

BOOK REVIEW

Kayamanan: The Philippine Jewelry Tradition. Ramon N. Villegas. Manila: The Central Bank of the Philippines, 1983. 210 pp. Original price: Peso 1000.

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This sumptuous book depicts a large number of jewelry pieces, primarily of gold, from many periods of Philippine history. While the plates of this often astounding jewelry are most fetching, the text is our concern here.

The stated goal of the work is "to gain deeper knowledge of Philippine jewelry tradition," through documentation, identification, classification, qualitative analysis ("the critical analysis of materials, styles and techniques"), and contextualization of jewelry (1). One could only applaud a book which reached these goals, and the success of a book must be judged on how well it meets its own standards.

The author begins with a handicap. As he quite rightly points out, there has been no synthesis of the history, origins, and use of personal adornment in the Philippine context. The published sources are meager, the actions of some collectors have been detrimental, and Philippine prehistoric studies are not well developed.

But to that handicap, Villegas adds another, unnecessary one. A jeweler rather than an academic, he engages in what might be called "scholar bashing." He has no patience for "specialist scholars [who] have segmented, not cemented, our cultural experience" (2). Though he stops short of naming names, he must have had certain people in mind when he vilifies "mismanagement, corruption, and plain incompetence." Beyond that, however, he has no patience with the tedium of archacology or the measured attempt to get at truth. Research into the past

should be a neatly understood history rather than an inexact science that pursues problems, poses hypotheses, and seeks ways to test them. Some of his criticism may well be justified, particularly in the Philippines of the Marcoses, but the question is whether Villegas can do any better.

The content of chapter 3 (mostly on beads) is full of misascriptions and misidentifications. Given that bead research had not progressed very far when Villegas was writing, this alone is not a serious critique, as he could not be expected to know what no one else knew. Many of his errors are traceable to his sources, but some are not. His definition of *mutisalah* (28) includes a wide range of beads, but has nothing to do with the beads his source (van der Sleen) calls "mutisalah." Granted, the term is confusing, and Lamb and van der Sleen argued over what it means. It is "false pearl" in Indonesian, but is applied in Timor and Flores to both drawn Indo-Pacific beads made in South and Southeast Asia and small wound "coil" beads made in China. It covers any small opaque red or orange bead, but certainly never all the beads Villegas names. Yet, he feels free to use his "information" to bolster other points, as when he declares that there are "tons of West Asian beads in many sites throughout the Philippines" (66).

Leaving aside glass beads, the author is badly misinformed about jade (17, 187). Jade is not exceptionally hard, but exceptionally tough. It was named by the Spanish in Mexico, not the Portuguese in Macao. Jadeite can

hardly be described as “crystalline.” Unlike the case of glass beads, there is no excuse for not having these points straight.

However, the author is obviously most concerned with gold, and his work should be judged on what he has to say about the precious metal. The thrust of his text is to demonstrate that most gold jewelry in the Philippines was made there. He brushes aside suggestions that sophisticated pieces were imported, as examples of ignorant prejudice based on class or ethnic shortsightedness. This problem was the very reason I opened this volume. How is it solved?

One evidence of goldworking is tools. Although goldworking tools have never been excavated, Villegas has “collected several artifacts probably connected with goldwork” (71). Two are assumed to be dies for punching, and one is supposed to be a touchstone. There is no attempt at dating them, and no mention of the fact that anyone can use a touchstone. We are not even given photographic proof of their existence, only a line drawing (75).

Turning to style, we can take as an example the discussion (76–79) of goldwork during the “High Classic” period (seventh to thirteenth century). A catalogue of Philippine pieces resembling jewelry from Ur, Thebes, and elsewhere in Egypt, all from the second millennium B.C., is supposed to whet our appetites as to how they came to the islands. Such “endless” examples were not imported because the dates are so far apart. They could have been locally made, spontaneously derived from the “universal tank of ideas,” but “historical data” suggest otherwise. It is first postulated that West Asians set up goldworking shops in Malaya and Sumatra, and they filtered into the Philippines, but we are told that it is not likely since such objects are very rare in those areas. The answer lies in the Surigao Treasure, which “allows us to reconstruct the cultural background of these goldworkers to a certain extent.”

The Surigao Treasure, up to 30 kg of gold, was discovered by a bulldozer driver at *sitio* Magruiyong, San Miguel town, Surigao del Sur, Mindanao. It includes “indigenous design elements that survive today” among groups in central Mindanao and a long list of

objects that are either “universal” in form or quite foreign to Philippine aesthetics. Among the *surviving* design elements only the twisted wire leglets (if that is what they were) have clear Philippine *prototypes* (of fiber). There is no thought to the possibility that brass bracelets and anklets and T’boli beaded necklaces were inspired from imported objects, whether gold or otherwise. Nor is it convincing that garnet and turquoise glass-studded bracelets, T’ang-like cups, vessels shaped like asparagus, thick sash terminals (one with an elephant), or gourd covers that “feel” Chinese-Malay were all made in the Philippines. In fact, the presumed influences upon this “Treasure” rather remind one of the “Ziwiye Treasure,” which Muscarella (1977 [*J. of Field Archaeology* 4(2): 197–219]) convincingly demonstrated was never a hoard at all. While the Central Bank may hold examples from this hoard, most of the pieces Villegas describes are in private hands.

But the most significant thing about the Surigao pieces, we are told, is that a majority are decorated with granulation, a technique so unlikely to be independently invented that it could not have come from anywhere but the West (conveniently overlooking its use in precontact America). The Sasanian Persians are given credit for teaching it to Philippines. They also brought the styles (if not the objects) that went into the marvelous eclecticism of Philippine jewelry. All of this seems far-fetched and totally unproven, and the principle of parsimony suggests that the objects themselves are imports.

There are several points for which the editor must also share blame. At least three references cited in the text are not to be found in the bibliography. I did not check all references, but was looking for further information. It is Child, V. Gordon; not V. Gordon-Child. Legaspi is spelled Legazpi; both appear twice or more (108). The rosary (123) has 14 not 15 decades. Skull and crossbones under a crucifix initially symbolized Golgotha, “place of a skull,” where Jesus was executed. The bar graphs (72 and 73) are totally meaningless, as they are not based on any arithmetic data. Marco Polo did not “capture the imagination of Europe and inflame the possessive passions” (197 n 1). He was largely disbelieved

and long ignored. Most annoying are the footnotes, many of them rather interesting, which should have been incorporated into the text.

In sum, the book does not achieve what it was supposed to do and is largely a disappointment, though it is not without redeeming value. As stated at the beginning, the plates are quite beautiful. I also found some of the general ideas about jewelry in chapter 1 to be creative and provocative. Then one has to give credit for trying, and Villegas clearly worked hard on this book.

This brings me to a final point. There is a need—and certainly in Southeast Asia, a demand—for well-illustrated and informative books on aspects of material culture. With few exceptions, professionals are not fulfill-

ing either the need or the demand. There are an increasing number of untrained, but not necessarily untutored, people taking up the slack, writing books on ceramics, jewelry, and other artifacts. They are easy to criticize, as this review shows, but some of the criticism must be leveled at the archaeological community. If well-crafted books on such subjects are done properly they will not only satisfy popular demand but educate scholars and the public as well. The pleas of lack of time or of data are usually spurious. Until scholars begin to write the books, they have little reason to complain about false information in those that appear and the inevitable circulation of such inaccuracies long into the future.