

we feel pretty

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN WESTERN COSMETICS



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ISSUE 02

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Yardley London ad, 1972
 Founded by William Yardley
 London, UK

Letter from the Editor: Commodifying Culture



Ever wondered what would give your beauty brand a little edge over the competition? Why not borrow from a culture that's not your own and pass it off as innovation? It's easy, straightforward, and has been practiced for a century in the cosmetics industry. This zine will act as a helpful primer for some of the most common ways beauty brands culturally appropriate, and how it benefits or backfires on them. Though blatant cultural appropriation has become less prevalent in the past decade, westerners still find ways to co-opt aspects of other cultures to build their branding and provide something "new" and unfamiliar to western markets. Use this zine as a guide on these cultural appropriation "strategies," ranging from the use of foreign buzzwords to culturally indeterminate packaging! Happy learning!

- Lily H. Foster

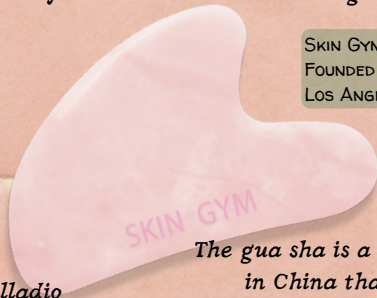
East Asia: Mysticism & Marketing



LIME CRIME
FOUNDED BY DOE DEERE (XENIA VORTOVA)
LOS ANGELES, CA

American cosmetics company Lime Crime released the 'China Doll Fantasy Eyeshadow Palette' in 2012 with advertisements depicting a white model wearing a Japanese kimono. Eyeshadow color names included terms commonly associated with Asia, such as 'Lotus Noir' and 'Fly Dragon Fly.' In response to criticism, founder Doe Deere made a blog post where she claimed the design concept was inspired not by a Chinese woman herself but 'a fantasy [character] inspired by China' who was 'not meant to be necessarily Asian.' She went on to call the concept of cultural appropriation 'silly' and defends it as 'cultural exchange.'

SKIN GYM
FOUNDED BY KARINA PORUSHKEVICH
LOS ANGELES, CA



The packaging of American-founded Palladio Beauty's 'Rice Paper Oil-Absorbing Blotting Tissues' depicted an eastern Asian woman when the product was first released in 2018. The product has no connection to east Asia besides containing rice. Palladio quietly removed the woman from the product's packaging in recent years.

The gua sha is a skin tool with origins in China that has recently found popularity in the west. Skin Gym is just one of the many western brands that now sell their own gua sha. Like Skin Gym, most of these brands make no mention of the tool's Chinese origins in their marketing, and if they do, it is referred to as an 'ancient' or 'traditional' Chinese practice.



The “Vaguely Ethnic” Approach



ESSENCE COSMETICS
FOUNDED BY CHRISTINA OSTER-DAUM
GERMANY

German beauty brand Essence Cosmetics released the ‘Lights of Orient’ collection in 2016. The packaging utilized vaguely Middle Eastern imagery, with a text font resembling Arabic. Product shade names included ‘Oriental Beauty’, ‘Arabian Nights’, and ‘The Sultan’s Daughter.’ Similarly, MAC Cosmetics released their ‘Vibe Tribe’ beauty line in 2016 with packaging clearly inspired by Native American imagery. The collection’s marketing campaign depicted white women draped in Navajo prints with tribal tattoos and feathers in their hair. In response to controversy, MAC stated that the collection was inspired by ‘art, outdoor music festivals, and the colors of the desert’, and ‘has absolutely no connection to nor was it inspired by Native American cultures.’



MAC COSMETICS
FOUNDED BY FRANK TOSKAN & FRANK ANGELO
TORONTO, CANADA

Ingredient appropriation & discovery narratives



TARTE COSMETICS
FOUNDED BY MAUREEN KELLY
NEW YORK, NY

Some of Tarte's most popular products are from their "Amazonian Clay" line. The products claim to contain Amazonian clay, but the only clay listed in the ingredients is kaolin, which is not found exclusively in the Amazon. Their website states founder Maureen Kelly "discovered this skin-balancing powerhouse" when she visited the Amazon for the first time.



ORIGINS
FOUNDED BY LEONARD LAUDER
USA

American cosmetics brand Origins best-selling "GinZing" skincare line tout s ginseng as one of its main ingredients. Ginseng root has been used in traditional Chinese and Korean medicine for centuries. The website describes it as featured "prominently in ancient Chinese texts as a powerful herb." The company has trademarked the term "GinZing".



DRUNK ELEPHANT
FOUNDED BY TIFFANY MASTERTSON
HOUSTON, TX

Houston-based skincare brand Drunk Elephant's website claims the brand's name comes from a "myth" about elephants becoming intoxicated from eating fallen, fermented marula fruit. Marula trees are native to numerous regions in Africa, and African people traditionally use it to moisturize their skin. Drunk Elephant packaged pure marula oil in a dropper bottle and began selling it for \$72 an ounce. The company states, "It is an oil we believe is superior to any we've tried."

Cultural Misrepresentation

Sol de Janeiro is an American skincare and fragrance brand whose products and branding are inspired by Brazil. Despite being co-founded by Brazilian-born Camila Pierotti, the company's CEO is co-founder Heela Yang, an American who spent time living in Brazil and is the main face of the brand. The company claims its ingredients are sourced from Brazil, but its products are entirely manufactured in the U.S.



SOL DE JANEIRO

FOUNDED BY CAMILA PIEROTTI, HEELA YANG, & MARC CAPRA
NEW YORK, NY



TATCHA
FOUNDED BY VICTORIA TSAI
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

American skincare brand Tatcha claims to be inspired by Japanese beauty rituals. It was founded by Taiwanese-American Victoria Tsai. Some of its products include a facial cleanser called 'The Matcha Cleanse' that claims to contain 'Japanese Kyo-Matcha', despite it not being listed anywhere in the ingredients. The brand also sells 'The Kissu Lip Mask', which is a romanized misspelling of the Japanese word for 'kiss.'



MOROCCANOIL
FOUNDED BY CARMEN TAL & OFER TAL
MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA

Though cosmetics brand Moroccanoil is named after Morocco, its genesis had little to do with the country. The main ingredient used in its products is argan oil, sourced from argan trees that are native to Morocco and southern Algeria. The company's website claims Chilean-Canadian co-founder Carmen Tal was 'miles from home' when she used argan oil for the first time. This vague description alludes to Morocco, but in reality, Tal was in Tel Aviv, Israel when she first experienced argan oil.

Why Choose?

Why pick one way to culturally appropriate when you can use multiple? Here is a product that encapsulates all of the aforementioned cultural appropriation “strategies” for branding.

Batiste dry shampoo was created in the United Kingdom, but has a French name. Their “Light Dry Shampoo” in the scent “Zen Matcha” accomplishes a few things with its packaging and marketing.

Firstly, naming the product after matcha is capitalizing from the tea powder’s current popularity with young people. Coupling it with the word “zen” (which refers to a Japanese school of Buddhism), the packaging clearly wants to evoke an east Asian theme without getting too specific. The bottle’s design contains images of tea cups with steam rising out of them in a shape resembling a yin and yang symbol. The yin and yang are a central idea in ancient Chinese philosophy, which is completely different from zen and Buddhism.

The dry shampoo claims to contain green tea, which is not the same thing as matcha, but is less of a marketing buzzword. The ingredients list Camellia sinensis leaf extract, which has not typically been used for topical skin and hair benefits.



BATISTE
SCHWARZKOPF
UK



What We've Learned

1. "FOREIGN" SELLS

WESTERN CONSUMERS FIND THE UNFAMILIAR INTRIGUING AND MYSTERIOUSLY EXOTIC. COMPANIES VIEW THAT AS A WAY TO MAKE MONEY.

2. CULTURES ARE SYMBOLICALLY REDUCED (LITERALLY)

WHAT I MEAN BY THIS IS THAT COSMETICS COMPANIES IDENTIFY THE "FOREIGN" SYMBOLS MOST RECOGNIZABLE TO WESTERNERS AND APPLY THESE TO THEIR BRANDING AS CULTURAL SIGNIFIERS.

3. BELIEVE IN BUZZY INGREDIENTS

INGREDIENTS NATIVE TO NON-WESTERN CULTURES HOLD MYSTIQUE, AND THE AVERAGE CONSUMER WILL BUY INTO WHATEVER BENEFITS BRANDS CLAIM THESE INGREDIENTS PROVIDE (WHETHER OR NOT THE INGREDIENT IS ACTUALLY INCLUDED IN THE PRODUCT).

4. THE PROCESS OF "OBSCURATION"

A BRAND FOUNDER CLAIMS TO BE INSPIRED BY A CULTURE THAT IS NOT THEIR OWN. THROUGH THIS SUPPOSED INSPIRATION, THEY PRESENT AN OBSCURED PORTRAYAL OF THIS CULTURE THAT IS ENTIRELY INFLUENCED BY THEIR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCES. I CALL THIS OBSCURATION.

5. THE END OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IS CULTURAL COLLABORATION

THE ONLY WAY FOR CULTURAL "BORROWING" TO OCCUR EARNESTLY AND ETHICALLY IS FOR THERE TO BE GENUINE INTERACTION AND EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE BORROWED AND THE BORROWING.

The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten.

- bell hooks

