Before 2014 or so, I didn’t think about cultural appropriation in terms of the art &
design community at MICA, where I work in the Decker Library. My thinking about
 cultural exchange in art was informed by my study of anthropology in the 1980s,
especially Folklore and Material Culture. There we considered theories about how art
forms persist and transform through time and diffuse geographically to people of
different cultures, and we often looked at power relationships among different groups,
but we were generally not considering the practices of individual artists or designers.

Needless to say, this was well before the Internet and the cultural echo chambers of
social media.
In 2014, the librarians at Decker Library began to be liaisons to various departments, with responsibility to connect students with library resources specific to their art making. All of my liaison areas were in studio or design areas.

One of the Illustration faculty told me about a video series called Design by the Book, co-produced by the New York Public Library and Design*Sponge. In the series, Grace Bonney of Design*Sponge visits with several artists in the New York area in their studios to talk about their interests, then the artists meet with Jessica Pigza at the NYPL Special Collections to see materials from the NYPL collections, which the artists use to inspire their work.

I was asked to do a similar activity with a group of Illustration Juniors, and in choosing materials from special and general collections to share with the group, I wondered about my responsibilities to the students. If I shared plates of Peruvian motifs, should I advise students to consider cultural context? There was barely time to address copyright and fair use issues, and I realized that cultural appropriation was much more complex. I began to wonder what the students and faculty at MICA thought about cultural appropriation, or if they did. And whether we, as librarians, had a responsibility to mediate their experience of the collections that we shared.
Around that time, a number of books came out promoting use of library collections by artists. Some were aimed at librarians, and some for a more popular DIY/crafting audience.

They are wonderful, useful books:

*The Artist’s Library* was an offshoot of the Library as Incubator Project

*BiblioCraft* by then NYPL librarian Jessica Pigza contains excellent information on navigating libraries for design sources

But none of them could tell me, the librarian, what I should say (if anything) to art students about cultural appropriation
Around the same time, the college re-organized its Foundation program, and the Intro to Drawing class is now called Drawing: Tradition and Innovation with a research project where the students choose a tradition in art that can be interpreted through drawing, create a short presentation based on library research (which we support through group instruction) and develop artwork that innovates on the tradition.

Books like this one talk with artists about their visual inspirations within art museums, without consideration of how their cultural background aligns with their sources of inspiration.
Advances in published information about fair use, and even image appropriation, but not cultural appropriation!

Also at that time, there were advances in the understanding of copyright and fair use for artists and students:


While all of these deal with image appropriation, they do not give guidance to the librarian on how to address cultural appropriation.
Long story short, I proposed this conference session, and decided that a helpful contribution for me would be to initiate a survey of the MICA community, to see what people are thinking.

I wondered if there might be a sense of “fair use” for cultural material, as there is in copyright situations. And whether a sense of “community norms” might emerge, as that concept is understood in fair use conversations.

I recognize that:

- This is a beginning
- The concerns of MICA students regarding this topic will vary according to their discipline, with design and illustration differing from studio arts
- The students at MICA are diverse in nationality, ethnic and gender identity, age, and life experiences, all of which impacts their perspective on CA

In creating the survey, I was partnered with **MICA’s Center for Identity and Inclusion** for input on the questions and help in publicizing. I created this poster to display on campus and send emails to faculty and students.

In case you are interested, the poster graphic makes a good case-study in cultural appropriation, using the image of an Hermes scarf that is based on a textile tradition of the Bamileke people in Cameroon.
Here is the opening section of the survey.

There were 104 responses.
Most of the responders were students, with much fewer faculty, and just a few staff.
Most of the responders were age 25 or younger, followed by age 26-40, then 41-60, and a few age 60 and over.
How do you identify your ethnicity/race? (select all that apply)

- 20 (19.2%) Asian
- 16 (15.4%) African American
- 12 (11.5%) Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin of any race
- 6 (5.8%) Middle Eastern, North African
- 52 (50%) White or Caucasian
- 3 (2.9%) American Indian, Alaska Native
- 4 (3.8%) Asian Indian
- 2 (1.9%) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- 2 (1.9%) Race and Ethnicity unknown
- 3 (2.9%) Ethnicity/race category not listed here
- 8 (7.7%) Prefer not to disclose
The majority of the responders identified as female (66 percent). About 20 percent male, and a number of agender, gender fluid, or genderqueer participants, with several transgender individuals.
What would you consider to be an example of cultural appropriation in your field?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Borrowing from another culture that is not yours</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to acknowledge historical &amp; cultural roots of ideas, and/or inaccuracy in representing them</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking for profit or social capital</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power differential</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking without permission or giving credit</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing the context from ceremonial or sacred to secular</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No participation from, nor benefit to, the culture of origin</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exoticizing / Othering</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of cultural heritage by Western museums</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Borrowing from another culture that is not yours” was the most frequent response, followed by “Failure to acknowledge historical and cultural roots and inaccuracy in representation.”

Also cited as problematic were “gaining profit or social capital” and “power differential” between the borrower and the one/s borrowed from.
Have you noticed instances of cultural appropriation in art & design work… (choose all that apply)

In the world - 80 responses (79.2%)
  On social media - 65 (64.4%)
    In your classes or elsewhere at MICA - 50 (49.5%)
      In a peer’s work - 40 (39.6%)
        In your work - 15 (14.9%)
          No - 12 (11.9%)
Have you engaged in conversation regarding cultural appropriation in art & design work ... (choose all that apply)

With colleagues or peers - 74 responses (71.2%)
   In your classes or elsewhere at MICA - 71 (68.3%)
      In the world - 55 (52.9%)
         On social media - 44 (42.3%)
            No - 13 (12.5%)
What support for conversations at MICA about cultural appropriation might you find helpful? (choose all that apply)

Classroom Discussion - 70 responses (68.6%)
  Visiting Artist Talk - 62 (60.8%)
  Classroom Lecture - 47 (46.1%)
  Community Program - 43 (42.2%)
  Library Workshop - 31 (30.4%)
In your art/design practice, does cultural identity inform your work?

- Yes: 71.6%
- No: 28.4%

The majority of responders said that cultural identity informs their work.
If yes, how...

Identity informs their work in specific way/s - 31 responses

One’s cultural identity **must** inform their work - 17

Identity informs their work in general ways - 12

And these were the most common ways that cultural identity informs their work.
If yes, how… Identity informs their work in specific way/s

My religious upbringing  Queer culture  Afrofuturism  Scandinavian

everything I make is about the black experience

my queerness; my cis-body; my mixed racial make-up; my nationality

I make work about the structure of white identity in america, how and why it was formed and how the idea of race is a social construct

… I'm drawn to spiritual aspects and that comes from my mother’s side who are Tlingit Indian. … My great great great grandfather was a chief of a tribe in Alaska and we tend to focus on animal spirits and earthly spirits which show up a lot in my art.

I make work surrounding the "gap" in identity that exists of being an immigrant's daughter, an Asian-American. I am invested in diaspora, dual identity, and displacement.

Artists of my nationality inspire me all the time & sometimes I incorporate traditions & stories into my work

… I use aspects of Iranian culture in my character / world designs that I’ve grown to learn about from my grandparents and my dad’s side of the family

Some examples of **specific ways** that identity informs people's work:

- Religious upbringing
- Queer culture
- Ethnic / racial / nationality
- … and many intersectional identities
If yes, how... One's cultural identity **must** inform their work

No one works in a cultural vacuum  
My culture is my perspective

How can I not be informed by my lived experience and my journey re-connecting with heritage?

Whole? where I grew up, my education…  
Cause racism exists and I can’t not be brown

This question feels ridiculous. We all have a lens to look through. Our background colors our lens through which we understand the world. I also use culture as content, specifically create race work.

Cultural identity informs everyone’s work. It is who we are - we cannot escape it, and probably shouldn’t.

It is part of who I am. Therefore it is part of my work and life.

I believe that it is impossible to be/work outside of one's learned, felt, or presumed identity

Comments maintaining that cultural identity **must** inform one’s work
If yes, how... Identity informs their work in general way/s

In any way I want it to, it's MY WORK

Through cross-cultural collaboration

Heritage and upbringing

Cultural traditions, practices, figures

I always think about & use traditional culture things in my work

... what and how I choose to portray figures mostly. I tend to make figures that look like myself and come from the same lifestyles and backgrounds as I do.

It informs some subject matter in my work where I visually show my relationship with my heritage and culture. It also informs some aesthetic choices.

I personally strive to include my identity in my work so that it can be special and unique to me. If I don't, then anyone else could have made it.

I try to be conscientious of where I draw my inspiration and also am informed by both sides of my ancestry

This perspective is embedded in my practice, whether intended or not

Some cited general ways that identity informs their work
In your art practice, have you been attracted to art/design or subjects/themes originating in a culture other than your own and decided **TO NOT** work with that material because it would be cultural appropriation?

- Yes: 57.3%
- No: 42.7%

This next question looked at whether people had avoided working with material in case it would be seen as appropriation.
**If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?**

- **It would be oppressive / harmful / exploitative / disrespectful / people would get angry** - 21 responses

- **Not enough understanding / insight into the culture** - 15

- **It is better for people to tell their own story / I should work with my own heritage** - 12

- **Concern for genuine cross-cultural exchange** - 7

And here are notes they shared as to their thought process in that decision:

- The most prevalent being not wanting to be harmful or disrespectful

  Followed by:
  - Lacking understanding or insight into the culture
  - The belief that people should tell their own story
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

It would be oppressive / harmful / exploitative / disrespectful / people would get angry

It would have been oppressive “This does not belong to me”

… I know it would be offensive and not as powerful since I’m not part of that culture. It is not my culture to remake …

my use of another culture’s traditions would only perpetuate white commentary and occupation of others’ necessary experiences

After being on social media, I noticed that a lot of people were engaging in discussions about cultural appropriation and I noticed that there is such a negative impact on a culture when someone uses it for their own work, or to profit off of it.

I thought it would offend those of that culture and knowing how I've been offended in the way some people have appropriated my own culture I made the decision to not do it myself.

Although I admired other forms of art and craft that is similar to my culture, I knew it was not my own and did not want to face the scrutiny of the MICA Student Body who may target students that go beyond their borders, both figuratively and literally
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

**Not enough understanding / insight into the culture**

It's not mine to work with, I don't understand the significance

… I am not an expert in certain art forms and shouldn't try to "copy" them just because I think they are cool

… that I do not fully understand the subject and would not want to misinterpret it

I did not feel like I could authentically represent themes and experiences of another culture in a painting

well I think about its original context and use in that culture. my knowledge or lack there of that information

yes, however i can not use it since i do not understand nor have been educated enough about it

I was worried I didn’t have enough knowledge or background on the culture to confidently create a work of art that would also appeal to people who know the culture more than me
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

It is better for people to tell their own story / I should work with my own heritage

... stay in [my own] lane and let others tell their story

... not my culture, not my history, so how dare I?

I don't make that kind of work, because I can just appreciate it when someone else tells their own story

I have been interested in different African aesthetics and culture, but don't feel like it's my place to take from it because I have no stake in its expression or voice

I am currently completing a documentary wherein all the film subjects are fully involved in how we tell our story together. This was the conscious decision instead of telling someone else's story for them.

... I remind myself that my culture and heritage is just as interesting and powerful and it's my job as an artist to dig in further and research my own background/culture to find it

I'm formerly poor & now in the middle class & am first generation African American. I think I don't have a claim over the culture that black people in poverty have cultivated. I know what being black means to me, so I stick to telling my own stories the way I see them. I'm not sure if this vein of thinking is correct, but it feels wrong to grab from things I am not?
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

Concern for genuine cross-cultural exchange

I am drawn to storytelling traditions of people indigenous to North America and motifs and themes that appear in these stories. I have endeavored to educate myself and think through the issues of cultural appropriation in my own story-based work, since I am drawn to similar themes and motifs (animals and hybrid creatures interacting with humans, creation stories, stories about our relationship to our environment).

I did not want to paint black slaves in a painting about freedom, since it felt inauthentic. I am sympathetic, I feel that it is an atrocity, but I cannot know what it is like to have that history, or to send my son out into a world where he can be killed - by officials - because of his race …

I ask first if the design/art/subject/theme resonates deeper than aesthetic purposes, and if I believe it is personal, I think where is my place in the world to speak on the subject. Will my input actually be beneficial?

… whether I would be able to give respect and give authorship to is source... In the end it a question of my own responsibility as a maker; can I trust myself with a topic that is not my own?

My use of another culture’s traditions would only perpetuate white commentary and occupation of others’ necessary experiences and that is not productive on the search for empathy and knowledge … Someone’s culture should not be in the hands of someone of privilege who has the ability to change it when the person of privilege is not the original occupant of that culture and cannot empathize but only sympathize with the people of the culture at hand.
In your art practice, have you been attracted to art/design or subjects/themes originating in a culture other than your own and decided **TO WORK** with that material?

Conversely, this question asks whether people have done work with motifs or themes from cultures other than their own, and asks about their thought process in that.
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

The world has people of different cultures so my artwork/design/scholarship reflects that

- I did careful research

  Intentional exchange or collaboration

- I create my own perspective
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?
The world has people of different cultures so my artwork/design/scholarship reflects that

I enjoy drawing a variety of different races and clothing/hair styles, I think my art would be boring if I only stuck to the same thing.

I saw parallels or contrast to my own culture

I think it's important to look at art from cultures outside of your own. Not only can it broaden your overall perspective of the world but it's also important in expanding what you can do as an artist.

I acknowledge the original source and how it reflects cultural tradition of that individual/community, but also address any cultural connection that it has to my own experience (as a white woman growing up in a southern town whose history, culture, and social-political circumstances were informed by traditions and practices rooted in indigenous and African-American culture; or as my experience as the wife of a Japanese man/mother of biracial children)
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

I did careful research

Doing the project was a great learning experience, where I got introduced to a new culture through my vision research

I tried to do good research and weigh what topics I was informed on and could handle respectfully

I acknowledge the original source and how it reflects cultural tradition of that individual/community

When I choose to work with subjects/themes of another culture I do as much research as possible before actually creating the work. If possible, I talk with people of that culture and make sure that what I make does not offend them and if they think it will not offend others or appropriate their culture.

When showing others, they are normally excited/amazed, ask questions about it (which I answer to the best of my ability and if I'm not sure about something I tell them), and want to learn more.
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

**It was an intentional exchange or collaboration**

We were working in the context of international exchange, all members of the arts team play a shared role.

I'm co-authoring a career guide for young designers that includes characters whose identity is different from my own.

I often work with museums and the content is often from a culture other than my own. I trust curators and others more informed about cultures other than my own to guide me when I lack the knowledge to fully understand cultural contexts.
If yes, what was your thought process in that decision?

I create my own perspective

Fell deeply in love with it and want to develop my own style

I was thinking I liked that design concept. Just because I wasn't born into that culture (like a lottery) shouldn't mean I'm banned from liking/exploring a particular concept that was developed centuries before my existence.

I've drawn inspiration from African cultures I'm not really related to. I know people in the Nigerian community so I like learning about their fabrics and paintings. It's fun to find new works or artists that support your ideas.

My first project in grad school took inspiration from Japanese design and aesthetics. I didn't try to recreate Japanese art/design, but chose to use things that inspire me about Japanese design (like the Zen design principles) and showed my version of it.
Is there something you would like to share concerning cultural appropriation that has not been addressed in this survey?

Let’s have more discussion, resources, open dialogues

I'd like more discussion about the in-between space, where two cultures collide and create a third/new space… what does appropriation look like then?

I'd like a broader discussion. I'd like resources and to hear opinions from not only scholars, but regular people.

There should be more conversation about this, where to draw the line and how to identify when you subconsciously or mistakenly appropriate

Because I'm in art history and not an artist or designer myself, some of the questions are less relevant for me. That said, conversations about cultural appropriation in my art history classes have been heated and engaged. I'd love to have readings or examples to help guide us through them.

From my perspective the thing that is most missing from conversations at MICA and outside of MICA on this topic is nuance. I think there is such a wide range of engagements and appropriations happening and they are not all the same, I'd love to see a more complex discussion of this, and a broader language for talking about this topic.

Let’s have more discussion, resources, open dialogues
Is there something you would like to share concerning cultural appropriation that has not been addressed in this survey?

Cultural exchange can be positive

Many cultures today from around the world have been created through the mixing and sharing of ideas between two or more other cultures. The only things I would go as far as to consider Cultural Appropriation would be instances where someone is using someone else's cultural in a way that's blatantly disrespectful. Simply wanting to recreate the style of art found in another culture because you love/are inspired by it is, more than anything, Cultural Admiration.

Appropriation of culture as a topic is difficult to dissect when one is genetically from multiple cultures yet also one's family has resided in the US for generations. What culture can one claim or avoid as a melting pot American?

I think that we create more and share more when our inspirations are vast. I think it's a bit prideful to decide that you cannot be inspired or influenced by another culture and suppress that in your work. In that way I think appropriation is ok and necessary. So many beautiful works and relationships have been created by people unfamiliar with new cultures interacting, trading, re-imagining. I think the problem is when people fail to research or cannot access educational material.

The way I see it we live in a global age and nothing is original anymore. We should be free to take inspiration from other cultures as long as we are being respectful and well researched. Simple.

Cultural exchange can be positive
Is there something you would like to share concerning cultural appropriation that has not been addressed in this survey?

**Let’s be clear on what is / is not cultural appropriation**

It would be helpful for students to be clear on what is not cultural appropriation. Being inspired by the traditions of others is often a good thing and not cultural appropriation, but there is a nervousness that it might be.

Sometimes I wonder if this cultural appropriation debate has gone too far. I don't think you should profit off someone else's culture but I feel like art is about the unity of culture and the wholeness that we all share as being human. I think the whole debate creates fear in people explore other traditions and ways of work. Working outside of your culture is a way to understand more viewpoints and to connect with more people. MICA is so ready to call people out and I think it's well intended but our greater purpose is to remove the separateness we feel from race, gender, or sexual orientation ...

I don't think "appropriating" culture is necessarily a bad thing. If it's done respectfully (not in a mocking or belittling way) and proper research is done, using cultural visual themes from other cultures is a perfectly normal and GOOD thing.

Let’s be clear on what is / is not cultural appropriation
Is there something you would like to share concerning cultural appropriation that has not been addressed in this survey?

Identity is complex, transient, intersectional

The artist's identity, intention, and reaction matters when determining how culturally appropriative a work seems. To some extent, all work is culturally appropriative, but that does not make it an excuse to ignore thinking more critically about art.

There is so much to share here. I take the idea of cultures as imagined and always in flux seriously. There is no authentic culture, or race, or ethnicity. Cultural appropriation is, for me, a paradoxical subject, although I find that one can be respectful in listening to the sensitivities of others.

I'm a bit worried that talks about Cultural Appropriation have given students the impression that they can't draw inspiration from anything outside their own culture/background. To me, that's an incredibly limiting and, dare I say, damaging mindset to have, not just as an artist but as a person.

Appropriation of culture as a topic is difficult to dissect when one is genetically from multiple cultures yet also one's family has resided in the US for generations. What culture can one claim or avoid as a melting pot American?

Identity is complex
Conclusion: Fair use and/or cultural norms at MICA?

- Acknowledge your sources
- Do research and be accurate in your representations
- Be conscious of your adaptation
- Identity is complex
- Be open to discussion and critical thinking
- . . . to be continued
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