

Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation

Why Cultural Appropriation is Not Cool

From: <https://au.reachout.com/articles/why-cultural-appropriation-isnt-cool>

Rocking a Native American headdress at your next music festival may be a bigger deal than you first thought. Chances are you've heard about 'cultural appropriation', but it can be tricky to understand. Learning about what it is, when it happens and what makes it a big deal is a great way to avoid landing in a sticky or offensive situation.

What cultural appropriation is

The name is a bit of a mouthful, but cultural appropriation happens when a dominant culture takes things from another culture that is experiencing oppression. We know there are a lot of technical-sounding words here, so let's break it down:

A 'dominant culture' is the most visible and accepted culture within a particular society.

'Oppression' describes repeated and prolonged discrimination. It's something that's carried out through powerful organisations such as courts, the armed forces or schools. It's not just one-on-one behaviour, but a form of structural discrimination, meaning it's backed by powerful authorities. Racism, homophobia and sexism are all forms of oppression.

What cultural appropriation isn't

Cultural exchange is different from cultural appropriation. Things like tea, gunpowder and pasta have been shared between different cultures throughout history. These 'borrowings' aren't the same as cultural appropriation, because they don't involve power. When different cultures come together on an equal footing, exchange happens. But when dominant groups take from an oppressed group, we're dealing with appropriation.

Cultural exchange is also very different from assimilation. 'Assimilation' describes what happens when minority cultures are forced to adopt features from a dominant culture in order to fit in. This is different from appropriation, because it's done to ensure survival and to avoid discrimination.

Why cultural appropriation is a problem

It continues the oppression of the non-dominant culture

When we look at a culture that's experiencing oppression, it's often a result of colonisation, where a dominant group has claimed ownership of the land and its people. When the dominant group continues to steal aspects of the non-dominant culture, it continues the economic oppression and disadvantage of that culture.

In Australia, there are cases where white Australian businesses have stolen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artworks for use on T-shirts and souvenirs. This allows the dominant culture to make money from the non-dominant culture, without benefiting the original artists.

It doesn't give people credit for their own culture

Cultural appropriation also has a nasty habit of giving the dominant group credit for aspects of a culture that they have taken, reinforcing the power imbalance between the two groups.

For example, Kylie Jenner was credited with starting an 'edgy' new hair trend, while black actress Zendaya faced criticism for wearing her hair the same way. What's interesting about this, is that Zendaya's natural hair was seen as a negative. But Kylie Jenner, a person with no ties to black culture, was given credit for taking something that wasn't hers.

It creates stereotypes

Cultural appropriation often adds to stereotypes faced by non-dominant cultures. The Native American chief, the Japanese geisha or the Arab sheikh can be examples of stereotypes that pop up during Halloween. When people from dominant cultures 'dress up' like this, it reduces something of cultural significance to a costume just so that the dominant group can have 'a bit of fun'. It also keeps these kinds of stereotypes going. And when cultures have been oppressed, stereotypes often add to their negative experiences.

So, does this mean it's always wrong to engage with a different culture?

Nope! There are times when it's encouraged to try something from a different culture. Being invited to an Indian wedding where the hosts are cool with you wearing traditional clothing is not cultural appropriation. You're invited to take part by people from that culture. So, the all-important ideas of dominance and oppression don't exist here, which is what makes cultural appropriation a big deal in the first place.

Toronto gallery cancels show after concerns artist 'bastardizes' Indigenous art

From: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-gallery-indigenous-art-cancels-amandapl-1.4091529>

Shanifa Nasser · CBC News · Posted: Apr 28, 2017 7:36 PM ET | Last Updated: May 10, 2017

Outrage over a Toronto artist borrowing from the style of an acclaimed Indigenous painter has prompted a gallery to cancel its plans for an upcoming exhibit.

Visions Gallery had planned to showcase the work of Amanda PL, 29, a local non-Indigenous artist who says she was inspired by the Woodlands style made famous in the '60s by the Anishinabe artist Norval Morrisseau, who focussed on nature, animals, Indigenous spirituality and medicine.

But within hours of the gallery's email announcement promoting the exhibit, there was a backlash, with people alleging that PL had appropriated Indigenous culture and art.

Chippewa artist Jay Soule was among those leading the charge. He argues PL blatantly copied Morrisseau with virtually no regard for the storytelling behind his work.

"What she's doing is essentially cultural genocide, because she's taking his stories and retelling them, which bastardizes it down the road. Other people will see her work and they'll lose the connection between the real stories that are attached to it," said Soule.

Artist surprised by reaction

PL said she first became inspired by the Woodlands style when she was living in Thunder Bay, Ont., studying to become a visual arts teacher and taking Native studies.

"I just tried to learn all I could about the Aboriginal culture, their teachings, their stories, and I've tried to capture the beauty of the art style and make it my own by drawing upon elements of nature within Canada that have meaning to me," she told CBC Toronto in an interview Friday.

She was surprised by the reaction when her exhibit was announced, especially online.

"A lot of the Aboriginal people had issues with me not being native.... I feel like they think that I'm taking away from the culture, but really I'm not," PL said.

"I think it's a shame to say that an artist can't create something because they're not from that race," she said.

"That's like saying any other culture can't touch something like abstract art unless you're white, or you can't touch cubism art."

Artist's background didn't come up before exhibit

PL said she's never intentionally led anyone to believe that she herself is Indigenous.

"I always tell people that I'm a Canadian artist," she said.

Everyone here in Canada has to be aware of the history of how Indigenous people have been dealt with from the time of colonial settlements.

- Tony Magee, co-owner of Visions Gallery

Visions Gallery co-owner Tony Magee acknowledged PL didn't misrepresent herself to him or his partner, artist Francisco Castro Lostalo, in their conversations ahead of the planned exhibit.

Magee said it never came up, and he didn't think to ask whether she was Indigenous. "In retrospect, I wish that I had," he said in a phone interview Friday.

It was only after the exhibit was announced on Monday that he learned PL was not Indigenous.

The first thing they did in response, he said, was reply with an apology to every single individual who wrote with concerns, noting that they hadn't anticipated the issue.

'Everyone here in Canada has to be aware of the history'

By Tuesday, they'd spoken to PL and offered her the chance to display another style of work, which she turned down. The gallery owners felt they had no choice but to cancel the exhibit.

'This is how I choose to express myself and this is how I choose to continue to paint,' PL says. Above is an image from her Facebook page. (Amanda PL/Facebook)

Magee said that in his own opinion there is no debate about appropriating from Indigenous people.

"Yes it's tricky, cultural issues and borrowing from different cultures — everybody has an opinion. But everyone here in Canada has to be aware of the history of how Indigenous people have been dealt with from the time of colonial settlements, and there is a specific perspective that we have to have with respect to that culture," Magee said.

His own work flips Indigenous stereotypes on their head in everything from sports teams to film — taking well-known movie posters and recasting them with titles like *The Bride of Frankensioux* and *Tribe of Dracula*. But Soule said borrowing from Indigenous people is a different case altogether.

That's a point he sees reflected in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which affirms full protection over Indigenous Peoples' intellectual property — ranging from oral stories to artwork.

Asked if she would consider no longer painting in the Woodlands style after reactions like that of Soule's, PL said she will continue.

"This just happens to be the style that I'm drawn towards at this time. This is how I choose to express myself and this is how I choose to continue to paint," PL said.

