

A masterpiece saved

Mid-20th century Filipino woodcarver Jose P. Alcantara was ahead of his time, but one of his works, which lined up the walls of the famed Philam Life Auditorium, had been forgotten by it. Today, his relief is out of the shadows and is on view at the National Museum.

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TWO years ago, Las Vegas resident Louis Alcantara brought his son to the Philippines for a visit. He wanted the child to know his roots, to meet his grandfather.

Louis is the youngest son of artist Jose P. Alcantara, a woodcarver from Manila who is considered as the last maestro of traditional wood carving. He trained in the Quiapo atelier of Isabelo Tampinco, after which he worked as a carver in the furniture shop of Gonzalo Puyat. Alcantara's immense talent took him to numerous shows and won him several accolades here and abroad. He passed away in 2005 at age 94.

When Louis decided to introduce elder Alcantara to his own son, they went to the Philam Life Auditorium along UN Avenue in Manila, the iconic performing arts venue built in 1961, famed for its near-perfect acoustics through the design of the same group behind the Sydney Opera House and the Cultural Center of the Philippines. On its walls ran a 15-meter commissioned work of Alcantara.

Depicted on the epic relief are scenes representative of Filipino culture, with characters that served as stoic audience to the performances the theater housed night in and night out, including the orchestral debut of eight-year-old piano prodigy Cecil Licad in 1969. The curtain closed in the Philam Life Auditorium for the final time in 2013 following the acquisition of the building by a giant property

developer, which, through the prodding of an online petition, later promised to protect its heritage. Since then, the halls of the theater remained quiet, as was the case when the two Alcantaras paid a visit.

"It was dark and dusty," Louis said. "A sliver of light managed to seep into the room, enough for my son to see his grandfather's works for the first time."

"But for me," he added, "that wasn't enough."

Louis grew concerned about the state and fate of the precious artwork. He wanted more people to see the carvings, to save the masterpiece, to keep his father's memory alive. His goals received a big boost during a recent event.

The important Jose P. Alcantara woodwork has been retrieved from the theater and placed in the care of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Manila by the Philam Foundation, the corporate social responsibility arm of Philam Life. The initiative is part of the life-insurance company's thrust to support nation-building through the promotion of holistic wellness.

Philam Life Chief Executive Officer Kelvin Ang said that through Philam Foundation, they firmly support the role of the arts in achieving mental wellness. "We want to go beyond physical and financial wellness. It is our intention to come full circle in bringing to life our brand promise of helping people live healthier, longer and better lives."

For the past five years, the Philam Foundation has given the National Museum an institutional grant of P5 million to supplement funding for acquisition, preservation, and restoration of artworks, as well as for the upkeep of key pieces of Philam Life's art collection: seven Vicente Manansala paintings that

were turned over in 2015, and now, the Jose Alcantara mural. Aside from the unveiling of the panel, the event also marked the renewal of another five-year institutional grant for the National Museum.

A part of the Alcantara relief is on view at Gallery XVI, set against an orange wall that brings the earthy piece to life in popping contrast. The rest of the work is to be installed at a later time. Mounted now is the right side of the piece that consists of 19 panels, featuring religious narratives in a piece tentatively titled by the National Museum as *Muslims Greeting Filipino Christians*.

Alcantara's genius takes shape in the way he carves wood to anything he envisions with intricate realism. On one side, there's a group of worshipers dancing around a flame that almost fends off heat; on the other is a cockfight, bettors' mouth bawling and bird's feathers ruffling—a multisensory engagement carved out of tree trunk.

The piece is installed across another national cultural treasure, The Progress of Medicine in the Philippines, by National Artist Carlos "Botong" Francisco. National Museum Director Jeremy Barns said the two pieces showcasing early Filipino culture are engaged in a dialogue.

He added that Alcantara was one of the giants during the 1940s and 1950s, which bridges interesting periods in the arts. "He was bursting to express something bold and edgy, something almost ahead of his time."

According to Max Ventura, Philam Foundation president, they take pride in being able to share to the public the Alcantara wood carvings and the Manansala paintings. He said the masterpieces are now available for more Filipinos to "enjoy and marvel at, and perhaps take inspiration from, as many Philam Lifers have done so through the years." ■



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