

Cultural Appropriation in Design Practices:

Retaining cultural value and moving towards ethical and inclusive practices



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Abstract

Culture deeply influences our ideas, practices, and creative expressions, shaping everything from art to architecture. However, cultural traditions often face exploitation in today's fast-paced world. Cultural appropriation—the misuse of minority cultural elements without understanding their origins—erodes traditional knowledge, impacts identities, and harms communities economically. For instance, art forms like Warli painting, Mata ni Pachedi, and Lippan Art hold deep cultural significance but are often commodified, losing their meaning while benefiting external businesses. Conversely, ethical collaborations in design demonstrate how cultural narratives can be preserved and thoughtfully adapted to modern contexts. This study examines why cultural appropriation occurs in design and explores strategies for ethical integration by promoting conscious design practices alongside innovation.

Introduction

The terms 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' are commonly used, but the concept of 'appropriation' is less often discussed. According to

the Cambridge Dictionary, appropriation is the act of taking something for one's own use, typically without permission. Richard A. Rogers (2006) defines cultural appropriation as an active process where one culture adopts elements of another, shaped by power dynamics, sociopolitical contexts, and historical conditions. Similarly, James O. Young (2008) identifies distinct types of appropriation, including object, content, and subject appropriation, offering a nuanced perspective.

In today's fast-paced design landscape, cultural appropriation has become increasingly relevant. Often, cultural elements like kolams or rangolis, recipes, or arts and crafts are replicated without acknowledging their origins, disregarding their deep cultural and societal significance. This mindset, rooted in a culture of "inspiration," neglects the context, history, and communities behind these practices.

Art and craft are integral to heritage, serving as extensions of a community's identity. However, when designers alter traditional designs, misuse products, or modify heritage materials, it leads to cultural appropriation, erasing the narratives and emotions that imbue these practices with meaning.

Need of Research

When cultural elements or objects are used without proper recognition, credit, or benefit to their communities, it becomes exploitative and disrespectful. Cultural appropriation, while discussed in fields like law and media, remains an overlooked yet crucial issue in design studies. This research examines:

- The impact of cultural appropriation in design, exploring both exploitative practices and ethical approaches to integrating cultural elements.

- How technology accelerates these trends and identifies strategies to foster fairness, inclusivity, and respect for cultural heritage.
- By analyzing real-world examples, the study aims to inspire designers to protect cultural integrity, bridge innovation with preservation, and ensure traditional knowledge thrives sustainably.

In examining these questions, this research fills an important gap in the academic discourse by addressing cultural appropriation's unique challenges in design, particularly in the context of global commerce, digital innovation, and the preservation of cultural knowledge.

Methodology

The research employs qualitative methods, including case study analysis, literature review, and examination of online resources, without primary data collection. The data is gathered through the following approaches:

- **Case Study Analysis:** Examining documented instances of cultural appropriation and ethical practices in Indian design, with a focus on crafts such as Warli painting, Lippan Art, Kalamkari, and Phulkari.
- **Literature Review:** Analyzing academic papers, articles, and reports to understand the discourse around cultural appropriation, ethics, and inclusivity in design.
- **Ethical Design Case Insights:** Exploring online resources, including websites, interviews, and project descriptions of organizations and designers practicing ethical design (e.g., FabIndia, Jaipur Rugs, Sandeep Sangaru, Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya, Kalakarihaath, and Morii Designs). The analysis

spans various scales, from commercial ventures to education and independent practitioners.

This methodology offers a structured framework to explore cultural appropriation in design and highlights how emerging technologies and ethical design strategies can help mitigate exploitation while fostering innovation.

Discussions and Findings

The topic of *Cultural Appropriation in Design* encompasses ethical, aesthetic, and socio-cultural complexities. Insights from various scholarly works provide a nuanced understanding of how cultural elements are appropriated, celebrated, or misused, especially in design contexts.

Defining Cultural Appropriation in Design:

Appropriation is distinct from appreciation and involves a power imbalance. Rogers (2006) describes it as a process shaped by historical and sociopolitical factors, while Young (2008) categorizes it into object, content, and subject appropriation. Mosley and Biernat (2020) define cultural appropriation as a form of ***"identity theft,"*** highlighting its impact on intergroup relations and identity. The perceived harm is influenced by the power imbalance between the appropriator and the appropriated. Cruz, A. G. B., Seo, Y., & Scaraboto, D. (2023) explore the tension between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation, examining how consumers justify or ***"self-authorize"*** their use of cultural elements, often downplaying ethical considerations. In the context of design, this practice can lead to the erasure of cultural narratives, economic exploitation, and the devaluation of traditional knowledge systems.

Power Dynamics and Identity:

Appropriation often reflects unequal power relationships between dominant and marginalized groups. This dynamic is embedded in historical colonization and ongoing socioeconomic inequities, as discussed by Rogers (2006) and Young (2008). The commodification of cultural elements in globalized markets exacerbates this imbalance, often turning deeply significant cultural symbols into mere aesthetic commodities. Cruz, A. G. B., Seo, Y., & Scaraboto, D. (2023) argue that consumers often adopt a lens of *individualism* to justify their actions, ignoring collective cultural significance. For example, Naga textiles hold sacred meanings that are frequently misrepresented when commodified or used without regard for their cultural protocols (Lyndem, N., & Bhandari, V., 2022). Studies on Naga textiles, emphasize the importance of engaging with communities to ensure their voices are central in decision-making.

Ethical Challenges in Design:

Permission and collaboration with local artisans and elders are critical to ethical design practices. In design, the ethical challenges arise when elements with deep cultural or spiritual significance are used superficially, often for profit or aesthetic appeal without understanding their roots. Appropriating cultural elements can be done ethically when designers focus on neutral, sustainable, and collaborative approaches, as highlighted in the Naga textiles study. For example, reinterpreting traditional techniques for modern uses (e.g., home decor) without misusing sacred or gender-specific motifs. Reed, T. G. (2021) critiques the inadequacies of copyright law, especially concerning Indigenous designs. Western frameworks often fail to account for *community ownership* and cultural protocols, leaving many traditional designs vulnerable to exploitation. Mosley and Biernat (2020) suggest that stronger legal and social frameworks are needed to address the harm cultural appropriation causes to group identity. Ethical practices in design can emerge from reflexivity—where designers and consumers

consciously consider the broader implications of their actions on cultural integrity and inclusivity.

A Case on Indian Crafts: Cultural Appropriation and Its Complexities

The intersection of *cultural appropriation and Indian Crafts* reveals deep complexities in the design world. The appropriation of Indian crafts, such as *Warli painting, Lippan art, Kalamkari, and Phulkari*, raises issues of exploitation, cultural misrepresentation, and the loss of authenticity. These traditional art forms, rich in history and symbolism, are often commodified without respect for their origins or the communities that created them.

Warli Paintings, from Maharashtra's Warli tribes, use simple geometric forms to tell stories of life, nature, and spirituality. In commercial settings, these sacred symbols are often reduced to mere decorative motifs, losing their cultural meaning. **Lippan Art**, a traditional mud and mirror art from Kutch, is adapted into modern decor but often disregards its ceremonial significance in rural homes. **Kalamkari**, hand-painted textiles from Andhra Pradesh, is sometimes stripped of its spiritual context when reinterpreted with secular themes. **Phulkari**, traditional Punjabi embroidery with symbolic storytelling, is occasionally reduced to fashion trends without acknowledgment of its cultural roots. These crafts are frequently mass-produced without crediting or compensating the artisans. The demand for cheaper, faster production leads to industrial reproductions that exploit artisans, perpetuating economic inequality.

Many Indian crafts face misrepresentation when adapted for global markets, where their cultural significance is often stripped away. These sacred and symbolic motifs are used in commercial settings with little regard for their origins, turning them into decorative

elements rather than honoring their cultural context. Mass production further exploits artisans, reducing traditional crafts to cheap, mass-produced items. However, some designers are collaborating directly with artisans to preserve the integrity of these crafts while ensuring fair compensation. Examples include brands like FabIndia, Okhai, Gaatha, Jaypore and more that market these craft pieces by involving artisans in every step, ensuring cultural relevance. Yet, the line between ***cultural celebration*** and ***appropriation*** is blurred when designers reinterpret these crafts for modern purposes, risking the dilution of their original identity.



Image 1: Lippan Art, DIY Kit – unethical practice



Image 2 and Image 3: Warli Painting as décor elements – unethical practice

A Case on Ethical Design Practices:

Designers and organizations like FabIndia, Jaipur Rugs, Sandeep Sangaru, Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya, Kalakarihaath, and Morii Designs exemplify ethical design practices that address cultural appropriation in Indian crafts. These cases highlight how design can bridge tradition and modernity, fostering innovation while preserving cultural heritage through meaningful collaborations with artisans.

Ethical design goes beyond aesthetics; it ensures that cultural elements are used responsibly and respectfully, avoiding the exploitation or misrepresentation of traditional crafts. **Jaipur Rugs** serves as a model for empowering artisan communities, particularly women, by directly involving them in the design and production process. This ensures that the artisans remain central to their craft, rather than being sidelined for mass-market demands. Organizations like **Somaiya Kala Vidyalaya** focus on **education-based collaboration**, teaching artisans about market trends and enabling them to innovate within their traditions. This fosters sustainable livelihoods while preserving cultural relevance. Designers like **Sandeep Sangaru** collaborate with artisans across crafts like bamboo and Kashmiri woodcraft, blending traditional techniques with modern functionality. His work preserves indigenous knowledge while adapting it to contemporary design needs. Brands such as **Kalakarihaath** and **Morii Designs** reinterpret traditional crafts like block printing and embroidery, ensuring that innovation respects the original cultural context. For example, Kalakarihaath's use of natural dyes and Morii's intricate handwork highlights the artisans' skill while catering to modern tastes. Ethical brands like **FabIndia** and **Jaipur Rugs** attempt to address these inequalities by providing fair wages, direct market access, and platforms for artisans to tell their stories.

Ethical brands provide fair wages, market access, and platforms for artisans to share their stories. However, innovation risks oversimplifying or commercializing sacred cultural symbols, a concern ethical designers navigate. Educating consumers on the cultural significance of handcrafted products is also vital. Ultimately, ethical design involves respecting cultural contexts and ensuring fair compensation to prevent cultural misrepresentation and appropriation.



Image 4 and Image 5: Morii Designs – Intricate Embroidery work done by women artisans – Ethical Design Practice



Image 6 and Image 7: Sandeep Sangaru – Bamboo products displayed at raw collaborative, along with artisans who worked on the designs – Ethical Design Practice



Image 8 and Image 9: Somaiya Kala Vidya – Artisans learning environment, education and entrepreneurship – Ethical Design Practice

Conclusion

Cultural appropriation in design challenges us to balance innovation with respect for cultural heritage. The decontextualization and commodification of traditional crafts, such as Warli painting, Kalamkari, Lippan art, and Phulkari, often erode their cultural integrity and disempower the communities that sustain them. Ethical design practices, as exemplified by Sandeep Sangaru's collaborations and brands like Jaipur Rugs, demonstrate how respectful engagement and fair compensation can preserve authenticity while driving innovation.

To further address cultural appropriation, a new approach is needed. Designers and companies must integrate emerging technologies, such as digital platforms and blockchain, to create transparent, fair-trade systems that ensure artisans receive proper recognition and compensation. These technologies can bridge the gap between artisans' traditional knowledge and modern markets, creating new opportunities for them without compromising cultural integrity.

By fostering respect, transparency, and collaboration, designers, consumers, and businesses alike can ensure that cultural appropriation transforms from an exploitative practice into an

opportunity for mutual growth, cultural preservation, and innovation. This shared responsibility not only safeguards traditional knowledge but also enriches the global design ecosystem, creating a future where heritage and creativity coexist harmoniously.

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Image Credit

Image 1 – Lippan Art Kit, Amazon Online - [Link](#)

Image 2 – Warli Painting on Home Décor, Online - [Link](#)

Image 3 – Warli Painting on Home Décor, Online - [Link](#)

Image 4 and 5 – Morii Designs – Artisans Work, Instagram - [Link](#)

Image 6 and 7 – Sangaru Designs – Bamboo Craft, Instagram - [Link](#)

Image 8 and 9 – Somaiya Kala Vidya, Artisan Education - [Link](#)