

← Magdadaing,
1976 Oil,
Jose Blanco

woodcarving, pottery, and brasswork, much of it still done with the Malay forge and the *cire perdu* method of casting. Along with these are the folk arts of paper mache animals, paper cut-outs for festival sweets, and brightly-colored delicacies of glutinous rice. All these continue to be produced in rural communities for their needs and for demands from urban centers.

Then there is the level of contemporary art, as painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts, or as two- and three-dimensional expressions. For a long time, there was a distinct separation between the popular traditional arts and the contemporary arts. This was largely because of the western academic prejudice against arts linked to practical function. This is the elitist distinction between the so-called fine arts produced by artists in the context of the academy and the applied arts produced by the peasant folks in the context of everyday needs.

In recent times, however, there has been an increasing interaction between the traditional and the contemporary in Philippine art. Rather than maintaining them as separate categories, there have been efforts to bring the traditional arts into the forefront of Philippine art consciousness.

Research into the traditional arts have been encouraged as shown by the increasing number of master's degree theses on the subject. The main problem in these studies has been to define the elements and characteristics of indigenous art-

A Reassessment

of Philippine Art

by Alice G. Guillermo

Strongly western-influenced as the Philippines may be, it is nevertheless a fact that Philippine culture was born in the Southeast Asian matrix. Indigenous arts, living traditions in folk expressions all over the Philippines, have much in common with other countries of the region, as products of the same tropical environment with its distinct flora and fauna, the same archipelagic setting of land and water, the same basic occupations of rice planting and fishing.

In fact, Philippine art being produced today exists on two levels. And when we speak of Philippine art, we do not exclusively refer to painting and sculpture, but include the popular

forms as well.

There is, first of all, the first and deepest level of traditional art expression that constitute the national-popular culture. These are the living traditions that trace their roots to precolonial times and that drew their life from the Southeast Asian cultural matrix while developing their local adaptations and modifications. Among these are the arts of the rural folks, the weaving traditions, such as the ikat tie-dye cloth found in different parts of the Philippines. Also included is basketry which fuses design and practical function, in a multitude of forms made of bamboo, rattan, and reed grasses.

There is likewise indigenous

making, so as to be able to bring these into the practice of contemporary art. These traditional indigenous arts have been recognized as forming an important part of the Philippine national identity, as Filipinos, and their regional identity as Asians, particularly Southeast Asians.

The visual arts, painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts, as well as music and literature, have been, since the late '60s, concerned with the issue of national identity. This has appeared hand-in-hand with the perception of the true interests of the people and the importance of

advancing these in all fields, including art.

This concern has expressed itself in different ways. On the whole, there has been a discernible effort to move away from western academic aesthetics towards the exploration of Filipino/Asian ways of art-making and conceptualizing art.

Once move in this direction is the significant trend towards the use of indigenous and non-academic materials, handmade paper became widely favoured among printmakers and painters. Soon collages were made, not only with handmade paper but with organic materials, such as

twigs, leaves, and three-dimensional sculptural forms also made use of roots, vines, branches, especially for mobiles.

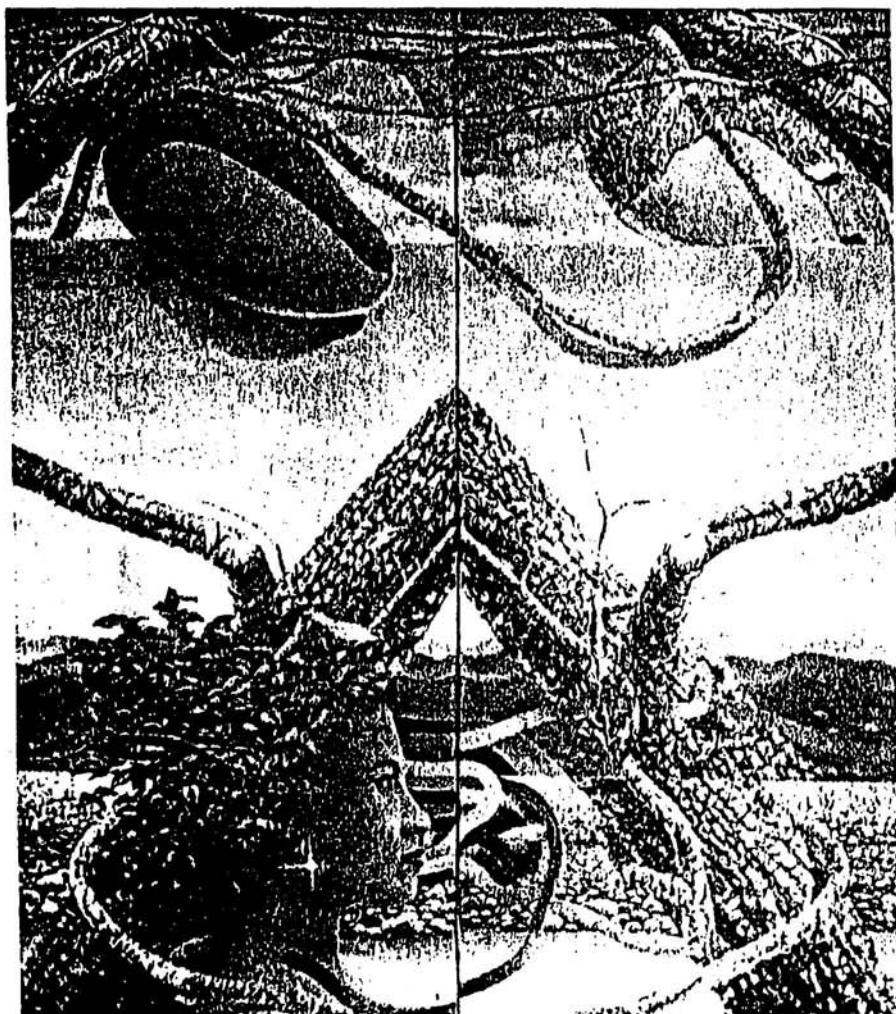
One woman artist, **Imelda Cajipe-Endaya** does large paintings, collaged with sawali panels from interwoven dried leaves, together with fabric, denim pants, crocheted curtains, and blankets to make a statement on the times. Another woman artist, **Paz Abad Santos**, extensively makes use of coconut shells, dyed rope and abaca fiber interwoven and embossed on a burlap surface.

Other materials used are tree bark, shells, and driftwood. Some artists have likewise gone into experimentation in dyes and pigments with local plants and mineral substances although these small efforts can do little against the commercial dominance of imported art materials.

This same trend is seen in sculpture, as well as in new productions of sculpture/furniture in a fusion of design and function. The use of non-academic materials also springs from necessity. Due to the scarcity of whole pieces of wood for sculpture, artists, such as **Jerry Araos** and **Rey Contreras**, have made virtue out of necessity.

They have turned to old wood from demolished houses, even to discarded turn-of-the-century wooden frames from railroad tracks, to create sculpture. This kind of material lends the dimension of time and memory to their work.

This exploration in new materials outside the hierarchising traditions of medium in academic art has been



← Pavane Luzviminda,
1979 Acrylic,
J.P. Bailleux.

going on for some time now. Sculptor **Eduardo Castrillo** uses broad metal sheets welded together; other sculptors, such as **Solomon Saprid** and **Edgar Doctor**, have done important works in junk metal from discarded machines. **Ramon Orlina** does sculpture in glass, sometimes structurally combined with metal.

Needless to say, this is a salutary trend since it opens up an entire range of hitherto overlooked materials, which are, furthermore, readily accessible, in a time of scarcity. This has also served to challenge the ingenuity of third world artists to create art from the materials on hand, thus reducing dependency on expensive and imported materials.

For the ordinary art viewer, the use of familiar and accessible materials has aided in breaking down the alienation between the viewer and the work of art, at the same time inviting him to exercise his own latent creativity, resulting in a greater and more democratic participation in art-making. It is also in this way that art can be revitalized as a vehicle for the people's sentiments.

With this trend in indigenous materials, more artists now try their hand in popular forms which can reach a larger audience. Going beyond oil and canvas paintings, more artists work in prints, posters, murals, illustrations, comics, and editorial cartoons. These forms have their own standards of excellence, and what gives them significance is the kind of content and meaning that they convey.

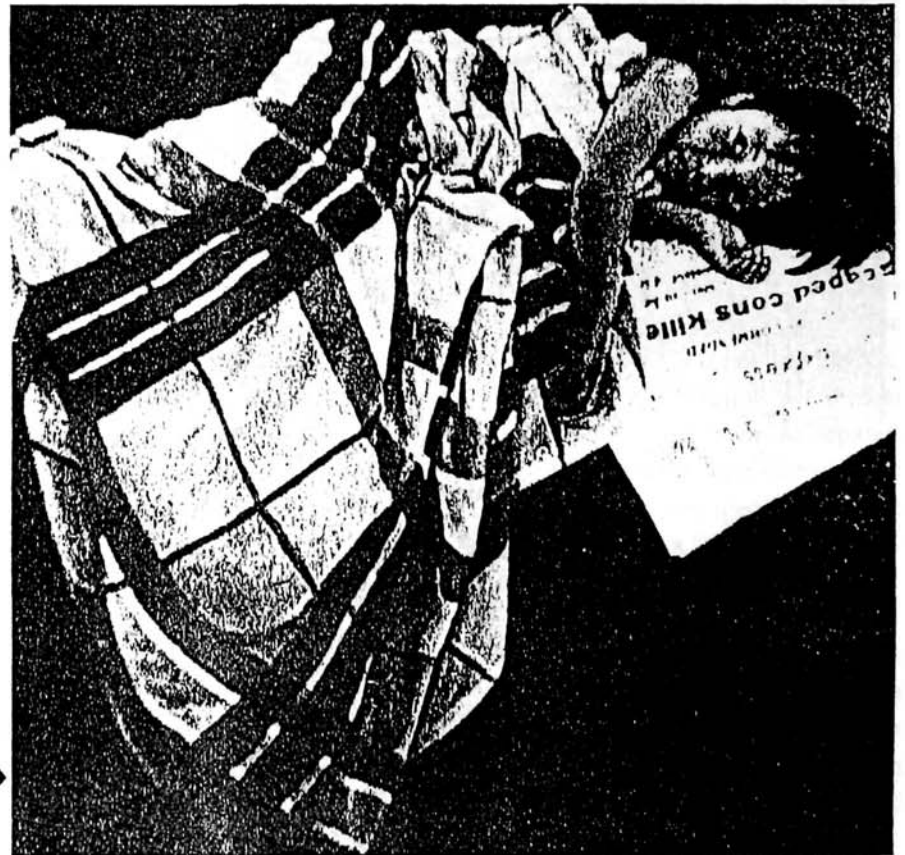
Thus, artists working in these popular forms strive to wean them away from their usual escapist content to relevant subject matter drawn from reality. These forms have also acquired a new flexibility. For instance, artists have developed portable murals which are not fixed on walls, but which are painted on large canvas cloth which can be rolled after their display in a public occasion.

Many artists have also been concerned with bringing their work, previously limited to the possession of wealthy art collectors, to a larger public. They have done this to an extent through quality color reproductions, through travelling exhibits, through art lectures accompanied with slides, and, of course, through the use of popular forms which can be easily disseminated.

An artist has reproduced his pen-and-ink drawings through photocopying. These artists who strive to reach a wider audience have a strong social consciousness as seen in their works through which they express unity with the people's aspirations.

The subjects and themes of recent paintings also reflect the concern to create a truly national art which would further the sense of Filipino/Asian identity. In oil paintings, many artists continue the long tradition of genre scenes, most of these on the life of the peasants and fishermen of the countryside, and a number of the city's poor and how they eke out a precarious existence.

Outside Manila, a flourishing center of folk genre is **Jose Blanco** with his family of painters. Also of Angono are **Nemi Miranda**, **Salvador**



Ang Walang Malay, →
1976 Oil,
Eric Torres.



← Sarimanok,
1975 Acrylic,
Abdulmari Imao.

Another theme taken up by a number of artists, especially women artists, is feminism and the continuing campaign to win equal social, political, and economic rights for women. These artists strive towards a meaningful art as it is drawn from the experiences of everyday and as it poses questions about the present conditions.

With the striving for national identity in art goes the affirmation of Philippine art vis-a-vis the continual massive influx of western cultural importations. The task of decolonization involves not only the economic and political realms but the cultural and artistic as well.

Artists of the Philippines are faced with the challenge to awaken creativity among the large number of the population and to show the way to make art, which draws inspiration from the people's experiences, a potent vehicle for contemporary expression. ■

Juban, and many others. In the Visayas, another large group of artists are based in Cebu province. Mostly influenced by impressionism, they are best known for landscapes, genre scenes, and portraits. A number of them, like Galicano and Subang, have come to Manila to join a wider field.

Aside from folk genre with its traditional subjects of planting, fishing, and doing rural chores; other artists have explored other areas of the folk. Aro Soriano, for instance, has done highly successful series of

paintings on folk songs, legends, and riddles. He has given a fresh and lively interpretation to these and has even brought some into the contemporary context in a witty and humorous vein.

Alongside these, artists of social consciousness have turned to the issues of the day for their subjects: ecology, feminism, and other issues. Many recent nature paintings make a plea for the preservation of the environment and ecological balance.



↑ Market Scene,
1980 Oil,
Tam Austria.