

**CARLOS V. FRANCISCO**  
(1912-1969)

Greatest Moralist

A National Artist for Painting, and 1964 Republic of the Philippines Cultural Heritage awardee, Carlos Villaluz Francisco is considered the greatest muralist of the country. He was born on November 4, 1912 in Angono, Rizal.

Among friends and town mates, he was known simply as “Botong” a nickname he acquired early in life after a dark-skinned Cainta character by that appellation.

Botong lived in Angono where he found the fullest expression of his talents. His father, an ex-seminarian who settled in Angono and engaged in winemaking, died when Botong was only five. His mother, also from Angono, attended to his education.

Young Botong was among the few of his generation in Angono who went to college. He did not finish, though, for with only a semester more to go before graduation, necessity forced him to work. Fabian de la Rosa then director of the school, impressed by the promising artist from Angono, was disappointed over his student’s inability to continue his formal education.

Botong Francisco started his artistic career as an apprentice at the *Philippine Herald*, a layout artist at *La Vanguardia*, and later at *Manila Tribune* as a layout artist. Shortly before the war when the University of Santo Tomas opened the School of Architecture and Fine Arts, Botong joined its faculty. A former student of his, J. Elizalde Navarro, recounted that Botong, being reticent, did not care to rationalize his works; there was a certain degree of logic to them, as in Botong’s controversial fore-shortening of the human bodies in his mural which appeared in theory as a distorting flaw, but in practice, served as an optical device that neutralized the oblique angle at which a high hanging mural is invariably viewed. Another trait of Botong as a teacher was his typical geniality; it did not encourage strict discipline but it fostered a kinship with his students that earned him their sincere respect.

The art of mural painting was still in its infancy in the Philippines before the war. There were mural decorations but most of them were merely enlarged easel painting. After the war, mural painting under Carlos Francisco made gains.

Despite his aversion to dogmatism, he initiated the growth of modern art in between the “conservative” and the “modernist.” Botong was invariably linked to the latter group, forming with Victorio C. Edades and Galo Ocampo what was then known in local art circles as “the triumvirate,” the vanguard group of the modern art movement. In 1938, the former “ the thirteen moderns, ” a group of modern artist.

When war disrupted his teaching career, Botong went home to Angono where he joined the guerillas. After liberation, he returned to teaching until the latter part of 1947. Due to the increasing demand for services as an artist, he devoted full time to painting. His colleagues, likewise recognized Botong’s special talent. While in the newspapers, his fellow illustrator Demetrio Diego, himself a painter, already took keen notice of Botong’s artistic abilities. Likewise, the writer Liberato Poblador saw it fit to publicize the young and gifted artist. Such was Botong’s growing fame that early after the war, several American officer artists visited him in Angono in the company of former Governor General Francis Burton Harrison.

As early as 1944, Botong won his first award for painting. *Fiesta in Angono*, but it was not until 1948 in the month of July, when his work entitled *Kaingin* won the first prize at the annual Art Association of the Philippines Exhibit at the National Museum. Here he was officially acknowledged by the art establishment to be one of the country's foremost artists.

Despite being a renowned muralist, Botong led a simple life. To help him out, his uncle Ramon Reyes furnished Botong with a studio. In jovial attitude, Botong playfully painted his benefactor as the conductor of the *Musikong Bumbong*, in the widely reproduced mural made to hang at the Fiesta Pavillion of the Manila Hotel. His other commissions at this time were the murals for the residences of prominent Filipinos such as Carmen Planas, Jose Yulo, and Eugenio Lopez. Bigger commissions in the offing were the murals he did for the Keg Room of the Jai Alai, the *bayanihan* scene for the Philippine Bank of Commerce, the four-panel *History of Medicine* for the Philippine General Hospital, the stations of the cross at the Far Eastern University chapel, and the life of St. Dominic for the Sto. Domingo Church.

To do these wall-sized works, Botong obtained the services of fellow painters and apprentices. Group sessions with him were more fun than hard work. There was laughter as well as liquor. However, it was he who supervised the preliminary designs and did the final shadings since he alone could bring the work to glowing life. When painting, Botong was more comfortable in pants held by suspenders topped with a faded striped jT-shirt and a baseball cap on his head. Botong was a sight to see as he climbed scaffoldings to color the details of the paintings and make prominent the features of his models. His meticulous attention to detail was with an authoritative acumen, for Botong was versed in our native customs and folklore.

Of all the artists he admired like Gauguin and Diego de Rivera of Mexico, Botong held most dear a certain Tandang Juan, an unknown religious folk artist from Rizal. Botong was also an antique collector and a researcher. When he was commissioned to do the design for Manuel Conde's films like *Genghis Khan*, *Sigfriedo* and *Siete Infantes de Lara*, he researched on the modes and styles of these foreign cultures.

At the height of his fame in early 1950's he developed his muralist style into its peak of refinement which has become the hallmark of his art: the unerring eye for composition, his sense of color and the abiding faith in the folk values typified by the towns people of Angono. When the Philippines decided to host its first International Fair in 1953, he was unanimously chosen to paint a mural that would adorn the main entrance to the fair ground. The theme of his masterwork was "500 Years of Philippine Progress." For his previously commissioned murals. Botong usually received four-figure fees but for this mural which measured 88 meters by 98 meters, he received a six-figure contract. When the fair opened in February, Botong's mural was reproduced in the colored center spread of the American magazine, *Newsweek*, the first Filipino artist to be given such coverage by an internationally circulated publication.'

With the money from his work, Botong was able to enjoy a leisurely life in Angono. He worked on his sketches, watercolors and paintings of rituals, legends and festivities of his native people – the *harana*, *pabasa*, the San Clemente Pagoda festival parade, the hammock ride of the old to Antipolo and other depicted fading customs of the country. Among the myths he depicted were those of the first Filipino man and woman emerging from a split bamboo (*Malakas at Maganda Legend*) and the legend of Mariang Makiling.

In his town he became an active civic figure and would engage the Angono youth in basketball and in-group music. He also joined the fluvial parade in honor of the town's patron saint, San Clemente. He likewise had a role in the *cenakulo*, a lenten presentation.

President Marcos conferred him the “National Artist” award on June 12, 1973. His last completed major work was the mural on the four walls of the Manila City Hall’s Bulwagang Katipunan. The work commissioned by then Mayor Antonio Villegas, was a pictorial history of Manila from the early contact with the oriental traders to the rebuilding of the City of Manila. Again in his work, Botong immortalized the men and women of Angono including his wife Rosalinda. This mural, depicting the advents of our history was to be Botong’s last completed work.

Laughing heartily at a favorite television show, on March 31, 1969 a Holy Monday, Botong burst a vein from a lung lesion. He died at the age of 57. He was buried in the town’s cemetery after the best-attended funeral procession ever held in Angono.

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