

Relationships: Gratitude and Reciprocity

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Introduction

Systemic practices of consumer culture have put the environmental and social health of all living beings at risk. A shift in the Western mindset may be possible when there is collaboration with Indigenous peoples to understand a perspective of gratitude for the earth's many gifts and to learn the wisdom of the generations before us. This design was based on research with Indigenous apparel makers that identified six core values of gratitude and reciprocity in their sustainable apparel-making practices: relationships, connection to the land, spirituality, community, sustainability, and identity and healing (Bye & Davis, 2021). The dress was co-designed with two Native American designers to tell a visual story of relationships. Blending Indigenous practices, history, and Western perspectives is about discovering balance in personal expectations and seeking a path to more restorative practices that can rebuild and support the environment. Bowers (2016) encourages looking to cultural commons as a means of sustainable wealth that supports lifestyles that are rooted in "Indigenous intergenerational knowledge of how to live within the limits and possibilities of their bioregions" (158) in balance with the money economy. The wisdom and traditions of Indigenous peoples have been challenged and ignored for centuries. Ahtone shared, "From our mother, we have received the materials from which we make our way in the world. Our cultural drive to make things results from the need to survive and the guiding stories telling us that we should do what we do well." (Yohe & Greeves, 2019, p.37)

Relationships are the core of the women's lives and making practices. They honor and respect their immediate family, extended family, and ancestors. Bloodlines and stories shared over generations are essential to the relationships that sustain them and their work. The land they come from is considered relative, establishing a core connection to nature.

Aesthetic Properties

This dress exhibits a profound connection to the theme of relationships, reflected in the intricate Lace Shadowing technique used to represent the black and white version of the "Bird Family" artwork by a contemporary Native artist, Norval Morrisseau (figure 1a). The piece was used with the legal permission granted by the Estate of Norval Morrisseau. The fabric manipulation with various layers of lace creates a multi-dimensional visual effect that highlights familial bonds and interconnectedness. The incorporation of birch bark elements as a connector of different parts of the ensemble not only adds a unique textural contrast but also honors traditional materials, symbolizing the resilience and interconnectedness of nature and community.

Methods

The garment's construction showcases innovative fabric manipulation through Lace Shadowing, which involves different layers of lace to create depth and narrative imagery within the fabric. Each layer was intricately cut based on the different shades of black, from darkest to the lightest gray (figure 1b), then layering from the one with more detailed cuts as the base and the fullest one on the top. This method adds a tactile quality to the dress and serves as a canvas for storytelling. Using cotton as the base fabric provides a soft, breathable foundation that complements the intricate lace details. The design was made using pattern-making and draping processes at the same time. The birch bark, traditionally used in various Native crafts, is ingeniously adapted here to connect different parts of the garment, enhancing its structural integrity and aesthetic coherence. The bark was cut into 5 inches narrow strips, crossing over each other in a group of five.

Cohesion

The design effectively merges traditional Native elements with modern fashion techniques, maintaining strong thematic and visual cohesion. The lace shadowing and birch bark are thoughtfully integrated, reflecting the theme of “Relationships” through material and design. The dress's silhouette balances contemporary fashion sensibilities with cultural homage.

Design Contribution

This dress significantly contributes to the dialogue on integrating Indigenous techniques and materials into contemporary fashion. It challenges conventional design boundaries by using traditional materials like birch bark in nontraditional ways and employing fabric manipulation to convey cultural narratives. The design promotes a deeper appreciation for Native artistic expressions and crafts and advocates for environmental and cultural sustainability in fashion. It serves not only as an apparel item but also as an artifact of cultural preservation and innovation.

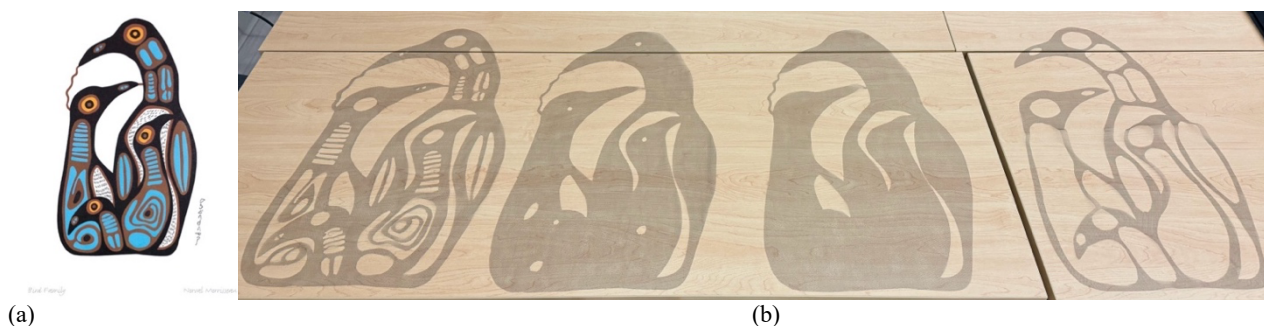


Figure 1: (a) Original artwork by Norval Morrisseau;
(b) Cutting different layers of lace for the Lace Shadowing technique.

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