

ART AND SOCIETY

By Alice G. Guillermo

While art resists a universal and fixed definition and that the most that we can say by way of a definition is that art is a cognitive mode and process of signification or conveying meaning, what is indisputable is that art is produced in specific settings, in particular societies and historical periods. As Janet Wolff perspectival, emanating from an artist who is part of a society and who situates himself within the different productive forces of his society.

The same is true for aesthetics which is the philosophy of art or how one thinks about art. There is no set of aesthetic principles which are good for all men and for all time. That was the assumption of Western classical art which laid down the canons of beauty which were advanced as universal, but it concealed the many different social contexts of art, thereby implicitly assuming the hegemony of the Western artistic tradition even over non-western societies with their own traditions.

Affirming the contextualist position, we thus view art, whether as visual arts, architecture, the traditional arts, music, literature, theater, film, and dance, within its social and historical context so as to be able to grasp its full meaning. Art derives its materials, subjects, themes, conventions, concerns, issues, values, ideologies, influences, and inspirations from its social and natural environment. The images and productions of art represent, recreate, or reconstruct their surrounding reality and thus they proffer various ways of seeing ourselves and the world around us and by doing so provide a cognitive vehicle for better knowing ourselves and the world. Opposite to the contextualist position is the formalist one in which the work of art is viewed in as a separate and self-contained entity or text while blocking its relationship to the real world. In this formalist view, only the elements of the text and their relationships to each other are brought into focus; they are not made to interact with their referents in the real world. The problem with this approach is that it truncates the meaning of art; it precludes drawing out its full meaning by not viewing the work within its social conditions of production and by not giving value to allusions, references, or symbols since these are dismissed as “extra-artistic” and therefore outside the realm of consideration. It completely breaks off the relationship of the work and the artist who is a member of society and who represents, wittingly or unwittingly, particular social, class or group interests. Needless to say, such an approach to art is not humanly fulfilling because it does not lead to a well-rounded knowledge and understanding of the work of art.

Mode of Production

The milieu and environment of art

In a broad sense, we study Philippine art as produced within the context of national conditions, social, economic, and political in a particular period of history, as for instance, the second half of the 19th century, the postwar period to the 60's, or the Marcos regime. In a specific sense, we study Philippine art as produced by a particular social group, whether by Manila urban artists with a “fine arts” background, by artists in the regions as in Bacolod, Davao, or Cebu, or by indigenous artists belonging to a specific cultural community which has preserved its artistic traditions from precolonial times.

Art is produced under different conditions even within the same society during the same time. The urban middle class artist usually imported from Europe and the United States. When he finishes a series or body of work, he usually arranges for an exhibit in a commercial gallery in a city center where his works are made available for public viewing by art lovers and patrons.

Conditions are quite different for a traditional artist, such as a weaver, a potter, a woodcarver or basket maker. For a long time, the traditional arts were produced to meet a local community's ritual and functional needs. They were circulated within the members of the community at the same time that the local datus and sultans were the first big patrons. It is only in the past few decades that local entrepreneurs and tourist agents realized their commercial value and brought these local artistic productions to the urban areas. The producers who live in remote barrios do not or cannot bring their works directly to the urban market but the entrepreneurs and their agents bring these to Manila, package them into more saleable commodities and sell them in commercial centers and boutiques. While the producers sell the works at a relatively low price, they are sold much higher in the urban malls. Likewise, not to be ignored are the particularly difficult working conditions of weavers and other traditional artists. Victims of neglect and prejudice, they are caught up in the daily struggle for survival and are continually threatened with eviction from the ancestral lands by speculators, subdivision developers and industrial capitalists who want to build factories usually highly polluting to the immediate environment; they are also easy prey to exploitations and abuse. As for the producers of folk art, who are mostly farmers and fishermen in the countryside, much of their work is seasonal, associated with town fiestas and produced in relation to the agricultural cycles. Thus, it is important that the works of traditional and folk art be viewed within its social setting to be able to know and understand the difficulties and problems that involved in their production.

Historical contexts of art

Throughout art history, art has been produced within different modes of production or social formations. Arts which answered the needs of the local group were produced in primitive communal societies, as in clans and kinship groups without a strong political organization. In warrior societies, artists specialized in designing weapons, such as the kris, which combined the aesthetic and functional aspects. In plutocratic societies and sultanates led by wealthy elite families or groups, artists catered to their need for status symbols and outstanding ritual objects. In the Cordilleras, the *hagabi* or ceremonial bench carved from a single tree trunk signifies social prominence. Among the Maranao in the South, an ornamental style of brassware developed to meet the need for lavish gifts and dowries among the elites. The *okir* likewise supplied the ornamentation of the datu houses, as well as many articles of everyday use.

With Spanish colonization, a feudal economy was instituted with the land divided into *encomiendas* given as reward to Spanish soldiers or conquistadores, and later to haciendas or large plantations acquired by wealthy families. The Church was given its share of large tracts of land including the friar estates. The colonial government likewise exacted taxes and forced labor or *polos y servicios* from the indigenous population. In feudal societies, as during the European Middle Ages and in the Spanish Colonial Period in the Philippines, art was produced under the patronage of the Church and State which were one. During that period in the Philippines, art was harnessed in the building and decorating of churches, in the carving of saints for the altars, and in the painting of images of Christ and the saints. This resulted in a large body of colonial religious art produced in the country. Entire town populations were mobilized to contribute to the building of churches in terms of material and labor. Art which was invariably religious came under strict ecclesiastical supervision so that no pagan or heretical elements could enter. At the same time, there was a great demand for church ornamentation in the form of wood and stone carvings, gold and silverwork, fine textiles and embroideries. Much of the country's wealth in the form of art and ornamentation was accumulated by the Church. The arts and culture of this period were material expressions of the religious ideology brought over by the colonizers.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Philippines was opened to international trade through cash crop agriculture. A mercantile capitalist economy based on agriculture began to appear although relations of production remained basically feudal with peasants still largely tied to the land. This new money economy led to the growth of the *ilustrado* class consisting of landlords who converted ricelands to export crops such as sugar, tobacco, copra, hemp, etc. With their new wealth, they gained access to higher education, first in Manila and then abroad in Europe with the opening of the Suez Canal. They built their *bahay-na-bato* which they furnished with amenities imported from Europe. Exposed abroad to European culture, they commissioned artists to do their portraits in the miniaturist style which celebrated their economic prosperity by rendering the rich decorative details of their costume, accessories and household setting. With the secularization of art which allowed new subjects such as portraits, landscapes, still lifes, and genre, the *ilustrados* soon replaced the Church in the patronage of the arts.

The American Colonial Period saw the expansion of trade, commerce, and industry. While this enhanced the capitalist sector of the economy in the cities, particularly Manila, a large percentage of the country persisted in feudal relations. The public school system was established all over the country and the University of the Philippines was founded in the first decade of American colonial rule. The School of Fine Arts, one of the first units of the university, instituted courses in commercial art to meet the needs of the new corporations for advertising and packaging products. Illustrations for school books, publications, and commercial posters were in great demand. During this time the first tourist brochures appeared, along with calendars featuring landscapes and genre. Fernando Amorsolo art patrons and the artists of the Amorsolo School catered to the tastes of the American art patrons for rural idylls. American colonization brought into art the ideology in consonance with the capitalist system that art is a commodity which is packaged and marketed like any other product.

In 1928, modernism was introduced into the country with Victorio Edades' homecoming exhibit at the Philippine Columbian Club. After the war, with the founding of the Philippine Art Gallery and the Art Association of the Philippines, the support system for art, especially modernist art, was laid down along with the broadening of the base of art lovers and patrons. The rise of political consciousness in the 60's and 70's that came with massive protests against the Vietnam War, the economic crisis, and the U.S. bases created a climate of political ferment that was reflected in the various arts, including painting, music, and theater. This period saw the emergence of social and political themes in the visual arts, a trend that was led by the Social Realists. However, the building boom during the Marcos period and the cultural projects and patronage of Imelda Marcos stimulated the art market and encouraged art catering to interior designers.

Relations of production: artist and public

An artist works within a society's relations of production which includes, in the production of art, the artist and the audience or public of art consisting of art lovers and collectors. At the economic base, the relations of production involve labor or worker/producer, on one hand, and capital or patron/financier on the other hand; in a feudal system, it involves Church or landlord, on one hand, and peasant on the other hand. Within the capitalist system in which everything is commodifiable, art, which is a kind of product, that is, an artistic product, is regarded primarily as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market and its value reckoned in terms of market value and investment potential. Its desirability as a commodity is measured by the degree in which it answers particular consumer needs, such as the need for status symbols, for social amenities, for valuable possessions, for ornamentation. However, the work of art, since it is not pure decoration but is a vehicle for conveying ideas, values, and emotions, in fact, a vision of life and reality, goes beyond commodity to art.

The true artist seeks to convey meaning which is a complex of ideas, feelings, values, attitudes, atmospheres through his work. He/she has a view of life and reality that is expressed through artistic form. When he/she holds an exhibit in a gallery, he avails of it as providing a professional venue for showing works of art and hopes that the buyer is one who will share and appreciate his/her interpretation of life and society. On the contrary, a painter is commercially motivated if he/she deliberately caters to the tastes of collectors and buyers and if the work is determined by considerations of saleability. As such, the painter has no independent concepts to convey but is a mere technician who skillfully renders current tastes and fashions or creates them.

But there is yet a deeper issue in the artist's relationship with society. This is how the artist positions himself in the relations of production. On one hand, he/she may align himself/herself with the basic producers and workers which constitute the large majority or, on the other hand, he may assume the interests of the elite class of patrons and financiers. His class affinities are perceived through his subjects, themes, and content in general. The social realists, for instance, take up social and political issues affecting the large majority, while other artists specialize in doing idealized portraits of ruling class women.

Support Systems of the Arts

For art to flourish in a society, it needs a support system. Art is produced and disseminated through institutions and bodies which constitute its support system. Among these are the academe, community organizations, the museums, the galleries, cultural organizations, religious entities, mass media, and the art market. Of these, institutions which have to do with educating and raising public consciousness and knowledge of art are the academe and the museum network. All aspects of art are learned from the academe and the museum in its thematic exhibits: art theory and practice, art history, aesthetics, and criticism. Community organizations, cultural organizations, religious entities, and the mass media serve to broaden the base of art appreciation in society. Galleries, and art dealers, along with the recent entry in Asia of the big auction houses Christie's and Sotheby's, make up the art market. Government cultural institutions and programs of patronage, also form part of the support system, but, as in the case of Imelda Marcos, may be used for government image-building and propaganda.

Many active institutions and bodies are Manila-based; others, while centered in Manila have national networks, and still others are grassroots institutions which may be linked to non-government organizations.

Mode of Reception

The social contexts of reception

Art is produced and received in a wide range of social contexts. The audience or public of a society may be quite uneven. This unevenness is due to several factors. The first is social class and the disparity of educational and cultural opportunities. The poverty of a large part of the population is due to the exploitation of workers, peasants, and employees by corporations and other elites. Many do not have the leisure to enjoy and to study art but engage in other forms of diversion.

The second has to do with the differences between urban and rural, particularly in occupations and needs. People in urban centers have a wider exposure to other cultures in terms of education and cultural exchange and thus can interact with the cultures. There is a greater concentration of schools, galleries, museums, and publications in the city. People in the rural areas are mainly engaged in agricultural work, their lives revolving around planting and harvesting and the many particular chores that go with these. The folk arts that they traditionally produce are related to their occupations: baskets as containers for agricultural produce of different kinds, pottery as vessels for indigenous liquor, bamboo traps for fishing, weapons for hunting. These are likewise folk arts that revolve around the fiestas, the paper mache *taka* of Paete, the pastilles wrappers of San Miguel de Mayumo, the *kiping* of Lucban and Sariaya, the *parol* of San Fernando, Pampanga. Folk theater, such as the *komedya* and *sarswela*, is performed in the town plaza during fiestas. The *Pasyon* is still sung during the Lenten season.

Thirdly, one cannot fail to recognize the pluralistic character in Philippine society that arises from the many cultural communities all over the country with their specific though often interrelated, cultural and artistic forms and expressions. The various cultural communities that are grouped in the Cordilleras, such as the Ifugao, Bontoc, Kalinga, etc. the Mangyan of Mindoro, the T'boli of Cotabato, and the many Muslim communities, the Maranao, Magindanao of Mindanao, and the Taosug of Sulu were people who resisted the onslaught of Spanish and American colonization. Because of this, they have preserved their ancient culture, including rituals and arts and their living traditions give us an idea of precolonial art and its forms which the Philippines shared with the rest of Southeast Asia. The arts of these different cultural communities contribute to and enrich our national culture.

Because of the distinct contributions of the urban and the rural, the folk, and the cultural communities with a strong ethnic character, Philippine culture has a rich and broad range. There have been exchanges among the different groups; folk art and the living ethnic traditions have become familiar in the urban context. Likewise, regional painters as those of Bacolod, Iloilo, and Cebu have exhibited and interacted with artists in Manila.

These exchanges, however, have not been entirely without problems. For one, the exhibit of a textile or an Ifugao *bulul* in a gallery or a museum removes it from its original context and easily leads to a purely formalist appraisal. Ideally, these works should be viewed in their original sites, and regional museums are to be supported, but there are indisputable gains in exhibiting them in other contexts in order to familiarize the larger Philippine society with the productions of Filipinos in different ethnic contexts, and even abroad to show the full range of our art. However, it is important that these exhibits be accompanied by educational material such as texts, videos, and documentation, along with books and publications on the subject, so that the art is resituated in its setting of the people who produce it along with their belief systems, myths and rituals, and common occupations. This information should also include updates on the problems encountered by the ethnic groups and their struggles against exploitation, militarization, and landgrabbing. The goal of such information is to involve more Filipinos in espousing the causes of the indigenous Filipinos and seeking ways by which these various groups can be empowered to change their conditions.

Other factors which have led to a distorted reception of the traditional arts in urban contexts is business allied to tourism which feeds on the arts of the cultural communities. We know, for instance, that within the T'boli belief system the *t'nalak* weave should not be arbitrarily cut and if it must be cut that there are ritualistic observances which must be satisfied. But once in the hands of entrepreneurs, they are ruthlessly cut to be made into all sorts of accessories. Likewise, a recent development in the globalist trend is the commissioning of weavers by foreign-based corporations to do single-hued *t'nalak* without the traditional *ikat* designs. Since the weavers' time and energy are spent on meeting their quotas, the day may not be far off when their *ikat* weave will disappear.

Tourism and the sending of cultural entertainers abroad also often leads to distortions as in the example of cultural dancers wearing Ifugao blankets in Japan. For the problem, as we all know, is that they do not showcase authentic Ifugao dances but do much debased forms of exotica catering to prurient tastes. A wide educational campaign to appreciate these living traditions and to instill respect for them can be conducted in schools and public for a, although this will always go against business interests which commodifies and debases even the finest examples of our material culture.

Art and social relationships

In the production and reception of art, one necessarily takes into account the social relationships of class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and political belief. The understanding of art is not complete if it is not viewed in the light of these factors. Art is not an innocent and neutral practice but contains ideologies which are perspectival and interest-linked. The element of class underlies the system of art patronage and exists in the inherent ideological contents of the work and how it is situated within the relations of production of a society. Does it align with the interests and aspirations of the large majority or with the self-perpetuating interests of the economic elite? Likewise, the understanding of art should be infused with gender-sensitivity in the analysis of images and art discourses. Production and reception here comes to the fore. The patriarchal society and its stereotyping of gender roles has long been prejudicial to the development of women's art. The reception of art implies a largely male public and audience, so that, as John Berger has pointed out, the imagery of art presupposes a male gaze, favors male interests and perspectives, and perpetuates the subordination of women.

Race and ethnicity are important factors to be reckoned with. While race may not seem to take much prominence in Philippine society, it enters in the form of racial attitudes which were ingrained by centuries of rule by white colonizers. This is seen primarily in the film industry which of late has increasingly valorized fair complexions associated with the privileged classes, as well as in advertisements which invariably have mestiza models. At the base, this leads to a distortion of our national identity as a people.

In our country, both race and ethnicity have given rise to prejudices, overt and covert, conscious and subconscious. Again these prejudicial attitudes were instilled by the Spanish and American colonizers: the prejudice against native dark skin, the prejudice against the non-Christian and non-Westernized members of the national population. But these prejudices have worked against our interests as a people and the long and continuing process of decolonization and liberation involves the breakdown of these prejudices for a truly just society.

Religious and political belief are also factors that play a part in art. But again, these are interest-linked and perspectival. Religion, as linked to big social institutions, is not a neutral aspect of people's lives. It may serve the status quo, even support authoritarian and right-wing interests as in the case of the erstwhile Mindanao vigilante groups which harnessed indigenous folk beliefs towards an extreme and militant conservatism. This came into conflict with grassroots religious organizations of a liberative goal, as in the theology of struggle that became popular among the Basic Christian Communities of the 70's and 80's. This came with the important realization by the progressive clergy that the Bible as discourse contains a radical potential that could be drawn out in support of people's causes. One such section is the Magnificat on which theme a number of social realists made a series after the Aquino assassination. The Magnificat, however, was appropriated by Mrs. Aquino in her political campaign.

As for political belief, there is no doubt that it backs either privileged interests or dominant ideologies backed by powerful and wealthy groups and the oppositional ideologies always striving to win greater popular support. The arts may reflect directly or indirectly these competing political positions and in this sense they have underlying links with political and economic interest for social conservatism or change.

Art and Social Transformation

Art that conveys meaning and that derives from the artist's vision and interpretation of life and reality is not a mere demonstration of technical virtuosity in drawing or painting; it is not mere ornamentation the lines and colors of which are part of a larger scheme of interior design for well-appointed houses; it is not a mere paltry commodity to be bought and sold and measured by its market value; it is not mere part of a fashionable lifestyle of press releases and cocktails. Such art would defeat the meaning of art because it is alienated from the vitality of people's lives.

Because art is not neutral and derives its energies from the dynamism and conflicts of society, it is also an agent of change. As it tackles social and political themes, it shows its affinities and sympathies with one or the other pole of the productive relations. Its approach to these themes may not necessarily be direct and unmediated, but it may be the development of a social or political theme in several works or in a body of work which takes up different aspects. Its approach may be dramatic or low key, even subtle, sophisticated and highly complex with layers of allusions and symbols. Throughout the history of art, some of the most memorable works deal with political issues, as Picasso did in *Guernica* or Francisco Goya did in *Tres de Mayo* or in his engraving "The sleep of reason breeds monsters" against the background of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. Art as an agent of social change will always be the challenge for serious artists because they want to affirm the vital role of art in society and social transformation and its part in the making of history towards a human and just order which still eludes our grasp at the present.