Serious doubts cast on newly emerged cache of HR Ocampo paintings

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“MASCARA”

BE cursed, plunderers and imitators of the work and talent of others.”

Thus wrote the 16th-century German master Albrecht Dürer on his engraving of the Virgin. He was enraged by his numerous imitators who forged his signature on their prints to increase their value.

Although forgery has been in practice since Roman sculptors copied Greek sculptors, it has become extremely big business because of commodification in the modern and contemporary periods.

Coming close on the heels of the discovery of the dubious Vicente Manansala painting slated for auction at Christie’s in Hong Kong, the surprising emergence recently of an alleged cache of HR Ocampo paintings alarmed concerned members of the art community.

HR OCAMPO (1911-1978): He was not particularly prolific so the recent exhibit in Makati of a large collection of works authenticated by his own daughter surprised many, including artist Gig de Pio, who had worked with him.

Even the introductory notes to the catalogue exhibition, written by the dealer, did not assuage wary art-lovers. The notes read:

“It was no less than a miracle that the masterpieces in this exhibit came to our possession in a matter of just one week.

“By some wonderfully mysterious turn of events, a significant number of HR Ocampo’s masterpieces literally ‘flowed’ into our art gallery in so short a time with us not even in active search or fevered pursuit of these works.
“I will never be able to explain how painting… erstwhile in the possession of two unconnected sources would be brought together and be available for the world to see as complete works.”

**An HR Ocampo one-man show?**

The occasion was an exhibit ostensibly held in celebration of the 101 birth anniversary of National Artist Hernando R. Ocampo, who was born in 1911 and who died in 1978.

At a Makati mall, guests were astonished to see a veritable one-man show, displaying works never before seen by the public. The earliest work, “Mother and Child,” is dated 1951, while the rest were works dated in the ’70s.

Nearly a sell-out show (based on the red dots), the works have aroused the suspicion and skepticism of many art-lovers, especially those knowledgeable about the art of Ocampo, whether as fellow artists or collectors.

This despite the fact that each of these works bears a certificate of authenticity signed by Ocampo’s daughter, Norma O. Flores. Her siblings Dante (now deceased), Beatrice and Lorena, have long ago assigned Norma as the sole, legal authenticator of their father’s works.

**Prolific in death**

“CIRCA”

“Unbelievable! HR Ocampo is even more prolific now that he is dead than when he was alive!” remarked Mr. N, a renowned artist, who as a young man had known Ocampo, and had remained a close friend till the master’s death.

He had always regarded Ocampo as a father figure, and had even joined the master in the so-called “interaction” paintings in which on one canvas Ocampo, with one or several other artists, started and completed a painting.

Mr. N, however, would not say in public that the works on exhibit in Makati were fakes. He would, he said, safely state that they were “bad Ocampos,” admitting to his fear of being sued.

Of course, off the record, Mr. N denounces these works as outright fakes.
Breaking the silence

In the article “Breaking the Silence on Fakes,” published in The Art Newspaper, Jack Flam wrote:

“Sharply rising prices and an increasing scarcity of major works have created a rich environment for forgers. These market circumstances have unfortunately coincided with a situation in which scholars and foundations that make decisions about authenticity feel increasingly constrained by legal threats from people who own or are selling fakes.”

Imitating or reproducing any work of fine art with intent to deceive the public or the buyer as to the authenticity of the work is regarded as an act of forgery. So is selling or circulating any work of fine art bearing forged or usurped signatures.

“FIFTY Four J”

Recalled Mr. N: “I remember Ocampo as a slow, methodical painter, such that he could not even gather enough works for a one-man show. In fact, in his lifetime, he only had a couple of solo shows, the rest were in group shows. His paintings took a long time to finish. He had a list of buyers waiting. Once a painting is finished, he would offer it to the first on the list. If the collector did not like it, the painting would be offered to the next in line.”

Method of working

What was so obvious in these paintings is that they were done using a different technique.

Ocampo, together with his friend Cesar Legaspi, worked with the stippling method, in which pure oil pigment is applied in small short touches of the palette knife. In Ocampo’s trademark cellular shapes, each area is characterized by a softly graded shadow, which creates the subtle undulations that nuance his works into dynamic motion.

The late art historian and critic Rod Paras-Perez wrote: “His paintings thus attained a sense of depth without breaking the surface matrix; a sense of a variety of moving shapes without destroying surface serenity of the painting. Everything was locked in place.”

The tight, interlocked relationship of each shape was sensitively studied, such that each shape is an outgrowth of one, in a continuous organic unfolding. Ocampo had, in fact, devised a method of coding his colors by numerals. “Each color had its corresponding number so that as soon as he
finished a composition—which meant properly drawn on his canvas—he envisioned the whole color scheme and indicated the colors, [with numbers] on every shape.”

The Ocampos in the Makati show clearly showed that the canvas surface was slathered with a putty-like material which was then subjected to daubing to produce a consistent texture. In some areas, a thicker variety of texture was applied.

“PRACTICAL Politics”

Possibly, too, a roller, such as that used in painting residence walls, was the instrument. Only when the textures were dried were the cellular shapes delineated, with clearly no observance of Ocampo’s color-coding technique.

Wrong canvas

Gig de Pio, a well-known portrait artist, who prepared all the canvases of Ocampo three years before his death, rejects the canvases of these newly emerged Ocampos.

Says De Pio: “For his oil paintings, we used the US-brand canvases like Frederick’s. For the acrylics, the local canvas. The canvas was always wrapped on a stretcher, a bastidor, stretched tight as a drum. I never did a canvas wrapped on ¼ plywood and stapled on the side, visible to eye.” This was the canvas used in the show. Why was the canvas stapled on the side? “Because if you stapled at the back, tatagos, it will penetrate through the thin plywood.”

When Ocampo died, De Pio gathered all the remaining canvases and inscribed on them the year of their preparation, so that in case they were used by others, no one could claim the paintings were done by Ocampo.

‘Caveat emptor’

“Mother and Child”
De Pio was, in fact, consulted by the dealer, to whom he categorically said: “These are fakes.”

Karen Flores, daughter of Norma Ocampo and former director of CCP Visual Arts, was also consulted. She had reportedly told the dealer: “In truth, I am not confident of these works.” (While the reader might have expected a more decisive statement from a respected artist like Karen, it is likely she has found herself in a bind, being the daughter of the official authenticator.)

The dealer, however, having already secured the authentication papers signed by Norma Ocampo, disregarded any contrary opinion and proceeded with the show, even printing a full-color glossy catalogue. She said that without Norma’s permission she would not have exhibited these works.

De Pio himself contends that the dealer may be a victim herself, having acquired these works, as she recounted, from previous collectors. The principle of “Caveat emptor” (Let the buyer beware), however, applies to all and exempts no one.

The two Mr. Ocampos

What emerges from the recollection of former associates and the newly “found” works are two differing portraits of Ocampo as an artist. The first is an Ocampo who was an intellectual in his approach to his art. He was famous for endorsing his principle of “unity, coherence, emphasis,” which was the guiding intelligence behind his compositions.

“HR Ocampo’s interlocked shapes fluctuating in space created a strong sense of unity and cohesion. But he needed accents—or what he called ‘emphasis’—to satisfy relational approach to composition. It was a compositional mode anchored on the traditional concept of dominance and subordination of visual elements” (R.P. Perez).

Eminent art critic Eric Torres observed: “What immediately grabs one’s attention is the harmony and balance of the whole. The subtle modulation of tone from one section to the next, the polyrhythmic flow of forms and the variety of textures produced by his palette knife, all add up to a luminous, glowing illusion of exuberant life.”

Cannibalization

The other Ocampo is a master at cannibalizing his past works. Among several glaring examples is a Mother and Child, dated 1951, copied from a 1950 Mother and Child, (appearing on p.30 of the book “HR Ocampo: The Artist as Filipino,” Heritage Publishing).

Another is from p.171, with the caption “A circa 1958 drawing,” which now surfaces as a mirror image, and now bears the curious title “Circa 1950s.” Ocampo’s 1969 AAP Grand Prize-winning work, titled “Circe” (sometimes mislabeled “Circle”) on p.93, resurrects as “Family,” dated 1976.

By 1977 and 1978, the year Ocampo died, the artist’s trademark tightly knit, interlocked cell shapes had already evolved into loose, tentacular forms, spreading out like elongated fingers in several directions. This is most manifest in Ocampo’s long-running “Revelation” series, which, with the characteristic use of alphabetically counting his works, reaches up to “W.”

Yet, in this show, we see a 1978 “Promised Land,” like a puzzling throwback, an atavistic reversion to an earlier style.

Mirror-image

Straining the viewer’s credibility is the dealer’s claim that two works dated 1971, titled “Song for April” I and “Song for April” II, like long-lost separated identical twins and each a mirror image of
the other, arrived in her gallery “in a matter of just one week,” brought by the two collectors who were unknown to each other.

How do we explain then that on p.63, there is a “Song for April,” also dated 1971, in a private collection?

It is, in fact, the original, thus the “mother” of the recovered twin paintings. But since the photograph is in black-and-white, there is no telling if the “twins” share the same chromatic DNA as the mother.

More: The so-called “Interlocked” series 1-3 all dated 1971, is each a quadrant of what constitutes the whole of the 1954 “Fifty Four J,” attributed on p.177 as being in the collection of a National Artist but is actually now in the collection of a major bank.


Ocampo, who took great pride on his relentless ability to create multifarious organic forms, was never known to have indulged in recycling his works.

**National Museum verdict**

To show her good faith, the dealer has agreed to have these works examined and scientifically tested by the National Museum.

Thus the entire artistic community—indeed, the whole country, for these works are the purported legacy of a National Artist—now awaits the verdict of the National Museum.

Editor’s note: More than a month after the exhibit, the works have yet to be submitted to the National Museum for laboratory tests.

Photos from the book “HR Ocampo: The Artist as Filipino” and Catalog 101 Years.
