

Christmas in Philippine Art

By I. V. MALLARI

CONSIDERING OUR VAUNT that the Philippines is the only Christian nation in the Orient, it is surprising that our painters have not produced any notable work on the subject of Christmas, which occupied Italian, Flemish, and Dutch masters from the Middle ages down to the Renaissance. The Philippine Museum of Art and History, the Vargas Collection, the Alvero Collection, and the Ongpin Collection—in not a single one of these can you find a *Nativity* or an *Adoration of the Magi*. Of course, our painters—even the skeptical Hernando Ocampo—have painted *Madonnas*; but these are not strictly Christmas paintings, for they do not celebrate the holy night when the Saviour was born.

This deplorable paucity of Christmas paintings done by Filipinos may be attributed to the very low regard that the Filipino people had come to hold for the Roman Catholic Church just at the time when the art of painting in this country reached its apogee with Juan Luna, Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo, and Rafael Enriquez. Caught in the eddies of liberal thought then pervading the whole of Europe, these men, especially Juan Luna, preoccupied themselves with social questions. Most of their paintings were jeremiads against "man's inhumanity to man". They had lost faith in the comforts of religion, for the interpreters of God in their own country had themselves led in oppres-

sing and exploiting the weak and the lowly.

In the forty-four years that followed the Philippine Revolution, religion occupied a minor niche in the scheme of Philippine life. The Filipinos, especially the Filipino women, still went to church assiduously, of course; but the fervour which had inspired the buildings and the embellishment of our houses of worship—this fervour had been killed by the greed and rapacity and the arrogance of the friars. For the religious orders in this country, forgetting their missions of love and mercy, and their vows of poverty and humility; sought to establish here an ecclesiastical empire co-extensive with that of Spain. And this, together with their intense preoccupation with the affairs of the flesh rather than with the things of the spirit, had ended in alienating the affection and the respect of the people.

By the turn of the century, in short, religion—to use the language of the crown—had lost its glamour; and Filipino men of culture, particularly those with the creative urge, began to turn their attention to the economic, the social, and the political aspects of the national scene. The business man and the politician began to gain ascendancy over the men of religion.

This change of venue, of course, could not help being mirrored in our art; and its first tangible manifestation was the challenge flung by the

schoolhouse at the church building as the outstanding architectural landmark in every Philippine community. The schoolhouse began to vie with the church, not only in size, prominence, and pretentiousness; but also and mostly in its mission as the cultural center of the surrounding region.

Filipino painters, on their part, began to record, not their interpretations of the ageless Biblical stories of the *Nativity* and the *Adoration of the Magi*, but their reactions to the purely social and sociological aspects of Christmas. Take, for example, that Amorsolo canvas in the Alvero Collection, depicting a familiar scene during the Christmas season—the patio of a church alive with the crowd of vendors and holiday-makers, with only a glimpse of the interior of the sacred edifice, in which the solemn ceremony of the mass is taking place. And the artist has managed to give the impression that the hectic activities in the patio have somehow intruded into the sacrosanct presence of divinity.

This is a typical Filipino Christmas picture. The emphasis is on the pre-occupations of the people in the act of celebrating the most popular holiday in Christendom, not the sacred event that the holiday seeks to commemorate. Thus we have pictures of gay young swains escorting their sweethearts to and from the *misa de gallo*, housewives putting up Christmas lanterns or trimming the Christmas tree, men preparing the *lechon* for the midnight supper that always form the climax of every Christmas Eve celebration in this country. These are anecdotal and socially documentary, not allegorical and religious, pictures often prepared for popular magazines in order to satisfy the common man's—and woman's—craving for the romantic and the sentimental and the nostalgic.

In the 1930's, however, when the Filipino artists and men of letters began to be socially conscious, when

political leaders began to discourse on social justice, and when the common man himself began to clamour for his rights as a citizen and to complain of his pitiful lot in society—in the 1930's, our local painters began to depict on canvas the great discrepancy between the way Christmas was celebrated by the “haves” and the way it was celebrated by the “have nots”. An example of this type of painting is the one in the National Museum of Art and History, showing Christ Himself as a poor man knocking in vain at the gates of a palatial residence in which a Christmas party is in progress.

This picture is so poor it is difficult to imagine how it ever managed to get onto the walls of the National Museum of Art and History, but it has the merit of embodying the general attitude of local artists towards the institution of Christmas. If this attitude is tinged with censure and discontent, with frustration and despair, perhaps it is only because artists, as a general rule, are one of the worst misunderstood and unappreciated groups in these Islands. Like all prophets since the dawn of time, they are—or, at least, the great majority of them—without honour in their own country.

It would be interesting to speculate on how our artist will interpret the spirit of Christmas after this terrible baptism of blood and fire that our people have been undergoing since the war began. Would they, embittered and hopeless, feel that “there is no Santa Claus”—that there is no God even—and depict the spirit of Christmas in mockery? Would they, in a desperate attempt to blot out from their sight and from their memory the dreadful holocaust into which their country has been plunged, seek the romantic refuge of an escapist and paint nostalgic pictures of the beauty and the gaiety and the glory of the Christmas celebrations that used to be? Or would they, purified

by suffering and destitution and the threat of death, regain the old fervour that inspired their forefathers to put up temples of worship and to embellish them with the anonymous paintings and sculptures which now form one of our richest cultural heritages from our glorious past?

In all likelihood, however, we can expect the revitalisation of our culture and of our art, as a result of this rude and sudden impact of reality upon our national life. For there is nothing that can mature and enoble peoples as well as individuals with greater certainty than suffer-

ing. The need for sacrifice and spiritual fortitude cannot but strengthen our moral fiber, broaden our vision of life, deepen our insight into the eternal verities, and bring us closer to the forces that activate the universe. Thus, "seeing life steadily and seeing it whole", our artists may interpret and record that life with a compelling persuasiveness that would enable even the least discerning among us to perceive and to appreciate the full significance of the spirit of Christmas as the essence of mankind's dream of the best of all possible world.



American Casualties —

DOMEL, in a dispatch from Lisbon: Revealing that casualties among the American ground force on western Europe up to November 1 have already exceeded the 200,000 mark, a Washington dispatch said the U.S. War Department has announced that casualties, not including that of the air force totalled 200,349 including 35,884 killed, 145,788 wounded and 18,677 missing.

More Than the Gift—

TRIBUNE, Editorial, December 20, 1944: It is, therefore, not so much the eight pieces of dried fish, the half a kilo of cassava flour, and the three yards of cloth that should form the basis of public appreciation of the President's gift to each of the needy families. Rather, it is the profound commiseration and genuine affection for his own people which have prompted the giving that should be borne in mind and lodged in the hearts of all

There is, too, in the gift-giving the reflexion in what the government of the Republic is striving to do for the entire Filipino nation in its painful efforts to save the people from greater misery, to preserve the present for the future, and to secure the survival of this nation for the vast promises of the peace that this war is seeking to establish upon a more enduring basis.