

Freeing the Filipino through Monumental Sculpture

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Sculpture as an art form has certain limitations imposed by materials or medium, color, subject, and composition. The process of sculpture requires careful planning, technical skills in welding and engineering, and a very good understanding of the medium the artist chooses to work with. Unlike in painting where texture can be an illusion, sculpture is rough where it needs to be rough, and smooth where it should be smooth. Its size requires a big space that allows it to be viewed by many people. If carved in the round, it stands freely with all its angles exposed for everyone to see. It should be strong enough to resist the effects of the heat of the sun, thunderstorms, and even bombs in times of war.

Despite these limitations, the Greeks and the Romans chose sculpture to express their highest ideals embodied in the human figure. Monuments to citizens and leaders were erected in front of important buildings. These sculptures stood on elevated blocks sometimes surrounded by circular space. By erecting monuments to their important historical figures, they not only reminded people of their heritage but also inspired them to be good citizens. In this sense, monumental sculpture is an instrument that promoted nationalism.

Today, all over the world, people offer flowers at monuments to heroes, some still standing on heavily guarded parks or in front of

government buildings. A monumental sculpture is an expressive assemblage that germinated in the psyche of the artist but, as such, does not exist in a world of its own because it has an intended purpose. A public monument is usually erected to celebrate a nation's milestones. Beyond a visual narrative of events, it embodies a nation's values, identity, and vision.

In the city of Manila, two monumental sculptures stand along the long, eight-lane Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue (EDSA), one of the city's major routes: Guillermo Tolentino's *Bonifacio Monument* and Eduardo Castrillo's *People Power*.

This paper looks into the aesthetic qualities and historical significance of these two monumental sculptures inspired, first, by the Philippine Revolution against Spanish rule in 1896, and second, by the People Power Revolution against the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. These two monumental sculptures embody the Filipino people's vision of freedom, as expressed in the artworks' subject matter and the use of space. Through an analysis of these works, the paper hopes to deepen the reader's appreciation of sculpture as a tool for ingraining nationalism.

Guillermo Tolentino

Bonifacio Monument
Cast Bronze (1933)

The *Bonifacio Monument* at Balintawak (Caloocan City) is located amidst city life. It is situated at the far end of EDSA, and is surrounded by movie billboards and shopping places. It stands amidst the jeepneys and buses that circle around it to get to any of the four streets that merge



into it. It is visible to thousands of people in the area: commuters, students, vendors, Chinese businessmen, Western tourists, Filipino drivers and passengers, mall shoppers, street children. Having stood there for 59 years now, it has suffered blows from World War II bombings, and has endured tropical heat, high levels of air pollution, and the strongest typhoons.

It also stands in the way as the Metro Rail Transit (MRT) connects to the Light Rail Transit (LRT). To solve the problem, the Caloocan City Mayor wanted to move the monument to the Tala section of Novaliches. The debate on whether to move the monument went on for about two years. The statements, suggestions, and questions that were published showed the kind of thinking and values of our leaders and politicians, some of which opposed the values held by artists and historians. The National Historical Institute (NHI), however, passed a resolution declaring the *Bonifacio Monument* and its immediate surroundings a national monument. This makes it unlawful to move the *Bonifacio Monument* from its present location.

What is it that makes this monument great? What aesthetic qualities and historical significance does the Bonifacio monument have that make it worthy of being called a national monument?

The monument was the work of Guillermo Tolentino, a very talented artist who learned drawing under a Thomasite teacher, Mrs. H. A. Bordner. His desire to learn more about art brought him to Washington, DC, where he worked in a café in Rock Creek Park. He caught the attention of President Woodrow Wilson when he molded *Peace*, a small statuette inspired by President Wilson's stand on peace. Granted a scholarship by American millionaire Bernard Baruch, he enrolled at the Beaux Arts School in New York City for advanced courses in sculpture. Two years later, he went to Europe for further studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome.

When he came back to the Philippines in 1925, the country was still an American colony. Prevalent in art were idealized landscapes that attracted American tourists. Farmers planting rice gaily under the scorching heat of the sun, dressed in neat clothing were commonplace. The sculptors molded busts of heroes and government officials. Among Tolentino's famous works is the bronze *Oblation* that stands in front of the administration building of the University of the Philippines. Tolentino, whose hands were accustomed to classical sculpture, and whose eyes were sensitive to human emotion and passion, produced works which blended smoothly with the nationalistic trend.

Tolentino believed that an artist never copies or imitates the works of other artists. If he goes abroad to see the world, his purpose should be to see as many great works of great masters as possible. As the viewer takes a closer look at the *Bonifacio Monument*, he or she will not fail to see the influences that shaped the artwork: the human agony and despair in his figures are reminders of Juan Luna's *Spoliarium* and Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, and the narrative effect of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Doors of Paradise and Inferno*. The obelisk that rises from the sculpture base brings to mind the obelisk standing in front of the White House at Washington, DC, where the artist spent a number of years.

Tolentino's works are classical in form and romantic in expression. Combining these two styles is not easy since one requires perfection of idealized forms, whereas the other portrays intense emotion not only in the faces but also in bodily positions and gestures. This was only one of the challenges Tolentino had to grapple with in doing his multi-figural 45 foot-tall *Bonifacio Monument* cast in bronze. The fact that the monument had 23 life-size figures at the base of an obelisk presented another challenge in the use of space. But the artist overcame these challenges. The monument now stands as an embodiment of Tolentino's highest expression of beauty and the nationalistic spirit. Gatbonton describes it thus:

The principal figure is Andres Bonifacio, leader of the Revolution against Spain in 1896. Behind him stands his deputy, Emilio Jacinto, beneath the Philippine flag. On both sides, revolutionaries brandish their blades. Behind the figure of Bonifacio at the opposite side of the obelisk are the hooded figures of the three martyred priests, Gomez, Burgos and Zamora, whose execution in 1872 had spurred Filipino dissidence. These are followed in sequence by the initiation rites into the revolutionary secret society of the *Katipunan*; a dying woman with an infant reaching for her breast, and a man with clenched fist upraised beside the *Katipunan* figure which completes the movement. Bonifacio stands still with pistol and bolo held in each hand; the figure expresses nobility and resoluteness of purpose. (Gatbonton, p. 322)

In capturing a historical moment, Tolentino organized 23 figures to create a harmonious narrative effect which easily captures a viewer's sentiment. The monument has figures that evoke sorrow and compassion, such as a dying woman and an infant who are trapped in their weakness. In contrast, the male figures, led by Bonifacio and Jacinto, stand firm and aggressive in their call for uprising. How does one make this group of historical figures naturally flow to another group of figures on another side of the obelisk base without losing its narrative effect? Looking at the monument and inspecting it closely, one gets a sense of how much the Filipinos suffered in their struggle for freedom. The expression on the faces of these figures portray human pain that was beyond the physical. This, to me is where the greatness of Tolentino lies—using a hard, solid, and dark medium to project human suffering and fighting spirit in a flowing, narrative style.

His concept of narrative sculpture could have been influenced by his favorite European master, Bistolfi, whose works he considered "poetry in sculpture" (Jardin, p. 329). Tolentino's genius is seen in the unique and carefully planned arrangement of shapes, forms and spaces. Space in sculpture is neither entirely a visual affair nor an

illusion. By organizing shapes, space is created within the figures, between the artwork and viewer, who may view it from various vantage points. Suzanne Langer describes sculpture as

essentially volume, not scene. . . . It is more than the bulk of the figures. . . . The tangible form has a complement of empty space that it absolutely commands . . . the figure itself seems to have a sort of continuity with the emptiness around it. The void enfolds it, and the enfolding space has vital form as a continuation of the figure. (p. 87)

The artist seems to have a clear concept of relations of space where composition allows each figure and each group appear to be enfolded by space around it to emphasize the dramatic moment it portrays. In this sense, “the space made visible is more than the area, which the figure actually occupies” (p. 87).

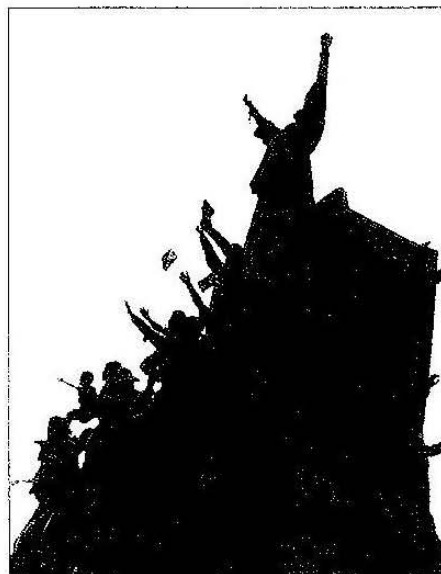
How does one fit seven life-size figures, each expressing intense facial and bodily emotion and gesture, into an approximately 12 x 2 feet platform on each side of an obelisk base? The dramatic arrangement of figures around the obelisk does not seem to be based on mathematical precision, which is characteristic of today’s geometric sculptures. Rather, the dimensions and the spaces between the figures are based on *instinctive geometry*.” This, according to the mathematician Henri Poincaré (qtd. in Langer, p. 16), is achieved “when we take our own body as an instrument of measurement in order to construct space—not the geometrical space, but a space belonging to an instinctive geometry.” As the body or figures are essential to measurement, no distortion can be made in the representation.

Distortion, in Tolentino’s classical training, is completely remote compared to another national monument which was erected 60 years later along EDSA on June 12, 1993 in celebration of Independence Day: the *People Power* monument by Eduardo Castrillo.

Eduardo Castrillo*People Power*

Welded bronze with
concrete base (1993)

The *People Power* monument is located on the corner of EDSA and White Plains (a class A residential area), one block away from the famous EDSA Shrine where the People Power Revolution of 1986 took place. The monument faces the eight-lane-EDSA and Camp Crame, with no tall buildings around it.



Castrillo's *People Power* monument was a commissioned work erected to commemorate the peaceful revolution of 1986. This multi-awarded Filipino sculptor has works not only decorating important landmarks and famous institutions in the country but also standing in some landmarks in other Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

A jewelry designer by training, Castrillo is very comfortable manipulating and distorting materials into sculptural forms. His sculptural style was inspired by various local artists such as Napoleon Abueva and Solomon Sapid, and foreign artists like the Mexican sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Among his famous works are *The Last Supper* at the Himlayang Pilipino Memorial Park and the *Pieta* at the Loyola Memorial Park.

People Power is an 18 meter-high monument composed of a woman that symbolizes motherland, with outstretched arms freed from chains, and 65 figures representing ordinary Filipino people who participated in the peaceful revolution that overthrew the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986: a cigarette vendor, the

physically disabled, the religious, musicians, a mother with her child, a farmer, a student, a soldier, and many others. Behind motherland is the Philippine flag. He was able to achieve a triangular bronze composition supported by a concrete base, skillfully welding bronze sheets to form the multi-figured monument. The use of geometric shapes and distortion did not reduce the monument's emotional appeal. Rather, it conveys a feeling of dynamism, power, and triumph. All of his figures have their arms outstretched, lips parted as if chanting a revolutionary hymn. Adding to the drama is the little religious image held overhead by a male figure situated right below the motherland figure, the candles beside the disabled man and the woman on wheelchair, and a boy holding a flower.

In contrast to Tolentino's depiction of pain, struggle, and call for uprising, Castrillo's monument is a moment of celebration. Unlike the *Bonifacio Monument* that stands amidst a busy commercial junction, the *People Power* is located in a peaceful, residential area near a commercial mall. It is surrounded by trees that appear short compared to its towering dimensions. Given the vast space around it, the multi-figured base tapers to the blue sky, evoking a feeling of freedom and spaciousness. It is an example of Langer's description of space, where "the figure itself seems to have a sort of continuity with the emptiness around it" (p. 87).

Castrillo has had a series of sculptures with social themes and symbolic meanings, "some of them are images of social inequality and conflict, contrasting images of decadence with those of poverty and struggle" (Guillermo, p. 179). With his sensitivity to the Filipino condition and plight, it is not surprising for him to create *People Power*, a nationalistic monument of magnitude, both in size and meaning. It is a symbol of strength and unity where the group of people serves as a human barricade that protects motherland. It is also a symbol of victory as suggested by the birds hanging on to the Philippine flag behind motherland and the outstretched hands of several figures. These arms show lines protruding from the

sculpture's general mass, suggesting movement and action despite their static reality. This is characteristic of Castrillo who loves to show movement in sculpture. He explains, "I love movement. I love action, and my existence always exudes life and energy . . . the tenacity, power and the lyrical or rhythmic movement possess physical grace and lithe movement toward a certain goal" (Roces, p. 30).

How could one fit in 65 figures, a flag, and a humongous female figure, the whole towering 18 meters high, without creating a chaotic mass? It requires a deep understanding of the interaction between space and composition. Castrillo, as observed by the art critic Alice Guillermo "is probably the first (Filipino) sculptor to grapple with the aesthetic issues of sculpture and space" (p. 178). Not only does he have an understanding of the nature of metals, owing to his training in the jeweller's art. He also has a deep sense of the relationship between figure and space. His figures are hollow inside as they are made of bronze sheets. While this material reduces the weight of the figures, there is difficulty in handling it as it requires cutting, bending, welding, and fusing to create a whole figure. Furthermore, the material is not amenable to details that can be easily shown in plaster. But Castrillo overcomes the limitations imposed by his chosen medium, probably owing to his long years of working as a jeweler. He admits,

I never compromise my idea by conforming to the limitations of metal. I often have to innovate. The problem of making high sculptures is often in the area of engineering which could indeed be quite restricting. [But] I see to it that my aesthetics is not hampered by any technicality in metalcraft or in the construction of the metal structures." (Roces, p. 31)

Castrillo's skillful handling of bronze enabled him to treat the figures beautifully. Each figure is a full sculpture in itself, expressing

passion, power, and strength that even those who are seated due to physical incapacity evoke these intense human qualities. Each has a pair of eyes and lips that speak his or her cause. These individual figures do not disrupt, nor distract from the figures beside and behind them. They make up a group that expresses a coherent message: *victory*, more concretely, *people power*.

The use of levels tapering to one main figure supported by a curving flat surface that represents the Philippine flag also reduces the heaviness of the group sculpture. The figures become less in number as they approach the main figure, to which the viewer's eyes are easily led by a man's hands raising up a religious figure.

The Social Significance of the Monumental Sculptures

Arnold Hauser (1959), a strong advocate for the social history of art, believes that style has a sociological cause. An artwork can "infer into the milieu or social environment in which the artist lives or from where the artwork comes. It can also account in terms of its actual origin for the outlook on life manifested in an artwork" (p. 208).

In this light, Tolentino's and Castrillo's works embody something beyond aesthetic qualities. The creation of the two monuments here described required not only physical strength, engineering skills, creative imagination, a deep sense of the relationship between figure and space, but also the spirit of nationalism. What moved Tolentino to create his *Bonifacio Monument* was the bloody revolution in 1896 that freed his country from the Spanish colonizers. The main figure in this monument is Andres Bonifacio, not only the founder of the *Katipunan* and leader of the revolution, but may also be considered the first President of the Philippines, who ruled from August 24, 1896

to May 10, 1897. He is considered the father of the nation and founder of democracy (Guerrero, Encarnacion, & Villegas, p. 12). The revolution was not won by this one man, however. With him were the three martyr priests, Emilio Jacinto, the revolutionary soldiers, a mother, farmers and other Filipino men and women who fought with pistol and *bolo* (native blade). This explains the presence of several figures in the monument.

In the case of Eduardo Castrillo, a peaceful revolution in 1986, which drove away the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his family from the Philippines, inspired him to create a monument to peace. It was a revolution won in five days without gunfire and loss of lives. Never in the history of mankind was there a revolution won by people who were armed with flowers, candles, and religious images.

These two works, Tolentino's *Bonifacio Monument* and Eduardo Castrillo's *People Power*, which were inspired by two revolutions 90 year apart, embody aesthetic qualities and historical significance that portray the Filipino sense of freedom. The artworks of these artists manifest not only their talent and integrity but also their nation's soul.

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