

# Fernando Amoroso's *Marketplace* *during the* *Occupation*

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**Clarissa Chikiamco**

Curator,  
National Gallery Singapore

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**Figure 1.** Fernando Amorsolo, *Marketplace during the Occupation*, 1942, oil on canvas, 57 by 82cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

World War II was a painful event globally and its impact was felt no less in the region of Southeast Asia. The Japanese Occupation of several countries in this part of the world led to innumerable instances of rape, torture and killings. While it was obviously a horrifying period, many artists across the region felt compelled to respond – either by painting during the war and documenting what was happening, or reacting in retrospect after the war when there was sufficient time, space and safety to re-engage in artistic practice. Singapore’s National Collection encompasses various Southeast Asian works which capture the artists’ different responses to a shared historical experience.

Three of these works are by one of the Philippines’ most iconic artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fernando Amorsolo (1892–1972), who produced journalistic and melodramatic paintings while he was staying in Manila during the war. Galvanised by the

events around him, he departed mostly from his usual subject matters of idyllic images of the countryside, such as men and women planting rice, for which he had become well-known.

In 1942, Japanese forces entered Manila, immediately after New Year’s Day. Amorsolo intriguingly chose to paint a market scene that first year of the Japanese Occupation (Figure. 1), quite different from the ruins he painted towards the end of the war or his theatrical scene of a male hero stalwartly defending a woman from rape by a Japanese soldier (Figures. 2 and 3). At first glance, *Marketplace during the Occupation* seemingly depicts a typical market scene, with vendors selling fruits and vegetables to interested members of the public. Golden light, which is frequently employed by Amorsolo in painting rural landscapes and cherubic country maidens, ostensibly creates a peaceful mood. Two women standing on the right look at the produce offered.



**Figure 2.** Fernando Amorsolo, *Liberation Manila in Flames*, 1942, oil on canvas, 50.5 by 66cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.



**Figure 3.** Fernando Amorsolo, *Defend Thy Honour*, 1945, oil on canvas, 91.4 by 153.7cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

The woman with a scarf over her head and carrying a basket looks like the typical demure Filipina whom Amorsolo liked to paint. He often painted these women wearing traditional clothing, portraying a romantic ideal amidst the backdrop of the growing modernisation in the Philippines in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

A closer look at *Marketplace during the Occupation*, however, reveals a stark contrast to the Amorsolo archetype. The female market vendor sitting on the left of the painting deviates from the conventional modest poses Amorsolo nearly always painted women in. The vendor in modern dress is shown with her legs splayed apart. Her too-short skirt rises above her legs, allowing viewers to see her exposed thigh underneath. Within the oeuvre of Amorsolo, such a posture for women is most unusual. Moreover, standing behind this female vendor is a Japanese soldier carrying a rifle. Based on the woman's position and the soldier's presence, it could be conjectured that Amorsolo might have been obliquely responding to the sexual slavery many women were forced into during this period. Alternately, he perhaps meant to reflect the new power dynamics between the Philippines and its then-recent occupier.

Amorsolo also included two Japanese flags in the paintings; one at the banner on the top left and the other on the right. These images of the flags

actually have pronounced scratches on them, whereas the rest of the surface of the painting is quite smooth. The scratches are almost certainly intentional but it is also unknown if this was done by Amorsolo himself or someone else, such as previous owners of the painting. Regardless of who abraded it, the scratches reflect a heated sentiment towards a distressing period of the Japanese Occupation.

*Marketplace during the Occupation* also shows a small crowd at the background, their faces either unseen or indistinct. People are gathered around and seem engrossed in something which is hidden from view. Could the group be gambling? Meeting and conspiring? Or simply looking at particularly interesting goods offered by another vendor? Amorsolo leaves it up to the viewer's speculation.

While having a seemingly placid atmosphere, *Marketplace during the Occupation* holds possibilities for multiple, and potentially deeper, readings. Quite different from Amorsolo's iconic but straightforward vistas or portrayals of beautiful women, this work is a compelling and enigmatic painting from a traumatic time in the Philippines and Southeast Asian history. The painting, together with other artworks from the collection which portray World War II in the region, presents a unique image by which this period can be read and interpreted. □

*The three works of Amorsolo shown above on World War II can be viewed in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery 6 at National Gallery Singapore as part of the exhibition, Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.*

#### Notes

1. From 1898 to 1946, the Philippines was a colony of the United States of America, with Americans frequently being the patrons of Amorsolo's bucolic scenes. During World War II, the Japanese occupied the Philippines from 1942 to 1945.