

“Claiming Inspiration: Artisans, Culture & Commercialisation”**New Exhibition Opens at the Traditional Arts & Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, Laos**

This multimedia exhibition explores cultural misappropriation in the global fashion industry through the experiences of Laos’ Oma ethnic group and traditional communities in Africa, Eastern Europe, and South America.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

18 October 2023, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR—The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC), an ethnographic museum and cultural centre in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang, has unveiled its latest exhibition: *“Claiming Inspiration: Artisans, Culture, and Commercialisation”*. The exhibition explores the boundary between cultural appropriation and artistic appreciation in the global fashion industry and sheds light on the growing field of Cultural Intellectual Property Rights®.

“Claiming Inspiration” is a collaboration between TAEC and the Oma, an ethnic minority community from the remote northern highlands of Laos with a total population of only 2,800 people. The impetus came when it was discovered that traditional Oma motifs and designs were copied by an Italian fashion house without consent or credit. Despite a global social media campaign, no wrongdoing was ever admitted.

The exhibition highlights how pervasive the problem is, with displays of traditional clothing from Kenya, Mexico, and Romania that have been used as “inspiration” by designers in the past. Along with an interactive display that includes video and digital resources, the exhibition raises compelling questions about the history of appropriation in the fashion industry and how to instead encourage creative collaboration.

“Claiming Inspiration: Artisans, Culture, and Commercialisation” will be on display through August 2025. TAEC is located on the foot of Phousi Hill in the historic city of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. The exhibition is open Tuesday – Sunday, 9am to 6pm. Entry tickets are 30,000k.

THE STORY: FROM RURAL LAOS TO THE RUNWAY

In April 2019, a former TAEC employee travelling in Croatia saw clothing in a Max Mara Weekend store that featured Oma motifs and designs. Upon further examination, it became clear that not only were the Oma not credited in the name of the garment, on tags, or online, but the motifs were simply digitally duplicated and printed onto dresses, skirts, and blouses, reducing painstaking, traditional motifs to factory-produced patterns. TAEC immediately reached out to Max Mara but after a week with no reply, launched the #MaxOma [social media campaign](#). Max Mara then responded by letter that they were simply “inspired” by the designs, and threatened legal action. No wrongdoing was ever admitted.

TAEC has been working alongside the Oma since 2010 to help document and preserve their cultural and textiles traditions. Living in Phongsaly Province, the Oma live in seven remote villages with limited access to the global commercial market. The Oma have a strong sense of cultural identity and much of the outward demonstration of that is through their traditional dress. “We are the Oma people, and we preserve our culture by making and wearing our traditional clothes,” said Khampheng Loma, former chief of Nanam Village.

THE PROBLEM: INADEQUATE PROTECTIONS

Unfortunately, the use of cultural designs without credit and compensation is commonplace within the fashion industry. While protections such as copyright, trademark, and geographical indication exist, they do not adequately protect traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. There is currently no international legal framework obliging companies to seek consent from or to pay compensation to communities for their shared cultural knowledge. This is not only damaging to the cultural sustainability of these communities, but a risk to the economies of countries like Laos, with large handicraft sectors that are crucial to rural supplementary income generation, particularly for women.

Organisations such as TAEC and the Cultural Intellectual Property Rights Initiative (CIPRI) have been working to bring attention to this gap in protections for traditional knowledge, and find paths for collaboration between communities and fashion companies, together with international bodies such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

THE EXHIBITION: CELEBRATING TRADITION

The exhibition sheds light on the complex and nebulous concepts of inspiration, appropriation and creative homage. Visitors can see stunning examples of handmade traditional pieces from Maasai, Otomí, and Transylvanian communities next to mock magazine spreads showing fashion brands copying the same designs. Videos documenting the 2019 Oma case and digital resources provide opportunities for deeper learning about traditional textiles and intellectual property rights.

Additionally, the exhibition provides examples of ethical collaborations between indigenous groups and fashion designers. These include Norma Baker-Flying Horse of Red Berry Woman and the Hidatsa tribe in the United States; Filip+Inna and the T'boli community in the Philippines; and Khang and the Krieng ethnic group in Laos.

“In this exhibition we wanted to highlight the richness and creativity of traditional knowledge and designs, and how they are just as deserving of legal protections and investment. “Traditional” can be “fashionable”, we just need to find a new design paradigm.” - Tara Gujadhur, TAEC Co-Director

The “Claiming Inspiration: Artisans, Culture, and Commercialisation” exhibition was supported by the European Union Delegation to the Lao PDR and Voice Laos, in partnership with the Cultural Intellectual Property Rights Initiative® (CIPRI). We would like to thank the Oma community for the trust they have placed in TAEC and for displaying their traditional designs in the final exhibition.

ABOUT TAEC

The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) is a social enterprise founded in 2006 to promote the appreciation and transmission of Laos’ ethnic cultural heritage and livelihoods based on traditional skills. The Centre’s primary activities are two-fold, a museum, and fair-trade handicraft shops directly linked with artisan communities. To date, TAEC has welcomed over 200,000 visitors to its exhibitions, and entry is, as always, free for Lao citizens. TAEC’s work includes community research, advocacy for artisan IP rights, and heritage training.

PRESS CONTACT:

Jennifer McCallum *Director of Marketing and Sales*
+856 2096341221 jennifer@taeclaos.org

Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre
www.taeclaos.org

 [DROPOBOX LINK TO DOWNLOAD HIGH-RES IMAGES](#)