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Enigmatic Objects: Notes towards a History of the Museum in the Philippines

RESIL B. MOJARES

Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2023.

Redoubled attention on the Philippines in light of the quincentennial of the first circumnavigation of the world has prompted historians to emphasize the archipelago's significant role in the global exchange of commodities and knowledge. Ancillary to this endeavor is the study of collection and display of its cultural artifacts. Shaped by a complex colonial history that includes the violence of colonial ethnology, museum objects have often been overlooked for what they most clearly reveal: the history of the institutions and personalities responsible for collecting them.

Resil Mojares's *Enigmatic Objects* is an attempt to chronicle the development of museums in the Philippines—an underexplored topic which he tackles with characteristic erudition. Mojares notes that scholars tend to focus on how colonizers represented Filipinos, leaving inchoate how Filipinos represent themselves (p. 53). This reflects a broader pattern of delayed institutional development, exemplified by the National Museum of the Philippines' official establishment as a government trust only in 1998. Prior to this, Philippine museums existed on an ad hoc basis, often under the jurisdiction of various government departments (p. 129). In order to write a longer history of museums, Mojares had to consider the history of private collections, which forms the second part of the book. These collections were assembled by the ilustrado class, whose curiosity cabinets eventually formed the foundation of museum institutions (p. 232). The anecdotes on Jose Rizal, Trinidad Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes, Pedro Paterno, and the lesser-known friar Clemente Ignacio offer insights into how museums function as both repositories of knowledge and vehicles for wresting power from colonial authorities. However, the nuances of their motivations—and the larger implications of their collections—are left under-examined. The valorization of figures like Pardo de Tavera and Paterno understates the excesses of the colonial nationalist gaze that so often accompanied early collecting practices. For instance, Mojares considers the *Velarde Map*—the earliest map to include the shoals of the West Philippine Sea—only for the challenges of its preservation, disregarding how it reinforced certain cartographic perspectives that served colonial and then later nationalist interests.

There are notable omissions, which may explain why the essays are presented as “notes,” signaling both the provisional nature of the work and an acknowledgment of the author's subjective stance. Mojares (2013) employs a similar approach in *Isabelo's Archive*: under-promising as a methodological strategy that grants curatorial freedom to the researcher, while still fostering remarkable discussions. Despite this caveat, the book leaves this reader wanting more direct engagement with contemporary issues facing museums, such as projects to decolonize and repatriate Philippine artifacts dispersed worldwide. *Enigmatic Objects* undeniably initiates some of these conversations, but it often feels like a history only half told.

One notable gap in contextualization is Mojares's explanation for why educational institutions became the first sites for museums, which he attributes largely to an 1865 royal decree mandating secondary schools to establish natural history museums, laboratories, and botanical gardens. This gives short shrift to the grassroots efforts of an emerging intellectual class which since the late eighteenth century had been a channel for spreading Enlightenment ideals.

The idea that early museums were predominantly curated by European missionaries and bureaucrats with the intent of imposing European values on local populations (p. 80) is therefore an oversimplification. As Mojares regrettably only briefly discusses, civic organizations such as the Sociedad Económica de los Amigos del País, whose members included individuals who first identified as Filipino, created an invisible college that significantly supported the organization of trade schools and the establishment of a museum (pp. 81–84).

The Enlightenment museum was a public space dedicated to the diffusion of useful knowledge, whose central innovation was the organization and display of an accessible taxonomy of the natural and artistic worlds. The founding mission of early Philippine museums followed this trajectory, seeking to cultivate an informed citizenry and democratize education. However, racial inequalities are also in evidence in these initiatives. While these museums were founded with liberal ideals, they also reflected the deep social hierarchies of their time. This tension between the democratic aspirations of education and the realities of colonial power is further explored in the chapter "The First Colonial Museum," which revisits the 1891 inauguration of Museo-Biblioteca de Filipinas under Pedro Paterno's direction. Mojares emphasizes the foreignness of this museum, whose collections were shaped by a desire to control and categorize the world around them. However, recalling both established and more recent scholarship, such neat conclusions remain curious. Writing in *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett (1995), whom Mojares cites, criticizes the unquestioned application of this Foucauldian perspective (p. 86). The emergence of the museum was part of a broader set of institutions, from clinics and prisons to department stores, which were all linked to new academic disciplines and ways of seeing the world. It is due to this ongoing discussion that rather than centering on quixotic personalities like Paterno and revisiting intellectual histories that Mojares has already adeptly explored, the history of Philippine museums urgently needs to be written under the lens of institution building, where the establishment of museums is viewed as part of broader efforts to advocate for humanistic education. In line with Bennett, Mojares writes that historically, objects like artworks and natural specimens were often hidden from public view, accessible only to elites. However, in the nineteenth century museums opened to the general public, making them witnesses to a new form of power. Museums, though enclosed, became sites where power was displayed to the masses through public exhibitions.

Indeed, historians from Benedict Anderson to Renato Constantino and John Schumacher have already established how colonial education inadvertently laid the groundwork for Filipino identity formation. Perhaps this volume's essays would have been more nuanced if the colonial museum's

function was evaluated as part of a more complex dynamic involving local responses and eventual resistance.

Mojares's concentration on the Spanish colonial era and ethnographic museums leaves another gap: the contributions of the father-son duo Roman and Alfonso Ongpin, who are mentioned only in their roles in establishing the first art supply store (p. 273). The younger Ongpin lived in the waning years of Spanish colonization (which is perhaps why he was not thoroughly considered), but his contribution cannot be understated as a conservator and collector of ilustrado paintings. He played a crucial role in establishing some of the country's most important collections, selling or donating works to the Lopez Museum, the National Museum, the National Library, and the museum in Fort Santiago. His minor role in Mojares's book is an unfortunate oversight, given Ongpin's influence in shaping not only public art collections but also the representation of Philippine culture during a transitional period in the nation's history. This reader is also baffled by how the historian Epifanio de los Santos, an avid collector of rare Filipiniana, is mentioned merely in a supporting role to his friend Pardo de Tavera, whose contributions have already been established in Mojares's earlier studies (p. 236). De los Santos's personal collection of Filipiniana laid the groundwork for the establishment of modern archives in the Philippines, and it is for this reason that the primary avenue in Metro Manila is named after him.

Mojares's historical framework also overlooks some questions of continuity and exhibits a bias toward colonial agency, glossing over the instability and inadequacy of the Spanish conquest of the Philippines. In Mojares's own account the National Museum led a nomadic life, shifting from one provisional space to another until 1927, when it finally found a home in a government building. That it inherited ilustrado collections was less a triumph of preservation than the salvage of a colonized nation's fragments. The absence of local participation in shaping the colonial museum parallels the resistance and evasion strategies used by Indigenous, Moro, and Chinese communities against colonial rule. However, a shift in perspective would yield, from the very records Mojares has cited, accounts of donations from the nineteenth century of artifacts, textiles, weaponry, precious stones, and minerals by Indigenous peoples given with the intention to be included in museum collections. Why were these not highlighted in the essays?

The exploration of intriguing ocean objects in Philippine museums in the chapters "Hunters, Gatherers, and Traders" and "Four Ways of Looking" illustrates the uniqueness of Philippine objects and the institutions that house them. The Venus' flower basket, a marine sponge in whose protective structure a pair of crustaceans called *Spongicola venustus* take shelter, was discovered in 1841. Classified as a form of naturally occurring glass, the Venus' flower basket is sometimes displayed alongside oriental arts and crafts. The glass sponge's popularity as a museum exhibit in Europe underscored Spain's significant lack of understanding about its most distant colony (p. 190). The essay on the dugong, an endangered sea creature native to the region from which the rare mermaid ivory is derived, touches on the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals

(p. 324). However, the absence of Indigenous perspectives about the dugong, while lurking just beneath the surface of Mojares's accounts, might be the most important issue *Enigmatic Objects* is trying to address.

In the chapter "The Painted Prince," about the display of the tattooed Mindanaoan slave named Giolo at the Bodleian Library, Mojares critically engages with the fundamental issue of how institutions display humans and their remains. While museums often preserve—and at times petrify—living things, disconnecting them from the dynamic contexts through static displays, there are times when imagining the opposite can be as haunting (pp. 170–173).

While Mojares effectively deconstructs the misappropriation of archival practices, the essays leave room to resurrect their affordances and potential in a postcolonial context. The choice to not discuss issues in this format feels like a missed opportunity to confront the ongoing tensions between Indigenous knowledge, ilustrado ambitions, and the colonial ethnographic frame that persists in museum displays.

A recurring theme in Mojares's essays on museum collections is knowledge precarity, an insightful framework considering the numerous natural calamities, fires, and wars that have destroyed entire collections, such as that of the *gabinete* of Ateneo de Manila (p. 7). However, the author does not explicitly steer the essays into a deep reflection on the topic, avoiding a conversation about the material realities of museums.

Enigmatic Objects presents a robustly detailed history of Philippine museums, but it is a history book that is yet to be completed. Nevertheless, there are many moving sentences in the essays that will leave the reader breathless. While *Enigmatic Objects* is undoubtedly an essential contribution to Philippine historiography, it suffers from burying beneath layers of fascinating anecdotes the hard questions about how museums might serve the living heritage they are meant to protect.

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