

Fashion Appropriation: A Study in Awareness of Crossing Cultural Boundaries in Design

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Abstract : Myriad cultures form the warp and weft of the fabric of this world. The last century saw mass migration of people across geographical boundaries, owing to industrialization and globalization. These people took with them their cultures, costumes, traditions, and folklore, which mingled with the local cultures to create something new and place it in a different context to make it contemporary. With the surge in population and growth of the fashion industry, there has been an increasing demand for innovative and individual fashion, from street markets to luxury brands. Exhausted by local influences, designers take inspiration from the so called 'low' culture and create artistic products, place it in a different context, and the end-product is categorized as 'high' culture. It is challenging as to why a design/culture is 'high' or 'low'. Who decides which works, practices, activities, etc., are 'high' and which are 'low'? The justification for this distinction is often found not in the design itself but the context attached to it. Also, the concept of high/ low is relative to time- what is 'high' today can be 'low' tomorrow and 'high' again the day after. This raises certain concerns. Firstly, it is sad that a culture which offers inspiration is looked down upon as 'low' culture. Secondly, it is ironic because the so designated 'high' culture is a manipulation of the truth from the authentic 'low' culture, which is capable of true expression. When you borrow from a different culture, you pretend to be authentic because you actually are not. Finally, it is important to be aware of crossing cultural boundaries and the context attached to a design/product so as to use it a responsible way that communicates the design without offending anyone. Is it ok for a person's cultural identity to become another person's fashion accessory? This essay explores the complex, multi-layered subject of fashion appropriation and aims to provoke debate over cultural 'borrowing' and create awareness that commodification of cultural symbols and iconography in fashion is inappropriate and offensive and not the same as 'celebrating cultural differences'.

Keywords : context, culture, fashion appropriation, inoffensive, responsible

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