THE ZOBEL NEXUS

Patrick D. Flores
Department of Art Studies
University of the Philippines
patrickdflores@gmail.com

Abstract
Fernando Zobel is an important figure in Philippine art history. His influence is wide and deep, from art making to formation of taste and to the production of discourse on iconography and identity. This essay focuses on his role in generating critical texts on the history of art in the Philippines, initiating a much-needed discussion on the categories of form, the cultural context of style, and the criteria for evaluating the value of objects. As a collector and connoisseur, Zobel endeavored to significantly set the terms with which the history of colonial and modern art would be written. Such an effort deserves to be revisited and subjected to critique, with the view of tracing the genealogy of the discourse of art history and prospecting new perspectives on the historiography of the colonial and the modern. Zobel is an exemplary personage in this regard because he was a polytropic agent. He made art, collected it, and historicized it. It finally offers analysis, too, of the political economy underlying this discourse; Zobel belonged to an economically ascendant clan in the country, created a coterie of taste makers, and pursued an “internationalist” ideal in the quest for modernism. Across the different roles that Zobel played may be discerned important aspects of consciousness, or better still, ciphers of the identity-effect: the “colonial,” the “Filipino,” the “modern,” and “class.”

Keywords
modern, collecting, art history, colonial art, iconography, Philippine art

About the Author
Patrick D. Flores is Professor of Art Studies at the Department of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines, which he chaired from 1997 to 2003, and Curator of the Vargas Museum in Manila. He is Adjunct Curator at the National Art Gallery, Singapore. He was one of the curators of Under Construction: New Dimensions in Asian Art in 2000 and the Gwangju Biennale (Position Papers) in 2008. He was a Visiting Fellow at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1999 and an Asian Public Intellectuals Fellow in 2004. Among his publications are Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art (1999); Remarkable Collection: Art, History, and the National Museum (2006);
and Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia (2008). He was a grantee of the Asian Cultural Council (2010) and a member of the Advisory Board of the exhibition The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989 (2011) organized by the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. He was also a member of the Guggenheim Museum’s Asian Art Council (2011). He co-edited the Southeast Asian issue with Joan Kee for Third Text (2011). He convened in 2013 on behalf of the Clark Institute and the Department of Art Studies of the University of the Philippines the conference “Histories of Art History in Southeast Asia” in Manila. He was a Guest Scholar of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2014.
The Zobel Nexus

The centrality of Fernando Zobel de Ayala y Montojo in modern art history proves to be a tricky affair. If we are to view him beyond his stature as an artist and situate him in the larger context of the making of modernity, we will realize in the long haul that the production of “art” is inevitably bound to the conceiving of “culture.” A post-colony like the Philippines aspires to this technology of distinction because it needs a certain degree of independence and autonomy, a freedom from being inauthentic. Perhaps, we spare no imprudence to hazard that the said centrality of Zobel stems from the class position his clan occupies in Philippine society, sustained by a political economy that has been described to this day as “neo-colonial” and with which that fraught centrality is complicit. Thus, the artist’s biography becomes critical in locating his part in the production of “art” that is the production of a material condition as well, the very means of being conscious of a self in the social world through economic and cultural capital. If we are committed to understanding the relationship between art and society, this concatenation of ties is inevitable.1

Zobel’s influence is largely rendered in his efforts to amass, specifically in the trade of museology and tangentially in the economy, manifested in his significant contributions in the formation of modern art collections in the country through the Ateneo Art Gallery, the Ayala Museum, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines; and in Spain through the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca. Initial reflections on this dynamic have been attempted2, and a volume on Zobel deserves a lively and candid conversation on his role in writing the narrative of the history of art in the Philippines.3 This sphere of authority, however, is not solely confined to “institutions”; rather, it extends to the invention of consciousness: Zobel was also pedagogue and historian of art.4

This essay focuses on the kind of mentality that Zobel brought into the discourse of culture through what Michael Baxandall has so acutely termed the “period eye.” Zobel demonstrated this period eye through three intertwined practices: connoisseurship, collecting, and coterie making. Across these three categories are important aspects of consciousness, or better still, ciphers of the identity-effect: the “colonial,” the “Filipino,” the “modern,” and “class.”

THE COLONIAL AS FILIPINO

In 1963, Zobel wrote and illustrated the book Philippine Religious Imagery, casting himself in his foreword as a frontiersman, having staked out the ground in an earlier monograph entitled “Philippine Colonial Sculpture.” Both ventures were published by the Jesuit university, Ateneo de Manila. While Zobel cautions...
that his is not a “history of Philippine imagery nor is it an attempt at definitive scholarship,” he nevertheless advances his claim as an authority on the subject of the Hispanic santos and, more importantly, a connoisseur of its prized form: he presents “a selected group of these objects as works of art...the profound beauty of the finest pieces has been overlooked...in the fever of collecting” (Philippine Religious Imagery 5-6). The phrase “objects as works of art” enables Zobel to posture as an arbiter of things, a high priest in a temple in which things are consecrated as art according to his scripture; and prior to his benediction, these objects were just objects. A honed acumen, the Berensonian long intimacy with material, was thus required to pass judgment on banality, everyday-ness, and functionality and elevate them to the lofty level of art. Modernity demands such rite of passage and Zobel was well versed in the sacraments.

Zobel’s endeavor was to propose a typology of form of colonial sculpture, rounding out its constitution in terms of artistic biography, material, and style. He introduced a seminal taxonomy that delineated between the popular, the classical, and the ornate in Philippine statuary. Since his approach was largely connoisseurial, he was attentive to both surface and facture as well as to artistic agency. Towards this end, he documented the artifacts through photography and illustration and was able to track down these “finest pieces” in public and private collections and their collectors. In so doing, he began the process of preparing an initial registry of colonial sculpture in the Philippines and those who own them. Only someone like Zobel who had the cultural capital and habitus, the proper social and intellectual pedigree, as well as access to the elite and the academe, could have embarked on a quest of this scope. A graduate from Harvard and Rhode Island School of Design, antiquarian, bibliophile, rariora specialist, philatelist, patron, member of the Spanish academy, polyglot, and amateur archaeologist, he was quite a formidable force.

Let us walk through Zobel’s ways of describing the colonial:

With regard to the popular, he contends, “as its name implies, the popular style is that of relatively uneducated, unsophisticated painters and sculptors…it includes much work by non-professional artists – private individuals who, needing an image for their house, went right ahead and made one” (26). It could be stated that this style is largely devotional, catechetical in nature, and idiosyncratic. Being incipient, it is also a testament to personal faith within a domestic sphere. Zobel refines the character of the popular by identifying certain characteristics:
generally correct and emphatic iconography reduced to barest essentials, faulty and highly formalized anatomy, a tendency to compose symmetrically and within the limitations imposed by the easiest materials to acquire and use, a general awkwardness of technique balanced by exuberance of color and a wealth of detail; finally, anachronisms in feature, costume, and ornament with a tendency to reflect the familiar features of every-day life whenever traditional iconography permits. (26)

In relation to these attributes, Zobel concludes that the makers of the popular lacked skill and were prevented from imitating models with acceptable fidelity; they were likewise predisposed to improvise and create confusion: “For instance, the wooded columns that support the choir of the Morong church end with animal heads. Nobody seems to agree whether the heads are meant to represent wild boars or snakes” (26). From this iconographic gamut, Zobel carves out the Philippine palette, “the wild color schemes...the use of maximum intensities, a generally warm range, deliberately violent clashes of complementaries and a unique insistence on purples as well as a very high proportion of yellow in the reds and greens” (27). He is led to suspect that this is a “typically ‘Philippine color scheme,’ one which unconsciously reflects the peculiar glare of Philippine light and the astonishing chromatic brilliance of the Philippine landscape, a brilliance, normally obscured by glare, that registers only when the sky is overcast” (27). At this point, Zobel makes the leap to inscribe in style an identity that cuts across modes of Philippine form making: “Quite independently, it is used traditionally by the Moro and Bajaw [spelling in original] peoples, and it reappears in the works of such modern Philippine painters as H.R. Ocampo, Vicente Manansala, Manuel Rodriguez and others, constituting the principal common link between their varied styles” (27). Here, iconography ratifies “typicality,” a procedure that confers on the popular style a particularity that is not only universally Filipino but is also cogent and survives mere quaintness: “Images in the popular style on the whole combine vaguely oriental figures and proportions, Spanish iconography, a naïve approach and strikingly original color to produce a unique and surprisingly powerful art form” (28-29).

The popular is distinguished from the classical in some biological progression from emergence to demise. This idea of the classical, however, does not stem from art history. For Zobel, classical statuary is like classical architecture. According to him, “it is essentially derivative. Its craftsmen had enough skill to preserve much of the flavour of Spanish and Latin-American models and these models range in style from the late renaissance to the rococo, though baroque predominates” (29). He further notes a strong Chinese influence, “particularly in the use of decorative motifs and, more subtly, in such things as cast of features, anatomical proportions, use of drapery, and human stance” (29). That being said, Zobel is moved to assert a stylistic element that may be considered “purely Filipino;” something that is so ineffable that he could not describe it with confidence (29). But he is certain of
this: the classical style is the “typical' Philippine colonial style,” owing to its volume, longevity, and the fact that “most of the finest work produced falls within its boundaries” (31). The Filipino eludes an impeccable and transcendent Zobel who can only feel it.

Finally, the ornate style in Zobel's estimation is the “degeneration” of the classical, confirming the linear logic of the history from birth to maturation to decay. The decline is traced to excess, “an elaborate development” in which “a heavy element of Spanish baroque and romantic ‘realism’ has been added” (32). He continues: “The simple vigour and directness of both the popular and the classical styles yield to a desire for richness of material, realistic detail, and a certain theatrical flavour. Ornate statues – for the ornate essentially applies to sculpture – seem more like expensive dolls than religious images” (32). While sounding quite secure about his judgment on the ornate, Zobel expresses a conflicted sentiment, saying that it is at once complex and insipid: “Although fussy in effect, ornate ivories have many original qualities and pose interesting aesthetic problems. I confess that I find ornate wooden figures very dull. The skill of the sculptors in disguising their materials and in copying second-rate models is complete” (33). This seems to be an indictment of both dexterity and sincerity of the makers of the ornate, denying them of prowess, which was ceded earlier to the makers of the popular and the classical. From this sequence of stylistic turns, we can say that Zobel’s notion of the Filipino is contingent on the ability of the makers to partake of the Spanish template and to imitate within proportion, portraying them as thoughtful imitators, as if they were conscious of imitating and imitating appropriately.

The art historian of the colonial period Santiago Pilar acknowledges Zobel’s embryonic project on typology, except for an important cavil. Pilar argues that since Zobel was working mainly with pieces dating to the nineteenth century, “what he perceived as classical or ornate simply originated from the individual sensibilities of the artists who made them, but these individuals were similarly working along a medieval naturalistic mode” (Harvest of Saints 45). Spinning off Zobel’s loom, Pilar weaves his own strands of colonial style: the proselyte, the formal, and the naturalistic (45). In another essay, he further refines the colonial style by way of the Bohol School, which he fleshes out by attributing works to nameless artists whom he calls “masters,” based on their signature strokes; and they had the following appellations: Guanyin, 1830, Chiseled Nose, Raised Eyebrows, Round Faces, alongside the only named artisan, Liberato Gatchalian (“The Icon Painting Tradition” 137-146). Without a doubt, the typologies of Zobel and Pilar deserve further analysis in the continuing analysis of the Philippine colonial form.

It is not precipitate to point out that both strategies may be read as allegories of colonization, beginning with innocence, terracing into cultivation, and languishing
as decadence. It is sufficient at this point to say that these attempts at iconographic explications lay the predicate for a limited consideration of form and may, in fact, be prone to the perils of typification. And a relevant signal in this discussion may be Pál Keleman himself, the art historian of the ancient and Hispanic Americas whom Zobel and Pilar reference and who would surface the interesting phrase “earthquake baroque” to foreground the hybridity of Philippine architecture. Keleman had always tilted towards the concept of admixture in his construal of the colonial. In fact, in his prefatory remarks about the Philippine art in the colonial period, he writes that the sources of the Philippine style were plural in comparison with those in the Americas. For instance, the friars who taught natives “colonial art” came from different countries; when the Jesuits were expelled in 1768, the list included “Germans, Austrians, Bohemians, Italian, Swiss, Belgians, Dutch, French Catalans, French Basques, Sardinians, and even Greeks. All these diluted the taste of the Spanish colony and brought with them the preferences and traditions of their native lands” (Kelemen 338). Furthermore, as far as the iconography of religious personas was concerned, the repertory was not confined to saints popular in Spain and in the Americas: “With the admission of the Jesuits, saints appear there whose connection with Spain is so remote that they are unmentioned in some official dictionaries.” Kelemen does not denigrate this hybridity; in fact, he looks at it as some kind of “originality,” a practice that can also be seen in Brazil (343). What Keleman confirms in Zobel is the remarkable Chinese variant in the stock of Philippine colonial art: “When we take into consideration that the Bodhisattva was gilded and equipped with a kind of encarnación, the way from a religion 550 years older than Christianity to this statue of the Virgin Mary is a short one – especially in a region where the older faith is still a living spiritual force” (345). This could only mean that colonial form is not inert, wrought once and for all by diffusion or imitation. As Henri Focillon would put it in The Life of Forms in Art: “Iconography may be understood in several different ways. It is either the variation of forms on the same meaning, or the variation of meanings on the same form. Either method sheds equal light on the respective independence of these two terms” (qtd. in Molino 23). A more diligent reading of Zobel will certainly occasion a dialogue with the fertile literature on iconology that includes the work of Erwin Panofsky, W. J. T. Mitchell, and Hans Belting because his texts initiate sorties into the territory of Focillon’s iconography and intimate possible “variations” on the ideology and the worlding of the visual and the visible that the said interlocutors have posited.

THE FILIPINO AS MODERN

It may seem then that the eye for the colonial as Filipino had been a trait of the modern: the self-consciousness of the past, the awareness of a European lineage, and the claim to a reinvention through the formation of the Filipino, which is invested with integrity because it assumes a category of culture. Zobel sought
out collections of things as things and valued them within their taxing autonomies. Surely, this modernity was not disengaged from his own peregrinate practice as a modernist artist whose sensibilities roamed in search of difference and alterity, the unknown or the unknowable. This was typical of the cosmopolitan modernist who felt entitled to quote and cite motifs of the other and integrate them into his expressive idiom. A significant part of the history of modernism, in fact, is derived from this impulse.

Thus, the heritage of the colonial through the intelligence of Zobel was not retrograde; it lay within the contrived continuum of progress to the degree that it was conceived through the urbane connoisseurship of the artist-collector, an enlightened agency that discerned the declensions of history. This helps in figuring out the possible framework of Zobel's donation of his Philippine modern art collection as well as fine prints and drawings from international artists to the Ateneo. This university was where he taught humanities and art appreciation, reared the critics of modern art of the fifties, and ensured the eventual founding of the Ateneo Art Gallery. It is noted that he bestowed the said collection incrementally from 1959 to 1964; in 1960, a structure built by the Ateneo to house the collection was completed, around the same time when the Lopez Museum and the Luz Gallery opened its doors to the public (Lerma 38). With these auspicious gifts, the Ateneo Art Gallery became the first modern art museum in the country, and primarily because of Zobel's collection of 67 paintings, 127 prints, 25 drawings, and 2 sculptures from Abdulmari Imao, the future first Muslim National Artist (see fig. 1-2). In this lot, 18 works are Zobel's. Its founding curator, the poet Emmanuel Torres, who worked until 1999, was Zobel's student in his classes (along with Leonidas Benesa, David Cortez Medalla, Leandro Locsin, Tessie Ojeda, among others). This is evidence of the tight circle of cognoscenti seemingly under the wings of Zobel in the enterprise of modern art at that time. The scholar, Roberto Paulino, has begun research on these classes; and it is of interest that he would draw a link between Zobel's lectures on art with the teaching of the Humanities at the University of the Philippines in 1955. These histories of pedagogies are co-incidents. The attitudes of Zobel and Josefa Lava, one of the first teachers at the University of the Philippines in the Humanities, are kindred. According to Zobel: “The first thing we must do is learn to see paintings. There is more to seeing than just looking. Give a picture a chance, rather than a glance. Paintings are at the mercy of the glance” (Paulino “Learning to See”; unpublished). And Lava: “I can never forget the momentary hush that always sweeps a classroom of forty or so students...when I flash a slide of Michelangelo’s Moses or Velasquez’s Las Meninas. They are caught in awe, they are speechless and just at that instant of time are drinking with their eyes what seems to them to be unutterably beautiful.” Both Zobel and Lava invest in the irresistible, even sublime
moment of “art” as an instinct and an inculcated norm, a history and a civilization (Flores “Art History, Broadly”; unpublished).  

Fig. 1. Ateneo Art Gallery

Fig. 2. Ateneo Art Gallery
The collection of the Ateneo Art Gallery, which Zobel thought of as a study collection, is an important node in the network of other modern art collections in the possession of the National Art Gallery, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and the private collections of Paulino Que, Aurelio Montinola, and Lucila Salazar. The strength of the treasure is neorealism, with the early works of such stalwarts as Hernando R. Ocampo, Vicente Manansala, Cesar Legaspi, Romeo Tabuena, and Victor Oteyza. It also reaches back to the Amorsolo period, with staple portraits of the gentle master, the initial period of modernism by way of Anita Magsaysay-Ho, and extends to the proto-avant-garde and conceptualist David Cortez Medalla. It might be worth mentioning that Zobel was not very keen on the inchoate years of Philippine modern art, which began with Diosdado Lorenzo and Juan Arellano and found its watershed in Victorio Edades and his confreres Galo Ocampo and Carlos Francisco. What caught Zobel’s eye was the post-Edades modernism, something that veered away from the post-impressionism of an early efflorescence, which benefitted much from the traditions of Beaux Arts and Art Deco as may be gleaned in the murals of the so-called Triumvirate Edades, Ocampo, and Francisco. The modernism of Zobel’s predilection would gather around the virtual portmanteau “neorealism,” coined by the painter-writer, E. Aguilar Cruz, and inspired by a certain Francesco de Sanctis. The word teeters between a realism that could not be abandoned and a newness that could not be resisted. From this tension between two desires arose idiosyncratic forms, exemplary of which was the transparent cubism of Vicente Manansala and the lush and incendiary motifs of Hernando R. Ocampo.

Neorealism had a wide latitude, something that perhaps fascinated Zobel because it presented the dynamic potentials of Philippine modernism, from post-impressionism to expressionism to the School of Paris. Furthermore, his art might have also found affinities with its sense of curiosity and mistranslation. Zobel collected species of this strain of modernist art; specifically, the nucleus that was demonstrated by the aforementioned luminaries. A separate essay is required to elucidate on this modernist oeuvre, but its significance at this point pertains to the currency that it brought to bear on the definition of modernism. It was neorealism that saw the movement through, gaining traction after the walkout of the conservatives at the competition and exhibition in 1955 held by the Art Association of the Philippines, over which Zobel once presided. It was a high point for the modernist struggle against the establishment, with intellectuals and collectors aligning themselves with the art of the moment. From these inroads, the modernists more decisively cohered and found themselves regularly exhibiting at the Philippine Art Gallery (PAG), founded by the exceptional Lyd Arguilla. Zobel presented his first exhibition around 1952 at the PAG, which evolved into the nerve center of the modernist impetus. It encouraged eclecticism and experimentation evinced in the prints of the eminent forerunner Manuel Rodriguez and the
expressionism of Ang Kiukok, and paved the path for “abstraction” and the talent of Arturo Luz, Lee Aguinaldo, and Jose Joya. All this energy helped harness the sensibility of David Cortez Medalla, sui generis and the original conceptualist who left the country for more halcyon times in Europe in the late fifties. With his departure, modernism was seized by a derivative high modern art that posed as conceptual, but was in reality an imitation of American minimal and pop art. This imitation of an internationalist style turned into a stranglehold partly through the clout of the Ayala family and its closeness with the Marcos government. The founding president of the Cultural Center of the Philippines was Jaime Zobel de Ayala, who at one time was also designated envoi to the Court of Saint James; and the visual and design programs of Imelda Marcos were hewn from the templates of Luz. It was Luz, held in the highest esteem by Fernando Zobel, who in turn chose Roberto Chabet to be the first curator of the art museum at the Center and continued to play the role of tastemaker by way of his institutional power as well as his sway in the market through the Luz Gallery. This internationalist fantasy was so much different from the practice of Medalla. While working outside his country, he prospected a lively kind of Philippine subjectivity, which was suspicious of structures and notions of identity, and was innovative in approaches to art making through performative and relational provocations. He was committed to process, railed against stasis, and was an activist. His involvement in important global exhibitions, notably those curated by Harald Szeemann, should make him an indispensable figure in the prehistory of the contemporary, one who with a ludic sensibility and broad sympathies mediated the local and the modern in all its complications and did not merely supplement the internationalist style. In fact, the internationalization of Spanish modernism around this period would be subjected to this same political critique, and Zobel was part of it too. Genoveva Tusell Garcia writes:

The political and diplomatic gains obtained by the regime from this art campaign have yet to be adequately assessed by historians of the Franco years. The regime has often been accused of making use of avant-garde art to give itself an international air of modernity and openness, which did not coincide with the real situation of the country. But it did deliberately help to involve Spain in the international art scene. (249)

The said imitation of the internationalist style had ossified into an official style, be it the abstract or the conceptual variety. It was Medalla, and later Kidlat Tahimik, who professed to an art of criticality; regained the post-colonial valence of the modern, the inter-national, and inevitably of the contemporary; and affirmed the global sensitivity of the Philippine. And if conceptualism were to be considered one of the signposts of the contemporary, Medalla was in Szeemann’s exhibition Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (1969), described by a critic as the “first comprehensive survey of conceptual art” (Brett 208).
The trove given to the Ateneo was not the beginning or the end of Zobel’s museum dreams. He thought of one in 1954, which fell through. After the Ateneo Art Gallery was firmly established, he ordained in 1966 the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca, Spain and in 1980, integrated his collection with that of the Juan March foundation’s to consolidate the holdings of the Museum (see fig. 3-4). Perched precariously on the Casas Colgadas (Hanging Houses) and earning admiration from no less than modern art’s monsignor Alfred Barr, it is home to Spanish abstract painting and sculpture mostly of the 50s and 60s, represented by the exemplary works of Eduardo Chillida, Antoni Tàpies, Manuel Millares, Luis Feito, Jorge de Oteiza, Eusebio Sempere, Antonio Saura, Gustavo Torner, and Fernando Zobel himself. This august fraternity of masters securely fixes Zobel’s pedestal in the canon of Spanish modernism, ultimately making his status international, partaking of both Asian and Spanish lineage. And this modernism persists as the museum puts up temporary exhibitions on Emil Nolde, Robert Rauschenberg, Alexander Rodchenko, Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, Liubov Popova, and Adolf Gottlieb (www.fernandozobel.com). It is no coincidence then that Arturo Luz has a series of homages to some of these artists.

![Fig. 3. Postal Stamps (2014) in Commemoration of Fernando Zobel’s contribution to the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca, Spain.](image-url)
THE MODERN AS FOREIGN

First was the thing; second was the vessel for it, the museum. It began with the pursuit of the object and ended with hoarding it and then leaving it as legacy for a posterity destined to be always measured by the modern. These instances of modernity, which strive to address the universal response for the aesthetic residing in a represented and representable possession, must be seen, however, within the history of the post-colony and its equivalent, if not critical, modernity: how art was a colonial inheritance; how modern art refunctioned coloniality; and how a personage like Zobel could coordinate these processes through art making, scholarship, and collecting how he could make, historicize, and theorize on art in synchrony. For Zobel, it was not only a matter of “art” being mere object, but as subject of metacommentary (see fig. 5-6).

Fig. 4. Postal Stamps (2014) in Commemoration of Fernando Zobel’s contribution to the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca, Spain.
Fig. 5. Zobel, Fernando. *Bellerophon*. 1955. Oil on canvas. Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City.

Fig. 6. Zobel, Fernando. *Saeta No. 42*. 1957. Oil on canvas. Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City.
Zobel considered himself a Filipino, and he is positioned quite exorbitantly, and therefore egregiously, in the history of Philippine modern art, even ensconced as a “pioneer” by the Ayala Museum alongside Juan Luna and Fernando Amorsolo, the collective oeuvre of which artists comprises the core of the collection. This privileging is suspect, to put it most politely, and must be probed as an ethical predicament, particularly among those who utter the word delicadeza with siglo de oro affectation when they repair to their parlors. Quite curiously, even if he was not Filipino, Zobel thought he felt entitled to speculate on Filipino expression and inexorably formalize a tradition. For instance, he considered Philippine art as residing in a “provincial art milieu,” which does not have either a long tradition of art or a rich tradition of art.” (www.fernandozobel.com) He also believes that to be obsessed with the “Philippine” might lead those who quest for identity to triteness (www.fernandozobel.com). This is one side of the story. The other is that the Philippine is primitive: to extract its core, it has to be stripped of its exogenous strata, proffering a formula thus: “object (minus) foreign influence/s (equals) residue, which is the Filipino expression we hope to find” (Zobel, “Filipino Artistic Expression” 128). Such drift of thinking about an identity that is residual may have informed his early forays into Philippine subject matter like the “carroza;” and Lenten rituals prompted him to say that lack of exposure to the vogues beyond the islands induces “inbreeding.” Based on his criteria, only artists like Arturo Luz, H.R. Ocampo, and Lee Aguinaldo can step up to the plate of “international” benchmarks (see Fig. 7-8). This idea of the international is primal in Zobel’s prominence. The founder of the Art Association of the Philippines, Purita Kalaw Ledesma, thought then that Zobel lifted Philippine art to the “international level” (www.fernandozobel.com).

Fig. 7. Fernando Zobel posing with his work, Caroza, at the Ateneo Art Gallery.
Surely, Zobel as a polemicist and pedagogue like Victorio Edades drew people to his élán and fastidiousness. An enthralled Arturo Luz narrates that he spoke in amazingly lucid terms and did not resort to the arcana of theory, a clarity of expression that, as Jaime Zobel de Ayala would interject, was accessible to both child and philosopher. Emmanuel Torres sustains this mystique with his tale of the Victorian spoon, which Zobel once brought to class as mute testimony of form not always following function: form may sometimes be about only itself. Torres praises his mentor for his erudition and interdisciplinary facility (Zobel). Needless to say, Zobel's reviews of exhibitions and assessments of peers need to be studied. We must ponder too the effect of this theory on succeeding avatars of culture like Arturo Luz, who has weighed in on the issue of identity. For instance, the following quote may well have come from Zobel: “What do we mean by Filipino painting? A painting by a Filipino, a Philippine theme painted by any painter, or we mean a

Fig. 8. Zobel, Fernando. Carozza. 1953. Polymer on wood. Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City.
Filipino theme painted by a Filipino painter? Again: When a Filipino painter paints a foreign theme or subject, does he produce Filipino painting or is he merely a Filipino painter painting? And when a foreign painter paints a Philippine theme of subject, does he produce Filipino painting or is he merely a painter painting a Filipino theme or subject.”

It is in this register that the Ayala Museum curator Florina Capistrano-Baker esteems Zobel, together with Juan Luna and Fernando Amorsolo (whose patron was Zobel’s father Enrique Zobel de Ayala), as among “transnational artists who transcend national borders, translating borrowed languages to affirm equality and confirm nationality” (13). This agility in crossing boundaries is reserved for people like Zobel, who could travel and relocate easily and in style. Because of such mobility, they are concomitantly wary of nationalism, an attitude that is perceived in Zobel’s attraction to cultural fusion (Philippine Religious Imagery 10) and staggering improvisation (14) embedded in the Philippine santos and his resistance to nationalist importuning: “The current spirit of nationalism almost demands that we attempt to classify these objects by the race of their makers. Fortunately, the attempt is quite impossible, and I doubt that it matters in the least” (15). This double movement of identification and effacement of the Filipino springs from the temper of a transient: an expatriate or tourist whose impressions of a locale shape those of the native, who internalizes the exotic or the orientalist as identity, the native who is labor to Zobel’s capital. Zobel was not an exile; he was unmarried, a childless gentleman, a scion of tycoons who devoted his life to the speculations on culture and the materiality of that desire. Like Bernard Berenson, he was a “passionate sightseer.”

The notes Zobel made when he visited Japan and his essay on the “first Philippine porcelain” made by his family’s firm La Porcelanica provide clues. The scholar, Pilar Cabañas, has pored over these journals to intuit in them a “search” for a singular identity on the part of the supposedly torn Zobel. On the other hand, Zobel’s annotations on a piece of porcelain, the only one of its kind surviving after the Pacific war, could only gesture toward an intractable distinction for the object, which is cognate of the discriminating subject Zobel. Of Zobel’s sojourn in the East, Cabañas writes of a perturbation: “Zobel must have been acutely divided between the East and the West. In the Philippines he would attempt to trace the ancient origin of the culture of the islands. He would seek to find what was distinctive of Philippine culture by comparing it with other cultures...he was interested in the peculiarities that made one culture different from another: he looked at the streets, the means of transport, the theatre, and the museums with the avidity of one who wanted to know what was different and special about Philippine culture” (Cabañas 215).
And observe Zobel’s report. First, the technical description drafted by the artisan-factory worker, and then his insight:

Molded dish of thin porcelain, translucent and sonant, with scalloped edge, undulant shoulders and raised foot. While body covered inside with a light grey slip and decorated with a design of iris blossoms and leaves executed in transparent mauve and blue enamels and heavy blue green and white enamels within a decorative border in the same. The outside is covered with a thick, glossy cold white overglaze. Base of the foot is unglazed. No potter’s mark. Diameter: 13.2 cm. Height: 2.3 cm. (“The First Philippine Porcelain” 19)

Then Zobel appraises:

There is nothing about this piece that identifies it as a Philippine product. The motif is woozy Europeanized adaptation of a traditional Japanese subject; it could have been done in France, England or Germany during the 1890’s. The technique has the anonymity of competence without inspiration. For those who like to read between lines this small dish makes an interesting example of Philippine craft ideals during the first decades of the twentieth century. (19)

A conjuncture presents itself here: the symmetry between a mundane material that refuses easy identification to an industrial object that becomes a commodity for a company to a rarity in the antiquarian’s cabinet of curiosities where science, nature, and art pave the path toward wonder and, ineluctably enlightenment. Zobel embodies this intersection himself: he is at once industrialist, connoisseur, and art historian, coordinating a sublation of the “stuff” that inheres in the “thing” that is the porcelain. This gives credence to Pierre Bourdieu’s elephantine treatise on taste predicated on distinction and how Alfred Gell would carry the theory further to stress that the value of things and the taste for things are not merely functions of norms; they are agencies:

Take, for instance, the relationship between human beings and cars. A car, just as possession and a means of transport is not intrinsically a locus of agency, either the owner’s agency or its own. But it is in fact very difficult for a car owner not to regard a car as a body-part, a prosthesis, something invested with his (or her) own social agency vis-à-vis other social agents. Just as a salesman confronts a potential client with his body (his good teeth and well-brushed hair, bodily indexes of business competence) so he confronts the buyer with his car (a Mondeo, late registration, black), another, detachable, part of his body available for inspection and approval. Conversely, an injury suffered by the car is a personal blow, an outrage, even though the damage can be made good and the insurance company will pay. Not only is the car a locus of the owner’s agency, and a conduit through which the agency of others (bad drivers, vandals) may affect him—it is also the locus of an ‘autonomous’ agency of its own. (18)
Perhaps knowing the material condition of this privilege to nominate, to transpose objects into various scales, is key in our revelation of Zobel. His class, which controls much of the wealth in the Philippines for the longest time, is pivotal in the construction of the discourse of modernity in culture and, as critics have pointed out, in the state, both being indices of potentially higher levels of intersubjectivity (Lloyd and Thomas 31). And this essay has demonstrated that such a modernity swathes a broad history, from the colonial to the contemporary; the Ateneo Art Gallery still invokes Zobel as a beacon in current art making in its annual recognition of artists supposedly on the cusp. That Zobel was a cousin of the eccentric artist Alfonso Ossorio, friend and collector of Jackson Pollock and a scion of sugar barons in Negros, complicates this argument even more. David Cortez Medalla once recounted that there used to hang a Pollock in a mansion in the mill, amid indentured labor, of course.8

Expectedly, Zobel would inhabit pride of place at the Ayala Museum, designed by Leandro Locsin, envisioned by Zobel, built by the Ayala family in 1967, and maintained by heirs who continue to be influential in the arena of the economy, politics, and culture. The curators reconstructed his studio in the new building which opened in 2004, the better to create an aura of genius by idealizing the artistic process and putting it on view for the generations to marvel. They cobbled it together partly based on anecdotes from Arturo Luz and Zobel's nephew Peter Soriano. It was recreated as a clean and well-lighted place, “white and dazzling... where visitors can actually ‘see’ the mind and environment of a highly cerebral artist to better appreciate the continuous rotating exhibitions of Zobel's works planned for the gallery throughout the years.”9 It is at the heart of the permanent collection, putatively transparent, certainly well within the axis of the other vectors of trade and money -- and elite rule: the dioramas of Philippine history, ceramics, maritime vessels, textile, and gold. It is a main node of the museum's narrative of Philippine modern art around which discourses of temporary exhibitions on Zobel would gravitate: Fernando and Fernando (with Fernando Amorsolo) in 2000 and Pioneers of Philippine Art: Luna, Amorsolo, Zobel in 2004 for the inauguration of the current edifice and a reconfigured edition of the same title for an exhibition traveling to San Francisco and Singapore in 2006, and Fernando Zobel in the 1950s: The Formative Years in 2009. The Ayala Museum, which sits on prime real estate in the central business district of Makati and is connected to the mall of the Ayala Corporation, counts 140 works of Zobel under its custody.

Zobel's studio in the museum is not incidental in this pattern and makes sense within the broader schema of modernity. It is theorized that the modern interior, specifically the “abstract interior,” sought to distance itself from domesticity (and in effect from the “feminine”) and instilled a sense of self-reflexivity under the avant-garde aegis of usually the male master (Sparke167-184). Zobel's sanctum in
Ayala becomes a rarefied realm in his home/museum, with the interior becoming an “object” in itself, an “image,” indeed: “The absorption of the interior into a sequence of modern art movements served to transform it, both theoretically and actually, from a visual, material and spatial reality into an abstract concept” (170). But the fact that a domestic domain like the studio is repositioned in a public terrain like the museum could only mean that the private/public antinomy is unstable; an instability that is the nature of modernity itself, as well as exemplary of the power of the elite to impinge their personal lives on others. The interior was “represented visually as a two-dimensional image: materially through the objects that went into it; and spatially through the architecture that contained it. Another of modernity’s key features, the continuing expansion of interior spaces, or ‘interiorization,’ which helped create and control social and cultural distinctions and hierarchies” (13). This completes Zobel’s manifestation inside out as an object/subject of the museum, something that hints at another confluence to be mapped out in the making of the Ayala Museum and by extension of Makati through the discipline of internationalist design: Leandro Locsin as the leading modernist architect, Arturo Luz’s mother Rosario Dimayuga as a pioneer interior designer, and Luz himself as director in 1977 of the Design Center Philippines, which promoted local design and materials (burlap, for instance, being at once textile and collage) as part of the export policy of the state.

The foreignness of the modern, its alienation from the poverties of the masses, is coextensive with the abstraction of Zobel’s art. He was, in other words, as abstract as his presence in the scene to the degree that capital itself is an abstraction; or the reality, alongside its cultural ethos, he had wished to convey in painting is an abstraction. Coupled with this is the outside that he embodied and made contemporaneous: the past, the Spanish, the mestizo rent-seeking elite, even the “international.” Zobel’s representation at the Reina Sofia, placed within the ambit of Antoni Tàpies, is telling of this abstraction. The art historian, Simon Baier, rereads Meyer Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art” to confront us with the ideological inscription of the “abstract.” According to Schapiro, abstraction is belated; even before it became ascendant, it was already widely believed that the value of a picture was a matter of colors and shapes alone” (qtd. in Baier 68). Its reiteration actually is a representation of a disappearing, of a world that could no longer be represented except through its catastrophic remains and of the only existing dominant, which is capital, singular and absolute. Baier asks: “In this context, what should be called the return of the repressed, the figure or its dissolution, the mimetic impulse or its negation? And again, what in fact should be a more adequate response to the state of the world: The affirmative repetition of effacements in the name of absolutes or the farcical attempt to trace the singular instance of events, in the language of a commodified object of financial speculation?” (70). Thus, the “Ayala” in Zobel is plenty and accumulating: it is emblematic of the colonial empire, imperialist
nostalgia, and the enduring cacique capitalism in the Philippines and all because of art and the museum.

It was Meyer Schapiro who said that abstraction is the “language of absolutes,” and that this language has “penetrated deeply into all artistic theory, even of their original opponents…The language of absolutes and pure sources of art, whether of feeling, reason, intuition or the sub-conscious mind, appears in the very schools which renounce abstraction” (69-70). And the peril lurks:

Schapiro feels, opposing Clement Greenberg before he even starts to write, that a purely affirmative outlook on abstract art and its underlying assumption – the universal progress of global reason, identified with the advance industrial-economic complex – is impossible to maintain in the already-loomig shadow of the Second World War, in which the coldest monster, called the nation-state, will industrialize the systematic killing of millions. (70)

This thought certainly gives us pause when we reflect on “abstraction.”

What might be finally worth pursuing in this reconnaissance of Zobel is the history of taste in the Philippines and the political consequences of its ascendancy in practically an encompassing social sphere. And here, a polytropic protagonist like Zobel is germane, having expressed so many sympathies as artist, connoisseur, collector, teacher, and museum maker. He was surely an intrinsic element in the inculcation of taste for the modern in the sixties and seventies when Makati was rising from acres of *cogon* and the government of Ferdinand Marcos was reclaiming land from the fabled Manila Bay and laying the foundations of the formidable houses for the arts. Zobel hovered as the architect Leandro Locsin, the mandarin curator Arturo Luz, and the heedless patroness Imelda Marcos dreamt of modernity’s many rooms, haunted by the Filipino’s illusive address.
Notes


3. For early texts written by Zobel, please refer to: “Filipino Artistic Expression.” *Philippine Studies* VI, No. 2 (Sept 1953); “The Seventh Annual AAP Art Exhibition.” *Philippine Studies* II, no. 1; and “Silver Ex-Votos in Ilocos.” *Philippine Studies* V, No. 3 (Sept 1957).

4. See Roberto Paulino’s essay in this anthology.


10. I am reminded here of the exchange between Alice Guillermo and Domingo Castro de Guzman on abstraction; publication cannot be found.
Works Cited


Flores, Patrick. Message. 27 July 2010. E-mail.


Luz, Arturo. No bibliographic details.


