

Imprinting Andres Bonifacio: The Iconization from Portrait to Peso

The face of the Philippine revolution is evasive, just like the freedom that eluded the man known as its leader.



(Photo courtesy of Mr. Jim Richardson.)

The only known photograph of Andres Bonifacio is housed in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain. Some say that it was taken during his second wedding to Gregoria de Jesus in Katipunan ceremonial rites. It is dated 1896 from Chofre y Cia (precursor to today's Cacho Hermanos printing firm), a prominent printing press and pioneer of lithographic printing in the country, based in Manila. The faded photograph, instead of being a precise representation of a specific historical figure, instead becomes a kind of Rorschach test, liable to conflicting impressions. Does the picture show the President of the Supreme Council of the Katipunan as a bourgeois everyman with nondescript, almost forgettable features? Or does it portray a dour piercing glare perpetually frozen in time, revealing a determined leader deep in contemplation, whose mind is clouded with thoughts of waging an armed struggle against a colonial power?

Perhaps a less subjective and more fruitful avenue for investigation is to compare and contrast this earliest documented image with those that have referred to it, or even paid a curious homage to it, by substantially altering his faded features.



This undated image of Bonifacio offers the closest resemblance to the Chofre y Cia version. As attested to by National Scientist Teodoro A. Agoncillo and the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, it is the image that depicts the well-known attribution of Bonifacio being of sangley (or Chinese) descent. While nearly identical in composition with the original, this second image shows him with a refined—even weak—chin, almond-shaped eyes, a less defined brow, and even modified hair. The blurring of his features, perhaps the result of the image being timeworn, offers little room for interjection.

In contrast, the next image dating from a February 8, 1897 issue of *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, a Spanish-American weekly publication, features a heavily altered representation of Bonifacio at odds with the earlier depiction from Chofre y Cia.



This modification catered to the Castilian idea of racial superiority, and to the waning Spanish Empire's shock—perhaps even awe?—over what they must have viewed at the time as indio impudence. Hence the Bonifacio in this engraving is given a more pronounced set of features—a more prominent, almost ruthless jawline, deep-set eyes, a heavy, furrowed brow and a proud yet incongruously vacant stare. Far from the unassuming demeanor previously evidenced, there is an aura of unshakable, even obstinate, determination surrounding the revolutionary leader who remained resolute until his last breath. Notice also that for the first (although it would not be the last) time, he is formally clad in what appears to be a three-piece suit with a white bowtie—hardly the dress one would expect, given his allegedly humble beginnings.

Given its printing, this is arguably the first depiction of Bonifacio to be circulated en masse. The same image appeared in Ramon Reyes Lala's *The Philippine Islands*, which was published in 1899 by an American publishing house for distribution in the Philippines.



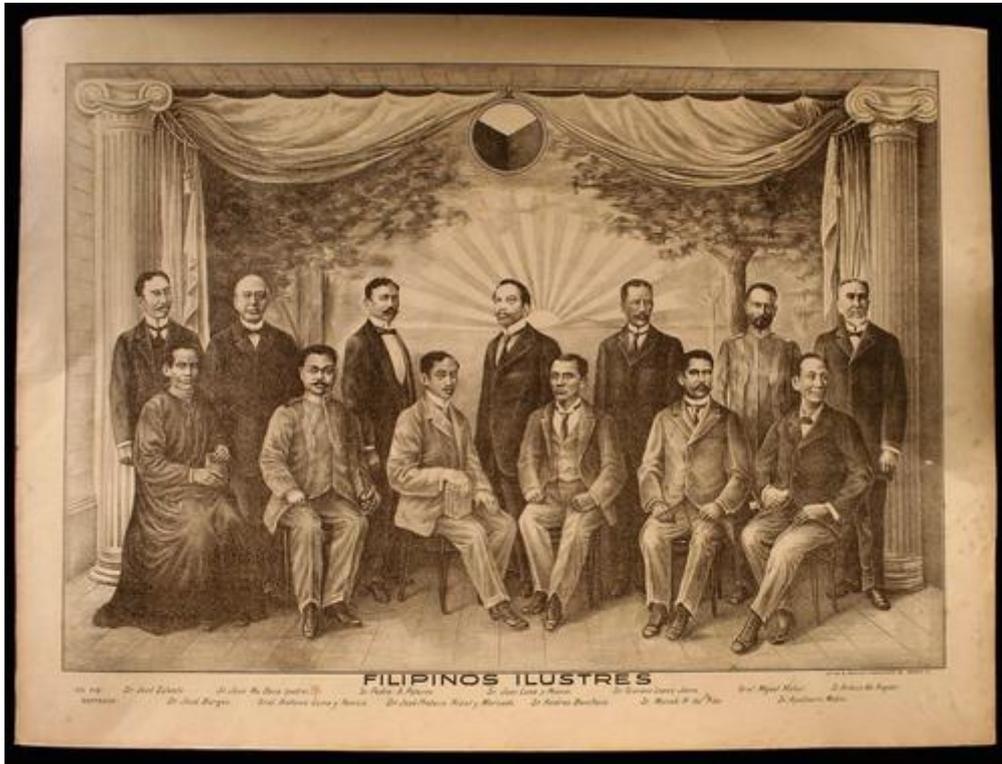
The records of both the Filipinas Heritage Library and the Lopez Museum reveal a third, separate image of Bonifacio which appears in the December 7, 1910 issue of *El Renacimiento Filipino*, a Filipino publication during the early years of the American occupation.

El Renacimiento Filipino portrays an idealized Bonifacio, taking even greater liberties with the Chofre y Cia portrait. There is both gentrification and romanticization at work here. His receding hairline draws attention to his wide forehead—pointing to cultural assumptions of the time that a broad brow denotes a powerful intellect—and his full lips are almost pouting. His cheekbones are more prominent and his eyes are given a curious, lidded, dreamy, even feminine emphasis, imbuing him with an air of otherworldly reserve—he appears unruffled and somber, almost languid: more poet than firebrand.

It is difficult to imagine him as the Bonifacio admired, even idolized, by his countrymen for stirring battle cries and bold military tactics. He is clothed in a similar fashion to the *La Ilustración Española y Americana* portrait: with a significant deviation that would leave a telltale mark on succeeded images derived from this one. Gone is the white tie (itself an artistic assumption when the original image merely hinted at the possibility of some sort of neckwear), and in its stead, there is a sober black cravat and even a corsage on the buttonhole of his coat.

Here the transformation of photograph to engraving takes an even more curious turn; as succeeding interpretations in turn find reinterpretation at the hands of one artist in two media; with each interpretation in turn becoming iconic in its own right.

For it was from contemporary history textbooks such as *The Philippine Islands* that the future National Artist for Sculpture, Guillermo Tolentino, based his illustration, *Filipinos Ilustres*, which was completed sometime in 1911. Severino Reyes, upon seeing the image, agreed to have it lithographed and published in *Liwayway*, of which he was the editor at the time, under the name *Grupo de Filipinos Ilustres*.



Grouping prominent Filipinos together as if posing for a formal studio portrait with the Partido Nacionalista emblem hanging above the group (though other versions do not have the seal), resonated with the public; the illustration was once a regular fixture in most homes in the first decades of the twentieth century. A stern, serious Bonifacio, with wide eyes and a straight nose, is seated between Jose Rizal and Marcelo H. del Pilar.

Filipinos Ilustres would inspire other depictions from around the same period— notably, Manuel Artigas’ *Andres Bonifacio y el Katipunan*.



[Credit: Reproduced from Manuel Artigas, *Arzobispo Bonifacio y el "Katipunan"* (Manila, 1911)]

The Artigas image is decidedly patrician in both dress and mien, with larger but still almond-shaped eyes but with a slightly more aquiline nose, complemented by prominent cheekbones and a defined jaw. Already far-removed from the original, this gentrified and respectable portrait almost betrays Bonifacio's class background and visually thrusts him into the exclusive club of ilustrados—the reformists who sought change from above instead of slashing revolution.



The first depiction of Bonifacio on Philippine banknotes (part of the English series of currency issued by the Central Bank of the Philippines from 1949 to 1969 and printed by the British printing company Thomas De La Rue & Co. Ltd.) mirrored both the Artigas rendition and a sculpture by Ramon Martinez. The twenty-peso bill had both Bonifacio and Emilio Jacinto on the obverse. On the reverse is a near-photographic depiction of Martinez' Balintawak monument, which was unveiled on September 3,

1911. Though he originally intended to commemorate the fallen heroes of the 1896 Revolution in general, this soon became the image of one particular man, Bonifacio, that lingered in the minds of many.



It is almost as if, in the face of conflicting representations, the engravers of the banknote decided to avoid controversy by simply depicting both. For here, the gentrified Bonifacio appears, while the increasingly more iconic—yet ironically not actual (because the statue was never explicitly intended to portray Bonifacio)—sculpture is portrayed on the reverse of the banknote.

However, it would be the *El Renacimiento Filipino* adulteration, despite its provenance, that would be lent credibility throughout the years with its use in Philippine currency, starting with banknotes issued under the Pilipino series, in circulation from 1969 to 1973.



The Bagong Lipunan series of President Ferdinand E. Marcos, which was in circulation from 1973 to 1985, would follow this design with simple alterations.



This would likewise be featured alongside the portrait of Apolinario Mabini on the ten-peso bill released in 1997, which the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas has since demonetized.



Bonifacio's image undergoes another re-imagining altogether in Philippine coinage—following conventions established, this time in sculpture, by Guillermo Tolentino.

There was, however, a re-ordering of the hierarchy of heroes. While Rizal was enshrined as the foremost hero by the construction of the Rizal Monument, the second (in scale and artistic ambition) grander monument was that of Bonifacio in 1933. In contrast, there were no monuments dedicated to Emilio Aguinaldo, very much alive, mired as he was in the partisan politics of the 1920s. The era of monumentalism for Aguinaldo would begin only in the 1960s, with [the transfer of Independence Day to June 12 in 1962](#), the renaming of Camp Murphy to Camp Aguinaldo in 1965, and Aguinaldo's donation of his mansion to the Filipino People shortly before his death. President Marcos consciously adopted the Malolos Republic—with its unicameral legislature and strong presidency—as the historical antecedent for his regime, [inaugurating the Interim Batasan Pambansa on June 12, 1978](#); and transferring the start of official terms to June 30 from Rizal Day (which had been the date since 1941). The looming centennial of the Proclamation of Independence kept the spotlight on Aguinaldo, and with it, the promotion of Aguinaldo in the hierarchy of banknotes: formerly it had been Rizal on the basic unit of currency, the Peso, followed by Bonifacio on two pesos. With the abolition of the two peso coin, Bonifacio was reduced in rank, so to speak, to share the ten peso banknote while Aguinaldo was promoted, so to speak, to the five peso coin.

In 1983, Emilio Aguinaldo replaced Bonifacio on the five-peso bill, and the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas minted a unique, octagonal two-peso coin featuring Bonifacio. This was in circulation from 1983 to 1990, re-released in a smaller, circular form

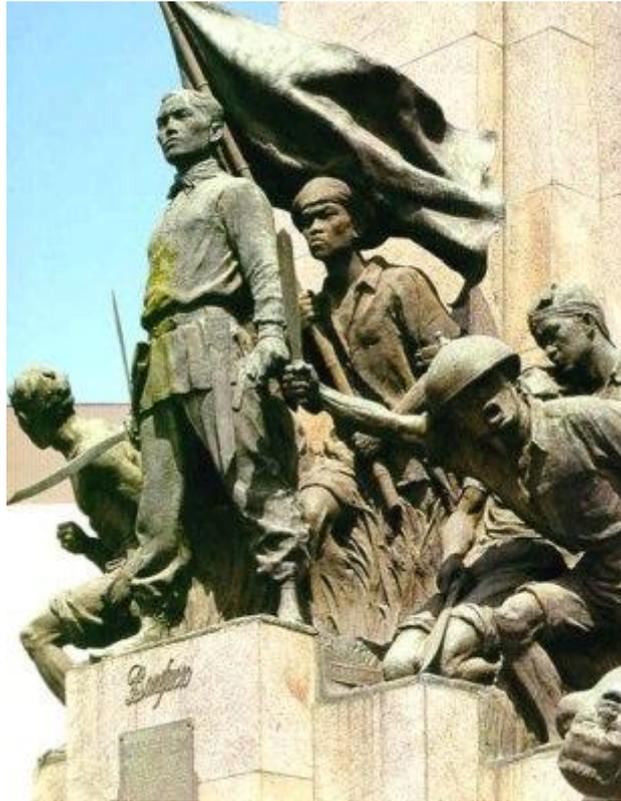
from 1991 to 1994. Bonifacio is more stern and masculine in profile, with a kerchief knotted around his neck.



The current bimetallic 10-peso coin, first minted in 2000, is similar in design to the 10-peso bill with Bonifacio and Mabini.



The image on the coins is most likely sourced from the 45-foot tall bronze monument that bears his name in the City of Caloocan, sculpted by Guillermo Tolentino, who was already middle-aged by this time—the second time the artist had featured Bonifacio in his art.



Here, at what was once the entrance to Manila before the era of the expressway, stands a calm Bonifacio, dressed in an embroidered Barong Tagalog and knotted kerchief, with a bolo in one hand, a revolver in the other, surrounded by Jacinto and two other Katipuneros, symbolizing the Cry of Pugad Lawin.

Tolentino's work was the culmination of extensive research and consultations not just with Bonifacio's living contemporaries, but also with the occult through seances and espiritistas. The artist also based his sculpture on Bonifacio's sister Espiridiona.

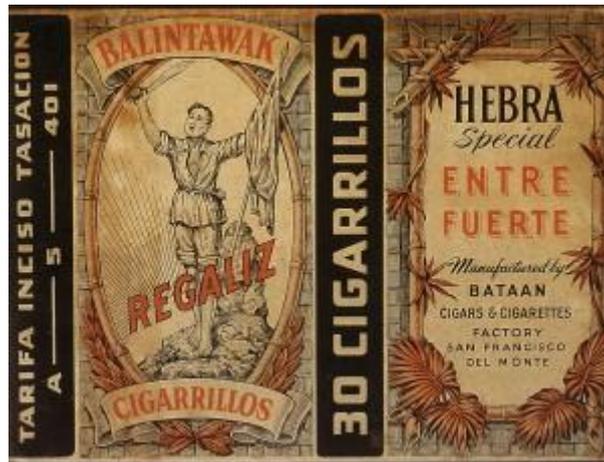
The Bonifacio of Tolentino was done in the classical sense, expressing almost no emotion—a cool, calculating, even serene leader in the midst of battle. Napoleon Abueva, a student of Guillermo Tolentino, offers an alternative interpretation: that Bonifacio's quiet dignity and confidence evokes the resilient spirit of Filipinos.

The monument itself was a purely Filipino project from start to finish, proposed by Bonifacio's fellow revolutionary leader Guillermo Masangkay in the Philippine Legislature, and funded by Act No. 2760 s. 1918, which also enacted Bonifacio Day as a national holiday. Inaugurated on Bonifacio's birthday in November 30, 1933, it presaged the transition to independence.

This is in stark contrast to the aforementioned Martinez monument in Balintawak, which was transferred to Vinzons Hall in the University of the Philippines Diliman

campus in 1968. Here, a lone figure stands barefoot with his arms outstretched, mouth open in a silent cry to arms. In one hand, a bolo, in the other, the flag of the Katipunan. He is clothed in red pants and an unbuttoned camisa chino.

This image of Bonifacio would endure in popular consciousness, appearing in even the unlikeliest of places, such as in cigarette boxes.



National Artist for Painting Carlos V. Francisco seemingly strikes a balance between both renditions in his famous mural *Filipino Struggles Through History*, 1964. While the fiery revolutionary in camisa chino and rolled-up red pants resemble the monument that previously stood in Balintawak, he also holds a bolo and a revolver, reflecting the research undertaken by Tolentino.

Amidst the bustling environs of Divisoria in Manila, another side of the President of the Supreme Council is given prominence—poring over a piece of parchment, here is the Bonifacio who wrote impassioned manifestos that rallied the masses. The Katipunan flag waves in the background.



Discrepancies abound even in the commemorative memorabilia released for the Bonifacio centenary in 1963. While the Philippine Postal Corporation evoked the defiant Katipunero of Ramon Martinez’s creation, the BSP chose to follow the serene figure of Tolentino’s monument. Notice that on the stamps marking Bonifacio’s Centenary, he is in what is considered the trademark, though hardly definitive, Katipunero attire; while the coin shows him clad in a suit and tie.



Commemorative memorabilia were likewise released for his death centenary in 1997. The stamps would now feature the various monuments that have been erected to pay tribute to Bonifacio—the calm Bonifacio of Tolentino’s creation, the fiery Bonifacio in Martinez’s sculpture and the pensive Bonifacio that stands in Tutuban.



Written accounts are similarly inconclusive when it comes to the physical characteristics of Bonifacio—none of his contemporaries nor the historians who specialized in the study of the Katipunan are able to provide a concrete description of Bonifacio.

Through the multiple visualizations and renditions of Bonifacio, we may never truly know how he looked. But revolutions are waged not by faces—rather, by the faceless hundreds and thousands who took up arms with the notable and the noted. In death, a definitive image of Bonifacio remains elusive, which presents a concluding irony:

that the man unfortunate in battle, achieved his true glory not through the sword, but the pen, through the manifestos and letters that ignited revolutionary ardor, sustaining the revolution in times of adversity, and, regardless of the eventual means for achieving independence, lives on in the hearts and minds of every Filipino who has read the words of Maypagasa–Bonifacio’s nom-de-guerre, which encapsulated in one word, what he himself sought to represent and inspire in his countrymen.

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- Guillermo E. Tolentino. *Facing History*. Kalipunan ng Sining at Kultura ng Pasig, Inc., 2003. Print.
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