**Moving From**

Cultural Appropriation **to**

Cultural Appreciation

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ppropriation is an important part of art history. From Marcel Duchamp to

# Andy Warhol, appropriation is justified by the use of artists’ creative license

(Graw, 2004). This article focuses on **cultural appropriation** in social media, which allows anyone to be a content creator, and cultural appropriation in art classrooms, where the student population comes from increasingly diverse cultures. The paper analyzes visual culture in social media and art in our classrooms from the perspectives of both cultural appropriation and **cultural appreciation**. Aided by the methods and questions it provides, this article hopefully will help teachers and students to move from cultural appropriation to

cultural appreciation.

**Context: In the Era of a Digital Visual Multiculture** Cultural ideas and values can be maintained by visual images, because images communicate, teach, and transmit the behaviors, ideas, and values of a culture (McFee & Degge, 1977). “Cultural identities emerge in everyday discourse and in social practices, as well as by rituals, norms, and myths that are handed down to new members” (Wang, 2001, p. 516). McFee and Degge (1977) explained that “culture is a pattern of behaviors, ideas, and values shared by a group” (p. 272), and Dewey (1934) asserted that “each culture has its own individuality and has a pattern that binds its parts together” (p. 349).

In today’s era of digital visual multicultures, social media is increasingly becoming part of students’ lives. Students come from diverse cultural backgrounds yet can have the same easy access to diverse cultural imagery on the internet. As a result, they live with and learn from the information they get through social media. I hope this paper helps teachers and students to move from possible cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation.

## Social Media

Media shape our worldviews and values (Kellner, 2011). “Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture” (p. 7). Media teach the general public, much like a public pedagogy, how to be who we are, how to see the world, and what the dominant norms are in society today (Hladki, 1994). However, a single image can mean different things to different users of social media, and the relationships between images and users are not always direct or transparent. Individuals’ cultural backgrounds influence their choices of what and how they view and alter a great proportion of the meanings of the images they do view (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004).

In today’s internet-based culture, images are crucial. Mass images and videos circulating around the world help social media users feel engaged in different digital communities. When users are engaged in digital social media, the boundaries between the real and the virtual can become blurred (Burbules, 2006). Seeing may no longer be believing (Lippit, 1994). Some social media users employ image or video editing software or apps to beautify, modify, falsify, or exaggerate the content they would like to draw the audience’s attention to.

Bloggers, YouTubers, and other social media content creators can profit from the content they upload online by attracting advertisers that pay the content creator based on the number of viewers who visit the site or the number of people who click on a site’s “like” button. Unlike mass media celebrities, social media celebrities create their own online pages or channels and gain their own audiences. Every day, social media consumers browse and share hundreds of images and videos, many with little concern for the authenticity of the imagery.

Digital images are easily circulated and consumed by people of different cultural or linguistic backgrounds from around the world. Through social media, users are becoming prosumers (Manovich, 2009), contributors to social media content through viewing, sharing, and creating visual imagery. Because of this two-way communication between prosumers, all meanings of cultural symbols that do not belong to the prosumers are, according to social media designer Chan, “accompanied by ambiguity of intent and motive” (as cited in Manovich, 2009, p. 327). The questions of what social media prosumers really see, understand, make, or remake also must be considered. As multicultural digital citizens, students need to know that the images they create and post online can be influential and that what they are seeing online now may also influence what they think about the world and other cultures.

## Multicultural Art Classrooms

K-12 art education in the United States today no longer focuses exclusively on art of the Western canon; it also introduces art from different cultures (Boughton & Mason, 1999; Delacruz, Arnold, Kuo, & Parsons, 2009; Freedman & Hernandez, 1998; McFee & Degge, 1977; Young, 2011). Today, students from diverse cultural backgrounds sit in the same classrooms and access multiple social media platforms that instantly feed them local and international cultural imagery. Art teachers work hard to find culturally relevant art to share with their students. However, teachers are also concerned with how to introduce cultural images without deepening stereotypes and how to appreciate, but not appropriate, a culture in their art classroom.

**What Is Cultural Appreciation?**

“We like to celebrate different cultures in an art classroom” is a sentiment shared by many art teachers.1 Art educators appreciate different cultural images. They research them, practice making them, and teach them in the art room. And so the art room becomes an ideal place to teach cultural appreciation. However, what is *appreciation*? According to the *Oxford Dictionary* (2018), *appreciation* is “recognition and enjoyment of the good qualities of someone or something.” In an art class, when art teachers think about cultural appreciation, we are also concerned with how much recognition should be attributed to a culture and whether we are celebrating a culture or deepening a cultural stereotype. The purpose of this article is not to provide a unified lesson on how

Every day, social media consumers browse and share hundreds of images and videos, many with little concern for the authenticity of the imagery.

to teach cultural appreciation, but to provide topics for student research and questions for teachers to ask, questions to guide art students and art teachers from possible cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation.

**What Is Cultural Appropriation?**

Cultural appropriation refers to the ways people adopt or adapt an aspect of another’s culture and make it their own (Heyd, 2003; Hladki, 1994). Culture is to be lived and to be learned. Even though cultural appropriation is an unavoidable action (Jenkins et al., 2009; Rogers, 2006), the connotation of cultural symbols is negotiated and learned within a culture. When people within a dominant culture use objects from another culture without thorough research, and remain ignorant of the cultural context, cultural appropriation takes place. According to Hart (1997), cultural appropriation is “speaking for others or representing them in fictional as well as legal, social, artistic, and political work [as] appropriate or proper, especially when individuals or groups with more social, economic, and political power perform this role for others without invitation” (p. 137). When one culture represents another culture, stereotypes can easily occur (Said, 1985) and have especially egregious effects on minoritized cultures (Kulchyski, 1997).

People are often attracted to different cultures and cultural products by a perception of novelty and exoticism. Social media prosumers may pay less attention to cultural appropriation if they are unaware that the visual product they create and share may be seen by people of different cultures; however, the power they have may be no less influential than cultural imagery in mass media (Said, 1985).

**What Is Art Appropriation?**

Appropriation in art is different from cultural appropriation. According to Stangos (1994), art appropriation is “the direct duplication, copying or incorporation of an image… by another artist who represents it in a different context, thus completely altering its meaning and questioning notions of originality and authenticity” (p. 19). During the modernist period, such appropriative approaches as “the readymade, collage, and montage...” were developed by the “avant gardes,” and now, “without appropriation, contemporary art is unimaginable” (Evans, 2009, p. 15).

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Figure 1. Definitions of appreciation, cultural appropriation, and art appropriation by Sandrine Han.

Definitions of appreciation, cultural appropriation, and art appropriation are listed in Figure 1 for readers to differentiate these three concepts.

**Cultural Appropriation? Cultural Appreciation?**

**Real Life Examples**

For art teachers, art appropriation can be a part of the curriculum. However, cultural appropriation is also something that should not be ignored. I will discuss, as examples, whether wearing clothing from another culture qualifies as cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation.

Is wearing clothing from another culture an example of cultural appropriation? Let me reframe this question: Is wearing a traditional costume from another culture cultural appropriation? Recently, there was a widely discussed story on social media about a high school student (@daumkeziah, 2018) who wore a Chinese qipao to her prom (Figure 2). Because she is not Chinese and chose to wear a qipao, social media users began to argue about whether this was an instance of cultural appropriation or cultural appreciation. However, when Melania Trump wore a qipao during a recent visit to China, no mass media reporting or social media prosumer suggested that this was cultural appropriation. On the other hand, if a person who is not of Chinese heritage were to wear a Chinese qipao, use cosmetics to create an “Asian eye,” and speak English with a caricature Chinese accent at a Halloween party, this behavior would likely offend people.

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| to wear for any occasion. It is crucial for art teachers to alert our students to these questions and to help them think them through before they wear a traditional costume from another culture. | Figure 2. Qipao as a prom dress. Photo credit: Michael  Techmeyer/MemoryTech Photography. Screengrab by Sandrine Han. |

The same dress, therefore, can evoke either cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation, depending on the occasion and behavior of the individual wearing it. But what determines whether an action is appropriation or appreciation? The questions to be asked are Who is wearing what? For what occasion and for what purpose? Moreover, research about the cultural meaning of the traditional costume is necessary. If the icons, styles, and even the colors are sacred or significant to the culture, then they should be considered when determining whether the costume is appropriate Another example concerning appropriation or appreciation of clothing is the Kimono Project (Imagine One World Kimono Project, 2018). Currently, a private organization in Japan is preparing for the 2020 Olympics by creating 196 kimonos that represent each participating country. The kimono in Figure 3 is meant to represent the United States. What is your reaction when you see a traditional Japanese art form used to represent U.S. culture? Is this cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation? Is U.S. culture valued or devalued in this example? Can a person better understand their own culture by viewing it from another culture’s perspective? When teaching cultural appreciation in a studio art class, the following questions are important to consider:

* What culture are we teaching?
* Why are we teaching it?
* Is it relevant to our students? If not, how can we make it relevant to our students?
* What cultural symbols are we teaching?
* What are the meanings behind these cultural symbols?
* What materials are we using?
* Are the materials we are using relevant to the cultural product we are studying?

Figure 3. Kimono Project.

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In some situations, cultural appropriation may cause a grin, as in the case of a tattoo of a foreign erratum character; however, in others, it can be very disrespectful and disturbing. In an art history or art appreciation course, when we use a visual representation that is sacred or relevant to specific cultural ritual, we may need to ask these questions:

* What is the reason for teaching these cultural representations?
* What will students learn from the lessons?
* If students would like to make art based on what they have learned, what are some suggestions to guide them?

**As Art Educators, What Should We Do?**

Cultural exchange and mutual respect are necessary preconditions for moving from cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation. In an equal platform, such as an art classroom, we can celebrate our own culture and introduce it to others. Art units can also encourage cross-cultural conversations. Through cultural objects and imagery, cultural connotations can be introduced and explained to others who are not familiar with the culture. Each cultural symbol contains specific meaning. Mutual respect can prevent dismissive, or limiting, cultural misunderstandings and appropriation.

As art teachers, we may not always have easy access to other cultural contexts; however, more and more culturally specific instructional resources are available.2 In an art class, art teachers can create units that not only deal with one specific culture, but provide a space for all students to celebrate and exchange their cultures. In addition to learning about colors and symbols used by specific cultural groups, units associated with home decoration, cutlery, embroidery, fashion, or community activities could also invite students to explore, research, and celebrate their own cultures.

In addition to exploring visual culture from daily life, teachers could also present artists from different cultural backgrounds and use similar topics in their artwork to motivate student interest. Moreover, art teachers should acknowledge that culture is not limited to traditional art styles or forms. There are many contemporary artists from across the globe who share and celebrate their cultures through art. While students celebrate their own cultures, they can also learn about other cultures from their peers. In this way, students are learning not only about a culture that may not be relevant to them, but also, through exploration of topics that are relevant to them, they are learning about other cultures. At the end of the unit, teachers can ask students to share their works. This gives students a chance to explain their culturally relevant artwork, and, hopefully, cultural stereotyping and misunderstanding can be reduced.

## Outside Art Class

As multicultural digital citizens, students need to be aware that the images they create and post online can be influential, and they need to understand that what they see online can influence what they think about the world and other cultures. Creating and posting culturally relevant images is not wrong as long as students have done in-depth research and are prudent in handling the images with respect and care. Students need to remember that their viewers are coming from different cultural backgrounds and that their images will be examined by people who may perceive cultural imagery differently.

Students should also read images critically. Teaching visual literacy will help students develop an ability to do so (Chung, 2005; Duncum, 2002; Stankiewicz, 2004). We are constantly learning from images we see, but without critical eyes, we can be easily influenced by these images. In the case of cultural imagery, if the image or visual representation is not created by the cultural owner, the image creators may simply be producing images from a stereotype of that culture.

**Conclusion**

Appropriation is critical and meaningful in art. Scholars also recognize that cultural appropriation is an inevitable action (Heyd, 2003; Jenkins et al., 2009; Rogers, 2006). However, cultural appropriation is not always a pure representation of another culture but a tangled representation of political, economic, globalized, and cultural hegemony (Cuthbert, 1998; Hladki, 1994; hooks, 2006; Kulchyski, 1997).

As art teachers, we should not only ask students to question cultural appropriation and develop cultural appreciation, but we should also share our culture and write instructional resources for other teachers who are interested in learning about different cultures. Culture needs to be shared, understood, and celebrated. Culture is not static but constantly changing. However, cultural objects should not be made fun of, joked about, or treated with contempt (Heyd, 2003). As art teachers, we should teach our students how to be consciously aware of the power of their creations (Graw, 2004).

Cultural imagery carries cultural meanings (Nelson, 2003). In social media, imagery can deliver a strong effect. Images can carry massive visual impact for viewers who do not have time to process them carefully (Duncum, 1997). A lack of critical thinking when receiving the imagery, and ignorance of cultures other than one’s own, can lead to cultural appropriation. Deviation between the original cultural artifact created by the cultural owner and the final element perceived by the viewers occurs through culture-based connotations (Evans, 2009). Looking critically at cultural imagery without cultural context is not an easy task. I believe students need to develop visual literacy to help them critically read, see, and decode the cultural imagery they encounter in social media (Duncum, 2002) to move from cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation. n

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### Endnotes

1. In this paper, the author considers herself to be one of the art educators and uses “we” to represent art educators and herself.
2. There are many useful resources: the NAEA Asian Art and Culture Interest Group (AACIG) website, [https://sites.google.com/view/ aacig](https://sites.google.com/view/aacig/); InSEA publications, http:// insea.org/insea-pub and http:// insea.org/publicattions/inseapublications/978-989-20-5388-2; USSEA *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, [www.jcrae.org/ journal/index.php/jcrae/index](http://www.jcrae.org/journal/index.php/jcrae/index)

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