



THE
POWER
OF
STYLE

HOW FASHION AND BEAUTY ARE
BEING USED TO RECLAIM CULTURES

CHRISTIAN ALLAIRE

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To all the kids who feel like they aren't seen or heard,
this book is dedicated to you.

—C.A.



CONTENTS



2 **SEWING
TRADITION**

16 **MY HAIR,
MY WAY**

30 **LEVEL-UP**

44 **HEAD
STRONG**

58 **STANDING
TALL**

72 **MIGHTY
MAKEUP**

vi INTRODUCTION

4 MY CULTURE'S COUTURE
8 WINNING RIBBONS
10 SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS
12 PAVING THE WAY
14 #TRENDING

18 LOVE THY LOCKS
21 OVER THE RAINBOW
22 AT ANY LENGTH
24 GROWING FREEDOM
28 THE ART OF BRAIDS

32 WHY WE COSPLAY
36 MY BODY, MY CHOICE
38 BREAKING THE STATUS QUO
40 CROSSING BOUNDARIES
42 DIY IT!

46 TAKING CONTROL
50 FASHIONING MODESTY
54 HIJABS ON THE RUNWAY
56 ENTERING THE ARENA

60 LIFT OFF
64 THE HISTORY OF MEN'S HEELS
66 TRAILBLAZER: BILLY PORTER
68 DESIGNING CHANGE

74 THE BEAUTY OF ME
76 HONORING HENNA
78 GLAM SESSION
82 MY FACE IS MY CANVAS

86 CONCLUSION
89 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
90 PHOTO CREDITS



INTRODUCTION



Aanin, hello.

This book is for anyone who has never felt represented, who has felt inferior or less beautiful, and who has questioned their roots.

My journey toward writing this book began back in 2014, when I was studying fashion journalism in Toronto. I decided that I would focus on writing about fashion through a more inclusive lens, something I now do as a fashion and style writer for *Vogue* magazine.

Along the way, I began meeting people like me—other writers, designers, and artists from a variety of cultures, all of whom felt a lack of representation in the fashion and beauty industries. I am Ojibwe and grew up loving fashion, but I rarely saw my people represented in magazines or in movies. Navigating my own experiences, and meeting those who shared them, led me to write this very book.

Fashion holds more power than you think. Its role as something more than just *pretty clothes and bags and shoes* has been debated for a long time. In fact, fashion wasn't even considered serious art until recent exhibits devoted to fashion started popping up at major museums (such as the Met's Costume Institute, for instance). It does raise the question: Can fashion or beauty serve a greater purpose than just

being visually satisfying? Can a fashion designer or model or entrepreneur have a direct impact on how we feel about ourselves and those around us? The short answer is yes! And you're about to meet those who do.

The people you will meet in this book are using fashion and beauty to promote cultural activism, empowerment, diversity, and inclusivity. They are essentially using garments, accessories, or various beauty techniques to reclaim their identities and celebrate who they are. It is so important to recognize that our own cultures and upbringings are beautiful—and equally as important to learn about other cultures, too. These creatives show why style is such a great medium to explore this through; it delves into our unique communities and traditions in a striking—and dare I say, *fun and fabulous*—way.

This book will hopefully allow you to see how all things style-related can make us feel more *like us* at the end of the day. Enhance who we already are and help share our stories with others. And while these individuals, and their distinctive style choices, serve as a snapshot into North America's diverse population and beyond, they are certainly not all-encompassing. There's so much more out there to discover.

— Christian Allaire

SEWING TRADITION

Through making (and wearing!) ribbon work, the Indigenous community is keeping their culture's unique traditions alive.

**WHAT IS
RIBBON WORK?**

Ribbon work is a traditional design craft, popular in many Indigenous tribes, in which colorful ribbons are applied onto shirts, dresses, and skirts. The colors of the ribbons, and how they are applied, typically have personal significance to the wearer.



MY CULTURE'S COUTURE

Through having his very own ribbon shirt made, **Christian Allaire** discovered that Indigenous design is about more than creating a garment. It's about maintaining traditional craft and honoring your family roots.



Christian Allaire, the author of this book.



FAMILY TIES

Growing up, I was always obsessed with all things fashion. Yet I rarely saw myself represented in this industry. I am Indigenous (Ojibwe) and grew up on the Nipissing First Nation reservation, where I was constantly surrounded by beauty—the stunning regalia worn at powwows being a prime example. But when I looked at the pages of a magazine or the big screen, I rarely saw anyone who looked like the people I grew up with. This caused a certain sense of shame in my youth; I always felt inferior to the peers who I felt were more represented in mainstream pop culture.

FINDING PRIDE

It took me a long time to realize that, no, I actually am proud of who I am. Nowadays, I have a growing appreciation for traditional Indigenous design. It is often rooted in something much deeper. Traditional garments are embedded with special meaning: whether it's Ojibwe, Cree, Lakota—each tribe holds unique craftwork that has been passed down through the generations. When you see traditional regalia worn at a powwow, the wearers aren't sporting them just for the pretty aesthetic (though, yes, they are pretty)—they're wearing these garments as a way to keep their culture alive and to honor their ancestors by bringing the specialties they've perfected over generations into the present day. A prime example of cultural fashion in my tribe is ribbon work, and by having my first adult ribbon shirt made, I developed a closer connection to my heritage in the process.

My ribbon shirt team: from left, my auntie Tammy; my mother, Nancy; my auntie Joan; and my auntie Lee.



CONSULTING MY ELDERS

I come from a large family of Indigenous garment makers—my mom is one of 18 siblings, and many of my aunties are extremely talented with a sewing machine—so I decided it was finally time to have my own adult ribbon shirt made. My late grandmother, Leda, made me a ribbon shirt when I was child, and my new one is modeled after it as a special way to acknowledge her spirit. My first step was asking my elders—my mother, father, and living grandparents—what their favorite colors are. Their choices are reflected in the colors of the ribbons sewed onto my shirt as a way to acknowledge my roots and where I come from. After consulting them, I landed on these colors: red, blue, yellow, white, black, and gray. Some of these hues are also represented in the four colors of our medicine wheel teachings; in Ojibwe culture, the medicine wheel represents the four directions and the four elements of the earth (earth, wind, water, and fire). Having these four colors on my shirt represents living a life that is balanced.

THE PAST AND PRESENT OF RIBBON WORK

HISTORY OF THE RIBBON SHIRT

Indigenous ribbon work became popular in the 18th century. French traders brought silk over from Europe to the Great Lakes region of North America. At that time, fanciful ribbons were falling out of fashion with Europeans, yet decorative ribbons began thriving in the designs of Indigenous people, who began experimenting with the new materials and putting their own unique cultural twists on them.

THE RIBBON SHIRT TODAY

These days, ribbon work workshops are used in Indigenous communities as a way to inspire creativity, bond the people within the gathering, and carry on their specific tribe's design traditions. The workshops are usually led by an elder who can guide newcomers on creating their own designs. The ribbon work can be applied onto a variety of pieces: men's shirts, women's dresses, and skirts. Ribbons are also often incorporated in traditional regalia, such as jingle dresses, and are worn by dancers at powwow ceremonies.





HONORING FAMILY DESIGN

After deciding on the ribbon colors, I chose a style of ribbon work to be sewed onto the shirt. I decided on a navy blue shirt as my base—a color I feel most comfortable in—and then for the ribbons to be sewn on top as horizontal accents across the chest and around the cuffs; it's a style of ribbon work that my Ojibwe family has traditionally specialized in, and I decided to follow this aesthetic. The assembling didn't take long. My mother, Nancy, and my aunts Joan, Tammy, and Lee teamed up and got it done over a few weekends; first they took my custom measurements, and then sewed it together at my mother's house. Abalone shells were used to make the buttons.

On the back, a family friend, Tracey Larochelle, also embroidered an image of a crane to represent my clan.

WEARING IT WITH PRIDE

When I first slipped on my brand-new ribbon shirt, I couldn't wait to wear it to many upcoming cultural events. It is a symbolic way of using fashion as a means to pay homage to my roots. Now, whenever I wear it, I will not only feel a sense of pride tied to my culture, but I will also know that each ribbon represents those who are close to me and the physical love they put into this garment. It's more than just a shirt—it's a family heirloom.

WINNING RIBBONS

Indigenous fashion artists like **Jamie Okuma** are making use of ribbon work in new, unexpected ways. By combining tradition with innovation, they are helping drive the craft forward.



“When I look at traditional dresses and skirts, more often the ribbon is only on the skirt or lines the sleeves of wing dresses, but I like to cover the entire garment with ribbon. I’ve also made entire ensembles, with modern silhouettes, completely out of silk ribbon.” — Jamie Okuma



Jamie Okuma is an Indigenous (Luiseño and Shoshone-Bannock) fashion artist based in the La Jolla Indian Reservation in Pauma Valley, California.