Façade of San Joaquin Church

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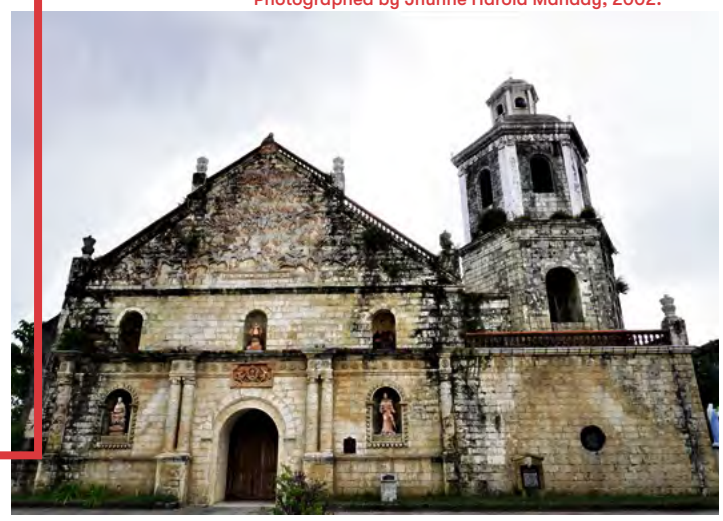
Fig. 1: Relief on the church façade. Photographed by Jhunne Harold Manaay, 2002.



The façade of the Church of San Joaquin in the city of Iloilo on the island of Panay in the Philippines is as intriguing as it is compelling [Fig. 1]. While many of the colonial churches in the Philippines built across the long duration of Spanish colonialism (16th-19th century), mainly reveal ornamentation, the images of sacred figures, and the bare nature of the architectural material, this particular façade uniquely stages a narrative of a war. It is a war that did not even happen in the locality.

The scene of a war intertwined with a Catholic church is not, however, totally strange. In fact, the relationship between war and colonialism is foundational, as it inheres in the very project of colonialism. The image of Santiago Matamoros (Saint James, the Moor Slayer), a prominent icon of the Reconquista in Spain (8th century to 1492), is the dominant trope to be seen at the main gate of Fort Santiago in Intramuros, or the Walled City of the Spanish colonial rule in Manila, which was founded in 1571. The sight of Saint James trampling on the Moor reveals the militancy of the Counter-Reformation Baroque in light of Spain's campaign to triumph over its Muslim rulers.

According to scant data on the edifice, the Church of San Joaquin was built in 1869 during the tenure of its parish priest, Father Thomas Santaren, an Augustinian, with the help of the Spanish engineer Felipe Diaz. The town was "earlier known as Suaraga, Siuaraga, or Suaragan, a name derived from the Siuaga (now Siwaragan) River, which in turn was named after a venomous snake. It was an *encomienda* (the Spanish slave labour system that exploitated the land and the people) in the southeast part of Panay Island under the guidance of Esteban de Figueroa. Christianization was initiated in 1581 by the Jesuits, to whom Figueroa donated the *encomienda* in 1585. In 1594 Panay Island was placed under Augustinian supervision by virtue of a royal decree."[1] The church was erected on a "plain overlooking the sea by Father Thomas Santaren, OSA and inaugurated in 1869. Its fabric is of white coral rock quarried from nearby shores and from the town of Igbaras. Halfway through the construction, an elaborate bas-relief was carved on its triangular pediment."[2] The blocks of coral stones cobbled together for the church came from Punta Malagting.[3] This "fortress church is pillared with nine pairs of strong buttresses...Statues of Saint Peter Regalado, Patron Saint of Bullfighters, and Saint Francis of Assisi."[4]

This relief is a subject of curiosity and, eventually, of art-historical attentiveness [Fig. 2]. Written on the pediment is the phrase *Rendicion d Tetuan*, or Surrender of Tetuan. As the title indicates, the scene references a conflict in Tetuan and its outcome, which is a surrender. Historical accounts lead us to the Battle of Tetuan in Morocco in 1859, in which the army under the command of General Leopoldo O'Donnel routed the Moors, who were led by Prince Muley Abbas of Morocco. Here again, we see an iteration of the trope of war as a corollary or cognate of conquest.

Up to this day, it is not clear why this scene was selected to adorn the façade of the church. It is claimed, for instance, that such a gesture signified the "patriotism" of Santaren. It is also said that the father of Santaren fought in Tetuan, thus this tribute to the battle, which exhibits traces of polychromy and details of local flora. The visualization of the contending armies is not so clear. What is discernible are the masses of figures to indicate the protagonists of the battle and their interaction to offer a semblance of intense combat.

Close to San Joaquin is the Church in Miag-ao in honor of Santo Tomás de Villanueva. The pediment, like that of San Joaquin, is elaborately decorated, an ornamentation akin to embroidery. As it is described: "The pediment features San Cristobal clad like a farmer with rolled-up trousers, carrying the Santo Niño on his back and holding on to a lush coconut tree for support. They are flanked by guava and papaya trees, and ornamental urns adopted from *viñetas*, decorative clichés in engraved books."[5] The juxtaposition of the churches in San Joaquin and Miag-ao contributes to elucidating the Philippine mediation of Western Catholic iconography and the potential of the façade of the church to be a ground of depiction which is usually expected to come from painting via wood, tin, or canvas; or from graphic modes like drawing or printmaking. In this case, the publicness is distinct, as it forms part of the architectural system and the scenography of the town.

Fig. 2: Rendicion d Tetuan. Photographed by Jhunne Harold Manaay, 2002.

How is the Battle of Tetuan relevant to the social and visual history in the Philippines, and how did this event ramify in the histories of Spain, the Philippines, and Africa? Itzea Goikolea Aman contends that "The armed conflict took place in the territory between Ceuta and the plain of Wad Ras, yet in Spain the setting of the war was written and spoken about as a synecdoche for the whole African continent, as the locution 'war of Africa' shows." Amano elaborates: "The fluttering of the Spanish flag on top of the citadel of al-Manzari, named after the leader of the exiled Andalusis who had re-established Tetouan in the fifteenth century, signaled the Spanish capture of the city on February 6, 1860. The whole Army of Africa, scattered in different locations, celebrated the feat to the sound of the music played by the military orchestra." She then quotes excerpts of the memoirs of the chronicler Pedro Antonio de Alarcón to gauge the ideological potency of the Tetuan episode: "Tetouan for Spain! (...) [I proffer] a hymn of gratitude and praise to God as Columbus offered [it] in the Antilles, Cortés in the Andes, Balboa as he discovered the Pacific sea, Gama in Calcutta, and Magallanes in the Philippines; this cheer of triumph, glory and fortune will reverberate now in the whole universe, and it will awake the echoes of our name which still roam all over, in all the latitudes and all the continents through which our armies went awhile; and from America, Flanders, France, Germany and the whole of Italy, Greece, Constantinople, Asia and farther Oceania, from all the towns and cities in which the Spanish blood ran and in which the ashes of our ancestors rest a glorious sleep, will turn their sight onto Spain."[6] This worldly fantasy of consolidation in the name of Spain affirms the importance of the migrating imagery that found itself in the Philippines. Art history must begin in this instance of transfer, which is not a diffusion but a genealogy. It is a beginning, not an afterlife of Western extraction, nor a simulacrum of a privileged origin. In this regard, the San Joaquin image may be seen against a broader proscenium in both art history and theory of religion and colonialism. For the former, it prefigures arguably the first historical painting in Southeast Asia, the *Basi Revolt* series of 14 panels by Esteban Villanueva, dated 1821, mainly chronicling the revolt in the Ilocos region in the northern Philippines arising from the state control of the production and distribution of the ritual and everyday sugarcane wine called the *basi*. For the latter, the San Joaquin façade testifies to the need to enhance the discourse around political theology in which the ideologies of state, church, and art converge to produce the complexity of colonial culture through the image that is politically and theologically competent to figure both history and salvation.

Clearly, the Battle of Tetuan, as emblazoned on the façade of the Church of San Joaquin, implicates a relay of relations between Spain, the Philippines, and Africa under the aegis of colonialism. Furthermore, it plays out a Reconquista imaginary to frame an annotation of colonial baroque in post-colonial art history. As a dialectical image, it registers resonantly in the intersection between history and art history. This occasions the possibility of a different historiography, and perhaps an alternative conception of art altogether, to animate and transform both disciplines. Sharply figuring at the outset is the trope of the Reconquista, or the recovery of the Spanish domain from Islamic hegemony. Transposed to an Asian colony, this trope sustains the colonial ideology of expansion, specifically the difficult conversion of the Muslim population in the island of Mindanao. It bears repeating that the main citadel of Manila under Spanish conquest, Fort Santiago, was named to exalt Saint James, the Moor Slayer, or Santiago Matamoros. Spain, the Philippines, and North Africa become the ambit of this reflection through an image that is simultaneously religious and aesthetic, nothing less than a world-historical imagination of what it means to claim a colony, on the one hand, and to struggle post-colonially, on the other.

The details of the image are not so discernible, owing perhaps to the attrition of the materials making up the relief. The viewer from afar can detect for the most part, as mentioned earlier, formations of armies placed along planes to indicate simultaneous action. This kind of perspective may have been determined by the format of the frieze-like façade, the better to convey a narrative that is also the image.

The historical source of the image has also not been remarked upon. Is it a print, a painting, a story told from memory? There have been other delineations of the event in art history, most notably those by Spanish artists like Mariano Fortuny and Salvador Dalí. Could their sources have been the same as those of the creative intelligence behind the San Joaquin relief?

Of interest is the presence of the Tetuan image in the Philippines, which testifies to the inter-local circulation of images and pictorial rhetoric across the colonial world. This colonial world was not confined to what we know of today as nation-states or regional identities. For instance, the relationship between the Philippines and Java is as vital and cogent as its relationship with Andalucia. It is from this conjuncture that another art history may proceed – not vertically or horizontally, but laterally and adjacently.

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Notes

1 Edgar Allan Sembrano, CCP Encyclopedia of Art: Philippine Architecture, with notes from Regalado Trota Jose (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2018).
2 Sembrano, CCP Encyclopedia of Art: Philippine Architecture.
3 *San Joaquin, Iloilo, Philippines*. Tourism Office of San Joaquin, n.p., n.d.
4 Sembarano, CCP Enclopedia of Art.
5 Regalado Trota Jose, "Major Works," *CCP Encyclopedia of Art: Philippine Architecture*, updated by Edgar Allan Sembrano (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 2018), 254.
6 Itzea Goikolea-Amiano, "Hispano-Moroccan Mimesis in the Spanish War on Tetouan and its Occupation (1859-62)" *Journal of North African Studies* (London: Taylor & Francis, 24, no. 1, 2018), 9, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/25444/.