

Visual Arts Review: “Native Fashion Now”—Tradition and Cutting Edge, Superbly Balanced

Even without museum commentary, Native Fashion Now is an important show – visually, socially, and politically.



Figure 1 Sho Sho Esquiro (Kaska Dene/Cree), Wile Wile Wile dress, “Day of the Dead” Collection, 2013. Seal, beaver tail, carp, beads, silk, rayon, and rooster feathers; skull and tulle. Photo: Thosh Collins



Figure 2 Jamie Okuma (Luiseño/Shoshone-Bannock). Boots, 2013–14 (detail). Glass beads on boots designed by Christian Louboutin. Museum. Photo: Walter Silver.

From numbers 1 – 14, choose the word that best completes the sentence.

This show will explode your ideas of where Native Americans fit in the world of fashion. Maybe you [1] don't / didn't realize fashion had a Native presence, but it very much does, and this exhibition celebrates Native American artists who [2] had / have found their balance between tradition and cutting edge.

[3] At / In the show's opening, the museum hosted a roundtable discussion with three artists, Jamie Okuma (Shoshone), Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo), and Pat Pruitt (Laguna Pueblo), and they helped orient my non-Native thinking [4] for / about their work. First, they are artists who choose to work in bead, fabric, and metal, and they produce clothing, footwear, and jewelry that can be useful as well as beautiful. Native peoples have been creating functional items for millennia, sourcing materials locally or through [5] their / its extensive trade networks, then decorating them with geometric and nature-based designs. Today's artists continue in that tradition, but kick it up several notches, with globally sourced materials and innovative designs.

The first Native American to achieve success with consumer fashion was Lloyd Kiva New, [6] he / who designed dresses and leather goods in the 1950s. For his fabrics, he borrowed colors [7] from / with western riverbeds, cliffs, and scrub plants; he printed the cloths with stylized figures and animals drawn from his Cherokee heritage.

Roughly his contemporary, Frankie Welch designed clothing in Alexandria, Virginia, [8] when / where she rubbed elbows with high level government officials. Her scarf with Cherokee language syllabics was used as an official presidential gift in 1966, and First Lady

Betty Ford wore Welch's red and gold embroidered evening dress.

Following [9] this / these auspicious beginning, the excitement about Native Fashion tapered off. Two dresses on loan from Phoenix's Heard Museum reflect the stasis of the 1970s and '80s: a wool blanket dress and another embroidered in turquoise and coral are carefully executed but they seem like artifacts, interesting but hardly exciting.

The buzz [10] returned / has returned in the early years of this century. For [11] its / his black-fringed dress, Derek Jagodzinsky printed Cree language syllabics on a white band around the midriff. On its own, the dress would be reminiscent of the straight shift worn by flapper girls in the roaring twenties, but the midriff band and long fringe transform it into a wholly different creation. [12] Other / Another piece, also black and white, comes from Virgil Ortiz's collaboration with Donna Karan—a strapless, gently flared dress with a bold design abstracted from plant and animal figures. It's Cochiti Pueblo meets New York.

In recent years, the work [13] has / had become even more experimental, edgy, even political. Two stand-out dresses are from Bethany Yellowtail (Apsaalooké/Crow and Northern Cheyenne). She layers fine black lace over a beige strapless sheath and stitches a row of white elk teeth down each sleeve. Leather applique on the black lace positions a large bell-shaped flower over the breasts. Her long-ago relatives may have worn clothes adorned with elk teeth, [14] but / and this is an entirely modern take. And its attitude is nimbly accentuated by a sunglass accessory—an example of 'Rez Bans' designed by Kevin Pourier (Oglala Lakota)—which is made out of buffalo horn, malachite, mother-of-pearl, coral, lapis lazuli, and sandstone.

For numbers 15 – 24, choose a group of words (a-j) from the box below to fill in each blank.

- a. when answering
- b. is far more than
- c. by working on
- d. but before using
- e. makes use of
- f. when it comes to
- g. who lived among
- h. along with
- i. giving them
- j. as if

The other Yellowtail dress is a simple, short-sleeved shift, using photoprint fabric: black birds in flight over ivory colored satin. The photo comes from Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip) who is photographing contemporary Native Americans for her Project 562 (that's the number of tribes recognized by the federal government). Here, again, the accessory [15] _____ an afterthought. The cuff bracelet by Caroline Blechert (Inuit) makes use of beads, porcupine quills, caribou hide, and antler to create a colorful, abstract design of lines and triangles.

The use of indigenous materials (feathers, furs, beads, leather) and design elements (birds, plants, geometric shapes) are ingredients that link most of the work in the show. But these connections are elastic; each artist [16] _____ them in his or her own way. Some work combines traditional materials with others that are not (silk, Mylar). Other pieces manipulate natural materials in new ways. Lisa Telford, for instance, stitched pieces of red cedar bark into a dress. Her Haida forbearers, [17] _____ cedar forests, may never have used tree bark for a dress, but if they did, it

certainly would not be this short, form fitting, and one-shouldered. Sho Sho Esquiro (Kaska Dene/Cree) created a deeply slit dress using seal, beaver, carp, beads, silk, rayon, and rooster feathers. It is modern and gorgeous, with feathers as the main event.

Some artists deploy traditional design in entirely new places—a skateboard deck, for instance. Rico Lanaat Worl (Tlingit and Athabascan) makes use of formline design to decorate wooden decks. The black lines of his ravens and eagles are bold yet restrained; they hold something back, [18] _____ there was space needed to let the intricate images breathe. Louie Gong (Nooksack and Squamish) enhances Chuck Taylor sneakers with the formline design of a wolf, [19] _____ a look that is both indigenous and urban. Jared Yazzie (Dine (Navajo)) coined the phrase “Native Americans discovered Columbus” on his T-shirt.

Jamie Okuma famously created beaded boots. They are Christian Louboutin boots—the red soles are the giveaway—and they are groundbreaking. They also, [20] _____ sneakers, skateboards, and some of the clothing in the show, inevitably lead to the challenging question of cross-cultural fertilization.

The artists at the roundtable shared thoughts about the specter of assimilation. Most Native artists learn about technique and the spiritual significance of traditional design [21] _____ ceremonial garments and objects for the tribe. When it comes to their own art, they draw on all that makes them who they are, including tribal traditions, and that motivates them [22] _____ deciding what to use in their artistic and commercial enterprises. “Whatever we’re doing as artists is to be seen, and sold.” Okuma said. On the other

hand, some of their creations must remain out-of-sight from the public. "Ceremonial life remains private to the pueblo," insists Pruitt.

One audience member raised the tricky issue of cultural appropriation this way: "What advice can I give fashion students who are inspired by Native art?" [23]

_____, Okuma pointed out the Isaac Mizrahi dress on display in the gallery: "It's beautifully done, in a respectful manner. [24] _____ a design, an artist should write to the tribe for guidance. Get permission. Your work must bear the integrity

of who you are and where the elements came from."

Michaels offered this as summary: "We are artists, and we are still here, after all the genocides, dislocations, and pillaging. We are proud of who we are, and want to be part of the larger world, while also celebrating our own culture." The splendid *Native Fashion Now* shows that this vital and complex conversation about cultural inspiration, mingling, borrowing, and appropriation is well underway.

Match the person (1 – 10) with what they have done (a – j)

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| 1. Bethany Yellowtail | a. Used a tree bark to make a dress |
| 2. Caroline Blechert | b. Designed sneakers with a wolf on them |
| 3. Lisa Telford | c. Encouraged artists to contact tribes for advice on using native designs |
| 4. Jamie Okuma | d. Made sunglasses out of buffalo horn |
| 5. Lloyd Kiva New | e. Has ancestors who wore clothes decorated with elk teeth |
| 6. Louie Gong | f. Worked with Donna Karan |
| 7. Frankie Welch | g. Made a bracelet designed with abstract lines and triangles |
| 8. Kevin Pourier | h. Drew animals on cloth |
| 9. Derek Jagodzinsky | i. Designed a dress for a president's wife |
| 10. Virgil Ortiz | j. Printed his native language on his clothes |