Metal Casting with Wire Templates

MARANAO, LANAO DEL SUR PROVINCE, NORTHEASTERN MINDANAO ISLAND, SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES. There is a very distinct class of metal objects cast in southern Philippines principally among the Maranao and also the Maguindanao. The distinguishing characteristic of these objects is the presence of wire-formed ornamentation that comes in loops, spirals, circles, curlicues and running and interlocked scrolls that are often plant-like as vines and growing ferns.

A GREAT DEAL of these objects come in the form of bronze/brass lotoans or betel-nut boxes that come in various shapes such as quadrangular, octagonal, cylindrical or lunette. Some are disparate objects like gong hangers, trailers for cosmetic cases and the like. Occasionally, this decorative technique is applied to enhance the appearance of kulintang gongs seen as triangular forms ornamented with wire-like curlicues radiating from the boss.

The process of making this kind of lotoan involves the lost-wax, waste-mold technique. Tablets of wax representing the sides that will be decorated are prepared, excising sections deep enough to accommodate the thickness of the ornamentation to be implanted. Wire-like lengths of wax are then applied within the excisions forming the whirls and curls of the ornamentation. There is a wide variation in the thickness of the appliqué, depending on the desired effect. Thin appliqué result in tiny and intricately delicate compositions, while thick ones result in designs that are more robust. The most common effect is a lacelike, open latticework that is floral. Oftentimes, the application of the ornamentation is done with a high density, giving the impression of a highly textured surface rather than being composed of isolated decorative motifs.

The tablets are put together to form the section to be cast and then covered with thick layers of clay and sand as mold. The number of molds depends on the number of parts of the object. Spruces, through which the wax, and then later the molten metal, will seep out are provided in the mold.

The liquefied bronze or brass is then poured through the channel into the mold and then allowed to cool. Subsequently, the molds are broken apart to extricate the cast objects. Final cleaning, repairing, refurbishing and polishing are required before assembling the parts of the lotoan.

For less dense wire inlays, the grooves are engraved with a narrow onglette graver with a swallow-tail profile. The wire is then forced into the groove by hammering. For wider pieces of metal inlays, a square graver is first used and then later the molten metal, will seep out are provided in the mold.

THE SARIMANOK is one aspect of Philippine culture that is taken for granted as it is familiar to all. First, it is an artifact usually constructed from wood in the form of a bird, and as its name implies in the vernacular, an artificial bird. It is usually assembled from de-mountable parts. The head, which slopes into the beak, is ordinarily integrated with the neck and ovaloid body. The widespread wings are inserted in sockets on the sides. The tail feathers are also inserted into holes at the rear of the body. The legs are likewise accommodated in sockets at the bottom. What distinguishes the sarimanok from all other bird constructions is the presence of a fish dangling from the tip of the beak, clutched in its talons or both. The approach to the construction, however, is abstract by way of highly conventionalized floralized, vegetal motifs associated only with the Maranao of the lake region of Lanao del Sur. The entire object is painted all over with primary colors in their full chromatic strength.

Although the sarimanok is not a flag, it is really a part of a system of Maranao flags displayed during important occasions. The entire set is called isa ka labay (meaning, a set of flags displayed when a boat drops anchor). There are six generalized named types that include the huge, swallowtail-like banner, the...