

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Marc Jacobs' fall campaign offers different take on cultural exchange

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Marc Jacobs is collaborating with some of the icons of 90s hip-hop. Image credit: Marc Jacobs, photo by Hype Williams

By DANNY PARISI

U.S. fashion label Marc Jacobs, no stranger to controversy surrounding its free-wheeling approach to taking influences from other cultures, has unveiled a new campaign for fall/winter 2017 inspired by hip-hop stars of the 1990s.

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Mr. Jacobs has been criticized in the past for using imagery from black culture in his shows, frequently using all-white models. With this new campaign for the fall/winter 2017 collection, Marc Jacobs is again demonstrating his affection for black culture, but this time he is collaborating with individuals who helped define that culture, rather than just sampling an aesthetic.

"When you collaborate with the right people, people who are from the culture and community, and your intentions have more to do with providing a platform than taking credit or putting yourself on a pedestal, then you successfully celebrate and acknowledge the importance of the people, culture and community as well as their impact as influencers and innovators," said Ayiko Broyard, executive vice president and group account director at **Walton Isaacson**, New York.

Fashion faux-pas

High-fashion, given its predilection for always finding new styles, patterns and shapes, has been at the center of much of the debate on cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is the idea that people in a powerful or majority group can take and exploit elements from another culture, almost always a minority or oppressed culture, and use it for personal gains, usually in the form of commercializing those elements. The archetypal example is a brand or retailer selling ambiguous Native American-style clothing or headdresses without respect to or input from the culture's people.

Marc Jacobs was accused of cultural appropriation recently when he decked out his white models in dreadlocks, a style that originated in black culture.



Mr. Jacobs with some of hip-hop's icons. Image credit: Marc Jacobs, photo by Hype Williams for InStyle

But rather than become antagonistic or defensive about that experience, Mr. Jacobs' fall 2017 collection seeks a similar goal incorporating elements of black culture and fashion that he admired as a young man in a way that is respectful and collaborative, rather than exploitative.

To do this, Marc Jacobs has created a collection inspired by 90's hip-hop fashion and artists, including LL Cool J, Biz Markie, Salt n' Pepa and Kurtis Blow.

Each of these artists played a role in shaping the iconic 90's hip-hop fashion that inspired Mr. Jacobs as an art student in New York at the time and upon which he based his fall collection.

The artists were all present at the collection's debut and their influence on its design is a major part of the appeal. Additionally, many of the models showcasing the collection were black, making it much more representative of the era and style the show was trying to evoke without whitewashing it.

Cultural unity

In addition to the subtextual nature of the new collection, Mr. Jacobs has been more overt about his motivations in creating it.

In a piece from InStyle magazine, Mr. Jacobs openly acknowledged that he had been insensitive before and hoped that the new collection, which is appropriately called "Respect," would accomplish a similar goal but in a better way.

"You asked me what excites me today, it's this," Mr. Jacobs said in his interview with InStyle. "I guess that's the weird thing in the way that I am never aware of what it is that we're actually feeling while working on a collection but in retrospect, you see.

"The show worked, and it obviously struck a chord with people outside of our little design room who are feeling that too," he said.



Marc Jacobs fall/winter 2017 ad campaign. Image credit: Marc Jacobs

This is a far cry from comments he made after his initial criticism for cultural appropriation when he responded via Instagram that when a black woman straightens her hair, there is not the same amount of backlash and that he "does not see color," comments that seemed to make matters worse for the designer ([see story](#)).

But in his new collection, Mr. Jacobs seems to be approaching his desire to incorporate elements of hip-hop and black culture in a way that works in collaboration with those who created and defined the look, rather than exploiting their creations.

"It starts with intention and with narrative control or collaboration," Ms. Broyard said. "Is it your story to tell or should you turn that role over to a more credible voice?"

"Brands can navigate these waters by making sure they do their homework, find the right in-culture collaborators and cultural influencers. Then support their creativity without shortchanging them by taking their ideas and limiting their financial gain or profit potential.

"In the middle of the word 'appropriation' is 'prop' always ask yourself why you're using cultural identity? Are you giving props or using them as props? It begins with intention but execution will certainly make or break a successful outcome so in-culture involvement has to stay present throughout the process."