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### Arts & Leisure

## Filipiniana style

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**FASHIONABLY DRESSED** mannequins fill Greenbelt 5's exhibition, sporting outfits made by the intermediate and advanced course students of Slim's Fashion & Arts School.

Thea Delena and Marc Carcillar

Most of the outfits are inspired by Filipiniana garments, such as the terno and the Maria Clara, feature elements such as butterfly or bell sleeves, the panuelo (the large fichu worn with a Maria Clara).

The Filipiniana theme is due in part to one of the school's upcoming projects, a book on the history and evolution of the terno, said Mark Higgins, school founder Slim Higgins's son, and one of the current directors of the school.

The school was founded in 1960 by Salvacion "Slim" Lim Higgins, an avant-garde designer who often fused western elements with traditional Filipina garb. In her hands, the straightforward and usually straitlaced terno was given a new life with excellent draping, new shapes, new lengths, and more exciting colors. In this aspect, she was not alone in the late 1940s and '50s as many designer around the world experimented with the idea of lavishness in texture and color after the privations of the Second World War. "She came from the postwar era where there was such euphoria that the war was over, and that the Philippines finally gained its real independence," explained Mr. Higgins.

Some of the outfits in the Greenbelt 5 exhibit made more than a fashion statement: for example, a terno by Roald Seña (son of painter Fernando Seña) is a serious number in black and beige, with the terno sleeves and spread out like a cape around the shoulders, the bodice and skirt painted with the image of a young Filipina (looking somewhat like an Amorsolo farm girl) holding a bag of French fries. According to the student, it is a comment on neo-colonial mentality.

Two students made outfits that were reminiscent of Maria Clara, Jose Rizal's hapless female character in *Noli me Tangere*. These were not grand executions of her gay days in the dinners in the novel: they were sober black numbers with large white collars recalling instead her sad days locked in a convent in *El Filibusterismo*. Marc Carcillar further referenced the National Hero's book by making a dress that featured pages from the novel, written on cloth, on the dress's skirt. The skirt itself was bathed in (digitally printed) blood.

Other students fused the terno with modern influences, such as Thea Delena, who made a simple cream dress in native silk, with a rounded collar that extends nearly to the waist at the back, and which can be pulled up as a very chic hood.

The terno has always been a part of the school's curriculum, serving many times as a graduating student's final project. Making a perfect terno is one of the requirements for graduating from the school. "It's very important that Filipinos know how to make their own national costume," said Mr. Higgins.

Another reason for the requirement is it serves as a measure of skill because it is quite difficult to make a terno. The iconic butterfly sleeves have to stand just so, puffed up and stored in a certain way, so as not to crumple the upright sleeve, which sometimes goes halfway the length of a woman's neck, sometimes grazing the ears. "It's all about the sleeves, knowing the proper way to execute it," said Mr. Higgins. It is not just difficult to make a terno, it is also difficult to wear one, he said. "You can't actually lean on a couch in a terno sleeve," he said, noting that this is the reason for the exquisite poise exhibited by the ladies of the terno-wearing era.

The school turns 55 next year, and since its inception, has made it a point to showcase its students' works, especially in an exhibition setting.

"We've always done exhibits, because I think it teaches much more valuable lessons than just doing a fashion show, where it's very easy to [show] badly executed clothes that you see for 10 seconds," said Mr. Higgins. He added, "I'd rather that you put up an exhibit where the public can scrutinize your clothes up close."

In today's world of fast fashion, sweat and hard work is sometimes skipped in favor of the look, an attitude which Mr. Higgins disagrees with. "We make them [the students] do the hard work, and make them understand that fashion, although it appears frivolous, has a lot of serious work behind it."

The exhibition of Slim's Fashion & Arts School is on view the second floor exhibit area of Greenbelt 5 in Makati City, until Oct. 21. -- JLG

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