

Early Works

While Dominic Rubio demonstrates an aesthetic sensibility that is unique in his own way, the late art critic Reuben Caete once dubbed him "the modern-day Damian Domingo." This criticism bears some critical unpacking should we establish the complexities between genre and neo-genre.

Damian Domingo, one of the most prominent artists of his time, was the first director of the Art Academy in Manila, created in 1821 by the Economic Society of the Friends of the Country. While the school was originally established to train Spaniards in the arts, Domingo admitted indios, thus passing on formal academic procedures and theories to a new generation of local artists. Domingo's nomination as director marked a significant departure in the arts and cultural authority of the nineteenth century: he had no formal academic training in art, either locally or overseas. Even so, as the academy's single director and professor, he was, in effect, *the Academia*.

Many foreigners traveled and settled in colonial territories during the 19th century, and those who did would buy illustrations, prints, drawings, and paintings of the world beyond to send back home as souvenirs, or to adorn many houses of rising middle and upper class families. Filipino and Chinese watercolor artists developed hand-drawn depictions of what the eye could see around them. Domingo was known for *miniaturismo*, or tiny miniatures on ivory or tin, re-presenting not only the resemblance of his human subject, but also the precise details of clothes and decoration. He is most known for his *Album de trajes*, which are collections of hand-painted images of Filipinos in various costumes. These albums primarily capture vignettes of the social and cultural customs of their era. However, they also signify a notable transformation in the style and purpose of Philippine art.

In the past, religious art was predominantly created through church commissions and religious patronage. Domingo and the artists who followed him, on the other hand, ventured into depicting more worldly subjects, such as scientific illustrations, portraits of the common folk, landscapes, and everyday life scenes. In this shift in artistic sensibility, the artist represents numerous landscapes and landmarks, Philippine customs, persons in appropriate clothing, people from various trades and commerce, and the natural richness of nature. The majority of these images are

documentations of citizens of the Philippine archipelago of various races, classes, and social standing, whether they be the *ilustrado* or *comprador* class, merchants, farm workers, or rural folk.

Rubio's works, with a stylistic singleness already recognized by many in the art world, pay homage to the *costumbrista* tradition of illustrations and literature in Philippine history, showing local or regional customs, scenes, or kinds. Rubio focuses on the *tipos del país* genre, which had been popularized by artists such as José Honorato Lozano, Justiniano Asuncion, and Damian Domingo. Rubio's distinctive contemporizations of turn-of-the-century Filipino figures, with elongated necks dressed in period costume become appealing reimaginings of a centuries-old visual archetypal legacy. The *tipos del país*, which are originally encyclopedic paintings portraying and characterizing the different types of individuals that lived in the colony, have evolved in Rubio's hand into lovable gestures for the Filipino folk.

Early in his career, the artist experimented with diverse subjects such as landscape, naturalism, and surrealism. He discovered references in old Filipiniana books, photos of Old Manila and colonial Philippines—nostalgic memories of a distant past that resonated with him—and he began to work on re-presenting these with a sensibility inspired by heritage, with careful historical accuracy to period details, as well as an enlivened sense of nostalgia for the legacy of the past and its reverberations to the present.

Rubio's characteristic aesthetic predilections are already visible in several of his early paintings: the characters are front and center, their body morphology lengthened and made central, representing a sense of regality and height. The surrounding scenery is minimized and in depth of focus, hinting merely at a sense of locale and time, but all the while familiar to the Filipino memory. In a visual sense, a block of negative space depicted in brilliant monochrome color emphasizes the subjects and their lives and customs, but it also adds a surrealistic bent that locates these events not in true history, but in an invocation of memory.

The textural quality of Rubio's brushwork is one notable variation between his early and more current works. The artist is increasingly concerned with achieving cleaner details and polished linear forms in his more recent paintings. The older pieces have less light and more shadow, as seen by

the strong shadings of faces, clothing, and landscape details. This seemingly raw quality emphasizes the artist's hand, whose energetic presence pervades his early pieces. In these artworks, Rubio portrays his subjects with a lack of charming facial expressions. Instead, he meticulously crafts their distinctive and expressive identities. For instance, there's a smoking man who holds a rooster while conveying some solemn news to two friends. There's also a woman with a basket and parasol, a man with an oar and his delicate pet dog, and a woman selling her straw mat, all appearing restless and ready to settle as the day comes to a close. Moreover, a man and woman in a romantic relationship seem uneasy, while two other women seem to be gesturing uncertainty towards the couple. Lastly, a man dolefully guides his wife and son on a horse as they head for a long walk home after a tiring day in the field.

Rubio's initial foray into a new genre is truly remarkable, as it goes beyond mere depictions of the country's people, their clothing, and traditions: these early works delve deep into their social standing, the challenges they face, their resilience, and their aspirations for the future, which are subtly hinted at in their expressive portraiture. While Rubio's recent work may feature more endearing characters, we must appreciate the profound care the artist bestowed upon his subjects in his early creations.

These characters are more than stereotypes; they are people who deserve to be noticed and heard. Much like Domingo's did centuries before, Rubio's dedication to portraying the secular aspects of people's lives—their tales, recollections, and ambitions for a better way of life in the country, all inscribed on their faces—makes ripples in the way we might see and appreciate art and history.

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Old Manila

The unique geographical position of our nation has always played a pivotal role in bolstering its commercial and industrial progress, since history. Dating as far back as the 9th century, vibrant trade with neighboring countries like China and India was already thriving across our local islands, underscoring our strong trade relationships in the transpacific. While the expansive stretch of ocean enveloping our seven thousand islands might initially seem to create divisions among the lands, in reality, these water bodies are the vital conduits, enabling the uninterrupted flow of trade between different regions. The task of transporting goods, both domestically and internationally, would have posed formidable challenges without the presence of these interconnected water routes.

During the peak of the Galleon Trade in 1565, Manila rose to global prominence as a major port, positioned as a crucial hub for commerce between China and Europe. As a Spanish colony, Manila's distinct location made it a pivotal stopover for the exchange of valuable commodities from countries such as China, India, and the Americas in return for Mexican silver. Galleons would regularly transport coveted goods like silk, ceramics, rugs, ivory, pearls, and seashells to Acapulco on an annual basis, yielding profits that would change the economy completely. In fact, until 1815, this trade served as the primary source of livelihood for the settlers involved in its operations.

The Galleon Trade consolidated its role as a vital global trade center, shaping its trajectory for years to come. Towards the end of it in 1854, the Philippines opened up to global trade: industries as far as Europe began exporting more unique items, whucg affluent families in coastal cities began acquiring to amass a varied assortment of overseas things. Locals now had access to high quality ceramic and porcelain vessels, silver and gold-plated dinnerware, adorned and inlaid wooden furniture, fashionable trinkets and accessories of semi-precious stones, ornate oil paintings, bronze and marble sculptures and decor, crystal and glass chandeliers, and many other items. Manila would earn the moniker "Little Venice" as the commercial and business core of Spanish Manila prospered over a broad boulevard north of the Pasig River, embracing places such as Binondo, Santa Cruz, and Quiapo. Many merchants and businesses built themselves along these avenues, with Escolta in particular serving as the city's busy commercial hub.

In Escolta, there were lines of commercial establishments and huge bazaars with all kinds of commodities, wares, and services. With ornate colonial-era buildings, it was the epicenter of trade, fashion, and entertainment, teeming with elegant shops, theaters, and grand promenades where the elite and socialites gathered to see and be seen.

Rubio's paintings reimagining Old Manila exude the vibrancy of this rich history. His dioramic portrayals of the busy towns and cities teem with scenes of tradesmen and their customers joyfully immersed in commercial transactions, vendors proudly displaying their merchandise, and buyers showcasing their purchases in the bustling urban centers and towns.

An intriguing artistic choice evident in his portrayals is his representation of the town's diverse populace. In commercial cities like Old Manila, the mid-1800s saw a mosaic of individuals from various ethnicities, social standings, and backgrounds: Spanish, Chinese, Indian, Portuguese, American, British, German, and Japanese entrepreneurs go about their daily commute to work on foot, bicycles, or horseback, or engage in interactions with colleagues, traders, customers, families, and the lively populace.

With Rubio's careful bringing together of the diverse persons that built the old city, one might contemplate the incredible journeys our riches undertook to reach these destinations: skilled artisans would have crafted ceramics in rustic kilns in China, while harvesters and hand-weavers in the Middle East meticulously produced textiles and dyes for fashionable clothing, tapestries, and carpets. Meanwhile, furniture makers, carpenters, and European studios intricately assembled and adorned items like writing desks, and silver-laid woodwork. Many of these objects embarked on perilous journeys over the oceans, to be eventually shared to Filipinos half a world over.

If we stop to think about it, the relationships we forge makes our supposed separation from foreign neighbors seem so little. Until the onset of the Second World War, Escolta retained its status as the primary commercial and retail hub of Manila, however, experienced a decline during the post-war reconstruction after the Battle for Manila in 1945. By the 1950s, Makati had emerged as the new epicenter of business and commerce in Manila. The artist's depictions of the old city thus stand as a tribute to the enduring relationships among diverse international cultures that played a pivotal role

in shaping Manila's formation of the city. The artworks resonate with the profound influence the diverse persons and their cultures have had on the city's rich and continually evolving heritage.

Rubio acknowledges the contributions of diversity in the community to a city's history. In the midst of the swift urban transformations today, marked by towering skyscrapers and thriving multi-national companies which stand as contenders in the globalized economy, the artist who reminisces about the past looks forward with optimism: believing that prosperity can be found in building affinities.

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Transportation

In the remarkable Manunggul Cave atop Lipuun Point in Palawan, a striking secondary burial jar, now recognized as a national cultural treasure, was unearthed in 1964. The Manunggul Jar featured an exceptional running scrolls set within incised lines in red hematite, but its cover boasted a distinctive design. Resembling a boat, two figures are depicted, one with crossed arms over the chest, and the other with an oar. It is a vessel for the deceased on their journey to the afterlife, guided by a boatman through a sea adorned with waves of red hematite—a vessel for the departed bound for another realm.

In previous epochs, ancient peoples migrated from land to land as hunter-gatherers, occupying caves only temporarily until the call of survival beckoned them to continue their great migrations. The ancient peoples did not settle to cultivate and create villages until agriculture was developed. People converted to farming at various dates and locations around the world between 8500 and 2500 AD. Humanity will never be the same again after the ancient peoples learnt to domesticate fauna such as water buffaloes, and horses in other parts of the planet, for utilitarian needs such as transportation.

Fast forward to the 19th century, in the nineteenth century, in the Philippines, the Compañía de los Tranvías de Filipinas (Philippine Streetcar Company) led by Jacobo Zobel y Zangroniz and Adolfo Bayo obtained a government concession authorizing the firm to consult and run the streetcar lines. Prior to this investment, residents of Old Manila and the Spanish colony relied on caretelas, carretones, and calesas as their major form of public transportation throughout the city and its suburbs. The advent of horse-drawn streetcars on steel tracks marked a significant shift in the Philippines' industrialization.

According to records, this streetcar system cost over 1,200,000 pesetas and connected Intramuros, Binondo, Tondo, Malabon, and Sampaloc. With a capacity of 20 passengers, 12 sitting in benches with sides and 8 strap hangers for standing passengers, the tranvia was such a hit that it was frequently overcrowded during peak hours, sometimes carrying a full load. The tranvia system would pave the way for the economic industrialisation of Old Manila, increasing the efficiency and

convenience of a variety of transit, freight, leisure, and tourism businesses and professions. Not only that, but owning a method of transportation was a status symbol, having the ability to acquire and become mobile in an increasingly growing city.

However, the tranvia operations were halted due to the Philippine Revolution and the Filipino–American War. By 1902, the franchise had been sold to the Manila Electric and Railway Company (MERALCO), and the city and its roadways were damaged during WWII. From the 1970s and 1980s to the present, PUJs and PUBs dominated highways and major urban thoroughfares in the Philippines, transforming them into motorized tricycles. The trike progressively replaced the pedicabs, and horse–drawn calesas would become a thing of the past, reserved solely for tourism nostalgia.

Rubio's paintings are rich in this intricate and colorful history of mobility. Rubio's paintings representing many locals in various equipment and modes of movement are a staunch picture of a nation's industrial progress. Individuals, couples, and families are transported from town to town in horse or carabao–drawn calesas in his bright dioramic works. We uncover the forerunner to modern jeepneys, transporting a large group of travelers to their daily destinations. Adults and children ride various types of bicycles, and a woman rides a rickshaw drawn by a local serviceman. Private autos and motorcycles are also seen traveling vast distances in significantly less time.

In one painting, a mother, father, and son row in a river boat, evoking the historical memories of water transportation that has long connected foreign traders and local settlers to the rest of the globe over a millennium ago. When we look back at our history of mobility as a human society, we can make many important observations. For one, human mobility was both instinctive and necessary for our species' survival on the planet. Only when we find comfort, resources, and livelihood does a settlement become a home.

Reflecting on the past, present, and future, and using the growth of our mobile inventions as our anchor, we might consider what it means to be grounded in an ever–changing world where nothing is permanent. As we find spaces and places to live and grow, we remember that everything and everyone passes. Like the manunggul jar, we are simply transported from one world to another in

such vessels. Mobility, as a transition, is simply another location to arrive at. Rubio's descriptions of transportation are thus more than just a chronicle of industry and technology, but also a very spiritual and existential reality.

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Churches

At best, a sacred site provides a space for its community of believers to practice their faith and devotion, where they can receive moral guidance and inspiration from God. Religious practitioners and devotees can express their common vocation here: to assist the faithful, their neighbors, and many others whose lives can be impacted by the direct experience of a spiritual life. Indeed, the church, in this case the Catholic Church, can act as a spiritual stabilizer in the Philippines.

In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer under the banner of the Spanish crown, and his emaciated crew, after enduring over a year at sea, eventually dropped anchor at Suluan and proceeded to Limasawa. There, they were warmly received, and on Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521, Fr. Pedro de Valderrama officiated the very first mass in the Philippines, marking a pivotal moment in the nation's history.

It is detailed by many historians that Spain intended to propagate its religion and colony in the Philippines. The subsequent process of Christianization and colonization, spanning over three centuries, was marked by varying degrees of intensity, including the use of force, coercion, and voluntary conversion. This period witnessed conflicts fought in the name of religion, the assimilation of Spanish customs into local economic, social, political, and cultural practices, and the vilification of the sophisticated pre-colonial spiritual traditions, which encompassed Hindu-Buddhist practices, animism, and polytheism. The popularization of Sunday mass, which peaked in the 19th century Philippines, is a testament to the success of this centuries-worth Christianization.

Fast forward to the present day, the Philippines stands as a testament to the enduring influence of that complex historical period. In 2021, the country commemorated *Five Hundred Years of Christianity in the Philippines*. A report from the CICM Missionaries for this momentous anniversary detailed that the Philippines bears the distinction of being the "world's third-largest local church," trailing only behind Brazil and Mexico. An astounding 82.9% of its population, which has surpassed the 100 million mark, identify as Roman Catholics. Even more remarkable is that a significant 60% of Asia's 120 million Catholics proudly claim Filipino heritage, cementing the Philippines on the global religious landscape.

Stepping into the evocative oeuvre of Filipino artist Dominic Rubio, one is transported to a time when Spanish colonial influence carved the intricate and complex histories of churches into the archipelago's soul. Amidst the vivid portrayals of lively characters, a whimsical menagerie, and the stylistic contemporization of the archetypal people types of 19th-century Philippines, one discovers the majestic presence of churches gracing the backdrop of Rubio's dioramic compositions.

In his reimaginings of the past, families take leisurely afternoon strolls on Sundays, which typically begin with the solemnity of mass, followed by a leisurely walk where people would meet up with friends, exchange local stories, and proudly display their finest attire and jewelry. Men wear *barong Tagalog* shirts, imported top hats or *salakots*, sometimes with silk or silver embellishments. Women on the other hand, dazzled in gorgeous *baro't saya* ensembles, with their delicate fans or prayer books in hand, and an array of fine jewelry, including intricate hairpins, earrings, and gracefully hanging from their necks, sacred scapulars or *tamburins*.

And in the majority of these works, the artist deliberately depicts churches that are no larger than his subjects: the archetypal Filipino as family—courting couples, mothers and fathers, their children, perhaps as a gesture that recognizes that the role of the church in the immediate everyday life supersedes its history and foundations: God and the divine life permeate ordinary people's lives—merchants and vendors, mothers and fathers, and innocent youngsters whose spiritual experiences spill over outside church walls into their humility, unadulterated simplicity, hopeful, and child-like view of the world.

More than half a millennium ago, when Magellan and his starved crew arrived at Suluan, they were not greeted by uncivilized, godless locals. Accustomed to welcoming traders to their shores, these inhabitants extended offerings of fish, coconuts, palm wine, and even a place to stay. It must have been a revelation for them to discover the profound spirituality and innate generosity within the simple hearts of the natives, as they demonstrated the depth of their humanity.

Since this initial encounter, thousands of churches have been built faithfully in the center of towns, signifying them as anchors of lives that surround it. Thus, the sacred space serves as the heart of

society where devotees and spiritual seekers remember and reconcile their everyday lives with the higher purpose and mission revealed to them by God. In his works, Rubio exposes a similar insight: at best, the church is the people in and of itself.

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China Town

Ethnic Han Chinese sailed around the Philippine Islands from the 9th century onward and frequently interacted with the local Austronesian people. Since then, when the Chinese came in their junks to trade, they brought with them various ceramic items like jars, plates, bowls, and saucers, along with commodities such as tea and silk. These goods were typically imported in large quantities by foreign merchants and stored in groups, often in bigger containers. In exchange, they received forest products, wax, pearls, areca nuts, tortoise shells, and various other items.

The Chinese were intelligent marketers since those early days. Evidenced by some unearthed ceramics from this time, they had brought vessels in the form of *balimbing* or starfruit, or pourers in the shape of water buffaloes—catering to their Southeast market. Trade connections and specifications of this kind were carried out on a regular and seasonal basis, eventually forming a broader marketing network that opened the way for the Galleon Trade.

However, by 1710, Chinese settlers would outnumber Spaniards in the Philippines, causing the Spaniards to be wary. Indeed, the Spanish had been suspicious of Chinese presence in the province since the Chinese pirate Limahong's attack on Manila in 1574, as well as numerous other Chinese revolts in the 17th century. According to statistics, immigration was limited to 6,000 people in the Philippines, but this figure grew to 20,000, with half of them residing in or around Manila, jeopardizing the security of the Spanish colony. Nonetheless, the Spaniards required their products and services. The Chinese were skilled at commerce, operating numerous shops and stalls and selling items from China, Japan, India, and Europe, as well as a variety of services such as gold and silver smithies, woodcarving, transportation, haircuts, and even ear-cleaning. As a result, the Parian was established.

Out of concern that the Chinese might have a negative influence on the local population, they were relocated to the Pariancillos district outside the walls of Intramuros. Chinese individuals who converted to Catholicism were allowed to establish residences in places like Cavite, Laguna, Bulacan, Pampanga, Ilocos, Cebu, and Naga, but only in areas similar to the Parian. While the

Parian was designated for their settlement, those who had embraced Catholicism and the mixed-race Chinese were housed separately in spacious Binondo residences. Binondo, established in 1594 within Manila, is widely recognized as the world's oldest Chinatown, and in 1596, Spanish Dominican priests founded Binondo Church and continued to convert more of its residents to Catholicism.

Escolta Street in Binondo would become the principal center of business and finance in colonial Manila by the late nineteenth century. Locals and tourists alike would congregate here to hunt for items ranging from souvenirs and traditional herbs, to clothes and jewelry. Dishes like dumplings, pancit, lumpia, hopia, and siopao were among the Chinese-Filipino favorites available at restaurants and food stalls on Ongpin and Carvajal streets.

Rubio's vibrant paintings bring the oldest Chinatown to life, its streets and alleys brimming with colorful history and exciting tales of its inhabitants. In his works, a community of Chinese and Filipinos engage in everyday quotidian activity: working vendors and merchants displaying their wares, service providers and laborers of all kinds, as well as men and women in traditional attire, children at play, a family, mother and child, and more. Rubio's reimaginings of this historical group however, go beyond simple depictions of Chinoy people types, to highlight their shared memories.

Throughout history and into the present, the Chinese and Chinoy communities have upheld certain ideals, a monument to their rich tradition in trade and commerce throughout the country and their commitment to living meaningful lives despite difficulty. Individuals working hard, transporting heavy cargo from the bay to the heart of the city, barbers tending to their clients in the midst of the bustling streets, or rickshaw pullers negotiating the urban turmoil, all exhibit unflinching perseverance. There is a remarkable sense of humility in Rubio's photographs of regular individuals engaged in their daily activities, grasping their basic bowls and chopsticks, a simplicity that does not lessen their effectiveness in accomplishing their tasks. Furthermore, we see a great commitment to filial piety in the countless artworks depicting couples, mothers with their children, or entire families, as mothers educate their offspring towards becoming moral members of society while cherishing the delights of childhood play.

In these many faces, Rubio's portraits of the Chinese and Chinoy communities reflect a careful understanding of their historical struggles and achievements, as well as the ideals and attributes that drive their achievements. Today, as we pay tribute to the people who have been our close collaborators in economic, industrial, and cultural histories for millennia and more, we see Chinatown not as a site, but as a shared community. In the end, the artist's effort to capture the substance of these communities' experiences offers light on the persistent principles that drive their ability to endure and prosper, providing us with insight into the very essence of a culture.

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