

ASIAN AMERICANS IN NEW YORK FASHION: DESIGN, LABOR, INNOVATION

March 2-27, 2022

Lesson Plan: *Asian Americans in New York Fashion: Design, Labor, Innovation*

Abstract: This lesson encourages students to explore the intricacies of how the Asian American community has impacted the fashion industry in New York City. Students will visit The Museum at FIT exhibition, think critically about the objects they see, and be given time to explore the exhibition on their own and sketch objects. There is an optional take-home activity that can be given at the teacher’s discretion. In the activity, students design a comic strip inspired by *House of Slay*, an online webcomic created by three Asian American designers—Prabal Gurung, Phillip Lim, and Laura Kim—along with social media influencer Tina Leung and restaurateur Ezra J. Williams. The cover of the comic is on view in the exhibition next to a hat by Gurung and t-shirt by Lim. There is a QR code on the label in the exhibition to allow students to access the comic directly while in the gallery.

Grade/Level: General High School, grades 9-12

Subject: Visual Arts

Time Required:

Tour: 30 minutes

Sketch Time in Gallery: 15-30min

Total: 45 min - 1 hour

Optional activity - 30 min

Materials Required:

- Paper
- Pencil
- Eraser
- For optional activity
 - Comic strip template provided on page 10
 - Art supplies of student's choice - markers, colored pencils, crayons, paint and paint brushes

Educational Standards: New York State Learning Standards for Arts Education, grades 9-12

- Standard 2.1 - Artists and designers experiment with forms, structures, materials, concepts, media, and artmaking approaches
- Standard 6.1 - Objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented communicate meaning and function as a record of social, cultural, and political experiences, resulting in the cultivating of appreciation and understanding
- Standard 7.1 - Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, and the world

Lesson Overview: Students will be given a tour of the *Asian Americans in New York Fashion: Design, Labor, Innovation* exhibition. Throughout the tour the teacher will guide students through a series of questions promoting them to think critically about the objects presented in the exhibition. Students are encouraged to think about how the designers in the exhibition have used their voices in the fashion industry to advocate for issues of labor and discrimination. After the tour students should spend 15-30 minutes sketching a piece that inspires them.

As an additional optional activity, students can use their sketches to create a comic strip inspired by the online webcomic *House of Slay*. For this activity students should be encouraged to address the themes touched on throughout the exhibition, and to think about how the labor force, designers, and innovative thinking all make up the fashion industry. There is a blank comic strip template on page 10 for students to use should the teacher decide to assign this activity. The students can view the *House of Slay* webcomic before visiting the exhibition at <https://thehouseofslay.com/>, as well as in the exhibition via a QR code within the gallery.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will think critically and learn about the diversity of the Asian American fashion community
- Students will understand the production involved in fashion: labor force, materials, and design process

Lesson:**Gallery Tour:** 30 minutes

These questions will guide students as they explore the exhibition. They are designed to inspire critical thinking to help them conceptualize the impact of Asian Americans on the fashion industry.

1. *New York Times* photo and Ruben Toledo *Paper Magazine* illustration:

Point out the relationship between the *New York Times* photo and the Ruben Toledo “American Teamwork” illustration. The illustration from 1997 clearly depicts several Asian American designers who were strongly influenced in the fashion industry. The 2020 photo shows the growth of Asian American designers over the course of two decades. *Teacher can encourage students to keep an eye out for the Vivienne Tam dress in the illustration. It appears towards the end of the show.*



“Asian American Designers,” New York City, February 17, 2020. Photo by Renee Cox.



Ruben Toledo for *Paper Magazine* “The Tug of War Continues...,” Illustration Series, December 1997.

2. Yeohlee Teng jacket

The teacher should encourage a discussion about why the curators chose to highlight both Yeohlee Teng as a designer and the interior label containing the garment sewer’s name (Sue). What does this tell you about labor in the fashion industry?



Yeohlee Teng ensemble, fall 1997, MFIT, 99.43.2, gift of Yeohlee New York.

3. Harvey Wang photographs

The teacher will encourage a discussion about the invisible labor force behind the fashion industry, using Harvey Wang's photographs of garment workers and the videos of the garment workers' strike.



Chinese garment workers,
Chinatown, New York City,
circa 1980. Photo courtesy of Harvey Wang.

4. Naeem Khan dress and Derek Lam embroidery swatch

The teacher will point out the similarities between the work of designers Naeem Khan and Derek Lam, focusing on the influence of their families' heritage in embroidery making. *In addition to Naeem Khan and Derek Lam, many other designers in this exhibition note their families' lineage as something they carry into their designs. Teachers can talk with the students about how this might impact a designer's choices.*



Riazee Boutique by Naeem Khan
evening dress, 1992–1995,
Adnan Ege Kutay collection.



Derek Lam embroidery sample
Derek Lam, Adnan Ege Kutay collection.

5. Mary Ping bag

The teacher will ask students to point out the two types of materials Mary Ping used to make bags - canvas and newspaper. In the exhibition, these are represented in a bag (pictured below) and in a video on a monitor next to the bag. The teacher can further ask the students: When thinking about fashion, do you consider the many ways it can be created?

Answers may vary

This is a good opportunity to talk about sustainability and the fashion industry. There are designers, like Mary Ping, Jussara Lee, and Yeohlee Teng, on view in the exhibition, who are increasingly more conscious about their carbon footprint and are bringing that awareness to their designs.

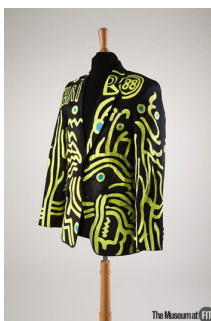


Mary Ping bag, fall 2002, MFIT 2005.63.1, gift of Mary Ping

6. Shail Upadhya jacket and Gemma Kahng jacket

The teacher can ask: What similarities and differences do you notice in these jackets? How do these two jackets represent different definitions of what it means to be a designer?

Gemma Kahng creates fashion commercially for a ready-to-wear line sold in stores. Shail Upadhya worked with artisans to create clothes for himself. Both have impacted fashion with their designs.



Shail Upadhya, jacket, 1988, MFIT 2013.36.2, gift of The Estate of Shail Upadhya.



Gemma Kahng, jacket, fall 1991, MFIT, 2002.56.3, gift of Linda Tain.

7. Opening Ceremony (Carol Lim and Humberto Leon) and Public School (Dao-Yi Chow and Maxwell Osborne)

The teacher can use this pair of objects to talk about how designers draw on different influences to create their designs. In the Opening Ceremony ensemble the motifs on the clothing come from Carol Lim's Korean background, while Public School designers Chow and Osborne were inspired by New York City street fashion.

This is a great time to talk about how Asian Americans come from multiple identities, and there is no monolith inside the Asian American community. The juxtaposition of these garments creates a visual for how different designers use their backgrounds to create fashion.



Public School NYC ensemble, 2016, MFIT 2016.64.1, gift of Public School NYC.



Opening Ceremony ensemble, spring RTW 2014, MFIT, 2013.54.1, gift of Opening Ceremony.

Activities/Projects: Ask students to draw on what they learned in the exhibition, as they walk around and sketch after the tour. They can sketch a design of their own or sketch an object in the exhibition that moved them.

Additionally, as an optional take home activity they can create a comic strip inspired by *House of Slay*. <https://thehouseofslay.com>

This activity is ungraded and optional to be offered as extra credit for the students.

Due Date: The activity is optional for the students and does not need to be graded. May be offered as extra credit in which case the assignment can be given a due date of one week.

Educational Objectives: Students will have the opportunity to engage with the museum exhibition and think critically about how the Asian American community contributes to New York City fashion. Should they choose to create a comic strip they will also create their own artwork while reflecting on the exhibition. The students will be able to apply what they observed to their own creative process.

Featured Designer Bios:**Yeohlee Teng**

Yeohlee Teng founded her fashion label YEOHLEE in New York City in 1981 after relocating from Malaysia and studying at Parsons School of Design. Teng has designed genderless, sustainable, size-inclusive clothing since the start of her career. The designer was recently honored by the Council of Fashion Designers of America with their Board of Directors' Tribute.

Naeem Khan

Originally from Mumbai, Naeem Khan was surrounded by fashion and textiles throughout his upbringing; his father and grandfather created ornate clothing for royal families. During the late-1970s, Khan moved to the US to apprentice for the designer Halston. He launched his eponymous label in 2003 and has dressed numerous influential figures and celebrities.

Derek Lam

Derek Lam founded his label in 2003 after studying at Parsons School of Design and working for designer Michael Kors. His 10 Crosby line and boutique were launched in 2011. Originally from San Francisco, Lam's grandparents operated a wedding gown factory and his parents owned a fashion import business.

Mary Ping

Shortly after launching her namesake line in 2001, Mary Ping founded her conceptual line Slow and Steady Wins the Race as a "response to the hyper-consumerist pace of fashion." She emphasizes straightforward materials, classic silhouettes, price accessibility, and a return to the fundamentals of design.

Shail Upadhyia

Shail Upadhyia's first career was in diplomacy, representing Nepal in the UN. Known for his flamboyant and colorful designs he became a recognizable fixture in the New York City fashion scene throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Gemma Kahng

Gemma Kahng was born in South Korea and began her career designing modern sportswear for New York designer Cathy Hardwick before launching her own label in 1989. Kahng was commercially successful throughout the 1990s with her bold suiting and classic silhouettes. As of 2011, she has relaunched her brand with a more feminine styles that emphasize layering of materials.

Opening Ceremony

Carol Lim and Humberto Leon founded the Opening Ceremony boutique in 2002 in lower Manhattan. Along with their own designs, the store introduced international brands to the US and the work of emerging American designers. They helped to usher in the collaborative climate of the era with their theatrical and humorous fashion shows.

Public School

Dao-Yi Chow and Maxwell Osborne, both native New Yorkers, met while working at the brand Sean John, going on to found their collaborative label Public School in 2008. They have received many awards for their tailored, high end approach to streetwear as well as their emphasis on supporting local garment workers by keeping the majority of their production in New York City.

Resources List for Further Reading:

Aguirre, Adalberto, and Shoon Lio. "Spaces of Mobilization: The Asian American/Pacific Islander Struggle for Social Justice," *Social Justice* 35, no. 2(112) (2008): 1-17.

Kambhampaty, Anna P. "In 1968, These Activists Coined the Term 'Asian American'—And Helped Shape Decades of Advocacy," *Time*, May 22, 2020. <https://time.com/5837805/asian-american-history/>

La Force, Thessaly. "The Designers: Why there are so many Asian-Americans in fashion, and how they changed the industry," *New York Times*, April 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/13/t-magazine/asian-american-fashion-designers.html>

Reilly, Maura. "What is Curatorial Activism?" in *Curatorial Activism: Towards and Ethics of Curating*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2018.

Tong, Julie. "Stop Asian Hate: How Phillip Lim and Ruba Abu-Nimah Are Fighting Anti-Asian Racism." *Vogue*, March 21, 2021. <https://www.vogue.com/article/how-phillip-lim-and-ruba-abu-nimah-are-fighting-anti-asian-racism>

Tu, Thuy Linh N. *The Beautiful Generation: Asian Americans and the Cultural Economy of Fashion*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Waxman, Olivia B., and Paulina Cachero. "11 Moments From Asian American History That You Should Know," *Time*, April 30, 2021. <https://time.com/5956943/aapi-history-milestones/>

Comic Template

