

Native Fashion Now: North American Indian Style.* Karen Kramer, Jay Calderin, Madeleine M. Kropa, and Jessica R. Metcalfe. New York: Prestel, 2015. 144 pages. [Published in cooperation with the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem.]

Reviewed by Lucy Fowler Williams

A debt of gratitude is owed to Karen Kramer, her team at the Peabody Essex Museum, and their supporters for producing the beautiful and substantive exhibition catalogue, *Native Fashion Now: North American Indian Style*. This oversized, full-color survey introduces the work of seventy established and up and coming artists and hurls Native American art onto a new stage of couture fashion, an arena that amplifies and accelerates creativity and change.

The book's impressive range, from Native couture to Arizona street style, is organized using four theoretical categories that effectively illuminate the designers' responses to fashion: "Pathbreakers," "Revisitors," "Activators," and "Provocateurs." "Pathbreakers" are the great innovators, active agents of change with an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit of design and Native aesthetics. These artists have achieved recognition far beyond their home communities. They include visionary Lloyd "Kiva" New (Cherokee), who gained national recognition in the 1950s for his Navajo inspired printed fabrics and dresses; Frankie Welsch (Cherokee), who designed silk scarfs and dresses from the 1960s-1980s, coveted by the Washington elite; and Dorothy Grant (Haida), Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo), Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo), and Orlando Dugi (Diné), whose garments express deep respect for their Native heritage through materials and the interplay of color and signs. Despite legacies of cultural oppression, these artists have risen, against all odds, finding their own styles in celebrating their Native heritage. Their achievements have opened pathways for later generations of Native American designers.

"Revisitors," including Bethany Yellowtail (Crow/Northern Cheyenne), Jamie Okuma (Luiseno/Shoshone-Bannock), Margaret Wood (Navajo/Seminole), Teri Greeves (Kiowa), Carla Hemlock (Mohawk), and Niio Perkins (Akwesasne Mohawk), among others, are designers who are reconfiguring old designs and motifs in new ways, while reinvigorating ancestral traditions. They honor and amplify the continuity between the past and the present and work to preserve traditions even as they update them. Their designs are shaped by tribal memory, and express cultural knowledge rooted in ancient understandings of the world. These garments represent abstract philosophical ideas and ceremonial practices such as prayer, honor, protection, and transformation that set them apart from mainstream fashion.

A third group of designers are grassroots "Activators" who combine color, graphic patterns, and tribally specific motifs with a street-style sensibility. Responding to trends and current events accessible through social media, they often mix Native made with other garments such as t-

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shirts, sneakers, and skateboards. This art empowers Native youth while highlighting social issues confronting their communities. Jared Yazzie (Diné), Dustin Martin (Diné), and Loui Gong (Nooksack/Squamish), just to name a few, raise awareness of racism, mixed race identities, and colonization.

Finally, “Provocateurs,” such as Margaret Roach Wheeler (Chickasaw), Wendy Red Star (Crow), Kent Monkman (Cree), Lisa Telford (Northwest Coast), Sho Sho Esquiro (Kaska Dene/Cree), and Barry Ace (Anishinaabe) offer refined conceptual projects, often one of a kind, from the sculptural to the experimental that blur the boundaries between art and fashion. They attempt to provoke us to think about issues like racism, exploitation, and violence against women and draw attention to the marginalization of indigenous peoples.

Native Americans have always made one of a kind garments by hand. Material culture is one of Native America’s most enduring legacies, and this active dedication and creative agency is what has kept the art alive. By doing so, Native artists give of themselves deliberately and meaningfully to honor each other, as well as their ancestors. The result is a driven and meaningful artistic agency that marks identities and puts beauty into the world.

Few arenas have a more palpable sense of change than the fashion industry, fueled by economics and a relentless push of seasonality, which itself is driven by desires to demonstrate social status. This is a space where today’s Native American designers seem to be very much at home. Native fashion is to be worn, yet in this context it is also for show and for sale. There is a palpable tension between piecework as personal, devotional acts of community, where Native art is perhaps most comfortable and meaningful, and this idea of scaling up and out for fashion and the market, where Native clothing now conveys high social status within the global realm. While Native and international leaders, celebrities, politicians, and collectors will likely continue to purchase the finest work, one worries, about the sustainability of the field. There are many questions the book leaves unanswered. What are the unspoken challenges of producing a line of clothing or accessories, taking it to markets, and making a living? How can designers maintain their fine handwork yet meet demands when products take off? How are artists gathering the needed finances and protecting their unique ideas in a global market? How will Native fashion reconfigure itself for more typical women’s bodies? And how will these gifted designers continue to make this arena their own by giving back to their home communities? As seen on catwalks now common from Juneau to Santa Fe, and from Bartlesville to Akwesasne, in Paris and in New York, Native American fashion has made its way onto the runway where it is moving freely and quickly and can change with the wind. This book is the first to recognize the meaningful vitality of this growing industry.

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of Native American Voices on Identity, Art, and Culture: Objects of Everlasting Esteem
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2005).

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