

LUNA'S 'SPOLIARIUM'

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MASSIVE and direct, the "Spoliarium" by Juan Luna goads the viewer into asking: Why did he paint such a terrible scene? Depressing to the point of melancholy, brutal to repulsion, the painting is dominated by two corpses being dragged across a stone floor into the maw of darkness. Within the shadows are faces which are palled with sorrow, hopelessness and pain.

Simply, the motive seems fanciful. Juan Luna painted the "Spoliarium" from a fascinated reading of Rome au Siècle d' Auguste, un Voyage d'un Gaulois at Rome (A Frenchman's Voyage to Rome During the Time of Augustus). The traveler, Carlos Luis Dezobry, describes the large and gloomy basement of the Roman amphitheater where corpses of gladiators are stripped of armor and weapons before they are buried.

Soon after a reading of the book, Luna took a trip to Rome in July 1883, as a brief sojourn from his art studies in Barcelona. While under the spell of the Roman Colosseum, he began to paint, using the ruins, as the setting for his huge 7.72 by 4.26 meters canvas. Eight months later, in March, he completed the painting for inclusion with an exhibition at the Palazzi dell' Esposizione at the Via Nazionale in Rome.

On his return to Spain two months later, he brought along the painting, entering it next at the Exposicion Nacional de Bellas Artes in Madrid. There "Spoliarium" won the gold medal, setting off a jubilant banquet where the guest speaker was Jose Rizal, fiery with nationalism - a bad word for Filipinos to use when with Spanish royalists.

Fortunately, however, Luna and his friends' hot-eyed revolutionary ideas did not stop the sale of the artist's paintings. Within that year, the provincial government