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Ancient, Indigenous and Iconic Textile Motifs in Contemporary Fashion Case Study: Defining Concepts through Textile Designs: Appropriation, Collaboration, Provenance and Identity

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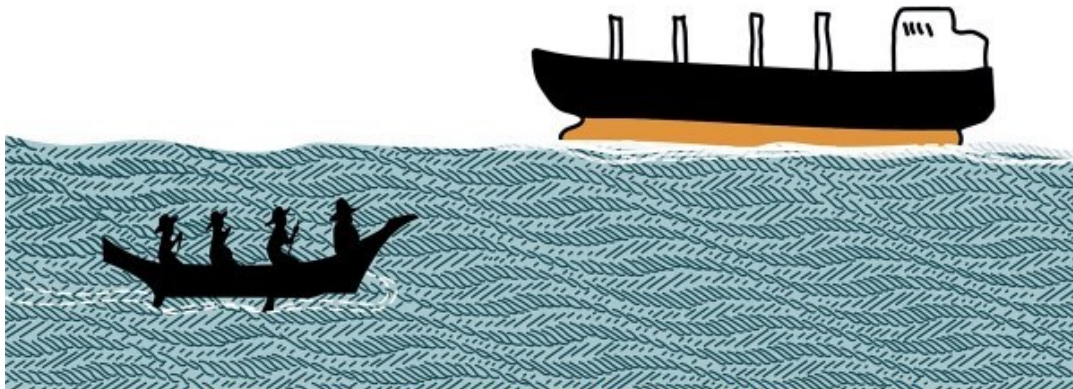
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Introduction

In recent years ancient, indigenous and iconic textile motifs have emerged in global brands' fashion collections, evoking wonder and curiosity, or, a sense of insignificance. Are these designs intentionally participating in the economic expansion related to global fast-fashion consumption, or are today's fashion textiles purely decorative, simply displaying the trending materials of designer brands?

Ancient sumptuous textiles used to signpost information about cultural identity, rank, wealth, power or majesty, and textile patterns and their designs have played a major role in the social, economic, and religious structures of communities around the world. Even today, many iconic textiles and indigenous designs still carry specific meanings, conveying messages related to a culture or tradition. Textiles may therefore be considered as active or passive objects that their wearer or carrier displays and transmits. They can operate as "billboards" or agents and, due to their transferability, certain iconic textile designs may serve as intentional metaphors for social, economic, cultural or political agendas. Textiles and their designs, which may carry specific meaning in relation to traditional practices in certain cultures, in others, however, these same designs may have lost their original meaning, becoming purely decorative.

Textiles are also able to carry narratives of technological advancement and design innovation, or reveal information about various degrees of design appropriation related to the transfer of symbols, motifs and decorations incorporated in different societies. Cultural appropriation, however, may also be associated with the economically dominant cultures' use of the ideas and practices of a downtrodden one. Indigenous textile designs are still affiliated with a cultural heritage and language in many parts of the world. These seem to be less exposed to intense international exchanges, and their growth is slower than, for example, emerging economies.

This case study focuses on the terminology used in the classification of cultural and indigenous designs observed in some of today's fashion brands, addressing hereby the questions of cultural appropriation or collaboration, and examine why design authenticity, provenance and hybridity¹ are concept that remain difficult to grasp amidst the tangle of multi-cultural designs that have emerged during the last decades. The study will explore the evolving consumption patterns related to design appropriation, exposing aspects of "otherness" and identity in the context of multiculturalism, global power and cosmopolitanism. Are these examples of "authentic provenance," in the sense of objects produced by members (or insiders) of a certain culture reflecting aspects of hybridity or, do they in fact exhibit "inauthentic provenance" -

¹ Distinct and un-mixed cultures constitute 'hybridity', and when the original design belongs to pure cultural origins. Unless, however, the original culture is truly isolated all designs are informed in some sense – consciously or not – by a wider cultural matrix.

absorbed and produced by outsider cultures? What are the functions of appropriated textile designs in their new cultural locations?

Before we examine these three designs - the Chinese dragons, the Lesotho Basotho blanket, and the Mexican designs – let us have a brief retrospective on this ancient phenomenon of “design appropriation.” Cultural appropriation and the movement of designs dates back to many centuries as a result of various consumption patterns that shaped this practice.² This can be exemplified with the ‘The Pearl Roundel’ and ‘The Mongol period’ (1206 – 1368AD), also addressing the questions of design appropriation. These examples also highlight that design appropriation not only alludes to a certain aesthetic value; the phenomenon also considers various levels of power. This also allows us to address the question of design authenticity, affected by movement and appropriations.

The Pearl Roundel

Assuming that motifs or designs have a single origin, elements of which are retained as they move, we could trace the famous ancient roundel-and-pearl motif to several cultures and locations in Central Asia and China, such as The Uighur, Tangut, Sasanian and Tang cultures between the 6th and the 13th century. This much-travelled motif can ultimately be traced back to Egypt and the Eastern lands of the Mediterranean, in representations dated to the 1st and 2nd century³. The roundel design was traditionally attached to power and nobility, and continued to be used in those circles, as a result of various types of movements, or appropriations.

With its numerous transcultural uses throughout the years, the iconic roundel motif may therefore be considered to be a design with no single or pure cultural heritage claiming its provenance. The recurring uses of the same type of motif renders this design multicultural rather than a hybrid. The roundel motif could also be considered as belonging to an international design repertoire representing a geographical region stretching over many consumers or cultural spaces. Textiles and designs are, therefore, often difficult to culture-classify with certainty when considering their movements and appropriations, or lack of proper evidence. One of the most compounding issues of culture-classification is that textile designs rarely contain any concrete or definitive indication of their origin.⁴ A combination of various methods, however, such as stylistic analysis, historical documentation, technical weave, material analysis, as well as visual examination, can identify consistencies in time and a cultural space. Nonetheless, interpreting the identity of a textile design is still presented with a number of problematic issues. Mobility is likely to obscure the provenance of a textile and its design: materials and their makers – the designers and craftsmen – as well as pattern books and prototypes have the ability to be relocated, challenging assumptions about an object’s origins. Categorizing designs within specific geographical and cultural locations may therefore be problematic when both location and culture have the ability to move, fluctuate or change.

² Cultural appropriation can be observed at many levels and is a core element in archaeology for societies prior to written historical records. The appearance of designs in different geographical locations reveals trade and cultural exchange.

³ One of the earliest roundel motifs found on a garment dates back to the 2nd century AD: a statue portraying King Sanatruq Hatra, Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament, The Lotus and the Dragon*. London: The British Museum Press, 1984.

⁴ Textiles rarely contain a useful indication of their production and origin, unlike certain types of ceramics and paintings which do so with seals, reign marks or inscriptions, assigning objects to either a place of production or an artist, or offering an indication of a genre of belonging.

Design Authenticity

When a design culture changes its location, for example, through the movement or re-location of designers and craftsmen, it is likely that these people will incorporate elements and designs of their home culture in their new locations. It is also likely that they will themselves absorb new cultural elements from their new locations. While migrating individuals are likely to re-use certain design repertoires derived from their home culture, it is also possible that in the re-location process, certain aspects of a design or technical knowledge will be re-used or included in the production of a textile at the new location. This process whereby more than one form of transfer appears simultaneously, constitutes the so-called ‘hitchhiking’ effect, posited by Eerkins and Lipo.⁵ The recurring use of the same motifs render such designs multicultural rather than hybrids, when their pure cultural origins are lost with the multiple appropriations and consumptions over time.

Mongol Design Consumption Pattern

Cultural appropriation enabled by such multiple movements has often occurred in relation to conquest, to elevate or expand one’s power or economic wealth. For example, the luxurious *lampas* textile designs that emerged under Mongol rule epitomize the peak of design appropriation in terms of design authenticity and identity creation.⁶ To elevate their status, the Mongol elite appropriated sumptuous silk weave techniques and embellished their costumes with iconic gold designs from the cultures they conquered. Designs such as the Chinese dragon and cloud motifs, the Buddhist Lotus and endless knots, the Central Asian falcon, facing animal motifs and geometrical designs from the Middle Eastern lands, in addition to the pearl roundel motif, enabled the Mongols to become associated with different sartorial customs representing the cultures they had conquered. Wearing appropriated majestic designs affiliated with the different cultures they conquered linked the Mongols with a worldly presence and, above all, led to associations of power and ‘majesty’. Integrating the different cultural symbols into a new design language also represented a certain unity of cultures, or ‘cultural space’ that had been created under Mongol rule, and which alluded to a new national identity of the ‘Mongol culture’. The relationship between cultural appropriation and power may therefore emerge in the ways of expressing rank, status and identity in society. However, cultural appropriation may also give rise to a relationship between cultural reference and otherness, or be purely decorative.

As these two ancient examples show (the ‘Pearl Roundel’ and ‘Mongol design appropriation’), textile design motifs may have belonged to more than one culture. Various forms of movement or transcultural consumptions that occurred over time, as a result of conquests, trade and commodity exchanges, as well as the movement of weavers and artisans, have resulted in various degrees of geographical multiculturalization. This also suggests that different cultures participate in a certain degree of continuous movement, and may therefore be considered as travellers, or units that consciously or unconsciously collect, disseminate and incorporate ideas,

⁵ Eerkins, Jelmer W. and Lipo, Carl P. 2007. “Cultural Transmission Theory and the Archaeological Record: Providing Context to Understanding Variation and Temporal Changes in Material Culture”. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 15(3): 247-252.

⁶A *lampas* is a figured textile and is constructed with two weaves: a ground weave, which is woven in tabby, satin or twill, and a supplementary weave forming the gold design. The ground weave and the supplementary weave are joined in a bind by the supplementary warp thread.

objects and beliefs throughout the years - particularly during times of great expansion and interculturality.

All these considerations may render the use of the term “authenticity” or a “cultural belonging” inappropriate. The degree of transfer involved in a design also prompts us to reconsider assumptions of a ‘national cultural label’ or a label for ethnicity when it comes to labelling objects and designs. Perhaps more nuanced concepts such as “cultural space” or “cultural zones” would be more appropriate for designs with more than one cultural origin. Designs from different cultures not only challenges the usefulness of terms such as “national cultural label;” it also questions the concept of ‘hybridity’. People, objects and cultures circulate continuously and are involved in some degree of transfer. The new designs resulting from this transfer do not comply with the concept of “pure” origin, which has gradually been lost. The question that therefore emerges is how to relate the term ‘appropriation’ or ‘collaboration’ to the intercultural designs that increasingly dominate certain contemporary fashion designs.

In recent years, various types of transfer, along with the reuses of ideas, materials and designs have increased significantly as a result of growing global interconnectedness⁷. The multiple ways in which this “recycling” occurs may have led to an increased conscious or unconscious multiculturalism, resulting from a series of appropriations. We will now turn to our case study exploring the appearance of ancient and iconic designs indigenous to China, Lesotho and Mexico in contemporary western fashion collections.

The Chinese Dragon

The Chinese dragon’s earliest appearance in European sartorial designs can be observed during the Middle Ages as a result of “Pax Mongolica,” which enabled intense exchanges of gifts, commodities, services and ideas in the vast intercultural space between China and Europe.⁸ The Chinese dragon has since circulated as a motif in an international design repertoire incorporated by cultures stretching from China to Europe. During the 17th century the phenomenon “Chinoiserie” also intensified the multiple uses of Chinese motifs and designs in western cultures.⁹ The popular motif of the Chinese dragon was thus circulated continuously within Chinese culture but also beyond, for centuries. During the last decades, it has been increasingly used by a number of western fashion labels.¹⁰ More recently, Chinese textile artisans have also started working in Italian fashion workshops.¹¹ We can thus conclude that Chinese artisans, materials and motifs have been moving continuously over time, even until today.

The Italian fashion company Gucci has produced an overcoat embellished with 5-clawed dragons, mimicking the Emperor’s costumes during the powerful Chinese dynasties. This has

⁷ The increase in movement that occur today includes people, objects and ideas through physical travel or electronic devices.

⁸ Pax Mongolica, circa 1250 – 1350 AD, enabled the safe and free movement of people, goods and services, Allsen, Thomas. *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁹ Chinoiserie is the imitation of Chinese motifs which began to emerge as an decorative form in Europe from the 17th century, <https://www.britannica.com/art/chinoiserie>, accessed 12 January 2019.

¹⁰ Some of the most important luxury brands adopting this motif include Roberto Cavalli, House of Dior, Jean Paul Gaultier, Gucci and Isabel Marant.

¹¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-chinese-workers-who-assemble-designer-bags-in-tuscany>, also <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/05/17/long-term-chinese-immigrants-in-italy>. Accessed December 4, 2018.

obvious references to majestic power, rank and identity in Chinese culture, as we have discussed above. For the Gucci brand, this design was, quite likely, not intended for a narrow royal consumption, but for a broader consumer group reached through the global distribution of Gucci products. The transfer of the dragon motif related to the ancient Chinese design likely rendered this object appealing for a growing international group of consumers affiliated with Chinese culture. Moreover, it was likely recognized by a wider and multicultural consumer group via its link of the iconic symbol to a growing Chinese presence in the world scene. This coat, therefore, is also a representation of inauthentic provenance, in the sense that its design and object is not produced by one culture exclusively. It is neither a design hybrid nor does it constitute a design appropriation, due to its century long circulation and transcultural consumption. This example, however, can be recognized as a design collaboration between the Italian and Chinese designs, also representing a two-way exchange of consumption patterns.

Design Collaboration

In 2018 the Gucci label produced an entire collection dedicated to celebrating the Chinese New Year of the dog. Sold exclusively in limited editions and locations, these designs appeared as global displays, appealing both to a home market and to a growing Chinese diaspora. This also suggests that the intermingling of images representing “deep local” Chinese traditions with pan-global consumables, such as the Gucci brand, may not only appeal to a specific “Chinese taste” but also empower Chinese traditions within and beyond China. For example, Gucci collaborated with prominent Chinese designers and artists to develop commodities with iconic designs merging the two cultures. Gucci’s involvement with the Chinese art scene, with the aim to “exchange” rather than appropriate designs, is interesting. The Chinese artist Cao Fei, for example, who re-uses local, traditional and historical iconic themes of the Chinese ‘bird-and-flower’ motifs, presents a retrofitted “deep local” Chinese design with the “pan global” Gucci product.

As these examples show, the designs were intentionally used with the aim of projecting a past Chinese heritage. Although they retain some recognition and significance among consumers related to Chinese culture, their original meaning and majestic powers have been lost. The “local and global” design collaboration may offer both a significant market consumer potential for Gucci, as well as an opportunity for meeting a growing demand for specific commodities. This type of transcultural consumption furthermore presents a degree of mutual presence and acceptance, demonstrated as a ‘new cultural space’: an intercultural zone, or a “Third Space” expressing a certain unity of a design culture which, over time, may be integrated with an international design repertoire, as seen above, or remain purely decorative.

While our Chinese examples above show an emphasis on various forms of local design collaboration in global partnerships, the examples also highlight the formation of cultural relationship between striving economies and expanding global players. In the following examples we will further explore aspects of design appropriations in two different cultures and market economies.

The Basotho Blanket

Louis Vuitton’s Spring-and-Summer collection 2017 included a blue blanket displaying designs of giraffes, palm leaves, corn cups and four pinstripes, produced with a matching shirt. The French fashion company’s design, alluding to an ‘African theme’, shares a number of striking similarities with the Basotho blanket associated with Lesotho culture: the pinstripes, the corn cup design and the blue hues are traditionally used by for Basotho royalty. Their priced

values and materials of the two products are, however, quite dissimilar: the cashmere Louis Vuitton blanket is sold for over 2000 US dollars, while the local woolen Basotho blanket has a price of just over 60 US dollars.

The Basotho Blanket has become a cultural emblem affiliated with the Lesotho King Moshoeshe I, who in 1860 received a woolen blanket as a gift from European traders and missionaries. Impressed with the blanket, the King replaced the traditional adorned leopard skin with the blanket. When Queen Victoria visited Basotho Land in 1897 and offered a blanket as a gift to the king, the design of this blanket has remained among the nine varieties woven today. Apart from the Queen Victoria design, a European design from the 1940s has been integrated into the repertoire. Another example is the Batho Ba Roma design, commemorating Pope John Paul's visit to Lesotho. This supports the argument that the designs represented in the Basotho blankets are related to more than one culture, and are therefore not exhibiting explicitly indigenous designs of Sotho culture, or presenting pure cultural origins.

The blanket, however, is still an integral object for the Sotho people, also displaying motifs signifying sacred rituals linked to Sotho culture. It is traditionally worn wrapped around the body and secured at the shoulders with a hidden safety pin. Some of the different designs also signify the wearer's rank, and refer to the latter's important life events, such as his transition to manhood, reaching adulthood, his wedding day and the first-born child. The corn-cup motif, referring to health and prosperity, also appears in numerous Basotho blanket designs. Other designs are appropriate for every-day use. However, what is common for all designs, both royal and every-day, are the characteristic four pinstripes, worn vertically at all times; when worn horizontally, by women, they signify mourning.

Although the traditional Basotho blanket is associated with the indigenous Sotho culture, it is manufactured in neighboring South Africa by Aranda Mill. Produced by an outsider culture, the blankets are neither indigenous nor entirely a local invention. They are a result of various 'outsider' design collaborations, thus exhibiting an inauthentic provenance¹². Although the majority of Aranda's blanket production is consumed among members of the Sotho culture, they also circulate as commodities and appeared in various transcultural consumptions. For example, retrofitted, the blanket has been used by the fashion label Thabo Makhetha. It has also appeared as costumes in a movie production, *The Black Panther*, and can be sold worldwide via Aranda's website¹³. This suggests that the Basotho blankets have consciously and continuously been made available for a transcultural consumption and not exclusively to Sotho culture. Their distribution appears in a market space shared by different cultures and consumers, and therefore they cannot be considered exclusively affiliated to Basotho tradition. Does the lack of a design collaboration between Louis Vuitton and the Basotho culture, however, constitute an example of cultural appropriation?

While the Louis Vuitton blanket and shirt are not identical copies of the Basotho blanket design, the style, the 'royal blue' hues associated with the royal family, corn-cups, the safety pins and the four pinstripes are. Despite these similarities, though, the ways in which the two items are used differ. Firstly, the Louis Vuitton blanket and shirt are worn with the pinstripes

¹² Aranda Textile Mill has produced the Basotho blanket as part of their homeware product range in Johannesburg since the 1990s, and after taking over the production from a British manufacturer.

¹³ <https://thabomakhetha.com/collections/collection> accessed January 18, 2019; the blanket has also featured in the movie *Black Panther*, <https://www.aranda.co.za/blanket-blog/basotho-fashion-on-super-heros-in-wakanda/> accessed September 2, 2018.

displayed horizontally, something that is offensive to Sotho cultural practice.¹⁴ The blanket is also secured around the neck with a visible safety pin, which also clashes with the Sotho design.

The exclusive Louis Vuitton blanket, whose price is unaffordable for the indigenous Sotho culture, was likely intended for wealthy consumers appreciating styles and designs evoking a certain foreignness associated with “African exoticness.” Although the design may also be purely decorative, its iconic motifs appeal to an affluent local customer group that appreciates the sartorial reference to majesty associated with traditional Sotho royalty.

Although Louis Vuitton themed its 2017 collection “Basotho blanket,” borrowing significantly from the Sotho design concept, the indigenous Sotho community has not profited from this one-sided collaboration; their home culture has not benefitted economically from sharing a collaboration with Vuitton. The eponymous blanket design, which may have resulted in intellectual property rights violation (if Aranda had legally protected the Basotho designs), cannot, however, be considered as a design appropriation but rather a design appreciation.¹⁵

Mexican Designs

Our last example illustrates the case of indigenous designs from a remote Mexican village in Oaxaca, Mexico: its local flower-and-wheat motifs and designs. This case constitutes an example of appropriation and authentic provenance. These designs, created as embroidered swatches fashioned into dresses, are purely decorative and associated with local traditions. They have circulated within their cultural environment, passed down through generations, and are therefore considered of ‘pure origin.’

In 2016, a strikingly similar design to the indigenous Oaxaca one, was put on the market by the Spanish company Zara, a seller of “fast fashion.”¹⁶ A dress by the French fashion house Isabel Marant featured, in 2015, another nearly identical design to the blouse worn by locals in Santa Maria, Tlahuitoltepec, Oaxaca.¹⁷ Whereas the appropriated designs are strikingly similar to the Mexican original, their prices are not. The local women producing the indigenous designs are paid just 6 US dollars for the 36 hours of work necessary for creating one outfit, while the Zara product costs 52 US dollars, and the dress by Isabel Marant is priced at 365 US dollars.

The Zara blouse and the Isabel Marant dress demonstrate not only examples of foreign conglomerates’ lucrative engagement in indigenous local crafts designs, offering neither payment nor tribute, but they also constitute examples of design appropriation. This case is similar to the African blanket example, discussed above: both societies are victims of “one-way design appropriation.” However, these examples are in contrast with the Chinese case, where “cultural appropriation” turned into ‘cultural collaborations’. In the African and Mexican examples, the appropriation of indigenous designs was intentional, with the aim of offering something decorative and “exotic.” In contrast, in the Chinese example, collaborative forces revealed strategic and pragmatic approaches in the interaction of Chinese cultural heritage for greater economic rewards. This, therefore, prompts the questions of how to

¹⁴ The case of the pinstripes may have provoked the uproar of the Sotho people of the Lesotho Kingdom, who were seeking justification of cultural appropriation. Interview with Aranda Textile Mill December 6, 2018.

¹⁵ Intellectual property right for the Basotho blanket designs were filed in Europe in 2018, and filing in the USA was still pending, *ibid*.

¹⁶ <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2018/07/zara-plagia-diseno-bordado-chiapas/>

¹⁷ <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/isabel-marant-embroidered-blouse-plagiarism-row-mexico-antik-batik>

consume and integrate appropriated “deep cultural” designs responsibly, particularly when they are intended for a pan-global economic consumption.

Conclusion

Modern age technology has had a big impact on the mobility of individuals and the exchanges of goods and services, accelerating the movements of indigenous designs and facilitating voluntary and involuntary cultural appropriation. The intensified connectivity and physical mobility between people, nations and cultures has given rise to new “cultural spaces” while questioning notions of authenticity and cultural belongings. New forms of transcultural consumptions, as well as cultural collaborations, have emerged as a result of this increased movement, while a focus on the protection of indigenous designs of ‘pure cultures’ has also intensified.

Protecting a design has, paradoxically, increasingly developed into a two-way process between luxury brands and counterfeits: while luxury brand companies are increasingly appropriating ancient, indigenous or iconic designs, they are themselves subject to counterfeits or appropriation by other (usually less luxurious) brands using their logos. Sold at a fraction of the price of, for example, an original Louis Vuitton product, the high demand for counterfeits demonstrates a desire for “luxury” products associated with “luxury” or uniqueness. It also highlights the relationship between designs which are identified with “luxury” on the one hand, and acts that signals identity on the other. For example, consuming a luxury counterfeit may signal a connection or identification among groups who share similar tastes or use similar products. The counterfeit consumer thus assimilates to a new custom in an act of re-identification. Consuming counterfeits with the intent to change or improve one’s current or future status may also be related to the so-called cultural *mimicry* phenomenon, as posited by Bhaba.¹⁸ *Mimicry* here refers to a behaviour whereby the counterfeits, such as ‘Louis Vuitton’ commodities, are sought after for what they represent in a social environment, with the prospect of accessing a certain identity (or expressing shared representations). Therefore, in the process of re-identification by different means, such as counterfeit objects, self or cultural identity is compromised or suppressed. The two-way process of luxury brands and counterfeits in the context of re-identification may, however, also be expressed through adopting specific iconic designs. Inducing certain individuals to acquire counterfeits may allude to disguising one’s cultural identity and indicate the various stages of a re-identification demonstrated as affiliation with, or admiration of luxury commodities. A sense of a re-identification may therefore also be experienced when acquiring a certain appropriated, indigenous or iconic design as illustrated, for example, by the Gucci, Isabel Marant and Sara examples discussed above. These examples also demonstrate how certain designs constantly move and fluctuate, as replicas, at the various levels of the consumption chain.

Large fashion corporations are constantly on the lookout for new ways of making their products more attractive, which may be resulting in the greater influx of indigenous and intercultural designs. Design innovation, reflecting a sense of novelty, uniqueness, elitism, foreignness or “majesty“, has prompted a demand for a wider design repertoire accommodating a greater multicultural consumer base. Cultural appropriation or Making reference to earlier ancient or indigenous powerful designs, or “cultural zones“, may be one method of establishing a

¹⁸ The term *mimicry* emerged in colonial and post-colonial literature, Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

presence in the expanding world of textile consumption, even if for certain consumer groups these designs may be purely decorative or unrelated to cultural identity.

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