

Native Fashion Now
Linda Welters, University of Rhode Island
February 24, 2016

Summary by Aysha Moreino

As a person of partial Native American roots, I was very excited for Dr. Welters' presentation about Native American Fashion. Although I have never dressed in traditional Native regalia or danced growing up, I still appreciate the culture and dress of my people. This presentation walked the audience through the "Native Fashion Now" exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. I have been to many PowWows growing up, and although regalia is beautiful and colorful, it is not something one would be able to wear on a daily basis. What I found most interesting is that designers were able to embody the essence of Native culture without creating garments that seem outdated or too costume-like. Karen Kramer, who is the curator of Native American and Oceanic Art and Culture, assembled the exhibition. The pieces showcased represented designers from tribes all over the country. She was able to embody different interpretations of Native American fashion by many different designers. She achieved this by breaking down her showcased items into four themes: Pathbreakers, Revisitors, Activators, and Provocateurs.

The Pathbreakers have a new vision of Native American fashion. They still use traditional aspects in their designs, but with a more modern twist in silhouette. Examples of this are Lloyd Kiva New and his replication of Southwestern landscapes printed on silk or cotton fabrics. Derek Jagodzinsky also used his native Cree language and lettering as a pattern for a garment. Similarly, Frankie Welch used the Cherokee alphabet as a pattern for scarf designs that later became collectables, and presidential gifts. The commonality of the Pathbreakers includes the use of symbols and animal shapes as pattern, as well as traditional fabrics for more modern designs.

The Revisitors have similar interests to the Pathbreakers, however, they take it one step further. This section of the exhibit also includes non-Native designers who took their interpretation of what Native American culture is, and translated that into their designs. Once again, there is an emphasis on nature, animals, and traditional blanket patterns. Designer Elizabeth James-Perry incorporated wampum jewelry. Historically, wampum was used as currency and had a lot of value. An example showing borrowing of culture would be Ralph Lauren's use of what closely resembles Native American patterning and expression. It is crazy to think the exhibited wool jacket was circa 1986, and there are still similar examples of cultural borrowing in today's clothing stores.

The Activators are more of a new generation incorporating Native Culture with present day culture. It is used to make a statement or emphasize native pride. Louie Gong transforms average white Vans, to exciting custom Vans with native designs and prints. Jared Yazzie created statement graphic t-shirts stating "Native Americans discovered Columbus."

The Provocateurs produce garments that may not necessarily be functional to wear, but exceed boundaries by blending Native Fashion with art. This is evident in Lisa Telford's PochaHaida dress made of cedar bark and faux leather. It is also expressed in the Reaction Shoes (beaded moccasins) with computer wires shooting out of the back, designed by Barry Ace.

Some people may think Native American culture and dress is stagnant and has remained the same since the beginning of time. Natives do not run around in animal skins, but rather put a twist on traditional themes, patterns, and values. Designers have been creating new and innovative styles to reflect their culture in a beautiful way. Karen Kramer has succeeded in collecting items for this exhibition to reflect the continuing progression of Native American fashion.