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The Seventh Annual AAP Art Exhibition

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The Seventh Annual AAP Art Exhibición

FERNANDO ZOBEL DE AYALA

At this stage it is quite obvious that the Art Association of the Philippines, popularly known as the AAP, has become a well established, dependable and highly significant fact in the cultural life of the Philippines. Its annual shows have grown in both size and quality, and the public has responded by an ever increasing attendance surprising to anyone whose memory goes back seven years. Newspapers, which generally publish what the public wants to read, have been turning more and more of their space to art, and this year's show has set off an avalanche of print impressive in tonnage if depressing in quality. Lectures delivered during the exhibition have drawn large if sometimes bewildered crowds. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, sales have been rather brisk. All in all I guess one can say that art is here to stay, which is a cliché, but a pleasant one.

This year's show is of unusual interest in that, for the first time, an important group of foreign paintings have been shown. The Filipino artist has long suffered from the handicap of being unable to study foreign works of art at first hand. Few things are more exciting, encouraging or irritating to a painter

than the works of another painter. Few things are more likely to make him want to paint, and to paint well, than the sight of good paintings by someone else. After all, Malraux was quite right when he said something to the effect that "painters do not study nature; they study other painters". Up to now, barring the fortunate few who have travelled, our local painters have in the main studied the other local painters. The result has been a kind of inbreeding, with all the charm and monotony that inbreeding signifies. A kind of "family likeness" is noticeable in the mass of Filipino painting, particularly in the matter of color, without a real distinction between modern and conservative. This is neither good nor bad in itself—at any rate it's not worth discussing just now—what remains is the fact that work from abroad, in quantity, comes as a most refreshing experience. I wondered, while looking at art students in turn looking at the Spanish paintings, what results, if any, would be discernible in next year's show. But let's get back to this year's show, starting with the local contributions.

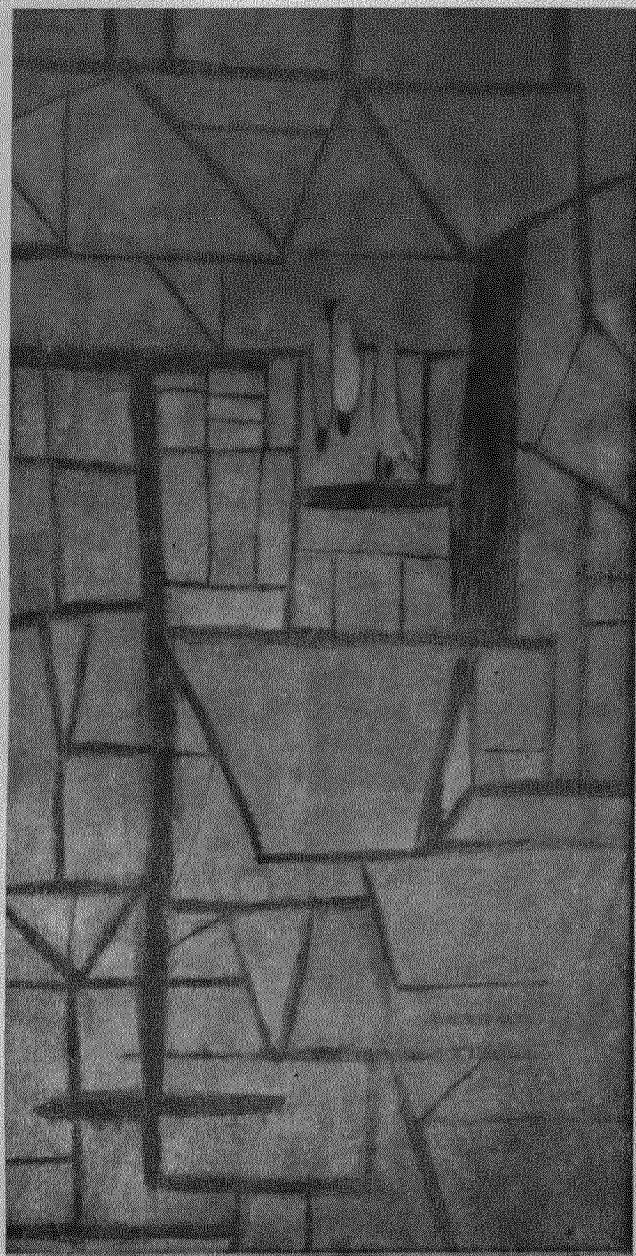
The moderns, as the newspapers noted, seemed to carry the day both in quantity and quality. Nevertheless, in comparison with previous years, this section had a curiously unsatisfactory quality about it, caused, I believe, by the total absence of anything that might be called a major work—something on a level with, say, Luz's *Bagong Taon* or Manansala's *Jeepnies*, both of happy memory. This probably resulted from the fact that only one of the recognized modern leaders, Hernando Ocampo, exhibited. Luz, Tabuena and Legaspi were abroad at the time; Manansala and Anita Magsaysay Ho, for some reason or another, did not exhibit. Those who did exhibit, on the whole, sent in variations of old themes, pictorial "mopping-up operations" rather than the beginnings of new campaigns. The most interesting work came from comparative newcomers. The first prize, deservedly, went to the cartoonist, Hugo V. Yonzon Jr., for his *Harana*.

Despite complaints that it was a derivative painting, with overtones of both Luz and Manansala (criticisms that almost cancel out each other), in sheer painterliness it remained the most impressive painting around. It did, perhaps, remind one of Luz in its use of a linear, basically geometrical composition, and of Manansala in technique, particularly in the dramatic use of dark color; however it was completely original as well as successful in the handling of light to suggest depth, a problem that so far as I know has never concerned either Manansala or Arturo Luz.

Fifty-three Q is, to date, the most exciting of Hernando Ocampo's current series of abstractions. The forms have lost some of their "fatness", the colors are combined without the old stridency, the spectator's eye is invited into a nervous exploration of surface if not of space. It is difficult, however, to escape the feeling that the significance of this recent group of abstractions is, precisely, as a group. It is the series that forms the impressive whole; the single part suffers by its isolation.

A few other works deserve more than passing mention, which is exactly what space does not permit me to do. Passing mention will have to do. Among the best, with slight regard for the way prizes went, were Leandro Locsin's *Saucer Chairs*, delicately vibrant, subtly colored and largely unnoticed by the public; Manuel Rodriguez's *Kwentong Kutsero*, in which delightful draughtsmanship was somewhat cancelled by an equally delightful treatment of surface and texture, each item, unfortunately, distracting attention from the other. Carl Steele's *Pink Tablecloth* came as an object lesson in the fact that effective, even overpowering color is by no means the necessary result of bright, straight-from-the-tube color; Barbara Eve Jones showed handsome combination of calligraphy and wash in her *Hotel*, weakened by a rather clumsy execution of human figures; finally Nena Saguil and Vic Oteyza produced new freshness in their non-objectives.

HUGO V. YONZON, JR. (Philippines) *Harana*





ORTEGA MUÑOZ (Spain) *La Cancilla*

In fact, the large proportion of non-objective paintings marked perhaps the greatest single surprise in the modern section of the show. The fact that non-objectives got a healthy share of prizes and honorable mentions likewise came as a surprise, especially when one recalls the battles waged over their acceptance in other countries. The fact that non-objectivism has come to the Philippines after it has been dominant in the US and parts of Europe for some ten years or so is probably the reason for the preparedness of both jury and public.

Like the Moderns, the Conservatives also suffered from the absence of their "big names." It can be assumed that the profitable pressure of commissions prevented the appearance of new pictures by Amoroso, Dumlao and Garcia Llamas. Amoroso's absence was hardly surprising; he does not exhibit almost on principle, but on the other hand his brilliant style is by now so familiar and so well studied that his absence can almost be remedied by an effort of memory. Not so Garcia Llamas and Dumlao, whose merits, although apparently as well-received as Amoroso's by the public, have been less carefully identified and studied, and inevitably cause controversy when discussed among artists. It is always desirable that a school or style be defended, or at least represented, by its best exponents. The presence of recognized leaders in national exhibitions of this scope serves, not only to entertain and educate the public but, even more importantly, to provide an adequate challenge for the younger and less well-known artists. Familiar signatures act quietly in the guise of a pictorial Bureau of Standards. The absence of so many such signatures this year can only be deplored.

Aside from this, the conservative group performed much as usual, mixing the careful competence of Gabriel Custodio and Oscar Navarro with a group of relatively inept works which, on the whole, seemed to show a trend towards increasingly careless execution

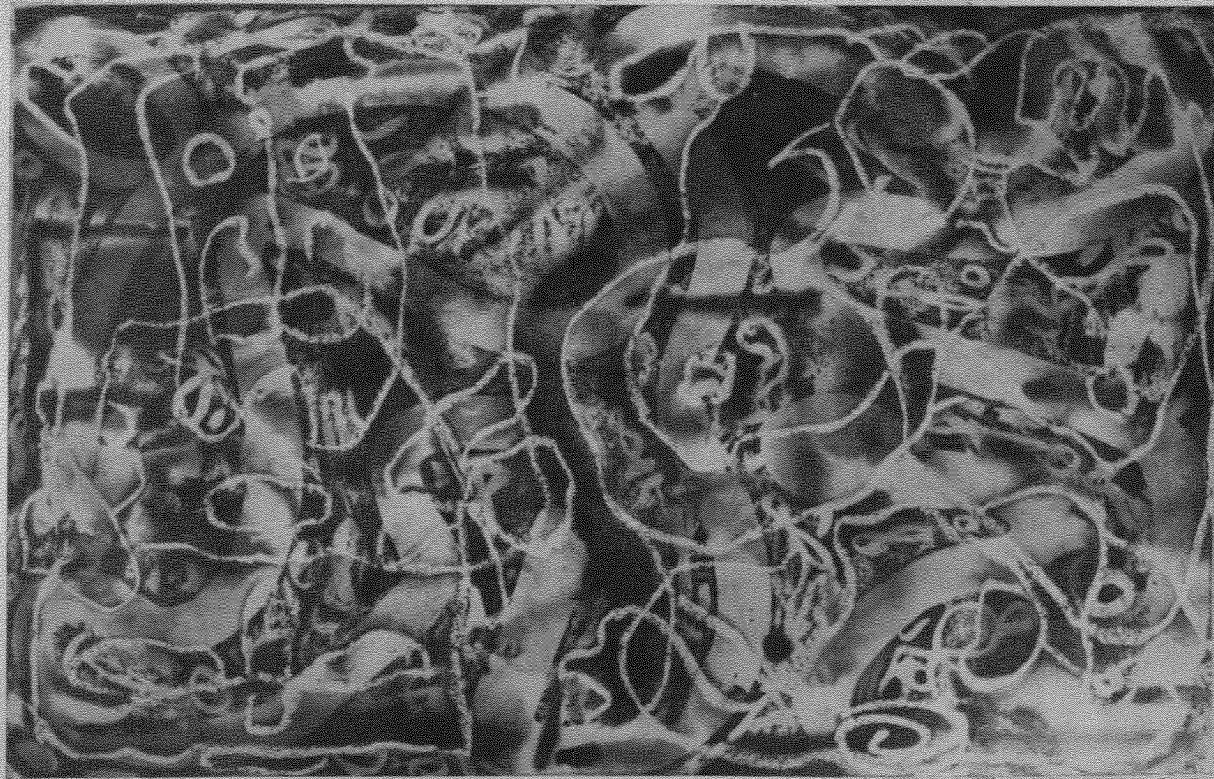
and increasingly sentimental subject-matter. The lone surprise of the section came from Arsenio D. Mercado, whose *Sisilim* showed a fresh feeling for color—largely in the range of browns—and a handsome use of the palette knife. His little sunset scene was full of a warmth and liveliness that came as news to one who has by now seen, literally, about a hundred or so square meters of painted sunsets. The excellent effect made by this newcomer was somewhat weakened by his second entry in the exhibit: a relatively pedestrian affair dealing with those eternal *barong-barongs* in the standard oil and turpentine technique. I did not find the other paintings particularly arresting. The bulk might be classified as variations on previously-seen themes.

Sculpture, likewise following an apparent tradition, was represented by very few works. Abueva, of whom much was expected, was adequate; Harry Richardson outdid himself with a tall, strikingly elegant figure in wood, and with a reasonably exciting, well-constructed mobile. The most startling piece in the category was *Dyesebel*, a life-size, polychromed, plaster-of-Paris mermaid disturbingly reminiscent of a discarded stage-prop (which, upon investigation, is more or less what it turned out to be). Located inescapably in the middle of three walls of modern painting it added a touch of hysteria to the otherwise sedate atmosphere of the exhibition. It also drew angry mutters from several of the exhibitors affected, who blamed matters, not unreasonably, on the screening committee.

Photography and Cartooning held little excitement except in one instance, that being Carl Steele's unusual and extremely sensitive study of space and texture in a photograph entitled *160 Real Street*. Faulty mounting deadened some of its impact and it apparently passed unnoticed by the jury, although in my opinion it was one of the most distinguished photographs we have seen on exhibit in a long time.



CHEN FANG (China) *Bamboo*



ALFONSO OSSORIO (U.S.A.) *The Watchers*

First among the foreign contributions, both in size and importance, was the Spanish show which consisted of a full thirty-four paintings. Despite its size it failed in presenting an accurate bird's-eye view of painting in Spain today in that it lacked some of the top modern painters in that country, to wit: Joan Miró, Benjamin Palencia and Rafael Zabaleta. A fourth of equivalent importance—Daniel Vazquez Diaz—was represented, but with an old and rather inferior work. Despite this, the exhibition turned out to be a definite success on two counts: the first being that the works shown were lively and exciting in their own right and proved beyond doubt that there is a good deal of first rate painting going on in Spain; the second point being that these pictures came at a *useful* moment, as evidenced by the numbers of young people, obviously students, who stood rooted before them deep in thought. They were, as one of our best known painters put it, extremely *professional* paintings. In them a variety of technical problems were solved clearly, cleanly and with every appearance of ease—in particular that problem that seems to plague every generation of Filipino artists: the achievement of maximum brilliance in color. One way of solving this was provided by Francisco Carretero, in his use of contrasting values. Of course, there are many ways to skin that particular cat, but Carretero produced a particularly effective solution.

The most notable and individual painter in the group seemed to be Ortega Muñoz. Harsh, earthy, subject-matter and equally harsh, earthy, color combined to produce works of great strength—which is hardly surprising, considering the beauty of his draughtsmanship. What is surprising is that the works had no trace of crudity about them, as might have been expected from that particular combination; on the contrary, they were distinguished by a kind of cold elegance similar in quality to the "dryness" of fine wine. It is not difficult to see why the younger

intellectuals of Spain have found one of their leaders in Ortega Muñoz, although his sort of understatement comes close to being painters' painting, which is traditionally neglected and overlooked by the public.

Another painter who provided a good deal of excitement was Jose Caballero with his *Maria Fernanda Niña*, in which he exploited both his restrained skill with neutralized color and his dazzling technique with the palette knife. It was especially interesting to see his earlier, Daliesque and rather inferior work, *La Divina Proporción* (marred particularly by heavy-handed varnishing), which provided a pleasant demonstration of an artist's conquest of his art. Several other pictures deserve more space than I can allow them, in particular Juan Guillermo's *Bodegón* in resonant browns, the brilliant cubist exercise of *Paisaje* by Francisco Moreno Calvan, Garcia Ochoa's quietly Matisse-like *Paisaje No. 1*, Francisco Capuleto's delightfully assured *Muchacho Estudiando*, and finally, Garcia Abuja's curiously expressionistic, dramatic, *Desnudo*, courageously executed almost entirely in Prussian blue and lemon yellow: a combination that any painter, no matter how skilled, would regard with cautious respect.

The Chinese show was, relatively speaking, a bit of a disappointment in that it showed no evidence whatever of the contemporary idiom or technique. These pictures boiled down to familiar scrolls of standard subjects executed in the brush and ink technique. The basic approach used dates back to the Sung dynasty, and on the whole it has not improved, rather the contrary, during subsequent centuries. It is an art of subtlety, primarily intended for the well-trained spectator, and even at its best escapes with difficulty an appearance of monotony caused, I believe, by being exhibited "en masse", whereas the pieces should be ideally seen individually and with lots of time on one's hands. At any rate, Chen Fang stood out with his strong rendition of bamboo leaves, although the shapes

behind them were a bit ambiguous and soft. Fu-Chuan-fu had a nice, harsh, precise, landscape distinguished by brush strokes of great strength, and Ma Shou-hua showed a handsome command of space relationships bereft of the crutch provided by perspective.

It would hardly be fair to approach the Indian contribution in the same spirit as the other two, being, as it was, almost entirely the private collection of a single individual and without pretensions either to size or significance. It was good to see some minor works of Jamini Roy who is getting so much renown these days. They were clean and strong though they came dangerously close to the posturesque. It was likewise interesting to follow the difficult rebirth of a national style through the various items on exhibit. For instance, I couldn't help meditating, before Kalyan Sen's *The Dream*, on the curious economics of painting which apparently used primitive Indian art to inspire the British school of exotic watercolor as exemplified by Edmond Dulac, then used the Dulac school in turn to inspire some of the new Indian painters such as Kalyan Sen. There is a world of difference between the final result and the original sources which include Rajput and Moghul miniatures, the difference consisting, if I'm not mistaken, in a certain air of "gentility" that has somehow crept in. This curious "gentility" can also be seen in the works of the Tagore circle, which have become familiar through reproduction.

Aside from the foreign national groups we have just mentioned, the AAP fortunately invited one American painter, of particular interest to the Philippines, to the exhibit. Alfonso Ossorio sent three dazzling, technically breathtaking, absolutely difficult works to this show titled respectively, *Figure in Landscape*, *Generations*, and *The Watchers*. Ossorio was of particular interest to Filipinos not only because he is Filipino himself by birth, but because of the repercussions of his well-known mural in the Victorias Church of Negros Occidental. Up to the present no-

body here had, without travelling abroad, seen any of his pictures, although they were gradually getting to be known through rumors, verbal reports, reviews and occasional reproductions. These pictures satisfied many curiosities and, what is even better, awakened many new ones. They were, as I say, puzzling pictures, teetering on the verge of non-objectivity. Ossorio, in a letter to the AAP, said something to the effect that these are different times we live in, and the times require a different visual alphabet, to which someone in the audience remarked that we might all have to learn to read again. Perhaps so. If Ossorio's pictures had been straight non-objectives they would be easier to judge; however they are not, and that is where the critic's difficulty sets in. Just precisely what is he trying to get across? The critic has one of two choices. He can either explore the subject with painstaking care, if not completeness, and produce a book like Dubuffet's *L'Art initiatique d'Alfonso Ossorio*, or he can shrug off the deeper implications of these paintings (a relatively cowardly procedure) and judge them as purely non-objective works, a procedure adopted both by *Art Digest* and *Art News* with entertainingly contradictory results. This critic will be even more cowardly, evading the problem altogether at least for the present, pausing only to remark that Ossorio's technical equipment is of a quality never seen here before. His combination of ink, wash, color, encaustic, sheer brains and hard work in producing something that, again, was aptly described by someone in the audience as "crushed jewels", left those of us who are painters as well as onlookers literally gasping. The rest of the audience also gasped and gaped—what else could one do before so much richness and complication?—but they looked slightly irritated, as people always do when they expect to be amused and find, instead, that they are asked to exert a certain amount of mental effort.

At any rate that, more or less, covers our show.

Since we can accurately say that, taken as a whole, each AAP show has been a marked improvement over the previous one, perhaps I am not entirely unjustified in hoping that next year's show will include more of the recognized leaders in the Philippine conservative and modern categories, and that the invitations to foreign participants will not be discontinued but increased. It would be nice to get a handsome, large, and representative show of US painters for next year; French for the year after that, and so on ad infinitum. The good a show of this nature may be able to do is impossible to calculate. Results may be invisible for as long as a decade, but who knows what gets an artist started? As far as the public is concerned, it wants its eyes gladdened, and that can happen only if it sees the best. For its brave attempt to provide just that, the AAP deserves every encouragement and highest praise.
