

VERSACE'S NATIVE AMERICAN

A COLONIZED FEMALE BODY IN THE NAME OF AESTHETIC AND DYNASTIC GLORY

In this contemporary moment fashion designers have the means to collaborate with Native American fashion designers. However, there is still a flourishing fashion market that refuses to recognize Native American tribes as owners of intellectual property.¹ While some brands may initially start on the right track via collaboration with Native artists, it may not always end in success.² Most recently, Versace has included Native American designs in their ready-to-wear fashion for the 2018 Spring-Summer season. This component of the collection belongs to a tribute honoring Gianni Versace and his original *FW '92 Native American* print (Figures 1 and 2).³ I will be discussing the implications of the revived Native American print and how it affects Native North American men and women. In this essay, I will look at Versace's legacy and his original print; the new Native American Tribute Collection by Donatella Versace; and Donna Karan's collaboration with Pueblo artist, Virgil Ortiz. I argue that respectful recognition of Native North American property is thrown aside for aesthetic and dynastic glory, which in turn, allows non-Native designers to colonize the 'exotic' Native woman's body by denying Native North American men and women the opportunity to represent themselves to the global fashion community. Virgil Ortiz's collaboration with Donna Karan illustrates how respectful collaboration can shape the dominant society's perception of Native North American women.

If we use Native North American fashion as a framework to understand how Native designers are working to dismantle mainstream stereotypes, it is imperative that global designers

¹ "Navajo Nation Sues Urban Outfitters," *Business Law Daily*, March 18, 2012.

² See Jessica R. Metcalfe, "Oh No, Valentino | Appropriation and the Case of the Stolen Beadwork," *Beyond Buckskin* (blog), April 25, 2017, <http://www.beyondbuckskin.com/2017/04/oh-no-valentino-appropriation-and-case.html> for a case in which Valentino collaborated with Metis artist, Christi Belcourt, to design gown but stole beadwork designs that did not apply to Copyright Law.

³ Sally Singer, "Versace Spring 2018 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show," *Vogue*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2018-ready-to-wear/versace>.

seek collaboration with Indigenous designers. Understanding how images (in magazines, newspapers, brochures, etc.) affect self-representation allows us to include fashion design into the discourse of Native sovereignty. As explained by Amanda J. Cobb in her essay “Understanding Tribal Sovereignty: Definitions, Conceptualizations, and Interpretations,” sovereignty needs to be linked to all aspects of life, not just the political; to lose cultural identity is to sacrifice sovereignty.⁴ My paper seeks to illuminate how cultural identity, vis-a-vis sovereignty, is put at stake when global European designers perceive North Native American identities as a resource to improve aesthetic and individualistic glory.

One exhibition, curated by Karen Kramer from the Peabody Essex Museum, to counter mainstream narratives imposed upon Native North American women is traveling exhibition *Native Fashion Now: North American Indian Style*. *Native Fashion Now* is argued by Karen Kramer to be the first of its kind that displays a large scope of Native American fashion.⁵ Kramer argues that our contemporary society is in the middle of a “Native American fashion renaissance.”⁶ She states that fashion designers are tapping into their own aesthetic creativity while negotiating cultural boundaries –imposed from within and the outside.⁷ Kramer asserts that fashion is a reflection of society and its people, and that Native designers “speak with many voices,” not just one.⁸ As my essay suggests, Patricia Hill Collins’ “controlling images” are used by Versace, and thus, have the ability to dehumanize and undermine Native North American

⁴ Amanda J. Cobb, “Understanding Tribal Sovereignty: Definitions, Conceptualizations, and Interpretations,” *Mid-America American Studies Association*, *American Studies*, 46, no. 3/4 (October 2005): 121–22.

⁵ Karen Kramer et al., eds., *Native Fashion Now: North American Indian Style* (Munich; London; New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 16.

⁶ Kramer et al., 15.

⁷ Kramer et al., 17.

⁸ Kramer et al., 16–21.

self-worth.⁹ However, as demonstrated in *Native Fashion Now*, Indigenous designers have the ability to transform the global fashion industry into one that fosters community, reciprocity, and healing.

Versace's introduction of *prostitute style* in the 1980s shook the fashion industry and contributed to "defining the character of the modern woman."¹⁰ Versace's designs transcended boundaries that were interpreted as a means to reaffirm women's power.¹¹ His vision of the prostitute as autonomous and not as a sex worker adds a considerable amount of gravity when depicting Native North Americans, especially when women are the target audience for consumption (Figure 1). The impacts are twofold: first, the imagery presented is the average American's understanding of Native Americans and homogenizes 567 Native nations into a singular, flattened plane;¹² and two, Native North American women are expected to accept this style of dress as a "modern" reaffirmation of power implying that Indigenous North American women are outdated and hold no authority in their respective communities.

Gianni Versace frequented The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where exhibitions influenced his designs;¹³ however, his original *FW '92 Native American* print disavows appropriate representation of Native North American men and women. In Nancy J. Parezo's two articles, "The Indian Fashion Show: Fighting Cultural Stereotypes with Gender" and "The Indian Fashion Show: Manipulating Representations of Native Attire in Museum Exhibits to Fight Stereotypes in 1942 and 1998," she discusses Federic H. Douglas's outreach program called

⁹ Kimberly R. Huyser, "A 'Real' American Indian," *Contexts: Understanding People in Their Social Worlds* 16, no. 1 (February 2017): 71.

¹⁰ Richard Martin and Gianni Versace, *Gianni Versace* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art : Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1997), 12.

¹¹ Martin and Versace, 13.

¹² "Tribal Nations & the United States: An Introduction | NCAI," accessed April 16, 2018, <http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes> The number is growing. See: <http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes>.

¹³ Martin and Versace, *Gianni Versace*, 9.

“The Indian Fashion Show,” which sought to dismantle the negative stereotypes of the “gendered Wild Savage.”¹⁴ Parezo argues that Federic H. Douglas’s show from the 1940s and 1950s holds the same relevance in contemporary society by actively engaging a “culturally blind” audience, challenging ethnocentrism, questioning definitions of modernity, and harkening to contemporary views of gender and women’s bodies.¹⁵ This show was seen as a success when it first toured; however, the show reinforced positive stereotypes, thus negating the effects of Douglas’s original intent.¹⁶ Despite Douglas’s efforts to elevate Native women on the same sphere, with non-Native women, the appearance of Versace’s *FW 1992* print (Figures 1 and 2) comes as little to no surprise and adheres to Douglas’s underlying tone that all women are the same and need to be represented by their male counterparts.¹⁷

While museums often praise Versace for his acute awareness for historical accuracy,¹⁸ the 1992 print’s execution creates a monotonous voice that is far from acceptable. In both advertisements (Figures 1 and 2) the models are stoic, representing the Noble Savage. Neither model fosters a smile to the audience; they evoke past representations seen in Edward Curtis’ *The North American Indian* (Figure 3). The print also fails to acknowledge historical truths, diversity, and gender equality. The Native American print features popular imagery that attempts to erase intellectual property by refusing to feature designs that resonate with Plain’s Native

¹⁴ Nancy J. Parezo, “The Indian Fashion Show: Fighting Cultural Stereotypes with Gender,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 69, no. 3 (2013): 318.

¹⁵ Nancy J. Parezo, “The Indian Fashion Show: Manipulating Representations of Native Attire in Museum Exhibits to Fight Stereotypes in 1942 and 1998,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (January 2007): 6, <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.31.3.x6702023216019p8>.

¹⁶ Parezo, “The Indian Fashion Show: Fighting Cultural Stereotypes with Gender,” 322.

¹⁷ Parezo, 322.

¹⁸ Martin and Versace, *Gianni Versace*.

North American culture. The advertised motifs are homogenized and make it impossible to accurately identify the depicted Nation.¹⁹

The generic approach to the FW '92 print highlights Versace's strive to promote his personal ambitions in the fashion industry as innovative, accurate, and a guardian to women. The artistic voice within the *FW '92 Native American* design is formal and individualistic. Modernity and traditionalism are contrasted by Versace's "Wild Baroque" design, which reminisces the "luxurious past."²⁰ The intricate baroque pattern contrasted by the generic Native North American iconography imply that Native North American tribes are of the past and contrary to European civilization. Versace is known for creating controversy with his fashion designs and, often, did not cater to the middle-class.²¹ Versace's indifference to the Native American population he was representing is seen in the paternalistic design, which features Buffalo Bill (Figure 2, 4 and 5) and multiple non-identifiable Native men. The inclusion of Buffalo Bill, a time-specific identifiable male figure, who thrived off Native American cultural exploitation and oppression, and the exclusion of any woman figure contradict museum narratives that boast of Versace's advocacy for women.²²

Twenty years after Gianni Versace's murder, Donatella Versace sought to honor her brother's artistic genius.²³ Donatella Versace's *Tribute* collection features Native American iconography that is directly based from Versace's 1992 collection (Figures 1 and 2). When the *Tribute* collection debuted on the runway, Donatella's voiceover encouraged the audience to

¹⁹ To see respectful recognition of intellectual property regarding Plain's Native culture, see Bethany Yellowtail's inclusion of Crow traditional designs superimposed on contemporary fashion pieces: byellowtail.com.

²⁰ Claire Wilcox, Valerie D. Mendes, and Chiara Buss, *The Art and Craft of Gianni Versace* (London : New York: published by V&A Publications ; Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 20.

²¹ Martin and Versace, *Gianni Versace*, 12.

²² Wilcox, Mendes, and Buss, *The Art and Craft of Gianni Versace*.

²³ Singer, "Versace Spring 2018 Ready-to-Wear Fashion Show."

“imagine a world without [Versace’s] allegiance to women.”²⁴ Versace’s *prostitute style*, that reveals as much as it covers, contradicts the voiceover. Women’s voices are claimed by Gianni Versace through swaddling fabrics that accentuate and fetishize women’s skin.²⁵ Donatella’s voiceover entertains the thought in which Versace “helped women reclaim their own voice to be themselves.”²⁶ I argue, however, that Gianni Versace robbed women of a voice, and created them as objects subjected to the male gaze despite his lifelong commitment to women’s “visual authority.”²⁷

Portraying Versace as historically accurate and culturally driven willfully ignores the effects of Versace’s work in the mainstream American Imaginary.²⁸ Figures 6 and 7 are two of seven items that are direct reproductions of Gianni Versace’s original print belonging to Donatella’s *Tribute* collection. In these designs there are several motifs that promote “the world of the American West:”²⁹ feather staff (Figure 3); tipi; white stallion with headdress-wearing rider (Figure 4); Natives on horseback with young child and colt; a non-identifiable Native American man with long unbraided hair, feather atop his head, peace pipe, moccasins, plains hide clothing, and beaded accessories; and most notably, Buffalo Bill (Figures 4 and 5). The static imagery represented on the *FW ’92 Native American* print (both original and revived) imagines Native American identity as the United States of America’s intellectual property –free to use, sell, and appropriate. The inclusion of Buffalo Bill therefore cements the United States of

²⁴ *The Versace Tribute Collection - Spring Summer 2018, 2017*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0iLg-fgNbE>.

²⁵ Wilcox, Mendes, and Buss, *The Art and Craft of Gianni Versace*, 13 uses “second skin” to refer to Versace’s bodysuits.

²⁶ *The Versace Tribute Collection*.

²⁷ Martin and Versace, *Gianni Versace*, 13.

²⁸ Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian*, Yale Historical Publications (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁹ “The Gianni Versace Tribute Collection - New Arrivals | US Online Store,” Versace, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.versace.com/us/en-us/the-versace-tribute-collection/>.

America as paternal, civilizing, and rightful owners of Native North American intellectual property.

The absence of women in this design silences those who are respected and integral members of their respective Native communities.³⁰ That no additional print has been created to honor the women of the depicted community reinforces the mindless appraisal of Versace's original designs. It is through Donatella's *Tribute* collection that Versace is elevated and perceived as genius and icon.³¹ Rather than question the designs and rhetoric of the original Native American print, it is reimagined on new silhouettes that achieve the same effects as when it first debuted.

Where are the women? Where are the people? These designs portray fictional characters, Buffalo Bill, ethnographic zooscapes (Figure 9), and an idealized past. There is no truth to these images except Buffalo Bill's likeness. The only true image in this print is Versace's attitude towards the Other: part of the past, only to be romanticized via clothing.³² The juxtaposed "Wild Baroque" pattern demonstrates Versace's love for the idealized past, a past that never existed and continues to circulate today and renders Native North American voices as incomplete (lacking women). The juxtaposition portrays Native North Americans as vanished, only to be viewed in photographs or prints recovered from World's Fairs (Figure 9) and ethnographic studies (Figure 3). As a fresh breath of air, these aforementioned designs and approach differ from that of Donna Karan New York back in 2002.

³⁰ Rauna Kuokkanen, "Indigenous Economies, Theories of Subsistence, and Women: Exploring the Social Economy Model for Indigenous Governance," *American Indian Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2011): 215–40, <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.35.2.0215>.

³¹ *The Versace Tribute Collection*.

³² Martin and Versace, *Gianni Versace*, 27.

Non-Native fashion designers can maintain prestige while advocating for Native North American artistic expression. A few years back the New York designer, Donna Karan (DKNY), attended Santa Fe Indian Market, met Virgil Ortiz and asked to collaborate with the Cochiti artist.³³ In 2002, Ortiz and Karan joined forces to create a clothing line that included Ortiz's fabrics adorned with Puebloan motifs sewn into Karan silhouettes (Figure 10).³⁴ The resulting pieces are versatile, sophisticated, and elegant. The dresses speak to all audiences, Native and non-Native, and are specific to an identifiable nation: The Pueblo of Cochiti.

Dr. Jessica R. Metcalfe writes a compelling article, "Reclaiming the Body: Strategies of Resistance in Virgil Ortiz's Fashion Designs" where she argues the collaboration between Ortiz and Donna Karan was an act of reclamation for Native representation in fashion, and by doing so, he defied the expectations of Native American art.³⁵ Having continued a family tradition of muños pottery (figurative pottery), Ortiz uses the same techniques to create social commentary regarding non-Native societies (Figure 11).³⁶ For Ortiz, reclaiming the representation of Native peoples lies within decoration, both on pottery and the body via fashion.³⁷ The designs Ortiz uses "have belonged to his family for hundreds of years";³⁸ Donna Karan's acknowledgement of Ortiz's creative familial lineage and authority allows future Native artists to gain recognition for their respective nation's intellectual property.

³³ James Servin, "The Art and Times of Santa Fe Artist," Virgil Ortiz | VOxDKNY, accessed April 5, 2018, https://www.virgilortiz.com/portfolio_page/voxdkny/.

³⁴ Jessica R. Metcalfe, "Reclaiming the Body: Strategies of Resistance in Virgil Ortiz's Fashion Designs," *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 172–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.781929>.

³⁵ Metcalfe, "Reclaiming the Body," 172.

³⁶ Servin, "The Art and Times of Santa Fe Artist." Around the 1800's Puebloan potters used muños to parody outsiders living in or visiting traditional and contemporary Pueblo spaces.

³⁷ Metcalfe, "Reclaiming the Body," 174.

³⁸ Servin, "The Art and Times of Santa Fe Artist."

Ortiz uses his stardom to promote Native well-being, rather than promote himself. Metcalfe describes in her article Ortiz's *Le Sauvage Primitif* collection from 2007 where the catwalk performance juxtaposed the wild savage and civilized man.³⁹ While this pairing sounds familiar to Versace's juxtaposition described earlier, Virgil Ortiz's fashion show blurred the lines between savage and civilized to critique stereotypes afflicting Native people today.⁴⁰ Rather than perpetuate notions of the "vanishing Indian" Ortiz uses the catwalk to question mainstream representations of Native North Americans. With his personal income and public visibility Ortiz "creates access to arts and culture for the youth of the pueblo and to preserve the Keres language."⁴¹

So, the question: why does this matter? Indigenous self-representation is limited when global designers profit from centuries of Native American misrepresentation. Static images feed into the mainstream, control the dominant narrative of how marginalized groups should feel, and dictate what is socially acceptable. In the case of Gianni Versace, *prostitute style* is highly prized as modern, glamorous, and seductive.⁴² The perception of the "modern woman" as sexually "liberated" is marketed to women of all classes through magazines, social media, advertisements, and, yes, it seeps into Native communities.⁴³ With an ever-increasing acceptance of Gianni Versace's *prostitute style*, Native women are encouraged to welcome sex into fashion and thus transform their bodies into "teasing veils."⁴⁴ By encouraging this mindset, clothing becomes second skin to be fetishized and only worn to reveal what lies beneath (Figure 8), thereby inviting negative stereotypes of Native American women promiscuity.

³⁹ Metcalfe, 176–77.

⁴⁰ Metcalfe, 177.

⁴¹ Metcalfe, 178.

⁴² Martin and Versace, *Gianni Versace*, 12–13.

⁴³ Martin and Versace, 12–13.

⁴⁴ Martin and Versace, 13.

The way Native North American men and women are represented in the fashion industry is an image that mediates the consumption of American society. Versace's *FW '92 Native American* dismisses women as absent, non-essential members of Native communities, whereas men are unworthy of descriptive information to distinctly identify an individual. Versace's *Tribute* collection is a result of the dominant social and economic formations within Western society that commodifies Native American artistic expression. Aspects of dominant American culture thrive off images that exploit Native North American motifs as exotic and obtainable via clothing and accessories. Stereotypes created by the fashion industry transform and exoticize both Native men and women into non-existent peoples living in the periphery of American popular culture.

Virgil Ortiz is not the only artist who is using his commercial platform to benefit his community, there are other designers such as Bethany Yellowtail. Jared Yazzie, Patricia Michaels, and Loren Aragon. Virgil Ortiz and Donna Karan set a hopeful precedent for other global designers to give back to the communities they work with. Rather than use Ortiz's designs for her own aesthetic glory, Donna Karan was mindful to refer to Virgil Ortiz as an artist, "whose work *directly* influenced my spring designs."⁴⁵ In comparison, Versace, both Donatella and Gianni, appropriate Native American identity to build a legacy that silences Native women and restricts Native North Americans to the "world of the American west."⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ Servin, "The Art and Times of Santa Fe Artist." Emphasis added. .

⁴⁶ "The Gianni Versace Tribute Collection - New Arrivals | US Online Store."

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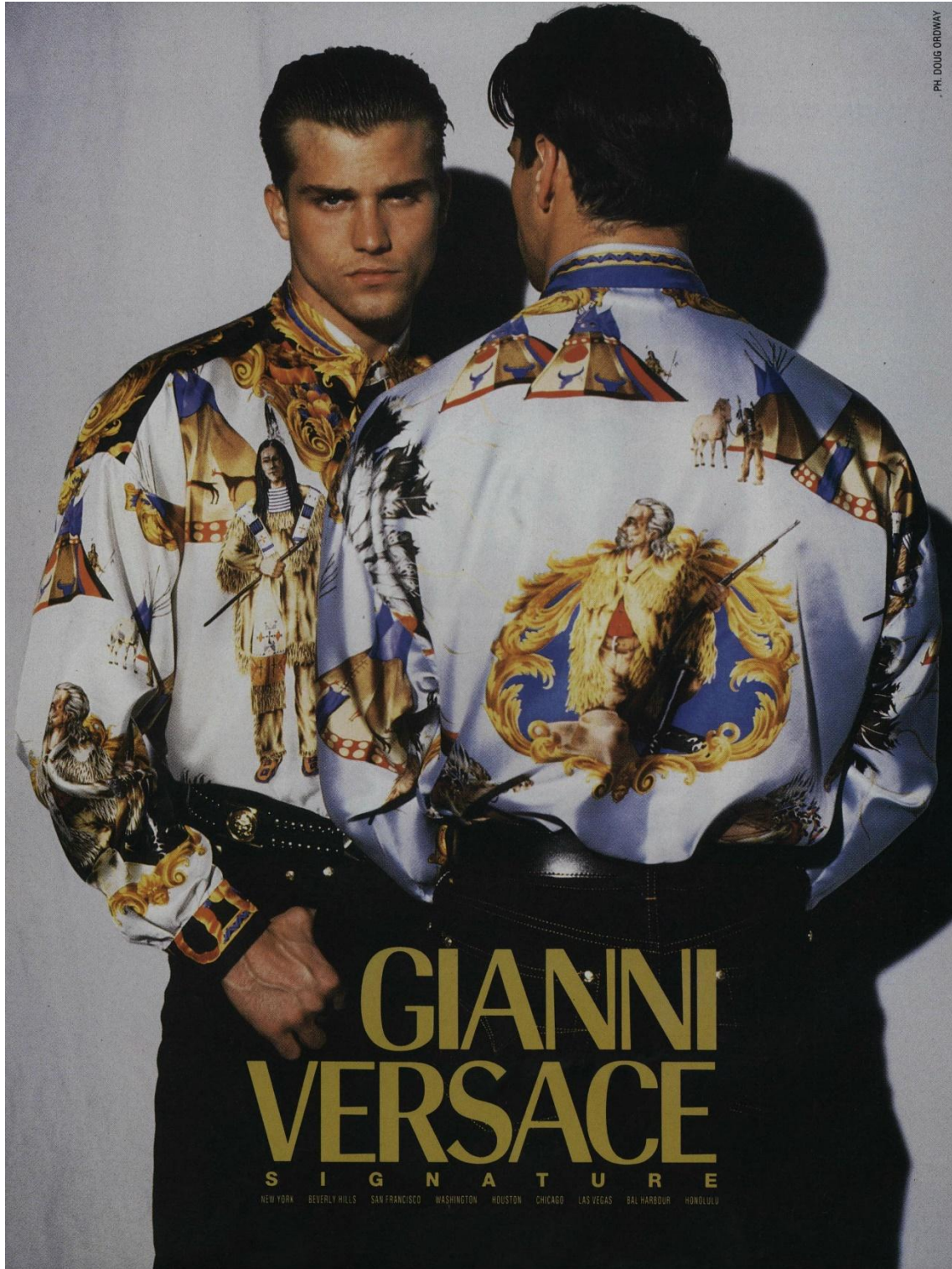
November 6, 1992
January 9, 1993

Tuesday - Friday: Noon - 8.00pm
Saturday: 10.00am - 5.00pm
Sunday and Monday: Closed



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Figure 1: Gianni Versace Advertisement. Vogue Italia; Milan 507 (Nov 1992): 98.



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Figure 2: Gianni Versace Advertisement. *Vogue*; New York 182, no. 6 (1992): 197.



Figure 3: *New Chest – Piegan*. Edward S. Curtis. C. 1910. Courtesy Library of Congress. Call Number: Lot 12322-C. Published in *The North American Indian*, v.6, pl. 200.

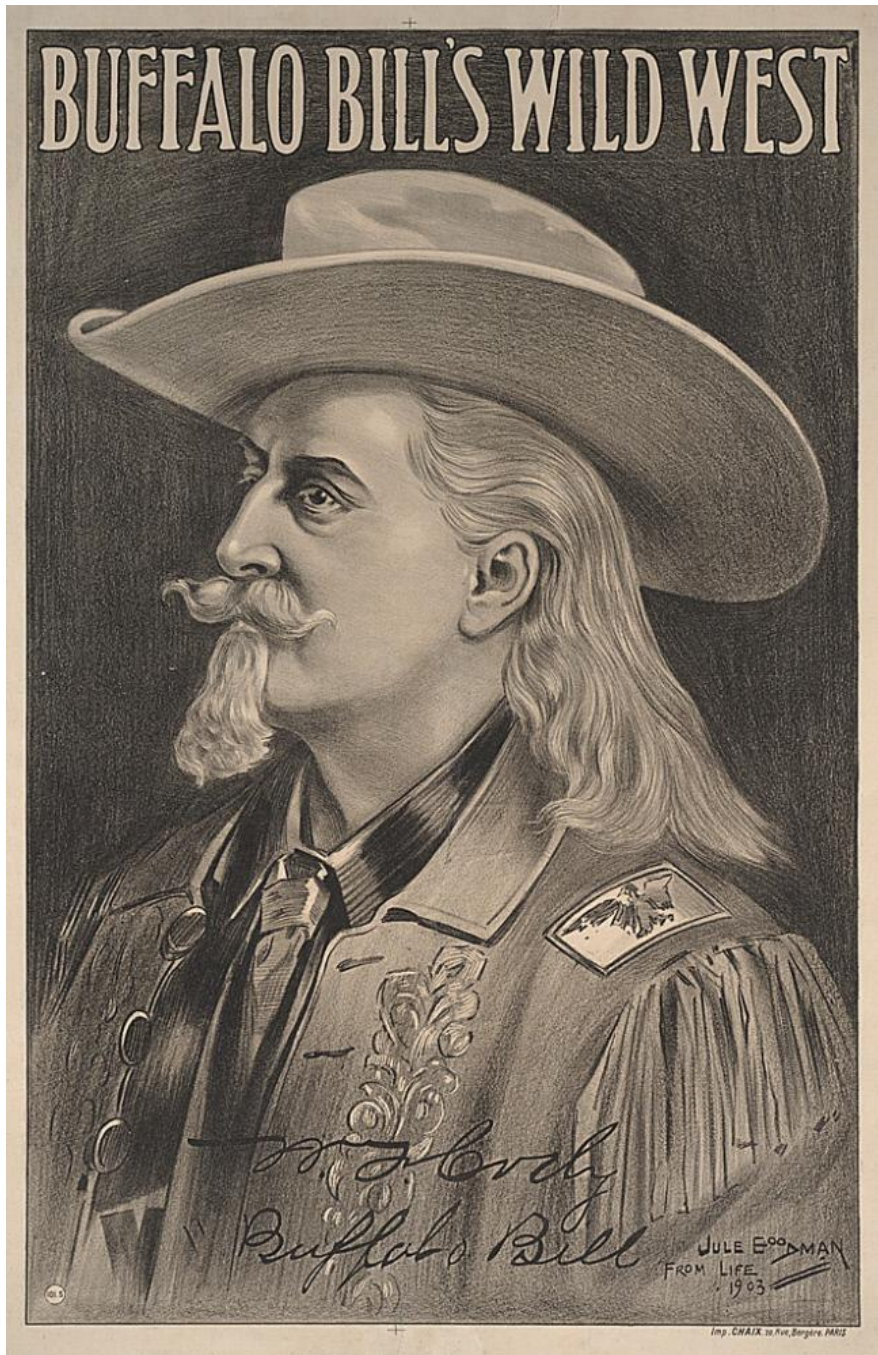


Figure 4: *Buffalo Bill: Portrait*. Imp. CHAIX. Ink on Paper, 29.5 x 20in. 1903. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art: Circus Collection. Accession Number: ht2003964.



*Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 5: Native Americans Silk Shirt (Back featuring Buffalo Bill). Versace. Silk. 2018.*



Figure 6: Native American FW'92 Bodysuit (Front and Back). Versace. Polymide and Elastane. 2018.



Figure 7: Native Americans Silk Shirt Dress (Front and Detail). Versace. Silk. 2018.



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 8: *Fashion Evening Orientation*. Vogue; New York 182, no. 10 (Oct 1992): 354.



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 9: *Native Americans*. Circa 1962. Seattle World's Fair. Courtesy Associated Press. ID: 6208100153.



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 10: Spring 2003. DKNY x VO. Courtesy: virgilortiz.com



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 11: *Bi-Furcation*. Virgil Ortiz. Cochiti red clay, white clay slip, red clay slip, black (wild spinach) paint. 12" x 9". Courtesy: virgilortiz.com.