

“The Larry Itliong Story: The Road to Equality and Justice For All”



(Original watercolor “Concept Art” submitted by Eliseo Art Silva for consideration, which was green-lighted in collaboration with the Mural Committee; the same painting which the artist used as foundation to add other digital art from Filipino culture and award-winning masterpieces from the students at Morningside Elementary School in Delano, CA.)



Mural Design Key

(Yellow letters on the second mural image above correspond to the mural key below.)

Mural Design Description

by Eliseo Art Silva, 10/20/2021

Overview: The “main event” of the mural are the seven award-winning works of art from the annual Larry Itliong Day art competition, created by the students at Morningside Elementary School. The children’s unbiased and pure vision on how to tell Larry Itliong’s story helped the artist narrow down the mural narrative. The tableau on the farthest right with Larry reading a book to a group of kids is where the mural design begins and everything else behind that section is the actual story Larry is sharing to the kids...coming to life.

In between the first two doors is the giant book on the ground, with its pages open and revealed to all of us. The book’s center is right where the wall shifts to a right angle, and above it rises a 15-year-old Larry with half of his body dressed to the nines (with a suitcase in hand) wearing a stylish suit, pants and shoes. His suitcase also bears the outline of the map of the Philippines and the United States (at that time, PH was part of the USA and the US is considered by Larry’s generation as their motherland). On the other hand, the other half reveals his worker’s clothes complete with work boots. This scene shows how his ambition in coming to the United States to become a lawyer was met with the reality that he would have to work in the agricultural fields of California, Washington, the railroads of Montana and the canneries of Alaska just as what most Filipinos in the US did at that time.

His left hand with a large heart-shape symbolizes that he came from the Philippines to bring love and Filipino stories to his new home in the USA. This iconic image was inspired by one of the children's works of art. The young Itliong's left foot stands upon the "soul boat" of the 1,310-year-old Manunggul Jar from the Philippines, while on his right foot, he is held afloat by the steamship named Empress of Asia. Born in 1913, the same year the last US military engagement of the 14-year Philippine American War was waged (Battle of Bud Bagsak, June 15, 1913) and departed the Philippines in 1929, the same year as the occurrence of the "Exeter Incident" (Oct 24, 1929) and just nine months prior to a Filipino martyr (Fermin Tabora) emerged from the week-long Watsonville Anti-Filipino Riots (January 19-23, 1930) which spilled over to the neighboring towns - galvanizing Filipino workers to organize into unions.

Within the giant "sun" behind his head are the words that Larry repeatedly reminds his own children: "Never give up!" While on the opposite side of the sun is the same words from Larry but written in its Filipino translation: "*Hindi Ka Pasisiil!*" written in Filipino script known as "*Baybayin*". This particular line in Filipino is specially significant for it was culled from a stanza in the National Anthem of the Philippines known as "Lupang Hinirang" (Chosen Land). The complete line goes like this: "Sa manlulupig hindi ka pasisiil" (In the face of tyranny, never give up!) Although the tune of the anthem was launched on June 12, 1898 (during the Declaration of Philippine Independence), the words was written during the war of independence against the United States, when the Filipino soldiers of independence valiantly defended the 5th Capital of the Republic of the Philippines from the northern advance of the US armed forces on August 1899. Thus, the National Hym of Filipinos encompasses both the Spanish and American invading forces as malevolent and the antagonist of the Republic of the Philippines-Asia's 1st constitutional democracy.

Larry Itliong's journey may have been providential, for his birth year also coincided with the end of the Philippine American War which was credited for ending US Manifest Destiny according to David Silbey, associate director, Cornell in Washington and author of "A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War"; thus sparing other Asian nations from subsequent American land wars of invasion. On the other hand, his arrival in the USA coincided with the US Great Depression, the same year (October 24, 1929) of the Exeter Anti-Filipino Incident and barely a year prior to the Anti-Filipino Riots in Watsonville.

The solidarity of our ancestors which manifested itself in the victorious War of Independence against Spain and Asia's 1st Guerilla War which struck the 1st major blow against US Imperialism was seeded into Itliong's birth and eventually infiltrated the US Labor and Civil Rights Movement with Itliong's migration to this country-to write a major chapter in US History and earn for all Filipino Americans the right for an equal "seat at the table" of cultural influence and political power.



(Seven of the award-winning artworks selected to be used as basis for the entire mural)

A. Sleeping Mat Pattern-The weave pattern at the bottom of the left panel (green, red, blue and orange dyed palm leaves) references the Filipino sleeping mats called "Banig" thus symbolically symbolizes " the act of dreaming while sleeping on a mat". This section also renders the first half of the giant book, which are all part of Itliong's "Filipino Stories". Towards the farthest left corner, at the bottom of the "page" is an image of Larry's birth culled from one of the children's artworks.



B. Classroom Chairs Pattern- The weave pattern on the other side of the wall/ 2nd panel (the next page of the giant book) is a uniquely Filipino weave pattern used for classroom chair seats and backrest.

Thus, the student's artworks are symbolically framed by this Filipino weave pattern called "Solihya" weave (thus they are called solihya chairs). Suggesting that the students are taking the public 'to class" or that they are the teachers and telling us that...."class is in session, take your seats!"



C. Unity Clap- We celebrate Larry Itliong Day throughout California because Larry led the way in the great 1965 Delano Grape Strike, which was the first to cross racial lines and bring diverse people together. Among his most unique and enduring legacy is the UNITY CLAP which united all the workers called "*ISANG BAGSAK*!" (Filipino/Tagalog: If One Falls, Everyone Falls=Thus, Together WE RISE!).

This legacy is visualized through the "wings" of the magenta hued giant Filipino bird (Sarimanok) connected to soar and bound together with a handshake. Along the wings are various hands clapping while alternating in between them is the word "*ISANG BAGSAK*" written in ancient Filipino script called "*Baybayin*".

Definition/description of *Isang Bagsak*: Translating to "One Down," it was Filipino farmworker and militant labor activist Larry Itliong who introduced the Tagalog saying to fellow activist and organizer, César Chávez, during the era of the 1960s U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Itliong and Chávez utilized the phrase to create the "unity clap," a practice that would join both Filipino and Latino migrant workers together after a long day in the fields — communicating across language barriers — to further their cross-cultural fight for farm worker's rights.



D. Humanizing Workers by Telling Their Stories Through Great Art: This mural will only be the second mural ever painted honoring Larry Itliong as the foremost figure, thus I wanted a way to connect both thematically. The first one is located at Unidad Park in Los Angeles and which I

designed in 1994 and painted in 1995. My first visit to Delano was in 1994, when I designed that mural. The first question that came to my mind was: "what did the public see in their mental map or the imagination as a "default image" when the Filipino farmworkers made that great leap to ignite the great 1965 Delano Grape Strike? "

Was there any image or work of art that stuck in their head that tells THE FILIPINO STORY? In the same way that the TEN pre-war public art murals painted all over the USA by the Tres Grandes of Mexico: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siquieros and Jose Clemente Orozco did much to "humanize" and tell the Mexican Story- specially their Pre-Columbian Golden Ages.

There was ZERO or NONE that registered in the minds and hearts of the American public- one major reason Filipinos were overshadowed and rendered "invisible" in the USA. Thus, I filled the 1995 mural with Filipino Art and channeled the great art masterpieces of our country (Philippines)- because stories enter into the realm of "ART" when artists transform ordinary stories into extraordinary ones so that the same stories not only to endure and prevail but stand the test of time through Great Art.

Art does not depict events (this approach results in illustration or a literal, didactic, even stereotypical depiction of an event), rather artists elevate "paint" as the main event; creating a charged space Jose Rizal called "The Spectre of Comparisons" (which functions as a departure point to create new stories, innovation, art, the imagination, even nationalism or love of country).

E. The Molave Tree: The Molave tree is abundant and endemic to the Philippines along with our neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia. It is a medium to large tree attaining a diameter of 100 to 150 centimeters and a height of 25 to 30 meters. In exceptional cases, it reaches a height of 35 meters or more and a diameter of 200 centimeters with a bole from 16 to 20 meters. A young 5th Grade student reading a book about the United States underneath the shade of a Molave tree depicted in the first panel of the mural is Larry Itliong himself. Larry has a backpack to carry his books and school materials made of woven rattan known as "Pasiking" common in the Cordillera region of the Philippines, which is within the vicinity of his province.

Furthermore, this tree is intolerant to shade and a light-loving species with a spreading crown. It partially or entirely sheds its leaves during the latter part of the dry season.

Molave, being one of the hardest woods, is used in railroad ties, ship-building, wagon-making, bridges, cabinet, carabao yokes, cog-wheels, inserted cogs, saltwater piles, plane stocks, sugar mills, sculpture, and carving wooden tools, tool handles, novelties, agricultural implements, and high-grade construction where strength and durability are required.

Its wood and bark have curative effects on wounds and poisonous bites. The leaves are used to feed cattles, carabaos, and goats, especially during the dry season when rangelands are somewhat barren. Wood extract is considered a good remedy for poisons, as a dose of it will induce vomiting. The extract can also be used in treating diarrhea, jaundice, and dropsy.

Here's the popular poem about the Molave tree which inspired mural design. This poem is taught to 5th - 6th Grade students in the Philippines. The giant portrait of Larry with a silhouette of a protest march juxtaposed along his forehead is layered above a forest of Molave trees.

Like The Molave

by: Rafael Zulueta da Costa

Not yet, Rizal, not yet.

Sleep not in peace:

There are a thousand waters to be spanned;
there are a thousand mountains to be crossed;
there are a thousand crosses to be borne.

Our shoulders are not strong;
our sinews are grown flaccid with dependence,
smug with ease under another's wing.

Rest not in peace;
Not yet, Rizal, not yet.

The land has need of young blood-
and, what younger than your own,
Forever spilled in the great name of freedom,
Forever oblate on the altar of the free?
Not you alone, Rizal.

O souls And spirits
of the martyred brave, arise!
Arise and scour the land!
Shed once again your willing blood!
Infuse the vibrant red into our thin anemic veins;

until we pick up your Promethean tools and, strong,
Out of the depthless matrix of your faith in us,
and on the silent cliffs of freedom,
we carve for all time
your marmoreal dream!

Until our people, seeing, are become like the Molave,
firm, resilient, staunch, rising on the hillside, unafraid,
Strong in its own fiber,
yes, like the Molave!

II. Not yet, Rizal, not yet.
The glory hour will come
Out of the silent dreaming
from the seven thousand fold silence

We shall emerge,
saying WE ARE FILIPINOS!
and no longer be ashamed

sleep not in peace
the dream is not yet fully carved
hard the wood but harder the woods
yet the molave will stand
yet the molave monument will rise
and god's walk on brown legs.



The fruits and flowers of the Molave tree are purple-hued just like grapes, a significant coincidence!

F. THE AMERICAN DREAM- I thought it was best to represent “THE AMERICAN DREAM” as a “Snow Globe”. Such an object invites magic, memories, souvenirs, and nostalgia, usually a souvenir gift of a parent to a child.

Within the “globe” are the US Flag, the Statue of Liberty, and the Hollywood sign in the background. In the foreground are: “a money tree” (money grows on trees), a path paved with gold bars (the roads are paved with gold), an idyllic house with a fancy car, trees, chimneys, and rooftops covered with snow... and a snowman! Snow is such a magical image for children who has never seen nor experienced it growing up in a tropical and humid country with only two seasons: the wet and dry seasons.

G. LARRY ITLIONG THE STORYTELLER- This is where the mural begins its narrative, with “the man” himself as the source of the story. According to Larry’s youngest child, Patty Serda (included in the mural standing right beside Larry himself) it was Itliong who developed her love for reading and books. A polyglot who was driven to organize workers, Itliong mastered the 9 major languages of the Philippines (the natives of the archipelago has 187 “living languages”, if you can speak the 9 major ones you can communicate to ALL Filipinos) along with three other foreign languages: Cantonese, Japanese and Spanish. He was also articulate in law, thus through his great deeds we can clearly say that Larry Itliong was indeed a voracious reader and lover of books, new knowledge, and multiple languages.

H. LARRY ITLIONG DAY- The mural ends with a recognition and representation of the annual Larry Itliong Day, which also falls on his birthday on October 25. At the top right of the Storytelling Scene is my own design for a future Larry Itliong Monument with Larry’s distinctive “Barong Tagalog” (PH

National Attire for men) embroidered with grapes to localize the “callado” design of his Filipino polo shirt. Held in his left hand, positioned like scabbard, is the symbol of his triumph and legacy to the agricultural workers of America, which he shares equally with Cesar Chavez- the historic contract signed by all the once mighty grape growers of Delano, who eventually gave in to the demands of the workers.

Finally, the last three images are the “Pabalat ng Pastillas” (Milk Candy Wrappers) which resemble the Papel Picado of Mexico. Since Larry Itliong Day is within a week away from the Day of the Dead celebrations which honors ancestors, I included this uniquely Filipino Folk Art, which was nativized by Filipinos from the Chinese Folk Art of Paper Cutting known as “Chuang Hua” which symbolizes luck and happiness.



The top is a “pabalat” (Filipino paper cut-out) with the word “Mabuhay” which was the final exaltation and call to arms by the Filipino people, led by the Filipino soldiers of independence after the June 12, 1898 Declaration of Philippine Independence was read publicly for the very first time. This singular event launched the Filipinization movement of the Philippines, designed to unite the entire archipelago and embolden the Filipino army in their unequal fight for freedom against the colonial oppressor and invader. The word is also sung repeatedly in the immortal Filipino song “Dahil Sa Iyo” which was sung collectively by the Delano Manongs and Filipino Strikers during the 5-year strike. The design on the bottom left honors the “Bahay Kubo” (in purple color) or commoner’s dwelling made of

bamboo and palm leaves called “Nipa”; while the Filipino cut-out design on the bottom right is that of a Filipino man pounding rice on a mortar known as “Lusong” (which the island of Luzon was named after and where Itliong’s hometown is located) and the pose of the figure holding up the wooden pestle with the stone mortar directly below it references the “Haligi” or the foundational house posts which holds up or elevates a house to protect it from flooding, pests, creatures, etc. It is a common belief among Filipinos that while the mother is the light of the home (ilaw ng tahanan), the father is the “haligi” (haligi ng tahanan) or the posts that elevates the home for their family to be honored and recognized and protects them from harm.

The completed mural:

