Filipino Identity and European Influence in Fernando Amorsolo's Paintings of Rural Life

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Abstract

Fernando Amorsolo, a Filipino painter whose works were characterized by idealized rural landscapes populated by smiling laborers and peasants, started gaining popularity in the Philippines around the 1920's and 1930's. His romanticized imagery is contrasted by the political and social turmoil in the Philippines during his lifetime, from the overturn of Spanish colonial rule to the subsequent period of American occupation. By engaging with a close visual analysis of Amorsolo's rural genre scenes, comparing his work with the European Impressionist painters he cites as influences, and analyzing his work through a postcolonial lens, this thesis paper will examine Amorsolo's efforts to form a unified image of Filipino identity in the face of shifting colonial rule. In an attempt to define what it means to be a Filipino during a time when nationhood was continuously being denied, Amorsolo blends Impressionist painterly techniques with imagery that signals national identity in order to glorify both the Filipino countryside and the individuals who inhabit that space. In doing so, Amorsolo creates a multifaceted discourse about the conflict between identity, nationhood, and the effects of colonial rule, offering a unique look into the ways that colonial power affected the Philippines.

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Introduction

In 1948, after viewing a retrospective show containing fifty-one paintings spanning Filipino artist Fernando Amorsolo's body of work, Filipino journalist Francisco Arcellana angrily wrote that Amorsolo's paintings were "pictures that do not speak, that do not shout - they have nothing to say; pictures that are not hard to understand - they have nothing to understand."[1] A painter who began to make his name in the Philippines in the 1920's and 1930's by painting scenes of the sun-lit Filipino countryside, Fernando Amorsolo quickly rose to prominence and received attention from Americans and Filipinos alike. Amorsolo's colorful canvases create a serene picture of rural life, often depicting smiling, hard working peasants dressed in traditional costume, gathered together to harvest crops, rest in the shade, or other communal activities. However, as seen above in Arcellana's critiques as well as others, Amorsolo's work was often criticized later in his career for its perceived frivolity and lack of depth. This critical view can be attributed to the fact that Amorsolo's painting's seemingly light subject matter is contrasted by the shifting political influences competing for control in the Philippines during his lifetime.

From the end of Spanish colonial rule during Amorsolo's early childhood, to the rise of American colonial leadership, Amorsolo's life and career ran concurrently to major transitions of colonial power. Despite this ever-changing colonial landscape, Amorsolo's body of work remained much the same thematically, very rarely straying from the idyllic rural genre subject. While there is much debate surrounding Amorsolo's subject matter and their perceived disconnect with contemporary colonial contexts, what scholars do agree on is the profound influence the work of Spanish Old Masters and European Impressionism had on Amorsolo's

[1] Alfredo R. Roces, *Amorsolo (1892-1972)* (Filipinas Foundation, Inc., 1975), 126.

painterly style and exploration of sunlight and shadow. After a trip to Madrid, Spain, Amorsolo became influenced by the works of Impressionists like Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla, as well as other Impressionists like Anders Zorn, Edouard Manet, and Claude Monet. He was also captivated by the works of Diego Velázquez, whom many Impressionists cite as an influence on their own personal style. Where Amorsolo differed from these influences, however, is his particular treatment of color, sunlight, and shadow in order to depict a space that is uniquely tropical in nature. He continued to distance himself from these influences by using specific imagery, namely highlighting the national costume of the Philippines, to connote national identity.

While much has been written in previous Filipino scholarship covering general information about Amorsolo's life and career, as well as his stylistic influences from European Impressionism, little scholarship outside the Philippines has been dedicated to a close analysis of how Amorsolo's imagery and influences work together in tandem. This thesis aims to begin to fill a significant gap in American art historical scholarship by examining a Filipino artist, a subject that is hardly discussed in the grand scheme of art history. In fact, despite Amorsolo's fame in the Philippines, he is rarely discussed in American scholarship and remains generally unrecognized in art historical discourse. By engaging with a close visual analysis of Amorsolo's rural genre scenes, comparing his work with his European Impressionist counterparts, and analyzing his work through a postcolonial lens, this thesis paper will examine Amorsolo's efforts to form a unified image of Filipino identity in the face of shifting colonial rule. In an attempt to define what it means to be a Filipino during a time when nationhood was continuously being denied, Amorsolo blends Impressionist painterly techniques with imagery that signals national identity in order to glorify both the Filipino rural countryside and the individuals, specifically

women, who inhabit that space. In doing so, Amorsolo creates a multifaceted discourse about the conflict between identity, nationhood, and the effects of colonial rule, offering a unique look into the ways that colonial power affected the Philippines.

As mentioned previously, while much has been written about Amorsolo's life and career in the Philippines, Amorsolo is relatively unknown in the United States, and is therefore rarely written about in American art historical discourse. Most of the body of literature published about Amorsolo in the Philippines is made up of biographies and retrospectives. For example, Alfredo R. Roces' book *Amorsolo* gives a comprehensive account of Amorsolo's entire life and career, discussing his birth, his rise to fame in the Philippines, and his reception in both the Philippines and the United States. Similarly, the chapter titled "Fernando Amorsolo: The Gentle Rebel" in *Pioneers of Philippine Art: Luna, Amorsolo, Zobel*, by Rodriguez Paras-Perez, gives biographical information and an overview of Amorsolo's storied career. Other books offer collections of essays focusing on different aspects of Amorsolo's career. *Fernando Amorsolo: Seven-Museum Exhibition* is a collection of essays written for a large retrospective exhibition in 2008 titled "His Art, Our Heart" that spanned seven museums in the Philippines, celebrating his life and his immense contribution to Filipino art. The essays start with a biographical account, then go on to broach topics such as Amorsolo's depictions of women, the land, and noble dignitaries. Similarly, *Maestro Fernando C: Amorsolo: Recollections of the Family* is a collection of essays, curated by and in many cases written by members of Amorsolo's surviving family, mostly his children. Because this collection is written and published by Amorsolo's kin, it is clearly biased towards praising Amorsolo, not only as an artist but also as a beloved father and teacher; however, it still gives a useful account of Amorsolo's life. All these sources provided the necessary background information about Amorsolo's expansive career in order to

understand his artistic production and tendencies. While most, if not all these sources argue for Amorsolo's excellence as a painter, some in more explicit ways than others, this thesis will be more focused on complicating the discourse that Amorsolo creates around national identity.

In order to situate Amorsolo's career in the historical contexts of the Philippines during his lifetime, books like Stanley Kernow's *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*, Maria Christine Halili's *Philippine History*, and Keith Thor Carlson's *The Twisted Road to Freedom: America's Granting of Independence to the Philippines* provided extensive information regarding the colonial overturn between Spain and the United States. *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream* is a comprehensive anthology of essays dedicated to the Philippine-American War that was crucial to understanding the more negative effects of that specific period. Furthermore, in order to compare Amorsolo to his European influences, books like *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting* and *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light* give insight to their technique that was used to facilitate analysis of both their style and Amorsolo's. Mina Roces' article "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines" discusses the transformation of Filipino national dress over time, and argues that different periods of history have used national dress in order to make certain statements about national identity. Roces' article was particularly helpful in understanding how Amorsolo portrays women in traditional Filipino costume in order to achieve a specific goal. Finally, the works of post-colonial theoreticians Homi K. Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee, specifically Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" and "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" and Chatterjee's *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* analyze the effects of colonization on the colonized nation. Their essays provide a crucial framework to use in analyzing Amorsolo's

works in a post-colonial context. The goal of utilizing these sources was to better understand how Amorsolo might fit into a larger discourse, and to aid this thesis in an in-depth analysis of Amorsolo's works that is very rarely addressed in American art historical writing.

Amorsolo's Early Life

Fernando Cueto Amorsolo was born in 1892 in Paco, Manila.[2] Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Daet, Camarines Norte, a rural province in Luzon where they lived for thirteen years.[3] Amorsolo's father passed away when he was eleven, and after staying in Daet for a few years the family moved back to Manila in order to seek financial stability, as job opportunities were more readily available for his widowed mother in the city.[4] During this time, both he and his brother Pablo learned to draw and paint from their mother's cousin[5], Fabián de la Rosa, who was a prominent painter in the Philippines. Fabián de la Rosa was known in the Philippines for his genre subjects, also known as scenes from real life, focusing on rural landscapes. His tutelage and choice of subject matter was no doubt influential on the young Amorsolo, as Amorsolo would go on to become one of the most popular genre and landscape artists in the Philippines. According to Rodriguez Paras-Perez, although Amorsolo continued to draw and paint informally while growing up, there was no formal art education available in the Philippines during Amorsolo's youth since the Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Engraving in Manila (*Academia de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado*) had been closed during the Philippine Revolution.[6]

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[2] Santiago Albano Pilar, "Fernando Amorsolo: Milestones in His Life and Art," in *Fernando Amorsolo: Seven-Museum Exhibition*, edited by Arnold Moss (CRIBS Foundation, Inc., 2008), 160.
[3] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 20.
[4] Ibid.
[5] There are different accounts regarding the exact relationship between Amorsolo's mother and Fabián de la Rosa. Most will cite Fabián de la Rosa as Fernando Amorsolo's mother's first cousin, but he is also referred to as Amorsolo's uncle. *Maestro Fernando C: Amorsolo: Recollections of the Family*, a memoir written by Amorsolo's surviving children, cites de la Rosa as Amorsolo's mother's nephew.
[6] Rodriguez Paras-Perez, "Fernando Amorsolo: The Gentle Rebel," in *Pioneers of Philippine Art: Luna, Amorsolo, Zobel* (Ayala Foundation, Inc., 2004), 55.

However, when Amorsolo turned 16, he and a few other eager young artists started petitioning around their neighborhoods for a new art school to open. In 1909, the University of the Philippines (UP) opened the School of Fine Arts (*Escuela de Bellas Artes*), and Amorsolo became one of the first batch of students to graduate from the program in 1914.[7] His prodigious talent followed him through school, as he won multiple awards during his time at UP and was quickly hired as an instructor at the School of Fine Arts despite only having graduated from the program four years prior.[8] Amorsolo's artistic abilities were quickly recognized at a young age, and his childhood in the provinces and his training under Fabián de la Rosa would serve as a backdrop for his future development of scenes of rural life.

Spain, Velázquez, and Impressionism

In 1919, Amorsolo traveled to Spain in what would become the most influential trip on his artistic career and burgeoning style. The trip was funded by a grant from Enrique Zobel, a prominent businessman in the Philippines. During his seven months in Spain, Amorsolo studied at the *Academia de San Fernando* in Madrid to further his artistic ability.[9] While there, Amorsolo also had the opportunity to visit the Prado Museum, where he encountered the works of Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya.[10] Amorsolo was immediately taken by both artists, especially the work of Velázquez, and copied works such as Velázquez's *Don Fernando de Austria* and Goya's *Maja Desnuda*.[11] Additionally, he saw the works of Impressionist artists such as Joaquín Sorolla, Edouard Manet, and Anders Zorn, who also would have a large impact on his painterly style and color palette.[12]

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Pilar, "Milestones in His Life and Art," 160.
[9] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 55. See also R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 42.
[10] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 42.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 55.

Amorsolo's act of traveling to Spain and copying old masters' paintings places him immediately in the tradition of many artists and intellectuals who came before him. Starting around the late sixteenth century, young male European aristocrats would embark on a trip around the most intellectually and culturally significant cities of Europe in order to further their classical education.[13] This trip would eventually come to be known as the Grand Tour. The goal of visiting cities such as Paris, Venice, Florence, and most importantly, Rome, was to gain as much knowledge of culture and the arts as possible. This tradition continued to be a rite of passage for wealthy intellectuals into the nineteenth century. The idea that traveling to an important city, especially one rich with artistic tradition, was important for one's intellectual growth was passed down to young artists who would travel from their birthplace to cities like Paris or Rome to copy Old Master paintings as an important part of their artistic training.[14] Even further, in the Philippines in the latter half of the nineteenth century, many young Filipino intellectuals often from wealthy families traveled to Spain in order to further their education; these men would come to be known in the Philippines as *illustrados*.[15] Amorsolo, therefore, can be seen as participating in a well-established tradition, one that privileges Spain, and more widely, Europe, as the place where the most artistic and intellectual growth can take place. The artists and artworks that Amorsolo came into contact with here, namely works by Velázquez, Manet, Sorolla, and Zorn, would be influences that he would carry throughout the entirety of his artistic career.

[13] Jean Sorabella, "The Grand Tour," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grtr/hd_grtr.htm
[14] Ibid.
[15] Stanley Kernow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1989), 15. One of the most famous *illustrados* is José Rizal, a Filipino intellectual who became a national hero for his writings which spoke out against the injustices of Spanish rule in the Philippines.

Diego Velázquez is widely considered to be one of the most important painters of the Spanish Golden Age, both for Spain's artistic history as well as globally, as his style would come to be admired by many subsequent artists including the Impressionists in the nineteenth century. Velázquez was described by his contemporaries as "paint[ing] from life, '*del natural*.'"[16] Indeed, Velázquez's works are characterized by a distinct attention to naturalism, a broad and painterly brushstroke, and an attention to contrasts in light and shadow, also known as tenebrism. Velázquez's naturalism can be seen in his court portraiture for King Phillip IV of Spain, but also in works like *The Triumph of Bacchus*, also known as *Los Borrachos*. The Spanish followers of Bacchus depicted in the painting are shown in a naturalistic manner, their ruddy, laughing faces and rumpled clothing contrasting directly with the pale skin of Bacchus. However, because of Velázquez's dramatic treatment of light, they seem to radiate forward from the dark background rather than fading into obscurity. This painting exemplifies Velázquez's ability to portray figures that are true to life, yet imbue them with a sense of importance.

The influence of Velázquez's work on that of the Impressionists stems back to Edouard Manet's interest in Velázquez's work during the beginning of his artistic career, from 1850-1862.[17] According to Juliet Wilson-Bareau, the young Manet first encountered the work of Velázquez via the Louvre, where he diligently copied the few Velázquez's in the collection during his time as a student. Early in his career, Manet was drawn to Velázquez's "bold and simple handling of clean, colorful pigments and by his way of placing figures on a canvas."[18] In 1865, Manet briefly traveled to Spain where he continued to copy and absorb Velázquez's

[16] Gridley McKim-Smith, Inge Fielder, Rhona Macbeth, Richard Newman, and Frank Zuccari, "Velázquez: Painting From Life," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 40 (2005): 79.
[17] Juliet Wilson-Bareau, "Manet and Spain," in *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting*, edited by John P. O'Neill (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 205.
[18] Ibid, 203.

works, as well as engaging with other Spanish masters such as Goya. For Wilson-Bareau, Manet's early devotion to Velázquez taught him "to understand how the splendors of a long-lost 'Golden Age' could be reinterpreted for the modern world."[19] Spanish Impressionist Joaquín Sorolla was also deeply inspired by Velázquez, having also extensively copied Velázquez's works as an early painter especially in the early twentieth century. He began to incorporate Velázquez's style in his own portraits, exhibiting Velázquez's influence in his "subtle palette of blacks and greys, in the confident brushwork and in the intensity of the sitter's gaze."[20] With multiple Impressionist artists pointing towards Velázquez as an influential force in the development of their style, Velázquez's importance for the movement as a whole cannot be understated.

During his visit to Madrid, Fernando Amorsolo would also be inspired by Velázquez's treatment of light and shadow, just as Manet and Sorolla were during their own artistic growth. As mentioned previously, Amorsolo studiously copied Velázquez in a similar manner to Impressionists like Manet and Sorolla. In a 1920 interview after his trip to Spain when asked about his preferences of works in the Prado, Amorsolo is quoted as saying: "Velázquez is indisputably number one."[21] As observed by Rodriguez Paras-Perez, "Amorsolo discovered in Velázquez the effective use of greys in attaining color balance and the impact that can be achieved by indicating form instantly grasped at a glance."[22] In this way, Amorsolo's stylistic influences mirror that of the Impressionists, despite painting over sixty years after Manet initially encountered Velázquez. Amorsolo again can be seen following a clear tradition laid out by artists

[19] Ibid.
[20] Gabriele Finaldi, "'The Greatest Thing in the World,'" in *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light*, edited by Linda Schofield (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2019), 12.
[21] R. Roces, *Amorsolo,* 43.
[22] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 49.

who came before him, understanding Velázquez as a master of technique and wishing to translate that genius into his own works. Impressionism itself also had an influence on Amorsolo, as he also cites Sorolla as a large inspiration and ultimately uses the same painterly brushstroke that marks the Impressionist style.[23] Where he differs from these European influences, however, is his treatment of light and color when used to depict the rural Filipino countryside, a difference that is discussed below.

The Rise of American Power

In his professional life as a burgeoning artist, Amorsolo saw many successes early on in his career. His trip to Spain further catapulted his artistic success, as he began to adopt the techniques he observed in Spain into his own artworks. This blending of European influence into Amorsolo's paintings of Filipino rural life will be addressed at length later in this thesis; however, it is important to first examine how Amorsolo's youth was also marked by a time of extreme political upheaval and transfers of colonial power. This shifting period in the Philippines, specifically the end of Spanish rule and the rise of American power, had a direct impact on his upbringing and his subsequent artistic training and decisions. In 1896, the Philippine Revolution began, led by a group of revolutionaries known as the Katipunan.[24] After over four hundred years of continuous colonial Spanish rule, many Filipinos had grown frustrated with generations of mistreatment and a lack of representation under Spain. The Katipunan, led by revolutionary Andrés Bonifacio, started as an underground movement but was exposed to the Spanish government, forcing them into war in August of 1986.[25] In June of 1898,

[23] R. Roces, *Amorsolo,* 43.
[24] Maria Christine Halili, *Philippine History* (Rex Book Store, Inc., 2004), 142.
[25] Ibid, 143.

only six years after Amorsolo was born, the Philippines declared independence from Spain.[26] Despite this declaration, however, the Philippines was not immediately recognized as a free nation, and in fact would not be officially given their freedom until almost fifty years later. Towards the end of the Philippine Revolution, conflicts arose between Spain and the United States, resulting in the Spanish-American War.[27] Although the conflict initially began with the United States becoming involved in the Cuban struggle for independence, the war eventually extended to the Philippines. Eventually, the United States would seize control of Manila from Spain in the 1898 Mock Battle of Manila.[28] Despite the fact that Filipino revolutionaries had helped in the original siege, the Americans and the Spanish had already come to an agreement in which Spain would surrender to the Americans, and purposefully kept Filipinos outside the city during the final capitulation.[29] Ultimately, the Spanish-American War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris of 1898, and instead of receiving their independence from Spain, the Philippines was surrendered to the United States, alongside Guam and Puerto Rico.[30]

As Alfredo Roces describes, this period of Filipino history was incredibly "restless and tension-filled," with "events moving towards a series of national upheavals."[31] Despite their efforts to declare independence which resulted in an incredible amount of bloodshed, the Philippines moved directly from one form of colonial rule to another, and while "vestiges of the Spanish Regime were crumbling, the pillars of the American colonial government were going up."[32] This transition period was far from peaceful, as just one year later in 1899, the Philippine-

[26] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 20.
[27] Halili, *Philippine History*, 153.
[28] Ibid, 163-164.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid, 164.
[31] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 18.
[32] Ibid., 33.

American War began.[33] The Philippine-American War began as an immediate revolt against the new colonial power of the United States, as many revolutionaries felt that they had been denied their rightful independence during the previous war against Spain. Unfortunately, the Filipinos were simply not prepared for the military power of the United States, and were quickly suppressed in extremely destructive and bloody confrontations. After a year of widespread bloodshed, the revolutionaries resorted to guerilla warfare, but were ultimately still unable to win against their new colonial rulers and many ended up siding with the American cause instead. Many accounts of this war describe the atrocities committed by American soldiers against the Filipino people, which, in addition to killing thousands, rendered many provinces and farmlands a complete wasteland by the end of the revolt.[34] With the US emerging as the victor by the end of the conflict, the American government quickly began the process of establishing themselves in the new territory they had acquired.

President William McKinley's directive for American conquest in the Philippines was for it to be a "benevolent assimilation."[35] Education became the main driving force for the US to exert its dominance over the Filipino people. Teaching exclusively in English, American teachers set about the task of educating Filipinos in a distinctly American tradition, in both language and customs. In response to this new education, "Filipinos readily accepted American styles and institutions. They learned to behave, dress, and eat like Americans, sing American songs and speak Americanized English."[36] In order to further facilitate the acceptance of American power, the Philippine-American War was almost immediately written out of both Filipino and American

[33] Halili, *Philippine History*, 174.
[34] One example of a wartime account can be found in Reynaldo C. Ileto's "The Philippine-American War: Friendship and Forgetting," in *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream*, edited by Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia (New York: New York University Press, 2002).
[35] Kernow, *In Our Image,* 197.
[36] Ibid, 198.

history through the education system and subsequently forgotten.[37] American educators framed the Philippine-American War as an insurrection, claiming that those who rose up against the Americans simply did not understand that the American government was here to aid the Philippines, not harm. Despite the fact that American soldiers spent the three years of the Philippine-American War inflicting unspeakable acts of cruelty on the Filipino people, American colonial rule immediately framed itself as a friend and ally to the Philippines through education.[38] This education, however, had a large hand in perpetuating the idea that the Americans should be looked up to and modeled as an ideal society, rather than seen as the enemy. By framing the Spanish as the villains and the United States as the heroes, American power easily took hold and the Philippine-American War was quickly forgotten, as it did not fit with the narrative that was being pushed forward.

Additionally, the US attempted to aid the Philippines further by advancing industry and bringing mass amounts of American imports to the islands. First spearheaded by U.S. civilian governor William Howard Taft, American rule had multiple goals for their development of the Philippines: "construct and improve roads… agriculture, mining and logging would be revived through heavy doses of US capital… special tariffs, aimed at spurring trade… would further stimulate the development of the islands."[39] In addition to improving infrastructure, imported goods from familiar American brands were quickly brought in and flooded the Filipino market. This push of industrialization and influx of American goods completely transformed the city centers of the Philippines, enough to the point where in just a few years, "a stroll along the

[37] Reynaldo C. Ileto, "The Philippine-American War: Friendship and Forgetting," 4.
[38] Renato Constantino, "The Miseducation of the Filipino," in *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream*, edited by Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 179.
[39] Kernow, *In Our Image*, 210.

arcaded Escolta, the main shopping street of Manila, was like a stroll along Main Street in any American city."[40] With American influence being so dominant, many Filipinos quickly adapted to their new colonial rulers and thrived under the new developments. But, according to scholars like Mina Roces and Rodriguez Paras-Perez, this period of American occupation was also a catalyst for highly romanticized, nostalgic images of the Philippines of the past, a "rejection of urban images associated with the intruders [Americans] and an idealization of rural ethos."[41] Additionally, despite some Filipinos completely accepting American rule, others still felt a sense of betrayal at having been denied their independence from the country that was supposed to liberate them. Tension between the modern, revolutionized city and the idyllic pastoral countryside, as well as a similar tension between accepting and rejecting their new colonial leadership, can be seen building throughout the early part of the 20th century. The tension in this period of shifting colonial rule is crucial to understand, as much of it aligns with the development of Fernando Amorsolo's career and provides the background from which his paintings emerge.

All this political upheaval, war, and eventual establishment of American rule happened in the first fifteen years of Amorsolo's life. Amorsolo would have been around ten years old at the start of the Philippine-American War, and in fact would have moved from Daet in the provinces to the more urban Manila as the war was ending. While it is unclear whether or not Amorsolo's area in Daet came under direct attack from the American forces, his family was likely affected in numerous ways. In fact, Amorsolo's mother's choice to move back to Manila to find employment may have been, in part, due to the effects of American colonization as the rural areas were widely destroyed by war while the city centers flourished with new opportunity under

[40] Ibid, 226.
[41] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 52.

American civic policy. This new opportunity was seized by Amorsolo's older brothers, who found employment thanks to the new American government at the post office and the bureau of agriculture.[42] Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Amorsolo's early artistic education was directly affected by the Philippine Revolution with the closure of the Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Engraving in Manila (*Academia de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado*). Even though Amorsolo was able to receive training from his uncle and eventually found success at the new School of Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines (UP), the lack of formal training up until that point meant that Amorsolo had to be creative in his youth, learning as much as he could from the sources he had.

Despite his difficult start, Amorsolo's talent as an artist carried him into an illustrious career as both an instructor at UP, as well as a commercial artist, earning money through commissions, advertising work, and portraiture.[43] As Amorsolo's star continued to rise, American influence and industry continued to grow in the Philippines, further transforming the rural landscapes of his childhood into bustling, Americanized cities. Amorsolo and his career, therefore, were likely deeply affected by this ever-shifting colonial landscape. Alfredo Roces highlights how the idealized rural landscapes that Amorsolo became most famous for, which will be discussed at length, were "riding on the crest of a national nostalgia for the Filipino pastoral lifestyle" that emerged through the 1920's and 30's, with songs, poems, and other popular media being written about "the felicity of barrio life,"[44] a yearning for a space that contrasted with the quickly developing urban areas.[45] Amorsolo's lived experience and cultural surroundings,

[42] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 16.
[43] Ibid, 12-13, 33, 65.
[44] In modern Spanish and many Latin American countries, the word *barrio* connotes an urban city space; however, in its Tagalog use, *barrio* refers to a rural village.
[45] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 87.

therefore, become incredibly important to understanding how he decides to construct his images and the discourse about Filipino identity he develops through his Impressionistic technique as well as his depictions of women.

Amorsolo and Impressionism

In order to understand how Amorsolo worked to form his own version of Filipino identity, it is important to closely examine both the technique and the imagery present in his work. Amorsolo was a prolific painter; with a career that spanned over fifty years, many of his paintings are multiples of the same subject with subtle changes in certain details.[46] While his compositions varied, two works from 1938 and 1955 may stand as representative of Amorsolo's preferred style and subject matter to facilitate my analysis. In *Under the Mango Tree* (fig. 1), completed in 1938, a group of Filipino peasants gather in the shade of a large tree surrounded by baskets and piles of green, unripe mangoes. One woman stands in the foreground with her back to the viewer, resting her right hand on the twisted branches of the mango tree that dominates the right side of the composition. While she and the other individuals on the right of the canvas remain in shadow, their faces hidden either by their body position or by their conical hats, the focal point of the painting falls on the woman seated in the center of the painting with a basket of mangoes in her lap. In contrast to those around her, she sits bathed in light with dappled shade falling on the puffed sleeves of her blouse. Behind her, the light illuminates the grass and leaves that travel into the background. Similarly, in *Farmers Working and Resting* (fig. 2), 1955, another group of Filipino peasants are gathered in the foreground, again resting from their labors in the shade of a large tree. One woman squats in the bottom left corner with her back to the viewer, stirring a pot of food over an open flame, while the other figures, a seated man and

[46] Ibid, 12.

woman and a standing woman carrying a child, look on. In the field behind the figures in the foreground, another group of laborers pushes forward with their task of harvesting crops.

Both of these paintings exemplify Amorsolo's painterly brushstroke, which can be seen in his quick application of paint to the canvas. Rather than being precise and particular, Amorsolo's brushstrokes are expressive and rapid. This technique is especially evident in the backgrounds and foregrounds of both paintings, where his brushstrokes dissolve into an approximation of leaves and dirt. When standing from far away, the figures and shapes appear clearly defined, but the closer the viewer moves to the painting, the more blurry and unfocused the details become due to the loose brushstrokes used.

In further comparing the two images, the most immediately striking choice in Amorsolo's painting is his use of the color green. By utilizing different levels of green both of these images, Amorsolo creates depth while also showing his mastery of color and light. In both images, Amorsolo almost seems to be engaged in a study of the color green, from the rich deep greens of the trees' foliage, to the more emerald greens in the women's skirts, and most noticeably, the almost lime green that blankets the fields in the background of both images. Amorsolo further shows his tendency towards bright colors in the coral pink of the skirt and headscarf of the woman seated in the foreground of *Farmers Working and Resting*. Both of these images also display Amorsolo's signature "back-lit" technique, where his light source appears to be coming from behind the figures in the image, illuminating the background with an almost yellowish glow while keeping the foreground rich and dark.[47] This tendency to emphasize light and shadow can be connected back to Velázquez's use of tenebrism, where high contrast is used to create drama and tension. From Amorsolo's painterly brushstroke to his treatment of color, light, and shadow,

[47] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 55.

the observations he made during his trip to Spain can clearly be observed in both of these images.

While it is clear that Amorsolo is in dialogue with the European artists that serve as his influences, what sets Amorsolo apart from them is his distinct exploration of the tropical sunlight of the Philippines. This drives Amorsolo to render his canvases in much more brilliant colors than the typically muted, pastel tones of the European Impressionists. For example, when comparing both *Under the Mango Tree* and *Farmers Working and Resting* to Spanish Impressionist Joaquín Sorolla's painting *Sewing the Sail* (fig. 3), the same painterly brushstroke can be observed in all three paintings, especially in the foliage in the background of each. Both artists further utilize the loose, energetic sweeps of the brush to depict how dappled sunlight falls through the trees in the center of their compositions, scattering bright, uneven patches across the outstretched sail in Sorolla's painting and across the bodies and clothing of the women in Amorsolo's. The similarities make sense, since, as mentioned previously, Amorsolo has directly cited Sorolla as an influence on his own style. However, the colors used in Amorsolo's work, specifically the greens, are markedly brighter than that of Sorolla. While Sorolla's color palette is fairly muted overall, Amorsolo's are highly saturated, giving the effect of a warmer, more illuminated space. This extra saturation is especially evident in *Under the Mango Tree*, where Amorsolo's vibrant, neon green mangoes are in direct contrast to the cool tones of Sorolla. Although it might seem at first glance as if this difference is simply due to the artists' preference, when paired with the fact that Amorsolo's subject matter is distinctly grounded in Filipino rural life, it becomes clear that Amorsolo's highly saturated color palette is a purposeful one. As discussed by Rodriguez Paras-Perez, Amorsolo's canvases are imbued with "unmistakable

warmth, a nuance only someone familiar with a tropical climate could give."[48] Edwin A. Martinez also notes Amorsolo's propensity towards focusing on the high points of light in his paintings, and how Amorsolo "acknowledged the uniqueness of the Philippine setting, as embodied by the heightened illumination of the tropical sun;" his unique attention to sunlight earned Amorsolo the nickname the "Master of Philippine Light."[49] While both Amorsolo and Sorolla are invested in depicting light, Amorsolo's colors are so vivid due to the fact that he is painting a tropical world, which calls for a new and distinct color palette.

Other Impressionists artists engage in a similar tweaking of the Impressionist color palette in order to portray the world that is familiar to them. One example is the works of Anders Zorn, a Swedish Impressionist who Amorsolo also cites as an inspiration for his own works.[50] In works like *Midsummer Dance* (fig. 4), Zorn takes the Impressionist palette and gives it an almost golden tint; rather than the eggshell blues of the French Impressionists, Zorn treats his sky with a lightness and haziness, using the light wash of cream and yellow to depict the unique sunlight present in his area of Sweden. What is similar between all the paintings by Amorsolo, Sorolla, and Zorn, however, is that they all engage with showing specific moments of their respective culture's daily life, from repairing sails in the Iberian Peninsula to a festival in Sweden. All of these artists use a painterly style and a specific color palette in order to transform their depictions of sunlight into something that indicates a specific place and climate. What is interesting to note, however, is how Amorsolo again can be seen following in a European style and tradition, but using that stylistic device to portray something uniquely Filipino. This hybrid identity is a

[48] Ibid, 54.
[49] Edwin A. Martinez, "The Master of Philippine Light," in *Maestro Fernando C. Amorsolo: Recollections of the Family* 2009, edited by Liza Ito (Quezon City: Fernando C. Amorsolo Art Foundation, Inc., 2009), 113.
[50] Ibid, 55.

tension that is consistently present in Amorsolo's work, and will be discussed further later on in this paper.

Amorsolo's color choice and use of light and shadow are not only indicative of his dedication to depicting a tropical climate, but are also incredibly effective at creating an idealized space and a sense of nostalgia for a perfect, untouched rural landscape. By using such a specific color palette with warm, bright tones, Amorsolo's canvases appear inviting and idyllic, almost to the point of feeling too perfect to be true. In his choices, Amorsolo can be seen starting to create a discourse, one that evokes a sense of familiarity and pride in the land he depicts. This discourse of idealization extends to the Filipino peasants depicted in his paintings. Although they are surrounded by the fruits of a hard day's labor, all of the figures are devoid of sweat or other signs of difficult work, which would definitely be present in such a humid tropical climate. Additionally, the ways their bodies are positioned suggests community and togetherness within the picture plane. In *Under the Mango Tree*, by showing one woman with her back completely turned to the viewer, Amorsolo creates a closed circle that joins the figures together in their shared harvest. The figures in *Farmers Working and Resting* are a bit more open to the viewer, but still infer the same closely knit community, by depicting the woman crouched with her back slightly turned to the viewer, preparing a meal for those gathered. Here, the sense of community is more evoked by the domesticity depicted within. In both cases, by the careful attention paid to composition, it is clear that Amorsolo is again creating a discourse about the people in his paintings, just as much as he is creating a discourse about sunlight and the rural landscape. Where this discourse is most evident, however, is in his particular, complicated treatment of women.

Women and Filipino Identity

When looking at the women portrayed in both *Under the Mango Tree* and *Farmers Working and Resting*, there are many similarities. They all wear the same type of traditional, national dress: a white, gauzy blouse with puffed, bell-shaped sleeves, paired with a colorful, sometimes patterned, skirt that wraps around the hips and covers a longer skirt underneath. Some of the women wear head scarfs that match their skirts. The women are also all of a similar body type, slight and elegant, and share a similar skin tone. They appear youthful and fresh, without a drop of sweat or dirt despite their surroundings. Amorsolo further emphasizes these women and their dress by using the back-lit effect described earlier in this paper; the bright light in the background of the image illuminates the women, creating an almost halo-like effect, with the sunlight highlighting their see-through sleeves. By looking at these parallels, it is clear that Amorsolo is focusing on a very specific depiction of Filipina women. In fact, when surveying Amorsolo's works, it becomes clear that most, if not all his women in his rural genre scenes appear to be exactly this same type.[51] This specific image of women, which Amorsolo became famous for, has been described as the *dalagang Filipina* or *dalagang bukid*, or Filipino maiden or country maiden.[52] Perhaps one of the most famous examples of a *dalagang Filipina* image is Amorsolo's 1920 painting *Palay Maiden* (fig. 5), in which a blushing Filipina woman stands holding a large bundle of unhusked rice (*palay* means "unhusked rice" in Tagalog) and smiles towards the viewer. Since *Palay Maiden* is one of Amorsolo's earlier paintings, it is clear that Amorsolo is dedicated to this specific portrayal of the Filipina woman throughout the course of his long career. In conjunction with the way Amorsolo carefully constructs his depiction of

[51] The only time Amorsolo paints women who appear different than the *dalagang Filipina* type are when he paints portraits, and during Japanese Occupation during World War II, when his works take a considerably darker turn.
[52] Mina Roces, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines," *Gender and History*, 17 no. 2 (2005): 363.

Philippine sunlight, I would argue that Amorsolo is also carefully constructing the image of the "ideal" Filipino woman through her manner of dress, her appearance, and her connection to the land and space around her. By using the woman as a symbol of the nation, Amorsolo continues to develop his discourse around Filipino national identity in a complicated, often contradictory way.

In order to understand how Amorsolo connects national identity to his construction of the Filipina woman, it is important to look at the development of Filipino national dress and how Amorsolo uses a specific type of traditional costume in order to evoke a specific time and place. Filipino national dress can be traced back to the early days of Spanish colonization, when the native Filipino people were made to wear specific clothing in order to fit into Christianized standards of modesty.[53] This initial garment became known as the *baro't saya*, or "blouse and skirt."[54] The *baro't saya* is characterized by a blouse, or *baro*, with large bell-shaped sleeves made of fine woven fabric, paired with a long *saya* or skirt that was covered with a *tapis* or overskirt in a thicker material to protect the more delicate fabric underneath.[55] While this outfit went through many transformations throughout the years of Spanish rule, the characteristic element that always remained were the dramatic, voluminous, and often translucent sleeves.[56] The specific variation of national costume that Amorsolo chooses to clothe his country maidens in is called the *balintawak* dress. According to the Philippine Folklife Museum Foundation, the

[53] Roces, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Dress." See also Stéphanie Marie Coo, "Clothing and the colonial culture of appearances in nineteenth century Spanish Philippines (1820-1896)," Université Nice Sophia Antipolis (2014).
[54] Eric V. Cruz, *The Terno: Its Development and Identity as the Filipino Women's National Costume* (Diliman, Quezon City: U.P. College of Home Economics, 1982), 2.
[55] "Baro't saya," *Philippine Folklife Museum Foundation*, https://philippinefolklifemuseum.org/portfolio-items/barot-saya/.
[56] Cruz, *The Terno*.

balintawak dress is a more casual variation of the traditional *baro't saya*.[57] In comparison to the classic *baro't saya* and its more formal version known as the Maria Clara gown, the *balintawak* has shortened, see-through sleeves, although still quite voluminous, as well as a slightly shortened and less dramatic *saya* and *tapis* for ease of movement.[58] Due to its more casual nature, the *balintawak* was specifically worn during picnics and other visits to the countryside, specifically to an area called Antipolo, which was a popular country getaway for those living in urban Manila. *Balintawak* has specific connotations, signaling "Filipina gaiety, light-heartedness, and her costuming sense of rural roots."[59] By his choice of a dress associated with a rural nature, not an urban one, it is clear that Amorsolo connects his *dalagang Filipina* to the land and the countryside, not the city center.

In addition to its rural connotations, the *balintawak* and its multiple variations are all understood as forms of national dress for the Philippines, and are therefore connected with a sense of Filipino identity. Indeed, these garments were commonly woven from *piña* (pineapple) or *jusi* (abaca) fibers, materials that are indigenous to the Philippines.[60] Additionally, the sheer quality of these fabrics seem uniquely suited to the humid climate of the islands. The dress that Amorsolo chooses immediately signals to the viewer that they are looking at a specifically Filipino space; in the same way he uses color and sunlight to connote a uniquely tropical atmosphere, Amorsolo uses dress to signal a specific nationality. However, this connotation is complicated by the fact that Filipino national dress traces its roots back to Spanish colonization, not the pre-colonial costumes that existed before Spanish influence. Therefore, while Amorsolo

[57] "Balintawak," *Philippine Folklife Museum Foundation*, https://philippinefolklifemuseum.org/portfolio-items/balintawak/.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Cruz, *The Terno*, and Roces, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Dress," 356-360.

attempts to use the *balintawak* dress to make an argument for a singularly Filipino identity, the Spanish colonial history of this particular garment cannot be ignored.

In addition to the complex connotations of national dress, even more complicated is Amorsolo's treatment of the actual physical bodies and appearance of the women themselves. In both *Under the Mango Tree* and *Farmers Working and Resting*, as well as all his *dalagang Filipina* paintings, all the women are of petite stature, with rounded faces, dimpled cheeks, flat noses, and dark eyes. Despite the visual similarities, it does not appear that they are the same exact woman; that is, not a portrait of a known person. Instead, the facial similarities point to a more generalized representation of a Filipino female, emphasizing specific traits. In order to confirm this notion, many scholars like Roces and Paras-Perez have cited the same statement from Amorsolo regarding his depictions of women. In an interview where he was asked about ideal Filipina beauty, Amorsolo stated:

> My conception of an ideal Filipina beauty is one with a rounded face, not of the oval type often presented to us in newspaper and magazine illustrations. The eyes should be exceptionally lively, not the dreamy, sleepy type that characterizes the Mongolian. The nose should be of the blunt form but firm and strongly marked. The mouth plays a very important part in the determination of a beautiful face. The ideal Filipina should have a sensuous mouth, not the type of the pouting mouth [sic] … So, the ideal Filipina beauty should not necessarily be white-complexioned, nor of the dark brown color of the typical Malayan, but of the clear skin or flesh-colored type which we often witness when we meet a blushing girl.[61]

From his own words, it is clear that Amorsolo is working with a very specific definition of beauty for the maidens he paints. Paras-Perez notes that this quote seems highly unusual for Amorsolo, as he was a characteristically shy man who "believed that a painter's business was to paint and not to talk."[62] In fact, it is difficult to find any direct statements from Amorsolo about

[61] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 90.
[62] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 52.

his process, except for this one. Regardless of whether or not this quote is uncharacteristic for Amorsolo as a person, however, it confirms what is clear in his paintings: that Amorsolo carefully constructs a mold for what he believes a Filipina woman should look like. This mold, however, is problematic in that it not only seems to derive from stereotypically racial tropes, but it also works to essentialize Filipina women's appearances into a homogenous and idealized group. The Philippines, with its many islands, encompasses an incredibly diverse group of ethnic backgrounds, yet Amorsolo chooses to only highlight a very standardized sense of beauty. He asserts this beauty as being uniquely Filipina through her surroundings and her national costume, but at the same time excludes any Filipina women who do not fit this mold. By generalizing their appearance, Amorsolo also idealizes them, creating a type of template that viewers can place their own ideas upon. The women smile at the viewer in an almost childlike, sweet manner, with a general appearance of kindness but no hint at personality or individuality. By placing them in an idealized vision of the rural Filipino countryside, Amorsolo links the land and the women together into one idyllic scene. Even though Amorsolo seems to be celebrating and glorifying this ideal beauty found in the smiling, winsome country maiden, he also completely essentializes the women, condensing them down to a false homogeneity that does not exist in reality.

The complicated and arguably problematic depiction of women in Amorsolo's paintings is only emphasized by the fact that women like the ones that appear in Amorsolo's works are in direct opposition to the actual Filipina women who lived during the time these images were painted. As mentioned previously, Amorsolo was painting during the time of American colonial rule in the Philippines, which brought rapid industrialization to the islands. Gender scholar Mina Roces has emphasized the fact that during the American colonial period, Filipina women were, just the same as the general Filipino population, becoming increasingly "Americanized."

Through education and introduction to Western culture, Filipina women started to become "English-speaking, university-educated, professional clubwomen," a direct contrast to the idyllic farming communities depicted in Amorsolo's paintings.[63] Therefore, Roces sees Amorsolo's paintings as a direct response to this increasingly Americanized woman. With increasing development, there also rose a sense of yearning for the rural and pastoral, directly responding to the rapid changes they saw in urban spaces. For some more conservative Filipinos, this yearning extended to a sense of loss, in that they felt that Americanization endangered the "essential" quality of Filipina women. In this way, Amorsolo's *dalagang Filipina* images can be understood as deeply rooted in "male nostalgia for a romanticized 'Filipina woman,'" one who is "shy, timid, beautiful and obedient."[64] Amorsolo's images of eternally smiling, rosy-cheeked women in *balintawak* dresses, therefore, become the exact symbol of this romanticized idea; with their essentialized qualities, Amorsolo's women embody what some might understand as the "traditional" Filipina, one who is directly connected to the land and does not interact with the more modern city center. It is also notable, especially in *Farmers Working and Resting*, that Amorsolo chooses to show the women performing tasks such as caring for children and cooking meals, further emphasizing this traditionally gendered stance. Amorsolo's *dalagang Filipina* stands as the direct foil to the contemporary Filipina woman, reflecting an anxiety about changing modernity and gender roles in society, all happening at the same time as American occupation.

[63] Roces, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Dress," 362.
[64] Ibid, 363.

A Postcolonial and Critical Lens

As argued above, Fernando Amorsolo's images of the rural, pastoral Filipino countryside may seem simple at first glance, but are actually multifaceted, especially in how they synthesize and incorporate European influences in order to form a discourse about national identity. One way to further understand the unique qualities of Amorsolo's works is through postcolonial theory, specifically theoretician Homi K. Bhaba's concepts of hybridity and mimicry. Bhabha has defined mimicry as "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge," where the imitation of a colonizer by the colonized produces "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite."[65] Amorsolo embodies this idea of being "almost the same, but not quite" in multiple ways, in both his life and his works.

The most defining moment of Amorsolo's career, his trip to Spain, mirrors aspects of the Grand Tour and similar trips taken by European artists to city centers to hone their craft, but does not replicate them completely. While the idea that one travels to a cultured city in order to gain experience or learn about their craft further is present, it is markedly different and more complex in Amorsolo's case in that he is an individual from a former colonial territory traveling to the colonizer's land. Additionally, while his style adopts elements of European influence, like the painterly brushstroke of Impressionism and the attention to light and shadow from Velázquez, he is not making exact copies of what Impressionists or Velázquez have done in their work. For example, while many Impressionist artists embraced themes of city life and urbanization, Amorsolo completely stays away from these subjects, and instead focuses almost exclusively on rural scenes.[66] For Bhabha, this form of mimicry "articulates those disturbances of cultural,

[65] Homi K. Bhaba, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 126.
[66] In no way is this observation meant to imply that Impressionism is a monolith and only focuses on the urban; while there are many Impressionists who also focused on rural landscapes and scenes, painting the city and its inhabitants is a major theme for much of Impressionism, which is why it is worth noting that Amorsolo completely

racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority."[67] Through close examination, it is clear that Amorsolo is not simply creating an imitation of the colonizer, but instead is adapting elements of what he observes into his own artistic expression.

By utilizing stylistic elements of European Impressionism in order to depict a uniquely Filipino space, Amorsolo can also be seen creating a kind of hybrid space, similar to the kind discussed in Bhabha's "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern." Due to the blending of European style and Filipino subject matter, Amorsolo creates paintings that are not easily defined as being purely one or the other; rather, they are a unique and complicated combination of both. Additionally, the actual imagery in Amorsolo's paintings are hybrid, most exemplified by the use of national dress where there is a blend of implied Filipino identity wrapped up in a garment that has Spanish colonial roots. This hybridity is something that Bhabha asserts as opening up new forms of communication, which is "particularly important for envisaging emergent cultural identities."[68] According to Bhabha, hybridity is crucial to understand in order to break down the binary oppositions between the "First" and "Third" Worlds, classifications that Bhabha argues do not exist. Indeed, it seems that Amorsolo's works are engaged in this dialogue, in that they do not clearly align with forms of expression that are considered to be traditionally "Western" or "Eastern." Amorsolo's paintings instead operate in a "third space," or, as Bhabha terms, "outside the sentence."[69] This concept is used to describe the space that results when "the contingent and the liminal becomes the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference," or "the cultural space for opening up new forms of identification."[70] In other

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rejects that space. As mentioned in footnote #51, the only time that Amorsolo strays from the rural genre scene is when he paints portraits, or during the period of Japanese occupation during World War II.

[67] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 129.

[68] Homi K. Bhaba, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 255.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

words, this alternate space that Amorsolo creates through hybridity can be seen as a space that opens up new ways to communicate and transcribe ideas of identity that subvert traditional methods of understanding.

Through the lens of mimicry and hybridity, Amorsolo's works appear revolutionary in that they seem to create a new form of discourse that allows Filipino identity to be expressed and discussed. However, this hybridity is complicated by the fact that the way Amorsolo attempts to visualize this identity is incredibly limiting in its scope. This limiting view is especially evident in his depictions of women, as previously discussed. Amorsolo essentializes his women's physical features, as well as dresses them in a national garment that is tied to both the rural and the past. By rendering all his women in the same manner, Amorsolo reduces the Filipina women in his paintings down to a symbol, a symbol used by Amorsolo to represent nationality and pride during a time where that quality seemed to be vanishing.

Postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee has discussed this tendency to use women as a symbol for nation. Chatterjee observed that in nationalist contexts, women are made to shoulder the burden of tradition. As modernization occurs while ideas of nationhood are also being formed, a sense of nostalgia for traditional values appears. The burden to carry and embody these traditions is placed specifically on women, wherein appears "...a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of 'woman' standing as a sign for 'nation,' namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on."[71] In order to preserve these characteristically "feminine" qualities, women "must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized."[72]

[71] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 131.
[72] Ibid, 126.

While Chatterjee observed this trend in early and mid-nineteenth-century Bengal, a strikingly similar trend can be observed in Amorsolo's visual language. Due to the rapid and violent transitions between Spanish and American rule, and the constant denial of independence despite their multiple efforts, many Filipinos felt a deep sense of betrayal during the American colonial period.[73] With the Philippines experiencing such intense changes both politically and socially, "some became sentimental for the imagined 'unchanging' countryside peopled by beautiful women in national dress winnowing rice or carrying water jars."[74] The nation's anxiety about increased modernization and American influence is therefore transferred directly onto the bodies of the women in Amorsolo's paintings, and they become eternally beautiful, eternally rural, and eternally domestic. While they might stand to represent the timeless beauty of the Filipino rural landscape and lifestyle, they do so in a way that completely eliminates the diverse reality of the Filipino experience.

For some critics of Amorsolo, this tendency to essentialize is exactly what makes his paintings difficult to justify, despite their overall popularity with the Filipino people. In his 1959 seminal essay "The Miseducation of the Filipino," Filipino historian Renato Constantino decries the American education system in the Philippines. Even though education was disguised as Americans freely giving the gift of knowledge, "the education of the Filipino under American sovereignty was an instrument of colonial policy" under which "indigenous Filipino ideals were slowly eroded in order to remove the last vestiges of resistance."[75] Constantino argues that the American education system in the Philippines was built around the goal of shaping the Filipino people into an obedient conquered subject. In order to further bolster this mission, American rule

[73] Paras-Perez, "The Gentle Rebel," 51.
[74] Roces, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Dress," 364.
[75] Constantino, "The Miseducation of the Filipino," 179.

also made the Philippines economically dependent on its aid through offering free trade and imports, ensuring that the Philippines would rely on the seemingly benevolent American aid instead of striving for its own nationhood. For Constantino, the way to combat this miseducation is to break the habit of glorifying American culture, imports, and industry, and instead re-educate Filipinos in ways that allow them to build their own nation apart from colonial rule. However, Constantino points directly to Amorsolo and painters like him as being a large roadblock in this re-education of the Filipino people.

Rather than crafting a unique image of Filipino national identity, Constantino argues that Amorsolo's "painting with carabao, its smiling healthy farmer, the winsome barrio lass…"[76] actually creates a dangerous, two-fold lie:

> First, it strengthens the belief (and we see this in adults) that the Philippines is essentially meant to be an agricultural country and we cannot and should not change that. The result is an apathy toward industrialization. …There is, further, a fear born out of that clear stereotype of this country as an agricultural heaven, that industrialization is not good for us, that our national environment is not suited for an industrial economy, and that it will only bring social evils which will destroy the idyllic farm life.
> Second, this idealized picture of farm life never emphasizes the poverty, the disease, the cultural vacuum, the sheer boredom, the superstition and ignorance of backward farm communities.[77]

In other words, Constantino recognizes that Amorsolo's paintings condense the complexities of the modern Filipino experience down to a singular, monolithic image. But this essentialization of both the rural landscape and the people who inhabit it broadcasts the idea that Filipinos are only capable of staying within that timeless, idyllic space that they inhabit within the confines of the canvas. For Constantino, it is not that industrialization and modernization is bad or dangerous. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that it was American rule that brought industry and education

[76] Ibid, 182.
[77] Ibid.

to the island, instituting it in a way that made Filipinos reliant on that model. Images like Amorsolo's paintings, according to Constantino's argument, perpetuate that reliance because they imply that the Filipino's essential nature is to remain rural forever, and therefore forever rely on the help of outside forces. In Constantino's critique, Amorsolo's seemingly sweet and commercially popular images become, at their best, a tool to further American colonialism, and at their worst, a sinister lie to the Filipino people.

A further complication regarding Amorsolo's relationship to American colonialism is the fact that a large part of Amorsolo's clientele was American.[78] Many Americans who visited the Philippines or lived there during American colonial rule bought his paintings and postcards, and even commissioned portraits from Amorsolo. Even though Amorsolo's images did indeed function as a source of national pride for Filipinos, they also served as tourist images, as they were visually easy to digest and could easily be brought home to America as a souvenir of one's trip to the islands. Amorsolo even exhibited a selection of his paintings in New York in 1925, where his works were positively reviewed by many art critics.[79] While a full discussion of Amorsolo's clientele and its implications is outside the scope of this thesis, it is interesting to consider Amorsolo's popularity with Americans in light of Constantino's argument. Is it possible that part of Constantino's issue with Amorsolo's paintings is tied up in the fact that his images allow Americans to fetishize their colonial subject, allowing them to purchase images that perpetuate the stereotype that Filipinos are simple and rural? Ultimately, Amorsolo's clientele is representative of the complicated interplay between Filipino identity and colonial, specifically American, forces.

[78] R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 78-79.
[79] Ibid, 66-67.

Conclusion

Despite the criticisms that came later in his career, from the Francisco Arcellana critique claiming that that Amorsolo's works are vapid and do not speak, to Renato Constantino's harsh criticism on the dangers of American education, Fernando Amorsolo remained an influential and popular artist in the Philippines until his death in 1972.[80] His paintings of rural life continued to be his most well-known subjects, and only four days after his death, he was named the first National Artist of the Philippines, a title that eventually grew into an official way to recognize artists who have made significant contributions to the development of Filipino art.[81] His importance as a seminal figure in the larger history of Filipino art, therefore, cannot be overlooked. But even with his long list of achievements and recognition in the Philippines, Amorsolo is barely known in the United States. Amorsolo, and by extension, Filipino art as a whole, is hardly discussed in European or American art historical scholarship. This large gap is striking, especially since many Western art historians have dedicated entire careers to studying other parts of East Asia. By closely examining Amorsolo's works through this thesis, I hope to begin to bridge that gap in understanding, in further hopes of bringing other Filipino artists and artworks forward in the larger scope of art historical discourse as a whole.

In his paintings of Filipino rural life, Amorsolo creates a discourse around national identity in two ways: first, in his particular treatment of the landscape using his painterly brushstroke, choice of bright color, and contrast of light and shadow in order to depict a uniquely tropical, and therefore Filipino, space, and second, in his use of Filipino national dress and the idealization of women's appearance in order to symbolize a unified identity and pride. These factors work in tandem to create his characteristically idyllic, warm, and inviting paintings,

[80] Pilar, "Fernando Amorsolo: Milestones in His Life and Art," 163.
[81] Ibid. See also R. Roces, *Amorsolo*, 12.

exemplified by works like *Under the Mango Tree* and *Farmers Working and Resting*. Paintings like these, however, stand in direct contrast to the rapidly modernizing Filipino population underneath American colonial rule. Even though Amorsolo's life and career encompasses periods of turbulent war and political upheaval in the Philippines, from the fall of Spanish colonial rule, to the rise of American power, and even through World War II and the extremely violent period of Japanese occupation, his work and subject matter rarely vary from the themes discussed in this thesis, except for those made during World War II.[82] It is interesting to note that even after the Philippines finally received its independence from the United States in 1946, decades after its initial declaration of independence from Spain in 1898, Amorsolo returned to the same idealized subjects as he had painted before.[83] Perhaps this return constitutes an attempt to reclaim the imagery of the past, an imagined Philippines before the destruction of war or the modernization of cities. Regardless, Amorsolo's connections to the historical period in which he lived are multifaceted and complex, despite the seemingly straightforward scenes captured on his canvases.

Ultimately, regardless of shifting views about Amorsolo's work, understanding Amorsolo's complicated relationship with his colonial surroundings is crucial to opening up a wider understanding of how convoluted postcolonial relationships can be overall. On one hand, Amorsolo seems to be celebrating and glorifying the Filipino countryside, lifting it up to a place of idyllic beauty and tranquility, while on the other hand, he completely undermines the diversity of Filipino culture and experience by confining it to a singular image. While his images indeed

[82] Amorsolo's body of work made during Japanese occupation is a subject that is deeply complex, and needs further contextualization within the broader scheme of his overall career. While that conversation is outside the scope of this thesis, please see Pearlie Rose S. Baluyut's chapter titled "Occupation, resistance and collaboration: Triangulating Japan, the Philippines and Singapore through Fernando Amorsolo's Defend Thy Honour" in *Visual Histories of Occupation: A Transcultural Dialogue* for a an in-depth examination of one of Amorsolo's works from this period.
[83] Pilar, "Fernando Amorsolo: Milestones in His Life and Art," 161.

served as a way to express national pride and identity during a period of history where that identity was struggling to be defined, they do so in a way that conjures a nostalgia for an imagined rural bliss that no longer exists, or never even existed at all. Even so, it is crucial to study Amorsolo's paintings because they illuminate the complicated and often contradictory nature of colonial history and relationships, a history that remains extremely fraught into the present day. Closely examining the visual language that Amorsolo creates through his artistic choices and imagery gives audiences the opportunity to understand the complex effects that shifting powers of colonial influence might have on forms of artistic expression, opening up greater possibilities in analyzing the postcolonial experience in the Philippines, as well as in the history of art as a whole.

Figures

Figure 1: Fernando Amorsolo, *Under the Mango Tree*, 1938. Oil on canvas. 51.43 x 71.75 cm. Museo Ng Lahing Pilipino (Museum of Filipino Heritage), San Francisco, California. Photograph taken by Samantha Cruz.

Figure 2: Fernando Amorsolo, *Farmers Working and Resting*, 1955. Oil on canvas. 64.5 cm x W. 83.8 cm. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California.

Figure 3: Joaquín Sorolla, *Sewing the Sail (Cosiendo la vela),* 1896. Oil on canvas. 222 x 300 cm. Fondazione Musei Civici, Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Ca'Pesaro, Venice.

Figure 4: Anders Zorn, *Midsummer Dance*, 1897. Oil on canvas. 140 x 98 cm. Nationalmuseum (National Museum of Fine Arts), Sweden.

Figure 5: Fernando Amorsolo, *Palay Maiden (Rice Maiden)*, 1920. Oil on canvas. 85.5 x 60.3 cm. Ayala Museum Collection, Makati, Philippines.

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