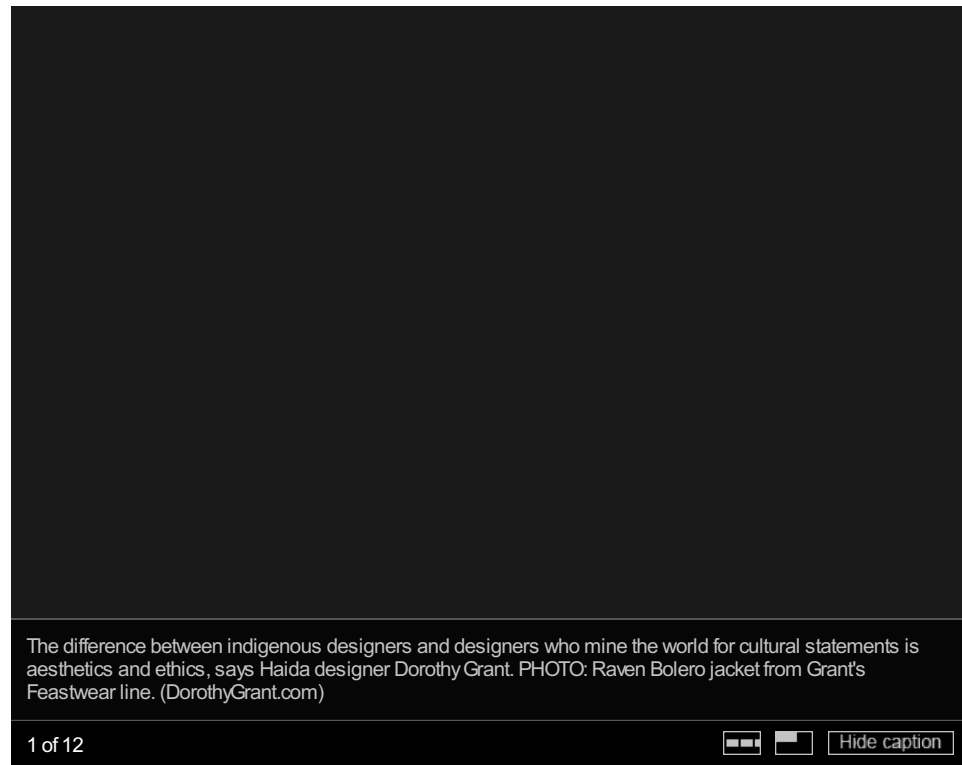



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## Indigenous fashion designers prove authenticity can be elegant, edgy







By Kim Wheeler, [CBC News](#) Posted: Mar 14, 2015 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Mar 14, 2015 5:00 AM ET



The difference between indigenous designers and designers who mine the world for cultural statements is aesthetics and ethics, says Haida designer Dorothy Grant. PHOTO: Raven Bolero jacket from Grant's Feastwear line. (DorothyGrant.com)

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Last week a Canadian design team revealed a controversial clothing line during Milan Fashion Week. They aren't the first designers to be inspired by indigenous cultural motifs. They won't be the last.

"Designers the world over have copied each other and used designs for professional gains," said Haida couture designer Dorothy Grant.

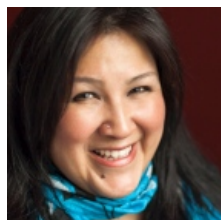
Grant was breaking ground in indigenous fashion design in North America in the 80s. She said the difference between indigenous designers and designers who mine the world for cultural statements is aesthetics and ethics.

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"Ours comes from years of teachings, from our parents and elders ... We are on two different planes of understanding," she said, referring to her non-indigenous counterparts.

### New indigenous fashion incubator

A new project in Toronto called the Setsuné Indigenous Fashion Incubator provides a space for emerging designers to work together to learn traditional and new techniques.




**Kim Wheeler**  
Writer

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Kim Wheeler is a writer and an award-winning producer living in Winnipeg. Her work on the CBC radio series ReVision Quest garnered a New York Festival silver medal and two ImagineNative awards. Wheeler currently works as an associate producer for the CBC Aboriginal Digital Unit and Unreserved on CBC Radio One.

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- [More Dorothy Grant designs](#)
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It aims to learn and re-teach culture through various art forms of textiles, including fashion, says co-founder Sage Paul, on why she and Erika Iserhoff created the incubator.

"I'm hoping the incubator will prove that cultural appropriation is just not cool, I feel like that's what it comes down to in fashion, because really, fashion can be that superficial in the mainstream world," says designer Paul, who is half Dene.

"We're not a trend and we're doing more than 'just fashion.'"

The incubator will offer courses like moose hide tanning, basic pattern drafting and sewing, silk screening and moose hair tufting and appliques.

"We use [the name] to acknowledge inter-generational cross-overs, blood memory and oral histories expressed in fashion and the arts," according to the group's website.

## Authentic and ethical, elegant and edgy

"I'm pretty cautious of using anything traditional in my work out of a fear of misappropriating my own culture," said Paul.

Her spring collection is called Strawberry Girls and her website describes it as "a reminiscence of my Berry Fast. The Berry Fast is a coming-of-age ceremony to learn the teachings, importance and responsibilities of being a woman."

Integrity of traditions is on the top of Trip Charbs mind, a jewelry and accessory designer originally from Pine Creek First Nation.

"I want to take our traditional fashion beyond the powwow ground but maintain the respect," said Charbs.

**Charbs' jewelry will be on the red carpet at Juno Awards this weekend**, worn by country singer and Juno nominee Crystal Shawanda.

## Making it on the runway

Angela DeMontigny, owner of Young Native Fashion Inc. in Toronto, has a suggestion for mainstream designers who want to incorporate traditional influences in their collections.

"They should bring a native designer and/or artist onto their design team as a cultural consultant in order to show respect and ensure authenticity," said DeMontigny. Her work draws from Chippewa, Cree and Métis tradition, and has been featured in Flare, Chatelaine and Say magazines.

Respect, integrity and authenticity are the themes that emerge from each of the designers when talking about their work. Grant said she was driven to "design with integrity" in 1991 when Time Magazine put an image of a totem pole dress by Isaac Mizrahi on its cover.

Cultural appropriation isn't something new to the indigenous fashion industry. What is new is the awareness of it, thanks largely in part to social media as evidenced in stories like Milan Fashion Week and anytime a celebrity or a model dons a Plains headdress other than a chief.

Grant said that indigenous designers may not gain the recognition from

## Setsuné: Dene word for 'grandmother.'



Sage Paul is a designer and co-founder of Setsuné Indigenous Fashion Incubator. (Nadya Kwandibens, Red Works)



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## 'I want to take our traditional fashion beyond the pow wow ground but maintain the respect.'

- Trip Charbs, First Nations accessory designer

the mainstream industry unless they make the waves to do it themselves.

“That is the nature of this business and I have long known that,” said Grant.

In the same breath, Grant wonders “when will we be on those runways as authentic interpreters of our culture?”



Haida designer Dorothy Grant (Nadya Kwandibens, Red Works)

'When will we be on those runways as authentic interpreters of our culture?'

- Dorothy Grant, Haida couture designer



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