

The World through the Eyes Of Pacita Abad

By Encarnita F. Gaviola

Grim-faced Cambodian children peering through a barked-wire fence. Brightly-colored minarets crowding out a darkening sky. A pair of elegant, ebony-skinned Turkana tribeswomen in a leisurely pose on a grassy Sudanese plain. A reveler dancing amidst the glittering confetti of a South American festival. Pacita Abad has seen them all, and has captured their essence for others to appreciate in a collection of 120 works currently on exhibit at the Museum of Philippine Arts. Among the pieces on display are what she calls her trapunto paintings — large, quilted and painted works on cloth sometimes decorated with rick-rack, lace, cowrie shells, buttons, silver dust, ceramic beads and whatever else she happens to pick up on her frequent sojourns in various places around the globe.

"Colorful" does not adequately describe this artist whose very physical appearance is a montage of different cultures held together by a personality which somehow makes each exotic touch seem just right. Although her features are definitely Malayan, her braids are African-inspired, her silver drop earrings could be American Indian, her clothes could have been picked up in a marketplace in Sudan or some other exotic city, her nails are painted a bright orange, and her lively and uninhibited laughter knows no nationality.

Pacita Abad was born and spent her early childhood in Batanes, a small island on the northernmost portion of the Philippines approximately 46 kilometers long and home to a few thousand people. The island is accessible only by plane, there are four incoming flights a week, and it has become somewhat of a quaint tradition for the townspeople to meet each one with equal and unflagging enthusiasm. Driving in from the airport, one is greeted by the sight of gently rolling hills, which, along with its beautiful beaches, are the island's most remarkably attractive features.

The people of Batanes are possessed of a festive mood which is indulged during quite a number of local festivals — the feast of Santo Domingo, the Palo-palo, a carabao race, the Tataya (small boat) race, and, of course, the Maytime Santacruzian,

during which Pacita as a child often played the part of a sagala all decked-out in regal finery.

For a place which derives its livelihood mainly from agriculture, Batanes has a surprisingly high rate of literacy and counts a great number of professionals among its residents.

Pacita's own parents were very academic-oriented people who instilled in their children a deep-seated love for learning. Her father, Jorge Abad, was a lawyer and engineer who served several terms in Congress and was Minister for Public Works and Communications. Her mother, Aurora Barsana, whom she describes as an "early feminist," was a Congresswoman who juggled her legislative duties and her responsibilities, as mother to 12 children with such aplomb as to gain her daughter's lasting admiration.

"They were not rich," Pacita says, "so all they had was education." When Jorge Abad died some years ago, he left behind a trust fund from which any of his children can draw financing for further studies.

Pacita was a very curious child who showed an early bent for adventure by tagging along with her father on his inspection tours of public works projects which often took him to faraway provinces. These trips undoubtedly sharpened the little girl's powers of observation as well as whetted her appetite for new places and people.

Although Pacita describes her childhood as a very happy one, she admits that she had had to cope with the middle child's dilemma. The fourth of 12 children, she describes sibling relations in the family as very competitive. Pacita felt early on that she had to prove herself and she thinks she's doing it now. "I'm the only artist in the family," she says.

When she was seven years old, the Abads moved to Manila. But Batanes was still the place where a major part of their lives was played out.

Every four years, the family would go back for the elections in which Jorge Abad would run. And even today Pacita goes back to her hometown as often as she can. Included in the exhibit is a painting entitled *Batanes*,

an idealistic look at a childhood home done while the artist was in Washington, DC and feeling the pangs of homesickness.

Politics played a major part in Pacita's life, and for a time it looked as though she would be following in her father's footsteps. While she was a student at the University of the Philippines taking up political science in the turbulent sixties, her political involvement revolved more around the old hometown scene than the highly-charged world of campus activism.

In 1969, after a year at the UP Law School, Pacita became deeply involved with her father's career. When he lost the election because the results were tampered with, Pacita organized demonstrations in Manila and even had an audience with the President to clear up the matter. The fact that Jorge Abad eventually assumed the seat which was rightly his proved his daughter's political abilities.

But Pacita was not meant to be a politician. In 1970, she went to the United States to work on her master's in Asian history. While doing graduate work she also held a job as the University of San Francisco's coordinator of cultural affairs, through which she became acquainted with, and later enamored of, the world of art.

While a graduate student at Law Mountain College, Pacita attended a World Affairs Conference and met Jack Garrity, then also a graduate student at Stanford. In 1974 they were married. "Jack is a very sensitive person," she says. "He increased my awareness of the predicaments and unique cultures of underdeveloped countries. He is so interested in Third World countries and travelling, and when I married him, I knew I had to choose a profession that is 'portable.' I knew I couldn't establish a law practice while moving around all over the world. That's when I decided to take up painting."

Pacita was doing abstract work in Boston when she started to work on cloth using textile paint. And since she had a friend who sewed life-sized dolls, she came up with the idea of incorporating sewing and embroidery into her work. The result was a new art form she called



Pacita Abad and her 'Dancing Demon'

trapunto painting, from the Italian word meaning "layered."

Pacita's work reflect the spirit of each place she visits. And there is hardly a spot in the world she hasn't yet set foot on. She has been to Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Thailand, Europe, and the Middle East. In 1980 alone she travelled thrice around the world. At every stop she sets up her easel and puts on canvas a unique record of the sights and sounds around her. She is impressed by the elegant women of India, the serenity of Burma, the awe-inspiring mountain vistas of Nepal, and although she's not very good in languages and seldom travels with an interpreter, she is able to relate to the myriad people she encounters through the most basic elements of communication — sincerity and a genuine interest in others. "A smile," she says, "goes a long way when one is short on words."

The lifestyle may be

hectic, but it suits her just fine, this woman who seems to be somehow immune to exhaustion. "I never get tired as long as I'm working," she bubble. "I suppose if I had nothing to do I'd get bored. But I make sure I'm never bored"

Pacita is one artist who believes that if one works hard enough one creates one's own inspiration. She keeps a logbook in her studio and the 8 to 10 hours a day she logs up sometimes doesn't even seem enough. "I never run out of ideas, what I sometimes run out of is time to get them all out and on canvas," she says.

Although she says that right now she is "apolitical" because she is too engrossed in her art to pay much attention to politics, her works are themselves capable of making strong political statements simply by portraying the human emotions which are central to control, politics. Her portrait of Cambodian refugees in holding centers,

for instance, communicates an implicit condemnation of the forces which brought about the refugee catastrophe.

Pacita has had exhibits in Washington, Bangladesh, Sudan, Thailand, Bulgaria and a number of other places. A prolific artist, it took her 18 months to turn out all 120 works for her current MOPA exhibit. Her own home in Pasay City is crammed full of her trapunto paintings as well as all manner of folk art collected from her travels. But this home, as were the others, is temporary. Already, half of her projected three-year stay in the country is over, and she'll soon be moving on again to other points on the globe which will someday take their appearance in one of her canvasses or trapunto paintings. Sometime in the future she plans a permanent move to New York City. But whether the attractions of the Big Apple can hold this free spirit for long remains to be seen.