THE FILIPINA AS ARTIST AND ART SUBJECT IN 19TH CENTURY PHILIPPINE ART

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In studies on 19th century Philippine Art, the Filipino woman is virtually invisible as an artist. This does not mean, however, that the Filipina was not involved in artistic endeavors. Certainly many women excelled in embroidery, cloth and mat weaving, basketry and pottery, but neither the consumers nor the creators themselves considered the products as art, even if these showed beauty of form and excellence of craft. No names have come down to us because, naturally, no signatures were attached to mats, embroidered clothes, pots or baskets. The making of such articles was considered not as an expression of individual talent, but as just another family chore or community responsibility, virtually in the same category as cooking and washing clothes or feeding animals or clearing the fields for planting, except that the goods produced beyond the family's needs could be bartered or sold, in which case it was deemed as another profitable enterprise.

The confinement of the term '*Art*' to the creations of painters, sculptors, poets, and composers continued until late in the 20th century. It was only in 1990, when the *Manlilikha ng Bayan* Award (counterpart of the National Artist Award) was created to officially recognize as artists the excellent weavers (and by extension, embroiderers and potters) and chanters. Thus, now included in the *CCP Encyclopedia of Art* (1994) are the names of Magdalena Marte, a *piña* weaver of Kalibo Aklan; Kahhimngan Palatic, an *ikat* weaver of Banaue; and Maluy Lasa

Sambolani, a Samal mat weaver from Laminusa. These three women have continued the tradition that their unrecognized female ancestors of the 19th century and earlier had maintained, sustained, and passed on to their daughters and granddaughters.

Names of some weavers in the 19th century are accessible to researchers, only because they are mentioned in the biographies of the 'legitimate' artists; and only because they were the mothers of these artists. For example, Gregoria Perez, a weaver from Polo, Bulacan appears in the *CCP Encyclopedia* entry on the Tagalog playwright-director Valente Cristobal, one of seventeen children she raised with her barber-husband Timoteo Cristobal. Also mentioned was the fact that she added to the family income by selling rice. Definitely a superwoman she was.

Another such woman was Simplicia Merte. The mother of prolific Ilonggo playwright-composer-fictionist Angel Magahum (1867–1935), she supported him after his father died. She managed a textile business, weaving *jusi* and *sinamay* herself. Though it is obvious that Angel Magahum's success is due to his innate talents as a writer and composer (he wrote the score for all the songs in his eight *zarzuelas* and the music for twenty masses, in addition to creating works of fiction), one cannot deny the great supportive role his mother played in his life and career.

Nineteenth century Philippine painting was, understandably, dominated by male artists. There are a number of reasons why so few Filipino women made it to the art scene. First, in the 19th century (and earlier) women were not encouraged to go to school, much less to art school. Second, even if they had talent in painting (or in music or in writing), and formal training was not really necessary, they were not encouraged to develop such talent in the same manner as they were exhorted to practice sewing and embroidery, perhaps because painting was deemed less useful in homemaking than these two latter activities. Third, artistically gifted women, even granting that

they were not discouraged by their family to indulge their talent, hardly had any time to develop it because most of their adult life would be spent in rearing children, since they usually got married at age fifteen or younger and gave birth to six children or more.

A very interesting example is Clemencia Ramirez who was an artistically gifted student of the painter Lorenzo Guerrero. She later became Guerrero's wife and bore him nine children. She could have been a painter, a famous one at that, too, but with nine children to nurture, she had no time to tend to her brushes, paints, and canvas. So now her 'fame' is pegged to being the wife of painter Lorenzo Guerrero and mother of writers Fernando and Manuel Guerrero, and grandmother of the other famous Guerreros of Malate, Manila (including Leon Ma. Guerrero and Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil).

Musically inclined women found themselves in the same predicament. They had no time to blossom into full-fledged artists themselves but, having given the first music lessons to their male offspring who would eventually become famous, their names are mentioned in the biographies of the latter.

Such is the case of Feliza Santos, who was a singer married to violinist, Vitaliano Buenaventura. She reared thirteen children, one of whom is the now famous composer-conductor Alfredo Buenaventura (one of whose popular works is the opera *Urduja*).

Another singer, Luisa Beltran, married a church organist and bandmaster, Fortunato Buencamino. The well-known composer Francisco Buencamino is one of ten children of this musical couple. (Incidentally, internationally renowned pianist Cecile Licad traces her roots to this family.)

Composer Jerry Dadap first heard "Verdi Arias" from his mother Dionisia Amper, another talented and prolific woman who reared thirteen children.

There were many other women who were musically/artistically inclined but who opted to pursue full time the traditional role assigned to women—that of mother and wife. These include Marcela Lopez, mother of violinist Gilopez Kabayao; Asuncion Roces, mother of composer Lucrecia Kasilag; Raymunda Carriaga, mother of Philippine Madrigal Singers' founder and director Andrea Veneracion; Adela Lim, mother of pianist-marimbist Ernestina Crisologo; and Marcelina Cruz, grandmother of composer-pianist Willy Cruz.

Some women did manage to pursue careers in acting/singing, and at the same time raise children and keep their marriage intact. For example, Casiana de Leon, a leading lady in the *comedia* and *zarzuela*, was married to actor-director-playwright Hermogenes Ilagan, with whom she had thirteen children.

Patrocinio Tagaroma was the principal actress of the Compania de Zarzuela Carvajal. She had six children, one of whom was Monang Carvajal who surpassed her mother's fame, as an actress both on the stage and in cinema.

On the other hand, Praxedes (Yeyeng) Fernandez (1871–1919), a very popular actress-singer-dancer at the end of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century was able to devote her life to her career because she was childless. She appeared in Spanish *zarzuelas* like *El Anillo de Hierro*, She and her husband also tried their hand at producing plays and operas.

Dolores Paterno is the only woman composer of the 19th century cited in the history of Philippine music. And only one of her compositions is mentioned—the song *"La Flor de Manila"* (the lyrics in Spanish were written by her brother Pedro Paterno, the author of the first Filipino novel, *Ninay.*) *"La Flor de Manila"* was so popular that it was adopted and vernacularized in the different regions in the Philippines, many of them claiming it as their very own folksong.

Going back to the visual arts: Ines Dalhag Caancan, the mother of Paete sculptor Jose Caancan, partly supported her family by sewing clothes and embroidering the robes of religious icons. Valentina Velasco was a nun who painted and did sculpture in between her religious duties; the grand-aunt of painter Gabriel Custodio, taught the child Gabriel the rudiments of art. Mariana de la Rosa, aunt of Fernando Amorsolo's contemporary, painter Fabian de la Rosa, taught Fabian his first art lessons. Fabian later immortalized her in his painting titled *La Pintora.*

The few women whose names appear in Philippine Art History as artists in their own right and not as nurturers of famous male artists are:

1. Pelagia Mendoza (1867–1939): The first woman student of the Academia de Dibujos y Pintura (the only co-educational institution in the 19th century). She married engraver and silversmith Crispulo Zamora, her former schoolmate. Their union produced eight children. When Crispulo died, Pelagia carried on their silver smithing and engraving business, located in R. Hidalgo, Quiapo, which virtually cornered the market for the making of trophies and medals. They are known for utilizing native materials such as coconut shells, mother-of-pearl shells, and the Philippine hardwood kamagong, and using in their designs Philippine vegetal forms like the coconut tree, bamboo, anahaw, banana, and gabi leaves. Pelagia Mendoza won an award in sculpture for a bust of Columbus during the 1892 celebration of the discovery of America.
2. Carmen Zaragoza y Roxas (1867–1943): Her painting, *Dos Inteligencias,* won a prize in 1892, during the quatrocentennial celebration of Columbus' discovery of America. Also, her two landscape paintings were awarded a copper medal in the Exposicion Regional de Filipinas in 1895.

Other Filipino women artists who participated in this exposition were Rafaela Calanta, Fermina David, Josefa Majo, Concepcion de Montilla, Concepcion Ortiz, sisters Concha and Adela Paterno, Ana Garcia Plana, and Olimpia Teran de Abella.

3. Paz Paterno (1867–1914) is known to students now more than the other women painters of her generation, including her half-sisters Adelaida and Concha, because one of her still life paintings has been included in the *Portfolio of 60 Masterpieces of Philippine Art.* Aside from the deft brush strokes and skillful blending of hues and tones her work shows a very imaginative approach to her subject. Instead of placing the fruits on a table, which is the usual still life arrangement, Paz Paterno used a landscape for a background. Also, she magnified the fruits (you can readily recognize the lanzones, mangoes, and bananas) without adjusting the proportion of the background landscape to them; but instead of jarring the senses, the fanciful distortion my very well charm the viewer.
4. Adelaida Paterno (1886–1962) is a half-sister of Paz Paterno. Only one work of hers is known to us. It is a countryside scene showing a cluster of nipa huts, painted with human hair on Chinese silk (fig. 1).

The women painters created mostly landscapes and still lifes, not historical or biblical scenes. The reason for this is the fact that the latter were generally commissioned by the government or the church, who of course, would favor male over female painters to do the important works. Their favoring landscapes and still lifes can also be explained by their traditional training in embroidery and other applied arts in which nature designs were emphasized, such as fruits, flowers, leaves, and vines.

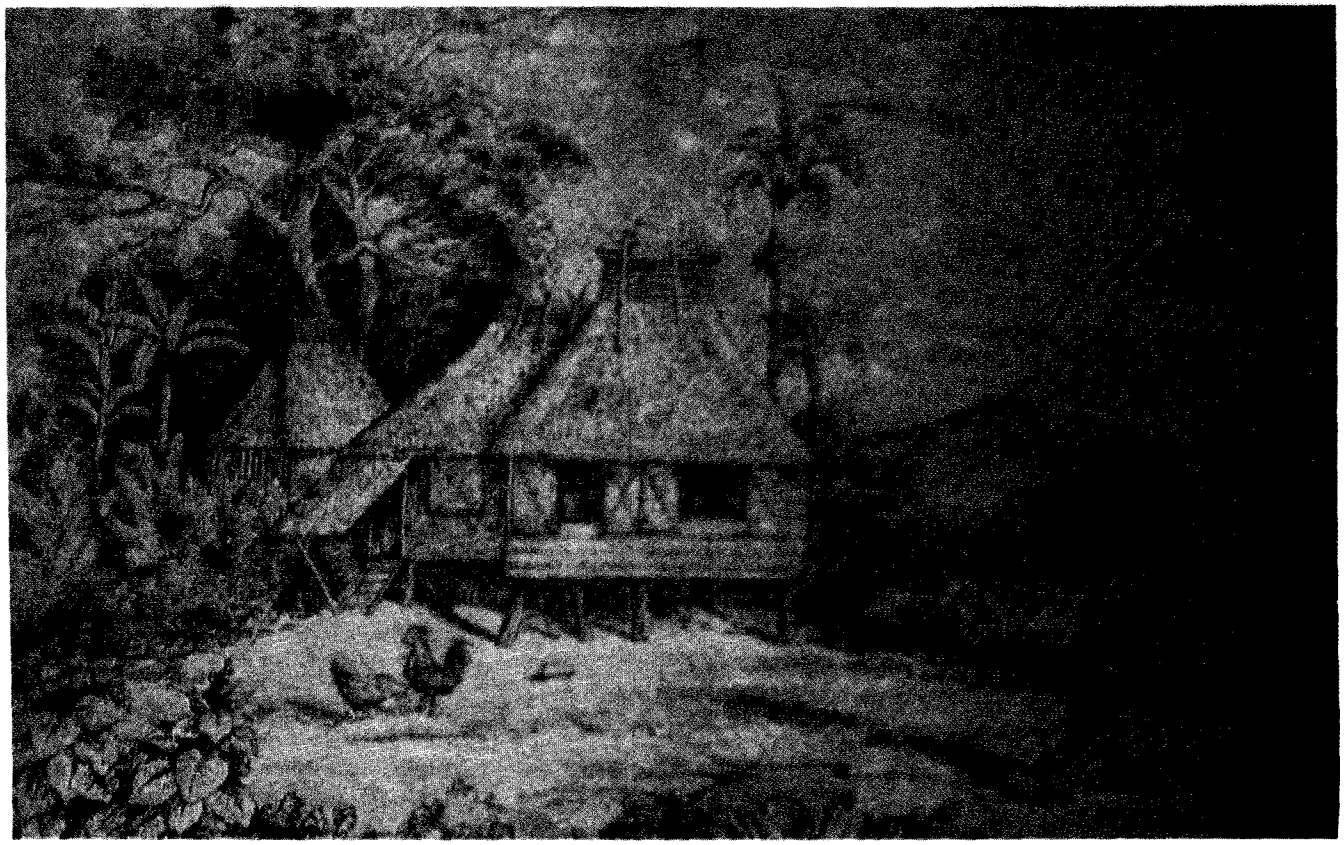

Figure 1: *Country Scene* attributed to Adelaida Paterno.Human Hair on (Chinese) silk, ca. 1897
33.9 cm x 45 cm x 7 cm. Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas Collection.

THE FILIPINA AS ART SUBJECT

The Virgin Mary (in her various images as Mater Dolorosa, Immaculada Concepcion, Lady of the Rosary, Madonna, among others) dominated early Philippine painting, which from the time she was introduced to the Philippines by the Spanish missionaries, was used in the propagation of Christianity. When art was secularized at the end of the eighteenth century, although the Virgin Mary still continued to be painted or carved, the Filipino woman now became the favorite subject of painters and engravers. She was portrayed not as a passive, clinging creature, but as an independent, dynamic entrepreneur; not as a seductive vamp but as a nurturing mother. We encounter her as teacher-guide, a vendor of various merchandise, a washer-woman, an embroiderer, a musician—clothed in plain cotton *baro't saya,* or elegantly garbed in finely embroidered *piña* or *jusi camisa* and silk skirt.

A rare lithograph shows an ambulant woman vendor of *buri* mats, probably woven, if not by herself, then by one of her women kin. In Philippine culture, weaving (whether textile or mats) is done by womenfolk; basket weaving, on the other hand, is done by both men and women.

A frequently depicted subject in late 19th century (and early 20th century) paintings and magazine illustrations is the *Buyera* or Betel nut vendor. This is a clear testimony to the betel nut-chewing tradition practiced in all regions of the Philippines—from the Cordilleras in the north to Tawi-Tawi in the South; in the mountains as well as on the plains; among the Christianized and Islamized folks as well as in the animistic groups. It is interesting to note that betel nut chewing carries cultural meanings beyond mere assuaging of hunger pangs, such as a gesture of hospitality, or an offering of friendship or love. Betel-chewing figures in many rituals—such as

harvest, courtship, wedding, and healing rituals. The sanitary code introduced at the beginning of the 20th century by the American colonial authorities prohibited spitting in public places. This led to the gradual disappearance of the betel-chewing custom since this involved frequent spitting.

The *buyera* prepares the mixture, spreading lime on a betel leaf; wrapping or folding this leaf around a slice of areca nut (an optional ingredient is a tiny piece of tobacco), then sells the prepared betel wads to waiting customers.

The oil painting *Buyera* by Jorge Pineda won a bronze medal at the St. Louis Exposition of 1904. Perhaps to the spectators, the painting's significance lies as much in the subject represented as in the artistry of the creator. 'Local color' was, after all, what they were looking for in this Exposition where the Philippines was introduced to the American lay-person for the first time. And, certainly, to them the tradition of betel chewing is as exotic as the women who prepared and sold the mixture of areca nut, lime, and betel leaf.

Jorge Pineda's painting has its antecedent in an illustration entitled *La Buyera*, which accompanies an essay on the *buyo* seller published in *La Ilustracion Filipina* on June 15, 1859. This essay and illustration (cited and reprinted in Ma. Luisa Camagay's book) form part of a series on the life of working women in 19th century Manila, including, among others, the *lechera* (milk vendor), the *cigarrera* (cigarette factory worker), and *costurera* (dressmaker).

The Filipina embroidering a piece of cloth has been a favorite subject of painters from the late 19th century up to the present. Two of the more popular works on the subject are Jorge Pineda's and Ben Alano's.

The finished articles of the embroiderers are works of art in themselves. The portraits done in the *miniaturismo* style, showing the fine intricacies of the sitter's embroidered *camisas*

are an eloquent testimony to this. In a way, we can say that in the portraits, two Filipinas are presented: the sitter herself and the embroiderer, absent but represented by her exquisite creation. And the portraits celebrate two arts: the painter's and that of the embroiderer.

Damian Domingo, the director of the first Academy of Art in the Philippines, painted a number of album pictures depicting Filipino men and women in different occupations and wearing representative costumes. One of these shows a *mestiza* shopkeeper, carrying a bundle of woven textile and turning the key to open the door of her business stall (fig.2). This is a pictorial record which proves that the 19th century Filipina was not just a housewife who depended on her husband to support her and her children: as shopkeeper or itinerant vendor, as washerwoman or embroiderer, she contributed to the family income.

A concrete example from history is Doña Teodora Alonso. Being an *ilustrada* did not prevent Rizal's mother from pursuing a business of her own—"she cured and sold ham, ran a small rice mill and traveled to nearby towns selling or bartering merchandise," according to her great grandniece.

Another 19th century Filipina businesswoman was Rufina Cabangon who commuted to Binondo from Tayabas to trade coffee, cocoa, and embroidered clothes.

One picture in Damian Domingo's album shows a woman fish vendor. She is barefoot and wears a piece of cloth around her head, probably to keep her hair in place as well as to absorb the sweat from her brow. Whereas the women from the middle and upper classes in Domingo's album wear gold necklaces with pendants, those from the lower class, like this fish vendor, wear cloth and cardboard scapulars as religious accessory, *anting-anting* (amulet), and ornament rolled into one.

The *Seller of Pots and Pans from Pasig* depicts a woman wearing a *salakot* to protect her from the sun. Like the fish

Figure 2: *Una Mestiza Mercadera de Manila* by Damian Domingo, ca 1830, water color on rice paper. 15.4 cm x 11 cm.

vendor, she is barefoot and wears a red scapular. Usually it is the men who produce the pots and the women who sell them, although in the Cordilleras it is the women who make the pots.

We observe that the Damian Domingo album pictures are not portraits of individual persons but are representations of types, showing not the personality and character but the costumes and occupations of the subjects.

In the third quarter of the 19th century when the Filipino merchants accumulated wealth from the agriculture and trade boom, the portrait became a significant status symbol on two levels: one, it reflects that the family is rich, considering that it takes money to commission an artist to paint the portrait; and, two, the portrait shows the material possessions of the subject that are themselves wealth indicators, such as clothes with delicate embroidery, diamond-studded rings and earrings, gold lockets and necklaces, pearl-encrusted *peinetas;* velvet or satin curtains, shining lamps and mirrors, tables, chairs and pianos imported from Europe.

Unlike the Damian Domingo pictures which represent types, not individuals, these portraits show specific women, as indicated by the names. However, what stands out in most of these portraits is not so much the personality of the subject as the material possessions enveloping her; or to put it in another way—the sitter as a person is almost upstaged by her 'role' as a mannequin.

Antonio Malantic's portrait of Inocencia Francia of the prominent Francia family of Pagsanjan, Laguna is an interesting example. Here we see Inocencia in an exquisitely embroidered transparent *camisa*, holding a gold chain (which would have disappeared in the intricacies of the lace *panuelo* had it been worn around her neck). Inocencia's jewelry is understated—she wears only one ring, a pair of earrings, and a *peineta*. Similarly portrayed is Leticia Jimenez by an unknown artist from Sta. Ana, Manila (fig. 3).

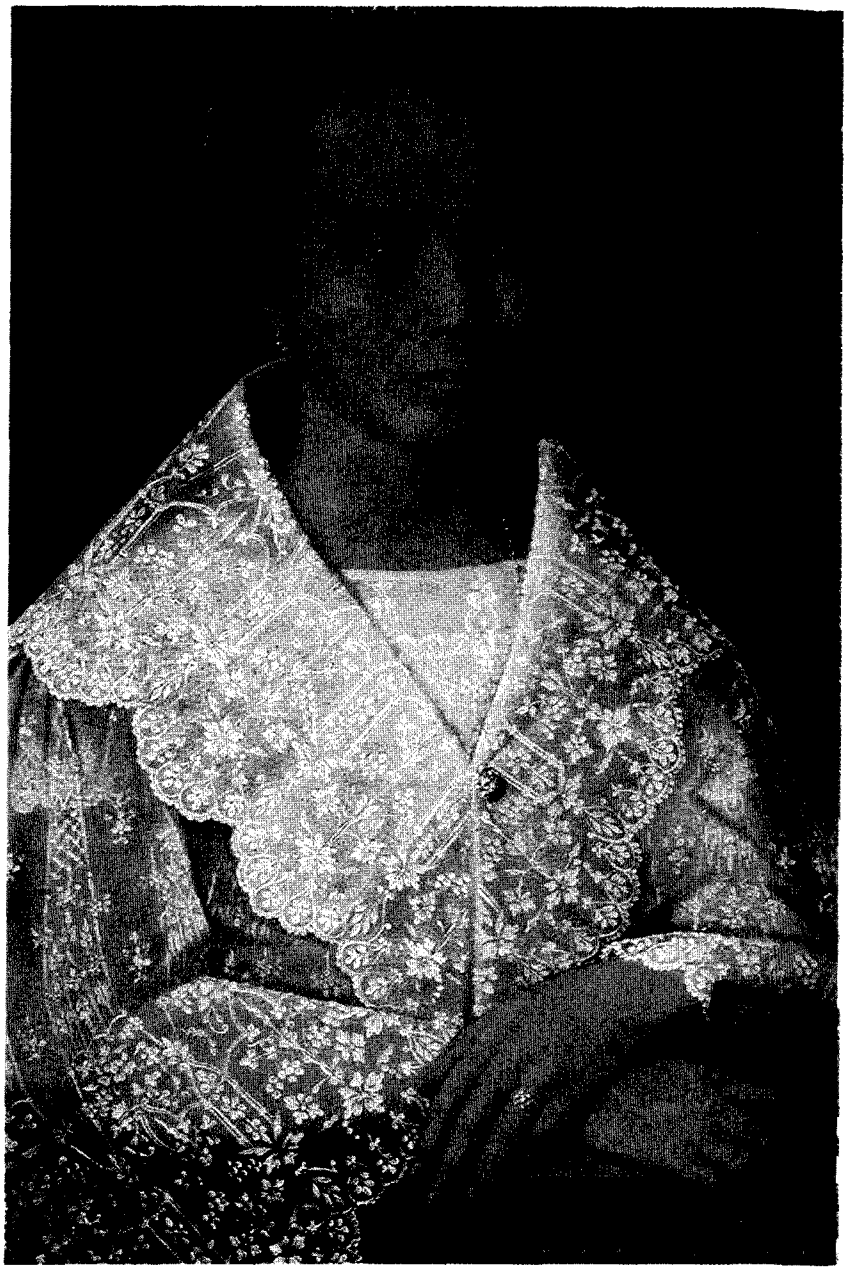

Figure 3: *Portrait of Leticia Jimenez* by an unknown artist from Sta. Ana, Manila, oil on canvas, 67.1 cm x 50.9 cm. Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas Collection.

It is significant to note that in all these portraits the women present a serious, unsmiling face. This is a reflection of what was deemed proper at that time. In the 20th century, with the coming of the Americans and Kodak, the 'say cheese' look replaced the dour appearance in pictures. Bared teeth no longer is indicative of lack of breeding and urbanity. Even in the so-called 'formal' portraits, a smile is now encouraged.

Simon Flores is known not only through the portraits he was commissioned to paint but also through two famous genre pieces: *Primeras Letras* (fig. 4) and *Feeding the Chickens*.

Primeras Letras, shows a mother teaching her daughter the alphabet. Calling to mind the many book illustrations showing Doña Teodora Alonso teaching the young Jose Rizal to read, this painting underlines one of the many roles the Filipina mother is expected to fulfill—aside from doing household chores like cleaning the house, washing clothes and cooking meals, she is also expected to teach her children the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic (if she is literate). If she cannot herself read, she still is a teacher since aside from training them to cook, wash clothes, and clean the house, she teaches her daughters to sew and mend clothes, and how to embroider handkerchiefs, pillowcases, and underwear.

Like *Primeras Letras, Feeding the Chickens* underlines the role of mothers as trainers: the little girl beside the mother will someday do the same routine, having learned what she has observed her mother do. And she is starting early—she helps in little ways—like holding the winnowing basket. And if one looked closely at the mother—how young she appears. The image is not an idealization, it is realistic; for we know that in the 19th century (and earlier) the women married as young as 15 (even 13). A woman still unmarried at 25 was already considered an old maid.

One of the very first paintings in which the Filipina serves as a symbol of *Inang Bayan* (Motherland Country) is Juan

Figure 4: *Primeras Letras* by Simon Flores, ca 1890, oil on canvas 86.4 cm by 61 cm., U.P. Vargas Museum collection.

Luna's *España Guiando a Filipinas.* Depicted are a brown-skinned woman, a head shorter than the white lady who is leading her up the steps towards progress. From this painting it is clear that Juan Luna was not thinking of the possibility of the fight for Philippine independence from Spain, but, rather, the continuing guidance of the Philippines by Spain. Reform, not independence, was his goal; and he was one in this with the other *ilustrados* then studying in Madrid—Jose Rizal, Lopez Jaena, Pedro Paterno, and Marcelo del Pilar.

The *Tipos del Pais* in three dimensions are the sculptural counterpart of Damian Domingo's album drawings. One of the Graciano Nepomuceno's *tipos* shows a woman carrying a pot: a common genre theme in both painting and sculpture until the first half of the 20th century, this image has perpetuated the woman-pot cliché, also calling to mind the variant —the woman with a broken pot (a reference to lost virginity).

Very rarely do we encounter nudes in 19th century Philippine art. And the few times that the figure of a woman is rendered bare, it does not refer to a specific individual or even to a type, but is taken as an allegorical figure or as a symbol. For example, Jose Rizal's sculpture *Triumph of Science over Death* shows a naked woman, representing science, carrying a torch and standing on a skull. In his other work, *Triumph of Death over Life,* an unconscious naked woman lies under a smiling skull.

One of the entries submitted to the Exposicion Regional de Filipinas in 1895 was a sculptural piece *Espiritu y Materia* by Marcelo Nepomuceno which depicts a priest embracing a naked woman. One can hardly make the imagination leap from the concrete to the abstract. It is the figure of the priest that prevents the naked form of the woman from transcending its physicality. Even if one can see it as a symbol of Filipinas as a country suffering under colonial frailocracy, one can still get stuck with recollections of real encounters between Spanish

frailes and Filipino *dalagas*. One can even imagine it as an illustration of Juli and Padre Camorra. In any case, the sculpture was not approved for exhibition.

Another piece of sculpture which was also censored although the female figure was fully clothed was Marcelo Nepomuceno's *13 de Agosto* showing a woman symbolizing the Philippines, brandishing a bolo against a lion, representing Spain, and an eagle representing the United States. This was sent to the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 but it was not allowed to be exhibited because of its strong anticolonial message.

When Jose Rizal was in Dapitan he created a terra-cotta sculpture of a woman washing clothes (fig. 5). This is probably the first in a long list of *lavanderas* in art, culminating in the canvasses of Fernando Amorsolo painted in the 1920s and 1930s. Idealizing rustic women, Amorsolo's paintings depict washing clothes not as a backbreaking and hand-chaffing chore but as a cool, pleasurable task, especially in the canvasses where bathers are shown splashing happily near the *lavanderas*.

CONCLUSION

In the 19th century the Filipina seems to have been more visible as art subject than as artist.

As an artist she was a victim of three forms of discrimination:

1. Discrimination arising from the definition of art—the artistic endeavors in which the Filipina was engaged, like pottery, textile weaving, mat weaving, embroidery, were not considered art because the products had a utilitarian function.
2. Discrimination in the categorization of paintings—still lifes and landscapes, which the Filipina artist favored, were considered less important than historical or allegorical paintings.
3. Discrimination in family roles—the 19th century Filipina was burdened with raising a big family (many had more

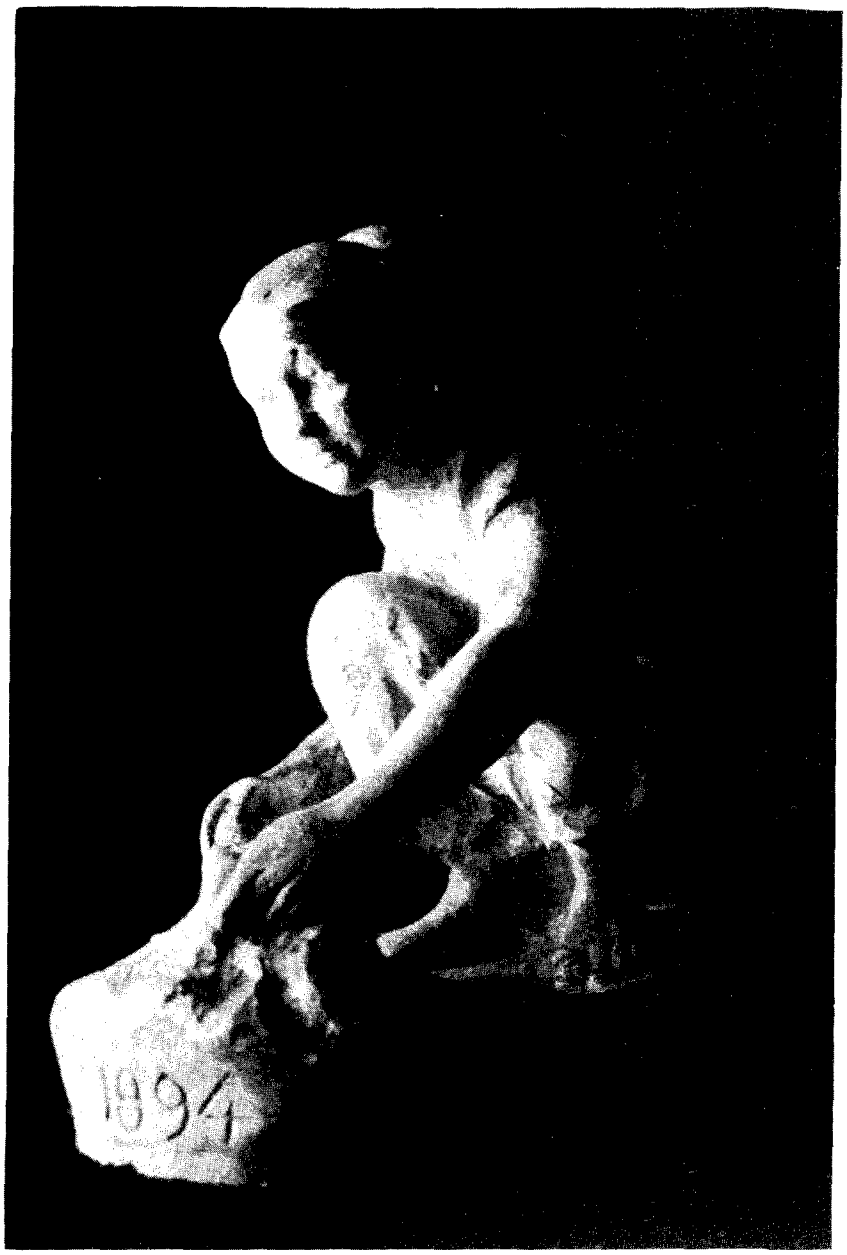

Figure 5: *Ruella* (Lavandera or Laundrywoman) terra-cota sculpture attributed to Jose Rizal, ca 1894, 6.5 in (w) x 3.5 in (l) x 7 in (h) Andrea Morales Edang Collection.

than ten children). Thus she had no time to nurture her talent, only her talented (as well as untalented) offspring.

As an art subject the Filipina is presented by Filipino male artists of the 19th century as a respectable person. Whether she belongs to an *ilustrado* family or comes from the working class, she is imbued with dignity. And whether she is represented as a 'type' or as an 'individual', it is not her physicality or sensuality or sexuality which is the focus; rather, what is underlined is her role in society: as mother, teacher, entrepreneur, or artist.

It is significant to note that the Filipina is never presented in the nude in 19th century paintings. There are a few examples of nudes in sculpture but these are allegorical and therefore the physicality is transcended.

We can say that the Filipina is both subject and predicate in 19th century art. The Filipina is not an object, much less an object of 'male gaze'. We can only concede to her being an object of admiration—of both the artist and the spectator, male or female.

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