


MOD

# FILIPINA

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A woman with her hair in two braids, wearing a colorful, patterned traditional Filipino blouse (blusa) over a dark top and a red skirt. She is standing in front of a large, vibrant tapestry that depicts a scene with people and animals, possibly a festival or a rural setting. The tapestry is made of many small, colorful pieces of fabric.

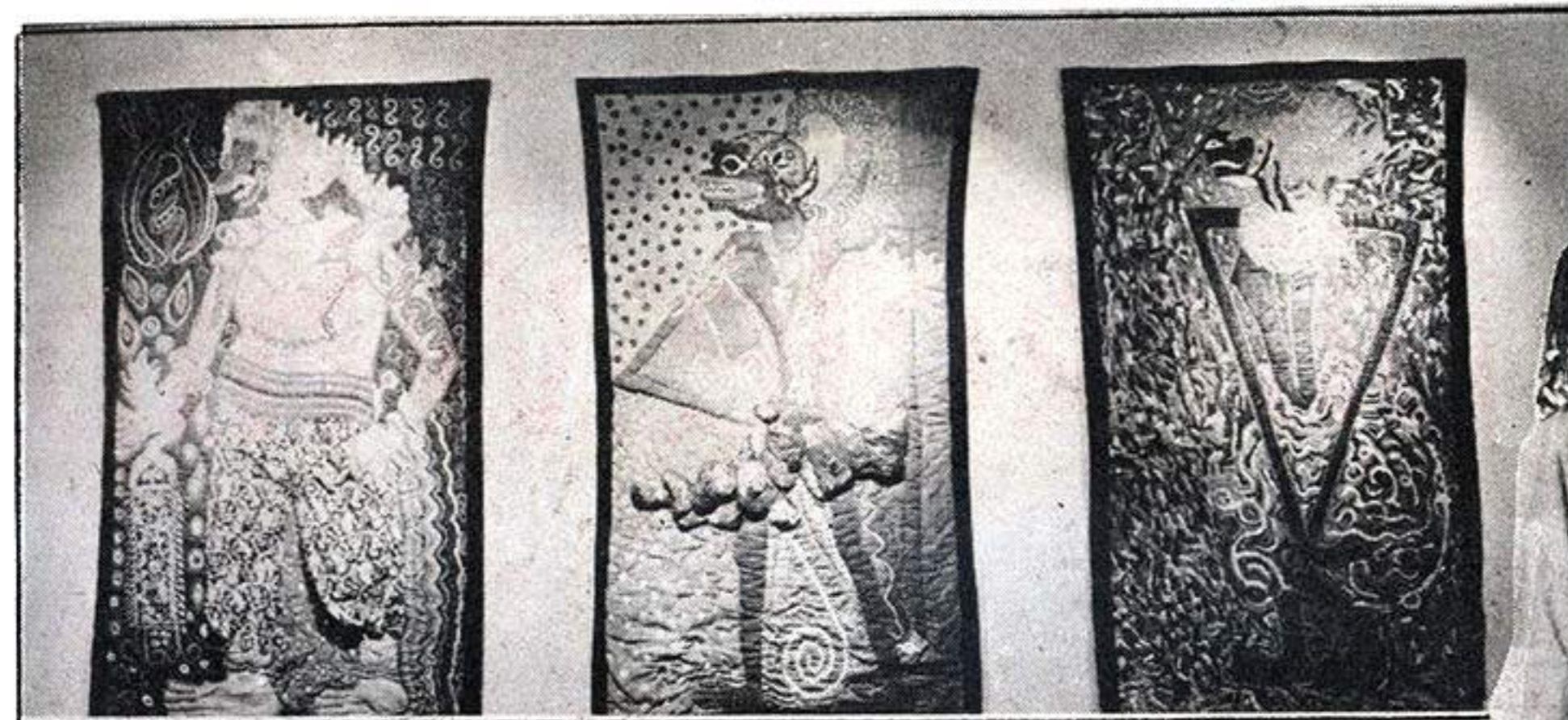
A Filipina artist, *Pacita Abad* who hails from Batanes has been drawing attention worldwide. She has pioneered in trapunto, that is painting in quilted tapestries, overwhelmingly arresting in size with a magnificent play of colors.

Photo/  
MANNY DOMINGO

## FT Cover Story

ings mostly in Washington, Connecticut and Massachusetts; Bangladesh, Sudan, Thailand, New Hampshire, Dominican Republic, Bulgaria and the Philippines. Her first show in Manila was in 1979.

Pacita is one of the very few, if not the only one who has perfected



Three trapunto paintings of Pacita Abad.



The artist, Pacita Abad, with her trapuntoed work, "Dancing Demon" (Papua, New Guinea).

By BAY DEL MAR

# The Total Artist

WHENEVER the province of Batanes is mentioned, storms would always be part of the picture. The small island about 300 miles north of Luzon is etched in the Filipinos' memory as a storm-soaked, wind-drenched, calamity-stricken area. Nobody would think of Batanes as an attraction either for local or foreign tourists. It is simply a haven for storms.

Recently, as Metro-Manila's summer was about to begin, a Batanes "storm" stirred the cosmopolitan scene. Indeed, true to its epithet as "the seat of Philippine storms," the tiny but power-packed island gave us a rare and grand "summer-storm" in the person of its famous daughter, Pacita Abad. Batanes-born, Batanes-raised Pacita left the country in 1972. She returned to share with us all, the "storms of her creative passion" in a 120-piece exhibit of her paintings.

The Museum of Philippine Art made a very neat coup in showcasing Pacita's trapunto paintings as well as her monoprints, collagraph and oils. Since finishing her art studies at the University of San Francisco, Corcoran School of Arts in Washington, D.C. and the Art Students' League in New York City, Pacita has been making her presence felt. Asia, Europe and the United States have had the experience of Pacita's art. Petite Pacita had shared the excitement of trapunto paint-

trapunto painting. Adept with the brush and palette, the Batanes artist is also a whiz with the needle and thread. Trapunto is a magnificent combination of painting and intricate needle work. For her trapunto works which may appear like quilted tapestries, Pacita uses ethnic materials like batik, cowrie shells, beads together with buttons, threads, sequins, rick-racks even left-over cloth or *retasos*.

The artist's mastery of color is best seen in the trapunto. She frankly admits, "I can weave as many color combinations as need be." Her trapunto subjects take the viewer to the exotic world of gods, goddesses, anthropomorphological beings such as *Dancing Demon* and *Hanuman, the Monkey King*, inspired by the Ramayana. The dimension of a trapunto painting which can go as big as 241 by 134 centimeters is enough to fill the viewer with awe. "That's why I need a gallery which will not appear cluttered and crowded even with 19 trapunto paintings," Pacita notes. The MOPA did justice to the artist's search for elbow room.

Pacita's art is very much enriched with various experiences she gained from her numerous trips around the world. She has traveled far and wide with her husband Jack Garrity, a development economist currently assigned in Manila with the Asian Development Bank. For the last 12

years, Pacita and Jack, "my marriage to him has changed the directions of my career," have been to 65 countries. They have lived in Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, France, Sudan and Thailand. But in between, for a period of two or three weeks, the couple would go to some small, unknown or unpopular, remote corners of the world.

Those short trips gave Pacita the chance "to paint, paint and paint." While she believes, that academic training is critical for a painter, the trapunto artist says that it can also be limiting. "Therefore, after three years of art school I felt the need to couple my academic training with individual experiences and emotions and express those on canvas."

Pacita's unaffected charms and her easy smiles make rapport come spontaneously with the natives of the place she has visited. "I communicate with them through my

paintings and a bit of gestures or improvised sign language," she stresses. Her polaroid camera also helped in "getting their attention, consent and cooperation for a sitting." A generous soul, she usually gives to her subjects some of her drawings and sketches.

Moreover, Pacita is no snooty artist with her nose high up in the air. She has a genuine interest in people and their environment. Her wardrobe is an eloquent testimony of how she comes to understand people, their culture and tradition. For our Filipina Today pictorial, Pacita wore an authentic Afghanistan tunic with dainty embroideries and lace. Pacita can well afford to wear diamonds but she prefers the exotic ethnic beads and bangles of the Orient which match her corn-row braids. Perhaps by doing so, Pacita is able to imbibe part of the living force of the native's way of life.

This gives her colors and lines some kind of a primeval power which make her paintings seemingly infused with breath, an unseen energy.

Her paintings from the trapunto to her oil in canvas are largely about "the smaller people." There are no portraits of celebrities decked in wealth but the simple folks in their daily chores. Pacita says: "I wrote a capsule story about the particular place or person that I was painting, hoping to help others understand some of the wondrous things I had seen." Thus, some of her powerful portraits are not of kings, queens or tycoons. *Manolito* and *Joselito*, the shoeshine boys; *Josefina Ironing Clothes*; *Doña Rosario*, who is actually the supervisor of Casa Velasquez, a supermarket in Guatemala, the *Turkana Women* with their endless rows of beads; the *Dinka Rek* of Kenya are all potent statements of the artist's affection for mankind.

Through her art, Pacita would like to see the evils modernization has brought to man. There's Wau, a small town in Sudan in the heart of Africa. Pacita described the natives as "fantastic people." But she laments, "it is a shame that their way of life is ending as 'development' encroaches and breaks down tribal traditions by forcing them into towns."

Of the 120 paintings in exhibit, Pacita considers her Cambodian series as the most important. The artist has sublimated the Cambodian experience from an ugly nightmare to a living reminder of man's follies. Soft-spoken, husky voiced Pacita explained; "I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility. . . in these canvases, vivid colors are fused with moral convictions and human emotions to present a powerful commentary on the plight of the lost souls of Cambodia." Furthermore, Pacita is convinced that her Cambodian series will "keep staring at you and let you know that the refugees are still there in the camps."

A disciplined artist, Pacita does 40 hours of work a week. "I keep a logbook, I check in and out, before I work, at lunchbreak and after for there is so much to do." She would like to see more of the Philippines especially the mountain tribes like the Mangyans of Mindoro to capture them once more in her canvases.

Pacita may have blustered Manila with her paintings but she is a most pleasant, exciting storm whose return will always be a welcome news.