

# Tropical Interiors



by Elizabeth V. Reyes photography by A. Chester Ong

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Contemporary Style in the Philippines

by Elizabeth V. Reyes  
Photography by A. Chester Ong  
Styling by Aida Concepcion



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*Cover:* Modern entrance to the home of Jaime Augusto and Lizzie Zobel; furnished with giant *abaca* loveseat by Delfin Penero; floor lamp by Val Padilla, sphere vase by Carlo Tanseco, Princessa piña shawl from Palawan. Cover styling by Aida Concepcion.

*Back cover:* (clockwise from top): Nature setting by Dita Sandico-Ong; vine-inlaid desk set by Louisa Robinson; laminated display plate from Bacolod, Negros; and Gerico Austria's atrium *sala* by Eric Paras.

*Page 1:* Fiery orange draperies made of *abaca* and rayon, by fabric designer Elisa Reyes of Bulacan.

*Page 2:* An artful setting in the Jose Quiros home, by Ivy Almario; painting by Bernard Pacquing.

*This page:* Modernist accent vases hand-wrought in stainless steel, by Markus Schmidt for Firma Inc.

*Opposite page:* Contemporary glass trays and serving dishes by Bobby Castillo; functional art displayed at the Avellana Gallery.

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## New Tropical Design

### Soulful Creativity and 'Philippine Moderne'



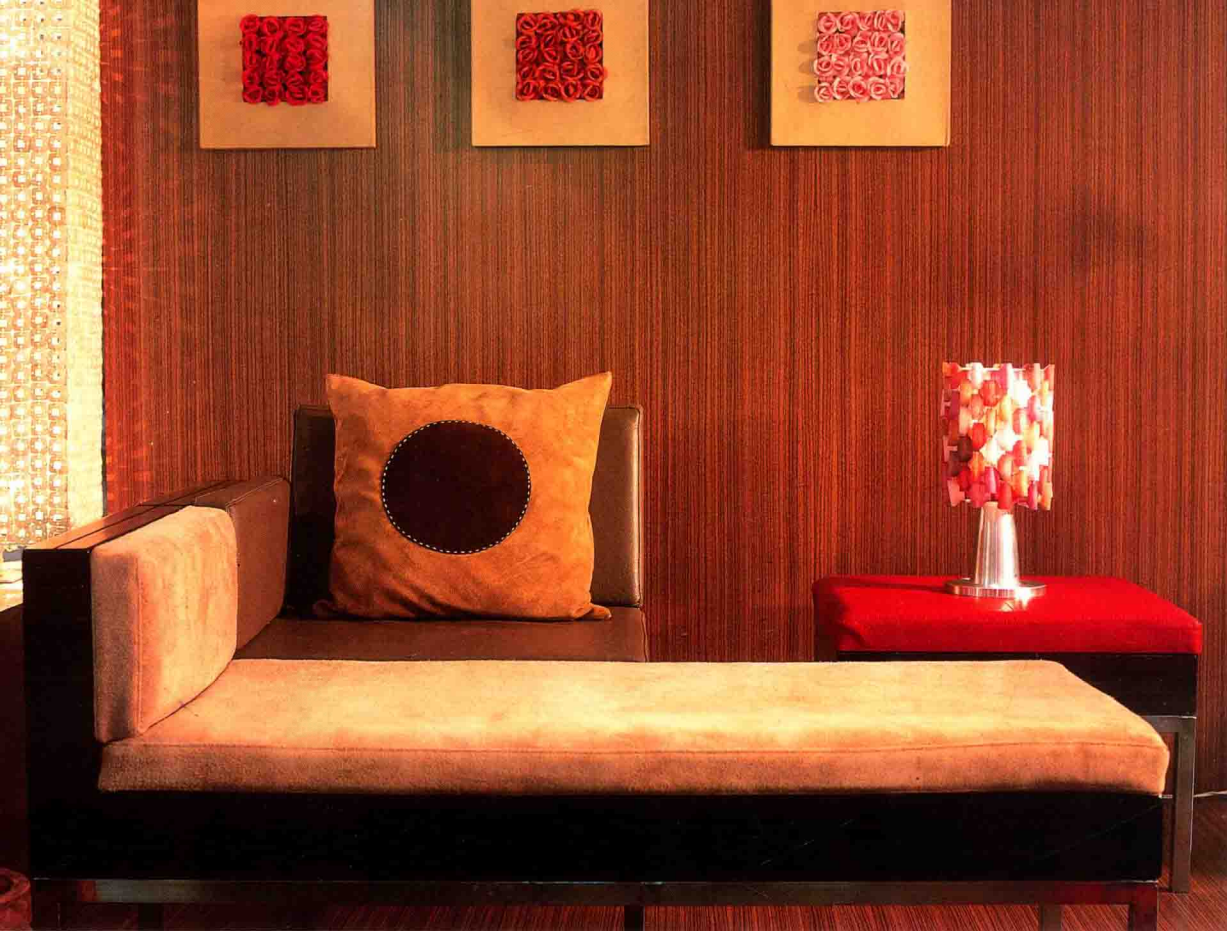
A new generation of Filipino designers has, in recent years, been making design waves outside the Philippine archipelago. Designers are combining metal technology and native rattan weaving; splitting, bleaching and using *abaca*-rope in stylish ways; laminating coconut shells and twigs into biomorphic artworks; making soigné lounging chairs from seagrass and organic lamps from handmade paper; mixing fibreglass pipes with twigs and shells—and soulful creativity.

In September 1999, a designer consortium called "Movement 8" made a big splash in the furniture exposition in Valencia, Spain, displaying unique home items not yet seen on local shores. Curator Budji Layug had selected a stylish array of clean-lined, geometric furnishings made by Filipino designers—realizing his own vision of a purely *moderne* sensibility (deriving from Art-Deco, Bauhaus, and natural materials). The show stunned viewers, turned heads and opened doors. After Valencia, "Movement 8" won acclaim at virtually all the major furniture expositions, including New York's prestigious International Contemporary Furniture Fair in May 2001—when the Filipino designers took home the top award for craftsmanship.

In July 2001, the *Washington Post* carried the exciting design news that was syndicated across the USA—the Philippines' largest market for furniture.

*Opposite:* The Quiros condo's abundance is showcased with Zen-like balance. Chinese traditional furnishing is synchronized with Asian modern art: a gauzy painting by Romulo Olazo; modern Japanese print by Toko Shinoda; and the living room's pivotal oil, "Neurotic Zen Master", by Lao Lianben. The bamboo vases and violet organza cushions are from Kish, Makati. Balanced design by Ivy Almario and Associates.

*Above:* Three *capiz* and resin finger bowls, by Shell Arts Company of Cavite, upon Japanese inspired bamboo veneered tray, designed by PJ Aranador for Rebena Co. of Bacolod.



**Left:** At the FAME 2001 exhibition, designer Josef Crisanto taught the values of modularity, versatility, flexibility—and colourful whimsy—in small living spaces. His special setting brought new manufacturers to the fore: Vienna Furniture Inc. created smart modular seats that can be realigned for different needs; the rose-lamp and three frames comprise wood shavings art by Papuri Crafts; the stuffed pillow and tall coco-bead lamp are by Cătălina's Embroideries of Cebu.

**Opposite:** The FAME show's Best Display booth, showing new products by Padua International, presents the statuesque Gia lamp in beached Philippine mahogany with her wide cylindrical shade flaunting a faux-*capiz* finish. Fine leather armchairs are complemented by black wood accents featuring a hand carved, indented treatment inspired by Ifugao artefacts. Designs by Val Padilla for Padua International.

Style writer Patricia Dane Rogers spread the word: "Filipino designers are using the wealth of traditional, indigenous materials they always have—volcanic rock and forest vines to coconut palm wood and narra wood—but the young experimenters are using them in decidedly non-traditional ways. Natural materials are being beaten, pressed, polished, woven and stained to make urbane, up-scale, high-end furniture in innovative and modernist designs." Said Christopher Reiter, owner of a Washington DC furniture boutique. "This stuff really rocks! Within the trade, everyone knows that furniture makers in the Philippines have moved up the value chain. They're on the fast track; they have leapt ahead of other Asian manufacturers."

The main draw-card of the New York show was the *Pigalle* armchair. This curvy topiary form, composed of wiry steel bound in *abaca* twine, was created by 31-year-old Kenneth Cobonpue from

Cebu, Philippines. Cobonpue epitomizes the new aesthetic. He had previously designed an award-winning Yin & Yang armchair, a cubist wire framework wrapped in open-weave rattan. "I wanted a feeling of lightness and transparency, but to achieve it using natural materials," Cobonpue explained. "We're all designers who share the same belief in the mixture of a modern sensibility and an Asian sensitivity to craftsmanship and natural materials."

The modern-thinking Movement 8 was nurtured by two design gurus: Ms Araceli Pinto-Mansor, executive director of the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions (CITEM), a semi-governmental body promoting Filipino products; and curator Budji Layug, one of the country's most successful interior designers. They invited ten designers to contribute to the image-raising effort and expose their work to a global market—with unprecedented success.





**Right:** The folkloric sofa, Laso (Loop), is a mixed-media design featuring flattened bamboo, leather, mat-weave, and whole rattan vines, bent to demonstrate the extreme flexibility of the material; by Ramon Castellanos, Disegno en Asia (Cebu).



Comments Mansor: “We’re starting to create sophisticated designs for the modern world! Although the Philippines offers neither high technology, nor formal training or government support to boost the furniture industry with more global exposure and focused efforts like these, design-consciousness is being raised—and will filter down to the rest of the industry.” Mansor calls the main characteristic of Philippine designs a soulful creativity. “Filipinos have innate talent and creativity with natural materials—but up to now, our products have been too ethnic,” she says. “We have to uplift our whole image for the sophisticated global market.”

Earning international recognition has been a slow process and a constant dream long nurtured by Budji Layug. His design-driven circle of Movement 8 produced new furnishings embodying a common sensibility: clean, contemporary lines, very *moderne* profiles (between Art Deco and Bauhaus), and sleek geometric forms with the natural feel of indigenous materials. Presenting new items of wood, glass, stainless steel, leather,

bamboo, *abaca*-hemp and rattan, Layug imbues each Movement 8 setting with a light, resort-like feel, but an unmistakable aura of sophistication. “Many items follow a stylish modernity that harks back to the ‘50s but with a more refined feel.”

The prime achievement of Movement 8 has been: elevating the Philippine image and a design-driven consciousness within the industry. Having Filipino-made furnishings recognized for their creative and innovative designs in the highly competitive (i.e. price-driven) Asian market.

Industry pioneer Nicholaas de Lange muses on Filipinos and their talent for design: “They are quick to absorb trends. They are not just manufacturers, but generally have an appreciation of style from living with varied colonial masters.” Filipinos have the ability to ‘make do’ with perennially limited resources—this has naturally bred the talent for creativity which is the cornerstone of the Philippine industry today. When the supply of one particular material was diminishing, they moved to mixing materials ... and the world was gifted with a



new, relaxed yet stylish look. Style watcher Elsa Klensch named it “Asian Fusion”.

Not long ago, the country was merely a source of raw materials. From a middling cottage industry 20 years ago, the vital design sector has emerged, putting the Philippines firmly on the map with its furniture, decorative products and household accessories. Two Philippine institutions played big roles in the organic evolution of crafts and design: The Design Center and CITEM. The Design Center, created in 1973 and directed by modern artist Arturo Luz, was the first body to focus research, development and experiment upon humble native materials. Its mission was to design aesthetic products for the country’s nascent crafts industry. Hands-on graduates of Luz Design Center include Val Padilla, Dem Bitantes, Joel Enriquez, Jun Delingon, Olive Loyola—all seasoned designers today.

From 1984, it was CITEM—led by Mina Gabor, trade show ringleader—that fomented a dramatic crafts revolution. Seeing native handicrafts stagnating, Gabor pulled Philippine woodcraft and basketry out of the doldrums and led the way into the export world. She recognized talent, rallied local designers, and stimulated both design and markets. Foreign consultants were contracted to train, expose, and teach local suppliers “to satisfy the overseas markets”.

“Mina had vision, drive and brazen enthusiasm,” says Chito Vijandre, the eclectic interior designer. “She had both gut-feel and vision. She took our tourist crafts out of the mould of long-necked wooden heads and Miss Universe chairs. She had foresight, challenged designers, upgraded skills, then flogged our stuff to the world!” Gabor stimulated small-time provincial cottage industries to go urban. She implemented exhibitions in the country and overseas. Under her gaze, the Philippines metamorphosed itself from supplier of raw materials and low-cost manufacturer to a creative innovator of hand-crafted décor. Cebu, in particular, developed her small furniture trade into a major industry, turning out fanciful mixed-media products. These creative designs garnered, for the whole Philippine industry, the moniker “the Milan of Asia”.

In the ‘80s Filipino architects and designers earned individual successes. In 1987, Ched Berenguer-Topacio’s “Petal Collection” of wrought

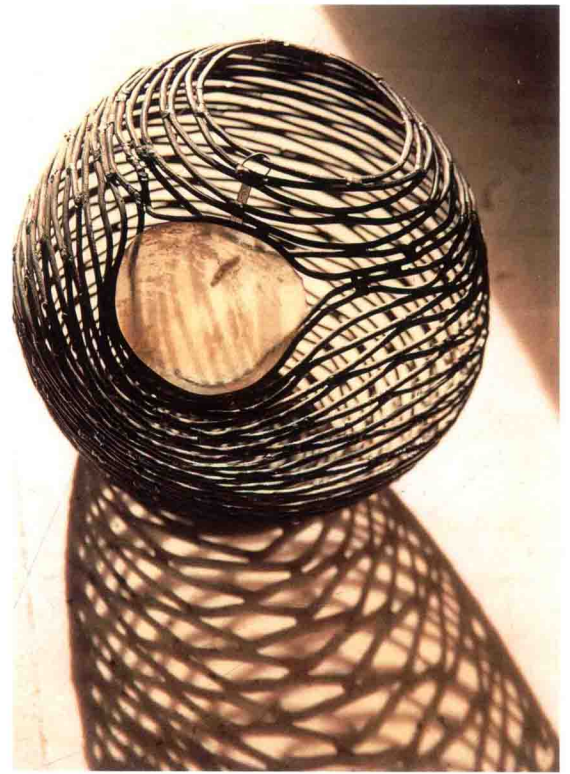


**Above:** Graceful ‘cutgrass’ resin accents by Louisa Robinson reach up to a multi-framed paper-art composite by Tess Pasola of Mindmasters Inc. Filipinos’ new crafts designs have blithely crossed the line towards organic artistry.



**Left:** Ifugao Suite setting: black and gold bowl and matching mug are “vintage Lanelle Abueva” stoneware, on modern serving tray in black fossil stone and glass, by Leo Almeria.





iron and leather furniture was awarded the highly coveted Roscoe Award. About the same time, rustic-chic bamboo furniture by Budji Layug was selling to Bloomingdales, USA. Layug became a brand-name designer for his graceful, well proportioned furnishings—especially his signature products which used bamboo and rattan. The Philippines gained a foothold as an innovative supplier of classy tropical furnishings, while Layug shone as the doyen of an organic *moderne* style.

Philippine furniture and crafts have, according to designer Chito Vijandre, reached another creative level in the new millennium. “Filipino designers are not trendsetters nor originators, but creative innovators. Best at handmade, handcrafted products, we have a real ingenuity with natural materials—what high-tech machines cannot do! Very interesting things are happening now. One company harnesses ethnic *abaca-tnalak* cloth and adds coco-bead trim—for the most chic pillows in town. In Davao new designers like Ann Pamintuan have been able to create something so very modern



**Right:** Consultant Crisanto lends a fresh designer touch to a casual dining table at the FAME show. The half-back chairs are by Vienna Furniture, the seat pillows by Catalina Embroideries. The sunny crockery is by Cardinal Ceramics.

**Opposite, left:** The wiry oval seat by Davao-based Ann Pamintuan of The Gilded Expressions is an edgy sculpture that has won accolades in the West.

**Opposite, right:** Fused metal wire as tealight ball by Ann Pamintuan.



out of rustic methods and basic materials. Her creations of metal wire, welded and fused like a net, are so individual and edgy, so far from mass-produced!" Unusual items are coming out of Negros in the form of throwaway materials which are used to make modern designs.

Thus the Filipino forte for innovative crafts in natural materials and high-end modernist furniture has high-dived into the 21st century. Designer Leo Yao experiments with bleached banana trunk and twisted raffia for giant armchairs. Modernist Milo Naval designs bold, modular furnishings wrapped in earthy natural materials—and confident attitude. Val Padilla creates eclectic furniture in fine leathers, handmade paper or seagrass. Ed Yrezabal produces golden Permacane furniture using a high-tech lamination process on rattan—for items that lend a graceful presence to resorts and lanais. And who knows what Cebu's rising star Kenneth Cobonpue will design next, after his airy cubist seat and curvy topiary *chaise*?

The Filipinos' designer niche has been cast,

aiming to lead the industry beyond the competitive marketplace. Budji Layug is backing it wholeheartedly. He wants passionately to embrace the culture, arts and crafts, and unique materials of the whole region and create a truly "Asean style". As he sees it: "Our only edge is innovative design for the high-end market. There's no choice: to survive among competitors with more technology, cheaper labor and more materials, we have to design cutting-edge products for design-driven clients—and stay several steps ahead of the copy-cycle!"

*Tropical Interiors* celebrates Philippine interior design by exploring the most popular styles—the Elegant, Natural, Urban and Eclectic. But the more exciting matter vibrating between the pages is the Philippine *moderne* sensibility evident among the homes and décor products. This new style book is indeed more about Filipinos' soulful creativity—the invention, experimentation and individuality of designs that swim ahead of the rest.

**Overleaf:** Moroccan gazebo in the garden. The Zobels' professional black-and-white curtains have been reinvented as an exotic Moroccan tent within a glass-enclosed garden pavilion. In the corners hang Spanish wrought-iron lantern-lamps. Hand-plaited designer *abaca* rug, ottoman and side table are from Soumak, Makati. The dainty Dalmatian model is Pongo.