/or *filipinos* (the *ancien régime's* term for Spaniards born in the islands) who helped shape the beginnings of art in this country, e.g. Cortina, Nieto, and Saez. By extension, should we not then begin to wonder how the American Whistler is sometimes included with the "British School" of painters, or how the Greek Theotocopuli has become incontestably Spanish as El Greco?

The second question: Is the national character of a painting discoverable in the subject of the painting, whether in the matter it portrays or in the form in which it is portrayed? In other words, must a painting, to be Filipino, depict "the trees that crown thy mountains grand, the seas that beat upon thy strand", the "thy," of course, being "Philippines, my Philippines"? We remember a conversation with a learned man who seemed to think so: he was, strangely enough, a foreigner.

We disagreed for we felt that this would immediately disqualify from classification as Filipino, Luna and Hidalgo who towards the end

of the last century splashed enormous canvasses with scenes from classical antiquity when they did not dab some European sunset or other onto smaller frames. The book under review says that, in this respect, the nationalism of Luna and Hidalgo was never really translated from intention to artifact. Are their works, then, not truly Filipino? Are Gauguin's Tahitians unwelcome representatives of French art? Are Mary Cassatt's Parisian theater-goers, therefore, un-American?

If the questions about subject matter can be quite bewildering, then the questions about form can become downright foggy. This is especially true when we begin to consider the modern period, for is not the idiom of non-representational art an international, rather than a national, idiom? Are not, for example, Aguinaldo and Joya and Ayco speaking fundamentally the same language as Klee or Pollock or Kokoschka?

The third question: Is nationalism in art expressed in the conscious attempt to turn out a product distinctly identifiable as belonging to a people? In the United States, for instance, an articulate "nationalist" movement was started by a group simply referred to as the "Eight." The members of this group were Davies, Glackens, Henri, Lawson, Luks, Prendergast, Shinn, and Sloan. They supplied the stimulus that later gave the American public Bellows and Coleman, and much later, Hopper and Burchfield. But this group and their followers did not deny honored places in the history of American art to painters largely dominated by European influences, e.g. Sargent, and again Cassatt. What, then, is the real motive for this "conscious attempt"?

In addition, there is connected to the above the extra difficulty of reconciling spontaneity (particularly the automatism of the surrealists) with still another "conscious" element.

And lest it be forgotten, might not the procedure by which any such "conscious attempt" is made become sooner or later subject to regulation, no matter how indiscriminate or even ignorant? One has merely to call to mind samples of the official art in totalitarian countries to understand what we mean.

Asking all these questions, of course, may seem like putting the old flower cart before a cynical nag, and perhaps the only sensible thing to do is what some local painters of the modern school themselves suggest: Let us not bother to meditate on whether our paintings are going to be Filipino; let us instead create, and when we have produced enough, our works shall have become part of Philippine cultural history. They will represent a movement, or part of a movement, in Philippine art. Who will say they are not Filipino?

To the extent that the book under review does generate interest in not only the past but also the future of art in the Philippines, it

warrants a welcome that should be marked by at least some moments of Elysian joy.

ANTONIO G. MANUUD

POINTS FOR PRIESTS

HOLINESS OF THE PRIESTHOOD. By Josef Staudinger, S.J. trans. by John J. Coyne, S.J. Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, Ltd., 1958, 546p.

Books of meditation, good, bad and indifferent, as is to be expected, continue to flow off the presses. Despite this plethora of material, there is no doubt that many priests find it difficult to settle on a meditation manual which fully satisfies their needs. However, among the better meditation books for priests should be placed this compact volume of Fr. Staudinger, S.J. The author is a professor at the episcopal seminary of Klagenfurt in Austria and his life work has been for and among priests and seminarians.

The priest more than others, and indeed precisely because of his sacred studies, often gropes at prayer to bring his theological learning into play in his spiritual life. Knowledge of the great theological realities is his; realization of their import in his life can often be lacking. It is when his prayer-life fails to find substantial theological food that it languishes and wanes. This point seemed to be uppermost in the mind of Fr. Staudinger when he composed these meditations.

Three qualities make this book one to be recommended to the clergy. First, the central theme is always the priesthood, in itself and in its contact with the world to be saved. Second, the order of ideas is based on the order of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. To any priest familiar with the Ignatian method, this volume offers valuable supplementary considerations. Finally, strong emphasis is given to the theological groundwork of the great Ignatian principles.

The author has substantiated his considerations with a wealth of scriptural and patristic reference; each meditation is dotted with apposite quotations from Scripture, the Councils of the Church and the Fathers. Experienced too in the problems of the secular clergy, the author has not failed to give due attention to the needs and dangers of the apostolate.

In the absence of the original German text, no judgment can be given on the accuracy of the English translation, but it can be safely affirmed that the English style leaves nothing to be desired. Occasionally a few quotations are left in their German original, followed of course by a suitable English version. These however add to, rather