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Philippine Religious Magery

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Review Article

Philippine Religious Imagery

THE Philippines is one of the few countries with a substantial material culture which has not had what are often referred to as "art books" devoted to explaining and illustrating this culture or some aspect of it.¹ A new book by Fernando Zóbel de Ayala is a beginning at filling the gap in scholarly coverage of Philippine art history.²

It is an expansion of the same author's 1958 article in *Philippine Studies*, and from that article it derives its basic approach, which is to classify systematically the religious imagery made during the Spanish regime in this country.³ It does not follow the geographical or "guide-book" approach which is sometimes encountered in art books on Latin America (nor could it easily do this, for reasons to be explained below). It gives, so to speak, an over-the-shoulder look at the workings of an intelligent and urbane mind seeking to impose order on the subject matter at hand.

¹ The one possible exception is W. Scott Smith's *Art in the Philippines* (Manila: Art Association of the Philippines, 1958).

² *Philippine Religious Imagery*. By Fernando Zóbel de Ayala. Manila: Ateneo de Manila, 1963. 154 pp. 9 x 12 inches. Illustrated (drawings by the author and photographs by Nap. C. Jamir). Price in the Philippines, ₱25.00; elsewhere, \$7.95 plus postage. Distributor: Bookmark, P. O. Box 1171, Manila. Available in the United States from Wittenborn and Co., 1018 Madison Avenue, New York 21, N.Y.

³ Fernando Zóbel de Ayala, "Philippine Colonial Sculpture," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (August 1958), pp. 249-90.

This subject matter consists of the sculpture and paintings turned out in this country from the early part of the Spanish regime until the decline of the craft in the 19th century under the impact of cheap imported chromos and plaster casts, and the native carvers' suicidal skill in perfecting their imitations of such imports.

Zóbel divides Philippine santos functionally into the formal, which are used for churches, convents, and official buildings, and the informal, which are used in homes. He further distinguishes three styles. There is the popular, which is the work of "relatively uneducated, unsophisticated painters and sculptors," most of which fall into the informal category. There is the classical style, corresponding to the classical period in Philippine colonial architecture (including "earthquake baroque"), in which are combined the largely baroque influences of Spain and Latin America, the decorative and stylistic influence of China, and a distinct but undefined element which the author believes to be purely Filipino. As one of the characteristics of Philippine classical sculptures, Zóbel mentions that such santos retain their nature as pieces of sculpture even if stripped of their ornaments, unlike the later style where "ornament is the statue itself"; i.e., ivory heads and hands are joined to wooden frames over which are draped embroidered robes. Lastly, there is the ornate style, paralleling the Antillan in architecture, which embodies richer material, more realistic detail, and a certain theatrical flavor. "Ornate statues . . . seem more like expensive dolls than religious images."

Zóbel believes that the vast majority of religious paintings and sculptures in this period were produced by Filipinos although there is a strong tradition attributing many of the images to Chinese. Most of them are anonymous, and I have remarked elsewhere that this probably reflected the medieval spirit of faith and dedication in which these works were made.⁴

⁴ "Colonial Churches of Ilocos," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 1960), pp. 121-58; p. 125.

I should like to register my disagreement with two opinions expressed by Zóbel. First, with regard to collectors, Zóbel feels that they preserve more than they destroy and that their collections are important as sources of our knowledge of Philippine religious art. (This is only implicit in this book, although he has been explicit on the point in private conversation.) I have stated above that Zobel's approach to the subject is one of systematization and classification of the material. The existence of a few substantial collections is of course a great help to such an approach and represents an immense saving in time and effort. However, such accumulations in private hands, with the exception of the household santos in the informal category, cannot but empty the churches and convents in this country of their remaining artistic treasures, already badly depleted by the destruction of World War II and, half a century earlier, by the looting which went on during the Filipino-American War. In fact there are reports of substantial exports of these items to countries abroad, especially the United States, where they are passed off in many cases as Mexican. Needless to say, such continuous and systematic looting will in a few years make it impossible to take what I have earlier called the "guide-book approach" to the study of these sculptures. The rewarding visits to various places which are such an interesting part of any Latin American and European trip (or indeed of a trip in any country with a substantial material culture) would become impossible. I recognize that there is some merit in Zóbel's idea, especially if the collectors are Bantugs or Pardo de Taveras, and I am sorry that I must take such a dim view of its probable long-range results.

Second, Zóbel reports (p. 36) that "the Catholic hierarchy recognized the beauty and interest of these relics and is making an effort to preserve them." Again, I wish I could agree with him, but my own observation is that the opposite is true. Many parish priests are only too willing to sell their antique statues or to trade them for tasteless plaster-of-paris images. Others seek to curry favor with wealthy collectors by conniving with them in despoiling churches of such items. To go further afield, the beautiful 18th century facade of one

of Manila's major churches was barely saved by the intervention of a few interested laymen (incidentally, led by a foreigner) who raised a fuss and brought it to the attention of persons close to the Cardinal Archbishop of Manila. Sad-der was the fate of the Guadalupe ruins in San Pedro Makati, whose graceful arcades for half a century made it a mecca for art classes and tourists alike. The arches were pulled down, and a nondescript dormitory for retired priests, said to have been designed by a Teutonic clergyman formerly attached to the Archdiocese of Manila, was erected in their place. The facade of the Miagao church, Iloilo, probably ranks among the top ten in the country; Zóbel reproduces its pediment in one of only two full-page sketches in the entire book (p. 4). Yet the glowing red of the natural sandstone has been doused with a dull grey coat of paint (or is it cement?) and both the clergy and people of the town labor under the fond delusion that this is an improvement. At the moment, therefore, not only does there seem to be no general awareness among the Catholic clergy of the value of antique Philippine religious art, but there also seems to be no sign of any initiative on the part of the hierarchy to remedy the situation.

My differences with Zóbel do not affect my admiration for this volume. The book's text is accompanied by over 30 sketches drawn by the author as a "running commentary on the text" (p. 6); together they occupy the first fifth of the volume. The remainder is taken up with the excellent photographs of Nap. C. Jamir, along with Zóbel's arresting captions. Photographic enthusiasts will notice that the illustrations of statues and reliefs are either obliquely lit (for reliefs) or sidelit (for statues in the round). It is evidence of real expertise to photograph the flat surfaces of paintings without unwanted reflections and with even lighting. The volume closes with a useful annotated bibliography of literature on Philippine religious imagery.

This publication is to date the biggest and most impressive step Zóbel has taken toward realization of a grand goal he set for himself some fourteen years ago—to make an over-

all survey and study of Philippine colonial churches. One can think of no one better qualified to write a book such as this than he—Philippine by birth, Spanish by descent, cosmopolitan by training, a practicing painter, a student of history, and a writer of graceful and lucid prose. While the volume is not free from an occasional misspelling and mismatching of type, it is on the whole so well done as to rank as a major addition to literature about Philippine culture.

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