

Batik



Adoration of the Calf, Francis Picabia, 1941-42

The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal.—Aristotle

The courageous social justice warrior sat on the toilet, defecating while eating potato chips from a bag that he held on one hand. Tiny bits of chips broke off and scattered down his shirt to fall either into the toilet or got emmeshed with his pubic hair.

He was deep in thought. For over two months nothing had occurred to spark his need to show to others how intellectually and morally superior he was in every way. Yes, he had screamed obscenities and spit into the face of a girl wearing a MAGA cap on college campus who had gone away crying, but there had been nobody else present to witness it and tell him how courageous he had been. That was one of the things that social justice warriors liked to do after, say, beating up an old man, or tearing down signs in campus of groups that they deemed “fascist” (usually Christian groups). They would tell each other afterwards how courageous they had been.

Try as he might, he could not think of a single possible act of vandalism or physical assault of a weaker individual. He was not very upset, though. He knew that something would come up which would motivate him to carry out further acts of social justice. So he finished his business on the toilet and walked out of the bathroom still holding the bag of chips, but without washing his hands. He never did after using the bathroom.

Willy Dickman—for that was his name, which admittedly is not a very warrior-like name—decided to go down to the museum, since he had nothing else scheduled for the rest of the day, in order to broaden his mind. There was supposed to be a new exhibit there this week. He was a deep believer of broadening one’s mind, as long as he did not encounter facts and viewpoints which contradicted his own dogmatic outlook.

Before leaving, he ate a sandwich.

He went to the ticket booth and paid the entrance fee. Inside, he right away found the hall that was the site of the new exhibit, "Batik: Artistry in Apparel." He saw a group that had formed and which was about to make the rounds following a well-dressed docent in his mid-thirties, and he joined it. Apparently, they were waiting for additional latecomers and he realized that it would start in five minutes since his watch read 2:55 PM.

Willy looked around. There were numerous samples of fabrics with bright, phantasmagorical, yet oddly symmetrical patterns. Even the ones that were mostly brown or black appeared bright. Interspaced here and there were mannequins dressed with the fabrics, usually as skirts. In the middle of the hall were displays of metallic and wooden tools, as well as dated black and white pictures of Asian men and women, and a map.

"Well, let's get started, shall we?" the docent announced. "Batik is a technique of illustrating fabrics originating from Indonesia. Now, Indonesia is an archipelago, although it was not originally so, nowadays consisting of hundreds of islands, with the four largest ones being Sumatra, Java, Celebes and Borneo. You also had, and still have, hundreds of different ethnic groups, each with their own customs and traditions, and even different languages. But Batik originated in Java.

"In the old times, Batik was done principally for those who could afford it, the aristocracy, the merchants, the scholars, and so forth, and each region, which is to say each ethnic group, was known for its own particular style and motifs.

"The making of Batik is a very meticulous endeavor. The women making the Batik—now it is done by both men and women—would follow a pattern lightly etched in white cotton. Nowadays, Batik is also done on silk. They would tattoo the pattern with ink—you can see the instrument over there. They would follow a similar path by putting hot wax over the areas that they wanted to have a particular hue, and they colored the rest of

the fabric with a different color. They would then wash the fabric in hot water and the wax would come off, then they would color the fabric with another pigment. In other words, the wax sealed those particular areas from the initial dye. That's the instrument that would hold the hot wax. It was common for an old nanny to do Batik at the same time that she watched over a child.

"Nowadays, you will find products in Indonesia that are referred to as Batik, but they're not true Batik. They are simply prints. You find them in purses, or in wallets, for example, and the styles of those prints are mixed together. But, if you want true Batik clothing, they are still being made. The city of Yogyakarta, for example, is well known for its Batik."

The docent began to move around as he continued. He now pointed to one specimen with flamboyant patterns and colors of red, purple and blue. "This type is Batik megamendung Cirebon. You can see the clouds portrayed. This one," he pointed to another, "is Batik Priyangan Tasik Malaya. You can see that it has dense patterns, yet they are tidy, orderly, and if you look closely, you will realize those are leaves. The Batik Lasem over here, you can see the exuberant flowers; there are clashing, almost jarring, colors. This type of pattern is influenced by Chinese art."

To each sample, the viewers would gasp in wonder and admiration. "Oh, that's so beautiful!" was often heard.

"How long did it take to make one garment?"

"About a week. Now, over here are the brown Batik kraton. A kraton is a native palace. This type of Batik was only for palace people, including the guards, and the insignia of that authority is in the pattern of the Batik, here, and here," he said as he pointed. "Another interesting one is that one, the Batik Malang. The motif is a stylized temple. But the ones

next to it are Batik Bali from the island of Bali, naturally, and that specific style of Batik is particularly noted for incorporating creatures from their mythology.”

“What are these wonderful clothes called?” and admiring woman pointed to one of the mannequins.

“The top one is called a kebaya. You might think of it as a blouse for women. A sarong is a fabric wrapped above the waist of either a man or a woman and it reaches all the way to the ankles. They are very comfortable, by the way. I wear one at home.”

The social justice warrior straightened out on hearing this, very much excited, and he smiled wickedly.

The lecture did not last much longer and when it ended the group lingered while they admired the different Batik styles and the primitive instruments. In looking at the map, Willy was surprised to see that Indonesia was in southeast Asia. Heretofore, he had thought the country was next to Brazil, which is to say, when he thought of that country at all.

Regardless, he was now energized. He hurried home and called up his comrades for a meeting at his apartment. Once they were all gathered together, he told them of the outrages he had seen at the museum. Then he concluded.

“This is a clear case of cultural appropriation! We are going to go down there tomorrow”—he did not ask, he just said so—“and demonstrate our moral indignation.”

Up to that point, listening to his description of the exhibit, his followers had assumed that he was praising the Batik exhibit, but now they realized with embarrassment that they were supposed to be indignant, and quickly became so.

“A museum is the last place that we should be exposed to racism through cultural appropriation,” he concluded.

“What is?” Ana asked, very much puzzled. Ana was a Filipina student that Mosca had started dating, but who was not yet up to their level of social justice awareness. Nonetheless, she was a very welcomed addition since she qualified for the coveted title of A Minority—same as Mosca, a Mexican-American—to what was otherwise a group of white students prone to hysterics over social issues and claiming to be representing Minorities. As for Ana, she had heard the term ‘cultural appropriation’ before but had not paid any mind to it. The girl had just started her college as a freshman that semester, so she had not yet gone through the full lobotomizing experience of an American college education.

Consequently, Willy patiently explained it to her. “Cultural appropriation is a manifestation of racism. It’s when white people steal the elements of another culture.”

“It’s like when white people cook Mexican food. Like quesadillas. That’s cultural appropriation too,” Mosca added.

“So white people shouldn’t eat Mexican food? That makes no sense.” She was terribly confused due to the problem of her being able to think logically and rationally.

“No, it’s OK to eat Mexican food, they just can’t cook it,” said Willy.

“It’s ok to eat Mexican food, but only if a Mexican cooks it,” Mosca clarified.

“What if there aren’t any Mexican cooks around, but I’m in the mood to eat a quesadilla? Mexican food isn’t that hard to make.”

“Oh, it’s OK if you do it, you’re not white.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

“What?”

“Wait. Let’s give her another example,” one of the brilliant

intellectuals suggested.

“Another example of cultural appropriation is when white musicians play jazz with their instruments. Jazz was created by,” here his voice took a reverential tone, “African-Americans.” He resumed a normal tone of voice. “When white musicians play jazz, they are stealing from,” again the reverential tone, “African-Americans.”

“No, it just means that they appreciate and enjoy jazz, doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t!” Willy snapped with irritation at being exposed to a different viewpoint. “It’s theft!”

“Wait, I know, I got it!” another volunteered. “I know how to explain it. It’s when whites assume the identity of another ethnic group. Like in the cartoon the Simpsons? The character Apu was spoken by a white guy, not a real Indian.”

“So what?” she asked.

“So, it’s wrong,” he said matter of factly.

“How’s it wrong? Oh, wait, I think I know what you’re talking about!” she suddenly said, beginning to understand. “I saw something similar the other day. A program from the BBC had a series about the Trojan War. I was able to see part of it, and Achilles was being played by a black man instead of white actor. It was stupid. Oh, and the musical Hamilton, about the American War of Independence—the music’s good, but all the actors are blacks and Puerto Ricans. That’s cultural appropriation, right?”

“No!” Willy snapped. “It’s OK if blacks do it, but it’s racism if it’s done by whites! You understand now?”

Ana decided not to pursue it further due to the tone of his voice, though it made no sense whatsoever. Frankly, she thought ‘cultural appropriation’ was the stupidest thing that

she had ever heard, but she suspected that there might be something to it that she did not understand at this time. So, she dropped it. She would figure it out later.

“Let’s move on,” someone else suggested diplomatically, and so they basically ignored her and discussed their tactics for the next day.

The following afternoon came and so did the dozen or so activists. Since there was not going to be any illegal actions, they did not bother to hide their identity behind black clothing and masks, as was their usual habit when ganging up to assault some unsuspecting soul whom they accused of being a fascist. They simply walked into the museum, even paying the admission, and went straight into the exhibit hall where there was a sizeable crowd gathered around the docent. Three of the social justice warriors were carrying placards in a nondemonstrative manner, as if they were briefcases, so they did not elicit any attention.

At the exact hour, the docent began his usual lecture.

“Well, let’s get started, shall we? We have a large crowd today,” the docent announced. “Batik is a technique of illustrating fabrics originating from Indonesia. Indonesia is an archipelago, although it was not originally so, consisting of hundreds of islands, with the four largest ones being Sumatra, Java, Celebes and Borneo. You also had, and still have, hundreds of different ethnic groups, each with their own customs and traditions, and even different languages. Batik, however, originated in Java.

“In the old times, Batik was done principally for those who could afford it, which is to say the aristocracy, the merchants, the scholars, and so forth, and each region, which is to say again each ethnic group, was known for its own particular style and motifs.

“The making of Batik is a very meticulous endeavor. The women

making the Batik—now it is done by both men and women—would follow a pattern lightly etched in white cotton. Nowadays, Batik is also done on silk.”

Willy glanced at his minions and realized that they were really getting into it, enjoying listening to the docent, the learning and the displays of kaleidoscopic fabrics, so he decided to do something about this outrage. And he broke the spell.

“Cultural appreciation is theft!” he shouted. His comrades snapped out of it and began doing what they did best: parroting slogans.

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

Willy motioned to them to hold up their signs, which they did, each stating a variation of the same theme.

As for the museum visitors, they were shocked and embarrassed at this vulgar display in a museum. It was so disrespectful. And almost nobody there knew what they were bleating about. Except for the docent, who became angry after he got over his initial surprise.

“What the hell do you people think you’re doing?” he demanded as he approached them.

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

“Knock it off! Be quiet! This is a museum!”

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

“You’re disrupting a cultural event!”

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

“I’m calling security!” he said as the docent left.

“Cultural appreciation is theft!”

Immediately upon leaving, by unspoken agreement characteristic of hiveminds, they ceased their chanting. And, truth to tell, some of them felt uneasy, somewhat inhibited which explained why their vocal outpouring was not as shrill as in their usual temper tantrums. In ordinary circumstances, which is to say in a different environment, they would have poured over the exhibits and ripped up the beautiful fabrics in a typical fit of self-righteous indignation.

Sure, it was one thing for the group to pounce on an old man wearing a MAGA hat and beating him unconscious, then kicking his head. That was all right. The old geezer had it coming. He was obviously a fascist. But this? This jarred.

A group of women approached them and the activists realized that they were Asians, the Malay type.

“What are you doing?” one woman with an accent asked.

“Why are you doing this?” another one asked at the same time.

“This—” Willy waved his hand, “is cultural appropriation.”

“What?”

“What is ‘cultural appropriation’?” They were obviously clueless, not being on the same intellectual plane as the activists, so Willy magnanimously explained.

“This Batik exhibit is taken from . . . Indonesians” (he almost forgot from whom) “for the enjoyment of white people.”

“Good!”

“So what?”

“Yeah, so what? We like that. We’re proud of our Batik!”

It came as a shock to the social justice warriors that they were Indonesians and, not only that, but they approved of the exhibit. After all, they, the activists were there to give a voice to the voiceless, to the downtrodden.

“But, don’t you see, this is capitalist exploitation!” exclaimed Mosca, reciting the first

thing that came to mind.

“It’s cultural theft! It’s morally wrong!” said another.

“We give voice to the voiceless, we are the spokespersons for those who are marginalized in society,” said Willy. He looked at them. Nothing. The slogans, the magic incantations made no impression on them. And, truth to tell that despite his bluster he had been shaken, along with his fellow activists, by the presence of these infernal Indonesians who, by being present and questioning him, were throwing a monkey wrench in the virtuous scenario. They did not seem to appreciate what Willy and his comrades were doing for their sake.

The social activists felt deflated.

In particular there was a young Indonesian girl in her twenties. She was shorter than the rest, diminutive, a mere five feet tall, and whereas the other Indonesians, men and women, had confused expressions on their faces, hers was one of quiet, undisguised hatred, with flared nostrils and riveting, unblinking eyes that brought to his mind a Tasmanian devil. Willy had the impression that at any moment she would fly to his throat. In truth, there was nothing unladylike like that in her mind. Rather, she was fighting an urge to rip off his testicles with her hands and ramming them down his throat.

Meanwhile, the Indonesians were all speaking at once amongst each other.

“Kamu gak ngerti apa yang mereka bilang?”

“Apa maunya mereka?”

“Mereka bilang pakaian kita adalah ras. Baju batik adalah ras. Masa sih begitu!”

“Siapa itu mereka?”

“Kupikir ini orang-orang gila.”

“Pak dosen itu, dia keluar memanggil polisi untuk membubarkan mereka.”

“Yah, aku maunya mereka cepetan.”

“Kebayang gak orang bikin raket seperti itu di museum!”

Needless to say that those demonstrators giving a voice to the voiceless and marginalized, and who were there to let white people know what the exploited Indonesian people wanted had no idea what these damn foreigners were saying. The hubbub among the Asians ended when the Tasmanian devil barked out, “Lu gak ngerti siapa mereka? Mereka itu komunis! Komunis ini menyerang museum dan batik kita! Alasannya membebaskan kita!”

A look of comprehension came to their faces with a gasp.

“Oh! Komunis!”

“Oh, jadi itukah mereka! Komunis!”

“Bajingan dari neraka!!”

And, with that, they swarmed around the glorious liberators with hostility in their words and faces, a clamor of insults combined with demands that they leave.

Willy seized an equally befuddled Ana and shoved her to the forefront. “She’s Indonesian, see? See? See? And she agrees that this is racism. Go ahead! Tell them!”

In truth, Ana was put on the spot. She had come along to the museum at Mosca's invitation. Although she had sat in on their previous meeting, the significance of what they had been planning had not really sunk in. It had gone over her head. She had not realized until now just what kind of people they were. And Mosca had been vague about it afterwards. When they had started their clamor inside the museum, she had been mortified at being part of the group. And now, suddenly to her dismay, she was the center of attention.

"Lu bener dukung ini?" one asked her.

"Kenapa kau bilang mempunyai Batik adalah salah? Orang indonesia seperti apa kamu ini?"

Ana understood part of what she was being asked, since Tagalog and Indonesian share some similarities, and she tried to explain that she also had no idea of what it was all about.

"Wait a minute!" the Tasmanian devil said, angrier now, if that was possible. "She's not speaking Baha Indonesia, she's speaking Tagalog!! She's not even Indonesian, she's Filipina!! You're passing her off as Indonesian!!"

"Well, she's Asian, isn't she? It's the same thing!" Willy blurted out and instantly wished that he had not.

"Oh, so all Asians look the same! Is that it? You racist pig!!" the diminutive girl snarled, with the others not far behind.

A sudden, awkward, silence fell on the scene at this observation.

The silence was interrupted by the docent and another, older man entering the hall. The latter was noticeable because he was one of those men who have eight or nine hairs left on their head and let the hairs grow long and comb them across their bare scalp in a futile and ridiculous attempt to give

the impression that they still have a head full of hair.

“But, sir! I really feel that security should take care of this,” the docent pleaded with the man. “That’s their job!”

The older man ignored his subordinate and approached the group of glorious activists, wringing his hands with anxiety.

“Yes. Hello. My name is John Pifflesnot. I’m the curator of the museum. There seems to be a problem.”

The demonstrators aired their grievances to him, but they kept being interrupted by the Asians.

“They don’t speak for us!”

“We’re proud of our Batik! We want Westerners to learn about it!”

“We like the exhibit! It’s good! It’s accurate!”

Pifflesnot raised his hands. “I assure you, the museum will take your concerns—all of your concerns—under serious deliberation. There is no need for any further altercation. Believe me, we will address all issues.”

The docent was red in the face with anger and the activists smiled, both knowing from past experience what that meant. Before Willy and his glorious activists left, the docent approached him and snarled, “Didn’t I see you once under a microscope?”

As the social justice warriors began to exit the museum, Mosca realized that Ana was no longer among them. She had slipped away, unnoticed, during the exchange with Pifflesnot.

They then went to Willy’s apartment and told each other how courageous they had been.

The next day, the museum announced that due to concerns from the public, the exhibit, “Batik: Artistry in Apparel” was

canceled. The museum went on to add the mandatory mantra that the museum was “a place of Tolerance, Diversity, Inclusiveness, Equity and Transgender bathrooms, a place where there was no room for hate.”

Willy and his comrades were happy, having chalked up another victory.

And then they told each other again how courageous they had been.

And the Indonesians were marginalized.