

# THE FEMININE ART OF TRAPUNTO

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**T**rapunto is a little heard-of art in our country. For remarkable examples, one must view the unique works of Pacita Abad, who has discovered her original artistry in this medium. Actually, trapunto refers to a quilting process with an embossed design produced by outlining the pattern with single stitches then padding it with yarn or cotton. Pacita Abad creates from this process large tapestries of a joyous and warm vivacity.

Aside from the elaborate sewing and quilting, she also paints with acrylic on the muslim cloth, and attaches by hand assorted materials such as cowrie shells, tiny mirrors, buttons, rickracks, lace and what-have-you. All these materials and processes, including embroidery in endless mazes of spirals, scallops, and motifs, curvilinear or geometric, give the works a prodigiously rich texture, as of giant mosaics or collages of fantastic characters.

The trapunto works are marked by an oriental opulence such as is found in folk culture. In fact, her creativity is immensely enriched by her numerous travels which have opened her to entire cultural traditions. Thus, Hanuman, the monkey king of the Ramayana, as seen through the Javanese *wayang* puppet show, appears trapuntoed in his sprightly angularity. From Papua, New Guinea, comes a host of demons, mostly benign and dancing with serpentine movements, their bodies in colorful whorls, concentric



Artist Pacita Abad with detail from a trapunto work.

circles and ellipses, embellished by cowries, their hair like tufts of hardy plants. Goddesses, too, make their appearances, with an iconic directness, but in smiling painted faces surrounded by floral haloes of yellow and green. In *Papuan*, for instance, the green and yellow figure against a gray ground, has nothing to do at all with Western modes of figuration, but rather follow folk conventions.

Masks play a major role in her art, such as in the Masai face of the warrior from Kenya or as in the tapestry of the happy African couple. Ribbons, rickracks, and stitches create the features of the masks, the tattoos and the ritual scarification of the faces, icon-like at times, but with a primeval power and appeal. In these large works, Ramayana figures mingle with Dinka African chiefs and Papuan goddesses and enter in colorful procession into our fantasies and dreams.

Pacita Abad's travels have not only revealed the bright and sunny side of the world, but have also shown the dark side of human suffering. This aspect is explored, not in the tapestries, but in the oil paintings of the *Refugee Series* done in 1979-80 when the artist spent time in the Aranyapathet camp in the border of Bangladesh and Cambodia. Her subjects of this series are children caught in a gray limbo between the past and the future, and forced into an early maturity. There are the hungry children, too, of

Bangladesh and in South America, the waifs of the Dominican Republic eking meager livelihood by offering colorful balloons for a few tourists' coins.

On home grounds, Pacita Abad has done the underwater coral gardens of Puerto Galera with their schools of bright tropical fish in tapestries of cool green and blue where lively fish dart in spurts of yellow, red and orange among seaweed, waving reeds, and pink coral branches. Completely different in spirit are her compositions of the Mabini scene, with flashing neons this time and lithe bodies of a-go-go dancers swaying to urban night music. But for all her travels, home for Pacita Abad is always Batanes Island way up north where she was born and raised. Paintings of the idyllic life in the small isolated island express the nostalgia of the true daughter who views its scenery from the eyes of a child. It is in her landscapes, especially, that a naive, childlike charm emerges, a quality that suits the subjects drawn from folk life and culture.

The works of Pacita Abad, her trapunto tapestries and her paintings of the children of the Third World, are welcome contributions to the Philippine art scene, especially for their qualities of freshness and vivacity that add a new ingredient to the familiar landscape. Here is one example of how a woman, after many byways and detours, finally found her true vocation as an artist.