

Present and Future in Philippine Rattan Furniture

Influenced by the fastidious American woman, new designs and stable construction captivate the world of good taste

Progress enough has now been made in manufacture of Philippine rattan furniture to assure it a definite place in the islands' commerce. Only the volume of trade that may be built up remains in doubt, depending, as it does, on certain factors not yet present in the industry. Several flourishing establishments, making the new rattan furniture, exist in Manila. Some look only to the local market, one at least seeks and drums up custom from abroad, both in America and Europe.

At the basis of this industry is the taste of the American woman for furnishings of exotic attractiveness for the home. She found the old reed furniture made here flimsy and short-lived; it was made of split reeds, often of the pulpy inner portion rounded into form for twisting and braiding and binding by being pulled through steel plates with holes of the necessary size in them. Such material frayed, molded and gathered dust; such furniture soon went to pieces—the whole

effort merely produced the cheap and undesirable, the unsatisfactory, and the American woman no more than tolerated it. Often she did less. From the Philippines she turned to China, where, importing the canes in good part from the Philippines, men got them into better form than they did in Manila. Fan chairs, even entire porch sets, were bought in Hongkong and imported into Manila under the tariff rate of about 20% *ad valorem*.

But China too made cane furniture that was but short-lived. The workmanship of it was hasty and faulty; joints fell apart, wrappings came away from vital parts they were made to hold

together, and it was often found that second-rate material had been concealed under goodly exteriors. Insects ravished such furniture, as they did the old sort then Manila's almost exclusive output. Finally, however, there were enough belligerent graduates of women's colleges among Manila's young matrons, particularly in army and navy families, to compel and encourage improvements. Instead of meekly submitting and buying what was offered, these women sketched designs and left orders with the shops.

Their commands were direct: "You will please make the chair as I have drawn it, and only of the material I have selected—that you have shown me. Then I'll see if I like it."

A harsh spur, perhaps, but it hastened reforms in the making of rattan furniture. And now this furniture, as made in Manila, has hardly a rival in the world. Workmanship is honest, prices invitingly low, materials whole, seasoned, even tempered into keeping shape, and of course only of the best. The demand is for the stout Palawan rattan, diameter about an inch, put together with the first rate split rattan thongs of Luzon—aside from aid of the mortise and tenon, glue, screws and nails.

Smaller rattans, but whole ones, serve their proper functions in backs and bottoms and sides of things; they are relegated from the duty of supporting weight or pretending to keep shape. She would be an unwise woman now, who went away from Manila for her cane furniture. The industry here is

at her feet, awaits her bidding. It is her creation. She indeed didn't capitalize it, but her whimsy brought it into being; and though the mountain-dweller in the wilderness of Palawan and the Chinese trader at Puerto Princesa have perhaps never seen an American woman, they know her demands in rattans and have learned to live up to them. Thus she has served her sisters in other parts of the world a good turn while serving herself.

A demand for the product of one rattan-furniture factory in Manila has developed in Holland. Prices and high freight charges are practically not regarded; it is this choice furniture and it alone that is wanted. Now Holland is so situated as to be able to supply her elsewhere with such products. Then why does she come here for them? There can be but one answer. She comes here for the new rattan furniture because it is choice; it is at once tasteful, low-priced and substantial—it is distinctive.

Designs vary widely and embrace all sorts of pieces, everything in the way of furniture: a desk, a stool, a table, a bed, a lamp; and sets, of course, either for porches or rooms. Often the rattan is in combination with hardwood, and again the effect is tasteful yet striking. Divans, these

are low, deep and wide—the ultimate in what they should be. Lounge chairs, here again plain pagan comfort; and in contrast, a desk and chair, perhaps a light added—all as trim as a lace collar.

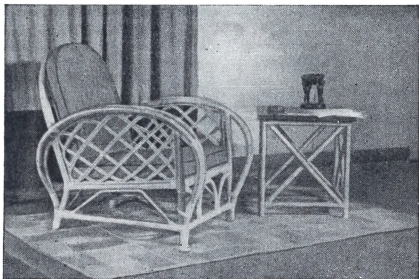
Banishing her grandmother's walnut what-not to the attic, the American woman had the burden of its empty corner on her conscience. This made her adept at designing corner pieces; and the Manila shops now make these pieces in rattan, or rattan and hardwood, so that at simple view they are almost irresistible. Working in unattractive offices, the American woman has thought long thoughts of being as practical as the French are, for instance—of abstracting ugliness from her surroundings. So with the rattan writing-desk made in Manila goes some cunning receptacle for papers—a transformation of the old wire basket.

Now rattan chairs demand cushions, beds mattresses. For these

too the new Manila shops have the best of material, kapok, our native tree cotton, coverings of indianhead. Kapok is clean, odorless and resilient; moisture is so abhorrent to it that it is the preferred material for life preservers. Used for cushions and mattresses for rattan furniture, it is one tropical forest product supplementing another; in other words, it is precisely the upholstering good taste would choose.

One city where there is much demand for Manila's best rattan furniture is Los Angeles. One factory reports regular and increasingly large orders from there. The demand brings up the question whether the furniture might not be made there, or rather assembled there, and shipped from Manila either partly manufactured or in knocked-down form—necessarily at much less freight cost than the wholly manufactured product is charged. This question is being studied in relation to the Pacific coast demand. It is also related to the possibility of devising machines to effect some of the work. It is now all handwork, even the bending of the canes is done with blow-torch and wood-clamp; and the tempering, for fixing shape and hardening, is achieved by application of the torch from time to time while a piece is in the making.

It may be that the ingenuity of the shopowners will be able some time to devise tools to lessen the handwork of their craft. But as you look over the shops, you doubt it; at any rate, the skilled workmen have set the tools a high standard. Its products tasteful and substantial, the industry may now be considered well launched; from this point it is only a matter of going ahead. And so the largest factory reports, three floors occupied, scores of workmen busy, and orders, largely for the export demand, well ahead of the output.



(Rattan Products Mfg., Inc. Photo)

Examples of Good Manila Rattan Furniture