THE VINTAGE sepia images are interspersed with colored photos, like the details of the fabrics or embroidery and designs, to remind readers that those “terno” were in full color. Jo Ann Bitagcol was the book’s photographer, with styling by Michael Salientes.

**What you didn’t know about the ‘terno’—and no, it wasn’t Ramon Valera who invented it**

‘It’s not the ‘terno’ but the kind of ‘terno,’ declares Mark Higgins, who, with Gino Gonzales, authors a ‘photographic resource book’ published by Bench

By: *Cheche V. Moral*

**Philippine Daily Inquirer** / 07:00 AM November 04, 2015

It was 2003 and, for the first time since the Marcos era, the spotlight was on the *terno*.

The Metropolitan Museum of Manila was holding a *terno* exhibit and a *terno* ball, with a fashion show of contemporary *terno* designs. There was also a nationwide *terno* design competition.

Gino Gonzales, fresh from New York University, was beginning to make a name for himself as scenographer, and exhibition and costume designer. He was in charge of exhibit design and curating the pieces, including the collection of eminent designer Joe Salazar.
Twelve years hence, Gonzales says he was dismayed at the turnout of the young designers’ competition.

“I thought a lot of them missed the point,” he says. “They didn’t get it. They didn’t know the history behind it. How could these guys stylize the terno without knowing what it’s about? A lot of people will be angry at me for saying this, but they really didn’t.”


It’s a photographic resource book that seeks to educate both young fashion students and foreign readers—and everyone in between—on the history of the terno, and how it evolved into what it is today.

Fashion retailer Bench is the publisher.

Variations

Trite as the title might sound (and deliberately so, by the way), it serves as a valuable educational reference that clinically dissects the transformations and variations of the national dress throughout a century, starting when studio photography started to thrive in the Philippines (1860) until the pre-Marcos years (1960).

The idea started with Gonzales merely wanting to preserve the photographic sources of Philippine costumes—postcards—which were fast deteriorating and disappearing. He only wanted to make a small picture book that was easy to carry around.

“He asked me and my sister Sandy for photos of the 1940s to 50s from our archives [for the planned book], and I foolishly said I’d help,” says Higgins, the son of the postwar designer Salvacion Lim Higgins and a co-director of the fashion school Slim’s.
FOR EACH decade, the photos have detailed outlines of how the national dress was evolving—from the folds of the “pañuelo” to the volume of the “saya,” even the women’s current hairstyle.

That was two years ago. What started as a small-budget picture book grew into a 200-page, magazine-size tome.

When they presented it to Ben Chan, Bench founder and chair of Suyen Corp., he loved what he saw and asked them to add another 100 pages, resulting in a hardbound coffee-table book complete with a slipcase.

“Gino is more the expert on the subject, though neither of us has a background in history or even writing,” says Higgins, who’s a visual artist and fashion educator.

“That’s why we also say it’s ‘an evolution,’ not ‘the,’ because we’re not making any ultimate statement. What this book is about is really a thesis—how we think the terno evolved.”

Even with his own students, Higgins says, he’s noticed that they do the terno’s butterfly sleeves so well—a prerequisite for graduation—“but they always close it, they make it into a jacket. They don’t know how long it took to get that neckline, the struggle to remove the pañuelo, to arrive at that point. When the terno ceased to be worn around the end of the Marcos period, there was this gap in history where all these young people growing up in that period didn’t have an idea what the terno is.”
THE VOLUME of the sleeves from 1908 onward signified women’s emancipation and new confidence as they earned the right to college education.

Monumental task

The authors soon realized the monumental task ahead, discovering there were very few scholarly sources in existence.

But they found two that were specially useful: an unpublished thesis by a certain Paz Meliton y de Mingo, who wrote it for her master’s degree at the University of Santo Tomas in 1949 (found at Lopez Museum), and four volumes of “The Terno” magazine (found at the Ateneo).

Meliton’s thesis, “A History of Philippine Costumes,” was also the basis of National Artist Salvador Bernal’s “Patterns for the Filipino Dress: From the Traje de Mestiza to the Terno, 1890s-1960s.”

The search for photographs led them all over, including cold-calling museums and individual sources.

They found what they needed from the Lilly Library in Indiana University, the US Library of Congress, three museums in Spain, a museum in the Netherlands, Getty Images, and London’s Victoria & Albert Museum, as well as individual collectors.
They were careful to avoid “landmines,” like using too many materials from certain families, or even from the Slim’s archive. Though who they were played a role in the clothes they wore, specific individuals weren’t the story, say the authors, such that the identities of the women in the photos are only identified in the index.

The book is, they stress, by no means a social registry.

1950S bride and bridesmaid dresses by Salvacion Lim

“We wanted to make a resource book that’s still fashion, and artistically appealing, almost like a textbook, but not too much text because kids won’t read it,” Higgins says. “Bench was on top of our list because it has that connection with pop culture. It also has a roster of endorsers that could popularize the terno again.”

At the launch at the Peninsula Manila, Slim’s students will dress Bench’s celebrity endorsers in terno. The book will be sold at Bench stores.

A more affordable soft-bound version will also be available. Bench is donating copies to municipal libraries.
THE BOOK’S creative and editorial team, and table of contents, with an image of actress Gloria Romero, in an off-shoulder Ramon Valera terno, circa 1956

Vital knowledge

In their research, the authors found startling details about the terno that they believe are vital knowledge for today’s fashion students and designers.

“We want to correct some misconceptions, including the idea that Ramon Valera invented the terno; he did not,” Gonzales says.

“No one person invented it. It was a collective effort. The removal of the pañuelo, which is usually attributed to Valera, happened way, way before [he removed it]. Women have been trying to remove it way before.”

They found photos of four women in 1910 without pañuelo; Valera began designing in the 1930s.

“There was so much rage for daring to remove it, and those women got flak for doing so,” Gonzales adds.
**Definition of terms**

The book also has three glossaries of terminologies: one on textiles, another on jewelry and a general one. They aim to clarify the meaning of the word “terno,” “because it kept changing throughout the decades,” says Higgins.

“Terno literally means a matching set, but when you look at the terno today, it’s illogical. In the 1920s it referred to a matching set of camisa, pañuelo and saya. Before that, they didn’t match.

“Terno was a reference word that they used if they wanted it to match—the design, burda, etc. were all matching. It didn’t refer to a single dress until about the 1940s.”

For each decade, the photos have detailed outlines of how the national dress was evolving, from the folds of the pañuelo to the volume of the saya, even the women’s current hairstyle. There’s also a pullout illustrative timeline of how the terno evolved vis-à-vis the western dress.

“We’re the only country in Southeast Asia whose national dress evolved directly from the couture houses of Paris. It’s a plus, not a minus,” adds Higgins.

“We made it our own. The sleeve is our own, it’s a hybrid sleeve.”

As a fashion observer, Gonzales could name only a handful of designers whom he thinks know their terno history, based on the clothes they make for the annual State of the Nation Address (Sona).

He cites the work of designer Pepito Albert: “You see that it’s very stylized, very architectural, but there’s a back story there that’s not necessarily in your face. You know he studied it. There’s just a hint of pañuelo, but you know that it is one. Even when he does a drape here, you know that he’s stylizing a tapis.”

“What Gino is saying is that you know if somebody knows what they’re doing and they know their reference, versus someone who’s groping in the dark, simply stylizing something they don’t know about,” Higgins adds.

**Political connotations**

“It’s all subtraction,” says Gonzales. “But these informed designers are able to quote from the past… They know the codes; they’re toying with it and turning it into something else. Some young designers are merely imposing sleeves on a western dress. The most horrifying part for me—and this is just my opinion—is that there’s a need for these designers to reinvent the sleeves, which is so unnecessary!”

Higgins believes the terno’s butterfly sleeve has reached its height of evolution.

“Rather than reinvent the sleeve, go back and look at what else you can reinvent. It’s fine to make it a bare midriff, or wear it with shorts, but the sleeves have to stay and not shrink any further.”

The authors seek to remind Filipinos that the size of the terno sleeve had political connotations. Its imposing volume was a marker of the Filipina’s emancipation and right to college education.
In the immediate years after 1908, when women started getting their college diplomas, it was essentially the power suit, much like the shoulder pads of the 1980s. Now, say the authors, some designers are collapsing the sleeves, like tiny little-girl dresses.

“Why make it small when it’s the symbol of nationalism? It’s like you don’t want to be noticed,” says Higgins. “Fashion isn’t trivial, it’s an artifact that tells you a lot about a country.”

What the duo is saying is that, there’s nothing wrong with the *terno* being worn at the Sona; people just need to know the etiquette of wearing the national dress because—surprise!—there are different types of *terno* appropriate for each occasion.

“People should wear the *terno* to the Sona, just not those *terno*,” Higgins says. “It’s not the *terno*, but the kind of *terno*. As it is, it looks like Oscar night.”

FAST FACTS: Who invented the Philippine terno?

While former First Lady Imelda Marcos popularized the terno, it has long been worn by Filipino women and evolved from earlier traditional Filipino dresses.

Rappler.com
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STATELY. Former First Lady Imelda Marcos (right) walks with former US President Ronald Reagan (center) and former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos (left) in 1982. File photo

MANILA, Philippines – Former first lady Imelda Marcos was well known for donning the terno and its famous butterfly sleeves during the ’70s, but the controversial "Iron Butterfly", as she was then called, did not invent the traditional Filipiniana dress.

Questions on the terno’s origins cropped up on Thursday, January 26, after Miss Philippines Maxine Medina wrongly attributed the invention of the terno to Mrs Marcos, wife of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos.
In a recorded video shown during the preliminary round of the Miss Universe pageant, Medina said, "The terno was actually invented by our former first lady Imelda Marcos. She invented these butterfly sleeves and they used this as covering their face. It was called terno because it’s all one piece."

Social media users quickly called out Medina for her wrong statement.

Marcos indeed made the terno famous, as it was her dress of choice worn to state events and functions when she was first lady. But the terno, which evolved from earlier traditional Filipino dresses like the baro't saya, the Traje de Mestiza, and the Balintawak, has long been worn by Filipino women years before.

According to Gino Gonzales and Mark Lewis Higgings, authors of the book Fashionable Filipinas: An Evolution of the Philippine National Dress in Photographs, 1860-1960, they found photographs dating back to 1910 showing women wearing a modern version of the terno without the pañuelo, or the long folded scarf dropping down from the chest.

**Matching**

The meaning of the word "terno" was also different back then.

The word "terno" means "matching," and was used in the 1920s to refer to a matching set of camisa, pañuelo, and saya.

“Terno was a reference word that they used if they wanted it to match – the design, burda, etc were all matching. It didn’t refer to a single dress until about the 1940s,” Higgins said.

For a time, the association of the terno with Marcos prompted future administrations to shun the dress and to prefer the kimona and Maria Clara instead.

"She was so closely associated with the terno that the following administration obviously didn’t help by sort of condemning it and wearing the kimona, which is basically a baro’t saya with no sleeves. It’s much easier to make," Higgins said in a 2016 interview with CNN Philippines.

**Designer**

One of the most well known designers of the terno was Ramon Valera, National Artist for Fashion Design. He was credited for giving the country "its visual icon to the world" via the terno.

"In the early 40s, Valera produced a single piece of clothing from a four-piece ensemble consisting of a blouse, skirt, overskirt, and long scarf. He unified the components of the baro’t saya into a single dress with exaggerated bell sleeves, cinched at the waist, grazing the ankle, and zipped up at the back," the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) said in a description of Valera on its website.
"Valera constructed the terno’s butterfly sleeves, giving them a solid, built-in but hidden support. To the world, the butterfly sleeves became the terno’s defining feature," it added.

But Gonzales and Higgins said that crediting the invention of the terno and the removal of the pañuelo to Valera was a misconception.

“No one person invented it. It was a collective effort. The removal of the pañuelo, which is usually attributed to Valera, happened way, way before [he removed it]. Women have been trying to remove it way before," Gonzales said in a 2015 interview with the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

Today, the terno is the dress of choice in formal occasions requiring Filipinana dress, such as the annual State of the Nation Address.


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Why the ‘terno’ and the SONA are a perfect match

By Don Jaucian Fri, July 7, 2017

The Actress Cielito Legaspi photographed in the 1950s with a cocktail "terno," a semiformal version worn to suit several events and occasions. Photo from ROWELL SANTIAGO/FASHIONABLE FILIPINAS
Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — Even before the former First Lady Imelda Marcos made it a staple in her duties as the wife of the country’s chief executive, the *terno* had enjoyed quite an evolution from the Spanish colonial period up to the postwar era, during which period it developed under the auspicious hands of those who knew about the power of fashion. In its heyday, coinciding with the golden age of haute couture from 1947 to 1957, the *terno* became a rarified specimen of clothing, reflecting the society that donned it. Though it always carried upper-class bearings, Filipino women themselves chose to evolve the *terno*, deconstructing its use from formal gatherings to semiformal functions and choosing to drop a piece or two from the ensemble, but never stripping it of its essence.

The *terno* bore the mark of Imelda Marcos even after her husband’s rule had ended, and this meant that any associations with it were avoided by future administrations, choosing instead to revert to a simplified version of the national dress, such as the *kimona* and the Maria Clara. Though often relegated to the sidelines, the *terno* enjoyed a revival from time to time, with one moment where it continues to be able to take the spotlight being the president’s annual state of the nation address (SONA), where attendees are required to wear Filipiniana — a theme that over the years has expanded into some sort of Oscar red-carpet pageantry, prompting President Rodrigo Duterte to shift the dress code into simpler business attire to rid the day of the perceived unnecessary pomp that’s become common in the recent SONAs.

One of the casualties of this proclamation is the *terno*, which grows more misapprehended as a status symbol of exuberance and excess. Mark Lewis Higgins, co-author of the book “Fashionable Filipinas: An Evolution of the Philippine National Dress in Photographs 1860-1960” with Gino Gonzales, makes a case for this misunderstood piece, calling it the deserved national dress. Below are edited excerpts from CNN Philippines Life’s interview with Higgins.

Pillow vendors photographed in Cebu, circa 1910s. They are all wearing "camisa," "panuelo," and the cotton "saya" commonly worn by women during the period. Photo from LOPEZ MUSEUM AND LIBRARY/FASHIONABLE FILIPINAS
How do you think the call for simplicity in the SONA dress code will affect the terno, with the SONA being one of the rare national occasions where the Filipino people can see a showcase of the terno being worn by many?

First of all, I don’t have a particular attachment to the terno. I’m just telling you this from a very clinical perspective. It’s nothing to do with patriotism, preference, or ulterior motives, I guess because I grew up with my mother, who’s from the postwar generation. This is what I saw, this is what I learned, and because of working on the “Fashionable Filipinas,” the research that I did, the story that I knew existed, we were able to put supporting evidence of it. You have all kinds of Filipino or native dress in this country. Wherever you travel you have the different tribal clothes, you go to the south you have the malong, etc. And all of those are perfectly credible national dresses. But if you really study the history of the country, the terno was the one that really had its own unique trajectory. It was evolved deliberately by women.

If you look at the baro’t saya, which is a T-shaped garment with the sort of sarong that you can find all over Southeast Asia in one form or another. The terno is distinct to us because first of all, the ancestor of the terno was the Maria Clara or in correct terminology, the traje de mestiza. It was adapted from what the Spanish women were wearing around the 1500-1600s and that evolved into the terno. If you really want to be purist about something, for me what is truly Pinoy is that we are a unique hybrid of cultures, of both East and West, and that’s what makes us special. The traje de mestiza was adapted from Spanish clothing, and the baro’t saya is sort of generic Southeast Asian clothing. It’s really the terno that is unique. It is the most sophisticated and it looks like no other dress in the world.

You really just have to temper what you’re wearing according to the time of day and the occasion. You’re talking about a somber government function. You should look very elegant, very dignified, but please don’t wear a train, don’t wear fully sequined fabric or shiny stuff at three in the afternoon.

How do you think the political connotations of the terno affect its standing?

Well, obviously the person most associated with the terno is Imelda Marcos. And also because the Marcoses were in power for a very long time, pretty much all my life growing up they were in power, so by the time they left, she was so closely associated with the terno that the following administration obviously didn’t help by sort of condemning it and wearing the kimona, which is basically a baro’t saya with no sleeves. It’s much easier to make.

You have decades that passed since the Marcos periods have ended, and you have designers who didn’t know how to make the sleeves properly anymore. And the other stuff is easier to make and easier to keep. So there are many reasons why it wasn’t resurrected, I think. But there’s a very important section in our book that talks about semiformal versions of the terno, because after World War II, there was such a resurgence of patriotism, because finally, the Philippines was an independent country. Filipina women, which my mother was very much a part of that generation, championed the terno so much that they found ways to fit it into every sort of level of society and occasion. If you were attending a formal luncheon, you would wear a short terno made of cotton, or linen ternos. Or if you went to a cocktail party that wasn’t completely formal, you’d wear a cocktail dress with terno sleeves. That sensibility has been lost, I find.
In answer to the overdressing at the SONA, there really is an etiquette that the postwar generation knew that is lost today, where you have some pretty ridiculous outfits in the SONA because it has become something like an Oscar red carpet. That’s not correct either. There should be daytime ternos. These semiformal and daytime ternos in the 50s, they didn’t have beadwork, they didn’t have bling on them although they would be embellished with Swiss straw, or if they were embroidered they would use wooden beads and stuff. There was a whole hierarchy of what sort of terno you wore for the occasion and time of day. And I think people need to relearn that now.

Why do you think people have had such a narrow perspective on the terno and what it represents, that there’s only one idea of what a terno is?

Amnesia. That’s the real answer. Look, fashion also changed. By the 1960s, it was not only Mrs. Marcos who was closely associated with wearing the terno. Beginning as far back as the 1920s, there was already a struggle to keep the terno alive. In the late 1890s, the Americans came and there was a struggle between wearing the terno or the Western dress, but there were conscious efforts in the 20s to keep the terno alive so it became required for formal occasions, as in the Philippine Women's University, where that was the graduation dress.

There were conscious efforts to keep it going but sadly by the time the Marcos period ended there were two things that happened. One was Imelda; the other was fashion became very evolved and very from the street. And let’s face it, the terno is very impractical and pretty uncomfortable.
They’re not easy to make. They’re not easy to keep, so women, I think, happily said: “OK, great! Let’s not wear them anymore.”

You have to realize that is the one dress that tells the history of the country. Which is why when I started meeting with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, they saw that right away. Because you have the _terno_ that I donated to them, which were from the late 50s, from my mother. I realized, and I had a discussion with them, this is an artifact that shows you the society back then. There’s this couture dress that was sort of echoing the new look that was happening in Paris yet it had the distinct butterfly sleeves. That tells you a lot about the progressive society, how forward-thinking they were, how it’s in a way patriotic but at the same time they were putting couture elements to the national dress. No other country did that. That’s what makes it unique.

People in power, whether in politics or in fashion or any kind of arts authorities have to really think about what you’re saying before you say it. Because I think we like to give these sweeping statements that can make us appear heroic at times, but think about what you’re removing from the history of our country by doing that.

**What can be the role of local designers to help create a resurgence for the _terno_?**

When we did the “SLIM: Salvacion Lim Higgins – Philippine Haute Couture 1947-1990” book in 2009, a lot of young stylists and fashion people wore the “terno.” They no longer have the baggage people my age had. Fashion changed; it became simpler. And then the _terno_ got relegated to cultural affairs — it was just too impractical. But I remember when I was a kid, when you went to church, even in the province, you’d see old ladies wearing _terno_” with _panuelos_! This was the early 60s. It’s not that long ago.

In terms of simplifying, as a creative person, designer, or stylist, you have to really analyze what that means. For example, if you want to wear a _barong_ that’s not ostentatious … There is a way to dress in an austere way, whether you’re male or female, but without destroying industries. You’ll put a lot of people out of business if you stop embroidering _barongs_. You’re going to put whole communities out of business. Again, this is a whole different story about how _barong_ evolved, but be careful what you’re erasing from history when you proclaim a message about something. People in power, whether in politics or in fashion or any kind of arts authorities, you have to really think about what you’re saying before you say it. Because I think we like to give these sweeping statements that can make us appear heroic at times, but think about what you’re removing from the history of our country by doing that. The _terno_ was one of the casualties. I think the former President Cory Aquino didn’t help by not wearing it. But then again, I’m not faulting her. But if you look at the history of fashion, whenever there is an upheaval, the clothing changes, which is why, as Diana Vreeland said, fashion can tell you the history of the country.
Terno sleeves from the 1950s in “cañamazo” embroidered with Swiss straw. Photo by JO ANN BITAGCOL/SLIM’S FASHION AND ARTS SCHOOL/FASHIONABLE FILIPINAS

The SONA, though, is a rare event that can highlight the terno ...

I think that’s great, but you really just have to temper what you’re wearing according to the time of day and the occasion. You’re talking about a somber government function. You should look very elegant, very dignified, but please don’t wear a train, don’t wear fully sequined fabric or shiny stuff at three in the afternoon.

Do you think there are other venues for the terno to flourish?

Absolutely. We’re hoping Bench does a terno ball. Things like that, that is what will create that resurgence. Maria Claras and kimonas are much easier to make for a designer and much easier to store for the client. But in my opinion, the terno is the formal national dress. So what if it’s not easy to keep or not easy to wear? It’s the national dress. It constantly reminds you you’re wearing the national dress.

Some people think the terno is an artifact and not an actual piece of clothing that you can wear. Is there a danger that, with all these proclamations, the terno will just be relegated to a national costume?

I can’t predict the future, to tell you honestly, but to tell you from the bottom of my heart, it’s the one national dress that deserves to remain because, as I said, it tells a bigger story than the others.


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