An overly abbreviated history of Philippine fashion

“You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select—I don’t know—that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you’re trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back... However, that blue represents millions of dollars—and countless jobs—and it’s sort of comical how you think that you’ve made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact you’re wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room.”

Truly, Andy Sachs (a character played by Anne Hathaway in the popular movie Devil Wears Prada) had it coming from THE Miranda Priestly (portrayed by Meryl Streep) when she found it funny that a group of people working at Runway fashion magazine got too serious deciding which of the two belts in almost identical hues of blue they should use for the fashion shoot.

One might think this is just a mere scene in a movie, but there are probably numerous real people who think the same way. The Andy Sachs of the world still have not grasped how fashion is entwined in our social and personal lives. They dismiss fashion as something insignificant. Fashion, for them, is all about what one wears at home, at work, when traveling or when attending special occasions.

But fashion is more than just clothes.
“Fashion is a design field of enormous impact. Fashion design is even closer; it is literally all over us—and throughout us, as it turns out, since we use it to project, aspire, express, and redesign ourselves, and to size up and judge others. Fashion is a form of design. We believe strongly that no true design history can be told without discussing garments and everything that they encompass, from aesthetics and technology, to economy, sociology, anthropology, labor practices, the whole world,” said Museum of Modern Art senior curator in Architecture and Design Paola Antonelli, who facilitates the Fashion as Design short course offered by the renowned art museum.

**FASHION EVOLUTION**

To understand fashion, we must look at clothes in the historical and social context in which it is made. In the Philippines, for instance, we have to revisit our history to know how our clothes have evolved, or how clothes changed the society. The evolution of Filipino fashion and clothing style reflects the rich history of the Philippines and greatly influenced by the chronological events that occurred in Philippine history—the more than 300 years of Spanish occupation, the American colonization, the World War II following the Japanese era, and other significant events.

In pre-colonial period, clothes signified social status. In the north, men wore a bahag or loincloth or pants. Women, on the other hand, often went topless, with just a woven skirt with intricate beadwork and other ornaments. Tattoos symbolized power and strength in warriors, beauty, power and wealth for women.

In Central Philippines, the Tagalog men wore baro, which is the predecessor of Barong Tagalog, while women donned baro at saya made from silk in matching colors. The textile used to make baro’t saya indicated social status - women in the upper social ladder wore silk, while those from lower caste used materials made pounded white bark fibers. Aside from materials, the colors of the clothes also symbolized social status. Take for instance, the Kanga, the sleeve-doublet made by rough cotton worn by men. Red kanga were often worn by the chieftains and warriors, while black and white were for the rest.

In the Visayas, clothes were somehow similar to those worn by the Malays. Baquero (ankle-long jacket without collar) or marlota (a colorful robe) were the usual outfit back then. Completing the look was the putong/pudong (a narrow strips of cloth wrapped around the forehead and temple like a turban) or the saplung (a bandana), as well as pieces of gold jewelry with intricate patterns and precious stones. Only the braves wore a red pudong, called magalong, while the commoners donned pudong-pudong, a turban mad from rough abaca. In Mindnnao, malong or tubular skirt is a fashion staple.
A STYLE FILLED OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

With the settlement of Spaniards in the country came a different fashion style. The traditional baro’t saya evolved into an Hispanized version, with a camisa (bodice) made from pina or muslin, and a floor-length skirt. Baro turned into Barong Tagalog, with collars and buttoned lace shirt.

By the turn of the 19th century, the Hispanized baro’t saya transformed again as the European influences arrived to the country because of the rising economy and globalization. It was the birth of the Maria Clara, which was named after the female protagonist in Joe Rizal’s novel Noli Me Tangere. This fashion ensemble now had four components - the full-wide skirt with long train, camisa or blouse, panuelo or scarf, and tapis or knee-length over-skirt.

Modesty has something to do with the introduction of panuelo and tapis. The panuelo, often embellished and served as accent piece, was used to cover the low-necked camisa. Tapis, meanwhile, was used to cover the lower torso because of the thinness of the saya.

Barong Tagalog has also evolved. From collarless baro, the new version got an upgrade with buttons and collars, as well as intricate embellishments. Men started wearing it with camisa de chino, an undershirt, an influence from the Chinese who traded goods in the Philippine waters.

These fashion staples remained even until the first few years of the American occupation. At the dawn of the 20th century, Maria Clara became the Traje de Mestiza, a modernized version with biggest sleeves and narrower floor-length skirt with a saya de cola (long train). This look reflected the Edwardian fashion prominent in the West during that era.

In 1920s, the Traje de Mestiza underwent another transformation. The wide sleeves was replaced by the butterfly sleeves, and the panuelo became much smaller. The look made its debut, and became prominent due to the annual Manila Carnival.

But as more and more Filipinos traveling and living in Europe and the US, Western influences were becoming more prominent. Women started doning loose dresses and knee-length skirt, foregoing the conservative look of floor-length skirts and dresses. Men donned suit and coat, replacing Barong Tagalog.

Floral dresses eventually replaced Traje de Mestiza in 1930s. While the elders still used it for everyday wear, the younger generation thought differently. The traditional dress was deemed as merely a formal dress for special events and occasions, especially for carnivals and galas.
THE WAR AND THE NEW ERA

When the World War II broke out, the Japanese forces occupied some of the factories, which resulted in shortage of textiles. Tailoring shops, clothing boutiques and dressmakers closed shop during the war. The trade and economic activities were affected.

As the people lived through rations, their clothes became much simpler. Men abandoned coat and “Americana.” Women no longer wore terno. Stores only sold monochromatic dresses in dark colors. Since its production has stopped, terno faced its gradual death.

After the war, the capital city suffered great destruction. Most of its infrastructures were bombed, the economy on a standstill. People started to build their lives. They focused on providing basic necessities such as food and shelter. Since, there was a lack of dressmakers and tailors, people could not find new clothes. The fashion style from the late 1930s until early 1940s remained.

In the 1950s, as the country enjoyed a rise in the economy, people earned enough to have more than their necessities. They started buying new clothes such as floral dresses and fuller knee-length skirts for women, and sweaters, colored printed polos, pants and flannels for men.

When the late Ramon Magsaysay became the president, he championed the Barong Tagalog. Following his advocacy of promoting nationalism,

he often donned Barong Tagalog in all the official functions he attended. This led to the rebirth of the Filipiniana. Although women still rarely wore it everyday, it was often used as formal attire in special events.

With the popularity of British pop culture, Philippine fashion started to change in the 1960s. Mod became an instant hit. Hemlines got shorter, while the clothes became more loose. Mini skirt and mini dresses became the go-to fashion piece for women. With the invention of hairspray, hairstyle got bigger and bolder.

In the late 1960s until the early 1970s, Filipinos embraced the hippie culture. Victorian vintage clothes made a comeback. Women abandoned the miniskirts and dresses to more modest clothing with long sleeves, laces and collars. In this era, bell bottom pants in bright colors was introduced. Turtle necks, sweater vests, colorful patterned polos and pants were the norm. Long hair for men became acceptable.
Disco culture emerged in the mid-1970s. Bell bottoms remained a fashion staple, usually paired with polos in bright colors and scarves. Women donned sequined short dresses. The laid back vibe of the era led to the popularity of more casual look. Bakya, a kind of footwear, became popular, as well as the denim-shirt ensemble.

Shoulder pads ushered the power dressing movement among women, especially the young adults. Wearing neon-colored clothes paired with miniskirts was a huge trend. Curls were in, and straight hair was out. Sporty look rose to popularity. Shorts were introduced for both boys and girls. Leggings became an everyday clothing, along with headbands and legwarmers.

The 1990s was all about loose fashion - just think oversized shirts and pants. The era ushered in a more laidback version of the 1980s fashion, but with rock music influence on the mainstream fashion. Dark, leather and overly sized clothes pushed bright colored clothes in the closet corner. Denim on denim became popular. While long hair was still popular, chachupoy - a straight hairstyle with middle parting at the center - took the limelight.

THE DAWN OF SOCIAL MEDIA FASHION INSPIRATIONS

The 21st century was a mash-up of different styles from different eras, but the era was characterized by the emergence of spaghetti strap clothes. Women reveled in wearing their innerwear as outerwear. Men’s fashion remained the same, with cargo pants and oversized shirts still popular.

Colorful clothes made a comeback in the mid-2000s, with flannel and checkered polos taking over the shelves of the clothing shops. Layering became the thing - dresses worn over leggings. Short shorts made an appearance, often paired with ugg boots and shirts.

In the advent of new technology and social media in 2010, the Filipinos were exposed to different fashion style and brands. As more and more shopping malls and clothing stores popping up in the metro, the people have more choices; hence, the styles became more varied. They also look for fashion inspirations from various social media apps such as Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook and what have you. Skinny jeans and shorts are no longer just for women. Men begin to wear androgynous fashion items. Women’s fashion becomes more feminine. Fashion look from mid-1960s and mid-1990s came back, with the popularity of midi-skirts, denim jackets, knitted sweaters, boat shoes, among others.
In the digital era, the introduction of e-commerce, coupled with the increasing number of people with disposable income, has altered the way Filipinos consume fashion. True, the fashion industry has always been fast-paced, always getting ahead of the game. But with the modern technology, their capacity to adapt to changes has to do a double time to keep up, otherwise they would be left behind.

Fashion businesses work on strengthening their online presence, partnering with online shopping sites to reach a wider target market. The arrival of smartphones secures a strong demand for up-to-date fashion choices, with affordable pricing. This changes the way people shop, purchase and review items. With just the click, people can see what’s new on the fashion shelves and compare different items and prices before making a purchase.

Fashion retailers think about different strategies to appeal to these mobile customers, including creating a virtual showroom, engaging in real-time customer service and introducing virtual payments. It also changes the way these fashion brands choose their endorsers. Before, they looked for celebrities who have a strong fandom. But now, they are choosing individuals who have huge following on social media. Take for instance, Kendall Jenner who became the face of a beauty brand because she is a social media influencer with over 25 million followers on Twitter and 85 million on Instagram.

THE FASHION IN NUMBERS

With the growing population, rise on spending, and steady remittances from abroad, Philippines has become an attractive retail market.

“Because the climate here so is specific, the fashion here will always be its own thing. It’s the growing middle class that’s really going to change the fashion landscape and not the high-end. As the middle class grows, it will be exciting to see what they come up with,” said. Scott Schuman, founder/editor of top fashion blog, www.thesartorialist.com, in an interview when he came to the country in recent years.

Philippines can’t compete with just pure labor, with Bangladesh, Vietnam, Indonesia and other Asian countries offering more efficient and cheaper production for fast fashion. But fashion designer Josei Natori believes that Philippines can compete when it comes to skills, creativity and artistry, as evident in her decision to do about 50 percent of her company’s production in the Philippines.
According to the report by the Board of Investments released in 2009, the garments and textile industry remains to be one of the top foreign exchange earners in the Philippines, garnering a total of US$848.744 million in exports in the first half of 2009. It is about 4.93 percent of the total Philippine exports amounting to US$17.225 billion.

With top export markets including the US, Japan, Great Britain, Germany and Canada, the garments and textile industry employed close to 400,000 workers, making it the largest employer in the manufacturing sector with 11 percent of the national total. An additional 700,000 people are employed as home-workers and small subcontractors.


Value of Production Index (VaPI) for manufacturing exhibited an annual growth of 3.6 percent, posting the same growth as in May 2016, according to the preliminary results of the Monthly Integrated Survey of Selected Industries (MISSI), with footwear and wearing apparel significantly contributed with 35.9 percent. For Volume of Production Index (VoPI) which continued to gain at a slower rate of 5.8 percent in May 2017, compared with 7.4 percent during same period last year, footwear and wearing apparel provided with 34.6 percent.

This momentum is echoed by the sheer number of Filipino fashion designers making waves in the global fashion market. The Filipino designers have stepped up their creativity and artistry to make the international fashion community notice their designs and craftsmanship.

There is fashion designer Michael Cinco, who holds the distinction of being the first Filipino to showcase in Paris Couture Week. He has dressed Hollywood A-listers Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez and Nicki Minaj. Former beauty queen and Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai Bachchan turned heads when she walked the Cannes red carpet in a Michael Cinco creation.

Designer John Herrera conquered the 2015 Mercedes Benz Tokyo Fashion Week with his marine-inspired collection, and won the London Emerging Designers Award. In 2016, his collection was featured at the London Fashion Week, and even bagged Britain’s Top Designer Award.

Cebu-born designer Monique Lhuillier has been gaining international recognition in the fashion industry, especially in the bridal couture. Hollywood’s biggest names like Halle Berry, Reese Witherspoon and Drew Barrymore have donned her stunning creations.
With his exquisite Fall/Winter collection in 2017, fashion company Moda Operandi took notice of Filipino designer Mark Bumgarner. He has also dressed Aishwarya Rai Bachchan at Cannes International Film Festival.

Dubai-based designer Furne One has become a favorite among the popstars such as Katy Perry and Jennifer Lopez. He has opened his first boutique of his fashion brand Amato Haute Couture in Los Angeles, California in 2012. That sparkling white cape that Beyonce wore at the Grammys was a Furne One creation.

Taking inspirations from her Visayan roots, designer Gabbie Sarenas was able to capture the international fashion audience at the Vancouver Fashion Week; while designer Ken Samudio was chosen by Vogue Italia as one of the Vogue Talents for Accessories in 2014, and was invited to launch his collection at Vogue Talents Corner in Milan in 2015.


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