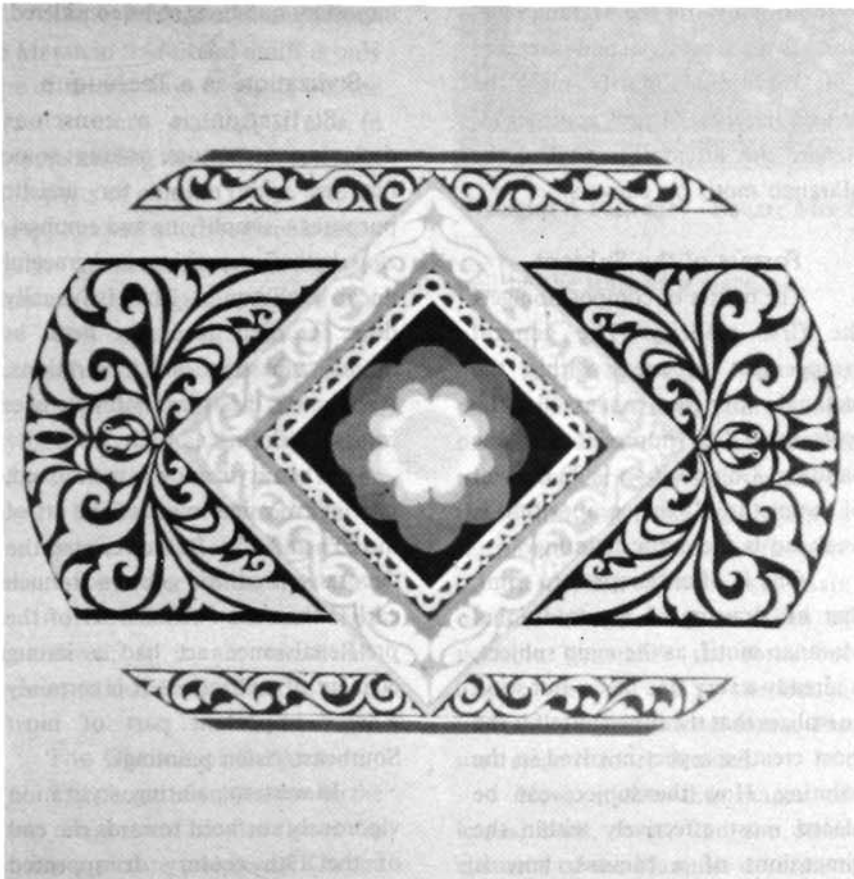


Maranao Ornamental Designs in Two-Dimensional Art

by Bertoldo J. Manta



“Rinti A Bac” A Lady’s Bracelet

The art of the Filipino Muslims from Lanao del Sur, better known as the Maranao, is one of the most appreciated ethnic arts in the Philippines. It is said that all forms of the Maranao art emerged from **Tominaman Sa Rogong**, a relative of Bantugan in the Maranao epic Darangen.

The Maranao art is typically peasant folk art. It is basically utilitarian from the smallest comb to the biggest boat. And it is not as complicated as it may look. The ever-present basic design called **Okir** is usually made more interesting by the continuous and graceful flow of botanical, floral or zoological elements. Elegant combinations of primary colours add zest and allure.

But the Maranao represent horses, serpents, birds, buffalo horns and various other animals in an abstract or non-representational way. This strict adherence to abstractions can be best explained by the Koran’s teachings which forbid any kind of animal or human representations in art. Muslim designs are thus purely geometrical and ornamental.

It is common among folk artists to give life to things which are used daily. Their umbrellas bloom with richly coloured embroideries; the intricately carved fronts of their houses are almost overwhelmingly

The author, a Filipino Maranao Muslim, is the Senior Specialist for Visual Arts of the SPAFA Regional Centre. Prior to this post, he was a Professor at the Graduate Studies Programme of the College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines.

painted with enamel in their brightest hues. Chests, farming tools, beds and many other implements are patiently inlaid or carved in reliefs.

It would seem as if the Maranao are insecure unless they are surrounded with beauty. What is ugly is taken away; what is painful, fearful or miserable is not portrayed. A design is always the consolidation of an idea associated with love and beauty.

Two-Dimensional Approach

At the beginning, one is usually most absorbed by techniques -- controlling materials and acquiring skills. Often he is grateful just to have a picture come out looking reasonably like its subject. Accurate representation becomes a triumph of sort and it is only at a later time when one realizes that there is considerably more to painting than just a good eye and sound technique.

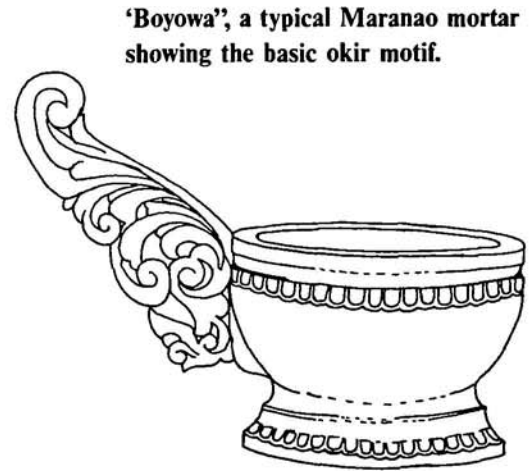
The first hurdle may be overcome. But then one has yet to express and put his skills into more meaningful use: to search out and reveal nature's underlying designs, to interpret aspects of nature, and to understand the cultural heritage of the people where he belongs.

Cezanne writes: "painting is meditation with a brush". This suggests that brush and paint are vehicles primarily for mental conceptions and that deep intelligence must be brought to bear upon the act of painting. The mind plays a role, just as important as technique, in the formation and presentation of graphic images.

It is said that developing creative imagination or a creative viewpoint means beginning to comprehend folk art. It is also the



Left: A Maranao tobacco container



'Boyowa', a typical Maranao mortar showing the basic okir motif.

start of constructing paintings -- realistic, abstract, ordinary, or conventional -- on the Maranao art, which is more personal and inventive.

Traditional motifs must be revived in terms of new approaches. Hence, the attempt to stylize the Maranao motif on canvass.

Format of the Subject

The matter of composition gets the first priority. The general arrangement of areas within the rectangle of the canvass is the spectator's first impression of the painting. Composition is 90 percent of the picture. If the composition is weak, so is the entire painting.

One is often tempted to think that his drawing of the traditional Maranao motif, as the main subject, is already a very fine piece. But soon he realizes that the subject itself is the most creative aspect involved in the painting. How the subject can be placed most effectively within the dimensions of a canvass, how it relates to those four edges of the rectangle, and how the composition

can be projected, as directly and interestingly as possible, are important questions to be considered.

Stylization as a Technique

Stylization is a conscious designing of nature, taking some liberties with nature for artistic purposes -- simplifying and emphasizing rhythmic repetitions and graceful linear arabesques. This is usually done for such decorative items as murals, tapestries and illustrations. Apparently, it has its legitimate uses in easel painting as well.

When stylization is mentioned, it brings to mind much of the art of the 20's and 30's. But, of course, the decorative tradition goes back much earlier than that. Almost all of the pre-Renaissance art had a strong element of stylization. It is certainly a very important part of most Southeast Asian paintings.

In western painting, stylization vigorously surfaced towards the end of the 19th century. It appeared mostly in book and magazine illustrations and in works related to the Art

Nouveau Movement. Many people regarded stylization as being synonymous with decoration but this is only partly true. Henri Matisse, a distinguished modernist, once said:

“What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity, and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter: an art which might be fit for every mental worker, he be a businessman or a writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue”.

Obviously, this notion would not appeal to those who consider art as an emotional catharsis, an expression of the agonies of the artist and his times.

The stylized decorative approach to Maranao traditional motif is only one of several ways to search out the order in crafts making. It aids in comprehending the design present in all aspects of culture. It also affords the exploration of ethnographic art as sources for inventions whose ultimate aims are to be elegant and gratifying.

This approach removes all accidents and trivial details to enable the interpretation of the subject. In stylized decoration, the subject and what it elicits from the artist in the way of harmonious relationships of line, shape, texture and pattern are essential. In other words, stylization is individualized rather than generalized; it is an “artificial” representation of one’s creative mind.

The Choice of Subject

The choice of subject can be the most important single factor in getting a picture under way. On the other hand, the response of an artist to some visual situation could just as



“Langkit A Patirogo” - Square Motif

well be the start of a piece.

Plan

To start a plan, one must outline the Maranao traditional motif on canvas. Instead of being attentive to the irregularities and particulars of the subject, one must begin stylizing the process with strict simplification.

Establish the most basic outlines and masses. As much as possible, generalize the form but always with an eye to the design inherent to the traditional forms. The next stage is more detailed.

Now, stylize the shapes of leaves, buds, ferns, and the other elements of the Maranao decorative motifs. Do not sketch the stems realistically -- treat them as

handsomely designed shapes. Sketch plans for visual echoes, for repetitions, to help relate the various areas throughout the whole composition.

Other details of old Maranao motifs could be discovered in museums and curio stores. Searching these places may spark ideas on new ornamental embellishments without disregarding the main thrust of the design.

Medium Used

While physically or mentally working out the picture format, the artist must already be deciding what medium is most suitable for the subject. Many painters specialize in a certain medium. For example, there

are artists who are exclusively oil painters or watercolourists.

But experiencing the use of different media could enhance the choice for the best possible paint for the composition. In addition, it may be wiser to consider certain preliminary questions, such as: Does the subject require opaque or transparent treatment? Would traditional motif lend itself to a complex sequence of opaque, semi-opaque and transparent washes (*acrylic*)? Or, would it be possible to technically capture those textures and effects in a quick wash (*watercolour*)? Is there a need for

subtle, meticulous blending which is possible only in oil? Or, would hard-edged colour shapes work best in acrylic?

In this study, acrylic is the best choice among the mentioned media. It is probably most sensible to restrict oneself to a favoured medium. There is no need to fight an uphill battle against a technique which is not congenial to one's taste and skills.

It is always wise to remember that in the long run, the completed picture must stand on its own to be viewed and enjoyed as a self-contained entity.

Use of Color

Contemporary painting depends on the mood, design, space and structure. Above all it depends on the element of colour as a surface. An artist's personal way of dealing with colour is crucial to the success of his paintings. Colours may be used to develop awareness of one's taste. It can be used for one's own sake as a decorative tool and to have fun with it.

Unexpected colour combinations instead of colours that exist in nature could be used. After all, colours stylize nature's forms. A personal color scheme could also be devised to reinforce and enhance the pure world of Maranao decorative arts in colour and forms.

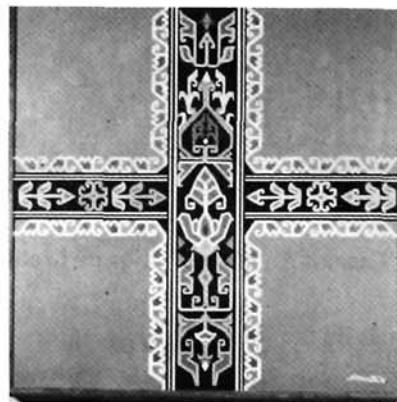
Conclusion

Commercialism has threatened the authenticity and integrity of traditional crafts. This has been brought about by mass production and the present high demand for exportation. As a result of modernization and progress, the so-called traditional arts and crafts have changed in style, color and even function, particularly in commercial crafts.

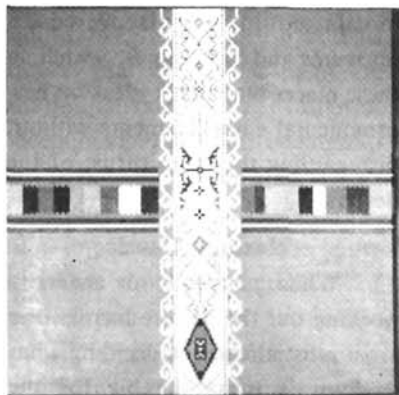
There is a need to preserve traditional Filipino designs and crafts. A documentation of some utilitarian crafts and ceremonial artifacts belonging to the Maranao people of the Philippines could be a step forward. At the same time, interested artists must explore the Maranao's recent arts as well as to reassess their ethnic art motif with an effort to integrate it into the mainstream of contemporary Filipino national art trends.



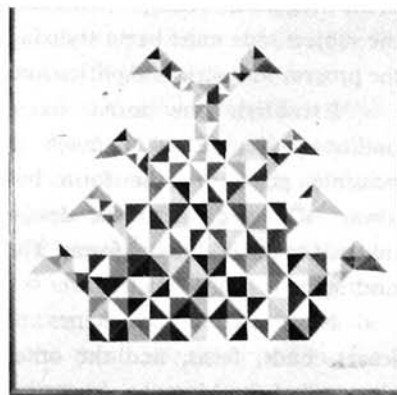
“Okir A Bae” - A Lady's Art Motif



“Landap A Gadong” - The Green Surface



“Langkit A Rambayong” - The Violet Surface



“Minarigai” - A Stairway Pattern