



‘Indispensable Treasures’:
Misrepresenting Indigenous Design as Inspiration for American Fashion in Illustrated Lectures

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Research Topic: In this paper, we critically examine the creation of lantern slides for a lecture series on the design and construction of ethnological clothing and textiles organized by Morris de Camp Crawford and Dr. Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in 1916. Since the late nineteenth century, museums of art, design, history, and anthropology have shaped the way we view, value, and experience fashion. Critical readings of fashion in the museum, however, tend to focus on how curators have collected and displayed extant objects within museum exhibitions.¹ By contrast, we investigate another way curators produced culturally recognizable meanings of fashion: through photography and its circulation. Drawing upon primary sources found within the archives of the AMNH, this paper brings to light how several of the museum’s curators chose to represent their anthropological collections as primary sources for design research within illustrated lectures. We argue that lantern slides not only became an important technology used to demonstrate the value of their collections, but also led to the normalization of cultural appropriation within the American fashion industry. In this paper, we define cultural appropriation as “the practice of taking the aesthetic or material properties from another culture by someone who is not a member of that culture without giving credit or profit.”²

Background: While there were multiple reactions to the challenges facing the American fashion industry following the outbreak of World War I, Crawford’s “Designed in America” campaign became an opportunity to develop an American design practice. In 1916, the fashion editor of *Women’s Wear* and Research Associate of Peruvian textiles the AMNH assembled a group of educators and scholars to discuss the state of American fashion and textile design.³ Crawford worked with the following individuals to provide training for American designers and manufacturers: Henry W. Kent of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Albert Blum of United Piece Dye Works, Wissler of the AMNH, and E.W. Fairchild of *Women’s Wear*.⁴ From 1916 to 1921, his campaign led a number of fashion and textile designers to seek inspiration among the fabrics, garments, and other artifacts in several museum collections throughout New York City, including the anthropological collections of the AMNH.

Framework: Drawing from Robert Spindler’s criteria for viewing lantern slides as historical evidence, we sought to identify how the museum’s curators chose to represent ethnographic clothing and textiles within lantern slides. According to Spindler, it is important to consider the physical and informational components of lantern slides collections.⁵ Unlike other photographic material, lantern slides were almost always produced in sets; they were primarily chosen to form a story line of importance to the photographer, museum curator, or educator.⁶ Lantern slide collections therefore were arranged according to a particular narrative. Beyond the

physical components of slide collections, additional materials like written descriptions or labels were meant to inform users how to interpret the collection for instruction.⁷ Another important aspect to consider is the fact that lantern slides were the first photographic medium designed for audience viewing, which led images to be shared simultaneously with a large number of people. Based on Spindler's criteria, we argue that the physical and informational components of lantern slides are integral to understanding how the AMNH sought to reframe their collections for the advancement of American fashion design in illustrated lectures.

Methods: In order to engage with the physical and informational components of lantern slide collections, we conducted an object-based analysis of several slides found within the AMNH Research Library. This involved analyzing the production of such material, as well as the format in which they were disseminated. We also reviewed supplementary material within the archives of the Anthropology Department to better understand how the museum's curators chose to reframe ethnographic clothing and textiles in photography during this period. This included correspondence between curatorial staff. In addition, we reviewed articles published within *Women's Wear Daily* that reported on the different materials discussed within each lecture.

Findings: In addition to providing designers with access to primary sources, several curators within the Anthropology Department created an array of visual material that further demonstrated the value of their collection for design research. This included their development of lantern slides for a series of lectures on "primitive textile arts in both ancient and modern times."⁸ Correspondence between Crawford and Wissler revealed the development of four lectures.⁹ Herbert Spinden's lecture on "Textile Arts of Mexico and Central America" highlighted ancient and modern textiles from this region and focused specifically on individual design motifs. Compared to Spinden's detailed analysis, Wissler's lecture on "Primitive Textile Arts" focused more broadly on the value of ethnological textile design for modern use. Lastly, Crawford's lectures on "Special Textile Processes and Products" and "The Textile Arts of Peru" illuminated the similarities between indigenous and industrial design processes. Beyond describing the design and construction of ethnological dress, each lecture was illustrated with lantern slides and museum objects. In a letter to Wissler, Crawford specifically mentioned the importance of documenting such material on live models.¹⁰ In fact, Crawford often produced his own lantern slides for such occasions. Several months prior to organizing the lecture series, Crawford invited the British dancer, Roshanara, to visit the collection and pose in some of the "wonderfully beaded costumes of the Indian" for the museum's photographer.¹¹ According to Crawford, these images were transformed into lantern slides for his lectures.¹² Compared to anthropological documentation that was meant record, document, and describe according to certain standards of logical rigor, such photographic material removed the garments from their socio-cultural context.¹³ Instead, they were placed on live models to demonstrate the "modern charm and feeling that would never be suspected from seeing them in the cases."¹⁴

Discussion: According to Ingrid Mida, the use of live models in photography became a standard museum practice during the early twentieth century; they were meant to provide visitors with an idea of how a garment would have been worn by the original wearer.¹⁵ Beginning in

1916, the AMNH, however, began to promote their collections as a resource for American fashion and textile designers. Not only do the slides convey the scientific quality of anthropological documentation through their positioning of the model in frontal, side, and three-quarter views, but they also appear to aestheticize specific cultures by including additional props that function as markers of exoticness. By combing scientific observation with anthropological interest, the slides move beyond a purely “documentary” mode. Rather they illustrate the ways in which the AMNH began to highlight certain design characteristics that would have been of interest to designers using the collection to identify “new” materials and silhouettes.

Significance: While fashion critics have begun to rethink and retheorize cultural appropriation within the public arena, very few scholars have reconsidered the role American institutions played in encouraging designers to imitate “another time, place, people or subject position.”¹⁶ The lantern slides discussed in this paper demonstrate how AMNH curators encouraged the appropriation of indigenous design through their repositioning of ethnological dress in photography and on live models. Moving forward, we believe this research project holds the potential to enhance our understanding of the role American museums played in fostering a new American design practice based on cultural appropriation, a practice that continues to occur within the industry today.

¹ For scholarship on fashion museology see, Valerie Steele, “Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition,” *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 1 (2008), 7-30; Alexander Palmer, “Untouchable: Creating Desire and Knowledge in Museum Costume and Textile Exhibitions,” *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 1 (2008), 31-64; Marie Riegels Melchior and Birgitta Svensson, *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014; Annamari Vänskä and Hazel Clark, eds., *Fashion Curating: Critical Practice in the Museum and Beyond*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018; Julia Petrov, *Fashion, History, Museums: Inventing the Display of Dress*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

² Denise N. Green and Susan B. Kaiser, “Taking Offense: A Discussion of Fashion, Appropriation, and Cultural Insensitivity,” in *The Dangers of Fashion: Towards Ethical and Sustainable Solutions*, ed. Sarah Marcketti and Elena Karpova (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts), 145.

³ Lauren D. Whitley, Morris De Camp Crawford and the “Designed in American” Campaign, 1916-1922 (*Textile Society of American Symposium Proceedings*, 1998), 410.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁵ Robert Spindler, “Windows to the American Past: Lantern Slides as Historic Evidence.” *Visual Resources* 5, no. 1 (1998), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ “Museum Notes,” *American Museum Journal* 16 (October, 1916), 411.

⁹ Correspondence between M.D.C. Crawford and Dr. Clark Wissler, 10 April 1916, Box 53, Folder 16, Departmental Correspondence, 1908-1926, Anthropology Archives, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY.

¹⁰ Correspondence between M.D.C. Crawford and Dr. Clark Wissler, 1 October 1917, Box 53, Folder 16, Departmental Correspondence, 1908-1926, Anthropology Archives, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY.

¹¹ M.D.C. Crawford, “Designer Impressed with American Art,” *Women’s Wear* (September 8, 1917), 1.

¹² Correspondence between M.D.C. Crawford and Dr. Clark Wissler, 1 October 1917, Box 53, Folder 16, Departmental Correspondence, 1908-1926, Anthropology Archives, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY.

¹³ Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1992), 13.

¹⁴ M.D.C. Crawford, “A New Source of Inspiration: Designers Adapt their Beauties of Primitive Arts to the Actualities of Modern Life,” *Vogue* (December 1, 1917), 118.

¹⁵ Ingrid Mida, “Animating the Body in Museum Exhibitions of Fashion and Dress.” *Dress* 41, no. 1, (2015), 38.

¹⁶ Denise N. Green and Susan B. Kaiser, “Introduction: Fashion and Appropriation,” *Fashion, Style, and Popular Culture* 4, no. 2 (2017), 146.