

Feather Arts: Beauty, Wealth and Spirit

Exhibit opens February 15 in Hall 26

BY PHYLLIS RABINEAU

Featherwork is the unique medium of this temporary exhibit, possibly the most unusual—and arresting— assemblage of art objects ever exhibited in a major natural history museum. Two hundred sixty works from five continents are represented, some contemporary, others as much as 1,000 years old.

The cultural contexts of the artifacts and their visual qualities cover a range as broad as their geographic distribution—from the theatricality of dance costuming to the intimacy of jewelry and religious offerings. In five theme areas, the exhibit considers the diversities of crafting technique and utilization.

About feathers. To fully appreciate the craft of feather-working we must first examine the physical properties of the medium. Some of these properties—color and texture, for example—are easily visible. To recognize others, such as material strength and flexibility, we turn to photographs made with the scanning electron microscope. Finally, we look at how the various characteristics of feathers have been put to practical use—such as in fishing lures, arrow fletching, and birdskin clothing, which is an ancient arctic technique whose modern descendant is the down-filled parka.

How to feather. This section juxtaposes objects from all over the world, showing the techniques which have been devised to utilize in art works the natural shapes, textures, and rich colors of the medium. Some techniques are simple appropriations of plumage—glued to the wearer's body or tied to the hair. Other techniques, involving cutting, weaving, or mosaic inlaying, often result in complex structures. Some of the outstanding objects exhibited here include an African dance costume covered with wild fowl plumage, delicate iridescent feather baskets made by the Pomo Indians of California, 19th-century Chinese feather jewelry, Plains Indian ceremonial objects made from entire wings, and colorful South American costumes employing birdskin mosaics on cloth made of bark.

Beauty. In human societies, feather ornaments serve many purposes. They may be displays of wealth or be costuming that is required for religious events. Often, however, their purpose is to satisfy the simple desire to look beautiful, to attract the opposite sex; in this we behave very much like

the birds themselves, whose displays of plumage are courtship overtures. This exhibit section shows how styles of feather ornamentation vary from culture to culture: the bold play of color and form in New Guinea, the delicacy and chromatic subtlety of Brazilian Indian work.

Wealth. Valued for their rarity, beauty, and fragility, feathers were a form of wealth in many countries. Feather money is still used by some peoples, although for others the ancient valuables have long since been replaced by modern mediums of exchange. The use of feathers as wealth is illustrated with objects such as Hawaiian and Maori clothing and with feather currency from North America, South America, and the Pacific.

Spirit. When we examine the cultural meaning of feather arts, we often find that they were used on occasions when people sought assistance from spiritual powers, in ceremonies of worship or in warfare. There are several reasons why feathers are “spirit matter,” but certainly the most important is that they serve to invoke the special power of birds — flight that takes them to the heavens where the spirits dwell. The religious meaning of feather arts is examined with materials as diverse as a Plains Indian eagle feather warbonnet, a pair of sorcerer's feather shoes from Australia, headdresses from South American drug-related rituals, and feather wands used by shamans to expunge illness from a patient's body.

Although feather arts are made everywhere, this is the first major travelling exhibit devoted to this medium. Those of us involved in its preparation have enjoyed discovering the wonderful creativity which peoples in many cultures have demonstrated in making these objects. We invite you to share in this discovery. □

Phyllis Rabineau, custodian of the anthropology collections, is curator of the exhibit, “Feather Arts: Beauty, Wealth, and Spirit.” Exhibit and catalog designer: Clifford Abrams; exhibit conservator: Shauna Clark; exhibit and catalog editor: Patricia Williams; exhibit catalog photographer: Ron Testa. A color catalog of the exhibit, price to be announced, will be available.



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