CARLOS V. FRANCISCO
(1912, Angono, Rizal – 1969, Angono, Rizal);
National Artist for Painting (1973)

The Progress of Medicine in the Philippines
1953
Oil on canvas

On loan from the collection of the Philippine General Hospital

APPRAISING THE PROGRESS OF MEDICINE

Of all the artistic body of work of Carlos V. Francisco (1912-1969), *The Progress of Medicine in the Philippines* is the least written about. This is quite ironic considering that these paintings are considerable in size, averaging 2.92 meters in height and 2.76 meters in width. Botong, as he was fondly called, enjoyed the confidence of his clients who would commission billboard-sized artworks and murals from him. He also made detailed production designs and was an occasional scriptwriter for the film company LVN Pictures. Ultimately he liked a good story and relished telling them in images.

Having been previously referred to as murals, these paintings must be appraised for what they are – large-scale works of art. Murals are defined as paintings done directly on the wall and have been conceived as integral to the architecture. Therefore these paintings are not murals since they were commissioned in 1953, 43 years after the Philippine General Hospital was inaugurated. They are also moveable, and indeed have been relocated from the entrance hall of the Hospital to the National Museum.

As large-scale paintings, these artworks of oil on canvas are monumental not only in size but also in scope. They are an exceptional feat as a group of four, which is sometimes referred to as quadtych, and the best way to appreciate them is from left to right. They each tell narratives that refer to the tradition of healing practices from the pre-colonial period to what may have been defined as modern when Francisco completed them in 1953. Replete in the colors that became his distinctive palette, the paintings are saturated in shades of reds, yellows, greens and blues.

Francisco's compositions are circular and rhythmic, like an uncurling rhizome. In them are flora found in the Philippines, perhaps inspired by the plants local to Angono, where he was born and which he acknowledged as the wellspring of his creativity. Bamboo, banana, molave, papaya and narra are some of the vegetation that bisect these pictures and are integral to them.

The decorative bamboo poles in the first painting are shaved to produce curly ringlets, a practice typical of Philippine traditional celebrations. These coils resonate in all the paintings, emanating from their spherical pattern composition. In the second painting, this is found in the vegetation and white ribbons, and in the third

and fourth, in the clouds of smoke, sky and atomic mushroom cloud. Spears, trees, intravenous drips and lamp stands mimic the vertical format of the paintings, directing the eye upwards.

Such are some of the elements that bind the four paintings, making it vital to display them together rather than as individual works of art. While at the Philippine General Hospital they were installed two to a wall and facing each other, they have been hung here at the National Museum in a linear manner as Francisco must have conceived the progress of medicine – medical history as a series of developments. Moreover, the height of the paintings is slightly lower than in their original location, but nonetheless the majesty of their epic theme is recreated in this hall.

Healing practitioners, such as the *babaylan* of pre-Spanish Philippines, represent the core of the first painting, which features a composite of Francisco's imagined representations of ancestral Filipinos, perhaps picked from his work as a production designer for films. The *babaylan* performing an invocation with her hands upraised may have been from a Filipino version of an Arabian Nights film, against a great spirit figure or *anito*.

In the center is a fire that seems to be prepared before the ritual sacrifice of the pig on the foreground. Lying supine below her is an emaciated figure with a seated chief next to him, resplendent in his costume and ornaments but who appears cheerless. Several figures in the background include a man who is using a conch shell as a horn to summon all to participate in this rite, while a local liquor being poured from a bamboo container is about to be offered to the spirits from a pot. Amid the traditional healing practices shown in this painting, the story is one of desperation, repeated on the faces of the figures.

The next panel features monk-scholars as healers, occupying the center of the painting. The kneeling figure seems to be searching on the ground for plant specimens, some of which he holds with his right hand, for medicinal preparations. The other monk, whose back is turned to us, appears to be recording their discoveries and poring over scientific experiments. A measuring instrument, apothecary bottle, hourglass, and mortar and pestle are symbols of their importance as men of science.

These monks are shrouded by a ribbon of clouds that have shielded them from the vanquished superstitions, magic and past healing rites that have been identified with pre-colonial medicine, including the malady of desperation. Found on the margins of this painting are several images that manifest this anxiety: a sorcerer casting a spell on an unknown victim using an effigy; creatures of the night including a *manananggal* – a witch who leaves her lower body while flying to prey on fearful villagers; falling figures who are tormented and oppressed; early faith healing that tortures rather than soothes; religious conversion through participation in processions that shifted beliefs in healing; and epidemics of cholera during the Spanish period that led to better and systematic water collection.

The third painting illustrates the American period with the birth of the Philippine General Hospital. Symbolized by hygiene, forced inoculations and other emblems of American medicine, Francisco seems to convey that it was a period of transition in which yet another colonial ideology was again being imposed using health and sanitation as a justification. A number of depictions underscore this, including the bamboo grove in the center the skewed long stems of which are bending towards the left, seemingly pointing favorably at the type of medicine brought by the Americans. To the right is a range of images, including people hiding from compulsory inoculations, and Culion, an island in Palawan where those suffering from leprosy were isolated.

As in many of his illustrative accounts, Francisco balanced the bad with the good by including representations of a healthy Filipino community: a piped water system; pest control through fumigation resulting in the collection and counting of dead rodents; a public health system founded on science symbolized by the Philippine General Hospital and the Bureau of Science; and dredging the esteros or canals to clean Manila's drains and rid them of noxious vapors.

The last artwork, where the pictorial plane is cut in angular fashion as opposed to the curvilinear transitions in the three other paintings, is full of the markers of modern medicine. In the center is a figure undergoing surgery with six masked figures in medical scrubs in attendance. Modern medicine is also defined as a combination of

new technologies and education, represented by buildings, pharmaceuticals, the production of vaccines, and the use of x-ray machines and laboratory analysis.

The atomic mushroom cloud at the top corner of the painting heralds the era of molecular biology, nuclear medicine and radiation therapy. More hospitals, lifesaving devices, and the sharing of knowledge through conferences complete the rest of this painting. The artist also included in the bottom left the first two of the *Progress of Medicine* quadtych, hanging at the Philippine General Hospital's entrance hall, which connects him to the modern rather than the traditional.

Patterns are found in these works, such as in the artist's manner of composition and use of colors and curvilinear shapes. The sequence of the paintings also follows a progression that provides textures, creating twists and turns akin to plots in films. Intersecting two panels – the first and the third – that depict healing and therapy are the second and fourth paintings with images of science and experiments in medicine.

In the end, Carlos 'Botong' Francisco – proud son of Angono, member of the celebrated Thirteen Moderns, and National Artist for Visual Arts (conferred posthumously) – was a consummate painter and master narrator in pictures who thoroughly enjoyed a good story.

CONSERVING AN ARTISTIC TREASURE

The four paintings entitled *The Progress of Medicine in the Philippines* were executed by National Artist Carlos 'Botong' Francisco in 1953, through a commission made by Dr. Eduardo Quisumbing, Dean Agerico Sison, Dr. Florentino Herrera, Jr. and Dr. Constantino Manahan. Upon completion, they were installed in the main entrance hall of the Philippine General Hospital.

The Hospital's entrance, however, was widely open to the surrounding environment, and as air pollution significantly increased over time, together with the traffic of people through the hospital, the paintings began to deteriorate, such that restoration was performed by Professor Tomas Bernardo in 1974 and again in 1991. Nevertheless the paintings continued to endure rapid deterioration due to environmental fluctuations, heavy levels of pollution in the surrounding area and termite infestation. Physical contact by curious people, including instances of minor vandalism, was also a factor contributing to the damage of the paintings.

By the first decade of the 21st century, yet another restoration of the paintings was clearly needed, and a joint project was undertaken by the National Museum of the Philippines and the Philippine General Hospital, with financial support from the U.S. Department of State through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. The objective of the project was to restore and conserve the paintings, and retard accelerated deterioration. In July 2006, the National Museum conservators conducted diagnostic analysis and detailed photo and graphic documentation of the paintings to establish appropriate conservation measures, and the restoration was conducted over fifteen months in a specially designated area of the Nurses Home at the Philippine General Hospital.

The paintings were found to be very weak and unstable. They were severely deteriorated and damaged as evidenced by the presence of alterations, and were darkened by thick layers of dust, smoke, insect stains, and oxidized synthetic resin applied as consolidant on the paint layer in previous restoration efforts. Foreign matter in the forms of dried secretions, grime, in-grained dirt and humic residues were deposited and permeated on the paint layer.

Slackening or movement of the paint layer was apparent, resulting in planar distortion. Craquelures and extensive networks of blisters on the paint stratum were clearly visible. The separation of the paint layer from the textile support on the lower portion near the seams was quite alarming. The back surfaces of the original textile support were attacked by microorganisms as manifested by mould stains, termites and other xylophagous insect attacks. Unpatterned lines and misalignment, a result of incorrect application of previous relining, were very evident. So too was the presence of whitish discoloration, blooming or cloudiness of the varnish as

indicated by pale discoloration on the surface of the paintings, possibly due to fluctuations in relative humidity and temperature or to certain atmospheric pollutants.

The seams where the canvas fabrics were joined were brittle, leading to the unraveling of the weave and rendering them weak and less coherent. Close examination on the painting surfaces revealed many areas of previous restoration work. The retouched areas had started to erode and fade, diminishing the aesthetic impact of the pictorial image.

Damage on the third and fourth paintings included holes and slash tears on the lower portion. Other alterations in the form of lifting, abrasions, and blind cleavage occurred in different areas of the paintings, ranging in size from minute pinheads to the width of the palm of a hand.

The restoration and conservation treatment included solubility tests, removal of the paintings from their stretchers and frame to determine the extent of damage, consolidation to arrest further cracking, flaking, and separation of layers, cleaning of surfaces, removal of old linings and consequent relining, removal of surface dirt and old varnish, grafting and application of fillers, retouching and, finally, application of a protective coat of varnish.

Upon completion of the treatment process after fifteen months, the paintings were once again installed at the main entrance hall of the Hospital, and the conservation of *The Progress of Medicine in the Philippines* was hailed as a significant achievement for Filipino conservators and restorers, and for all supporters, workers and advocates of culture and history.

However, concerns as to the environment surrounding the paintings remained, and the conservators of the Museum observed that deterioration would again accelerate and manifest itself if they were to remain in the same environmental conditions as before. Indeed, paintings displayed or stored in uncontrolled environmental conditions would invariably deteriorate over a period of time, no matter what precautions might be taken to arrest the process of damage. The restored artworks installed at the Hospital's entrance hall would be continuously exposed to the elements, and unless controls for proper temperature, relative humidity and lighting were established and maintained, the paintings would not survive.

It was strongly recommended that, to prolong the life of these important artworks, they be housed in a space where the necessary environmental conditions, together with a regime of consistent periodic monitoring and maintenance, could be assured. This gave rise to the idea of transferring the original paintings to a gallery of the National Museum, in exchange for high-quality reproductions that would take their place, thereby maintaining the historical and institutional association of the paintings with the Hospital, for which they had been specifically commissioned and where they had prominently hung for over fifty years.

Such an initiative would be unprecedented in the Philippines, but was made possible by the shared recognition of all stakeholders that the paintings were highly significant and clearly formed part of the nation's artistic and cultural heritage. As such, on October 4, 2010, the plan to transfer the paintings to the Museum and install reproductions at the Hospital was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding. The pioneering agreement was ratified by the Board of Regents of the University of the Philippines (of which the Philippine General Hospital is a component part) at its 1261st Meeting on October 28, 2010.

On July 23, 2011, the original paintings were relocated to the National Museum, and a set of reproductions produced and coordinated by photographer Benigno T. Toda III was hung in their place at the Hospital. The paintings were installed at a dedicated gallery that had been refurbished for the purpose by the Museum Foundation of the Philippines, one of the principal partners and support groups of the National Museum. The process of photography and reproduction, as well as the logistical operation, was supported by the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) through its contributions to the National Museum Endowment Fund.

The unveiling of the *Progress of Medicine in the Philippines* in its new home took place on September 21, 2011.

The event also served as the occasion for the declaration of the paintings as a National Cultural Treasure by the National Museum, in recognition of the outstanding importance of these works of art and the need to preserve them as a significant part of the nation's cultural patrimony, now and for future generations.