

A virtual Ainu fish skin workshop during Covid-19 times

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Abstract

Background scientific research: Fashion is a global industry. The growing environmental crisis and fashion acknowledged pollution calls urgently for action. The Covid-19 pandemic presented an immediate crisis, necessitating rapid and radical change. Fish leather provides an alternative to the leather industry with positive environmental, social, and economic implications that are practical, practiced, and practicable. The workshop showcased in this paper and the research behind it attempted to pass on the fish skin craft from Ainu Indigenous communities, preserving and protecting it providing an environmentally sustainable alternative to current fashion practices via dissemination of such knowledge.

Research issue to be addressed: The paper is centred on the research questions:

'How can we assist fashion students in developing sustainable materials by sharing traditional fish skin craft from Ainu Indigenous Peoples?'

'How can a faculty provide creative new ways of teaching that benefit both staff and students during difficult times?'

Methodology used: From April to June 2020, during the Covid-19 isolation, Ran Graber, a third-year student of Shenkar University, Tel Aviv, elected to study and remake a 19th century fish skin attush (Ainu robe), under the guidance of Elisa Palomino, Orit Freilich, Ran Kassas and Debbie Elhayeni, as part of the F4*3D course. This small project of individuals – one student, one course, one study, one sample – nevertheless brought together workwear and artwear, utilitarianism and spirituality, ancient tradition/history, contemporary society, and future thinking. It brought together Tel Aviv, London, and Hokkaido – as well as all of the readers of this paper, from across the globe.

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Results achieved or expected; their relevance for theory and practice: By disseminating the ancient Indigenous Ainu fish skin craft – as exemplified in the Ainu robe – to a non-Indigenous student, we were able not only to provide an example of an environmentally sustainable alternative material for fashion, but also, in so doing, to suggest a way of preventing marine pollution by exploiting skins discarded by the food industry that would otherwise be thrown in the sea. We were able to sustain an endangered historic tradition, to bring it to a new arena, and to plant the seeds of its further dissemination as the fashion students graduate and become industry professionals across the world.

Keywords: Ainu Indigenous Peoples; fish skin craft; traditional knowledge; fashion education for sustainability; food industry by-product

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