

# Field Museum News

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## THE BOWER BIRD, AN AESTHETE OF THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

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One generally thinks of an aesthetic sense, the appreciation of color, form, and sound for their own sakes, as an attribute solely of human beings. For example, there is no evidence that a bird will select for its mate one that is more brightly colored than its fellows, or that sings, to our ears, more beautifully than other birds. Detailed studies indicate that the songs of birds are expressions of physical vigor, and many songs are known to be warnings to rivals rather than invitations to mates.

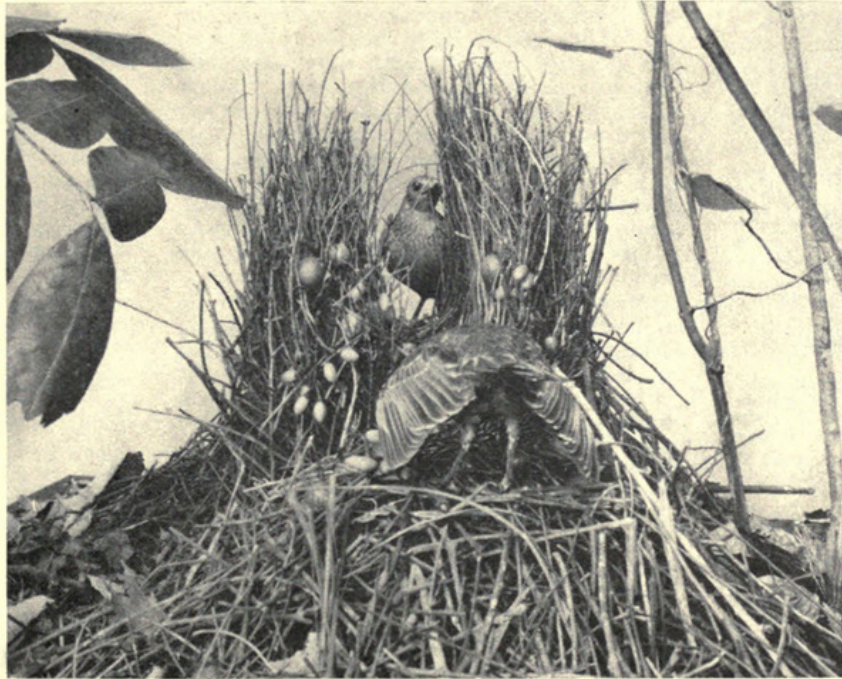
The bower birds of New Guinea and Australia, however, definitely display a sense of beauty which makes them unique in the animal kingdom. It is the habit of these birds to build complicated structures, which they decorate in various ways and use as playgrounds during the period of courtship and mating.

A habitat group of the New Guinean fawn-breasted bower bird was recently installed in Stanley Field Hall. This is a species which builds a bower on the ground, with platforms at each end, constructed of twigs and sticks by the male bird. He devotes about two weeks to the task and performs a remarkable feat of architecture. One platform is plain, but the other is definitely decorated with fresh and colorful berries, fruits, and leaves. These are not eaten; they are purely for ornamentation. They are replaced at frequent intervals, and the bird carries the old withered decorations to a neatly maintained rubbish pile near-by, instead of scattering them about indiscriminately. On the decorated platform the male performs a courtship dance, while the female stands on the undecorated platform at the opposite end of the bower to watch. When the courtship is over, a nest is built high in a tree near-by, and the bower is used as a playground by the male.

The Museum group, consisting of both male and female birds, and a bower, illustrates the courtship stage. The birds and the bower were collected near the Sepik River in New Guinea by Assistant Curator Karl P. Schmidt and Walter A. Weber while members of the Cornelius Crane Pacific Expedition of Field Museum in 1929. The birds were mounted by Assistant Taxidermist John W. Moyer.

Another species of bower bird uses shells and shiny pebbles for decorations, while a third species builds a mossy roofed hut and distributes flowers and bright petals on the carefully leveled dooryard of moss, renewing them as fast as they wither. An

Australian bower bird has recently adopted as cherished decorations for its playground pieces of broken china and glass bottles, showing that the selection of materials is not an iron-bound, inherent mechanical reflex. Here, indeed, is an artistic genius among bower birds! One can think of many parallels in human society, but conscious effort devoted to a non-utilitarian result is not common among animals. The hoarding of bright-colored objects by jays and crows is one of the few comparable instances known. Activity of this kind is, no doubt, an outgrowth of secondary sexual charac-



Bower Bird Group in Stanley Field Hall

The male bird is seen performing his courtship dance on the platform decorated with fruits and berries, while the female watches through the bower.

teristics, such as the drumming of the ruffed grouse and the dancing of the prairie chicken, which, as in the case of the bower birds, is performed by the males whether or not any females are present. It is dangerous to describe these actions in the anthropomorphic terms of human psychology and behavior, yet, in default of detailed modern studies, one is left no choice.

## Gift from C. Suydam Cutting

Through the generosity of C. Suydam Cutting of New York, Field Museum has received an extremely interesting collection of birds and mammals from Upper Burma. The collections were made by Lord Cranbrook and Captain F. Kingdon Ward. Among the most interesting specimens are several rare water shrews and moles, and paratypes of two species of new babbling thrushes, recently described by N. B. Kinnear of the British Museum (Natural History). A pair of very rare blood pheasants is also included.

## JEHOL PAGODA MODEL ON EXHIBITION

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER  
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An exact miniature reproduction of a pagoda in the imperial palace of Jehol, China, the region recently invaded by the Japanese, is on exhibition in the South Gallery on the second floor at Field Museum. The original of this pagoda, which is octagonal in shape, contains nine stories and is 213 feet high. It is one of the finest pagodas in northern China.

Between the years 1751 and 1765, the Emperor K'ien-lung made four journeys through the midland provinces of his empire. On his visits to Nanking and Hangchow he was deeply impressed by the two famed pagodas of these cities—the Pao-en-ta ("Pagoda for the Reward of Kindness") and the Leu-ho-ta ("Pagoda of Six Harmonies"), models of which are also shown in the Museum's collection. He desired to have these reproduced in his summer palace at Jehol, where he had erected a temple in 1751. The plan was carried out, but one of the two pagodas was destroyed by fire and the other collapsed on its completion.

The geomancers counseled and gave the verdict that southern monuments must not be built in the north. The emperor, however, scorned their decision and ordered new and more solid building material. After ten years' labor, the pagoda was completed. Its story is told in an inscription tablet and composed by the emperor. The tablet is

set up in front of the pagoda on a terrace enclosed by a stone rail, and is reproduced in the Museum model. Five lion cubs playing with a ball are carved in high relief on the top. Each side is adorned with a dragon in clouds striving for the flaming pearl. Each story has four doors and four windows. The pinnacle is in the shape of an Indian stupa (tope).

The territory of Jehol formed part of Chi-li Province under the Manchu dynasty (1644–1911). Originally inhabited by roving Mongols, it was part of Inner Mongolia to which it also belongs geographically. It never was part of or in any way connected with Manchuria. For many centuries the country has been settled by Chinese agriculturists. The Mongols returned to their steppes, and through hard labor the Chinese farmers transformed the inhospitable mountain region into fertile land.

The Museum's economic botany collections include a display of oils, resins and lacquers.





Laufer, Berthold. 1933. "Jehol Pagoda Model on Exhibition." *Field Museum news* 4(4), 1–1.

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