

Lost in Design: The Absence (Mostly) of Cultural Heritage in Puerto Rican Fashion Design.

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Abstract

Some of our past research has explored Puerto Rican dress and fashion through fieldwork, examination of primary sources and content analysis. We have published on the Masks Festival of Hatillo, a Christmas carnival in Puerto Rico where costumes are constructed by covering garments with ruffled pieces of fabric, creating intricate and colorful designs. We have also studied the Puerto Rican *jíbaro* or mountain peasant—one of the most significant images of Puerto Rican cultural identity—examining a variety of transformations of the romantic image of *jíbaro* dress (wide-brimmed straw hat, loose cotton shirt and pants and sandals or bare feet) as it navigates through time in new geographical and cultural settings. Dress associated with the female *jíbaro* (a peasant blouse with a low neckline and a full skirt with a headscarf, sash and large earrings) has also been appropriated in a variety of simulacra including a Barbie doll.

With this rich cultural heritage in tow we assumed that Puerto Rican fashion designers would take advantage and reference elements from dress associated to some of the traditions and popular culture aspects mentioned above. We have found, however, that the incorporation of national heritage and tradition is scarce among Puerto Rican fashion designers and left almost exclusively in the hands of manufacturers of souvenirs who also occasionally incorporate other elements of Puerto Rican cultural heritage such as native Taino imagery, hand-made lace or *mundillo*, and dress from folkloric dances such as the Bomba and the Plena. It seems that in Puerto Rico—and we venture to say that also in most of Latin America—connecting one's brand as a designer with recognized symbols of national culture is not a common practice. We believe that this is in part due to the commodification of said national and traditional symbols in the souvenir market. There are also strong reactions coming from the "traditionalists" when designers venture to modify an element of something considered cultural heritage and use it as a source of inspiration for their collections. This attitude limits the exploration in Puerto Rico, and perhaps most of Latin America, of cultural heritage as a source for design inspiration or branding.