Between Declarations and Dreams
Low, Sze Wee

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After World War II, many countries in Southeast Asia gained their independence from long periods of colonisation. The decades which followed were a period of intense nation-building, coupled with a search for and assertion of national identity. Though the artistic search for identity happened within national contexts, we find striking regional resonance as questions of national identity were raised by artists across Southeast Asia. Framing their search is the Cold War, which exerted influence on artistic directions in multifarious ways. Abstraction, an implicit representation of America’s freedom and democracy in Abstract Expressionism, became a prevalent artistic trend worldwide. Socialist Realism, the sanctioned artistic style of communist China and the Soviet Union, became an influence on left-leaning groups.

It is abstraction – from its stirrings in semi-abstract representation to the non-objective kind – which this essay discusses further. Having attained the “national” by way of independence, the artists in Southeast Asian countries were anxious to prove themselves “international” as well. Part of abstraction’s complexity was that it functioned both as an expression of the modern nation as well as of its international aspirations. It reflected the reality of modernisation that countries in Southeast Asia were undergoing and also demonstrated artists’ awareness of international trends in which they were keen to participate. Going against traditions which had become trite images, artists turned to abstraction as the conduit to assert their modernity and cosmopolitanism as citizens of newly independent nations and of the world. A result of aiming to be current and on par with world trends was that they opened themselves to accusations of being derivative and un-nationalistic. Artists defended the practice of abstraction and also sought ways to nationalise it and make it their own.

New Nations, New Realities

The question of national identity follows a period when Southeast Asia was portrayed in art in an idyllic, romantic and exotic manner in the early 20th century when much of the region was under colonisation. These were done by both foreign artists who travelled there and local artists who took advantage of foreign sentiment.
Belgian artist Adrien Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès often painted topless Balinese women set in the colourful tropics. Basoeki Abdullah from Indonesia and Fernando Amorsolo from the Philippines became popular and dominant artists of their respective countries depicting sweet exotic maidens and sun-soaked rural landscapes.

The generation of modern artists which followed questioned these depictions, as they did not find these images to be representative of the nation and its postcolonial current reality. S. Sudjojono, the acknowledged “father” of Indonesian modern painting, remarked:

Everything is very beautiful and romantic, paradisiacal, everything is very pleasing, calm, and peaceful. Such paintings carry only one meaning: the beautiful Indies… for… foreigners and tourists. […] They [the painters who make these paintings] are people who live outside our real life sphere.²

These earlier picturesque images formed a disparity with actual experience, particularly after the devastation of World War II, the struggles of post-war rebuilding and decolonisation, as well as the changes wrought by rapid modernisation. Philippine writer Ricardo Demetillo, who frequently wrote on art, was especially critical:

This art is false precisely because it refuses to grapple with the complex and often terrifying aspects of our present life. The rural idyll has been drowned by the cacophonies, the blatant economic struggle, the new wine of knowledge […] The machine age, with its attendant complexities, has changed the tempo and the tenor of our ways.³

Demetillo’s words reflect the reality that Southeast Asia was rapidly modernising, in stark contrast to its previous depictions as rural and exotic. Artists from the Bandung School in Indonesia, which was established after the war and heavily criticised as being a “laboratory for the West,” believed in a modern art form which would reflect this modern reality, initially seeking this aesthetic in the flattened perspective of Cubism.⁴ They were influenced by their Dutch teacher Ries Mulder, who studied in Paris and himself was influenced by the French Cubist painter Jacques Villon.⁵ What was considered a Western and modern form of painting was something which felt natural to these artists as Bandung, itself a centre of science and technology, was a highly Westernised and modern city. Art historian Claire Holt described Bandung in her seminal book of 1967: “There are no enclaves of kampung-dwellers hiding behind the big, modern hotels, the office buildings, or on the wide avenues where content, whitewashed residences are set off by neat front gardens.”⁶ Likewise in Bangkok, there was a drastic change in the city in the first half of the 20th century. This was described by Silpa Bhirasri (Cor-
rado Feroci), the teacher and founder of Bangkok’s fine arts school, Silpakorn University:

Roads replaced canals; ferroconcrete replaced wood as building material; traditional dress gave way to western clothes; the simple dwellings which in the past were built amidst a luxurious flora, near canals or rivers changed into monotonous rows of buildings along monotonous streets where here and there a tree strives for its existence. Where once the silent boat glided on its way, today there is noise, the deafening engines of the numberless motor-cars which strain the nerves of passers-by. Dynamism is sovereign, where a few decades ago the life of human beings quietly spanned its cycle like that of a plant. Willingly or unwillingly, the pulse of the nation’s life is now dictated by the universal constructive, and at the same time destructive, impact of modern life.

Though artists continued to use common traditional subjects in art such as nudes, still lifes, and landscapes, the approach was now vastly different. For instance, Popo Iskandar of Indonesia and Ta Ty of Vietnam made paintings of nudes but not as renderings to show skill or technical competence in illustrating the human body (figs. 1 and 2). Instead, their nudes were examinations of form particularly influenced by Cubism, which was a recent practice in Southeast Asia in this period. While Cubism is credited to being developed in Paris in the early twentieth century by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, it was in the 1940s and 1950s that artists in Southeast Asia began to experiment and adapt it, along with other “-isms” from abroad. International art movements were learnt by artists through foreign magazines, foreign teachers and studies overseas. After decades of emphasis of painting in the realist style, brought about paradoxically also through Western influence, forms of abstraction offered a refreshing perspective which also suited this period of modernisation. It matched an outlook of desire for newness and progress during this time, an outlook which was also expressed by Ta Ty:

Technique is only the secondary means to express the primary attraction: “Mind.” Anything that passes through the eyes of the “new artist” must be filtered, overturned, and rotated according to proportional direction.

Moreover, urbanisation and modern architecture also dramatically changed the landscape of cities across Southeast Asia. In various metropolises, architects were designing buildings using the then popular modernist language as desire and symbol of progressiveness. A few which deserve mention are Vann Molyvann (Cambodia), Leandro Locsin (Philippines) and Friedrich Silaban (Indonesia), championing an aesthetic which...
privileged clean, linear forms and careful, if any, use of ornamentation. In certain cases, these modern forms were adapted not simply to suit the tropical climate but to integrate references to local or national identity, to express simultaneously the national and the modern. For instance, Vann adapted the pointed roofs in traditional Khmer architecture and integrated these forms in his modernist designs such as in the fan-shaped Chaktomuk Conference Hall (fig. 3) and the Preah Sumarit National Theatre.

It is then of no surprise that this new modern environment would be absorbed and visually echoed in the artworks of this time. This setting coincided or even enabled visual representations of reduced or simplified forms. Lee Aguinaldo’s linear hard-edged paintings (fig. 4) were seen by art critic Emmanuel Torres as reflective of the modern architecture arising in Makati, Manila’s central business district, which had several buildings designed by Locsin. Similarly, Fernando Zobel’s Saeta series, though billed as non-objective paintings, were initially stimulated by the lines of scaffolding against the sky (fig. 5), as Manila developed rapidly after the war. In the painting of U Kin Maung (also known as Bank), the city of Mandalay is portrayed with overlapping quadrilateral forms, jagged corners and sweeps of lyrical curves, doing away with typical traditional Burmese images of temples and pagodas (fig. 6). Ithipol Thangchalok of Thailand also credited the urbanism which surrounded him in Bangkok as inspiration, extracting his forms from walls, windows, and doors which reflect city living (fig. 7). The bustling city of Kuala Lumpur and spirit of building in Malaysia also inflected the abstracts of Yusman Aman, who rendered this modern spirit in the traditional medium of batik (fig. 8).

Indeed, abstraction in Southeast Asia hews quite closely to the newly rising landscapes in the region. It was, however, not only an introspective manifestation as artists from Southeast Asia were travelling outside the region as well. In contrast to the earlier depictions of “tropical paradise” by Southeast Asian and foreign artists, landscapes which inspired form included, as a few examples, the city of New York (fig. 9), a European city in the winter time (fig. 10), or the landscape of Nikko, Japan.

It would be time spent away from their respective countries, paradoxically, that led some artists to see and persistently engage with the national. While she travelled extensively, Anita Magsaysay-Ho continued to use Philippine genre scenes as subject, such as rural maidens working in the field, but painted in a stylised manner. Sudjana Kerton spent more than two decades living away from Indonesia but painted themes inspired by home, such as Gamelan Orchestra, which was done at the time he was living in New York (fig. 11). A.D. Pirous found himself inspired by Islamic calligraphy during a visit to the Metropolitan Museum in New York shortly after he arrived in 1969, which he later integrated in his
Reflecting on his experience abroad which stimulated his thinking on identity, he said later,

In Bandung I didn’t have so many ideas about being an “Indonesian” painter. I was too much occupied with learning to paint following Western criteria. We got a Western education with Western teachers and Western subject matter. Only after I had mastered the technique did I start to meditate about the content. This happened when I was outside Indonesia when there was distance between me and Indonesia. It was only then that I asked myself the question: “Well, Pirous, who in fact are you?” And I concluded I was an Indonesian painter because the Indonesian environment mattered to me. Every modern artist is of course firstly international, but then I realized who I was.

The question of a national identity in art was a prevalent topic among artists across Southeast Asia, especially in this period of new nationhood. What did it mean to produce “national art”? Hernando R. Ocampo, the leading artist of the Neo-Realists, a group of artists which emerged in the Philippines after the war who painted the “new reality,” admitted a brief phase in making paintings with Filipino themes but abandoned it seeing it as an artificial endeavour. In an interview, he would go on to quote a fellow member of the Neo-Realists, Victor Oteyza:

Art must never listen to the still, small voice of patriotism. Beautiful as love of country is, it cannot serve as the motif of a painting because it would vitiate the subject of a painting and its treatment. One thing should be made clear at this point: nationalism in art is not necessarily achieved by the use of a native theme or a native medium.

Ironically, though Ocampo would not consciously intend to produce a particularly Philippine art, his abstractions came to be identified as being distinctly Filipino, with his unique use of colours and forms that were derived from his surroundings.

During this nation-building period, artists in Southeast Asia who practised in abstraction were faced with much criticism. There was the expectation to create something overtly national, and abstraction was seen as contrary to this aim, branded as an “international” or “Western” style. In response to this criticism, many leaders in the art scene chose to support artists practicing in forms of abstraction, if it was their aesthetic preference.
Mulder, the Dutch teacher of the Bandung School, defended the right for the Bandung artists to be modern and the liberty for them to practice in the style of their choosing. In a letter to an expatriate Indonesian artist, Salim, who lived in Paris and disapproved of the “un-Indonesian” character of the Bandung School, Mulder wrote:

“You… have been free to seek and find yourself without hindrances or prejudices or sentiments, without daily insistence that you be “Indonesian.” Why do you want to withhold this freedom from others?—the freedom to orient oneself, unimpeded, to the language of forms and to find one’s convictions in the slow process of acceptance and rejection.”

In Thailand, there was also disapproval for Thai artists in practising in abstraction, as if it was inauthentic for them to practise in this art form. Art critic Hiram Woodward Jr. reported in Bangkok World that a British artist who exhibited in Bangkok suggested that Thai artists draw from their own traditions rather than make pale imitations of Western art. Woodward further recounted that the Thai artist Damrong Wong-Uparaj, a practitioner of abstraction, retorted to him by asking what qualities his work shared with 18th century British artist Sir Joshua Reynolds. The pressure to produce nationalist art was deemed stifling by many artists in Southeast Asia and they found themselves constantly answering to this prevalent paradigm. During the preview in the Philippines of the country’s first participation in the Venice Biennale in 1964, Jose Joya’s entries, including Hills of Nikko (fig. 13), were criticised for not being “Filipino” enough. Critic and curator Emmanuel Torres, who was the Philippines’ Commissioner-General for the biennale and who observed this, responded, “that modern art criticism could not care less if a painting were done in an abstract, figurative, or nationalist manner – the important thing is that it has quality.”

Torres believed that the individual artist, whatever his nationality, had a right to work in abstraction and could develop it to make it distinctly his own. Many artists believed in the importance of the “international” quality or the universality of abstract art. Abstract art free from objective representation could be appreciated for its visual qualities – it was not bound by particular national criterion, subject matter or interpretation. There was the assertion that the appreciation of art went beyond national boundaries. Syed Ahmad Jamal, who was one of the first practitioners of abstraction in Malaysia, felt strongly about this universal aspect of Abstract Expressionism. He noted:

“We did not really make any conscious effort to portray the feeling of Independence as such, but the spirit of the moment, what is I think important; we put the problems of artistic excellence foremost, manifesting the nation: abstraction and the inter-national

Clarissa Chikiamco

12 A.D. Pirous
(b. 1932, Indonesia)
*Epitaph IV*
1972
Oil on canvas
Collection of Serambi Pirous

13 Jose Joya
(b. 1931, Philippines; d. 1995, Philippines)
*Hills of Nikko*
1964
Oil on canvas
172.7 x 198 cm
Collection of National Museum, Philippines

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and through this was reflected national aspiration, joy, ecstasy, optimism, and all those things which happened because we were right in the midst of the great happening. The fact that we were artists first and foremost I think is important, categorically. In the final analysis, I think, we should be judged on artistic quality, and I think in the long run this is the quality by which we should be judged.28

Likewise, Lee Aguinaldo in the Philippines believed that art transcended nationality, and that the quality of the painting was paramount.29 His cynicism with regard to creating a distinct national style is reflected in his remark that those attributed to creating the New York School were not native American, and were either foreign-born or second-generation immigrants.30 Torres referred to Aguinaldo’s abstractions as being of an “International Style,” linking the trans-border prevalence of this kind of abstraction with the context of the period, when information was circulating freely or more quickly than ever before.31 Aguinaldo manifested what many artists in Southeast Asia felt – an anxiety of desire to be part of international trends, to be on par and connected with the world. This angst was compounded by the impression that they were merely being imitative, belated and derivative, that though abstraction was a global movement, it was an art form with primarily Western geneses.32

In contrast, Philippine artist Jose Joya saw abstraction as having earlier origins than its popularity in the West in the post-war era. He studied abroad at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in America in the 1950s and became influenced by the Abstract Expressionist movement which was the trend at the time. Yet he remarked of the term Abstract Expressionism:

I’m using that label as mere convenience, a label attached to the New York school of painting. Abstraction is an international trend; it isn’t a contemporary development as most people would think. Even in ancient times, the Orientals were already doing calligraphy and Persian geometric designs; it isn’t at all a recent phenomenon. […] No, abstraction is not a time-honoured convention in the Western world as it is in the Eastern world.33

Joya’s assertion would have found resonance in Singapore with the members of the Modern Art Society. They acknowledged the influence of Western art but also sought to incorporate “the essence and abstract consciousness of traditional art forms of the East.”34 For Joya, as well as a number of artists in Southeast Asia, semi-abstract and abstract forms were ways they could be part of a prevalent international trend, showing they were abreast of art movements abroad. At the same time, it allowed them to connect with more local, regional or
Asian abstract tendencies which pre-dated the realistic style introduced through Western colonisation, while resisting an overtly nationalistic approach, particularly in subject matter. The semi-abstract stylised paintings of Nguyen Tu Nghiem, for instance, were influenced by images found in traditional Vietnamese culture, such as Dong Ho woodblock prints, Dong Son bronzes and dinh (communal house) carvings. It has been noted that the more Nghiem explored tradition, the more "modern" he became. Similarly, G. Sidharta Soegijo was inspired by decorative patterns found in Indonesian traditional art, using it as a design source for his screen prints and sculptures (fig. 14). Having learned art both in Indonesia and the Netherlands, he viewed it as an important approach in "nationalising" modern art.

Abstraction was indeed claimed as national in certain ways. The importance of gesture in abstraction allowed them to connect it to local practices of calligraphy, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia. Artists also rendered abstraction with the use of local materials, such as batik in Malaysia and lacquer in Vietnam, providing a unique aesthetic that differentiated these abstracts from Western iterations. Artists also linked abstraction to their religious ideas or spirituality, seeing abstract form as befitting the expressive and the intangible. In his later period as an artist, Ahmad Sadali used abstraction as a way to connect with the spiritual world of Islam (fig. 15).

In Thailand, Buddhism and the long tradition of Buddhist sculptures came to exercise a significant influence on artists of this period. The sculptor Chamruang Vichienket initially produced realistic figures but came to be influenced in his practice by Buddhist forms (fig. 16). This may have been encouraged by his teacher, Silpa Bhirasri, who believed that, while there should be an exchange of ideas in technical matters or new materials between East and West, art should keep to the spiritual and cultural value of its particular locale. Otherwise, Bhirasri felt it risked being imitations without genuine expression.

The fear of imitation without genuine expression is also illustrated in Malaysia, where detractors felt that Abstract Expressionism was Western and seemingly not a style that was adaptable or useful locally. The artist Syed Ahmad Jamal, however, argued that the expression was suitable to Malaysia especially so in the period of independence, when artists unconsciously but intuitively echoed the spirit of freedom through expressive form (fig. 17). He wrote about the art of this period:

The new way of looking at things, of the break with traditional ways of presenting the image of the seen world by means of representing the perception of the nature of the world, runs parallel to the impending break from the bonds of colonial patronage. Although one might argue that the form or rather the convention is in reality a perpetuation...
of Western cultural tradition, the spirit in which it was expressed is completely new. The new art form graphically reflects the new mood of the people. Indeed, in this time of nation-building, abstraction was asserted as a befitting articulation of national identity. By its very nature, abstraction allowed artists to freely interpret traditional concepts and forms of art and self, transfiguring them into works that were simultaneously personal, national and international. Through abstraction, they could claim a position as citizens of a nation and of the world.

Inter-national

In considering the complexity of the national and the international aspects of art and identity in this period, it is worth reviewing the salient points which arose from a conference and competition for artists of Southeast Asia in 1957, likely the first for the region. With the event held in Manila and organised by the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), Purita Kalaw-Ledesma, AAP Founder, and Amadis Guerrero noted of it:

"[T]wo important ideas emerged from the competition. The first was that all men are brothers and art transcends all barriers because it is universal. The second – and this may not be as diametrically opposite as it may seem – was a belief in national identity."

This duality would find itself a distinct co-existence, however tense, in abstraction, which was possible for its style and its popularity as an international trend at a time of nation-building in Southeast Asia. Seemingly dichotomous, the actual intersection of the national and international in the realm of abstract art allowed artists and the nation-states they found themselves in (and in many cases also felt a sense of belonging to) to simultaneously proclaim their respective identities and worldly ambitions. The new modern nation needed an appropriate new modern art form and abstraction was deemed by many artists to be fitting. Abstract art offered a new visual language which could express this spirit of modernisation and independence – a sharp distinction from the reductive and essentialising beautiful and exotic depictions of before. Even though the spectre of colonial (Western) influence would persist in casting a shadow over abstraction itself, many artists in the region continued to engage with it and to see it as a medium of expression they could make their own.


3 Ricardo Demetillo, "Filipinism in Art." This article can be found in a scrapbook in the Putita Kalaw-Ledesma Archives, Art VII, 26–9, available from National Gallery Singapore’s Resource Centre. The article is likely to have been published in *Woman and the Home*, 30 August 1956.

4 Trisno Sumardjo, "Bandung mengabdi laboratorium barat" (Bandung Is Becoming the Laboratory of the West), in *Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia: Esai-Esai Pilihan* (Modern Indonesian Art: Selected Essays), eds. Aminudin T.H. Siregar & Enin Supriyanto (Jakarta: Nalar, 2006), 113–6. This famous critique was first published in *Mingguan Siasat* 5 December 1954, 26. Ahmad Sadali, who was among the artists of the Bandung School, explained his own position on the modern: “Modern art is a type of creation exercised by contemporary artists who make use of every facility existing in today’s space and time. It involves the effort to find a new ground of reality that is a quandary from which modern men can find no escape. It is an insight contending a search of knowledge that can clarify the relationship between the self and the world.” Quoted in Jim Supangkat, *The Hidden Works and Thoughts of Ahmad Sadali* (Jakarta: Edwin’s Gallery, 1997), 13.


6 Ibid, 234. Kampung is a Malay world for rural community or village.

7 Silpa Bhirasri, "Contemporary Art in Thailand: Effects of Modern Civilization and Influences of Western Art,” in *Contemporary Art in Thailand*, 8th ed. (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2006), 11. The superscript note “(2)” appears in the original, where Bhirasri notes: “Up to forty years ago Bangkok was intersected by a net of canals which as in Venice, served as the indispensable means of transportation. Only a few roads could be counted in the capital up to forty years ago.”

8 Tatehata Akira, introduction to *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2006), 12.

9 Emmanuel Torres, *Philippine Abstract Painting* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1992), 4–5; Boitran Huynh, “Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards,” (PhD. Diss., University of Sydney, 2005), 244.

10 Helena Spanjaard, "Bandung, the Laboratory of the West,” in *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change*, 1945–1990, ed. Joseph Fischer (Jakarta and New York: Panitia Pameran and KIAS, Festival of Indonesia, 1990), 65. Silpa Bhirasri also makes that point, writing, "Of course, considering the character of our traditional art, realism is a western influence, better to say that it is from Western specimens, that Thai artists started to work in a realistic style.” See Bhirasri, “Contemporary Art in Thailand,” 14.

11 Ta Ty, untitled text in *Triển lãm Ta Ty* [Exhibition of Ta Ty], exh. cat. (Hanoi: Information Service of North Vietnam, 1951), unpaginated. Quote translated by Cung T. and Phoebe Scott.

12 Molyvann did use ornamentation as in keeping with the ornamentation of traditional Khmer architecture. However, he believed that these should be used carefully. See "A Conversation with Vann Molyvann,” in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, eds. Ly Daravuth & Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001), 17.


16 Rod Paras-Perez, Fernando Zobel (Manila: Eugenio Lopez Foundation, 1990), 35.

18 “Yusman Aman: Malaysia’s Pride,” Kingston Daily Freeman, 28 November 1975, 10.


20 Spanjaard, “Bandung, the Laboratory of the West,” 65.


22 “Hernando Ocampo,” in Cid Reyes, Conversations on Philippine Art: Interviews by Cid Reyes (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989), 122. The interview was conducted in 1973.


24 Holt, Art in Indonesia, 236.


26 Ibid.


29 “Lee Aguinaldo,” in Cid Reyes, Conversations on Philippine Art: Interviews by Cid Reyes (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989). This interview was conducted in 1973.

30 Ibid.

31 Torres, “Nationalism in Filipino Art,” 15.

32 The anxiety also of making belated art is reflected in Purita Kalaw-Ledesma’s writing describing the art of the 1950s period: “Intelectual stimulation, ambition to do better, painting sessions, looking at reproductions of Western contemporary art in Life and Times Magazines brought forth a new high…. And yet, even at this period, Philippine painting was 50 years behind the times.” See Purita Kalaw-Ledesma, ‘Art in the Fifties: Lyd and the PAG,” The Fifties (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1971), unpaginated.

33 “Jose Joya,” in Cid Reyes, Conversations on Philippine Art: Interviews by Cid Reyes (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989), 88. The interview was conducted in 1973.


36 Ibid., 29.


39 Ibid.

40 Note: Chamruang had signed at least one of his sculptures as “Chamraung” though uses “Chamruang” in his sculpture centre. There can be multiple English spellings for Thai names as translations of their sound. Apinan Posyhananda, Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992), 68; Amitha Amranand, “Art in the Abstract,” Bangkok Post: Outlook, 12 May 2008, 1. Amranand mentions an article by Krisana Hong-utane in which the latter attributes the shift in Chamruang’s work to his admiration for Sukhothai art.

42 Ibid.


45 The competition had the participation of Philippines, Malaya, Vietnam, Indonesia and other countries such as China, Japan and India Art Association of the Philippines. See First Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition and Tenth Annual Exhibition (Manila: Art Association of the Philippines, 1957), unpaginated, and Purita Kalaw-Ledesma and Amadis Guerrero, The Struggle for Philippine Art (Quezon City: Vera Reyes, 1974), 68.