



TRADITIONAL ARTS
& ETHNOLOGY CENTRE

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**MAX MARA PRESSURES LAOS-BASED WHISTLEBLOWER TO DROP CAMPAIGN REGARDING
PLAGIARISED DESIGNS**

Billion-dollar fashion brand Max Mara is accused of using the cultural designs and heritage of the Oma, an isolated ethnic minority group in northern Laos, without acknowledgement or compensation

LUANG PRABANG, LAO PDR, 23 April 2019 — Max Mara Fashion Group, a billion-dollar Italian fashion house, plagiarised traditional designs of the Oma ethnic minority group in their Spring/Summer 2019 collection, and is now pressuring a Laos-based organisation to delete social media posts about it.

The Oma, a tiny ethnic community living in the hills of northern Laos in Southeast Asia, hand-embroider, stitch, and appliqué distinctive red designs onto their traditional clothing, including head scarves, jackets, and leg wraps. Max Mara digitally duplicated and printed the patterns onto fabric, with colours, composition, shapes, and even placement that are identical to the original Oma designs. Max Mara did not acknowledge the Oma in marketing, labeling, or display of the collection in their stores and online shop, or provide compensation to the original artists.



The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, a Laos-based social enterprise founded to celebrate and promote Laos' ethnic cultural heritage and support rural artisans, is urging Max Mara to admit to the negligence and pull the line. After a former TAEC staff member recognised the designs through a shop window in Zagreb, Croatia, the organisation sent multiple emails and messages to Max Mara's headquarters, with no response. The organisation then took to social media with side-by-side comparisons, which immediately garnered public outrage and press coverage. Max Mara's legal team was in touch the following day, with demands to pull the posts.

Max Mara's communication was marked confidential, and while TAEC is currently abiding with that request, the organisation has now published two open letter responses to the fashion giant. *"In your most recent message, you seem to focus on the denigration of your billion euro company by TAEC, but have not once taken seriously your clear disregard for the cultural property of the Oma people. Your repeated requests for us to remove our posts on social media and your threats of legal action show that your concern is solely with your own image ... not with fair treatment and respect of the traditions and cultural practices of the Oma,"* writes TAEC in one of the letters published on their Facebook page.

A largely agrarian community, the Oma live in the remote mountains northern Laos, northwestern Vietnam and southern China. Their exact population and number of villages is difficult to establish, as they are often grouped as part of the larger Akha ethnic group. However, it is estimated that in Laos there are fewer than 2,000 Oma across seven villages. Traditional clothing is still a vital part of the identity and pride of Oma people -- handspun, indigo-dyed garments with vibrant red embroidery and applique is distinctive and unique to their group.

"Max Mara didn't get inspired by Oma motifs and reinterpret them. They simply scanned a handmade piece and printed it on clothes without even mentioning the existence of the Oma community. This is not cultural appreciation. This is not creative interpretation. This is plagiarism," says Dr. Marie-Pierre Lissior, a researcher working for TAEC. The Oma patterns appeared in dresses, skirts, and blouses presented in the collection's "Max Mara Weekend" resort line.

Founded in 1951 by Italian Achille Maramotti, Max Mara Fashion Group has grown into an international fashion powerhouse with over 2,200 stores in 105 countries and an online shop. In 2017, Max Mara Fashion Group recorded global sales of €1.558 billion, across all brands. Unlike most couture houses which are publicly traded or held by multinational corporations, Max Mara Fashion Group is privately-held and helmed by Luigi Maramotti, CEO and a member of the original founding family.

"For this behaviour to go unchecked is dangerous, as it sends the message that creative work that is traditional and shared by a community and culture in the developing world does not deserve the same kind of protections given to contemporary designs by individual 'artists' in the West. Companies can harvest motifs, materials, and ideas freely from communities that lack the educational, financial, and technological resources to have their rights recognised," says Tara Gujadhur, Co-Director of TAEC.

TAEC's campaign calls for Max Mara to (1) pull the clothing line from its stores and online, (2) publicly commit to not plagiarising designs again, and (3) donate 100% of the proceeds already

earned from the sale of these garments to an organisation of Max Mara's choice that advocates for the intellectual property rights of ethnic minorities. A Change.org petition has over 5,000 supporters and was delivered to Max Mara's CEO, Luigi Maramotti, yesterday. Various social media posts on the subject have now been seen well over one million times.

ABOUT THE TRADITIONAL ARTS AND ETHNOLOGY CENTRE

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 handicrafts shops directly linked with artisan communities. The Centre's work includes school outreach activities, craft workshops, lectures, research, and a non-profit foundation. TAEC is based in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR.

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For press enquiries, please contact TAEC's Sales & Marketing Director, Kristy Best at kristy@taeclaos.org or +856 20 5544 7895.

HI-RES PHOTOS

[Media Dropbox Folder](#)

ADDITIONAL QUOTES

"Our grandparents passed down these traditions to our parents, and our parents to us. We are the Oma people, and we preserve our culture by making and wearing our traditional clothes. We need them especially for funeral rites, out of respect to our ancestors." - **Khampheng Loma, Head of Nanam Village**

"Working with embroidery and applique is very challenging. Each motif is difficult and time-consuming to make. But, this is our tradition. Now, we can make products to sell to help support our families." - **Khampheng Loma, Head of Nanam Village**

"I had to do a double take. It was only because I had worked in Laos that I immediately recognized the designs as Oma. They had copied the patterns exactly. I couldn't believe that this major brand would sell such blatantly stolen designs." - **Lauren Ellis, former employee of Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre and current museums curator based in Melbourne, when she saw the Max Mara collection in one of the brand's stores in Zagreb, Croatia.**

"The handmade textiles of the Oma are incredibly detailed, taking a huge amount of time, skill, and patience. To see them reduced to a printed pattern on a mass-produced garment is heartbreaking."
- **Tara Gujadhur, TAEC Co-Director**

TIMELINE

Tues, 2 April 2019	<p>Former TAEC staff member recognises the designs in a Max Mara boutique in Zagreb, Croatia.</p> <p>TAEC sends messages to Max Mara's PROffice@maxmara.it email address.</p>
Wed, 3 April 2019	<p>TAEC sends follow-up messages to PROffice@maxmara.it and info@maxmarafashiongroup.com email addresses.</p>
Thurs, 4 April 2019	<p>TAEC sends messages to Max Mara and Weekend Max Mara on Facebook Messenger.</p>
Tues, 9 April 2019	<p>TAEC launches campaign on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter with side-by-side comparisons and a description of the Oma ethnic group.</p>
Wed, 10 April 2019	<p>TAEC sends out a press release.</p> <p>Max Mara sends an email to TAEC that denies any wrongdoing, and asks TAEC to remove its posts on the topic. Messages are marked private and confidential, and come from the Max Mara's legal team.</p> <p>TAEC responds with an open letter sent to Max Mara and posted to Facebook the same day.</p>
Thurs, 11 April 2019	<p>Second letter from Max Mara legal team is received by TAEC, again demanding the posts are removed, and threatening potential legal action.</p>
Fri, 12 April 2019	<p>TAEC launches Change.org petition, which garners over 1,000 signatures within 24 hours. http://chnq.it/SVyvvNPnxJ</p>
Sat, 13 April 2019	<p>TAEC responds to Max Mara with a second letter, also posted to Facebook.</p>
Fri, 19 April 2019	<p>TAEC contacts Harrods, Saks Fifth Avenue, MatchesFashion.com and other retailers to inform them of plagiarised designs they are carrying.</p>
Mon, 22 April 2019	<p>TAEC sends letter directly to Luigi Maramotti, Chairman of Max Mara, with petition.</p>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What did Max Mara do?

Max Mara used traditional designs of the Oma ethnic minority group in their Spring/Summer 2019 collection for the “Max Mara Weekend” clothing line, without acknowledgement, permission, or compensation. Oma women embroider, stitch, and appliqué these designs onto their traditional clothing, including head scarves, jackets, and leg wraps. Max Mara had these designs digitally duplicated and printed onto fabric, reducing painstaking, traditional motifs to factory-produced patterns. The colours, composition, shapes, and even placement, are identical to the Oma designs.

Who are the Oma?

The Oma are a small ethnic group living in mainland Southeast Asia. They speak a language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan ethnolinguistic family, like the Akha – a community more numerous and widely recognised by the general public. While Oma are often described as a sub-group of Akha ethnic group (and called “Akha Oma”), many consider themselves a distinct community. This association with the Akha makes the exact population and number of villages of the Oma difficult to pin down. However, it is estimated that there are fewer than 2,000 Oma in Laos, inhabiting seven villages in Phongsaly province. Small Oma communities may also exist in neighbouring southern China, northwest Vietnam, and Myanmar.

Can copying a design be considered “plagiarism?”

Absolutely. A design is intellectual property, whether it’s sketched in a notebook by an illustrator, mocked up by a graphic designer on a computer, or embroidered on indigo-dyed cotton in a remote village in Laos. If it is generally understood that using someone’s photography or written work without acknowledgement or permission is wrong, why would a handcrafted textile design be any different? Over the past three decades, protecting the intellectual property (IP) rights of third world and indigenous peoples has become recognised as essential, though how it should be done is much more debatable.

If the designs have no patent, how can Max Mara be held accountable?

Public opinion. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for traditional knowledge, artwork, design, and ideas to be co-opted by multinational corporations who have the power and financial clout to either ignore IP claims or drag them out in court. However, we have seen that a public outcry, negative press, and boycotting of brands can pressure companies to admit wrongdoing and improve their practices.

What should Max Mara have done if they wanted to feature the Oma’s designs?

They had many options. They could have approached the Oma community or artisans directly, and ordered their handmade work for a fair price to incorporate into their clothing, generating income for the community. There are organisations, like Nest, that work with brands to help link them to artisan groups and social enterprises in developing countries to collaborate. These partnerships can result in wonderfully creative products that also generate great visibility and earnings for both the brand and the communities. At the very least, Max Mara should have attributed the designs to the Oma (avoiding the generic “ethnic” term) and committed a certain percentage of profit to go towards education, rural development, or advocacy work with Oma communities.

How has the Oma community reacted to this issue?

The Oma artisans TAEC works with live in a very remote community, so their life experience is completely removed from issues of intellectual property rights. However, TAEC has been communicating with them about the situation and how to rectify it.

If they don't understand the issue, why does it matter?

Plagiarism is wrong, whether the plagiarised feel wronged or not. Letting this kind of corporate behaviour go unchecked is dangerous, as it sends the message that creative work that is traditional and shared by a community and culture in the developing world does not deserve the same kind of protections given to contemporary designs by individual "artists" in the West. Companies can harvest motifs, materials, and ideas freely from communities that lack the educational, financial, and technological resources to have their rights recognised.

How did TAEC get involved?

TAEC has worked with the Oma since 2010, when the organisation was hired to survey their crafts and identify potential income-generating opportunities for their artisans. Most recently, TAEC has worked with them on documenting their traditional music and new year's celebrations. Nanam Village is an approximately 9 hour drive from Luang Prabang, part of it unpaved, and is by far the most remote village (of 30 across Laos) that TAEC works with.

On Tuesday, 2 April 2019, a friend and former colleague was in Zagreb, Croatia, and saw the designs through a Max Mara shop window. She immediately shared pictures with the TAEC team. Amazed, TAEC initially thought it might be actual handcrafted work from the Oma that was incorporated into the clothing. 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 reproduced and mass-printed. TAEC immediately reached out to Max Mara's headquarters through various e-mail addresses and social media channels. After a week with no response, TAEC began the social media campaign.

What should Max Mara do now to right this?

Max Mara should: (1) pull the clothing line from its stores and online, (2) publicly commit to not plagiarising designs again, and (3) donate 100% of the proceeds already earned from the sale of these garments to an organisation of their choosing that advocates for the intellectual property rights of ethnic minorities.