

Sonny Yabao was born on September 15, 1943 in Catbalogan, Samar, the only child of a coconut farmer and his wife, a dressmaker.

He died on February 11, 2021 due to complications caused by pneumonia. He was 78.

But Yabao's legacy will live on through his photographs, revered and recognized by generations and generations of photographers and artists, Filipinos and foreigners alike.

He grew in a farming village in the province and initially, nurtured dreams of becoming a painter and a writer.

But he would later discover photography and when he did, he was drawn into this art form.

He was considered as the best Filipino documentary photographer of his time and the only one revered as "The Master" even long after he retired from professional work and lived in the foothills of Mount Makiling.

Yabao studied A.B. Literature in Christ the King College in Samar.

However, he was not able to finish his studies because his parents could no longer afford to send him to school. He then decided to earn a living in Manila so he could help his parents.

He started as an assistant in a friend's portrait studio in Manila in the 1960s, tasked to hold the camera and other equipment and to help in the darkroom.

Inside the darkroom, he discovered the "magic of photography" as images appeared out of nowhere. In an instant, Yabao fell in love with the craft.

He started as a freelance contributor to various local and international publications such as The Sunday Chronicle, Mabuhay, Sunday Magazine of The Manila Times and Now Magazine, Orientation Magazine and the Hong Kong-based broadsheet the Asian.

During the Marcos era, he joined Malacañang as part of the Bureau of National and Foreign Information, which was created in 1973 under the then Department of Public Information. During this stint, he trailed Imelda Marcos including her visits to world leaders across the globe. He was there when the former first lady shook hands with China's Mao Tse-tung, the Palestine leader Yasser Arafat and exiled Iranian strongman Ayatollah Khomeini.

In 1985, he was named Photojournalist of the Year by the Press Photographers of the Philippines and the National Press Club.

After Martial Law, he worked as the photo editor of Newsday, a daily broadsheet that ran from 1989 to 1991. He was the first and perhaps the only photo editor who sat in newspaper's daily editorial meetings, usually dominated by text editors.

His Newsday team of photojournalists whom he mentored would later emerge as among the country's best photographers of their time -- Ben Razon, Jose Enrique Soriano and George Gascon, among others.

After Newsday, Yabao resumed his freelance work. He contributed to i-magazine, the investigative magazine of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, headed at the time by multi-awarded journalist Sheila Coronel.

He also worked with Coronel on Memory of Dances, a coffee table book also published by PCIJ which profiled Philippine indigenous communities.

His other book projects included several coffee table books such as Tagaytay, Town on the Ridge; Cagraray, a Bicol-island World and San Miguel de Mayumo; Growth Decline and Renewal of a Museum Town published by the Environmental Center of the Philippines Foundation in 1997.

His works have been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum, Cultural Center of the Philippines and Vargas Museum at the University of the Philippines. He also held a solo show at Oarhouse Gallery and Bistro.

Yabao has also worked on several personal projects including Somnambulist and a documentary on the aftermath of the collapse of the Payatas dumpsite.

With a deep appreciation for literature, arts and humanities, Yabao, through his images, gave his audience a realistic view of the world but portrayed it in the tradition of surrealist painters. The result was nothing short of enchanting.

Indeed, he found the surreal in the most mundane of scenes and saw what was strange in the most ordinary moments.

His family is preparing to publish a book on his works through the decades.