

From Pineapple to Pañuelo: Philippine Textiles

December 7, 2024 - May 11, 2025

Located in Southeast Asia, the Philippine Islands are home to vibrant and distinct textile traditions. For centuries, *abacá* fibers extracted from the trunk of the banana plant have been knotted together and woven into cloth. After Spanish colonists introduced pineapples from South America in the 1600s, *piña* cloth made from pineapple-leaf fibers followed. Lightweight and semi-transparent—ideal for the hot, humid climate of the Philippines—these textiles are still valued today.

In the 1800s, elite Christianized Filipinos wore *piña* garments to signify their wealth and refinement. American merchants and tourists also purchased *piña* textiles as exotic souvenirs, a practice that increased between 1898 and 1946, when the United States ruled the Philippines. Today, the *abacá* and *piña* textiles in Western museum collections are often confused and mislabeled. We used a microscope to identify the fibers in the works in the RISD Museum collection.

—Angela Hermano Crenshaw, guest curator

RISD Museum is supported by a grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and with the generous partnership of the Rhode Island School of Design, its Board of Trustees, and Museum Governors.

Exhibition design by Nino Chambers (RISD MFA 2025, Furniture)

Exhibition graphics and projection by James Burgat (RISD BFA 2026, Graphic Design)

Title set in Mabuhay, a typeface by Clara Cayosa (RISD MFA 2026, Graphic Design)

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Philippine

Blouse (Camisa or Baro), ca. 1830-1870

Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) plain weave with cotton appliqué

Gift of Mrs. James Comly McCoy **14.414**



Blouses like this one were worn by upper-class Filipina women in the mid-1800s. Sleeve shapes reflected changing fashions: in the early 1800s, sleeves were straight and narrow. By mid-century they became draped and fuller, as you see here. Note the gathers at the shoulders, which created volume and required extra *piña* fabric, further indicating the wealth of the wearer. By 1900, sleeves were stiffer and even larger, and worn higher up on the shoulder.

Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber)
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1050A**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) and silk
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1050B**



These textiles are woven from *liniwan*, the thinnest, finest fibers and the last to be harvested, scraped from the bottom of pineapple leaves. Prized *liniwan* fibers were used to make garments like the blouse and *pañuelos* at left. One of these examples is unembellished, highlighting the fineness of the fibers in plain weave, and the other features blue and yellow checks made of silk.

Philippine
Scarf Length, ca. 1830-1870
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) plain weave with cotton embroidery
Gift of Miss Esther H. Baker **14.403**



This long *piña* scarf testifies to the skill and endurance of weavers and embroiderers who made it. Nearly eight feet long, it features intricate *calado*, a drawn-work technique in which threads are removed and twisted together to create a lace-like effect. *Piña* textiles of this length are rare; this example's unusual embroidery designs may reflect Chinese and Indian influences rather than imported European forms.

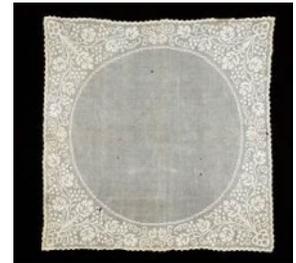
Philippine
Shawl (Pañuelo), ca. 1800-1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) with cotton embroidery
Gift of Mrs. James Comly McCoy 14.411

Cotton embroidery edges this textile. European-style embroidery was introduced to the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period (1565–1898) by Roman Catholic nuns, who taught this skill to young girls. Embroidery continued to be part of a girl's education during the American colonial period (1898–1946), when female American teachers provided instruction in schools. *Piña* cloth woven in the central Visayan islands was sent to embroiderers on the island of Luzon. The town of Lumban in Laguna is known as a center for *piña* embroidery.



Philippine
Shawl (Pañuelo), ca. 1800-1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) with cotton appliqué
Gift of Mrs. James Comly McCoy 14.412

Appliqué is a popular way of embellishing *piña* garments and accessories. Here, thin strips of cotton were cut out in floral and vegetal patterns and sewn onto the *piña* ground. Appliqué is worn on the inside of the garment, creating a shadowy effect known as *sombrado*. Look closely to see where holes in the piña cloth were mended. These repairs were made sometime before the museum acquired this work in 1914.



Philippine
Shawl (Pañuelo), ca. 1800-1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) plain weave with cotton appliqué
Gift of Mrs. James Comly McCoy 14.413

Pañuelos were an important part of the ensembles worn by elite Filipina women in the 1800s. These square piña textiles were starched and folded into triangles, then wrapped around the shoulders. Layering *piña* textiles reduced their transparent effects, and *pañuelos* provided additional coverage for the wearer. Floral cotton *sombrado* appliqué embellishes this *pañuelo* and its matching blouse.



Philippine

Handkerchief, ca. 1800-1900

Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) with cotton embroidery

Gift of Miss Esther H. Baker **14.497**

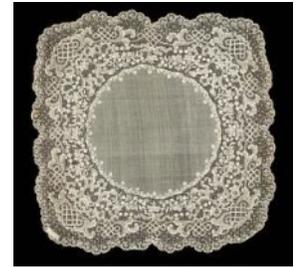


Philippine

Handkerchief, ca. 1800-1900

Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) with cotton embroidery

Gift of Miss Esther H. Baker **14.498**



Fashionable women in the 1800s and early 1900s complemented their *piña* finery with accessories including jewelry, fans, hair combs, and *piña* handkerchiefs. A woman might have embroidered her name or initials on her handkerchief, matching its embroidery or embellishment to that on her blouse and *pañuelo*. Both these handkerchiefs feature a center of plain-weave *piña* edged with drawn-work *calado* and cotton embroidery.

Mandaya

Woman's Blouse (Bado), ca. 1800-1900

Abacá (banana-plant fiber), bast fiber, mother-of-pearl disks, metal sequins; plain weave with embroidery and appliqué

Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf **15.235**



Many garments indigenous to the southern Philippines feature mother-of-pearl embellishments, like the small disks on this blouse. These adornments are made from mollusk shells by men in the community, who work together with the female weavers to produce the finished garments. Embroidered on the back is a human figure similar to the one in the ikat pattern on the skirt below. This blouse was purchased from the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, held in San Francisco in 1915. Many examples of craft and material culture from the Philippines were displayed there, then distributed to American collections.

Philippine

Man's Trousers (Sawal), ca. 1960

Abacá (banana-plant fiber) and cotton plain weave, with embroidery
Gift of Wendy Shah **85.001**

The design of these *abacá* trousers—two leg tubes and a triangular gusset—is typical on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. This region has long been home to Islamic communities, and this trouser shape likely derives from Middle Eastern influences. *Piña* cloth was traditionally woven on floor looms in the central Philippines, whereas the use of backstrap looms for *abacá* weaving has persisted in Indigenous communities in the southern Philippines. Like *piña*, *abacá* fibers are knotted together before weaving.



Philippine

Sarong, ca. 1930-1970

Abacá (banana-plant fiber), ikat-dyed
Mary B. Jackson Fund **2005.4.15**

The ikat patterns on this *abacá* sarong were made by resist-dyeing bundles of fibers before they were woven. While ikat dyeing is practiced throughout Southeast Asia, its use with *abacá* (banana plant) fibers is unique to the Philippines. Here, ikat technique was used to create patterns of human figures and animals—popular motifs among the Mandaya and other communities in the Mindanao region. Flat textiles like this one are wrapped around the hips and tied or sewn into a tube shape to be worn as a skirt.



Philippine

Textile, ca. 1900

Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) and cotton

Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1044D**

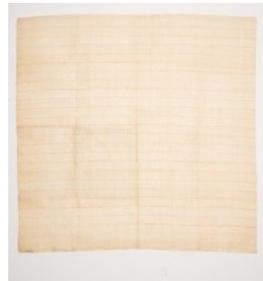
In 1909, these and other Philippine objects were gifted to the RISD Museum by the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Most are made of *piña bastos*—the thicker, rougher fibers that are the first to be harvested from pineapple-plant leaves. These works were originally brought to the US for the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, and were likely displayed at the Philippine Village there with other objects by Filipino makers, plants and animals native to the Philippines, and exhibits of living Filipino people.



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) and cotton
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1045a**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) and silk
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1045B**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) and cotton
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1045C**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber) and cotton
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1045D**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber)
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1047A**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber), silk, and cotton
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1047B**



Philippine
Textile, ca. 1900
Piña (pineapple-leaf fiber), silk, and cotton
Gift of the American Museum of Natural History **09.1047E**



Keystone View Company, photography studio
Meadville, Pennsylvania; 1892–1963
Manila Hemp Industry—Stripping the Tree—Philippines, late 1800s–
early 1900s
Glass
Gift of Andrew Wallerstein **1994.113.176**



Keystone View Company, photography studio
Meadville, Pennsylvania; 1892–1963
Manila Hemp Industry—Interior Native Rope Factory, P.I., late 1800s–
early 1900s
Glass
Gift of Andrew Wallerstein **1994.113.177**



These images document the processing of *abacá* fibers by Filipino workers. One of the strongest natural fibers, *abacá* has been harvested from banana plants and woven into cloth by Indigenous communities for centuries. In the 1800s, American investors industrialized the

process, leading to the use of *abacá* in rope and cordage for sailing. Also known as Manila hemp, *abacá* fibers came to be used in paper, lending its name to Manila envelopes and Manila paper.