

Stepping in Pinoy Style

April 28 to June 20, 2009

Yuchengco Museum

For Filipinos, protection as well as adornment for the feet, in any form, weaves tales of history, social stature, and traditions.

For early Filipinos, traditional footwear meant the absence of footwear, until the time when traders and colonizers visited our shores, as chronicled by our shoe-clad Spanish colonizers upon encountering our barefooted forefathers that they were “uncivilized” indios.

And predictably, over time, like all our Asian brothers who were forced to adapt to the dress codes of their colonizers, we have integrated the use of some components of Western dress, more specifically footwear, in our way of native dressing.

In time, shoes have subliminally become an instrument for labeling and segregating people in our society according to their economic class, social status, and ideology: the *bakya* for the lowly, the *tsinelas* for the middle-class, and the *sapatos* for the *ilustrados*, *peninsulares*, and *insulares*.

Even in the characterization of our national heroes, Jose Rizal and Andres Bonifacio, the latter, a plebian, was frequently portrayed in his *tsinelas*, while the former, an *ilustrado*, is always portrayed in his European shoes.

Quite inconsistently, in the present modern idiom, the word “*bakya*” has acquired a new meaning: lowly, of no taste, as disproven by the revival of the *bakya* which has not escaped the discerning eye of fashion innovators abroad.

Shoes or footwear have also inspired Filipino artists, musicians, and poets, as evidenced in our songs, poems, novels, and folklore in the forms the lowly *bakya*, and *tsinelas*.

Today, the Filipinos have been described as fashionable and good dressers. Our design taste has been accurately labeled as global. Hence, our footwear designers have been quickly recognized here and in some fashion capitals of the world.

Fashionable means being retro as well, as we revive our liking for lowly *bakya* and *zapatillas*. Trendy too, as we rekindle our liking for *abaloryos* or beaded shoes. We quickly adapted a good sense of taste and, likewise, have been trendy and fashionable.

Tsinelas

The *tsinelas* (slippers), which was derived from the Spanish word “*chinela*,” is a piece of light low-cut footwear that can be easily slipped onto the foot. Its simple design consists of a flexible sole and a Y-shaped hold-strap strategically placed to bind the slipper to the foot. It is considered a necessity by most Filipinos, and has been incorporated in the standard inventory of every household, regardless of their social and economic class. Though traditionally made from *abaca* or *katad* (leather), modern *tsinelas* are now made out of rubber, fabric, synthetic resin, and other materials. The *tsinelas*, thanks to its practicality and usefulness, has become part of Philippine popular culture.

Owing to its popularity, Filipino games have been observed to employ the use of *tsinelas* as premium media for gameplay. Among such games are *tumbang preso*, where boys use their *tsinelas* to hit a can inside a drawn circle; and *paway*, which makes use of the *tsinelas* as a *pamato* (primary tool) to hit the *tsinelas* of their rivals in order to win.

There are even festivals in the country that celebrate the humble Filipino footwear.

Today, the Brazilian brand “Havaianas” has transformed the simple *tsinelas* into trendy flip-flops. These rubber slippers, often patterned with hibiscus flowers and selling at an exorbitant price, have changed our notion of the *tsinelas* from a basic, practical necessity into a hip fashion accessory.

Bakya

The wooden clogs or *bakya* is the national footwear of the Philippines and was most popular between the 1950s and 1970s, until the introduction of rubber slippers. So popular even, that there is a song and movie inspired by it entitled “*Bakya Mo Neneng*.”

Bakya, as we know it, are simple wooden clogs with plastic straps. It is mostly remembered as the traditional footwear worn with our national costume, the *baro't saya*. The word, however, connotes poor taste and, eventually, to a more general term of *pang-masa*. Nevertheless, the word *bakya* is simply a fond reference to humble beginnings.

Fashioned from light wood initially with the use of the bandsaw, the *bakya* was then smoothly shaved and carved with floral, geometric, or landscape designs, and then painted or varnished to a high sheen in the distinctive Paete style. Uppers made of clear plastic or thin rubber were then fastened to the sides with tiny nails (*clavitos*). The *bakya* was then ready for export.

In its heyday (1930s to 1950s), American tourists and soldiers bought *bakya* as souvenirs for their girlfriends and mothers. But, for Filipinos, the *bakya* was the footwear for all seasons. The *bakya* was easy to get in and out of, which made it convenient for use by people who wore them on the ground, but took them off when climbing upstairs into their houses. They say you could tell how well-mannered a person was by the way he left behind his *bakya* before entering the house.

In the early 1950s, *bakya* shops were veritable channels of Paete culture, where apprentices were trained, families worked closely together, traditional songs and poems were passed on to the young, friendships were forged, and romances blossomed. *Bakya* was Paete's rice-and-fish. The industry that fed, clothed, and sheltered its townsfolk also taught them responsibility and gave them wisdom. It nurtured their dreams and led them to believe that they would grow up to become good people, just like their parents. And Paete prospered.

Corchos

When Spain brought its culture and lifestyle to the islands, locals were quick to adopt and adapt fashion influences. Derivative of the Spanish *zapatilla* was the Filipino *corcho*, soft velvet closed-toe slippers with beaded designs.

With motifs such as flowers, stripes, and other semi-abstract forms, colorful beads added to the elegance of traditional Filipino wear. Sometimes trimmed with leather, these *corchos* were either flat or made with very low heels.

Today, the colorfully beaded *corchos* are worn by Filipina women from all levels of society and not just the upper class. It is still the choice pair of shoes to match with the *terno* or *baro't saya*.

Alfombras

Alfombras are men's soft, padded slippers made of velvet, carpet, or cloth with a wooden sole. Lightweight and comfortable, the first users of *alfombras* were *sabungeros* or cockfighting enthusiasts.

Contemporary Designers

Filipino contemporary shoe designers have a wealth of local and global traditions from where they derive inspiration for their designs. They have breathed new life into the humble *bakya*, carving and painting wooden heels, stylizing old forms, and mixing new material for the upper. The *corchos* or beaded slippers have also evolved into high heeled shoes and today, designed by Filipinos, find their way to fashion stores of the world, and are also worn with prestige and elegance in the international scene.

Others designers have focused on using traditional materials while creating cutting edge global design pieces that stand at par with any other international shoe designer.

Participating local designers, collections, and shoe manufacturers in this exhibition are:

Lila Almario
Maco Custodio
Cesar Gaupo
Emi Jorge
Joanna Litton
Ann Tiukinhoy Pamintuan
Brian Tenorio
Kermit Tesoro
Patis Tesoro

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