

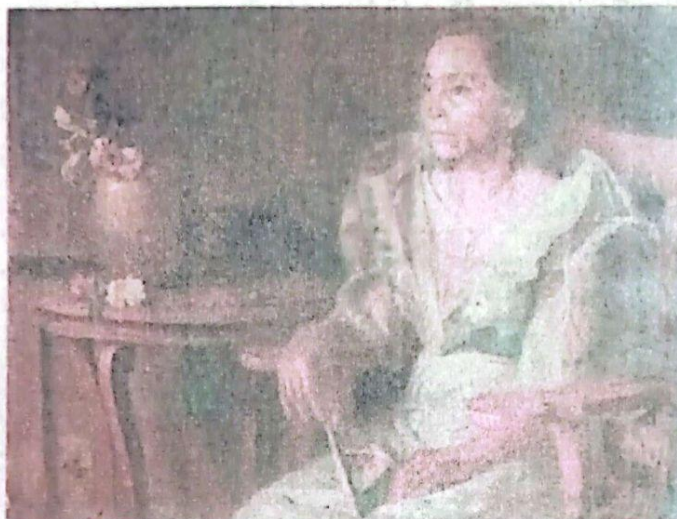
THE MAESTRO OF CARCAR

By REUBEN AMAS CANETE

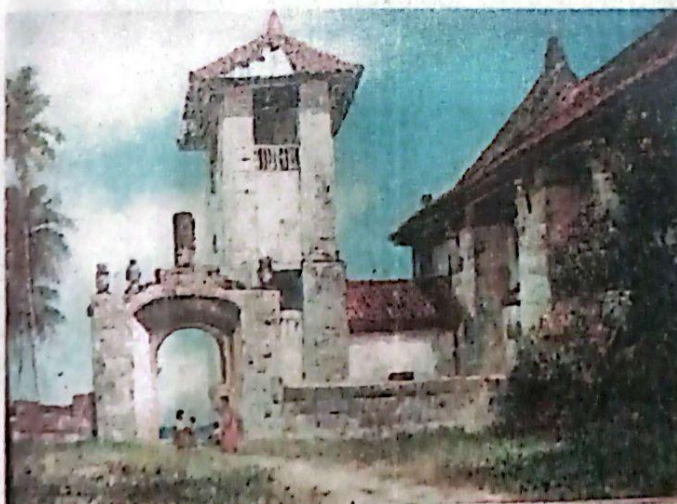
"To attain the near-approach to beauty and perfection, you have to spend the best part of your youth in scientific and continuous study of Drawing, Color Rendering... Modelling, Composition, Perspective... and the Human Body."

— Guillermo Tolentino, 1948

Martino Abellana is probably a name unfamiliar to the average Manila art reader or collector, brought up on a strict diet of standard names like Amoroso, Luna, Hidalgo or Botong Francisco. To the artist-layman of Central Luzon, however, his name rings with the clarity of recognition. Though dead for the past 10 years, the man known as the Amoroso of the South continues to leave his artistic heritage. It is in Cebu that his greatest influence is felt, as every major artist from Boy Kiamko to Amulo Galicano, Alfonso Mendoza, Giglio Pio, and Tony Abellana calls him Maestro: both teacher and friend. Abellana's brand of representational art, which in earlier times could have been dis-



"Portrait of Filomena Alcoseba Abellana" by Martino Abellana



"Landscape (Boljoon Church)"



1939 portrait of his mother, Filomena Alcoseba, shows his budding mastery, as the silent dialogue between half-wilting flowers on a vase, Filomena's distant gaze to the left field and the Velasquezian brown background heightens the sense of mystery and detachment, re-

cerulean-grey underbody swelling with life-giving rain, which it dumps over the ultramarine island on the horizon. A 1985 landscape of Boljoon's romantic church, in turn, is a sun-drenched symphony of color: crisp reds against blues and whites, while greens and yellows complement it. Truly, in this late piece, Martino gave substance to both Tolentino's and Amoroso's dictums: show the veracity of nature and the beauty of the outdoors all at once.

When depicting friends and relatives, Martino was sympathetic and sensitive, endowing his sitters with warmth and complexity of character. His 1952 portrait of former Carcar parish priest, Monsignor Abad, shows the otherworldly contentment of an aged man of the cloth, with still-alert eyes looking for souls to save. Contrast this to his affectionate 1970 portrait of daughter Ellen, in complete Beatnik getup, her deliberate poise among the icons of the era serving to demolish the illusion that Martino was too caught up in his own time to resist depicting Flower Power and the youth revolt.

His method of portraiture, influenced by the development of photography as visual

ed as "conserva- (and hence ned in the same jory as his much- ed colleagues in ni), is both a rev- n to the eyes and eration to the . For Abellana did nely follow the and-true formula s fellows in the hing circles of ando Amorsolo, greatly improved its artistic and in- tal fabric, as well ightened its rela- ith the family and omunity. Only has his story tesy of research- UP Cebu's und Fernandez Estela Ocampo) to full light. rtino was but one of a whole line of ts that can be d to one Gonzalo ana, an accom- ed designer of em- ered church vest- s and talented ian, who moved isolated Duljo he strategic town car in the 1890s. its back to the tains, warm, ring seas facing ern Bohol at its , and all roads southern Cebu nating at its da as it proceeds to Cebu City ntly an hour's away), Carcar ich with overland eaborne trade.

prosperous e class of traders, ants and land- rs lavished sums eir homes (so so that Carcar is compared to in the size and y of her ancestral na bato), as well r her church, has distinctive an onion-shaped s for its belfries.



"Portrait of Anita Gaisano"

In this atmosphere of genteel wealth, the talents of the Abellanas flourished. Gonzalo drew price graphs and tables for the *copra* traders at the public market, as well as carved wooden icons. Martino's father, Teofilo, took up the musical craft, becoming the town's leading piano teacher, and by the 1920s, its elementary principal. Teofilo was also a gifted artist, producing the sculptural designs that today still adorn Carcar's *rotonda*, centering on its exquisite Art Nouveau pavilion. This ferment of talent took off easily among the Abellana siblings. The elder Ramon, still spry and active in his late 80s, was an apprentice to his father at an early age, and eventually became a sculptor, though he practices dentistry as his breadwinning job.

It was the younger Martino, however, who got the blessings of the family to pursue his artistic calling (this at a time when being an artist meant virtual starvation). The sirens sang early on, when young Tinong absorbed artbooks of European masters in grade school, eventually focusing on Rembrandt as his idol after seeing a copy of his "Portrait

of an Old Woman" (1634). Among the first Cebuanos to enroll in UP Fine Arts in 1933, he immediately came under the spell of the gentle Amorsolo, whose own artistic talents were nourished by vigorous streams: Fabian de la Rosa in Manila and Diego Velasquez in Madrid. Amorsolo's week-long sketching jaunts into the then-countrysides of San Juan, Mandaluyong and Marikina were instrumental in forming Martino's artistic temperament for landscape, while his forte for portraiture was equally galvanized by the constant deluge of commissions that engulfed Amorsolo's studio on Azcarraga Street (now CM Recto).

Advertising jobs, encouraged by his UP mentors, filled Martino's stomach during his Manila stay and allowed him to refine exacting figure drawing and composition techniques that were to serve him well in the decades to come. Even before World War II, Martino showed his command of artistic language, strongly indebted to the Amorsolo School, but showing traces of his independence through landscapes and portraits of his family. The

lied only by the gay colors of her *saya* blouse and a Japanese fan held loosely in her hand. Set on one side of the picture plane, Filomena ignores the viewer, her inscrutable gaze centered outside our consciousness, letting in only the story of the counterpoised still life as an indicator of momentary existence.

The years after the war show that Martino favored the comparative freedom that landscape, painted *en pleine aire*, gave, in contrast to the often stifling demands of portraiture. It also showed his ability to go beyond the darker color codes favored by his Luzon contemporaries. This can be seen in two contrasting landscapes, one in 1940 and another in 1952. The earlier, reminiscent of the riverine paintings of de la Rosa or Dominador Castañeda, follows the Amorsoloesque treatment of foliage and color, especially in its yellow green versus sienna brown contrast. The latter, painted from the seaside town of Barili, revels in bright contrasts between blue-white clouds, vermillion-tinted *nipa* roofs and pale ochre sands. This liberal subject matter ultimately led Martino to unforgettable heights of virtuosity, lightening his palette and loosening his brush. A 1972 seascape is almost Impressionistic in his daring application of colored strokes that accent the emerald, turquoise, cobalt blue and magenta-colored waters, while a thickly built-up white thunderhead rises in the upper-middle, its

aid, softened the otherwise stiff poses of his subjects, and enlivened them with colors so brilliant, it is unmistakably Abellana's. Whether it is the languid pose of shopping mall matriarch Anita Gaisano in a Cebu beach in 1959; the straightforward, unruffled portraits of powerbrokers like Sotero Cabahug and Don Ramon Aboitiz; or the intimate but powerful portrait of socialite Generosa Solano, Abellana showed generations of artists how to do it right the first time. Ironically, Martino never got around to completing his own portrait, an unfinished grisaille study being the only evidence that he intended to duplicate one legacy of his first hero, Rembrandt.

To many young artists in the Visayas, however, Martino Abellana is the ultimate yardstick with which to measure their own artistic success. Through his years of teaching and advocacy of art, from the late-Forties, until his death in 1988, Abellana tirelessly championed the cause of artists, no matter what style they preferred. In a historical passage, taken from his 1974 exhibit at Gallery One, he stakes his position on stylistic preference: "I have always looked at (art) the way writers look at literature: that an artist may express himself realistically or abstractly, just as a writer expresses himself through prose or poetry." Martino thus is in all sense of the word the Maestro of Carcar: both master of thought, and teacher of freedom.