Appropriation, not Appreciation

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What is Cultural Appropriation???

Our exhibit explores the concept of cultural appropriation through the examination of items sourced from Salem, MA and East Asia over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Cultural Appropriation is the process by which components of a given culture — whether it be clothes, religions, symbols, or otherwise — are adopted by a different culture with systemic power. This is historically often accompanied by the new, dominant culture erasing and supplanting the original. Aside from the deliberate erasure that often accompanies cultural appropriation, however, the act of appropriation in itself represents a form of erasure. In the act of appropriating culture, the people who identify most with that culture are left stranded as others co-opt their themes.
Artists in Japan
Cabinet: 1600-1630 with stand incorporating elements from a Dutch table

Japanese lacquer cabinets were often mounted onto European stands. This specific cabinet is especially unique because the cabinetmaker saved the bulbous, which are vase-shaped oak legs from a Dutch table. However, the rest of the cabinet was crafted using local Asian woods and lacquer. Although this piece of furniture was originally designed and built by Japanese cabinetmakers, Europeans purposely altered the design to fit their definition of art. Instead of respecting the original craftsmanship, European cabinetmakers bastardized Japanese culture by putting their own “spin” on it. In the next slide, one will see how Asian culture is appropriated even in everyday objects such as a plate.
Plate, Transfer-printed Earthenware
1820s

This plate was created by English people, but it is very clearly a work that takes influence from Chinese art to the extreme. This constitutes an erasure of Chinese culture in that these English artists create works inspired by Chinese artists and conceptions, receiving credit for their creations without ever acknowledging the culture they robbed them from. This piece and the previous cabinet stay truer to their Asian roots than others in the collection, but they still represent a mentality that Western colonizers were entitled to the culture of the peoples they abused.
This is a porcelain depiction of a woman called “Madonna” holding up her child in her arms. This statue was made in Dehua, China. Although this porcelain statue was made in China, it is very clear that it has European influences. “Madonna” is another term for the Virgin Mary, and therefore the child she bears is Jesus. The origins of Madonna date back to between the 3rd and 6th century in early Christian art, and, in particular, the Byzantine empire, which its art produced many different Madonna types. The term Madonna, however, was created by Italian influence, as the translation from Italian means “Our Lady.” The Italian Renaissance, which occurred from the 14th century all the way to the 17th century, in particular, was responsible for the massive cultural spread across Europe and, farther down the line, in Asia. The Europeans supplanted the Asian culture with their own as they viewed their culture superior, that including their religions, and Christianity was heavily adopted into Chinese culture.
In another example of cultural appropriation by English folks, an 18th century painting showcases the hijacking of Asian dress and culture by Europeans. This portrait features two English boys — fully with blond hair and blue eyes — donned in traditional Chinese and Indian clothing. The two are painted in the style of a class European portrait, thus claiming these garments as European and erasing their Asian roots. These cloths are treated more as signs of wealth and opulence — to be revered — rather than signs of heritage to be respected.
Conclusion

Cultural appropriation has not only been a problem historically, but one in the present-day, as well. Whether it’s grand paintings or everyday life, aspects of Asian culture have been routinely co-opted, effectively erasing their heritage. This is not to say that there cannot be a cultural exchange and appreciation; in fact, that is a good thing. Some of society’s greatest achievements and breakthroughs have been the result of cultural mixing: for example, tempura, a dish renowned for its deliciousness, is the result of Japanese and Portuguese inter-mingling. However these items do not respect or appreciate their original roots. They simply rip these roots out of the ground and uproot the tree itself by presenting these items as uniquely Western. Portraits and the clothes featured in them lack Asian representation, traditional Japanese wood-carving techniques are degraded, and Asian culture is not given space to thrive but rather systemically quashed in favor of Western dominance while certain aspects are cherry-picked as worthwhile.
Bibliography

Japanese Lacquer Cabinet
https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/48804

Chinese Plate
https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/172135

Madonna and Child Porcelain Statue
https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/47513

Two English Boys in Asian Clothing Portrait