

## (12) Reading Reflection: Cultural Appropriation

The history of culture and art is closely tied to the history of appropriation. Cultural exchange often happens, reciprocal exchange appreciated by groups of people. Blending and change of culture also happens over time, when different societies influence one another, where it can either be reciprocal, or forced erasure. It is when dominance comes in, where appropriation is exploitative. Commodification of culture is often used to sell products or an idea- like yoga, originally being an ancient Indian practice whose goal was to unite the human spirit with the divine. Now much of the Western world has adopted, co-opted, and profited off it, while forgetting the inherent philosophy and meaning behind many actions.

Many people view cultures as distinct and isolated, believing they fit together like pieces of a puzzle. However, in reality, cultures constantly intersect and influence one another, as humans naturally draw inspiration from a variety of sources. This is why it is essential for students to learn about cultures beyond their own, even though many may feel uncomfortable doing so. Understanding other cultures visually and culturally represent ideas, create respect and awareness of the similarities and differences we share as human beings. Art education should encourage this cross-cultural learning- teaching students to approach cultures respectfully and avoid stereotypes. As prosumers in the digital age, we hold significant power through the images we create and share online. Social media gives voices to many, but it can also influence global perceptions in ways we may not fully recognize, impacting various groups around the world. No one grows up in a cultural vacuum, and all art is influenced by something-whether consciously or subconsciously-often drawing from multiple cultures over time. While it's important to be aware of cultural appropriation, an excessive focus on it can sometimes stifle creativity in the art room. Art should reflect genuine expression, and as long as it doesn't harm, misrepresent, or erase identities, cross-cultural influence is a natural and positive occurrence.

However, we must still ask critical questions: Why are you choosing to express an idea from a culture that is not your own? What is your own culture now, in a world of constant exposure to different influences? Sometimes, our physical identities don't fully capture the diverse experiences we've encountered. Art educators should help students understand cultural symbols and the meanings behind them, ensuring they respect cultural contexts. Knowing your audience is essential, as cultural appropriation can be exploitative—especially when dominant groups or corporations profit from misrepresenting marginalized cultures. For instance, artists like Gauguin are problematic because they embodied colonial attitudes, appropriating other cultures for personal gain, while disrespecting the people and land. By teaching students to consider these aspects, we can create deeper cultural understanding and respect. Cultural appropriation is very exploitative, especially when a powerful group of people (colonizers), or company's profit and misrepresent a discriminated minority group. In slang term, "whitewashing" is when people casted white actors to represent people of color and different cultures. It also extends outside of the film area, where the erasure or distortion of non-white cultures in art are presented in a way that conforms to Eurocentric standards. This can happen in the classroom when teachers, artists, or students unknowingly or intentionally present non-Western cultures in a simplified, sanitized, or "acceptable" way. This erasure can strip away the rich history,

diversity, and authenticity of these cultures. For example, students may be encouraged to create art using symbols or styles from indigenous cultures but without any understanding of their significance, leading to the marginalization or misrepresentation of these cultures. Of course, it does not happen with only white people, but that is often the people with more voice and power. Both whitewashing and cultural appropriation go hand in hand in being harmful because they fail to acknowledge the power dynamics at play and often reduce rich cultural expressions to mere trends or aesthetics. Students should be taught to reflect on their own cultural identity and consider how their art can either reinforce or challenge existing power structures. Educators should also recognize inherent biases. I think shying away from teaching about cultural appropriation because it's sensitive and political is harmful. Everything is political in our world, the art teacher's role is to continue to educate on meaning behind cultural art.