

THE STRUGGLE FOR PHILIPPINE ART



**PURITA KALAW-LEDESMA
AMADIS MA. GUERRERO**

THE STRUGGLE FOR PHILIPPINE ART

By Purita Kalaw-Ledesma and Amadis Ma. Guerrero
204 pages, 220 plates

front cover: "KAINGIN" by Carlos V. Francisco
first prize, painting, AAP contest, 1948

back cover: "TRES-SEIS DEJADO" by Danilo Dalena
first prize, painting, AAP contest, 1974

Any attempt to bring into focus the collective forces that brought about today's art complex has to start with 1948, the year the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) was founded by Mrs. Purita Kalaw-Ledesma. Because of her pioneer role and consistent influence, Mrs. Ledesma had an in-the-midst view of those heroic decades that saw modern art's struggle to win acceptance from its audience and patron. The AAP began as (and it still is) a body of clashing personalities who were drawn together by common causes. Over the years, it represented the first hand-in-hand effort to put forward contemporary aesthetic aims to an eventual triumph and fruitful sequel.

To achieve this, a certain cluster of challenges had to be encountered. In her book, Mrs. Ledesma cites these obstacles and the people who worked hard to hurdle them. She shows how a number of artists, in trying to establish a new kind of realism, first outraged, then baffled, then intrigued, then won the local art cognoscenti. She introduces the exponents who helped art in the crucial stages, through the social and political atmosphere of the times and the artistic climate of Manila in which the group struggled to win acceptance for their inner visions.

Herein lies the main relevance of the book to the present status of art and its view of art itself. The need for this kind of book indicates among other things that the freedom of creative expression came hard. To make the work of art itself the bearer of its own message in its own terms is the crux of the struggle. Mrs. Ledesma traces the struggle with a deep sense of involvement. She shared the crushing isolation of the artist and often wondered how anyone could produce art on a respectable level in highly improbable situations. She knew

continued on back flap

every artist, attached neither to a community nor school nor to one another, and touched the depth of their unique loneliness. Born to comfort, she nevertheless understood the plight of the artists who came from different parts of the country to plunge themselves into the anonymity of the city, revising the forecast set by their hope-hollow past.

For a quarter-century, Mrs. Ledesma saw it all – and felt it all. She was there during the bitter battle between the conservatives and the moderns in 1955; the coming of the Neo-Realists; the annual discoveries of new talents; the efforts of writers to clear the mysteries of the isms. She was involved in bridging the gap between the artist and his audience; the move of local art towards internationalism; the efforts to attain dignity for the artist; the flourish of patronage that would in time better the artist's lot.

The fruits of the struggle – which is the battle for control – is now evident in the present array of works. The sum total of the separate efforts, has resulted into a cultural explosion – a dazzling diverse manifestation of artistic achievements. Today's works of art are marked by a rich variety of cross-currents and interaction of individual viewpoints. The ideas behind them provoke the rules; they are gathered from a global flow of theories and facts and grafted to native forms and materials to create a new esthetic order.

Now as she views the present scheme of things, after the artist had graduated from a *hampas-lupa* into an affluent and sought-after figure in society, she looks back over the years, all the toils and troubles, the disappointments and aches, the friendships she treasured and the causes she nurtured and finds her spiritual rewards worth all the trouble. Art has enriched her life; it has made her feel complete. In sharing her memories with us, she has enriched our lives as well.

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**PURITA KALAW-LEDESMA
AMADIS MA. GUERRERO**

THE STRUGGLE FOR PHILIPPINE ART

To all the future generations of Filipino artists, in the hope that this book will serve as a record of the struggles and triumphs of those who paved the way...

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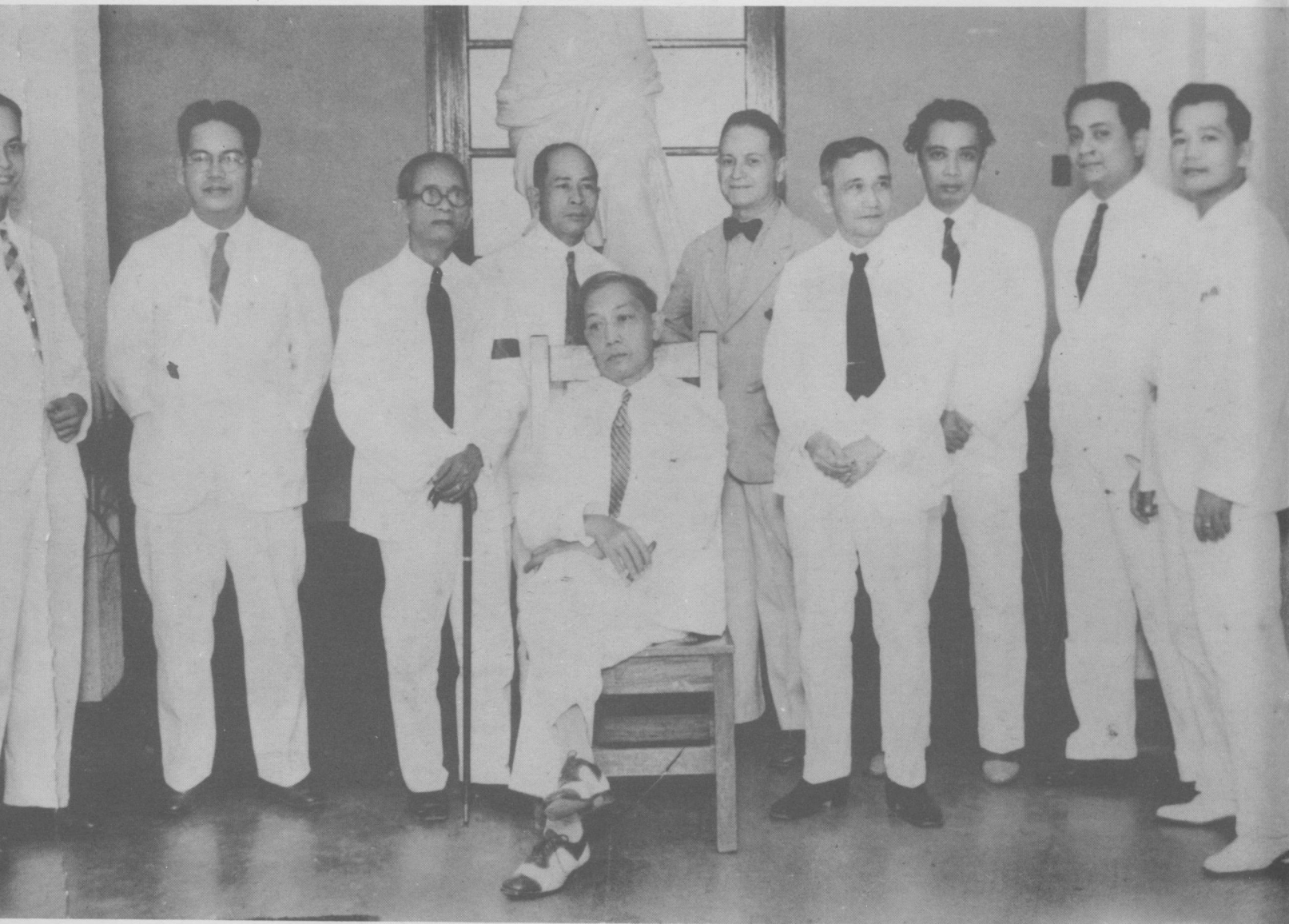
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The roster of early professors of the U.P. School of Fine Arts consisted of a virtual who's who of the giants in Philippine Art during the early part of the century. These professors trained the hand and influenced many of today's outstanding artists, including "Botong" Francisco and Vicente Manansala. Seated is Director Fabian de la Rosa; standing, from left to right, are: Pablo Amorsolo, Ireneo Miranda, Teodoro Buenaventura, Toribio Herrera, Ramon Peralta, Sr., Vicente Rivera y Mir, Guillermo Tolentino, Fernando Amorsolo, and Ambrosio Morales.

PROLOGUE

Most of our contemporary artists have been trained either at the University of the Philippines or at the University of Santo Tomas School of Fine Arts. The UP was the pioneer school in this field, having been organized way back in 1908. One of the earliest colleges of the State University, the school — at the time it was only a vocational school — was located in a two-story building at the corner of what was then California and Pennsylvania in Ermita. Its system of training, when compared to those of its counterparts abroad, was very old-fashioned.

The school which molded Botong Francisco, Vicente Manansala and many others offered a five-year course, including a year of preparation. Classes on painting, sculpture, commercial art (in which the students were taught lettering) and engraving were held. The lecture system was in force, and these were delivered in Tagalog and Spanish. Classes were conducted atelier style. One simply sat and drew, and then the professor looked the work over — in other countries corrective exercises were given instead and group discussions were held on the merits and defects of a student.

As can be seen, the system prevailing at the UP then was an antiquated one even for its time, but in justice to the school it should be stated that the professors excelled in instilling craftsmanship among the students. The preparation of the neophyte's hand was excellent. The roster of professors was a veritable Who's Who of the giants of the early part of the century, including Amorsolo, Tolentino, Fabian dela Rosa, Ireneo Miranda, Pablo Amorsolo and Ramon Peralta, Sr.

Consciously or not, these masters intimidated the students. There was hardly any conversation during classes. The youths then were a timid lot, a far cry from the articulate present generation.

What was the future of the artist of that period? His lot was not an enviable one. Most painters ended

up sign painters, magazine illustrators and teachers, while the sculptors became wood carvers and tombstone makers. There were no galleries, and paintings were not bought. If one wanted to purchase a painting, he had to go to the house of the artist. Only the works of outstanding artists like Amorsolo and Tolentino sold, and the sales were very limited. As for the prices — an Amorsolo usually sold for fifty pesos and at the time this was considered a lot of money. There were "walking galleries" in the form of enterprising painters who went around peddling their works to office employees. This was not a dignified practice. Often the painters were subject to the whims of the purchasers and they had to settle for humiliating bargains.

Creative talent was neither appreciated nor encouraged, and the audience for the fine arts was limited to a few cultured families whose way of life was a carry-over from the Spanish tradition, who benefited from the classical and humanistic system of education inherited from Spain (but with the arrival of the more pragmatic and materialistic Americans, the niceties of life were discarded and the emphasis shifted to making money).

The artist was looked down upon, he was not considered a "respectable" member of society. Among the artists, only the writers were respected. Those who pursued a career in painting, sculpture or music were considered lacking in intelligence, "mahi-na ang ulo." As a result of this bourgeois prejudice, the artist became distrustful and suspicious, working only for himself. In time the UP School of Fine Arts became a collegiate school, but the artist continued to be maltreated and often he resorted to unethical practices because he knew no better.

The state of affairs continued until after the war, when the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) was founded. Long used to being exploited, artists could not believe that the association was really dedicated to helping them.

I

THE FOUNDING OF THE AAP

SOMETIMES in the life of a person, an incident, seemingly casual and insignificant, may occur which unlocks a flood of memories, galvanizing one to action, changing his life completely and giving it new meaning and direction.

In my case, fate, if one could call it that, came in the form of a chance meeting with an old friend, Pura Santillan-Castrencia. The year was 1947. The war had ended two years ago, and things had not yet settled in Manila. Transportation was difficult during those days, and from our place in Sta. Mesa I had to commute by bus to Quiapo to do the marketing. It was here I bumped into Mrs. Castrencia, and the reunion was a joyous one for we had not seen each other since our student days at the University of Michigan during the early 1930s. At the time she was a scholar working for her Ph. d. in Romance Languages, and I was an undergraduate art student taking up Design.

We embraced happily, and after the usual amenities, I told her I had gotten married and was now a mother of three. "What about your art?" she inquired.

"I don't paint anymore." I said.

She paused. "And are you happy?"

I couldn't answer her. To tell the truth, I hadn't given much thought recently as to whether I was happy or not. As for my art, I hadn't thought about it for years.

But Mrs. Castrencia's question haunted me, affecting me profoundly. *Was I happy?* The artistic past came alive again, and I went out of my way to look up old friends and contemporaries at the UP School of Fine Arts. I met Alfredo Pestaño and Antonio Dumlao, and we discussed plans to organize an alumni association of the UP School of Fine Arts. Nothing resulted from this meeting, for artists do not always suit action to words, but I was determined to push through with the project.

I revisited my old school, now located at Padre Faura and by this time a collegiate school offering liberal arts along with fine arts subjects, and had quite a reunion with my former professors. They told me to get in touch with a number of people, including Emilio (Abe) Aguilar Cruz, Virginia Flor Agbayani, "a livewire", and Pestaño himself. I went to see them one by one, introducing myself and informing them of the plans to set up an alumni association. A date was set for the inaugural meeting — Sunday, February 15, 1948 — and on this day the association was

founded. The site was the building on Padre Faura which now houses the Supreme Court.

Excluding those who came and went (like Hugo Yonzon, Jr. and his classmates), there were thirteen charter members — Diosdado Lorenzo, Dumlao, Ramon Peralta, Jr., Nemesio Faustino, Severino Fabie (a very gifted sculptor tragically unrecognized because he was ahead of his time), Virginia Flor Agbayani, Emilio Aguilar Cruz, Candido Alcantara, Dominador Castañeda, Francesco Monti, Alfredo Pestaño, Fermin Sanchez, and myself.

We decided that the organization would be known as the Philippine Art Association, but Abe Cruz, a man of letters, observed that its initials were unpoetic — PAA. He suggested the Art Association of the Philippines, or AAP, and thus it has been known ever since.

Now the question as to who would head the association came up, and I suggested Jorge Vargas, a well-known art collector or Eduardo Quisumbing, then director of the National Museum, but the others turned this down, pointing out these people were very busy. Before I knew it, they had elected me president. The other officer was Ramon Peralta, Jr. (secretary since there were only thirteen of us). Later, when our number increased, Virginia Flor Agbayani was elected treasurer.

An emblem was also decided upon, in the form of an oval and a sprig of bamboo leaves representing the country. This was designed by Dumlao.

We had started at 10:00 a.m., and by noontime we were hungry. A decision to adjourn until next Sunday was reached, and yet we were reluctant to leave. We stayed on, chatting until well past the lunch hour.

THE DEED was done. How would the new association fare? None of us at this stage had any idea of what awaited us, but one thing was sure: there would be pitfalls and perils, like the ones that had for decades dogged previous attempts to form artists' groups. These organizations — from the *Asociacion Internacional de Artistas* in 1908 to the *Philippine Association of Fine and Applied Arts* in 1938 — had floundered and then folded up, due to lack of unity, limited scope and other factors. Would the AAP end up like them, to become a mere footnote in some future history book on art?

We met regularly during the succeeding weeks, and each time the ranks of observers and interested parties swelled. Among those who attended were Hernando R. Ocampo and Cesar Legaspi; Ocampo became involved in the association because, to his surprise, he found that his opinions were respected and his suggestions carried out (at the time he was better known as a poet and writer).

Having fired the opening salvo, we now prepared to write the constitution of the AAP. An invaluable assist in this direction came from Lily Harmon (Mrs. Joseph Hirshhorn), a visiting American artist whose work had been reproduced in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. We invited her to one of our meetings, and in her talk, she adapted a common sense approach and emphasized the practical aspects of painting and sculpture. Her main argument was that for an association of artists to succeed, it must eschew the purely cultural and take note of the living problems of the artists, i.e., it must promote the financial side. In carrying out its purpose, the association in addition must not embrace a political doctrine or favor a particular group or school of thought.

Later, after her return to the U.S., Mrs. Hirshhorn sent us a copy of the constitution of the Artists' Equity, an American organization familiar with the problems confronting artists and art groups in the United States.

Their constitution was sophisticated, socialistic and comprehensive. One look at it and we felt practically everything we needed to know was here. The constitution was also a prophetic one, foretelling many of the problems which would plague us in later years, such as how to deal with artists found guilty of unethical practices. There was also a provision on legislation to improve the lot of the artist.

Soon after this, we drafted our own constitution, and it was one heavily influenced by Equity's. The membership in the association was opened to artists in the graphic and plastic arts, art collectors, persons giving material support for the maintenance of the association and those who were lovers of the fine arts. Members were classified as regular, honorary, patron and associate.

The stage was set for our first public activity, a retrospective exhibit of the works of Fabian de la Rosa, a homage to our old professor who was an

underrated artist in his time. The exhibit was a success, and soon other plans and activities kept us busy, and the AAP became a going concern. However, it still was not functioning like a true organization. A professional guiding hand was needed, and this came in the person of the late C.M. Hoskins, an American businessman.

Hoskins came to the Philippines when he was 19 years old, a youthful adventurer. Eventually he became a realtor, and he learned to love the Filipinos and to speak in Pilipino and Spanish. In the process he professionalized the real estate business in this country, giving it a code of ethics.

Hoskin's dream was to become a sculptor, but this early ambition was frustrated by parental objection. His long association with the AAP began in 1949, the year we held our annual show at the National Museum. Along with a group of fellow Americans, Hoskins went to the exhibit looking for commissions to decorate the Manila Club on San Marcelino (the clubhouse, which used to be known as the English Club, was destroyed during the war and rebuilt later).

Hoskins went around and, impressed by the talent, came to me and introduced himself. I told him about our efforts in behalf of the artists, and he expressed surprise at the fact that the government was not assisting us. And then, perhaps touched by the AAP's dedication, he suggested that the Manila Club sponsor an AAP exhibit at the clubhouse.

Hoskins convinced the club members of the soundness of the idea, and the exhibit turned out to be a success. We were able to sell a lot of paintings, and the artists were elated. One member said he could now afford to send his son to school, while another disclosed he was now in a position to pay his back rent. When I reported to Hoskins the results of the exhibitions, he seemed touched by our naivete.

Thus began an auspicious relationship. That year, Hoskins became a member of the AAP, and upon his election as a member of the Board, he set about instilling professionalism into the organization. A man used to commanding, Hoskins "meddled" in everything we did in order to improve the AAP's administrative set up. He compelled all the members to pay their dues. This brought a howl from the artists, but they had no choice save to comply, for expulsion was the price of delinquency. Some mem-

bers dropped out, and for a while I feared that the association would flounder. But Hoskins assured me — "don't worry; they'll come back because they need the AAP."

On the matter of exhibitions, Hoskins laid down equally stringent regulations. He decreed that all paintings which came in late — even just five minutes late — would be automatically disqualified. Once more a furor ensued, but the point was made. From that time on, artists would rush to beat the deadline. Some of the entries would be received with the paint still wet, but never again would we entertain tardy entries.

Hoskins was instrumental in incorporating the association and getting official lawyers for the AAP (the late Claro M. Recto and Claudio Teehankee, now a Supreme Court justice). He also insisted that we acquire an auditor (Sycip, Gorres and Velayo, who for many years donated their services; later they charged us a token fee of 20 pesos a month).

The association learned many things from Hoskins. He brought us down to earth and taught us how to run the AAP like a business corporation, which was the only way it should have been run.

Through his initiative, the AAP began to deposit its money in a bank. Our employees were taught how to draw up vouchers, and our members learned not to price their paintings too steeply in anticipation of a price reduction. We also began putting up a catalogue of prices for the paintings, overcoming an initial impression that this was in bad taste. He insisted that artists pay 30 per cent commission on sale of their works, a practice which has since become standard procedure.

Hoskins served the AAP from 1949 to 1955, and in the years which followed, when he was no longer an active member, he continued to advise us on administrative matters.

Although a stern man who never showed his emotions, he developed a deep affection for the association. In later years his health deteriorated, and he began making trips to the United States more frequently.

He died in his country, leaving his real estate business in the Philippines to his employees. He also left the AAP an equally important legacy: discipline and organization, a solid foundation without which it would not have survived those years.

The Founding of the AAP

The Art Association of the Philippines grew out of a desire by alumni of the U.P. School of Fine Arts to band together and talk about the old days. Soon artists from other schools as well as self-taught painters joined the informal meetings and the AAP was founded on February 15, 1948 by 13 charter members. The site was a building on Padre Faura Street (Manila) which now houses the Supreme Court.



The emblem of the AAP shows an oval, symbolizing an artist's palette and a sprig of bamboo, representing the Philippines. It was designed by Antonio Dumlao.

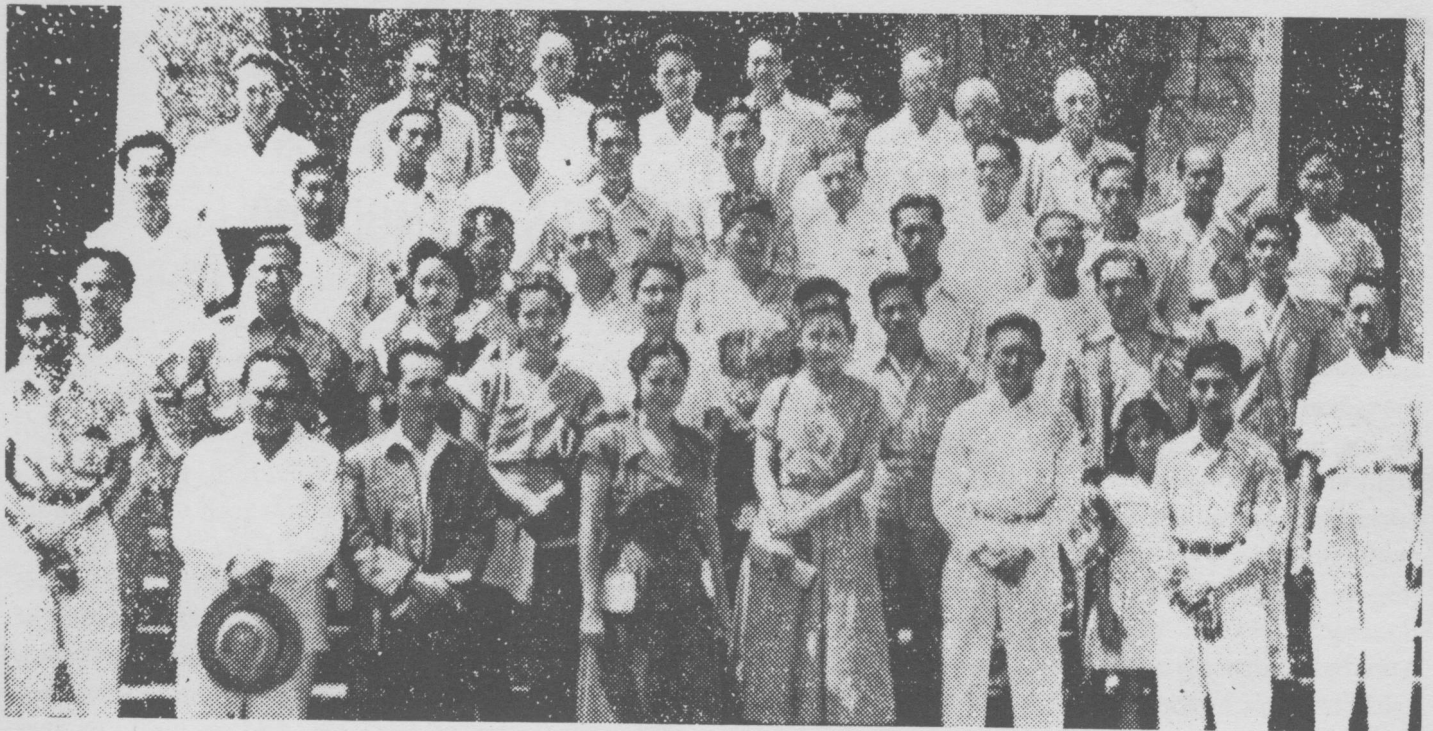
The pock-marked entrance of the National Museum in Herran, Manila, where the AAP had its first office, consisting of a small room and a gallery. In this building, the association held its early exhibits and lectures. Like the exterior, the interior was scarred by shells, mute reminders of the war which had ended in 1945.



The Early Days of the AAP

Members of the fledging association met regularly, and the ranks of members, observers and interested parties grew. The AAP first set up shop at a room of the National Museum donated by Eduardo Quisumbing, then museum director. With the help of a visiting American artist, Lily Harmon, the Association's constitution was written. Shortly after the AAP was founded, it staged its first public activity – a retrospective exhibit of the works of Fabian dela Rosa, former director of the U.P. School of Fine Arts and an underrated artist in his time.





TOP:

Members of the AAP pose for a souvenir shot during an awards ceremony in 1954. Seated from left: Macario Santos, Napoleon V. Abueva, Hernando R. Ocampo, Tomas T. Bernardo, and Generoso Cabrera. Standing, from left: Procopio Borromeo, Anita Magsaysay-Ho, Fernando Zobel (then AAP President), C.M. Hoskins, Adela Planas Paterno, Justice Fred Ruiz Castro, the author, Sylvia Camu, Leandro Locsin and Luis Ma. Araneta.

OPPOSITE:

In 1948, the members of the newly organized AAP paid a courtesy call on the late President Elpidio Quirino and invited him to inaugurate the first annual exhibition. The President agreed, and one of the works on display during the show was a drawing of a Philippine flag done by him. From left: Procopio Borromeo, Antonio Dumlao, the author, Victorio Edades, Ramon Peralta, Jr. and the President.

ABOVE:

Members of the AAP pose with Lily Harmon (fourth from right), an American artist who helped in drafting the constitution of the fledgling association. Beside Miss Harmon is the author. Girl at right is Rita Ledesma (now Mrs. Leony Gonzalez), currently a director of the AAP. Among those in the picture are Procopio Borromeo, Antonio Dumlao, Candido Alcantara, Alfredo Pestaño, Rodolfo Herrera, Ramon Peralta, Jr., Virginia Flor Agbayani, Maria Iglesias Rodriguez, Monserrat Iglesias Marsoni, Florentino Macabuhay, Fermin Sanchez, Rafael Asuncion, Mang Matias, Ireneo Miranda, Dionisio Paras, Hugo Yonzon, Jr., Diosdado Lorenzo, Joseph Hirshhorn, and Emilio Aguilar Cruz.

II BATTLE ROYALE: CONSERVATIVES VS. MODERNS

AFTER the de la Rosa exhibit, the AAP pursued a two-pronged program by offering incentives to artists and seeking means to improve the quality of art. On the priority list was a competition which was soon to be an annual affair. At stake were several prizes, including a first prize of P1,500 donated by Andres Soriano, Sr., an art enthusiast. The donation was made possible by Dumlao, a Soriano employee. At the same time, the association's secretary, Peralta, an Ilocano who knew President Quirino, requested the Apo to inaugurate the show (one of the drawings exhibited was a pencil sketch of the Filipino flag by the President — appropriately enough since the event was held on July of that year, 1948).

The contest was held at the National Museum on Herran, an old and pock-marked building. Museum Director Quisumbing, one of our advisers, drummed up public interest for the affair.

The first AAP competition was notable for various factors. In it first surfaced the stirrings of antagonism between the conservative and modernist artists, a struggle which grew and finally reached an explosive climax in the decade of the 50's.

The contest also underscored the importance of the moderns, particularly Carlos (Botong) V. Francis-

co. He was *the* artist of the time, exerting a great influence on his contemporaries, including Vicente Manansala. Botong, to his great surprise, won first prize in the competition. The other winners, in this order, were: Demetrio Diego, Manansala, Cesar Legaspi, Diosdado Lorenzo and Hernando R. Ocampo.

The board of jurors was a balanced one, including Amorsolo, Edades, E. Aguilar Cruz and Francesco Monti, an Italian sculptor. Amorsolo, the idol of the conservatives, listed four moderns in his lineup of the first six; this was a measure of his fairness. It took the judges about two hours to decide on the winners.

In the wake of the first AAP exhibit, a great debate over modern and conservative art arose. Taking up the cudgels for their respective schools of thought were two giants in Philippine art, Victorio Edades and Guillermo Tolentino. Edades, who introduced modern art in the Philippines in 1928, advocated a break from tradition while Tolentino upheld the value of art along classical lines. His models were Venus de Milo and the works of Velasquez.

Both were articulate, learned men and they spelled out their views in a series of articles in *The Sunday Times Magazine* and *This Week*, the magazine of the *Manila Chronicle*.