Canadian Crafts Federation

Fédération canadienne des métiers d'art

What is Cultural Appropriation?

A Brief Introduction to Indigenous Cultural Appropriation of Craft in Canada.

Synopsis

Indigenous cultural appropriation is considered a continued act of colonization. Being conscious of cultural appropriation reestablishes the significant connection between cultural spirituality, symbolism, way of life, creativity, traditions, stories and much more to people and practices that were historically outlawed. It's essential to be aware of any privilege a maker may have within the craft community, including the economics, education, and opportunities.

Forward

This document contains basic information only and is in no way comprehensive. Information and protocols are in constant adaptation and are different for each specific community. No person or organization, including CCF/FCMA, can speak on behalf of all people or any community, culture or group. This document is provided for general guidance and consideration only and focuses primarily on Indigenous cultural appropriation within craft in Canada.

What is Cultural Appropriation?

Simply stated, cultural appropriation occurs when cultural references are adapted without consent. Cultural appropriation often represents a power imbalance when a member of the dominant culture uses specific cultural references, including craft and self-representation, from a minority or colonized culture (including Indigenous, racialized and newcomer communities) without explicit permission or collaboration.

In some cases, cultural appropriation occurs when makers or sellers are unaware of the damaging implications and repercussions to under-represented communities. This document was developed to help the reader better understand, recognize and act when faced with an instance of cultural appropriation of craft in Canada. Some instances of negative cultural appropriation include:

- A gift shop marketing and selling "authentic Indigenous" products that are mass-produced, often manufactured in other countries for low costs using Indigenous designs or motifs.[1]
- A non-Indigenous artist selling recognizable "traditional" crafts such as using a beadwork design without permission from the family, community or original artist. [2]

Familiarity with cultural appropriation helps to assure makers and sellers not contributing to negative stereotypes and are actively providing space for artists to reclaim and earn income from cultural traditions and innovations.[3]
It is important to acknowledge cultural appropriation to avoid cultural theft or the removal of opportunities for economic success for those affected. However, understanding cultural appropriation does not mean eliminating opportunities for non-Indigenous makers if expanding on consent driven practices.

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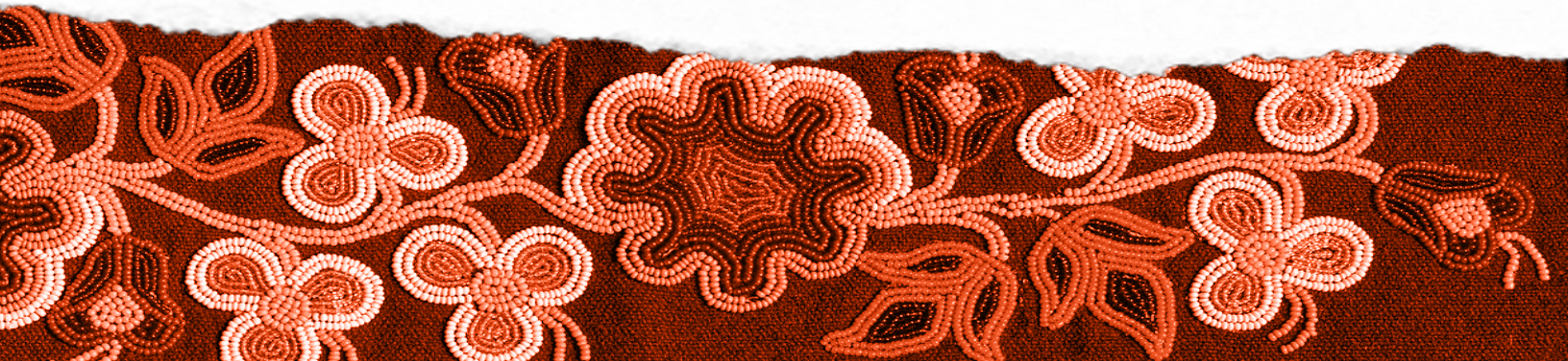
1 Learn about "Against Cultural Appropriation of Indigenous Art". The Craft Council of BC is conducting an audit of Indigenous-themed products sold on Granville Island, looking at how many are authentically made and produced by Indigenous artists. https://craftcouncilbc.ca/indigenous-art-on-granville-island

2 Authentic Indigenous developed a 3 tier categorizing system to recognize what makes craft "Authentic Indigenous". Read more here: http://www.authenticindigenous.com/authenticity-tags.php

3 Article 8.1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

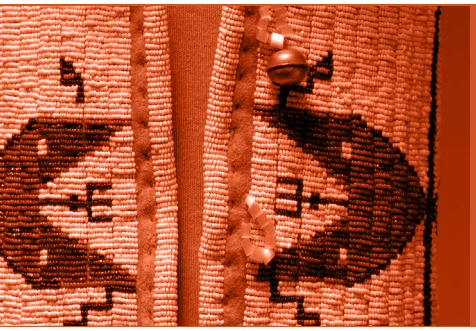


Origin

Indigenous cultural appropriation arises out of colonization, which endeavours to destroy the way of life of Indigenous peoples, and force assimilation into the colonizer's culture. Indigenous people in Canada were prohibited from practicing any traditional practices until the Indian Act was amended in 1951, causing a huge discrepancy between who could profit by selling Indigenous artwork.

"Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Canada's Aboriginal [3] policy was one of aggressive assimilation, based on the false assumption that Aboriginal peoples are doomed to extinction, lest they be "saved" from their primitive culture and savage ways. The ultimate goal of this policy was the assimilation of Aboriginal people into the dominant white culture and the disappearance of their traditional culture." [4]
Vanessa Udy [5]

The conversation of Indigenous cultural appropriation is related to the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation report and supporting research, which reveals the long and painful history behind Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples.



"As if the social specificity of non-western and non-modernist craft production—the ancestral traditions; the rituals tied to generations and the land, plants and animals; the spiritual and cultural significance of materials and designs; the geographic locations; the histories of trade, commerce, and labour; the meaning found in use and function—can be stripped away for the purpose of borrowing aesthetics, designs, materials, or techniques for superficial use."

Julie Hollenbach [6]

Cultural Appropriation is Not Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appreciation is the legitimate effort to learn and to support a different culture than your own. When you buy beaded earrings or moccasins from an Indigenous artist, you are not appropriating Indigenous culture, you are supporting Indigenous artists. When you are a non-indigenous person learning how to make moccasins from an Indigenous artist, you are gifted the insights of skills passed down from families and communities. However, suppose you sell moccasins without explicit consultation from your mentor. In that case, you are appropriating culture and disrupting the economic chain, which may have otherwise gone to an Indigenous artist making and selling moccasins.

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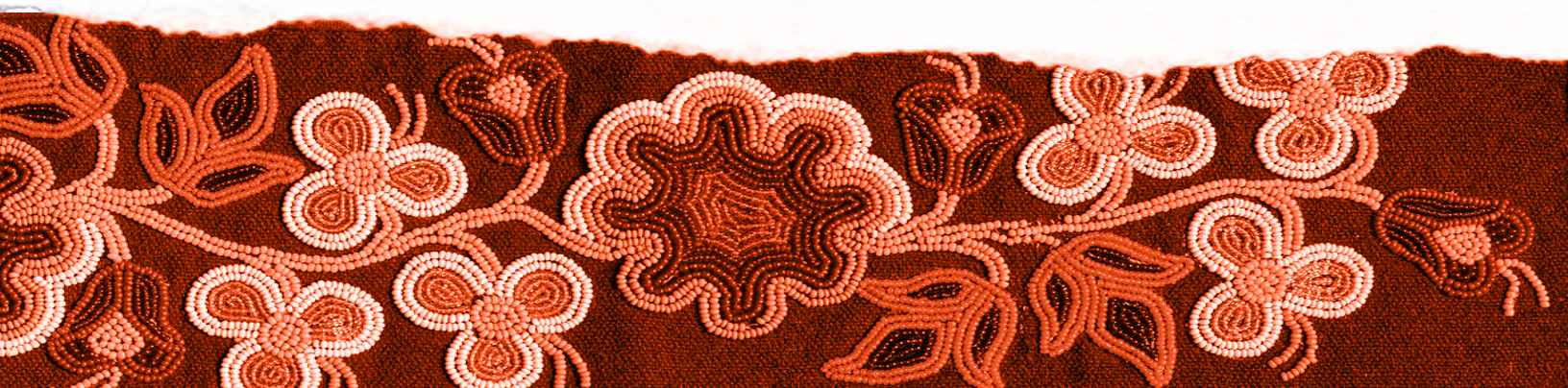
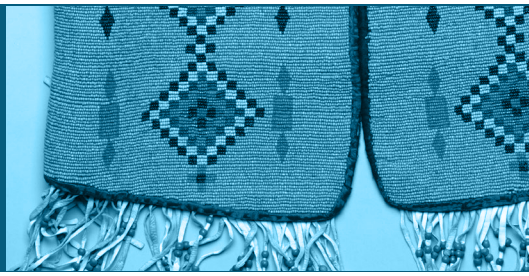
4 Please note the term Aboriginal is dated and is being phased out. Indigenious (with a capital 'I') is the correct term.

5 "The Appropriation of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage: Examining the Uses and Pitfalls of the Canadian Intellectual Property Regime." 2015. Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage. 2015. https://www.sfu.ca/ipinch/outputs/blog/canadian-intellectual-property-regime/

6 "Moving beyond a Modern Craft: Thoughts on White Entitlement and Cultural Appropriation in Professional Craft in Canada." n.d. Studio Magazine. https://www.studiomagazine.ca/articles/2019/moving-beyond-a-modern-craft.



"Scholar and writer Niigaan Sinclair has argued that the difference between appropriation and appreciation of Indigenous culture is that the former is "theft based on power and privilege," whereas the latter is "engagement based on responsibility and ethics." [7]



Cultural Appropriation is Not Collaboration.

Collaboration in craft is aligned with specific intent between creative partners with clear lines of communication about the process and outcome. It is not a collaboration when one artist 'borrows' from another without explicit authorization from the community they are taking from.

In the discourse of cultural appropriation, it is often claimed to mean 'the discouragement of artistic innovation'. This argument attempts to explain that all creative and cultural work is borrowed or inspired from all cultures and creative work. However, it is important to recognize who benefits from 'borrowing' cultural references. Being aware of cultural appropriation does not exclude outsiders. Instead, it reframes the colonial narrative to allow artists to reclaim authority over their cultural history and lineage and earn an income from their long-standing traditions and cultural innovations.

"Our art comes from the land and goes back to it. Now, if you have an overblown sense of entitlement and think everything belongs to you, then you are going to be taught to exploit what belongs to you as opposed to let the land teach you"

Lee Maracle, poet and author. [8]

Cultural Appropriation Dilutes Cultural Commons

Without proper guidance, endorsement or collaboration, creating without cultural ties dilutes cultural commons. Making, selling, buying or gifting culturally appropriated work furthers the romanticism of Canadian Indigenous culture. Using stereotypical symbols or language without intent, such as dreamcatchers, totem poles or referring to a meeting as a "pow-wow," is damaging to the efforts of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. There must be a reason for adapting identifiable cultural references. A collaborative example is the Winnipeg Art Gallery who consulted with the circle of language keepers, to rename the Inuit Art Gallery to Qaumajuq. In a statement, WAG explained, "This naming initiative is an important step on the WAG's Indigenization journey, [...]. It is the first time an Indigenous naming of this kind has occurred at a major art institution in Canada. [9]

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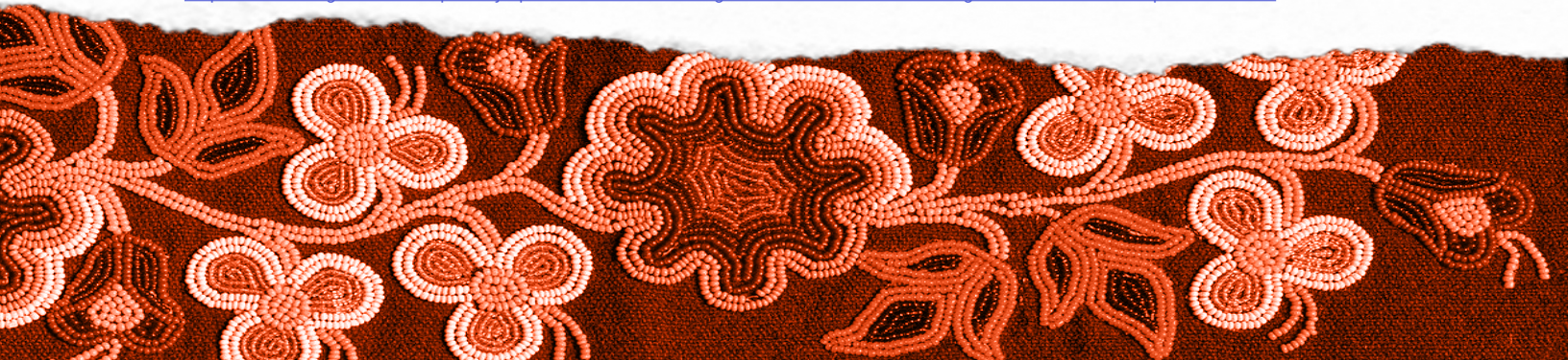
7 "Cultural Appropriation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada | the Canadian Encyclopedia." n.d. Www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca. Accessed August 16, 2021. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/cultural-appropriation-of-indigenous-peoples-in-canada#.

8 "Ontario Arts Council - Indigenous Arts Protocols." 2021. Arts.on.ca. 2021. https://www.arts.on.ca/news-resources/resources/indigenous-arts-protocols.

9 "Qaumajuq Is the Name for WAG Inuit Art Centre, New Indigenous Names for Spaces Within» WAG." n.d. WAG. Accessed August 16, 2021. https://www.wag.ca/media/qaumajuq-is-the-name-for-wag-inuit-art-centre-new-indigenous-names-for-spaces-within/.



Unethical Profiting

As the public interest in reconciliation evolves, Indigenous sovereignty has become 'trendy.' With any social trend, there's an opportunity for onlookers to capitalize on the interested market. Creating an online store and selling fraudulent artwork and products is easy to do. Misrepresentation and unethical marketing is a serious competitor to Indigenous, racialized and newcomer artists.

Artists can't compete with the low prices of inauthentic items, often factory-made in foreign countries for extremely low prices. Moreover, fraudulent items redirect revenue, causing harmful effects on everything from self-determination and cultural maintenance to families and communities.

"Not everyone has the financial and human resources that luxury brands have at their disposal to fight imitations and counterfeits." [10]

What Can We Do About It?

Cultural appropriation is an ongoing and evolving process of reclamation and collaboration. First and foremost, it's crucial to stay informed and aware of new information for respectful protocols. If you're unsure, ask questions or seek out resources.

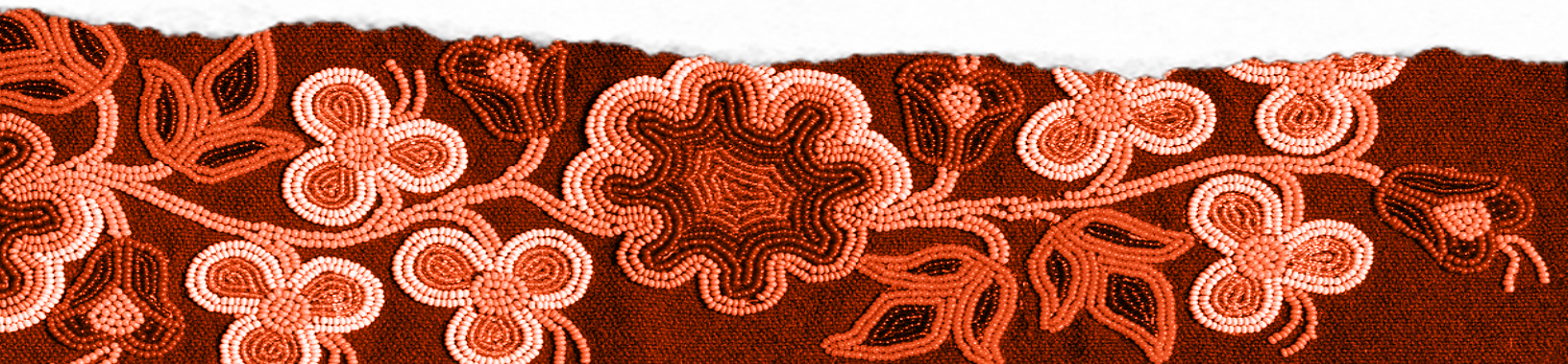
Give Space

Indigenous communities must be the leaders in the conversation of the cultural appropriation that affects them. The issues of cultural appropriation are not singular. They represent the wholistic effort of prohibitive governmental legislation beginning in the 1800s and early 1900s, resulting in the repression and genocide of Indigenous communities. While the "pow-wow ban" era seems distant, it remains a chapter of deep oppression. It's only within the last few generations that it has been legal to share and revive the crafts kept in secret to avoid harsh punishment, as much of this work was outlawed in the past.

Avoid the 'Pigeonhole' of Indigenous Artists.

Allow contemporary Indigenous artists space and opportunity to grow and innovate. Some artists and mentors are dedicated to traditional art and craft using design and elements passed down for generations. Provide space for Indigenous artists to expand beyond the romanticized expectations of Indigenous art, helping to further the richness and diversity of Indigenous art in Canada. Stereotyping "Indigenous-style" is harmful because it creates a fraudulent market expectation. The stereotype of Indigenous work is generally from pre-colonial times or early contact. Like any artistic practice, Indigenous art will grow and evolve.

10 "Think before You Appropriate: A Guide for Creators and Designers." n.d. Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage. Accessed August 16, 2021. http://www.sfu.ca/ipinch/resources/teaching-resources/think-before-you-appropriate/.



Collaborate

If you're interested in learning more about other cultures and craft to incorporate into your practice, offer opportunities to collaborate. Like any relationship-building activity, you can't expect it to be easy. Consider that, if you are an outsider, there may immediately be distrust. That is because many minority communities have experienced legitimate injustices, intergenerational trauma, and genocide from the dominant culture. Indigenous Canadians are currently in a period of exposing historical truths and cultural reclamation. Therefore, offers of collaboration must be genuine, and refusals must be respected.

Understand Your Relationship to Cultural Appropriation

Now that you're equipped with a basic understanding of the cultural appropriation that affects Indigenous communities in Canada, you can acknowledge your stance. Are you connected to a community, or would you like to be? There are many online spaces and resources to help you on your journey of cultural understanding. Gather your tools to understand how to recognize fraudulent artwork or learn how to support Indigenous artists and makers.

If you're an arts administrator, consider creating a statement (like Canada Council for the Arts) on how your organization resolves concerns about cultural appropriation. If you're an artist or a patron of the arts, consider what you might do when confronted with cultural appropriation.

> *"We are all agents of either stasis or change. For every act of political, social or cultural agency that challenges the status quo, there will always be opposing forces fuelled by colonial entrenchment/privilege, oppositional paranoia or, simply, inertia."*
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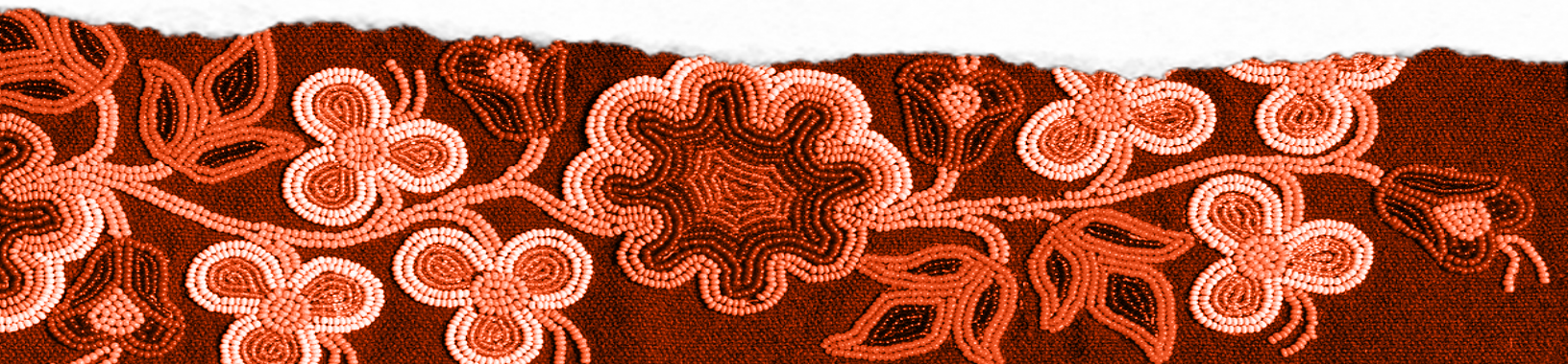
> *Canada Council for the Arts Policy* [11]

11 "Supporting Indigenous Art in the Spirit of Cultural Self-Determination and Opposing Appropriation." n.d. Accessed September 20, 2021. https://canadacouncil.ca/-/media/Files/CCA/Corporate/Governance/Policy/CCA/CCASupportingIndigenousArt.pdf.



FAQs

I am working with an artist selling/marketing as Indigenous, but I suspect they are not. What should I do?

Question the reasons why you suspect they may be misrepresenting themselves. Did a friend or family member approach you to say they are not Indigenous or are authorized to use designs? Are the designs inconsistent with the area they claim to be from?

False accusations are damaging, so it is vital to consult the proper communities. Indigeneity is complex. It is not enough to suspect a person may be misrepresenting through names and looks alone. If you have access to an Indigenous advisory committee, ask them for advice. Confrontation is difficult and awkward but extremely necessary.

The Facebook group "Fraudulent Native Art Exposed and More" recently uncovered a scheme between art dealer and pseudonym "Harvey John" in British Columbia regarding the misdirected profit of hundreds, if not thousands of dollars earned from fraudulent Indigenous carvings over many years. Unfortunately, appropriation is not a relic of the past, and it continues today on a large scale.

I am an Indigenous artist, and someone has copied my work. What should I do?

Ensure that you have photos and any other evidence that will support your case to identify copyright infringement. Canadian artists are protected for their creative intellectual property. Consult with the Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) (This advice applies to any artist whose work has been copied).

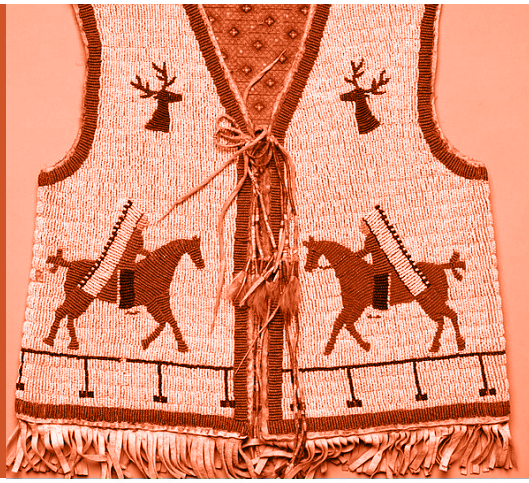
On social media, visit that company's copyright and intellectual properties policies for advice.
For Instagram and Facebook you can submit a report.

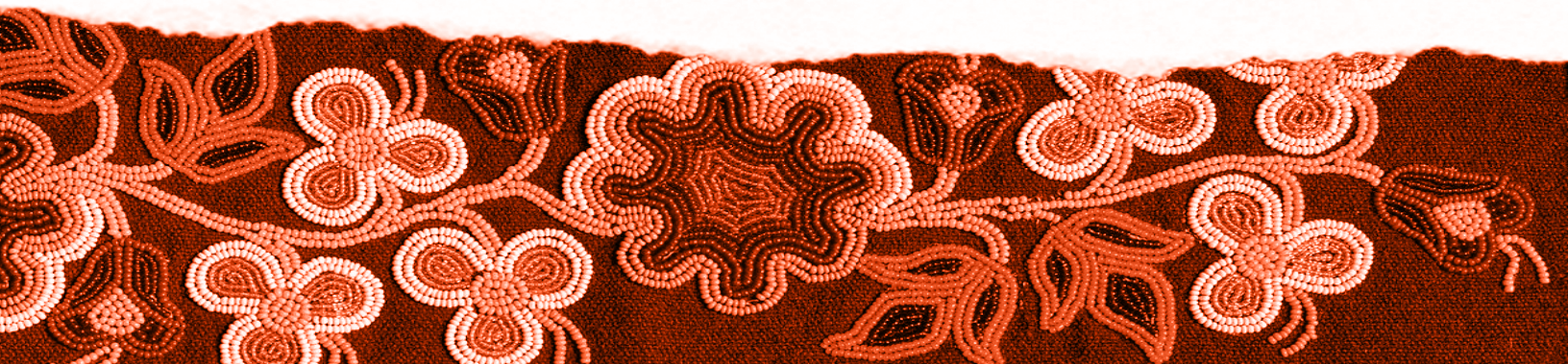
Know Your Copyrights, CARFAC

Legal Clinics for Artists, CARFAC

I am an Indigenous artist selling non-traditional work. Is this cultural appropriation?

This is not cultural appropriation, as long as the artwork is your original idea. However, cultural appropriation can occur if you are using explicit cultural references without the proper consultation. For example, the use of subculture or cultural designs for decoration or cultural clothing as costumes (kimono, sombrero, etc.) without community endorsement.





How can you tell if the craft is authentic?

Identifying inauthentic artwork can be a challenge even if you're familiar with what to look out for. The Facebook group Fraudulent Native Art Exposed and More has become an excellent online community to consult.

Identify the Artist

- If you're buying from a store or gallery, ask an employee if they can tell you more about the maker. Look for consistency between the style of work and the artists' community. Remember, not all Indigenous artwork will be "Indigenous-style."
- Read the "About" page on websites selling Indigenous artwork.
- Look for where the artist is from and where they are located.
- Statements that contain phrases like "inspired by [culture]", "after a visit to [other country]", "Indigenous-style" or "Indigenous-themed" are generally red flags for fraudulent work.

Artists making and selling Indigenous work should have significant ties to the community. Please note, some artists may have substantial ties to a community through friends, family or other relationships or have received explicit permission to sell and earn income from traditional crafts. Like every artwork, every artist's history is unique, and it is important not to jump to conclusions.

Further Reading

Cultural Appropriation in Canada

- Canadian Council for the Arts: Cultural Appropriation and the Canada Council's approach
- Indigenous Art Protocols
- Moving Beyond a Modern Craft: Thoughts on White Entitlement and Cultural Appropriation in Professional Craft in Canada
- Cultural Appropriation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada
- Considering Cultural Appropriation in the Art Classroom
- Indigenous Art on Granville Island, BC Craft Council
- Considering Cultural Appropriation, CCF/FCMA
- Igloo Tag Trademark
- Think Before You Appropriate

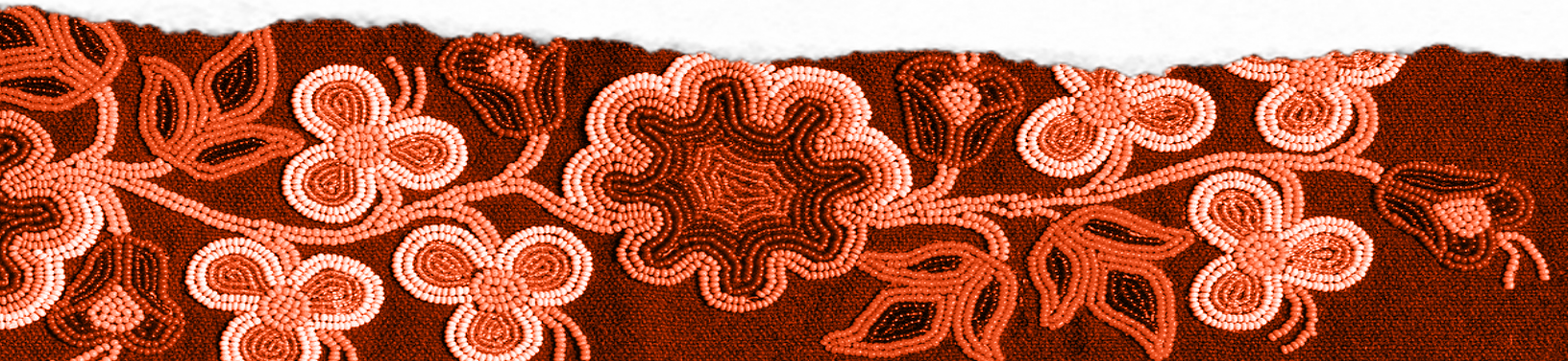
Truth and Reconciliation

- History of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Indigenous Ally Toolkit, 2019
- 150 Acts of Reconciliation
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

Organizations

- The Indigenous Curatorial Collective / Collectif des commissaires autochtones (ICCA)
- The Inuit Art Foundation
- Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario (CPAMO)

In the News

- Textiles and Tradition: a Conversation on Appropriation With Indigenous Artist Jaad Kuujus
- Major museum and art gallery shops duped by fake Indigenous carver, CBC News
- 'It's exploiting culture': Australia mulls bill to ban sale of fake Indigenous art.
- Offensive? Jeremy Scott And Adidas Debut "Native American" Tracksuits
- Nunavut family outraged after fashion label copies sacred Inuit design
- 'It's appalling': 12-year-old says Orange Shirt Day design ripped off by American website

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