

Doc Chat Episode Seventeen Transcript

A Blend of East and West in Filipiniana Clothing (February 25, 2021)

KATE CORDES: Welcome everyone. We'll get started in a few, just waiting for some people to join us. All right, welcome everyone. You're joining Doc Chat. I'm Kate Cordes, Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. And Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the New York Public Library's Center for Research in the Humanities where we dig deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlight the ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Miguel Rosales, librarian in the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Arts, Prints and Photographs and costume designer, Raven Ong, faculty member at Central Connecticut State University, will analyze images of Filipiniana dress in the context of the Philippines' colonial past. And discuss the ways in which clothing influences the weaving of a national narrative. Our guests will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. Make sure that you change your chat mode to panelist and attendee so that everyone is included in the conversation. Once we begin the question and answer segment, please use Zoom's Q&A function at the bottom of the screen rather than the chat function to pose your questions and you can pose your questions throughout the chat discussion. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. And so just right before we get started we'd like to know a bit more about you and what brought you here. So if you could please fill out the poll that I'm about to launch and that's it for me. I'd like to pass it over to Miguel now. Thank you.

MIGUEL ROSALES: Thank you Kate and welcome everybody. We're happy you're taking the time to join us in the chat and let me see. OK. So here's our information in case you're interested but just to give you also a little bit more background. So my training is art librarianship which in very broad terms means that I connect people with information regarding the study of the visual arts. And my particular research interest lies in the intersection between art and politics and how the two throughout history have worked in tandem to weave narratives that build identities, whether at a group level or at the individual. And visual culture is a great way to help tell the diverse and sometimes complex stories behind these identities since they serve as tangible evidence of a society's structure, aesthetics and networks. So the images we will be discussing today originate in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial rule. They are typical watercolor paintings of the time period meant to portray the Tipos del Pais which roughly translates to types of the country, referring to the ethnic and racial hierarchy that prevailed in the Philippines during this period. These watercolor paintings show the different types of inhabitants of the Philippines depicting their social status, occupation, and form of dress. The creator was Justiniano Asuncion, a leading 19th century Filipino painter who studied at the Academia de

Dibujo y Pintura, the country's first art school founded on October 8th, 1823 by a predecessor of Asuncion, Damian Domingo. The school taught using the scales of representational art by using the techniques of miniature painting and examples of this style can be found in albums showing local costumes that were produced mainly for export and to advertise the Philippine colony and its agricultural products. And as you see here, the library has a collection of Asuncion's work which is available for viewing in our digital collections. The originals are currently in the care of NYPL's art and architecture collection. So we will be focusing on two of Asuncion's watercolors today, Mestiza which you can see on the left and A Rich Mestizo seen on the right. So now I would like to turn it over to Raven, to discuss the images and the subjects depicted. So Raven, one of the things that drew my attention were the labels attached to the works. So both of the images chosen today indicate that the people wearing this kind of clothing are mestizo and the term mestizo originates from the sistema de castas or the caste system created during the Spanish colonial period and was used as a form of taxonomy that served to keep track of where each person ranked within the system. So my first question to you before we talk about the fashion trends is to get your take on the social structure of the time and if you can talk about the position that mestizos played within the racial hierarchy of colonial Philippines. What privileges as well as what limitations did the mestizo label provide?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. To begin, I think it is really important to know that the Spaniards ruled in the Philippines for over 300 years and within those years, the play in social classes changed from time to time due to many different factors. And technically the term mestizo refers to any biracial children or the offspring of mixed parentage. So if you take a quick look at this social pyramid, next slide please, you'll see that the inhabitants of Las Islas Filipinas during that time were primarily divided into two categories. At the top is the small population of the ruling class or the elite. We have the peninsulares or the Spaniards born in Spain, Insulares or Spaniards born in the Philippines and finally we have the Spanish mestizos also known as the mestizo de Espanol or the Spanish Indios. And we should also note the term Indio as it refers to the Filipino natives. Now the Spanish mestizos were considered part of the ruling class and they basically qualified for the same legal rights as the Spanish citizens, so they may have better relations with the local governors and simply that their parents can be holding an important position in the government expanding a lot of power and territory. Now, when we talk about fashion, the Spanish mestizos were actually the trendsetters. They were always seen in clothing of best quality and materials and they were always regarded as the superior ones, the upper class, the educated elite, the affluent, and the well-bred. And because of their Spanish heritage, they exhibited European-ness in their clothing while also keeping it suited for the tropical country or tropical weather and this is really where the blending begins. Now, with regards to the limitation, what I can only see is that the Spanish mestizos when selecting who to marry will need to be someone belonging to the same social standing and affluence. Now at the base of this pyramid you'll see a large population of the colonized groups. So we have the Chinese mestizos also known as the mestizo de sangli or Chinese Indios, then we have the Chinese. Basically they're the merchants and the traders during this time and at the bottom we have the Indios which again are the Filipino natives. And just because these three fall under the colonized groups don't necessarily mean that they're poor. So during the second half of the 19th century, agricultural

wealth as achieved by both Chinese mestizos and Indios and that gave way to the conversion of -- or convergence of fashion styles. So it was no longer just the Spanish mestizos who were clad in the finest garments. And also because of economic prosperity, the middle class citizens or now what we call the new rich, were able to travel and study abroad. So they too had access to what we call European-ess in clothing as a result.

MIGUEL ROSALES: Yeah. So it's interesting and important to understand how the social structure then affects the trends over the time period. So now I want to get into a little bit about the trends because I look at the images as it relates to representational art but as a costume designer, I wonder, what is your take on the images? How does the clothing depicted in these two images represent the time period?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah, so -- well, first of all it is really truly amazing that these paintings exist and if we can go to the next slide so we can show them again. I personally, as a costume designer, I consider these as sacred objects because there's really nothing like them and in studying fashion history and costume design, we look and refer to these as fashion plays or the early types of fashion magazines. These two paintings are both dated 1841 and in general, our history, the 1840s is a period of romanticism and gothic revival. In Western fashion it's the period between neoclassical or regency and the early Victorian period. And Queen Victoria has just been crowned during this time in England and the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Now talking about elements or themes in romantic art, childhood or the image of a child is one of those themes and you can actually evidently see them in some paintings by other painters like Damian Domingo. In these paintings by Asuncion, you see nature in the background which again is another theme of romanticism. So really without even looking at the fashions in these paintings, you can already get a sense of the time period because of these elements. Now with the question of how accurate the clothing is to the time period, I would say that the fashions we're seeing in these two paintings of the mestizos are quite unique and accurate to its own time period in the Philippines and I can explain that further. So let's take a look at the fashions specifically worn by the Spanish mestizos. First, women's fashion is really the beginnings, this image right here that we're seeing is actually the beginnings of the traje de mestiza or the dress of the mestiza. The look is always composed of the baro or the blouse, the saya or the skirt, the panuelo which we know as the fichu or the shawl in Western fashion and the optional tapis or the striped overskirt you're seeing tied around the waist. Since we are now looking at the Christianized Philippines and Catholicism has become more widespread, the shawl and the overskirt provided extra layers for modesty as most of the fabrics used in the ensemble are sheer. Now this whole outfit in itself is also the status symbol. The pieces are all the finest material and embroidery that only the rich can afford. So the baro is basically made of pina or pineapple fiber. The checkered skirt underneath consists of a panel. So translation during that time, eight panels is a lot and panuelo is also made of pina with exquisite embroidery. And all of these details are really the indicators of wealth. Most of these paintings, if you're going to look at the whole collection, they actually came with written text. And I'd like to share a simple observation that I found. As I've looked and read the text, it seems like that they were written at a later time. The one who wrote it actually mentions these ladies never deformed themselves by

wearing bustles. Now bustles, as underpinnings in Western fashion, did not become popular until the 1870s. So the whole idea of wearing bustles would not have been possible in the 1840s because we still need to get to the crinoline 1850s and 1860s into the bustle era. And also the word form seems to be a very 20th century ideology as I have always thought of how bustles enhanced the female silhouette. Now taking a quick look at the rich mestizo fashion for men's wear, the shirt was also called the baro made of sheer textiles like pina. The written text mentions about the shirt being worn outside or untucked which is the worse -- the reverse of what we are accustomed to.

MIGUEL ROSALES: Yeah. So another thing I would want to point out is that the barong or the men's shirt is like a staple of Filipino clothing.

RAVEN ONG: Yes.

MIGUEL ROSALES: It's still worn today and a recent example that I can think of is when Barack Obama went over to the Philippines he also wore it --

RAVEN ONG: Yes.

MIGUEL ROSALES: During his visit.

RAVEN ONG: Exactly. Yes, you're right.

MIGUEL ROSALES: OK. So moving on, the other question I wanted to bring up since we mentioned today in our title that this is a blending of East and West in Filipiniana clothing, so I'm wondering if you can speak more on that. What were the Western influences in the development of this clothing?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. I think it is also very good for us to explore, you know, the definition of blending. What do we actually mean by blending during this time? And by blending we mean many different factors. So blending in the context of Hispanized nations at this point, Christianized also, religion played a very big role in all of this blending. And when we define those words blending and Christianized we mean modesty, propriety, European-ess in clothing while connecting all of these ideas with the use of native materials, weather and climate and the use of sheer materials. Now again, blending in the context of trade as well, we also have to look at it from that angle where the Manila galleons also played a big part in all of this, the opening of the Suez Canal. And also by blending we mean travel because during the rise of the new rich for the second half of the 19th century came the rise of the ilustrados as well, those who had become rich and were able to afford studying abroad, and what they brought back to Manila from all of their studies and all of their time from Europe. Blending also in the context of hand-me-downs as how Spanish masters also clothed or costumed the Indios working for them and lastly blending in the context of imitation, how the Chinese mestizos and the Indios when they finally, you know, started becoming rich blended with the ruling class during the second half

of the 19th century. So even after the 1840s we're just looking at two paintings right here but we will see a lot of those blending, you know, from the 1840s on. And again, looking a lot closer to women's fashion again, here, the blending in women's fashion, if we can go to the next slide please, just to see where Filipiniana clothing stands in the fashion timeline and how it compares to Western fashion, you'll see that it basically follows the narrow silhouette of the 18 teens as seen in the far left photo. It's the overskirt or the tapis that actually does that for the 1841 Filipiniana clothing which is a response. So the other paintings actually if you take a look at all of the other paintings in this album, you will see how skirts have also become voluminous without the tapis and I know that that's basically because of, fashions really are more up to date during that time and the skirts are becoming bigger in response to the influences of the Western fashion. And then moving onto the next slide, we'll see men's fashion basically is what we call the dandy look, the similarities between the top hats. Instead of the walking stick the mestizos always carry the umbrellas with them and it's to preserve, even the written text mentions this, is to preserve their complexion from the sun. And aside from these pieces, details like ruffled collars, embroidered and upturned cuffs and even the way the shirts were being constructed are big evidences of European techniques. And then later on, men basically adapted the suit jackets during the second half of the 19th century. So this basically coincides with men in Europe becoming the businessmen during the Industrial Revolution. So overall, here, you can see how Filipiniana clothing really evolved into something quite unique and how the power of clothing has given Filipinos their identity.

MIGUEL ROSALES: Yes, and I also think it's like worth pointing out the double use of the umbrella because you mentioned this briefly, how it was both a fashion item because it was comparable to the walking stick but it also had a practical use. Because maintaining that Spanish mestizo identity meant being of fair complexion and because of the climate in the Philippines you needed to protect yourself from the sun by having this item for a double use.

RAVEN ONG: Exactly and basically colorism during this time also is a whole different discussion but really it's showing, you know, the skin color and all of that basically was highly regarded during this time as well. So that's the whole context.

MIGUEL ROSALES: So the last question I want to ask you before we open up to the -- for our questions from the public is an educator, what are the ways that you recommend that these images can be used in the classroom?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. I really believe that a lot of costume educators can benefit a lot from learning Filipiniana clothing, as this really is your Victorian age or the Victorian era in the Philippines during the 19th century. These are only two examples we looked at today and the evolution in Filipiniana clothing can be observed from the 1840s onward. So if we have costume educators from our viewers this afternoon, if you wish to decolonize or diversify your costume history class, Philippine clothing from the traje de mestiza to the terno is definitely something that you can add to your lectures or introduce to your students. And to those who are knowledgeable about Western fashion history, it is really as simple as presenting something

new yet familiar.

MIGUEL ROSALES: Thank you, Raven. So I think this is all we have and we are ready for questions.

RAVEN ONG: Thank you.

KATE CORDES: Thanks. A couple of questions, first off, were there any -- I don't know, but any vestiges of traditional, maybe pre-colonial Filipino fashion or clothing that persisted through this period that we're discussing now or is --

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. So again the context of being a Christianized country at this point really had a lot to do with what the Europeans brought. But even before the Spaniards came, the whole idea of wearing shirts already existed and we can see a lot of those from the Boxer Codex which is now at the Lilly Library. So it's not completely true that when the Spaniards came that Filipinos didn't have anything to wear. So just the composition of having the shirt and the trousers and, you know, and those pieces already existed but in terms of actually being able to continue with those pieces up until the Spanish colonial times didn't necessarily happen because of all of the fusion or the hybrid that has started happening.

KATE CORDES: Thank you and a question about the audience for these scrapbooks. Who is the audience for the paintings and were they envisioned more as fine art or for documentary use or perhaps both?

MIGUEL ROSALES: So what -- so these images were created for export. So one of the things that was happening at this time period is there was a lot of American manufacturers in the Philippines who were like new rich people who wanted to document and showcase their wealth by exporting things from the Philippines. And this was one way of doing it by getting these illustrations as a representation of art. And what was the other question, the other part?

KATE CORDES: Were they for decorative or were they functional? And another question along the same lines, was it for pure enjoyment or for like a sales catalog did they act as?

MIGUEL ROSALES: I didn't see anything on them being for sales catalog but it was -- they were commissioned and as far as we know, they were accessioned by the New York Public Library in 1927. So we predict that these are original to the libraries that preceded the NYPL. So either the Astor or the Lenox Library but we're not entirely sure who they belong to before them.

KATE CORDES: Quick question about pina cloth, was it -- I think you hinted at this, was it embraced as an export item as well? And there's another question about were any -- was it a two-way street like were there any fashion influences from the Philippines to Europe or the Americas?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. So it's two-way and yes, to answer the first question, yes, and even at the -- what I read also once was even Queen Victoria actually saw an example of a shawl that was in pina fiber during the, what do you call this, the big exhibition, the Great Exhibition of 1851. So that in itself has already been showcased, you know, in many different parts of Europe and then on the other hand, yes. And there's actually what we call the guayabera in Mexico as well which basically is the shirt of -- very similar to the barong or the baro of the Filipinos during this time. They're actually called as the cousins because they really look alike. So you'll see that because of the galleon trade and the opening of the Suez Canal and all of this, many other places have actually seen, you know, the beauty of the pineapple fiber.

KATE CORDES: That's another way to look at trade routes during this time.

RAVEN ONG: Exactly, yeah. So that's a whole different Doc Chat.

KATE CORDES: A comment from --

MIGUEL ROSALES: And there were a lot of influences because of the trade between the Philippines, Spain, and Mexico at that time so there was a lot of influence among the three regions.

KATE CORDES: Good point. A comment from Christopher. Thank you for preserving and sharing these works and thanks for sharing the pre-1898 history of the Philippines. Do we know anything about textile labor in this period and who would have made the clothes? Thanks.

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. During this time, they've actually been developing -- so a lot of your, the friars and the nuns were actually teaching the Filipinos embroidery. So there's a lot of those techniques also that was like new to the Filipinos, the women during this time as they were being taught of all of these like new techniques. So there's clearly a lot of like manufacture going on during this time in the Philippines.

KATE CORDES: And a question maybe for you Miguel, have there been other similar works identified by this artist?

MIGUEL ROSALES: There was a lot of imitation. We had somebody who was doing research before I came to the art and architecture collection who discovered that these were by this artist but there was also a lot of imitation. And there was also work by Damian Domingo who did similar kind of work and they do have these albums in other libraries. Some in the Philippines and in the United States I think the Newberry Library as well.

RAVEN ONG: Yeah, the Ayala Museum.

MIGUEL ROSALES: Yeah, the Ayala Museum but I can't think of other works by him at the moment that are in other locations.

KATE CORDES: Let's see. A bunch of questions just came in. From Karina [assumed spelling], are there imported Chinese silks in the textiles used for the striped under or overskirts?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah. So that's a very good question because once they ended the galleon trade, there was this really like a big focus on agriculture again. So a lot of these textiles were from native materials. Now, but the Filipinos have already been trading and using a lot of like silks because of the trade with China during the pre-colonial times and silk really was more reserved for the upper class. And you will see a lot of those changes because when we broke down the elements earlier with the tapis being optional, so when the ruling class started seeing that the middle class citizens were, you know, beginning to wear the tapis as well as a signifier of wealth, they started wearing the skirt without the tapis. And so there's that, you know, catching up with the Jones's kind of thing where, oh, they started mimicking or copying the way we dress and so we try to get rid of one element and now they started showing silks. So those checkered skirts that you used to see they're called the kambayas. They're basically more cotton based with the eight panels that I mentioned earlier. And so from the 1850s on, you start wearing the upper class women using a lot more silks instead of the cotton-based materials just to show wealth or more wealth.

KATE CORDES: More wealth, yes. A question from Kat, why didn't the silhouette of the barong change as drastically as Western's man clothing did throughout time?

RAVEN ONG: Sorry, can you repeat the question again? This is from --

KATE CORDES: Sorry. Why didn't the silhouette of the barong change as drastically as Western's men clothing?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah, you know, that's a very good question. The barong has always been loose so that's one fact. I mean nowadays, you know, we're so used to wearing slim fit and skinny and all of that so that might have changed the shaping a little bit nowadays in 2021. But yeah, the barong has always been loose. That is why a lot of historians would say that perhaps because of the hand-me-downs from the colonial masters, you know, they don't necessarily fit quite perfectly when they hand it to their servants and so maybe that's one way to look at it. And then the other one is that barongs were really long. You know, when we start seeing more pictures from other painters, barong, the barong mahaba which basically translates to a barong that's long and it's really not something that you can tuck in. So just like imagine a long dress being tucked in, you know, under your pants would be something extraordinary or bizarre. So that's one way to look at it as well. Plus the other fact that there also might have been an influence from the Indian kurtas which is basically the same tunic type of shirt. That's why there's definitely a lot of those fusion between the neighboring countries as well so that's the many ways on how to look at this.

KATE CORDES: Right. No focus on the West, exactly. Were there regional variants of this type

of clothing in the Muslim south for example or were they promoted as a form of nationalization?

RAVEN ONG: Yeah, a lot of the pre-colonial -- you'll see a lot more of those traces from the pre-colonial examples as well. So the gold trimming so that has still been incorporated in the weaving in down south. So you'll see a lot of those more of the pre-colonial style still being implemented and incorporated in the outfits of the south.

MIGUEL ROSALES: And I would also add because it says, were they promoted as a form of nationalization? The intention for these were just to show what the Philippines had as an export region but in Latin America there was a similar movement going on called costumbrismo where they were also creating images where they were describing the types of people for those specific regions. And this was a successor to the Casta paintings of Latin America as well where they were identifying people by racial lines and how they fit within the system.

KATE CORDES: Great. Thanks. OK, one last question. There are a lot of questions we couldn't get to and I'm sorry but we will follow up with a blog post and a recording of this, just let you know. A question from Deirdre [assumed spelling], Raven, is your shirt pina?

RAVEN ONG: Yes. So my mentor from the Philippines -- my husband and I went to the Philippines two years ago when travel was still a thing and since we're there, we went to my mentor, Eric Pineda, and we asked him to make our custom-made pina. And this actually has the callado or the open work type of embroidery which was another -- inspired by, you know, the techniques from Europe and from Spain during this time -- during that time.

KATE CORDES: It's lovely.

RAVEN ONG: Thank you.

KATE CORDES: And, OK, right before we go, Miguel, could you just mention again, I'm going to put in the chat the links in case someone missed them, how to access the images we discussed?

MIGUEL ROSALES: So they are available in the digital collections. They are all under Philippine costumes and you can also look them up if you type in the name of the painter who is Justiniano Asuncion. And there's a couple of images and they're all available online.

KATE CORDES: Great. So as Miguel mentioned links to these collections, items, and other resources that we discussed along with the video and transcript of this episode will be published shortly in a blog post on NYPL's website which we'll send out to everyone who registered in a couple of weeks, as we get around to it. And all previous episodes can be found there as well. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the Research at NYPL channel on the blog. I'll put that in the chat. These Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode explores the early days of the wildlife conservation movement and the Audubon

Society's campaign to stop the killing of birds for women's hats and clothing, more fashion. You can register in the link that I'll put in the chat and look for future Doc Chat events there as well. Let me put that in there. And I'm going to just give a plug to a talk I watched of Raven's National Arts Club -- sorry, Raven.

RAVEN ONG: It's OK.

KATE CORDES: It's so good. So if you'd like to hear more about Filipiniana fashion and these other resources that Raven mentioned, the Codex and, you know, the making of the textiles and everything and Imelda Marcos because there was a question about her, that is the link to the talk from last July, I believe it was and it's fantastic. So thank you everyone for your participation and questions. Thank you, Raven and Miguel.

RAVEN ONG: Thank you. Thank you New York Public Library.

KATE CORDES: Of course. Come back.

RAVEN ONG: Will do, anytime.

KATE CORDES: All right everyone. Farewell.

RAVEN ONG: Bye.