



FERNANDO C. AMORSOLO ART FOUNDATION FEATURE PAINTING



Portrait of a Woman, 1917

Christina Amorsolo Collection

By Edwin A. Martinez

Amorsolo was first and foremost an oil painter. His finished products were almost invariably a painting done in oil. Like most accomplished artists however, he was also proficient at using other media. His extensive preparatory work leading up to his final painting reveals numerous examples of Amorsolo's adept handling of other media such as graphite, pen and ink and watercolor. What is striking is the fact that his command of other media was at the same level as his mastery of oil paint.

The artist's meticulous use of preliminary studies provides a wellspring of examples of works done in various media. Amorsolo made an average of six studies before he started work on his paintings with the first versions done in black and white media such as graphite or pen and ink to establish form. With each succeeding version, the artist worked more on texture and substance by using colored media such as conte crayon, pastel, and watercolor.

Amorsolo's expertise was not limited to the technical aspects of his craft as shown by his nuanced portrayals. Male subjects are typically portrayed in a formal manner while children were drawn with a light carefree smile on their faces. Women presented more complicated subjects. More so than for men, the portrait was influenced by the subject's individual personality and social standing. In this portrait done in graphite and charcoal, the subject is depicted in a more relaxed and reflective way. The woman's gaze is pointed downwards noticeably away from the viewer. This gives the subject an air of modesty which early 20th century society expected of women. Her chin rests on her folded hands and the shadows at the base of her forehead suggest a lightly furrowed brow giving her a contemplative air. The slightly pursed lips and the heavy shadows on the subject's right side give the painting a somber mood. A dark shadow goes down the bridge of the subject's nose. It then continues downward emphasizing the indentation on her upper lip, and forming a sharp curved surface on the ball of her chin suggesting a slight compression due to the upward pressure exerted by her hands. Note how the fingers of her left hand bend slightly at the base of her fingers owing to the weight of her head. It is amazing that Amorsolo was able to communicate all of these with the use of only graphite as his medium. He only needed to represent the highlights with the absence of graphite rather than the application of white chalk or conte crayon.

Amorsolo was known for his extensive use of sfumato in his oil paintings, slightly blurring the outlines and borders where two different colors meet, to give his subjects a certain glow. This is easily accomplished with the proper stroke of a lightly laden brush and the use of an easily manipulated medium such as oil. In this composition, the artist seemingly utilized the same technique in a more challenging medium and endowed the subject with an almost imperceptible aura.

Most of Amorsolo's prodigious output of sketches and preliminary studies were divided up among his wife and children upon his death. This work is currently in the possession of the artist's daughter Christina Amorsolo.

Note: This article is an excerpt from the book "Maestro Fernando C. Amorsolo: Recollections of the family"