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ORIGIN SIN

Cultural appreciation or appropriation?



Inspiration, appreciation, assimilation, and borrowing are all words that define the history of fashion, music, food and the very nature of culture in a globalised world. From trade routes such as the Silk Road, ideas flowed, making cultural appropriation as old as culture itself.

Yet, cultural appropriation is currently one of the hottest topics in the worlds of fashion and crafts with public battles resulting in the likes of Chanel having to apologise to Fair Isle's Mati Ventrillon after using her designs as a 'source of inspiration' for their Shetland-style knits, and Isabel Marant has apologised after the Mexican government accused her of appropriating traditional indigenous patterns, an accusation they have also put to Carolina Herrera after she used traditional patterns 'in tribute' to Mexico's artisans.

Cultural appropriation is a debate about ownership, ethics and privilege. It is the adoption of an element of one culture by members of another culture on their own terms and for their own profit. It is especially problematic when members of a dominant culture appropriate elements from a less advantaged culture as reproductions or commodities decontextualised from their original use and significance. The line that divides appreciation from appropriation is very thin and it is the subject of great debate, particularly in the world of traditional craft and design.

At the heart of the matter are questions of context and power. Taking traditional designs out of context or the unequal nature of an exchange that

benefits just one side of the equation, disregarding the authors and real holders of traditional wisdom and heritage, are becoming less and less acceptable. Designers can no longer expect to copy and commercialise an aspect of a local culture without any consideration for the people who collectively own it without drawing negative comment. The so called 'exotic' factor, fetishising, romanticising, making it kitsch, decontextualising and commoditising in general, are the classic hallmarks of cultural appropriation. While until recently the point of view of the powerful outsider decided and defined how to use these cultural elements without consent from the owners, this kind of colonial hangover that misrepresents, confuses and dominates indigenous cultures is increasingly being called out.

As an idea, cultural appropriation has been swirling around academic circles since the 1960s, when colonialism was being looked at with a more critical eye. Writing in 2006, Professor Richard Rogers set out four types of cultural appropriation: cultural exchange (involving reciprocal exchange), cultural dominance (imposing the dominant culture on a subordinate culture), cultural exploitation (taking of subordinate culture for the benefit of dominant culture), and transculturation (the development of cultural hybrids). It is the exploitative aspect of that has come under greatest scrutiny in the world of fashion and textiles, something that Rogers defines as 'lacking substantive reciprocity, permission, compensation, understanding, or appreciation.' Suddenly, the use of artisan labour, as well as lifting traditional motifs to use in seasonal fashion ▶



Right; Print advertisement for Bihor Couture
from Beau Monde magazine

collections, requires a little more reflection. When Rogers asks us to consider is if there is a prior history of discrimination or some form of marginalisation, the use of artisan handwork (so often described by brands as 'empowering') appears in a different light.

In 1976, the artist Kenneth Courtts-Smith, wrote an article with the title of 'Some General Observations on the Concept of Cultural Colonialism'. He never actually used the term cultural appropriation, but he was the first to bring together the Marxist idea of 'class appropriation' in which notions of 'high culture' are appropriated and defined by the dominant social and economic class. This describes the way western cultures take ownership of art forms that originate in oppressed or colonised peoples. These ideas go to the core of the problem with cultural appropriation: an unbalanced and unfair power relationship, a relationship of dominance and exploitation between a ruling class and a subjugated one.

In the fashion industry, cultural appropriation is controversial, and the line is especially blurred and mixed with nuances of cultural appreciation. There is debate about whether designers and fashion houses understand the history behind the clothing they are taking from different cultures, and calls for fashion to follow the food industry in providing details of ingredients, the origin and the producers.

One of the biggest problems to the fashion world is the disconnect between fashion and textiles, specifically with heritage textiles. It is equivalent to



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being a chef who is not in sync with the ingredients of a recipe. This result is a kind of cut-and-paste creativity with disregard for the origin.

In 2017, Christian Dior presented a collection inspired by traditional embroidery motifs originally from the Bihor area in Romania, used to adorn a traditional garment, the 'cojoc bişănesc'. Dior presented the jacket as their own creation with no credit or retribution to the community in Romania. The community reacted by taking advantage of this publicity and launched a website, www.bihorcouture.com, which sells traditional Bihor garments and accessories. The initiative was launched by Romanian fashion magazine *Beau Monde* with the help of Bihor fashion designers and artists from the region. They offer the pre-order model and allow fashion enthusiasts to not only buy the clothing for a much more affordable price, but to buy it from the community where the design has its origins.

In 2019, Wes Gordon, Carolina Herrera's new creative director, was accused of plagiarism and cultural appropriation in México after his designs featured traditional designs and embroideries that belong to Indigenous communities. The resort collection called 'Latin Vacation' was manufactured in China and India, using embroideries inspired by artisans from Tenango de Doria, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca and the sarapes de Saltillo. The scandal was directed towards the fact that the communities that inspired the collection were not in any way involved in the manufacturing of the pieces or in receiving royalties. In the words of ▶



Left: Member of the Ashaninka ethnic group from the Amazon, Brazil

México's Minister of Culture: 'The people of Tenango will have finally been completely stripped of their unique cultural artistic expression, one that encompasses their worldview, founding myths, community and family life. They will have been stripped of their cultural identity that will now belong in the collective imagination to the Carolina Herrera house.'

The Mexican designer Carla Fernández is an example of cultural appreciation done right. Her work is a constant cry against globalisation and foreign forms of oppression. She establishes long term relationships with indigenous communities all over the country and co-creates with them. The end result is a fashion line that is flexible, adaptable and modular. Fernández documents techniques, materials and tradition. She publishes a free magazine, available in her boutiques, with all the stories and credits to accompany each collection. Her pieces are manufactured in a joint collaboration between her atelier in México City and many artisans around the country whose credit is shared in full transparency through her social media channels. They are paid a fair price and royalties on a case by case basis. While Fernández's distant origins are in the colonising Spanish elite, she is also Mexican, and is deeply committed to playing her part in making a more just society, giving credit where credit is due, and using her privilege as a tool for change.

Another example of cultural appreciation done right is the 2016 collaboration between Brazilian designer Osken and the Asháninka from the

Right: Osklen Spring / Summer 2016

Amazon. In return for permission to adapt their tattoos and traditional fabrics, Osklen paid the tribe royalties. With that money, the Asháninka have been able to make various improvements, including building a school. As a Unesco Goodwill Ambassador, the designer is also working to publicise the Asháninka's fight against illegal loggers and environmental degradation of their native forest. Osklen has been named Brazil's first global sustainable luxury brand. In his own words: 'It's very important to respect other people's culture and find a way to reproduce it for the public while taking into account its traditional knowledge.'

The famous 'kaftans' by the British brand Pippa Holt have also caused a stir on social media recently and the debate around their name and production is raising questions about the right way of working with indigenous communities and how to tread that fine line between appreciation and appropriation. Since 2015, Pippa Holt has established on-going relationships with artisans from Santo Tomás Jalieza and San Juan Colorado in Oaxaca. They manufacture her backstrap loom woven, embroidery and brocade collections that are sold internationally.

The discussion has raised questions such as: What gives value to the work of artisans? What is the right way to name the garments for an international audience? What is the right way to collaborate with artisans in long term relationships? In the words of artisan Felipa Hernández Reyes via Facebook in response to the debate: 'We are eternally grateful to God for putting Mrs. Pippa Holt on our way, we ask her to continue with the project and we also ▶



Right; Pippa Holt Kaftan

ask people who do not agree with her to not let these differences affect a community who depends on this work. It is very easy to criticise and make negative comments from outside without putting a grain of sand to support indigenous people. Remember the sun rises for everyone, you just have to look at the right side.'

In response to the debate between kaftan or huipil, Pippa Holt writes on her website: "We chose to use kaftan in our brand name to express our international approach and our love for fashion. The correct name, the one accepted by scholars, for the Mexican woven versions we work with is "huipil". Huipil is a beautiful word, with an important heritage, but it is not universally used. Where we work, the elder women call them "batas" which roughly translates as gowns, or in the case of the short ones "blusón", which means big blouse. Sometimes the weavers say "xicun", which is technically a shawl. It is unusual to hear the word huipil used conversationally here where the regional Mixtec language is spoken."

In summary, Pippa Holt and the artisans that collaborate with her, responded with great eloquence to the many inquiries raised by the debate via social media. It became evident that they have a solid relationship built on respect, transparency and impeccable work ethics, a true model for how to build collaborative models for success.

The appropriation vs. appreciation debate has been going on for years, but it is particularly relevant right now amid the growing Black Lives Matter





Left; A retrospective catwalk show at the V&A museum, Fashion in Motion: Carla Fernández, is staged in the dramatic setting of the museum's Raphael Gallery, the show sees models wearing designs by Mexican designer, Carla Fernández. She presents her work inspired by the rich textile heritage of Mexico's indigenous communities in her debut UK show.

movement. People who have been oppressed are speaking out against racism and prejudice louder than ever. In fact, indigenous communities worldwide are increasingly aware of their heritage and their right to preserve it and use it responsibly for future generations.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states, 'Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.'

We can't expect this to be settled anytime soon. The debate on cultural appropriation is gaining traction as one of fashion's most relevant issues, and one that cannot be swept under the carpet. At last, textile culture is being treated with the same importance as social and environmental concerns, in a world where customers are more and more calling for sustainability and humanity and standards. --- Marcella Echavarria

Where is the line between appreciation and appropriation? Join the debate in the Selvedge chatroom; find it under the 'community' tab at www.selvedge.org