



TREASURES OF PHILIPPINE ART

El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante
by Félix Resurrección Hidalgo



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El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante by Félix Resurrección Hidalgo
(National Museum; the gift of Cecilia Yulo-Locsin in memory of Leandro V. Locsin)

FOREWORD BY THE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

Jeremy R. Barns

It is with great pleasure that the National Museum produces this publication, the first in a planned new series of art history and conservation monographs that focus primarily on masterworks of Philippine art that this institution holds in trust for the Filipino people. Among the greatest of these is what was probably the last major work of Félix Resurrección Hidalgo, and certainly by far the largest of his extant paintings, *El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante* (The Assassination of Governor Bustamante).

This painting is a landmark for many reasons: its virtuoso display of Hidalgo's artistic genius; its dramatic and controversial depiction of a historical event with underlying themes that continue to resonate and provoke commentary and discourse to the present day; its being the manifestation of the social and political thinking of the great reformist and revolutionary heroes of our country from the generation of Padre Burgos to that of Dr. Rizal; its official recognition - the first of any Philippine work of art - as a National Cultural Treasure; being one of the most ambitious conservation and restoration projects carried out, with great success, by the National Museum's experts; and being among the most generous gifts of a work of art of the highest importance that has ever been made by a private benefactor, in this case the late National Artist and eminent architect Leandro V. Locsin and Mrs. Cecilia Yulo-Locsin and family, to the National Museum and the Filipino people.

The pages that follow include an essay by Alfredo Roces, the foremost writer on the life, times, and work of Hidalgo, together with further art historical notes by the National Museum's resident art historian, Dr. Pearlle Baluyut, as well as documentation of the Painting's conservation and restoration by the National Museum project team of experts led by Orlando Abinion. We hope that this and future publications in the series, which was conceptualized by Dr. Ana Labrador, Assistant Director of the National Museum, will serve as an indispensable reference for students, researchers, historians, artists conservators, restorers, and, of course, lovers of Philippine art and cultural heritage.

The National Museum expresses its deep gratitude firstly to Leandro V. Locsin and Cecilia Yulo-Locsin for their philanthropy and strong support of the institution's mission and aims; and also to the committee established for overseeing the donation of *El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante*: National Museum Trustee Mrs. Maria Isabel G. Ongpin, distinguished historian Dr. Ambeth R. Ocampo, Mrs. Socorro P. Paterno, and the late Fr. Rodrigo Perez III. We are also grateful to the Museum Foundation of the Philippines and the LVL-CYA (Locsin) Foundation for their financial support of the conservation and restoration project, and to Ms. Missy Señares Reyes and Ms. Maita M. Reyes for their generous technical assistance in bringing this National Cultural Treasure back to its best possible state, thereby bridging the divide in time and space between all present and future admirers of the painting and the mind, eye, and hand of Félix Resurrección Hidalgo.

PREFACE

Cecilia Yulo-Locsin

For those who have been deeply engaged with art, artifacts, and expressions of a people's heritage, there comes a time for circumspection when larger questions present themselves — questions that go beyond the realm of aesthetic appreciation, academic fascination, the primal need to understand one's past, and the vanities that sometimes accompany the activity of collecting. Often, this comes rather late in life. But from the very beginning of our marriage and at the outset of a "collecting life", my husband Lindy and I have been acutely aware and mindful of these questions and the issues that we would eventually be faced with. In particular:

- Why do we collect when we do?
- What meaning do these objects have and to whom?
- Who or what should ultimately be the proper stewards of these objects?
- Are the circumstances right to place the stewards in a position to care for these objects in a manner that befits the people for whom these object have meaning?

From the first day that Hidalgo's masterpiece came into our possession over thirty-five years ago, there were no doubts in our minds as to what the answers were to the first three questions. In fact, our private conclusions even prior to the acquisition drove the decision to obtain the painting with the specific intention to preserve the work in a relatively stable environment, in the hope that one day, the promise of the fourth question could be answered in the affirmative.

Many years passed and the irony between the content of "The Assassination of Governor Bustamante" and our own tumultuous national experience did not escape us. Beyond Hidalgo's technical mastery and as a reflection of the context in which the work was executed, the lessons, parallels, and an understanding of the historical background depicted on canvas are indeed potentially instructive toward the cognizance of self and an understanding of the Filipino psyche. Such is the power of great art. And now, with a revitalized National Museum that has finally settled in its home, perhaps the circumstances do not warrant answering the fourth question in the affirmative. My husband and I had always had this in mind in our desire to make a contribution to our people's self-knowledge, and we hope that others see fit to do the same — not only in supporting this important institution in terms of material — but more critically, by providing the time, effort, legislation, and serious resources which the institution badly needs to ensure that this material is well cared for, secured, and preserved for generations of Filipinos to come.

My only regret is that Lindy never had the personal pleasure of turning this masterwork over to the National Museum. In light of his passing in 1994, perhaps only history and hindsight many years from now will tell if our collective judgment as a family — a husband, wife, and our two sons Leandro Jr. and Luis — was appropriately timed and an enlightened one. We did take profound solace in the fact that Lindy's close personal friends who agreed to accept the responsibility of serving on the Donor's Committee were on hand during the turnover — Fr. Rodrigo Perez, Arturo and Tessie Luz, Maria Isabel Ongpin, Soccoro Paterno, and Ambeth Ocampo. I have no doubt that Lindy smiled upon us that day for seeing a fervent wish through to its realization.

It is now for others to consider these questions while learning from the many lessons the work still holds for us. Hidalgo's masterwork has come home.

September 2006



Félix Resurrección Hidalgo in his Paris studio, circa 1900
(Collection of Ambeth R. Ocampo)

HISTORY AS ART: PAINTING AN ILUSTRADO ICON

Alfredo R. Roces*

“Many of those who live here are always lacking in blood and are short of breath,” Dr. José Rizal lamented in a letter from Madrid to his brother Paciano in Calamba, adding “but I cannot understand why they lack perseverance in their aims. Is it due to their youth or is it because their flesh is not cut by wounds...” Rizal, however, made a special point of setting a colleague apart from this general observation, noting “...there are also those like F.R. ... who have a concealed heat which is nevertheless discerned, like smoke in the mountain that hides fire [within].”¹

Félix Resurrección Hidalgo could be seen as your closet filibustero. Alongside the more fiery leaders of the Propaganda Movement of his day, Hidalgo was viewed as reserved and low-profiled. The ‘concealed heat’ that Rizal had discerned in “F.R.” would surface quite late in his career in a magnum opus entitled *El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante* (The Assassination of Governor Bustamante) which he painted in the final chapter of his life; almost like a last hurrah.

He conceived this opus a good decade after his painting *Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* (Christian Virgins Exposed to the Populace) had won the ninth silver medal at the Exposicion Nacional de Bellas Artes in Madrid in 1884. His best known work at the time, *La Barca de Aqueronte* (The Bark of Charon) which had earned him a silver medal from an international jury in the highly prestigious Paris Exposition of 1889, spoke only in universal moral tones signalling no specific political reference to any Philippine context. The painting about the killing of Bustamante is unique for its strong political statement.

So controversial was Hidalgo’s subject of the Bustamante assassination that the painting was never publicly exhibited in Spain and the Philippines in the artist’s lifetime; and for a good half a century more after that, despite having been awarded a gold medal elsewhere at the distantly safe Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in the United States in 1904 (where the painting was exhibited with the title *La Iglesia contra el Estado* or “The Church Against the State”). It was finally unveiled to the eyes of the Filipino public at the National Museum in Manila only on 1 October 1974 at the beginning of the Marcos Martial Law years; and then 14 years later at the First National Juan Luna and Félix Resurreccion Hidalgo Commemorative Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila in 1988.

Why did Hidalgo, the low-keyed rebel, decide to tackle this highly explosive subject matter only to be reluctant to show it to his Filipino public? What is this Bustamante painting all about?

* Alfredo Reyes Roces is a writer, editor and artist, and the author of *Félix Resurrección Hidalgo and the Generation of 1872* (Pasig City, Philippines: Eugenio Lopez Foundation, Inc., 1998). He presently resides in Sydney, Australia.

Fernando Bustamante was the first field marshal to serve as Governor-General of the Philippines. The first step he took after taking office in 1717 was to examine the state of the Royal Treasury; whereupon he uncovered a nest of corruption revolving around the colony's only economic activity: the Manila-Acapulco Galleon Trade. It turned out that officials and religious corporations were the main ingredients in this can of worms. As the investigation began to zero in on the corrupt officials, these clever gentlemen evaded arrest by seeking time-honored sanctuary inside the churches of the religious corporations. The conflict with the Governor-General escalated to crisis point when Archbishop Francisco de la Cuesta refused to hand these corrupt officials over to the State, causing Bustamante to throw the Archbishop himself in the state dungeons.

To the ringing of the church bells of Intramuros, the walled city of Manila, the friars stirred a vicious rabble to march in rage to the Palace and physically vent their fury on the graft-busting Governor-General. As Bustamante stood in his palace stairway engulfed by a swirling violent mob, his son, the sergeant-major and castellan of Fort Santiago nearby, rushed to his aid only to be murdered as well. Having disposed of Bustamante and son, the good Archbishop de la Cuesta then assumed the office of Governor-General *ad interim*.

Filipino historians nowadays shrug off this episode as a passing, if odd, chapter in the history of the Spanish colonizers in the Philippines, but in Hidalgo's time it was charged with meaning and very much a part of their own *ilustrado* (meaning elite Spanish-Filipino) history. The incident portrayed vividly the power of the Spanish friars and their religious corporations over an effete State ruling through a mélange of short-tenured officials coming and going through the Spanish government's revolving doors. In Hidalgo's time - the last quarter of the 19th century - the socio-political conflict bubbled and boiled over the increasing friar dominance over parishes already ably run by native Filipino clergy. As in the case of the Bustamante killing, the power of the State was ruthlessly brushed aside as the friars appeared to assume both spiritual and temporal powers over the entire colony.

To the Ilustrados involved in the Propaganda Movement, the public garrotting at Bagumbayan of the three Filipino priests Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora without trial in 1872 dramatized the colony's horrendous state of affairs under a "friarocracy", replaying that brutal murder of Bustamante by friar power back in 1719.

The parallel was emotionally vivid to them. You sense it in the writings of the vocal spokesmen of the era. In the very first chapter of Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* for example, just eight pages into the novel, the reader is introduced to this dysfunctional relationship between Church and State in the Philippines through a recently arrived young and naive lieutenant who is being lectured to by the veteran Franciscan friar and parish priest Damaso Verdolagas:

There you have the cause of so much calamities! The ruling officials support heretics against God's ministers!' continued the Franciscan raising his ponderous fists.

"What do you mean?" The frowning lieutenant inquired once more, half rising from his chair.

"What do I mean?" repeated Fray Damaso, raising his voice even more and confronting the lieutenant. "I'll tell you what I mean. I, - yes I, mean to say that when a priest throws

out of his cemetery the corpse of a heretic, no one, not even the King himself, has any right to meddle and much less to impose punishment! But some little General - a little General 'Calamity' -

"Padre, his Excellency is the Vice-regal Patron!" shouted the soldier, rising to his feet.

"Excellency! Vice-Regal Patron! So what?" retorted the Franciscan, also rising up. "In other times he would have been dragged down a staircase as the religious corporations once did with the impious Governor Bustamante. Those were indeed the days of faith."²

Before Rizal, there was the erudite Fr. José Burgos who, in his famous *Manifiesto* published anonymously in 1864 in defense of the Filipino priests whose parishes were being rapidly gobbled up by the friars, pointedly cited chapter and verse from the *Historia de Philipinas* regarding this same friar crime:

[T]he assassination in his own palace of him who was also Governor and captain general Don Fernando Bustamante Bustillo y Rueda, with his son, in a rebellion plotted in the church of the Augustinian fathers. In it, friars of all orders were seen with crucifixes in their hands accompanied by people of all classes shouting: "Long Live the faith of God!" "Long Live the church!"³

The incident very likely remains a delicate matter in devoutly Catholic Philippines to this day (consider some years ago the then Manila mayor's anachronistic reaction to the Hollywood movie *The Da Vinci Code*) and, in this context, one can surmise that in Hidalgo's time a painting graphically showing cassocked priests brutally murdering a Governor-General would have been viewed - as Rizal would entitle his first major literary work - as *noli me tangere* or untouchable.

The direct personal link between the Ilustrados of 1872 and Hidalgo is Antonio Maria Regidor who was one of those exiled over the Cavite Mutiny and the "Gomburza" incident. Escaping from his Marianas exile, Regidor subsequently made London his base from where he would commute to Paris and Madrid to talk politics with Rizal, the Pardo de Tavera family, Hidalgo, and other attentive Ilustrados.

Hidalgo's own personal brush with radical politics rewinds back to his student days in Manila at the University of Santo Tomas in 1869. As the poetic symmetry of history would have it, one of those whose ideas sparked that subsequent famous campus unrest was the very same person who more than 30 years later would urge Hidalgo to paint the Bustamante subject: Antonio Regidor.

A lawyer taking his doctorate in Canon Law at the time, Regidor had remarked to a student of law, Felipe Buencamino, on the absurdity of requiring the use of Latin textbooks for a profession where the *lingua franca* was, in fact, Spanish. Buencamino took it upon himself to do something about it. Called to recite the lesson for the day in his class in Canon Law, Buencamino delivered the entire lesson in Spanish instead of Latin! The flabbergasted professor Fr. Benito Corominas of the Dominican Order unceremoniously dismissed the class. The jubilant students spent their unexpected free hour by triumphantly hoisting Buencamino on their shoulders, and amidst yells of "*Viva el castellano y abajo el latin*" ("Long live Spanish and down with Latin") marched their new hero all the way back to his quarters on San Juan de Letran street.

Emboldened by this gesture of protest, Fr. Coromina's class was further stirred up in subsequent days by anonymously written leaflets attacking hand-kissing and other reverential postures that the students were required to assume in the presence of the Dominican professors. Soon enough, the contents of these mischievous, hand-written leaflets that littered the classroom floor in subsequent days escalated into attacks on the friars and demands for academic freedom. Never tolerant of the least show of disrespect from students, the university authorities reacted - or more accurately - over-reacted.

Far more than mere student adventurism was read into the incident. The university officials urged the Governor-General to do something about what they perceived to be a wider, more sinister plot extending beyond the campus and involving the entire colony. The subsequent state investigations implicated Buencamino (who spent some uncomfortable nights in jail) as well as a fistful of students and their parents residing as far away as Pampanga. Among the students placed under investigation was Félix Resurrección Hidalgo. His uncle and godfather, Fr. José Sabino Padilla, prebendary of the Manila Cathedral, had to intercede on his behalf.

In the end, nothing came out of all that particular Dominican university paranoia. Even the cheeky Buencamino was released. Recalling this incident in his book *El Progreso de Filipinas*, published more than a decade later in 1881, Gregorio Sancianco - one of those investigated along with Hidalgo in that notorious university incident - wrote that "after 9 or 11 months, the case was dropped when no one was charged of the crime of subversion, which was how the affair was qualified at first, unless one counts those few anonymous letters retrieved in the university wherein was clearly expressed the aims, or more precisely the legitimate aspirations of the students."⁴

Despite the sinister black mark on him, Hidalgo went on to complete his Bachelor in Civil Law degree a year and a half later in 1871. But this incident at the University of Santo Tomas was never put to rest by the suspicious peninsular Spaniards or peninsulares.

When native militia staged a revolt at the Cavite arsenal - a disturbance quickly quelled with the leaders summarily executed - it was immediately perceived as yet another opening salvo of some wider more sinister and violent nation-wide plot. Night arrests of "the usual suspects" followed and prominent citizens were quickly bundled off without legal recourse to exile in distant Guam (then part of the Spanish Philippines). Three eminent members of the native clergy were then publicly strangled to death without benefit of a trial. This Gomburza incident at Bagumbayan in 1872 already referred to above scarred the Ilustrado generation of Hidalgo. Its shadow would haunt the imagination of the leading propagandists such as Rizal and Marcelo del Pilar.

Returning to the specific case of Hidalgo, the incident may have made him extremely wary of openly provoking heavy-handed political retaliation. Hidalgo's awareness of the Gomburza incident was direct and personal. Hidalgo was closely acquainted with some of the victims of the 1872 episode: one of the Gomburza trio, Fr. Burgos, was a prominent teacher at the University of Santo Tomas who had approved Hidalgo's final examination to obtain his law degree, while among those exiled (along with Antonio Regidor) was Dr. Joaquin Pardo de Tavera, one of his examiners. Among his classmates was Paciano Rizal, the elder brother of José.

In Gomburza's wake, Hidalgo abruptly decided to abandon his newly earned lawyer's career to take up art at Manila's *Academia de Dibujo y Pintura* (Academy of Drawing and Painting). The artist he had now reinvented himself into, signed his paintings "Félix Resurrección" pointedly dropping off the Hidalgo surname, in the same way and for the same reason that José Rizal would shed his family name of Mercado. While Hidalgo had always wanted to be a painter, he now got the unstinting support of his mother for this career change - very likely because she hoped an artist's profession would keep him safely away from the brewing political typhoon.

Young Félix did not come from a family of political agitators. Quite the contrary. His parents were conservative and respectable members of the *principalía* or local elite prospering in the commercial district of Binondo in Manila. His father, Eduardo Resurrección Hidalgo y Agapito, a *mestizo español* or Spaniard of mixed blood, was a wealthy lawyer from Vigan, Ilocos Sur, who had served as director of the *Dirrección Provisional de la Sociedad Postas Generales de Luzon* (Provisional Directorate of the General Postal Society of Luzon). His mother, Maria Barbara Padilla y Flores, a *mestiza de sangley* or Chinese of mixed blood from Binondo was an educated business woman, the proud daughter of lawyer and shipping magnate Narciso Padilla, who was no less than a *Regidor de la Audiencia Real* or a Regent of the Royal High Court of Manila. Her brother Sabino Padilla was a Catholic secular priest enjoying a pension at the Manila Cathedral.

Félix grew up on Calle de la Escolta in Binondo where he was born on February 21, 1853, the third of seven children. His mother, a deeply religious matriarch, doted on him from childhood, her hold over him growing ever more dominant following the death of her husband, an event that deprived Félix of a father figure at the young age of 12. Coming from a family of lawyers from both sides (his elder brother José was also a lawyer), it was taken for granted that Félix would also take up law upon completing his studies at the Ateneo de Manila. The obedient Félix followed this path, enrolling at the University of Santo Tomas in 1867 where he received top school marks of *sobresaliente* or excellent most of the time until he earned his Bachelor of Law degree in 1871. At the university, he had his first encounter with political radicalism, which, as described earlier, culminated in the 1872 Gomburza incident.

For the next seven years, Hidalgo stayed happily holed up within the walled city at the Academy of Drawing and Painting on Calle del Cabildo. His work, often marked *sobresaliente*, impressed the Academy's director, Agustin Saez, and in 1879 Hidalgo won a scholarship by means of an art competition to take up art studies in Spain. Earlier in 1876, Hidalgo had already exhibited at the Circo Teatro de Bilibid in Manila's Quiapo District.

Receiving his usual outstanding grades, Hidalgo continued his studies as a *pensionado* in Madrid for another four years until, finally bored stiff with the drudgery of the academic studio classes, he set off on his own in 1883. The following year, his painting *Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* won the ninth silver medal at the Madrid Exposition.

While it was a major accomplishment at the time, his compatriot Juan Luna did him one better by bagging the first gold medal for his gigantic *Spoliarium*. The double triumph of these two Filipinos was cause for jubilation among Madrid's Filipino colony, the more vocal propagandists marinating the cultural triumph with political significance in an evening of speechifying at the Restaurante Inglés.

Perhaps sniffing the strong political agenda in this much publicized dinner, Hidalgo had stayed in his new studio in Paris well away from the banquet in Madrid, claiming "sudden illness." Just the same, Hidalgo found himself once again linked with radical politics. Among the guests of honor was Segismundo Moret (who would become Minister of State the following year), a known liberal advocating autonomy for Cuba and Puerto Rico; Rafael Maria de Labra, a Cuban lawyer-journalist and vocal autonomist, and Miguel Morayta, a professor at the University of Madrid and staunch advocate of academic freedom.

Making his public debut into dangerous politics, José Rizal opened the round of toasts with this salvo:

Both [Luna and Hidalgo] express the spirit of our social, moral, and political life: humanity subjected to hard trials, humanity unredeemed, reason and aspiration in open fight with prejudice, fanaticism, and injustice; because feeling and opinion make their way through the thickest walls... and if the pen fails them and the printed word does not come to their aid, then the palette and the brush not only recreate the scenery, but are also eloquent advocates.⁵

The silver-tongued orator from Iloilo, Graciano Lopez Jaena, followed with his own remarks:

[T]he brush of Luna and the palette of Resurrección have once again given irrefutable proof that ability and genius are not just the exclusive patrimony of the races who title themselves superior; and that they are emblazoned within the repository of intellectual rights.... *Spoliarium* and *Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho* are the expression of the laments and cries that are exhaled from the breasts of this race on whose head has been weighted for a long time the stigma of unjustified prejudices.⁶

There is evidence that Rizal respected and confided in Hidalgo, as one letter concerning Rizal's most significant political work tells us:

For a long time you [Hidalgo] have wished to read a novel by me. You said to me that it was necessary to do something serious and not write any more articles that live and die with the page of a newspaper. Very well, to your wishes, to your letters, I reply with my novel - *Noli Me Tangere* - of which I send you a copy by post... you have always encouraged me with your approval and advice. Stimulate further your friend who respects your opinions and your criticisms...⁷

To which Hidalgo replied:

I have read pages of your book and I have found them full of truth. There are scenes finely delineated with an absolutely remarkable exactness... I admire your courage in saying plainly what you think and the inspiration reflected in your work which makes one feel the palpitations of the heart of a man who loves his country...⁸

Writing to his German friend Blumentritt, Rizal remarked:

I thank both of you [Hidalgo and Blumentritt] for having understood my book. I wanted to write something for my people, and two souls who love Filipinos, have understood me. May my country also understand me as you and Hidalgo do! Other Filipinos who are not writers, also congratulated me, but your congratulations and Hidalgo's are worth more.⁹

No further elaboration regarding Hidalgo's political credentials is needed. The artist's strong character revealed itself in one of his letters where he reacted to the shabby treatment that the purchase of his prize-winning work received from officials:

Neither the pecuniary sacrifices, nor the laborious efforts of nearly a year, not even the thousands upon thousands of obstacles which I have had to overcome to bring my modest work to a good end, hurt me; but [the conduct of the] artists such as the Gentlemen of the Jury, among whom not a single one would not have expressed indignation if someone had proposed the purchase of one of their works under the conditions which they have drawn up for the acquisition of my painting, pains me; it wounds me in my most profound artistic sensibility. It angers me, I repeat, that the stipulations of its evaluation are derisive and shameful... they want to clip the wings of the young denying them whenever they can the material means to continue advancing.

Fortunately, I do not allow, nor will I allow, myself to be vanquished no matter how hard the struggle; and even in bankruptcy I will continue to make another work of importance even if I have to deprive myself of what is most necessary in life.¹⁰

Though low-profiled, Hidalgo when pressed always showed an inner toughness to his character. He certainly had to be tough to survive as an artist in highly competitive Paris. In his book, *The Studios of Paris*, art historian John Milner writes of Paris in those days when:

[I]ts artists numbered in thousands and when the annual Salon jury reduced its selection of works for display to a privileged 5,000-6,000 works. For an artist to assert his presence, and even to be seen at all amongst the multitude of warring styles and ambitions was a formidable task calling for resolute commitment and determination. Merely to survive as a painter was a difficult task; to succeed as a painter was an almost insuperable task, demanding cunning as well as talent, shrewdness as much as originality....¹¹

The Paris of the last quarter of the 19th century to where Hidalgo moved was the Mecca of Western art. Its Bohemian atmosphere probably freed Hidalgo from the rigid social conventions of his religious family back in Manila. In any case, Hidalgo's unconventional relationship with his model, Maria Yrritia, who became his life's companion although he never married her, shows that Hidalgo was no timid, colorless personality.

Paris became Hidalgo's home for almost three decades. He returned to the Philippines in 1911 only to visit his ailing, nearly blind, mother. But he found the new Philippines, now under the Americans, just as stifling as in his youth - what with his companion Maria given no social status - and he travelled back to his beloved Paris only to die in Barcelona, Spain. From about 1884 to his death in March 12, 1913, Maria stood faithfully by his side.

Measuring an impressive 420 by 353 centimeters, the large oil on canvas of *El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante* was part of the artist's estate that went to his heirs, to then pass to the hands of Manuel Garcia before finally finding a home in the impressive art collection of Leandro and Cecilia Locsin.

In this final *magnum opus*, Hidalgo's neo-classical style had evolved towards a flatter surface, dispensing with the contrasts of dark and light which had earlier proved so effective in his *La Barca de Aqueronte*. In 1897, Hidalgo experimented with media and technique which he furtively called after himself as the "FRH procedure" (*procedimiento FRH*). He was trying to purge the "bitumen" (sometimes referred to as "brown sauce") coloration that characterized Academic painting.

I now find myself in possession of a procedure which permits me to dominate the material part of the work... I think I mentioned to you in one of my letters that I have succeeded in reconstructing the ancient procedure of the Flemish and Dutch masters which permit an artist to give to his works a brilliance and a solidity to colors to which the Moderns have barely arrived with their dirty and gross painting in oils!

...I suppose I don't have to tell you that I keep the secret for myself!...Through one of those providential coincidences I encountered [the solution to] the problem which, in its simplicity, I would have hardly tried to solve in this manner! ...when I think that we have persisted for more than a hundred years with the conviction that the paintings from Van Eyck to Rubens are painted in oil and I see authors burn the midnight oil to investigate why these works conserve themselves fresh in color as though they had been painted yesterday, and I see that my procedure has all the aspects of these works [so] that one could think it analogous to oil painting, and seeing that my procedure does not contain a single drop of oil; I become convinced with the ease with which an error can be perpetuated...!"¹²

One of Hidalgo's surviving sketchbooks contains a scribbled formula for what he labelled his *procedimiento*, which lists color pigment ground in water to be mixed with agglutinants. We are left to speculate just what these binding mediums were from his mention of varnish and alcohol on this list. Apparently he applied these in alternate layers. He cites a portrait of his mother painted in 1897 as an example of this new technique.

Through this self-discovered "procedure", Hidalgo rendered his work in clean colors, fine lines, and flat planes; applying brighter colors layered with watercolor-like transparency. Was *El Asesinato* created with this special medium and technique? Without benefit of chemical analysis, we can only speculate on how much of this *procedimiento FRH* was applied to *El Asesinato*; or whether it was completed with exclusive use of traditional oils. In any case, the effect he was striving for by 1897 was the "brilliance and solidity to colors" of the "Flemish and Dutch masters"; and in color and style, this particular Hidalgo opus differs from his other and earlier major works precisely along those parameters.

To take the opposite tack, were we to be critical and probe for aesthetic weakness, it would be in the comparatively plain style Hidalgo used to tackle such a strong subject. The subversive political overtones and the vicious nature of the assassination of a Governor-General by a mob instigated by angry friars in the dark of night, call for a deeper, more violent visual mood and atmosphere. Where are the rich contrasts of light and shadow, the conflicting dark and somber chiaroscuro tones that gave his best-known works, *Virgenes Cristianas* and *La Barca de Aqueronte*, their dramatic impact? It was the younger Hidalgo's talent for playing light and shadow to maximum emotional effect that gave us a

frightening glimpse in his masterpiece *La Barca* of Dante's Inferno. Lacking this pictorial mood and drama, the Bustamante picture takes on the qualities of explicit illustration at the expense of emotional depth and atmosphere.

The Hidalgo style in this painting may thus seem quaint and archaic to contemporary eyes and sensibilities attuned to visual art that has long departed from the anecdotal. But all work must be appraised in context, and the art of Hidalgo belongs to the age when Paris was the art center of the world, and the Salon and its high priests - strutting aloof and unaware that the dissident salon movement would ambush their glory and their conspicuous Salon presence - were at their zenith.

As prominent as Hidalgo was in Spain and Paris, he was but a small flame among much, much brighter lights of the likes of Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, Fernand Cormon, and Gustave Moreau who, among dozens of others, were the celebrities of the art world commanding astronomical prices and dictating artistic tastes from within the all-powerful French Academy known as the *Institut*. Alas, these famous, rich, socially lionized, bemedaled, cock-of-the-walk artists who held sway over the "City of Light" and the Western art scene in Hidalgo's day, lie mouldering in the dustbin of art history. How many recognize these names today? It was precisely in that last quarter of the 19th century that the French Impressionists were overturning the rules of the art game while the Academy had been looking down on these dissident artists. By the morning of the 20th century, the curators of many magnificent museums of the world would sheepishly hide major paintings of these Academic masters inside dank store rooms where once they had been proudly displayed - in their ornately carved gold-leafed frames - in the main exhibition halls of these very same temples of art.

As John Milner in *The Studios of Paris* observed only too succinctly:

Ernest Meissonier, [was] the most honored and successful artist of the late nineteenth century, whose aims and ambitions were as committed and determined as any of his contemporaries. Today he is a figure of greater obscurity. In a hundred years his reputation has largely vanished, despite all the splendours of his worldly success. In the histories of art he is rarely mentioned. There evidently lies a gulf between contemporary reputations and posthumous recognition. Painters and sculptors of the utmost diversity, commitment and professionalism have vanished by the hundred. Their works have been relegated from places of the highest honour to shadowy picture stores. With the passage of time their prices have plummeted from spectacular heights; their names are invoked as no more than a foil to the splendours of Impressionism and its heirs. Yet they were more than a background - they provided a highly visible and well-established foreground which time and criticisms have largely erased.

Not only has our view of history changed but in doing so it has become vastly simplified, obscuring the intricate diversity of the period to provide an image of the time of heroic struggle.¹³

The style of Hidalgo's painting of the murder of Governor-General Bustamante has to be seen in this context: the negative elements we see may well be our cultural perspective that now denies any merit not just to this work but all the major works of the most eminent artists of Hidalgo's day as well. In much the same way, appreciating French Rococo painting today requires special orientation; just as contemporary rap musicians may not be able to relate to traditional opera. Fashions and tastes change. In his novel, Rizal himself was

dismissive of the painting and religious subjects of early Filipino *miniaturismo* painters that now are proud treasures in Philippine museums.

As *El Asesinato* carries no date with the signature, one can only speculate on the precise moment when Hidalgo painted it. Did he paint this after the execution of his friend Rizal in 1896, and was this an offshoot of the tragedy? Or did the artist paint this after the demise of the Spanish regime in the Philippines, in effect after 1898 when he felt it had become safe to express his long repressed sentiments?

That Hidalgo chose a highly controversial anti-clerical theme for what may be his last major work, tells us some things about the artist. Firstly, that his stay in France had given him a dose of liberal thinking that would not have been possible to imbibe in the Philippines of the 19th century. Taking into account that his parents were devout Catholics, with one close uncle a member of the clergy, his willingness to append his name to an obviously politically-charged subject offensive to the all-powerful Catholic establishment in the Philippines sends a message that he stood opposed to what the propagandist Marcelo del Pilar termed the “friarocracy” (*frailocracia*) in the Philippines.

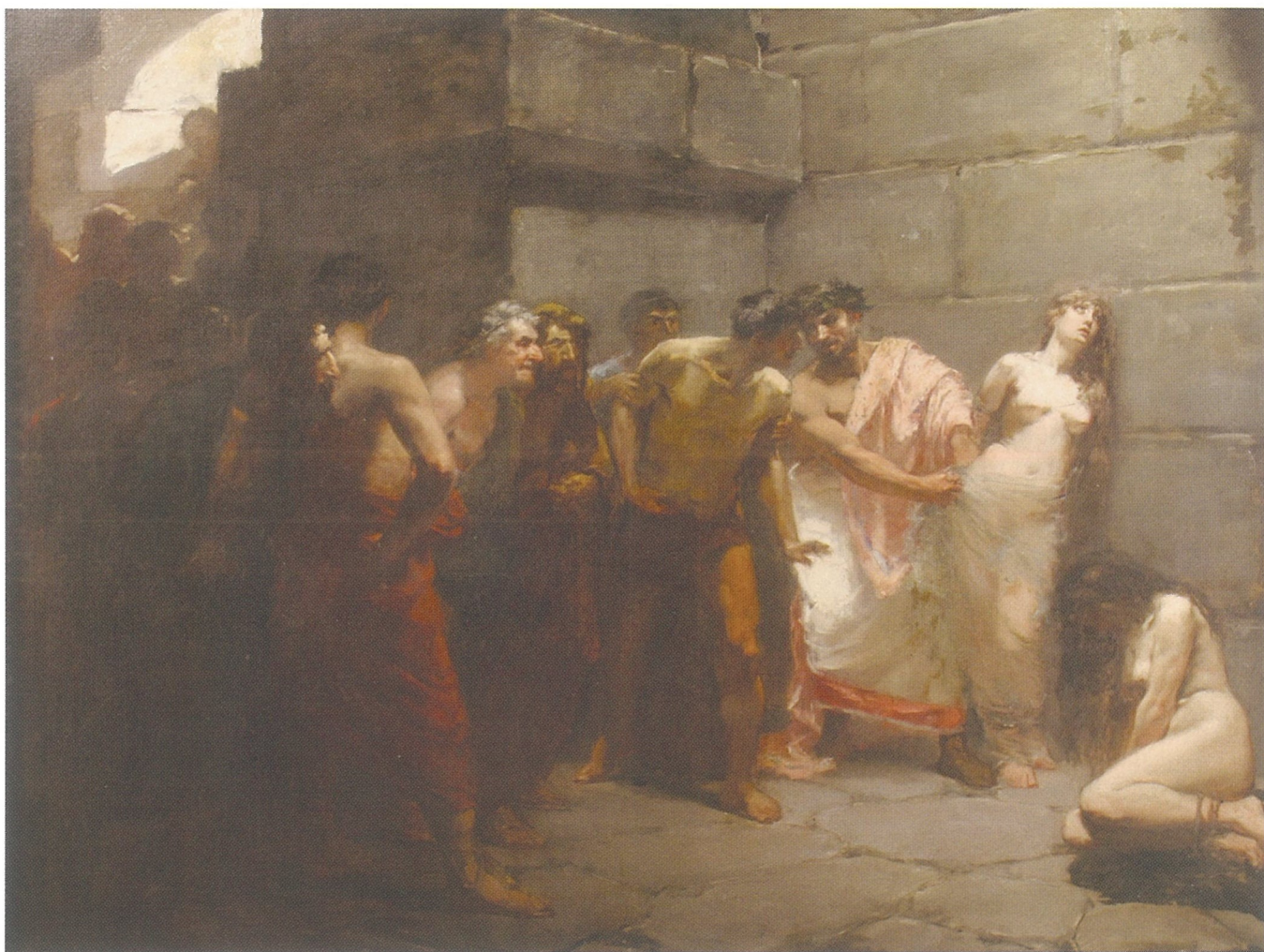
The second point about this painting is that it reveals Hidalgo’s unequivocal political viewpoint identifying with the generation of 1872. The fact that this subject matter had been suggested to him by Antonio Maria Regidor - one of those who chose to live in London following their exile in Guam over the Cavite Mutiny of 1872 - cements this link. To fully appreciate the emotive component in *El Asesinato* it is important to appraise the subject of this painting as the Ilustrados of Hidalgo’s generation perceived it: as an icon symbolically linked with Gomburza and the Ilustrado struggle against the despotic power of the friarocracy.

The mere portrayal of such an anti-clerical subject, a dark part of Philippine history, required great courage. Somehow Regidor had persuaded Hidalgo to work on this iconic subject and very likely provided much of its vivid historical details. You only have to look at the poses and faces of the friars (some viciously dragging a rope to which the hapless governor is tied) in the many studies now in the Lopez Memorial Museum and Library (some drawn in charcoal, others brushed in oil) to sense how the artist carefully mulled and constructed this macabre scene in his mind. The many meticulous studies also attest to the seriousness and importance he gave towards its final conception.

Hidalgo’s opus is a signpost to a significant chapter of Philippine history. In this historical light it is a national treasure. Indeed, this was officially acknowledged when *El Asesinato del Gobernador Bustamante* was declared a National Cultural Treasure by the National Museum of the Philippines on 1 October 1974 during its inaugural public exhibition in the country - the first Philippine work of art to be given this highest of recognitions.

NOTES

- 1 Postscript to a letter from José Rizal to his brother Paciano, Madrid, 13 February 1883: *Cartas entre Rizal y los Miembros de la Familia*, Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, Manila, 1961.
 - 2 José Rizal, *Noli me Tangere*, Comisión Nacional el Centenario de José Rizal, Manila, 1961, p8.
 - 3 *Historia de Philipinas*, chapter 20, p338, and chapter 24, p457, cited in John Schumacher, S.J.: *Father José Burgos, Priest And Nationalist*, Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1972, p105.
 - 4 Gregorio Sancianco y Goson, *El Progreso de Filipinas*, Madrid, 1881.
 - 5 Graciano Lopez Jaena, *Discursos y Articulos Varios*, Bureau of Printing, Manila, 1951.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 José Rizal, *Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformists 1882-1896*, Volume II, Book III, National Heroes Commission, Manila, 1963.
 - 8 José Rizal, *The Rizal-Blumentritt Correspondence*, Manila, José Rizal Centennial Commission, Manila, 1961, pp67-68.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Félix Resurrección Hidalgo, "Letter to Francisco de Yriarte", 15 August 1884, courtesy of Ramon N. Villegas.
 - 11 John Milner, *The Studios of Paris*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, p1.
 - 12 Félix Resurrección Hidalgo, "Letter to Pedro" [no surname], undated, from the Alfonso T. Ongpin Papers, courtesy of Ambeth R. Ocampo.
 - 13 John Milner: *The Studios of Paris*, op.cit.
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Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho

(1884, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas)