



# FUTURE ECHOES:

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# THE ART OF INDIGENOUS FASHION

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Orlando Dugi, *The Red Collection* -Look No. 2., photo by Tira Howard

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Director, IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts

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Curated and written by

Amber-Dawn Bear Robe (Siksika Nation) for the

Institute of American Indian Arts' (IAIA),

Museum of Contemporary Native Arts,

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## Art of Indigenous Fashion

*Fashions fade, style is eternal.* —Yves Saint Laurent

### Introduction

Timeless, stylish, and unique are attributes that describe Cherokee fashion designer, Lloyd Kiva New's designs in the 1950s and 1960s. Hired as the first Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) Art Director in 1962, the year the school was founded, New had worked as a successful fashion designer in Scottsdale, Arizona, before moving to Santa Fe. From 1967 to 1978, he served as the President of IAIA. News' designs are on view in the *Art of Indigenous Fashion* exhibition at the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA). This exhibition celebrates IAIA's sixty-year and MoCNA's fifty-year anniversaries.



Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee), MoCNA gallery image, photo by Sallie Wesaw Sloan.

Designs in the *Art of Indigenous Fashion* reverberate the power of visual representation while reminding the viewer that classifications do not bind Native art. On view from August 19, 2022 to January 8, 2023, this exhibition brings forth narratives of Indigenous designers that are frequently overlooked in American fashion. The exhibition represents over twenty leading contemporary artists from Canada and the United States. This anniversary observance encompasses the theme of *Making History*, a leading publication edited by Dr. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Fort Sill Chiracahua Apache) (UNM 2020), highlighting the role of IAIA and MoCNA in the Indigenous contemporary art field.

Guest curator Amber-Dawn Bear Robe (Siksika Nation) explains, "*The Art of Indigenous Fashion* offers insights into the approaches and perspectives of Indigenous designers beyond the visual and material qualities. Native garments are frequently custom-made and one-of-a-kind items." Indigenous cultures influence Native motifs and are an expression of personal style and experience. "Indigenous designers have been fashioning clothing and personal adornments for millennia and can be considered the original haute couture artists of America," states Bear Robe. The exhibit's designs, loosely organized by period and theme, present historical and contemporary issues.

Several of the designs address gender discrimination. For example, Jason K. Brown (Penobscot) & Donna Deontie Brown (Penobscot/Algonquin),<sup>i</sup> *Armored Beauty* is an upcycled polyester wedding dress with a message in the design. The dress reflects a study conducted by Ogilvy<sup>ii</sup> commissioned by Schweppes<sup>iii</sup>



Jason K. Brown (Penobscot) & Donna Decontie Brown (Penobscot/Algonquin), *Armored Beauty*, 2017, photography by Decontie & Brown.

to design a sensor-equipped garment to see where and how often a woman is touched without consent. Called a “smart dress,” investigators sent three women to a nightclub at various times wearing this dress. Hidden under the apparel were touch and pressure sensors that could transmit data via Wi-Fi to the researchers in a building next door. In just under four hours, the researchers witnessed in real-time the unwanted invasions of women groped 157 times combined. To highlight the study, Decontie & Brown placed spikes on the wrists, breasts, shoulders, and buttocks on the wedding dress to symbolize the inappropriate touch of women by men. The project brings awareness to how

pervasive unwanted touching is for women. *Armored Beauty* also references Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW&G) in the United States and Canada.

The art, design, and politics in the exhibition pose critical questions about culture and identity. Artists use different methods as a platform for social activism to



Yolanda Skelton (Gitksan), *Fin of The Fathers*, 2021, MoCNA gallery image, photo by Sallie Wesaw Sloan.



Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo), *Project Runway Finale Dress* (Haute Couture Dress), 2013-2022, MoCNA gallery image, photo by Sallie Wesaw Sloan.

challenge the viewer’s perception about Indigenous Peoples and their fashion. An Alaskan Native, Yolanda Skelton’s (Gitksan) dress, *Fin of the Fathers*, symbolizes polluted oceans and rivers. The artist believes the next generation will pay for the “Sins of the Fathers” and be responsible for the survival of the salmon. A runner-up in the popular cable series *Project Runway*, Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo) created a new work, *Colonial Dress*, which depicts her worldview of her Pueblo. She painted images of Taos’ sacred mountain, forest lands, and rain clouds on the dress. In



her long hand-painted scarf, Michaels addresses how non-Native settlers came to her Pueblo and exploited the land for oil, water, and minerals.

As an Indigenous-led organization, IAIA is the only fine contemporary Indigenous arts college in the world. The school's culturally based curricula, innovative teaching, critical inquiry, and intergenerational learning inspire students and prepare them for success. MoCNA's mission is *To elevate contemporary Indigenous art through exhibitions, collections, programs, partnerships, and new research*. The museum is committed solely to exhibiting, collecting, and interpreting the most progressive contemporary Indigenous art of our time.

*The Art of Indigenous Fashion and Making History* would not have been possible without the support of the Ford Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and Ralph Lauren.

Patsy Phillips, (Cherokee)  
Director, IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts

- <sup>i</sup> Donna Decontie-Brown is a citizen of the Penobscot Nation and a member of the Kitigan Zibi First Nation of Maniwaki, Quebec. Jason K Brown is a citizen of the Penobscot Nation.
- <sup>ii</sup> Ogilvy is a marketing firm in Brazil. The study: <https://bigthink.com/the-present/sensor-dress/>
- <sup>iii</sup> Schweppes is a beverage brand that originated in the Republic of Geneva; it is made, bottled, and distributed worldwide by multiple international conglomerates, depending on licensing and region, that manufacture and sell soft drinks. Wikipedia



MoCNA gallery image, photo by Sallie Wesaw Sloan.



Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo), *Recon Watchmen*, 2022, photo by Tira Howard.

## ***Future Echoes: The Art of Indigenous Fashion***

Indigenous designers have been creating exquisite clothing and unique personal adornments for millennia, establishing themselves as the original fashion artists of North America. *Art of Indigenous Fashion* (AIF), an exhibition curated for the Institute of American Indian

Arts (IAIA), Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, August 19, 2022 to January 8, 2023, showcased the work of twenty-six Indigenous designers from Canada and the United States.<sup>1</sup> Amber-Dawn Bear Robe's show offered insights into the approaches and perspectives of Indigenous artists beyond visual and material qualities, highlighting distinctive voices of Indigenous innovation.

The title of this essay, *Future Echoes*, suggests the interplay of past and present influences. Futuristic designs often merge elements from both past and present, embodying a cyclical or circular concept of time, rather than a linear one. In the context of Indigenous fashion, future reverberations highlight how “traditional” designs, concepts, knowledge, materials, and cultural stories inform and inspire modern and futuristic fashion trends. It emphasizes that while fashion evolves and adapts to new influences, it carries forward the qualities of its origins, ensuring that the cultural heritage and knowledge embedded in each garment continue to resonate into the future. *Art of Indigenous Fashion* imbues the concept of impending significance, showcasing the dynamic interplay between lore and innovation, illustrating how Indigenous fashion is a grounded continuation of cultural identity and a forward-looking art form. Fashion artists featured in the AIF exhibition include Lloyd Kiva New, Kay Bennett, Barry Ace, Orlando Dugi, Jamie Okuma, Patricia Michaels, Lesley Hampton, Catherine Blackburn,





Jamie Okuma (Payómkawichum (Luiseño)/Shoshone/Bannock) & Orlando Dugi (Navajo), AIF opening reception, 2022, photo by Tira Howard.

Jason Baerg, Dorothy Grant, Skawennati, Sho Sho Esquiro, Lauren GoodDay, Yolanda Skelton, Pamela Baker, Decontie & Brown, Virgil Ortiz, Marcus Amerman, Pilar Agoyo, Kent Monkman, Anita Fields, Wendy Ponca, and Margaret Wood. Each of these designers brings a distinct perspective to their work, reflecting their personal experiences, visions, cultural backgrounds, and fashion ideology.

What is Indigenous or Native fashion? This question defies a single, straightforward answer because it encompasses an incredibly diverse field, representing numerous Native nations and a multitude of prolific individuals. Historically, Indigenous fashion has been an expression of cultural identity, social status, events, stories, and spiritual significance. While this remains true today, the discipline is far more complex. Fashion's main characteristic is its constant and rapid metamorphosis, and Native fashion is no different. Yet, through its adaption to changing environments and influences, Indigenous fashion maintains a strong connection to cultural heritage reflecting the cultural design language of its creators. This essay examines exhibition highlights and AIF themes, illustrating how fashion embodies Indigenous knowledge with unique narratives interlaced into each garment; Native fashion maintains the essence of distinct cultural narratives that resonate and change through time, influencing future creations.

Sho Sho Esquiro's fashion designs serve as a powerful medium for social activism. While her creations are deeply rooted in Native traditions, techniques, teachings, and community values, Esquiro leverages her platform to address social justice issues, environmental concerns, and Indigenous rights. Her purpose is to bring light to issues that are important to her Kaska Dene and Cree community.<sup>2</sup> *Worth Our Wait*





Sho Sho Esquiro (Kaska Dena/Cree), *Worth Our Wait in Gold*, 2015, silk, beaver, 24K gold beads, abalone, mother of pearl, seal, skin, wool, brass, rayon, photo by Tira Howard.

*in Gold* is an exquisite two-piece ensemble addressing murdered and missing Indigenous women.<sup>3</sup> A cropped seal skin bustier is paired with a denim and silk mermaid skirt. Twenty-four-karat gold beaded floral petals forming large abstract flowers flank the corset and are cinched at the front with gold and pearl-colored beads. The form-fitting navy-blue wool mermaid

skirt flares into a flowing dark brown silk and rayon two-tiered bell hem, which moves gracefully with each step. Mother of pearl and abalone buttons line the sides of the corset, resembling seeds to the abstract flowers. The reference to gold in the title and the materials used in the garment symbolizes the exploitation of northern Canadian regions, from which the artist hails. This exploitation involves the extraction of gold, an industry that has brought significant environmental and social disruption to these areas. Additionally, the garment highlights the abuse of Indigenous women, perpetrated both by individuals and by systemic actions of the Canadian government. By incorporating these elements, along with her design

language, the artist underscores the ongoing struggles faced by her community and the broader Native issues of injustice and exploitation.

Diné Designer Orlando Dugi's approach to addressing the community through fashion involves focusing on personal stories and experiences. This method highlights personal connections and specific experiences, making the issues relatable and impactful on a human level. His 2020 capsule collection, created during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritized healing and protection with each dress named to honor his grandmothers. *Alice Dress*<sup>4</sup> was inspired by a Navajo story about Shell Woman, Father Sun, and Water. Diamonds beaded on the torso represent a flint bodice of protection from



Orlando Dugi, (Navajo), *The Red Collection-Look No. 2.*, 2015-16, cochineal dyed silk organza; 2015/16 gold embroidery; tambour beading; hand-beading; handsewing; machine-sewing.

*Lillie Dress*, 2018. 4 ply silk crepe de chine and silk organza, lined with silk charmeuse, ostrich feathers, with beads, sequins, French coil, flat metal, rhinestones, hand-pleated silk organza, hand-beading, hand-embroidery. IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts Collection.

*The Alice Dress*, 2020/21 Tambour beading and embroidery on nylon tulle; hand-sewing; machine-sewing.

Photo by Tira Howard.

the Sun, the floral work on the dress is Mother Earth, while the dark shoulders are Father Sky. Dugi creates exquisite evening wear with hand-embroidered symbols, feathers, beads, and silks. Beyond the visual beauty, his collections are carriers of Navajo knowledge.



Jamie Okuma (Payómkawichum (Luiseño)/Shoshone/Bannock), *Top for Ribbon Skirt*, 2016, 100% silk satin ribbon, *Woman's Dress*, 2015. Wool, synthetic materials, dentalium shell, brass beads, sequins. *Ribbon Short Dress*, 2016, 100% silk satin ribbon, *Ribbon Skirt*, 2017, 100% silk satin ribbon, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, photo by Tira Howard.

Native couturiers such as Jamie Okuma transfer their Native knowledge<sup>5</sup> through bold statements made of historical bead art techniques in unexpected ways. Intentional or not, advocacy and awareness are seen with Okuma's beaded designs that become statements that subtly yet powerfully challenge stereotypes by redefining perceptions of "Indian style." With a nod to punk and rock metal style, Okuma creates bead

mosaics that depict vignettes inspired by cinema and pop iconography. While her creations are bold fashion statements, her work is deeply personal. Famously known for her intricate beaded couture footwear, Okuma brings her creations into new spaces including a ready-to-wear fashion line and fully beaded accoutrements. "There are definite stories behind each pair of boots, most of them extremely personal," Okuma shared during research for the exhibition.<sup>6</sup> Her beaded round backpack is bordered with long, predominantly gold metal spikes and studs. The beaded front and back panels are dust pink, featuring curvilinear abstract floral designs that evoke a modernist, futuristic fauna. Her work is culturally encoded, presenting visual beauty interwoven with knowledge, skill, and narratives known only to the artist.

The work of Virgil Ortiz not only challenges the ideals of Native fashion but symbolizes how fashion can mark historical moments to inform the future. Ortiz creates fashion, ceramics, and multimedia artworks, with each practice informing the other. Apocalyptic concepts, fantasy, and futuristic storytelling anchored in his



Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo), *Recon Watchmen*, 2022, photo by Tira Howard.

Cochiti Pueblo worldview contribute to his distinct design language. An entrance installation featuring a trio of mannequins dressed by Ortiz and titled “Recon Watchmen” welcomed viewers into the AIF exhibition. Three figures, hailing from the year 2180, vigilantly oversee and protect the past, present, and future of the Pueblo people in New Mexico. With the use of assorted materials, Ortiz designed silk cloaks with his signature motifs of the sun, moon, Rez Spine, and VMaze, with each mannequin wearing custom fabricated masks made of silicone, latex, and resin, creating a futuristic Indigenous design language and domain.<sup>7</sup>



Kay Bennet (Diné), *Blue Dress w/Corn* (Mud Head Dress), ca. 1960s. Wool, embroidery. *Orange Dress*, ca. 1960s Wool, embroidery. Private collection of Doreen Picerne and Robert Black, photo by Tira Howard.

There are many more stories, accounts, insights, and perspectives that need to be documented about the designers in this exhibition, such as Kay Bennett (1922-1997), who is well known for her activism and dolls but less recognized for the dresses she made in the 1960s. Her modern

‘60s style featured hand-stitched Navajo symbols, such as Yei Be Chai forms and Mud Clan figures, blending modern fashion with cultural significance.

The celebrated artist and educator Lloyd Kiva New (1916-2002) created attire featuring hand-printed, recognizable Native figures. His signature clothing for both men and women includes color-clashing, self-made textiles adorned with figures representing various Native Nations, from Northwest Coast formline designs to ledger figures and abstract symbols. Kiva New is instrumental to the founding of IAIA while influencing generations of artists and fashion designers such as Patricia Michaels, Marcus Amerman, and Pilar Agoyo.



Lloyd Kiva New, *Pink and Blue Outfit*, ca. 1960's, cotton, silver buttons made by Charles Loloma. Private. Collection of Doreen Picerne and Robert Black, photo by Tira Howard.



Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo), *Colonial Dress*, 2022, Silk satin organza, devore' silk rayon velvet, glass cut beads, rayon fringe, tulle and synthetic lining materials. Earrings mica and gold leaf, synthetic wig, footwear by Goler Shoes, photo by Tira Howard.





Marcus Amerman (Choctaw Nation), *Beaded Suede Blazer Shamans Jacket*, 1998. Suede blazer, tie, glass beads, thread, photo by Tira Howard.



Pilar Agoyo (Ohkay Owingeh/Cochiti/Kewa), *Blood Line*, 2022, cotton (Denim) Organza with embroidery, red patent leather, photo by Tira Howard.

Many artists in this essay radically blur the line between fashion and art. Artist Barry Ace uses electronic components as a substitute for glass beads to create Odawa floral motifs for avant-garde and futuristic regalia. Through blending traditional influences with contemporary materials, Ace dismisses the notion that Indigenous cultures are stagnant and destined to become a footnote in history books. Instead, his shoes and accessories follow existing conduits within the continuum of Odawa art— holding space for the continual flow of culture.

Jason Baerg and Catherine Blackburn are two artists who work in the space between art and fashion. Blackburn fuses elements of contemporary beadwork with a visual language rooted in her identity as a Dene, European, and member of the English River First Nation. Baerg converts his practice of painting into contemporary fashion and design, constructing fabulous conceptual fashion collections based on being a Métis artist. Dorothy Grant is a Haida fashion matriarch whose garments are adorned with storytelling symbols created in the visual language of the Haida people, known as formline.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the stories of her ancestors, the designs she creates express what it means to be Haida today. Himikalas Pamela Baker's cape demonstrates stylized Chilkat and Ravenstail weaving elements adapted to stunning fashion collections infused with family and clan accounts of who she is as a Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw, Tlingit, Haida, Squamish woman.

Anita Fields' fashion tells stories of culture as a continuum that connects to the past and weaves memories and experiences together in the present. *It's in Our DNA, It's Who We Are*, an Osage wedding coat is a collage of images printed on silk depicting historical photographs of the artist's relatives, pictures from the Osage creation story, and oil wells. The exterior is vibrant colors, featuring ribbon-work and hand embroidery that depicts plants that are



Opening Reception, AIF, 2022, photo by Tira Howard.

significant in Osage culture. Her work layers remnants of the past, including newspaper clippings and cultural icons that come together in works to communicate the perpetual growth and evolution of Osage culture. Printed inside the coat is the Treaty of 1808 when the Osage Indians ceded almost two point five million acres.

Skawennati designs virtual fashion collections of resistance-wear for her culturally diverse digital avatars, who advocate for Indigenous rights and awareness in cyberspace. These visually striking and conceptually powerful designs are today showcased in the physical realm through fashion shows and performance art installations.

Each AIF fashion artist and designer brings a unique perspective to their visually stunning and thought-provoking work, blending personal experiences, innovation, Native knowledge, and cultural backgrounds to reflect on societal issues and cultural identity. Indigenous designers have long been at the forefront of fashion, creating exquisite garments that celebrate their cultural heritage and challenge contemporary norms. As the original fashion artists of North America, these designers leave an indelible mark on the world of fashion, inspiring future generations. Their designs highlight Indigenous concepts, knowledge, materials, and cultural stories, shaping modern and futuristic fashion trends.



Amber-Dawn Bear Robe, Ashley Calling Bull, Chris Eyre, AIF opening reception, 2022, photo by Tira Howard.

<sup>1</sup> *Art of Indigenous Fashion* was curated by Amber-Dawn Bear Robe for the Institute of American Indian Arts' (IAIA), Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, from August 19, 2022, to January 8, 2023.

Curatorial Statement: Indigenous designers have been fashioning one-of-a-kind clothing and personal adornments for millennia and can be considered the original haute couture artists of America. With exquisitely beautiful garments, often created with unconventional methods, each designer leaves traces of their identity in each creation. This exhibition brings together the work of twenty-six contemporary Indigenous designers from Canada and the United States.

From tradition to runway, Indigenous cultures are continually shifting, responding to the land and modern environment; Some fashions may challenge the viewer's notion of "Indian style", while some designers use fashion as a means of social activism. Blending art and fashion, several designers mirror society and pose critical questions about current issues, reflecting the power of visual representation.

The exhibition includes fashion and critical statements. Artists who create works referencing clothing can appeal to alternative audiences outside mainstream fashion circles. This merging can form a relatable connection back to the body, attracting audiences within and outside of academia. Some creations may explicitly tell an artist's story or have a message hidden within the passion and labor of the artistic process.

The leading designers of Native fashion largely overlap with artists who attended the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) which played an important role in fostering Indigenous designers through educational discourse. Lloyd Kiva New was instrumental to the founding of IAIA while influencing generations of artists, who can be seen in this show. I use the term "traditional" because tradition is a dynamic, living entity, not confined to a specific era or aesthetic. In Indigenous fashion, this concept is particularly vibrant as designers blend traditional techniques, symbols, and materials with modern styles and technologies, creating a fusion that honors the past while addressing present-day contexts and envisioning future possibilities. For example, an Indigenous designer might apply traditional beadwork patterns to contemporary garments like jackets or sneakers, preserving the craft while making it accessible and appealing to a broader audience, including younger generations.

<sup>2</sup> "Sho Sho Esquiro: Bill Reid Gallery." Create a Stir. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://www.createastir.ca/articles/sho-sho-esquiro-bill-reid-gallery>.

<sup>3</sup> Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW) is a movement that started the decades of Indigenous women going missing in the Downtown Lower East Side of Vancouver, Canada. A serial killer was eventually caught who was targeting Native women for over ten years in that particular region. MMIW became a term to address violence against Indigenous women across Canada and the United States.

<sup>4</sup> *Alice Dress* is made with tambour beading and embroidery on nylon tulle, hand-sewing, and machine-sewing.

<sup>5</sup> Jamie Okuma is a Luiseño, Shoshone-Bannock, Wailaki, and Okinawan who is also an enrolled member of the La Jolla band of Indians in Southern California.

<sup>6</sup> Phone call with Jamie Okuma, Wednesday, January 19th, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> V-maze and rez-spine are design languages created by Virgil Ortiz reflecting his Cochiti Pueblo heritage artistry. These design elements are integral to his unique style, blending traditional Pueblo motifs with modern and futuristic aesthetics. The V-maze design consists of intricate, interlocking geometric patterns that form maze-like structures. These patterns often feature sharp angles, straight lines, and repeating shapes, creating a sense of movement and complexity. The rez-spine design features a series of linear, spine-like patterns that resemble the vertebrae of a backbone. These designs often run vertically or horizontally across the artwork, creating a sense of structure and strength. Virgil Ortiz seamlessly integrates these design languages into various mediums, including pottery, fashion, and digital art.

<sup>8</sup> Northwest Coast formline design is an artistic style used by Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America, including the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakwaka'wakw nations. This distinctive art form is characterized by bold, fluid lines and shapes that create intricate, stylized representations of animals, mythological beings, and natural elements. Key features of formline design include ovoids, u-forms, and s-forms. Formline design is used in a variety of artistic expressions, including totem poles, masks, sculptures, drawings, paintings, prints, textiles, fashion, and jewelry. The designs often hold significant cultural and spiritual meanings, telling stories and representing the heritage and identity of the Indigenous peoples who create them.