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The Masterpieces of Fernando Amorsolo: Socio- Cultural Image of The Filipinos

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ABSTRACT

Fernando Amorsolo is a prolific and eloquent Filipino painter. For this reason, most of his paintings are considered masterpieces and great works of art. However, according to Francisco Arcellana, a literary critic, “Amorsolo’s paintings have nothing to say and that they were not hard to understand because there is nothing to understand, if at all”. But this is not so, as far as his legions of supporters and admirers are concerned. To them, Amorsolo’s works are “true reflections and representations of the Filipino soul and spirit”. Looking deeply and intently at his great works, an aficionado would surely find the symbols, signs and implications which undoubtedly portray and convey the innate character of the Filipinos. And the images succinctly and clearly point to the true identity of our nationhood and nationality. His masterful depiction of our serene and rustic life, scenic landscape, and natural beauty of the countryside serve as a living narrative of our true culture, social awareness and family values. Pro-Amorsolo critics and supporters conducting review and analysis of his works believed that these pieces are true reflections of the indomitable Filipino mind and spirit because accordingly, Amorsolo’s creations vividly describe the customs, traditions, practices and experiences as a nation. Hence, looking at the more than ten thousand art pieces of Amorsolo, these more than intensely project the lives, hopes, dreams, and common aspirations of our people, here in Asia and the ASEAN region, as well.

Who is Fernando Cueto Amorsolo? What made him a renowned Filipino Painter?

Fernando Cueto Amorsolo was born on May 30, 1892 in Calle Herran (now Pedro Gil Street) in Paco, Manila. His parents were Pedro Amorsolo and Bonifacia Cueto. Though born in Manila, Amorsolo would spent most of his early childhood in Daet, Camarines Norte, the gateway to the Bicol region, lying some 400 kms. South of Manila. It was here in Daet where his passion for painting would be nurtured and his love for the simple rural life would become his source of inspiration throughout his artistic career.

Amorsolo displayed early signs of his artistic talents. He would often hie off to the beach and draw pictures of ships sailing by the coastline. Recognizing the young Amorsolo’s talent, his mother would oftentimes send Fernando’s drawings to her cousin Don Fabian dela Rosa, a well-known painter in Manila.

This early, Amorsolo manifested his love for the rural landscape.

When he was eleven years old, his father died. But before his passing away, his father made sure that his mother would give Amorsolo a proper art education. Fulfilling her promise, his mother brought the family back to Manila and stayed with Don Fabian dela Rosa. It was here at his uncle’s residence, where Amorsolo had his first real exposure and introduction to the world of fine art.

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To support her family his mother would engage in embroidery, while Amorsolo would assist Don Fabian in his studio. It was during these times that Amorsolo got his first lesson in art education from Don Fabian.

In spite of financial hardships, Amorsolo finally obtained his arts degree with honors, and became a member of the first graduating class of the University of the Philippines (UP) School of Fine Arts in 1914.

Amorsolo became a UP Professor in his early 20's and Dean of the UP School of Fine Arts from 1952 to 1955 and immediately made his name in the world of fine arts. At age 25, Amorsolo got a big break in his career when he was commissioned to design the logo for Ginebra San Miguel (a popular and leading brand of alcoholic drink in the Philippines) by the owner of the distillery and beverage company, Don Enrique Zobel. The logo is still in use in its original form today and remained unchanged to date. The logo portrayed St. Michael, the Archangel annihilating the devil. So impressed by his art work, Don Enrique Zobel (a prominent and affluent businessman and a devoted patron of the arts in the Philippines) offered to send Amorsolo to the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid for further studies. Amorsolo took the standard entrance examination at the Academia. And to his pleasant surprise, the academy informed him that, based on the results of his exam, they would accept him not as a student but as a professor at the school, instead.

Settling in and spending seven months in Madrid, Amorsolo was able to observe the works of the masters. He also visited museums and art galleries and studied the works of Diego Velasquez, Goya, Monet, Manet, El Greco, Sargent, Van Dyck and Joaquin Sorolla. Among the masters, it was Diego Velasquez who influenced him most where he learned superior brush work, painting style, and mastery of color. From Sorolla's technique, he would also learn from and build upon it in utilizing the sun to draw out the most dramatic effects from the heightened sunlit colors and dramatic contrasts between light and shade. The perfection of this technique would set Amorsolo apart from his contemporaries.

In spite of his immersion and exposure to Western cultures and influences, Amorsolo remained true to his national identity and social consciousness as a Filipino. He would prefer to dwell and draw the verdant rice fields, cascading falls, gentle valleys and hills of the Philippines rather than draw the sophistication of the European cities. Even his paintings of Spanish women were depicted with slender bodies, narrower hips, and smaller bosoms akin to a typical Filipina rather than the voluptuous and buxomy physique of European women.

Fernando C. Amorsolo was named National Artist in Painting in 1972 and was the first Filipino ever to be given such distinction. He was also called the "Grand Old Man of Philippine Art" during the inauguration of the Manila Hilton's Art Center (where his paintings were exhibited) on January 23, 1969. Although his works covered a wide range of subjects, he was best known for his portrayal of the simplicity and femininity of the Filipina women. Included in his paintings were scenes of traditional Filipino customs, fiestas, occupations, and series of historical paintings on pre-Colonial and Spanish colonization era.

He chose to paint in natural light and perfected the backlighting technique, which all became his own trademarks, earning for him the following awards and recognitions:

Recognition

- ❖ Held a one-man exhibit at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York, exhibiting 40 paintings (1925).
- ❖ First Prize for General Painting at the Manila Carnival Commercial and Industrial Fair (1927).
- ❖ First Prize for his painting "Afternoon Meal of Rice Workers" at the New York World's Fair competing with other paintings from over 79 countries (1939).
- ❖ Exhibited at the Missionary Art Exhibit in Rome with two of his historical paintings entitled "Faith Among the Ruins" and "Baptism of Rajah Humabon" (1950).
- ❖ Exhibited at the International Exposition at the Civetas Des Vatican Pavilion in Brussels, Belgium (1958).
- ❖ Gold Medal of Recognition from the UNESCO National Commission (1959).
- ❖ Cultural Heritage Award from Independence Day National Committee (1963).
- ❖ Amorsolo Retrospective Exhibit at the National Museum at the Department of Tourism in May (1975)
- ❖ Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, Manila, "Lupang Hinirang, Alay ni Amorsolo" in June (1989)
- ❖ Celebration of his Centennial year: The Presidential Commission on Culture and Arts sponsored the "Launching of The Amorsolo Centennial" on May 27 at Galleria de las Islas, El Amancer, Intramuros, Manila (1992)
- ❖ Exhibition at the Lopez Museum, "Amorsolo Drawings" (1992)
- ❖ Exhibition at the National Museum, "Larawan" (1992)
- ❖ Exhibition at the Ayala Museum, "The Corporate Amorsolo" (1992)
- ❖ Conferment of the Doctor of Humanities, Honoris Causa, by the University of the Philippines on September 30 (1992)
- ❖ The PICC Art Gallery exhibit, "The Amorsolo Legacy", an exhibit of works by Amorsolo and of his children and grandchildren (1993)
- ❖ "Fernando, Fernando" exhibit at the Ayala Museum, Makati (2000)
- ❖ "Brush with History" exhibit at the Ayala Museum, Makati (2002)
- ❖ "Pioneer of Philippine Art [Luna, Amorsolo, Zobel]" exhibit at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, USA (2006)
- ❖ Received "Parangal Sentenyal" at University of the Philippines" June 16 (2008)

His major works include:

- 1920 – My Wife, Salud
- 1921 – Maiden in a Stream, GSIS Collection
- 1922 – Rice Planting
- 1928 – El Ciego, Central Bank of the Philippines Collection
- 1936 – Dalagang Bukid, Club Filipino Collection
- 1943 – The Mestiza, the National Museum of the Philippines Collection
- 1946 – Planting Rice, UCPB Collection
- 1958 – Sunday Morning Going To Town, Ayala Museum Collection

Achievements:

- 1908 – 2nd Prize, Bazar Escolta (Asocacion Internacional de Artistas), for Levendo Periodico
- 1922 – 1st Prize, Commercial and Industrial Fair in the Manila Carnival
- 1929 – 1st Prize, New York’s World Fair, for Afternoon Meal of Rice Workers
- 1940 – Outstanding UP Alumnus Award
- 1961 – Rizal Pro Patria Award
- 1961 – Honorary Doctorate in the Humanities, from the Far Eastern University
- 1963 – Diploma of Merit from the University of the Philippines
- 1963 – Patnubay ng Sining at Kalinangan Award, from the City of Manila
- 1963 – Republic Cultural Heritage Award
- 1972 – Gawad CCP para sa Sining, from the Cultural Center of the Philippines

On April 24, 1972, Fernando Cueto Amorsolo quietly passed away due to heart failure in Manila, leaving behind an incomparable legacy and compilation of his great works both as an eminent Filipino painter and a great ASEAN disciple of fine arts.

An Analysis of Fernando Cueto Amorsolo’s Great Works

Fernando Cueto Amorsolo is a prolific and eloquent painter. For this reason, most of his paintings are considered masterpieces and great works of art.

However, according to Francisco Arcellana, a literary critic, *Amorsolo’s paintings have nothing to say and that they were not hard to understand because there is nothing to understand, if at all*. But this is not so, as far as his legions of supporters and admirers are concerned. To them, Amorsolo’s works are *“true reflections and representations of the Filipino soul and spirit”*. Looking deeply and intently at his great works, an aficionado would surely find the symbols, signs and implications which undoubtedly portray and convey the innate character of the Filipinos. And the images succinctly and clearly point to the true identity of our nationhood and nationality.

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While his adverse critics may opine that *“his artistic temperament was simply not suited to generating the sense of dramatic tension necessary for such works”*, we still firmly believed in the theory that true image, symbolism, message and meaning of his art works are subject to the viewers own personal interpretation, appreciation and perception and Amorsolo’s intent in so doing, such as to inspire, awaken, maintain and preserve the sweet memory of the moments work and finally, to instill deep appreciation of cultural and historical values of the Filipino people.

And as specially mentioned in his biography, Amorsolo’s passion for capturing the richness of our natural endowments and tranquil environment do not necessarily mean that he himself did not experience the pain and hardship of a simple life but rather his extreme desire to preserve, inculcate, capture, and immortalize the purity, tranquillity, peace and abundance of such golden era and not to dwell on man’s apathy, callousness, indifference, and cruelty of the rest of the world.

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Let us consider the historical and socio-cultural significance of his early paintings: *Early Filipino State Wedding*, *Early Sulu Wedding*, *The First Baptism in the Philippines*, *The First Mass in the Philippines*, *Urduja*, *Princess Urduja*, *Traders*, *Dreams*, *The Conversion of the Filipinos* (1931), *Defense of a Filipina Woman's Honor* (1945), *Sale of Panay*, *Sikatuna*, *Bataan (Historical place)*, *The Bombing of Intendencia* (1942), *The Burning of Manila* (1949), *The Destruction of Manila by the savage Japanese*, *The Rape of Manila* (1942), *The Making of Philippine Flag*, *at The Explosion* (1944). All of these art works clearly showed that even before the advent of foreign colonial powers on Philippine soil, our nation is already enjoying high level of culture and development. Just looking into these paintings one could already discern the flourishing and progressive way of life of that period. While the paintings were bereft of historical data, an admirer would nonetheless agree and admit to the grandeur and glory of such times. Because these art works defined the evolution of our culture from its simple but distinct traditions, belief, and practices up to the modern western culture. That's why to his supporters; ***“Amorsolo often related on ethnographic photographs, which he rendered on canvass to depict his notion of the pre-colonial Filipino. In contrast to ethnographic photographs that fetishized exotic lands and peoples, Amorsolo suffused his images with quiet dignity”***.

According to an article in the book entitled *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Art* (Flores, 1998), ***Philippine colonial art is an art historical construct that is mainly produced by the art historians who create it out of data, traditional and stock representations, artifacts and their traces. Like a prism, the work changes in its multiple facets: as religious artifact, status symbol, historical artifact, historical document, commodity, and so on...”***. As they say, *a picture is worth a thousand words* because, indeed, it serves as a symbol of a historical fact, socio-cultural event and religious activity. His paintings are ingenious instrument that can be used by historians and chroniclers in the process of recording, gathering, finding, construing, constructing and reconstructing history. Similar with the historical data, the visual image exemplify symbols, metaphor and indicator akin to the socio-cultural events and experiences in a particular era and generation.

The works of Amorsolo clearly prove that every work of art like music, dance, drama, theatre, visual arts and literature are reflections of our own lives. For they provide an opportunity to express the significance of our lives, dreams and aspirations. In the book *Art as Experience*, it says that: *Art is a product of culture, and it is through art that the people of a given culture express the significance of their lives, as well as their hopes and ideals. Because art has its roots in the consummators values experienced in the course of human life, its values have an affinity to commonplace values, an affinity that accords to art a critical office in relation to prevailing social conditions*⁵. Any form of art is a product of our culture because such is based on our own lives, awareness and values. Art is deeply rooted in our thoughts, principles and values based on our experiences in life that's why it serves as the true picture of our general social awareness and factual image of our existing social conditions. Most of his paintings are inspired by the experiences, ideas and feelings of every Filipino and showing his actions, way of life, tradition and beliefs. His paintings reflect the image and social condition of the Filipinos during the reign of the foreign powers from Spain, America and Japan. From the hidden metaphors of his paintings the present generation of Filipinos could easily discern who and what their forebears were.

As vividly expressed in his *obras*, Amorsolo freely painted the genuine image of the Filipinos then even before they were influenced and affected by the foreign ways of the Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese colonizers. From the vibrant illustrations of native industries then (farming, rice planting and trading of locally produced fruits and

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vegetable), way of life (doing laundry by the river, going to church, partaking of lunch and dinner in the rice fields), hobbies (friendly chatting of the farmers, cockfighting and simple gathering). Oftentimes, he would draw inspiration from the lives of ordinary citizens and labourers in order to project and highlight the innate zealotry, industry, integrity and diligence of the Filipinos.

Most of his paintings would undoubtedly portray the genuine image and identity of the Filipinos. They would unmistakably reveal the real thoughts, feelings and actions of the Filipinos. These positive traits are fully demonstrated in the following Amorsolo collections: *Planting Rice (1922)*, *Rice Planting (1946)*, *Planting Rice with Mayon*, *Under the Mango Tree*, *Sunset Over Malabon*, *Landscape*, *Fruit Pickers Under the Mango Tree at El Ciego (The Blind Man) (1928)*, *Maiden in a Stream (1921)*, *Sunday Morning Going to Town (1958)*, *The Return of the Fisherman (1939)*, *the Afternoon Meal of the Workers (1939)*; *Dalagang Bukid (1936)*, *Lavandera*, *Market scene*, *Family Resting in the Shade (1892)*, *Seascape*, *Tinikling in Barrio at Fiesta*. All of these genuinely describe our distinct culture and values as a people.

According to Paul Klee: *art does not render the visible, (but) renders visible – create the possibilities of making sense of traces, making things visible in minds and of rendering the world as if it is seen and known – embodied – by the historical imagination*³. Often times, the message of any art work is not directly expressed but rather purposely concealed within the art itself. It merely provides hints that will serve as guide or clue to its real image it intends to convey to the observer, admirer, viewer or doing the critique. Through keen and critical or diligent search of the metaphors of the true image, symbols or clues in any art work it would provide a clear idea or concept of the historical truth and sound conceptual perspective. We can create a clear perspective or concrete school of thoughts based on the strong symbolism and images as embodied in the art work. These will become the means for expressing our thoughts, feelings, emotions, concepts, and understanding as communicated by the intended symbols, signs, metaphors, and riddle on the canvass.

Indeed, Fernando Amorsolo is a prized Philippine treasure and a renowned ASEAN artist as well.

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Glimpses of Fernando Cueto Amorsolo... The Great Painter

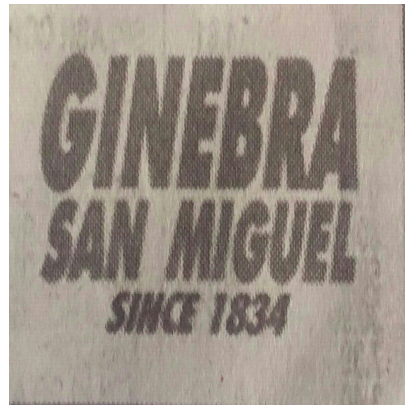


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The famous and original logo of Genebra San Miguel



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Fiesta and other occasion



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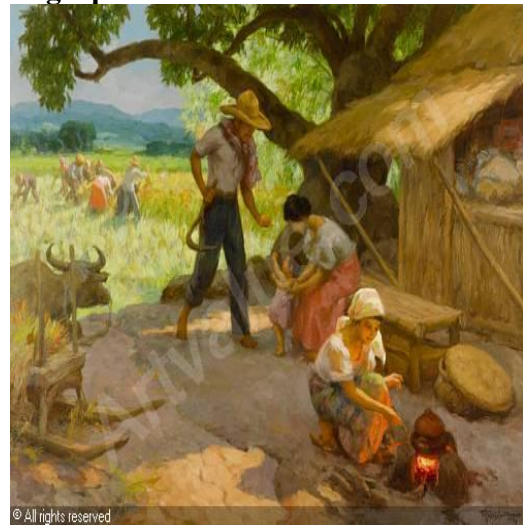
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The Filipino way of life ... A Century Hence

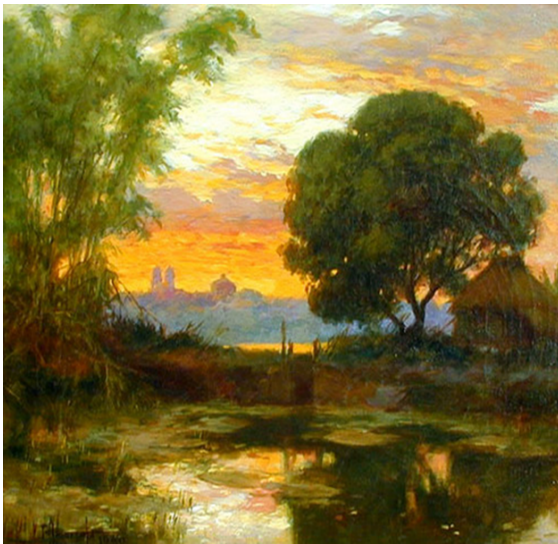


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“Family is first, among equals...”



The Serene Rural Landscapes



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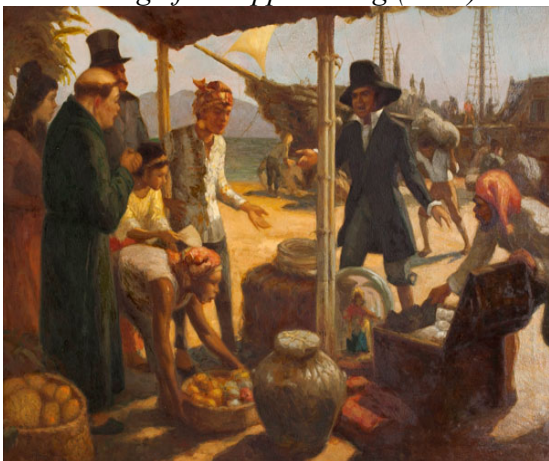
Philippine History in Review...

Princess Urduja



Traders

The Making of Philippine Flag (1944)



Defense of a Filipina Woman's Honor (1945)

Destruction of Manila



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