

## Framed Transparencies, Veiled Motives: Marian Rocés' *Sheer Realities*

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The first image one beholds in Marian Rocés' exhibit of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Filipino clothing is a portrait by Simon Flores of a preening lady posing beside her bureau mirror. The work could well have been part of the Metropolitan Museum's adjacent presentation of coeval Filipino *tipos del país*, yet similarities between the two exhibits ended with the curator's frontispiece. Upon leaving Flores' woman to her mirror, one is soon enjoined to shed the notion of clothing as being mere accoutrements of female display and propriety. Entitled *Sheer Realities*, Rocés' sartorial recollection aimed to reveal the role dress played in informing social identity, ascendancy, and legitimacy in the Philippines of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Upon entering the exhibit, the viewer is cast into the luminous and well-ventilated realm of *ilustrado* existence; it is in this expansive, two-tiered, rectilinear enclosure reminiscent of the *bahay na bato* that the 'social realities' of clothing are restaged. Bedecking walls with portraits of dandy native aristocrats, the exhibit found its heuristic centerpiece in a tableau that sought to show the transparent interlacing between 'art' and 'reality': Justiniano Asuncion's rendering of Doña Teodora Ygnacio and her effects is made to stand alongside the effects themselves. Herein both artifact and artifice become the obverse and reverse of one image, nostalgically flogging back to the pink the dead horse of art-as-mimesis. The presence of Ygnacio's *piña* blouse and her escritoire seems to attest to the 'truthfulness' of the painting and to the 'real life' provenance of artistic inspiration.

Nevertheless, they are realities inaccessible to the 'gallery.' Raised on a platform, both the original and the copy thwart tactile reactions elicited by their exacting delicacy. *Sheer Realities* in a sense revives the

class-inflected untouchability of the artisan's cloth and the artist's canvas. Going beyond the mere depiction of minute details, portraiture here reflects certain social affects and effects. Through the *trompe l'oeil* simulations of oil, the local leisure classes gloried in the possession of articles wrought by painstaking craftsmanship, making manifest their arrival as captains of labor and agricultural capital.

Of course, the phenomenon of a rising middle-class celebrating their mundane gains through art occurred far earlier and elsewhere. Tucked away from the Holy See and its fealty monarchies, the Netherlands of the 17<sup>th</sup> century nurtured no indigenous hereditary aristocracy, and its artists—weaned on the paucity of papal patronage and by their own Calvinist environment—ably trained their brushes not so much on saintly iconography as on wealthy bourgeois families who, questing for titles of nobility, acquired country estates and traded with their country's nascent overseas *lebensraum*. What resulted was not only a proliferation of nouveau-riche narratives and artist-centred tableaux (the period set the stage for self-portraits and art dealers) but a facilitation as well of artistic technique wherein portraiture, landscape painting, and the still life acquired a realism which approached the effects of natural light, setting down once and for all paternal heritage, sprawling property, and domestic space on an incontrovertible plane. From a distance one would assume offhand that Asuncion's optical interests were informed by the illusionism of the geopolitically-proximate Velazquez (whose hall of mirrors parallel Eyck's and Vermeer's), yet a close inspection of his textile tracery recalls a much older (and a likely unseen) guiding hand: Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543), the High Renaissance German portraitist whose peerless linearity remained a touchstone well into the neoclassicism of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

In Spain's very own 'East Indies,' art received impetus from the forces of colonial machinery. Aimed at a summary cataloguing of native aggregates, Governor General Narciso Claveria's 1849 edict calling for the formalization of Filipino surnames seems to have heightened the local's inchoate sense of identity and lineage, one soon celebrated by the prouder classes through portraits and *letras y figuras*.<sup>1</sup> The high esteem accorded to artistic exertion during this period owed greatly to the pedigree of the artists themselves. Asuncion was a Spaniard of mixed blood who—like his father and two brothers—was elected *gobernadorcillo* by his town's *principalia* while

his *mestizo* mentor Damian Domingo<sup>2</sup> was in 1821 the first professor and director of the country's first private art school, opening his spacious Tondo residence to students irrespective of racial constitution.<sup>3</sup> Deemed as a one-man prime mover of 'Filipino' art, Domingo attended no far-flung Spanish academy (the epoch-making Suez Canal was yet to be opened in 1869) and was the first homegrown artist known to have made a self-portrait.

For Roces, it was the likes of Domingo and Asuncion who occupied the front and center of that *fin-de-siecle* social drama. Showcased with the Ygnacio portrait are mannered expressions of an aesthetic taste that wove infinitesimal gestures through *horror vacui*.<sup>4</sup> Embroidered petticoats and fichus, *barong tagalogs*, appliqued wedding ensembles, and wickerwork lounge chairs describe the comfortable complexities of the already-arrived. Bounding this elevated milieu are the economic props of their station: abaca, tobacco, rice, and sugar. Safely enshrined inside glass cases and appearing with the requisites of a charmed life are necklaces, scapulars, rosaries, earrings, combs, hairpins, keyholders, *salakots*, canes, and riding crops each differently gilded, filigreed, chased, repoussed, granulated, or jewel-encrusted. No moveable is spared from the fixation with embellishment. A floridly carved bed and a hardwood dresser inlaid with carabao bone vie with the prolific *calados* and weft floats of bourgeois finery.

Basking in newly-found privileges, educated in the colonial metropolises which had ironically imbued them with notions of national sovereignty, the *ilustrados* could perhaps be forgiven for foisting their lifestyle, tastes, and representatives as general indices of 'Filipinoness.' With Aguinaldo proclaiming Philippine independence from a stone house and Rizal as the people's hero, the idea of a national garb seemed apt if not inevitable. For Roces, it was a theologically-inspired mandate not unlike Spain's White Man's Burden. Seeming to descend from a stairwell transfixing the museum's atrium, diaphanous Maria Claras<sup>5</sup> announced nationhood in middle-class tones. Their epiphany harbored a great promise, the prophetic stairwell itself, inaccessible to visitors, seemed to bypass the fledgling nation's intervening episodes of self-doubt, leading to a corollary exposition of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Philippines whose fashion sense had already gained approbation from her cosmopolitan peers. There, one

saw a wealth of indigenous garments cut, tied, and dyed for Western eyes.

The search for recognition, to be sure, had begun long before. Fence-sitters in a political arena that partitioned power according to race and class, the jockeying *mestizo* middle classes sought self-governance from Spain by donning the conceptual categories of Western schooling together with the favorite *piña* cloth of the *naturales* they despised. With studied ambivalence, they rallied the islands under one flag, leaving the periphery to what they thought of as the ‘peoples of the interior’: *salvajes* (‘savage’ loin-clothed natives), *infieles* (non-Christians), *remontados* (highlanders), and *tulisanes* (‘bandits’)—identities lumped, lumpen-ed, and obscured by an enlightened few that couched civilization in terms of religious affiliation, ideological allegiance, taxability, and skin exposure. Warping this divisive weft of thought, Roces tries to divine a common thread that ran through the social fabric of the archipelago. Spatially, textually, and texturally, *Sheer Realities* configures on one hand the *ilustrado*’s supercilious self-distancing and, on the other, his close affinity with his less ‘illustrious’ brothers. Displayed beside walls remotest from the exhibit’s entrance (yet at an arm’s reach away from his chattels), the accoutrements of various ethnic groups hang like washed linen for his and the outsider’s scrutiny. The thesis? That spear-wielding Filipinos already had a needle’s eye for fine clothing long before Spaniards, skirts, and Singer sewing machines.

A pretty thought, be it said, which invests on the daintiness of what most Westerners would shrink from calling ‘fine art.’ Roces’ knotty propositions—that civilization and savagery are trappings cut differently from the same cloth, that class and racial identity scarcely sever the ties that bind weaver and wearer—are yarns one occasionally likes to hear in this age of raging postcolonies and exotic cross-dressing. After unraveling themselves through the dialectical binaries of light and dark, center and fringe, backwardness and sophistication, Roces’ realities reveal in the end a cultural network filled with innate predispositions, inherent similitudes, and immanent interconnections: a mystic, monistic mandala where technicolor tensions, conflicts, inequities, and contradictions are somehow finally smoothed and ironed out. In this account of haute-couture rhetoric and political over-coating, a few ‘woman questions’ are particularly silenced. How did something as intimate as clothing configure the

relationship between a henceforth colonized man and woman? Where particularly are the women who might have woven what those fine ladies are wearing? Revisiting Simon Flores' dresser-bound damsel, one senses that the curator had from the outset knowingly framed her narrative, keeping women within the confines of their (well-) appointed private sphere.

Having begun with a fanfare of light, what seemed to be a pilgrim's progress towards historical illumination ended with a sombre chiaroscuro of polarities. What is perhaps the preeminent portrait of the period is flung to the outermost orbit of the *ilustrado* realm. Mounted on a dark, moribund backdrop, Juan Luna's lionized *Una Bulaqueña* faces the exhibit's exit; pensive and aloof, she becomes a reflective complement to Flores' epigraph of self-involvement. Textually accompanied on one hand by a serenade extolling a genteel Bulaqueña and, on the other, by an excerpt from Francisco Baltazar's *La india elegante y el negrito amante*, Luna's work is flanked in space by an ebonied torso and a miniature figure of an aboriginal *aeta*. This *mise-en-scene* is perhaps informed by Baltazar's satire which in a sense pits Rizal's Europeanized 'woman of Malolos' (edified by Rosseau's *Emile*) with a romantic noble savage. Striving to win a brown Filipina who has taken on airs and to wearing the colonizer's clothes, Baltazar's Negrito lover dons the different habiliments of her civilization. Historically, the preoccupation of Filipino artists with Otherly recognition extended to their very lives. Highly regarded and accoladed by their Spanish masters for creating what native *indios* sensed as veiled 'nationalist' allegories, both Luna and Baltazar became before Rizal the first 'sons of Spain' to frame Mother Country in epic terms.

And if there is an allegory in Roces' curatorial essay, it would be that of a colonial subject proceeding from the self-affirmation of a self-imagined identity to the recognition of that self by a mastering Other. Aided by the Delphic light of 'know thyself,' both sheer cloth and looking-glass fashioned for the Filipino an identity which, once projected to the colonizing alter-ego, would signify difference, invoke fellow recognition and justify his eventual disjunction from the latter. Crowding the upper and lower levels of the museum, painted by Domingo and Asuncion themselves, the well-comparisined characters of *miniaturismo* and *costumbrismo* embody this outward mirroring; bought as tourist mementos before the age of postcards, they are

quotidian trifles invested with a race's cherished future. The turn of the century would, however, offer only calculated regression. Surveying a tableau of American colonial period photographs set beside a collection of indigenous loin-cloths and girdles, one realizes that the re-colonizing gaze of Manifest Destiny dis-'covered' the islands of its outfittings along with its dreams of independence. What had heretofore eluded the demure canvas was captured on film. Posed, composed, and exposed in the name of anthropology and the human sciences, the native's nakedness became an argument which ineluctably cloaked American expansionism as a 'civilizing' mission. With the *ilustrados* deftly turncoating for their new master, it is not surprising that even the glossier 'realities' of photography was unable to bring to the fore the country's long-nurtured vision of selfhood.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>A graphic illustration, usually painted, which depicts the subject's person, relatives, friends, haunts, lifestyle as well as his or her life and times via and around the letters of his or her complete name; the maternal surname was most often included.

<sup>2</sup>Born into a prominent family, Domingo was an *alferez* (standard bearer) of the Royal Navy and was conferred the rank of honorary Lieutenant for his distinguished civic accomplishments (Santiago 13).

<sup>3</sup>The Domingo scholar Luciano Santiago cites the artist for being "the first to resist the system of racial classification and prejudice the Spaniards practiced—of classifying the Philippine inhabitants according to their proportion of Caucasian blood" (Santiago and Joaquin 28). Santiago notes that Domingo's acceptance of the stewardship of the Academia de Dibujo (established in 1823 by the Real Sociedad Economica) was predicated on the statute that it "enroll any applicant of whatever class, whether Spanish, *mestizo* or *indio*, as long as there [was] an opening and he presented himself decently." The singular presence of masculine pronouns here tells on the period's customary restrictions regarding women's formal academic training. After the master's death around 1832 the school closed down and was supplanted in 1850 by the Academia de Dibujo y Pintura, which observed racial segregation and barred instruction to female students until 1889.

<sup>4</sup>By using this term I do not mean to subscribe to the dated academic formulation that this is a distinctive stylistic trait of Philippine art.

<sup>5</sup>Women's *piña* ensembles named after Rizal's *mestiza* heroine.

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