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By Franz Sorilla IV | Updated Apr 02, 2025

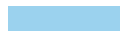


COVER (From left) Pacita Abad's 'Daily Rations' (Portraits of Cambodia), 1980, oil on canvas, from a private collection; 'Woman of the World' (Portraits of Cambodia), 1980, oil on canvas, from a private collection; 'Two Orphans' (Portraits of Cambodia), 1980, oil on canvas, from the collection of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (Photo: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Manila)

**Through Pacita
Abad's bold colour
palette, we look at
the eyes of people**

Our Newsletter

the eyes of people
reverently—
sparking an
empathetic
encounter that left
us appreciative of
our global village



The
resoundin
g humility

and innate
patriotism of Pacita
Abad, one of the
country's pride in
the contemporary

art scene, could perhaps be summarised in one of her
famous quotes, which was lifted from one of her
interviews in 1985. At the time, she was a year shy from
her decade-long anniversary as a visual artist. Yet, her
first ten years in the scene was already teeming with
profound masterpieces and an unconventional approach
to visual arts, which cemented her career.

“But I’d rather be known as a Filipino painter, wherever I
am,” she said in that 1985 interview.

And truly, she did. Jack Garrity, her former husband, who
continues to manage her art estate, shared with the press
during the exhibition opening of the Metropolitan Museum
of Manila (The M), that Pacita held on to her Philippine
passport (which means her citizenship) throughout most
her life despite having the opportunity to revoke it and
become fully Americanised because of their marriage.
When dual citizenship was finally offered in the Nineties,

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Pacita was first in line.

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ABOVE A portrait of the late Pacita Abad (Photo: Courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate)

Born in Batanes, the Philippines' northernmost province, Pacita earned her political science degree from the University of the Philippines in 1969. Initially, following the footsteps of her parents in the political arena was Pacita's plan. However, the tensions during Martial Law prompted her to fly to the United States in 1970 and pursue her law degree at the University of California, Berkely.

Being miles away from her family and their roots in Philippine history, Pacita gathered the courage to pivot to arts.

Lawyer and politician Florencio “Butch” Abad, one of Pacita’s younger siblings, shares that they were both surprised and initially sceptical of Pacita pursuing a career in the arts as she was the most civic-oriented among them siblings and thus groomed to be the next generation of politicians in the family.

“We never saw her with a paintbrush during the whole time she was with us in the Philippines,” Butch says.

Read more: Defying Convention: A Pacita Abad Retrospective



ABOVE (From left) ‘Catholic Still Life’, 1978, oil on canvas, from a private collection; ‘Heart-shaped Still Life’, 1978, oil on canvas, from a private collection; ‘Still Life VIII’, 1978, oil on canvas, from a private collection (Photo: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Manila)

After meeting and later marrying Jack, Pacita moved to Washington, DC, in 1976 to begin taking art courses at the Corazon School of Art. Clarissa Chikiamco, curator of the exhibition at the M, shares that the then-budding artist recalled her classes being frustrating and exhilarating.

“While she lacked technical skill in representing figures with objective accuracy, she delighted in expressing

herself through colour,” Clarissa says.

In 1977, Pacita and Jack moved to New York, where she took classes at the Art Students League. While there, she produced a series of vibrant still-life paintings, prompting her teacher, John Heliker, to ask why her paintings were so colourful.

Pacita answered him by sharing that the colours she would use were from the palettes she grew up with. “I come from a sunny country,” she was believed to have replied.



ABOVE Pacita Abad in 1985, painting Batanes’s breathtaking views as locales quietly observe her (Photo: Courtesy of Pacita Abad Art Estate)

Influenced by Fauvist and German expressionist stylistics.

Pacita's artworks in her formative years are vibrantly coloured and evocative. Some of these works were unveiled at The M's exhibition, welcoming guests as they entered the space. Using still life, nature, and personal memories as her inspiration, Pacita worked mainly with oil in describing how she saw the world and the colours of life.

The second part of the exhibition is dedicated to her travels. Titled 'A Philippine Painter Looks at the World', the section, was named after her 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Philippine Art, encapsulating Pacita's travels from 1976 to 1982 through the portraits she made of people and life scenes. Immersing herself in Guatemala, Nepal, Myanmar, Kenya, Sudan, Haiti, Cambodia, and the Dominican Republic because of Jack's nature of work as an economist for developing countries, Pacita has opened her eyes to the rising issues and concerns of other races and cultures.

"Pacita firmly believed as an artist visiting and living in developing countries she had a duty to remind society of its social responsibility," Clarissa says.



ABOVE (From left) Pacita Abad's 'Daily Rations' (Portraits of Cambodia), 1980, oil on canvas, from a private collection; 'Woman of the World' (Portraits

of Cambodia), 1980, oil on canvas, from a private collection; 'Two Orphans' (Portraits of Cambodia), 1980, oil on canvas, from the collection of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (Photo: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Manila)

During her stays overseas, Pacita also drew influence from the art of Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, the Bangladeshi painter Zainul Abedin, the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, and the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch. These artists painted emotionally charged works, delving into the inner and outer realms of human experience.

“She was particularly moved by the Cambodian refugees who fled to Thailand from the conflict between Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces in the late 1970s,” Clarissa continues. “She exhibited her portraits of them in Bangkok, Boston, and Manila, desiring to call attention to their plight. Years later, she said of the social and political aspects of her work, ‘It’s the Philippine blood in me. We fight to live,’” Clarissa shares.

A poignant touch in the exhibition is the inclusion of exhibition notes in black cards on some pieces where people from different ages and backgrounds shared their diverse perspectives on the artworks by Pacita.

Complementing the artist’s *Mountain Rancher and His Donkey* painting is Charlene Tiara Fulton’s photograph of her painting *Uva de Playa*, which featured notable items during her stay in the Dominican Republic. Meanwhile, a refugee from Gaza and genocide survivor Mahadia Maher

Abu Dalal shared her two-paragraph essay that comments on Pacita’s *Daily Rations* painting.

ABOVE Pacita Abad’s self-portrait trapunto work, ‘Pacita Sailing’, 1983/1987, made with acrylic paint, rickrack ribbons, painted cloth on stitched and

Another section of the exhibition is titled 'To See My Country Through the Eyes of a Painter', which complements the portraits of Pacita featuring international subjects. Here, her works focus on her humble hometown, which she returned to after a twelve-year absence.

In 1982, Pacita and Jack moved to Manila, where the latter worked at the Asian Development Bank. During their four-year stay until 1986, Pacita found renewed artistic stimulation in her country of birth. While no longer aiming for a political career, she remained socially and politically engaged as an artist.

"She painted social inequities, depicted the political situation under the Marcos regime, and created colourful portraits of her friends in the Philippines, including Jerry Araos and Sandra Palou," Clarissa says. Having now made a name internationally, Pacita mounted an exhibition in 1985 at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, featuring her paintings in homage to Batanes.

ABOVE 'Ligpo Island', 1986, oil, acrylic, buttons on stitched and padded canvas, from a private collection

Despite her longtime fear of the waters, Pacita later explored the Philippine seas through learning swimming and scuba diving. This bore fruit through her groundbreaking, immersive and multisensorial exhibition at the Ayala Museum in 1986. Titled *Assaulting the Deep Sea*, her major solo exhibition welcomed visitors to a dark-walled gallery space offering a meditative look at

underwater life. She hung underwater paintings together with abstract works and assemblages resembling sea creatures. Adding sand, fabric, and the sound of waves, this was the first and only time Pacita created an installation.

Her trapunto painting, which she began working on in 1981, fully blossomed in the 1986 exhibition. Pacita, with the assistance of her sister, Orenicia "Rency" Baroña, painted over large canvases, stuffed with cotton then hand-stitched, and later accentuated with hand-sewn materials like buttons, ribbons, and shells. These trapuntos cemented her career at the early onset and continues to make waves today.

In one of her old interviews, Pacita was quoted saying, “I consider my trapuntos as paintings because of the manner of how they were executed. I still paint on canvas. Now people may call it whatever they like. But no, it is not just craft. It is art.”



What's remarkable about Pacita is that she devoted her life to using the arts as a tool to understand other cultures

and make us see both the hope and woes of society. The exhibition, simply titled *Pacita Abad: Philippine Painter*, fulfills the late artist's wish to be known as a Filipino painter. Not only did she make the country proud of her international achievements before and beyond her death, but she also bridged the interstices of our peninsular mindset with globally relevant issues. Moreover, she brought to the limelight the artistry of the Filipino people through colours, perspectives, and ingenuity.

Today, Butch and his siblings honour Pacita's memory by keeping Fundacion Pacita alive in Batanes, which offers a unique staycation experience immersed in nature and the arts. Best remembered for her jovial spirit and genuine empathy, Pacita remains alive in the hearts of many.

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