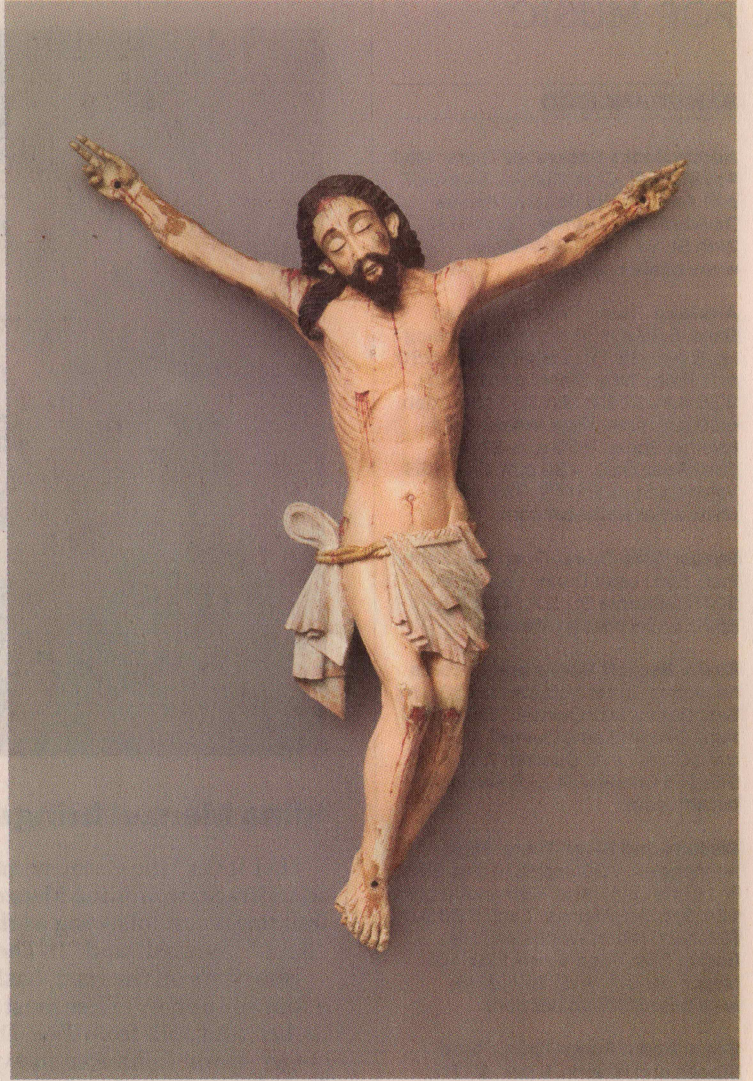




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A carved figure of a "Crucified Christ" (1650-1750) by an unknown artist, above, and Santiago Bose's "Native Song" (1999), at left, are part of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco's "Philippine Art: Collecting Art, Collecting Memories" exhibition.

Overcoming neglect of Filipino art

Art museums in Europe and America reflect the tastes and interests, for the most part, of private collectors. The assembled treasures of the wealthy, first placed on view for the edification of the masses, became the convenient research focus of curators. What did not engage the collector, therefore, did not easily enter the museum.

It's a problem that continues today — see, for example, the recent, unabashedly U.S.- and Euro-centric expansion of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. But some museums have been making efforts to correct the art historical record.

The Asian Art Museum acknowledges its own challenge with regard to the art of South-east Asia — particularly the Philippines — in plain language on a large gallery sign: "The donations that formed the core of the ... original collection did not include this island nation." There's also the problem of stereotype expectations: Objects from a culture with strong Christian traditions and Spanish colonial influence just feel out of place to scholars looking for Buddhist or Hindu sources.

A small exhibition on view through March 11, "Philippine Art: Collecting Art, Collecting Memories," presents 25 acquisitions, nearly all made in the past 10 years. It celebrates the museum's modest success in addressing the absence of cultural objects related to the Filipino background of half a million Bay Area residents.

Two devotional sculptures remind us of 377 years of Spanish dominance: A blandly serene "Virgin Mary" of indeterminate date ("perhaps"

1650-1800), borne on the wings of angels, and a bloody "Crucified Christ" (1650-1750) with a solidly architectural loincloth. A pair of paintings from the 20th century — Fernando Amorsolo's "Farmers Working and Resting" (1955) and "Popcorn Sellers in the Luneta" (1961) by Anita Mag-saysay-Ho — are saccharine idealizations, no match for the honest conviction of an unknown folk artist's 18th century "Saint Isidore the Farmer and Worshippers in a Field."

The museum's choices of contemporary art tend to the political. "1081," an etching made in 1975 by Benedicto Reyes Cabrera, is a bracing evocation of the era of martial law proclaimed three years earlier by Ferdinand Marcos

as Proclamation 1081. Santiago Bose's "Native Song" (1999) is more ambitious, taking on the topic of subjugation, whether by Spain, the U.S. or the Catholic Church.

A cabinet of textiles and costume is dominated by a brilliantly flowered women's shawl — actually a Chinese product of the sort embraced by Filipina women, a reminder of the overlapping borders of culture in the 20th century. But the quiet star of the entire exhibition hangs in a different part of the same display case: a wispy men's shirt, woven in the 19th century of pineapple leaf fibers ("piña"), silk and cotton. A shirt that, just by being, lays claim to elegance, national identity and masculine confidence.

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"Philippine Art: Collecting Art, Collecting Memories": 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays- Sundays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Through March 11. \$10-\$15. Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., S.F. (415) 581-3500. www.asianart.org

Above: "Saint Isidore the Farmer and Worshippers in a Field" (1750-1800), by an unknown Filipino artist. Left: A man's shirt (barong tagalog) woven (1800-1900) of pineapple fiber, silk and cotton, with shell.

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