
Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

August 2006

Rare find in Cordilleras leads to global recognition of Filipino photographer

By Georgia McCauley

On Monday, July 17th the Manila Women's Forum heard firsthand the intriguing tale of how author Jill Gale de Villa came to know and eventually befriend Eduardo Masferré, the father of Philippine photography. What follows is Jill's story of how she and Masferré met, how they became partners in an important project, and details on the man, his work and his life.

Masferré's body of work is known today as a gripping documentation of the ancestral life of the people of the Central Cordilleras. His work reveals how the Cordilleran forebears lived and worked. His photos bring to life the painstaking process of carving the thousands of rice terraces into steep mountainsides—now familiar to all as the quintessential travel photos representing the tropical lushness of the Philippines.

Jill used a projector to show us copies of Masferré's photos. The beautiful images she shared were taken between 1936 and 1958. They showed not anthropological specimens, but living, breathing, interacting people of vibrant upland cultures that have been

Image from Eduardo Masferré's book (Courtesy of Jill Gale de Villa)



irreversibly changed by contact with outsiders.

But these works were almost lost to the Filipino people and all humanity. As we watched a slide show of these images, Jill explained how she came to know Masferré and helped share them with the rest of the world. While researching her travel book "Luzon by

Car," she found herself walking through Bontoc, the capital of Mountain Province. Mountain Province lies at the very heart of the Central Cordillera mountains, and is a 2-day journey by road from Manila.

Here is her story...

I was walking through the town and
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Next MWF Meeting **When:** 5:30 to 8:00 p.m., **Tuesday**

August 22, 2006. **What:** Louie Domingo,

Vice President of the Emergency Resource Center, will conduct an emergency preparedness course that uses experiential education to practice reacting to fire, injuries, natural disasters, crime and terrorist attacks.

Where: Studio 116, 6th Floor of 116 Rufino Street (formerly Herrera), Legaspi Village, Makati. It is on the left side right before Legaspi St., with the UCPB on the ground floor. **Bring:** P300 to cover the course fee and venue rental. No dinner will be included (we can go to a restaurant afterwards). **September meeting:** Monday, September 18, 2006.

(Rare find... from page 1)

saw these amazing images in the window of a studio. So I walked in and hung about until I was able to meet the photographer.

Eduardo Masferré was a reticent man—a man of few words and not outgoing. I admired his images but could not afford to purchase, certainly not in the volume I wanted. So I asked him if someone was doing a book. He said yes. So I said “I want one” and left my name and contact details.

Some time later I received a call from his nephew, who was doing the book. He wanted me to raise money. I told him I could help with sales, but it would be difficult for me to raise money given that the nephew had never produced a book before and so quality was not a known factor.

A year or so later I was back in Bontoc and stopped in at the studio. “Where’s the book?” I asked Masferré. “No book.” He replied. “They were not able to do it.”

So I said “Let me try.” Masferré answered “I’ll think about it. Come back in a few weeks.”

So I did. And he then said. “Well, I have an agent, I have to contact him. He is in Japan. Come back again.”

So I did. And he said “I haven’t heard from my agent. Come back again.”

So I did. And he said “I haven’t heard yet. Come back again.” So I asked “Can I help try to contact your agent?” And he said. “No. Come back again.”

So I did, and he said “OK. Do it.” And I asked “What about the agent?” And he said “Never mind the agent.”

Then of course I was faced with the same problem his nephew had—his images couldn’t be done cheaply—they were too good for that, but I at least had a track record in publishing.

I started fundraising and figured that a print run of 1,000 would be possible. Then serendipity stepped in and soon Mobil Corp Philippines, which was looking for a high-profile project, agreed to pre-purchase 2000 copies—1500 to donate to Philippine schools, museums, and libraries, and 500 for their Christmas give-aways. We were on a roll!

The initial estimated print run of the book went from 1000 to 4500. Then, before the first print run was off the press, we ran a second printing reaching a total of 7,500 copies, which

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“The rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras are the work of the Ifugao culture, and are believed to be 2,000 years old. This continuing cultural landscape, which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1995, illustrates the challenges of balancing tradition and progress, and the importance of keeping local communities engaged in sustaining their landscapes.” ~ Adrian Phillips

Stairways to Heaven The Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras

The Cordillera Mountains are located on the island of Luzon in the Philippines. The mountains are over 2000 meters above sea level and are the backdrop for a local myth passed down from generation to generation.

Bugan and Wigan were the first Ifugao. God gave them rice, and something that enabled them to grow rice in the harsh mountains—The Rice Terraces. This is the Ifugao village of Bangaan. The Ifugao tribe have cultivated and protected these 20,000 hectares of Rice Terraces for over two thousand years, preserving traditions described in their local myth. The people of the Ifugao live in stilt houses. Harvested rice is stored in the attic. Smoke rises from below and keeps mice away. Bulul is the God protecting the rice. These beautiful Rice Terraces often referred to as “Stairways to Heaven” were inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 1995. Indigenous chants sung during the planting and harvesting are called Hudhud. The Hudhud’s 40 epic

tales were proclaimed the Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

In the 16th century, the Philippines became a Spanish colony. The Ifugao refused to convert to Catholicism and kept their tribal pride. However, the impact of modernization is now affecting this village. Many young people moved to the city and thirty percent of the Rice Terraces are abandoned and left fallow. Given the situation, the site was inscribed in the World Heritage in Danger list. Some young people have stayed in the village to try and protect the Rice Terraces handed down from their ancestors. This young Ifugao man is one of them. He is helping elders without successors to repair the collapsed Rice Terrace walls.

It is hoped that these Rice Terraces, given by God and valued as World Heritage, will be passed on to future generations. Chants calling for the people who left the village echo in the “Stairways to Heaven.”

~ UNESCO World Heritage Site © UNESCO



Picture taken by Magalhães in 2003. Source: Wikimedia Commons. This image has been (or is hereby) released into the public domain by its author, Magalhães. This applies worldwide.

Yay! Mention photography and the first person I think of is Ansel Adams, best known for his black & white photographs of California's Yosemite Valley.



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KaWoMeNaN

Selected and edited by
Beulah Pedregosa Taguiwalo

Your camera and Ibn al-Haitham

From a 10th century Middle Eastern physicist to the camera obscura to photography and modern physics

From “dark chamber” to the modern camera

The term *camera obscura* is Latin for “dark chamber.” It refers to an optical device used in drawing, and is one of the ancestral threads leading to the invention of photography. In fact, photographic devices today are still known as “cameras.”

Artists, painters, and the camera obscura

The potential of the camera obscura as a drawing aid may have been familiar to artists by as early as the 15th century. Leonardo da Vinci described the camera obscura in Codex Atlanticus, his first recorded notes (c. 1478). The 17th century German author Johann Zahn has many descriptions and diagrams, illustrations and sketches of the camera obscura in his *Oculus Artificialis Teledioptricus Sive Telescopium* (1685).

The Dutch Masters who were hired as painters in the 17th Century were known for their magnificent attention to detail, and it is widely speculated that they made much use of the camera obscura. The extent of their use by artists of this period, however, is still a matter of great controversy.

One such Dutch Master is Johannes Vermeer, often called “the painter of light.” His masterpieces include “Young Woman with a Water Pitcher” and “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window.” He is the subject of a movie titled “Girl with the Pearl Earring” where in one scene he is shown with a camera obscura in his studio and explaining how it works to the servant girl who served as his muse and model for the painting of the same title.

10th century beginnings in ancient Persia

The principles of the camera obscura however, may have been known even earlier, since antiquity. In fact, it has been claimed that a working camera obscura was successfully built in the 10th century by Ibn al-Haitham, an Islamic mathematician, astronomer and physicist.

Ibn al-Haitham (965–1040) is sometimes called al-Basri, after his birthplace Basra, Iraq which was then part of Buwayhids dynasty, Persia. He is considered the father of optics for his writings on and experiments with lenses, mirrors, refraction and reflection.

One account of his career has him summoned to Egypt by the mercurial caliph Hakim to regulate the flooding of the Nile. After his field work made him aware of the impracticality of this scheme, and fearing the caliph's anger, he feigned madness. He was kept under house arrest until Hakim's death in 1021. During this time he wrote scores of important mathematical treatises.

He later traveled to Spain and, during this period, he had ample time for his scientific pursuits, which included

optics, mathematics, physics, medicine and the development of scientific methods on each of which he has left several outstanding books.

The physics of light, the nature of vision

Ibn al-Haitham made a thorough examination of the passage of light through various media and discovered the laws of refraction. He also carried out the first experiments on the dispersion of light into its constituent colours. His book *Kitab-at-Manazir* (Book of Optics) was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, as also his book dealing with the colours of sunset.

He dealt at length with the theory of various physical phenomena like shadows, eclipses, the rainbow, and speculated on the physical nature of light. He is the first to describe accurately the various parts of the eye and give a scientific explanation of the process of vision. He also attempted to explain binocular vision, and gave a correct explanation of the apparent increase in size of the sun and the moon when near the horizon.

Aside from being known for the earliest use of the camera obscura, Ibn Al-Haitham is also known to have contradicted Ptolemy's and Euclid's theory of vision that objects are seen by rays of light emanating from the eyes. According to Ibn Al-Haitham, the rays originate in the object of vision and not in the eye. Through these extensive researches on optics, he has also been considered as the father of modern optics.

~ BPT / Adapted from Wikipedia and other sources.

Myths

Some cultures believe that photographs and cameras steal the souls of the people taken in them.

Vermeer and Light

“The only thing that really interested him was light,” comments Eduardo Serra, the cinematographer on *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. “He's really the painter of light. Rembrandt is light on faces; Vermeer is just light, period.”

The world's oldest photograph

It is believed that the creation of the oldest photograph in the world took place in both France and England at about the same time, in 1826. French inventor Joseph Nicephore Niepce produced his first permanent image on a light-sensitive sheet of pewter, while Englishman William Fox Talbot produced a series of negative-positive images called collotypes, whereby any number of copies could be made from an original negative.

(Rare find... from page 2)

is absolutely huge for a coffee table book.

Now let me tell you a bit more about Eduardo Masferré. He was born in Sagada, Mountain Province, in April 1909, and died there at the age of 86 in June 1995.

His father had come to the Philippines with the Spanish cavalry. He had actually chosen to serve in Philippines rather than staying near Spain. Once in the Philippines, he left the cavalry and joined the infantry to go into the Cordilleras, where the highlanders were lopping off Spanish heads, often with impunity. In the uplands, he married a native Alab woman and settled down. Their marriage was dissolved because no children resulted, and he remarried a woman from Sagada.

The Americans then took over the Philippines, and the elder Masferré switched sides rather than fight—he started working at the Episcopalian mission in Sagada, where he raised 6 children. Eduardo was his second son.

Eduardo Masferré lived his entire life, except for 7 years, in his beloved mountains. The 7 years were in Spain, where his father had sent him and his brother Jaime for schooling at a very young age. Eduardo was brought back because Jaime had died there: the aunt in charge of them was not taking good care of them.

Except for a trip or two to Manila, Eduardo Masferré never left his mountains again.

Before I met him his works were not well-known in the Philippines, but he

had been exhibited in Japan and Denmark. In both instances, his images were never returned and he was not remunerated. My agreement with him was a 50% sharing in all profits, which is well beyond the normal, but it was just incredibly important to me that his work be published.

In 1988 his book came out. One year later, in 1989, he became the only Filipino to be invited to exhibit at the world's most prestigious photograph festival—Les Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles, France. As he was not able to travel, his son and I represented him.

The following year, the Smithsonian Institution purchased 120 of his images through a grant from Mobil Foundation. The images were exhibited at the Smithsonian, and a traveling exhibit visited many places, for at least a decade. The originals are now archived at the Smithsonian.

Less than a year after Eduardo Masferré's death, I brought out a smaller format book of his images. He had been involved in the initial stages of its preparation. The title is, *A Tribute to the Philippine Cordillera*, but the book is a primarily a tribute to Masferré.

Throughout Jill's presentation and the question and answer period that followed, we were treated to rare insights into the artist's life and given a glimpse of unique customs of the region, most of which seem destined soon to be lost forever. The synergy created by these two kindred spirits—Jill and Eduardo—certainly enriched those of us attending and has brought

important recognition to the people of the Cordilleras and to Masferré's brilliant artistry.

For those of you who may be interested in learning more about Eduardo Masferré, you can e-mail Jill at: jgvadb@yahoo.com.

“Photography
is a major force in
explaining man to man.”

~ Edward Steichen

The Manila Women's Forum

The Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Cecilia Leung**, Programs. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

Visit our website – a work in progress
www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum

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