

Exhibitions

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'PHILIPPINES: AN ARCHIPELAGO OF EXCHANGE'

Musée du Quai Branly, Paris
9 April to 14 July 2013

France holds unrivalled private collections of Philippine wood sculpture from the Cordillera of northern Luzon, primarily Ifugao rice gods known as *Bulul*, as well as spoons, bowls, figural architectural elements and household charms.

But MdQB curator Constance de Monbrison and Corizon Alvina, an independent researcher from Manila, did not just borrow locally. They cast their nets wide to secure the best pieces from all over the world, and in so doing made history.

One's attention was taken by the beauty, power and dignity of the finest wood sculptures in the world. It felt as if one had entered a marvelous medieval cloister filled with compelling sculptures of saints. These deeply spiritual figures are physical manifestations of the deities that protect the rice, said to be among 10,000 gods of the cultures of northern Luzon.

Well selected as the primary symbol of the show was a sculpture of a man holding a bowl⁽²⁾, dated to the 15th century. A masterpiece of tribal art holding offerings from man and the gods, it was well suited to represent the theme of exchange.

The exhibition moved on to textiles, including fine pieces from the north that showed some kinship with textiles from Taiwan. However, it is also clear that costume and textiles are among the greatest artistic expressions of Mindanao to the far south, falling within the sphere of influence of Borneo, Sulawesi and the Moluccas.



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On view were pieces collected in the early part of the 20th century and now in the Field Museum of Chicago - considered the finest surviving examples in the world⁽¹⁾. Some Mindanao peoples embraced Islam long ago and their art reflects

stylistic traits of their faith: geometric patterns in wood or cloth. Grave markers include boat motifs, a maritime cosmological concept that no doubt predates the arrival of the Qur'an.

A fabulous treasury of ancient gold combined with Iron Age pottery helped answer questions about what the Visayan middle islands were like before the advent of Christianity. The iconography of gold sword handles shows distinct Dayak styling, supporting oral traditions of migrations from Borneo before Western contact.

This was quite simply the finest exhibition of traditional pre-Hispanic cultures ever mounted, an event of immense achievement.

Thomas Murray

1 Manobo or Kulamanof *Mabalot* or chief warrior's trousers, Mindanao, Philippines, 19th century. Banana tree fibre (*abaca*), cotton plainweave, reserve dyed (*tritik*), plant dye, 0.58 × 0.64m (1'11" × 2'1"). Collected by Fay Cooper-Cole, 1911, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 129644

2 Ifugao *Bulul* (rice divinity), Hingyon, Cordillera, northern Luzon, Phillipines, 15th century (C-14 dated 1386-1446). Narra wood, 35.5 × 40 × 48cm (1'2" × 1'4" × 1'7"). Musée du quai Branly, Paris, Anne & Jacques Kerchache donation, 70.1999.4.1