

WALKER



Textiles in Pacita Abad's *100 Years of Freedom*

By Clarissa M. Esguerra



Pacita Abad at the opening of her exhibition *Abstract Emotions*, at the National Museum, Jakarta, Indonesia, with *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo*, 1998.

Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

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A defining characteristic of Pacita Abad's extensive body of work was how she drew upon collected scraps of fabric, each representing the textile traditions of the many places she visited and lived, to create her vibrant collages. In various writings on Abad's artistic practice, it has been noted that "Pacita was one of the few artists who successfully merged traditional textiles with contemporary painting." ¹ The rarity of Abad's success exposes the underlying issue that she worked within a contemporary art system that did not generally value the long-standing art and craft of textile production. But Abad was a firm believer of textiles as art—as it has long been considered historically and in most parts of the non-Westernized world.



Pacita Abad at work on *To Paint and Wait for You*, 1990. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

Abad's own practice of collecting cloth goods and traveling with them as she moved from city to city harkens to the ancient history of textiles as one of the most portable luxuries one could collect; often these fabrics—which symbolized status, sophistication, and worldliness—carried within them new and exciting ideas, techniques, and aesthetics of the societies from which they came. Abad understood that each scrap of fabric held a story of a people and their lands, constantly adapting to generations of trade, conquest, and technology. In her own impulse to collage the fabric from her travels and paint them by hand (a time-consuming process but also meditative in its repetition, much like textile making), she paid tribute to the many skilled hands and dedicated hours required to grow the fibers, twist them into yards, dye them using available dyestuff, weave them on looms, and adorn them with embroideries, prints, or appliqués.

That Abad typically collected scraps of fabric left over from making clothes or home goods reveals her understanding of the value of cloth. Many of the textiles she collected came from cultures that did not traditionally cut and tailor their clothing to the body to the degree that we generally do in European and Western-style dress, a process that produces a lot of fabric waste. Rather, she was drawn to collecting and even wearing the textiles of cultures that historically tended to wrap lengths of uncut cloth around the body (such as an Indonesian sarong) or were made into tunic-shaped garments that utilized as much fabric as possible (such as a Guatemalan huipil). That she found scraps at all, and that those who knew her would time and again comment on how she would become so excited by these finds, underscores that such scraps are largely not easy to come by.

Beyond the scraps themselves, by collaging them, Abad created immensely personal works, with each piece of cloth alive with its own story of her travels and reverence for the craft and culture that created it. Fully understating this, Abad patchworked fabric remnants of these communities in order to pay tribute to them. Nowhere is this better represented than in Abad's monumental work, *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo*.



Pacita Abad, *100 Years of Freedom: Batanes to Jolo*, 1998. Photo by Charles Roussel. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery.

As the title suggests, Abad first displayed the 12.5 foot by 12.5 foot piece at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila for the Philippine Centennial in 1998. The nation is an archipelago of over 7,000 islands, with Batanes being the northernmost island and Jolo being the southernmost. In *100 Years of Freedom*, Abad layers her scraps, collected while traversing the country in the 1970s, with some textile pieces sourced from family.

In Victoria Sung's chapter, *A Deep Entanglement*, from the exhibition catalogue *Pacita Abad*, she details the origins of the textiles from previously unpublished text by Abad, sourced from the artist's archive: "Igorot hand-woven cloth from Baguio and Bontoc"; "hand-woven ikat weavings from the villages in Kalinga-Apayao"; "tinalak, tabao scarfs and malongs from Mindanao"; "Chinese floral silks from Binondo"; "my grandmother's Spanish lace mantilla from Cebu"; "crocheted curtains and dresses made by my mother"; "pañuelos worn by my aunts"; and "the old jusi barongs of my father." ² The variety of these textiles, stitched onto a wedding tent purchased in Zamboanga, similarly displays the variety of people that comprise the country, with each textile piece representing a history of hundreds of years of movement between societies that passed through the various islands, globally connecting the Philippines.



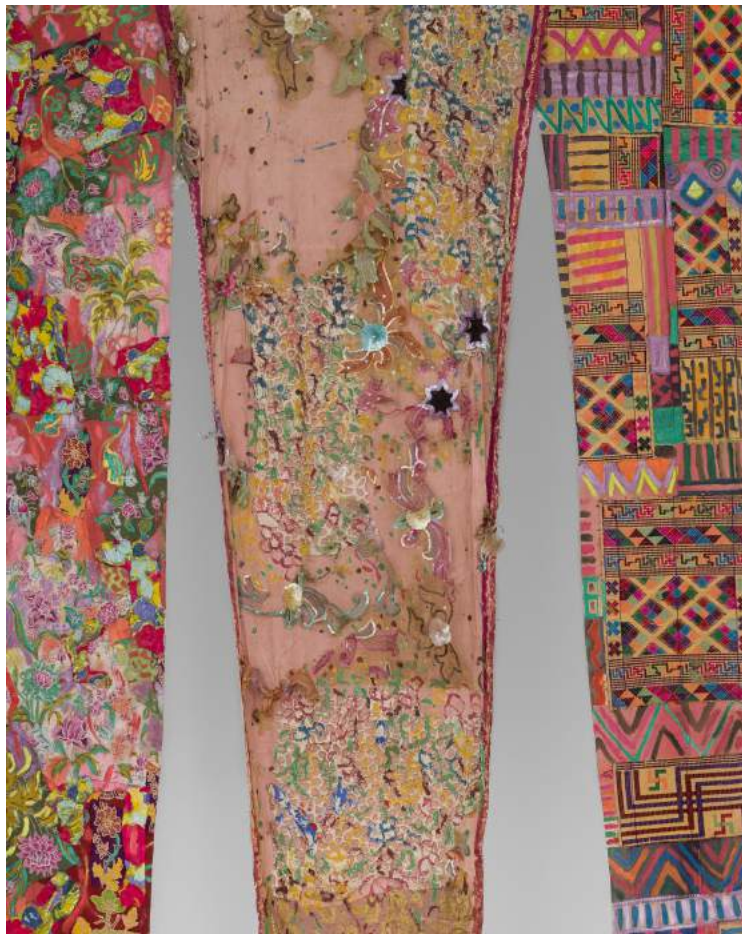
For example, scraps from Abad's aunts' pañuelos (square-shaped shoulder scarves folded diagonally, usually made of piña) and father's old jusi barongs (traditional men's button-up tops) were both typically made of sheer, lightweight woven textiles. Piña cloth is considered one of the most prized fabrics from the Philippines, as its weaving cannot be mechanized—it can only be produced by hand. Although a national textile, piña fibers, extracted from a variety of pineapple plant, are not indigenous to the Philippines; rather, the pineapple plants were imported from the Americas by the Spanish in the first decades of Spanish rule. Another commonly used sheer fabric, jusi, is akin to piña but woven with a mixture of pineapple fibers, silk, and sometimes cotton for added durability and affordability. Silk, too, is not locally grown and would have been imported, likely from China.

The global history of these textiles that are so strongly associated with the Philippines continues when examining their construction into Filipino clothing. The shape of the pañuelo and the barong descend from Spain and the European fashion for women's shoulder shawls (called fichus) and men's shirts. With Spain's colonization of the Americas, and with the Viceroyalty established in Mexico (or New Spain), which oversaw the Philippines for over 250 years, the Philippine pañuelo and barong also have cousins in Mexico: the woman's rebozo shoulder wrap and the man's guayabera button-up shirt.



Detail of Pacita Abad, *100 Years of Freedom: Batanes to Jolo*, 1998. Photo by Charles Roussel. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery.

In a detail image from *100 Years of Freedom* [above], one can see the delicate jusi or pina scraps attached, the thinness of the fibers evident in the breaking of the plain weave in this new iteration, now collaged with bits of brown net, woven cotton stripes (perhaps woven in Baguio or Bontoc), and blue brocaded sheer jusi or silk, all stitched in place and then painted.



Detail of Pacita Abad, *100 Years of Freedom: Batanes to Jolo*, 1998. Photo by Charles Roussel. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery.

In another detail image from *100 Years of Freedom* [above], we see a closer view of three long inverted-triangular panels, each very different from the other. The leftmost panel has various floral textiles, perhaps from Binondo as listed from above. Established in the late 16th century, Binondo, a neighborhood of Manila, is considered the oldest Chinatown in the world. In looking at the floral prints, some appear to be wax-roller printed, a resist-dye technique where wax is printed on a textile, then dyed and washed; when the wax is removed, the color underneath the wax print is revealed. This printing process, first created by the Dutch and now utilized in many other countries, from Ghana to Japan, is a mechanized version of Indonesian hand-drawn wax-resist dyeing called batik. Abad particularly loved batiks, especially after her years of living in Indonesia; this admiration may have informed her collection of flora scraps in this panel, which mostly appear wax printed or drawn with wax.

The central panel of the detail has patches of what look like lace, perhaps from Abad's mother's dresses or grandmother's lace mantilla (or head covering) from Cebu. On closer examination, the lace is actually a form of cotton cutwork embroidery, where a cotton woven fabric is densely embroidered and then cut to appear like lace, only much sturdier. European in origin, the technique was likely brought by missionaries, much like the far more detailed open and cutwork embroidery that traditionally decorates piña cloth. This panel also has the aforementioned piña and jusi scraps, as well as sequined appliqués in floral and star patterns.



Yakan headcloth from the Philippines. Gift of David W. and Barbara G. Fraser. Courtesy the Textile Museum Collection.

Much more geometric are the textiles found in the rightmost panel of the detail. These fabrics appear to be brocaded, where a colorful supplementary-weft yarn creates the angular triangle, diamond, and cross patterns. This style of weave is commonly associated with the Yakan, who inhabit the Sulu archipelago in southern Philippines. Such brocaded textiles were made into head scarves, tube skirts, or trimmed the sleeve and pant hems of men's suits. In both color and rhythm, Abad's painting between scraps mimics the zigzags and linear woven designs of the textiles.



Detail of Pacita Abad, *100 Years of Freedom: Batanes to Jolo*, 1998. Photo by Charles Roussel. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery.

Another image details a top portion of *100 Years of Freedom*; here we see Abad continue her dynamic painting of triangles, zigzags, and lines, as well as dots and circles. These shapes seem to echo the geometries embroidered onto the T-shaped blouses and tops of the T'boli or Bagobo of Mindanao; some faded blue scraps of this style appear to be included in a central horizontal strip in the detail image. Further adding to this are the sequins evenly applied throughout the top portion of the piece, which feel reminiscent of the precious and luminescent hand-carved mother-of-pearl sequins that also adorn the blouses of T'boli or B'laan women.



At the lower half of the detail image we see woven checked fragments and striped textiles, some with narrow stripes of a fine ikat design. Ikat is the process where a design is dyed into threads before the cloth is woven; the weavers of Mindanao, particularly from the Bagobo, B'laan, T'boli, and Mandaya communities, excelled at this intricate resist tie-and-dye technique, using indigenous abaca, or banana leaf fibers. Such textiles were typically woven on a backstrap loom, where the tension of the vertical threads (warps) was created by a seated weaver. Kalinga weavers from the northern Cordilleras of Luzon also create cotton-striped ikat textiles, and favored the color red, which is visible in the bottom right of the detail image.



Bagobo Textile, 1947. Gift of Mrs. William M. Mann. The Textile Museum Collection.
Courtesy of the Textile Museum.

Tying the work together is the vintage wedding tent from Zamboanga onto which the textile scraps were stitched and painted. Abad chose not to use a rectangular canvas backing; instead, she used something of the Philippines—notably from a region where Islam is the dominant religion, not Christianity, which was brought by Spanish missionaries and viceregal servants to the crown. An intentional choice, here is an example where a monumental textile demonstrates how cloth has both the strength to shelter people, as well as the power to celebrate two families becoming one. In a way, *100 Years of Freedom* marries the multiple cultures of the Philippine Islands into a microcosm of what the country was for Abad: a place where varying groups of people and forms of art evolved somewhat separately, but which were connected by the seas and their common struggle for independence against centuries of colonialism. Their legacies, woven and adorned into bits of cloth using methods still practiced today, persevere.▪



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Experience these materials, techniques, and more for yourself in the exhibition Pacita Abad. On view at the Walker Art Center through September 3rd, 2023.

Interested in learning more about the life and work of this unique artist? Pick up the exhibition catalogue next time you are in the Walker Shop or anytime, day or night, here.

ENDNOTES

1. *Textile Collages: Pacita Abad's Painted Textiles*. Pacita Abad Art Estate, https://issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/painted_textile_collages_by_jkgarri?fr=sNjVIMTE0OTg3NDg, 18. ↵
2. *Pacita Abad*, Victoria Sung, ed., exh catalog (Walker Art Center: Minneapolis, 2023), p. 28. ↵

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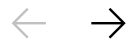


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