

RARE ANCIENT FEATHERWORK FROM PERU

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RADIANCE FROM THE RAIN FOREST: FEATHERWORK IN ANCIENT PERU, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, 3 MARCH–1 SEPTEMBER 2008, curated by Heidi King.

Feathers have been associated derisively with Native Americans since Columbus “discovered” the New World. As early as 1515, Albrecht Dürer made a drawing for the Hours of Maximilian I depicting a (probably) Brazilian Indian brought back to Europe dressed in feathers under a drollery with exotic birds.¹ Thus, the inhabitants of America were already imagined clad in feathers. As epitomized by the childish birdman, Papageno, in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*, to the European mind, featherwork suggested the barbarism of people living at the level of nature. Unlike Native Americans, Europeans were unable to see fragile and impermanent feathers as “treasure,” and therefore, with rare exceptions, did not value most of the featherwork sent back to the Old World. As a result, only a few examples collected in early modern times have been preserved to our day, and these come mostly from Mexico. To my knowledge, none dating to the 16th century survives from the Andes, where featherworking was also highly developed. However, we know from a 1545 inventory of Charles V’s collection, which refers to 11 garments covered with feathers and gold, that such items were sent to Europe at the time.²

Radiance from the Rain Forest: Featherwork in Ancient Peru, an unusual exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, focuses on the Andes. Of course, the cultural and artistic importance of feathers from North America to Amazonia is well known, especially as revealed in the spectacular feather creations from the

latter. Some of the most intricate featherwork, however, actually comes from ancient Mexico and Peru, where feathers were indeed treasured as much as gold and precious stones. But feathers are perishable, and only in Peru, given the dry desert conditions of the coast, have textiles and featherwork been preserved for 500 years or more before the Spanish conquest in the 16th century. Thus, we can thank the Peruvian desert and, in addition, the modernist and postmodernist taste of museums and collectors for the remarkable show at the Metropolitan Museum.

We all know the devastating effect of the art market that has enabled the collection of illegal antiquities, specifically how it destroys the context of individual objects, entire archaeological sites, and even human lives. Prior to the 20th century, the goal in illegal excavation of pre-Hispanic cultures was to find gold that could be melted down. In an extreme case, in 1602, an entire river was diverted from its course to cut through the Huaca del Sol, a huge ancient structure at the Peruvian site of Moche. Chartered companies literally mined the Peruvian Chimu site of Chan Chan in Colonial times, and for the last century, bulldozers have been working in the northern valleys searching for more gold. Recently, illegal digging has, of course, also targeted valuable “art,” such as pottery and textiles.

Featherwork is in a special category, since well-preserved pieces are, and perhaps always were, rare, and their existence cannot be predicted from a burial site the way gold had been. At the site of Pachacamac, Uhle found pieces of featherwork around the turn of the 20th century that proved the existence of ancient featherwork, but these examples cannot

¹Pasztory 1990–1991, fig. 1.

²Pillsbury 2006, 123.

compare with the objects in this exhibition in terms of completeness and state of preservation.³ (One headdress excavated by Uhle in 1896, now in the collection of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia, which has been loaned to the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition, is an interesting but modest piece.) Rather than through illegal or legal excavation, most well-preserved interesting examples of featherwork have been found accidentally and have subsequently entered the international art market. Despite that since 1929, a Peruvian law has stipulated that all pre-Hispanic remains found on private property after that date belong to the state, illegal activities have continued to the present day.

Considered tangential to the history of Andean art, featherwork has not been much exhibited, studied, or written about by scholars.⁴ In this rare case, private collectors have been ahead of the museum world in appreciating, purchasing, and thereby preserving such an esoteric, fragile medium. It is remarkable that the Metropolitan Museum, traditional as it usually is, was even willing to organize a show of featherwork. To survey this largely uncharted and most unusual medium in the exhibition, the museum has included works from private collections, but these undocumented objects have been counterbalanced with published examples from the museum's own collection and from the collections of other institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Museum. A short notice in *Archaeology* magazine has already drawn the public's attention to this seminal exhibition,⁵ but the show also merits scholarly investigation.

Featherwork still looks incongruous in a traditional museum, where even the nearby African wood and Aztec stone images fit in comfortably as "sculpture." A featherwork show seems intriguingly wild and transgressively postmodern, not unlike the animal bodies in formaldehyde in the works of Damien Hirst. (Some sensitive museum-goers have complained to the Metropolitan Museum that, by putting on this exhibition, it has condoned the killing of birds.) On one level,

however complex the craftsmen's techniques and however rich the designs, the feathers themselves, as objects of nature, overwhelm everything artistic. The exhibition's curator has also emphasized this feature by focusing on the zoological origin of the feathers and by presenting alongside the featherwork ancient terracottas of macaws and ducks and a modern photo of a spectacular group of macaws. The informative labels identify the types of bird feathers whenever possible, and the curator provided this reviewer with much additional pertinent information.

Specific types of brilliantly hued feathers and live birds were brought to the coast of Peru from the Amazon rainforest in pre-Hispanic times. Heading the list were macaws and parrots with their brilliant red, yellow, blue, and green feathers, and paradise tanagers with spectacular turquoise feathers. Some of the many other birds used included Muscovy ducks, flamingos, and honey creepers. As O'Neill has done for the Peruvian material,⁶ it often takes an ornithologist to determine the precise origin of the feathers on ancient featherwork. At certain times in history, exchanges with the rainforest areas were interrupted; then the featherwork was made from local birds that were not as desirable because their feathers were more white and dark in tonality and hence less colorful.

Since much of the featherwork in the exhibition was found accidentally, dating is conjectural. Most objects date to the Chimú culture, ca. 900–1470 C.E., but Chimú artisans are likely to have worked for their Inca conquerors from 1470 on, and the style may have lasted down to the Spanish conquest in 1531. Characteristic of Chimú weaving is the use of double warp threads, and such double warp threads are found on the cotton backing of many of the pieces in the exhibition.⁷ A few pieces, such as the blue-and-yellow hangings (fig. 1) and the curious four-cornered hat from the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 2), may date from the preceding Middle Horizon Wari culture (ca. 700–1000 C.E.)⁸ because hundreds of textile four-cornered hats are known from that period. This culture, the first empire in Peru, was based in the southern highland city of

³Uhle 1903.

⁴The major sources are Rowe 1984; Reina and Kensinger 1991; Reid 2005.

⁵Bonn-Muller 2008.

⁶O'Neill 1984.

⁷Rowe 1984, 24.

⁸Frame 1990.

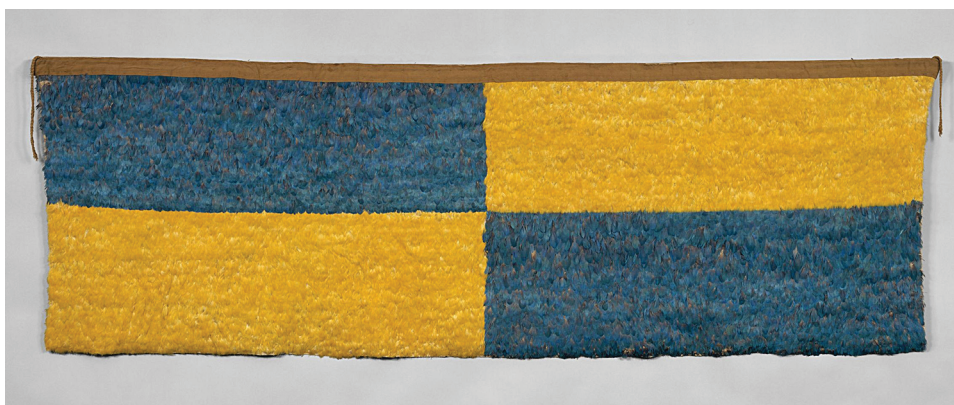


Fig. 1. Wari hanging, cotton camelid fiber and feathers, seventh–eighth century, ht. 66.04 cm, wdth. 219.71 cm. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979, 206.468 (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Wari, near modern Ayacucho, and is known only through archaeology. We have very little knowledge of its people and customs. Bonn-Muller's statement in *Archaeology* that the Wari were known for their practice of "wearing the skulls of subjugated enemies" is not mentioned in most of the literature on the Wari.⁹ The four-cornered hats, along with textiles and tabards, are believed to have been the garments of the nobility and/or officials of the empire. In many features, the Wari anticipated the organization of the Inca empire that emerged more than 400 years later. Some fragmentary feathered objects may even go back earlier than the Wari to the first century C.E. Nevertheless, the curator believes that featherwork may never have been common except among the Chimú.

The Chimú empire, located in a more restricted area on the north coast of Peru, was the largest kingdom in Peru immediately before the Inca, who conquered it in the late 15th century. Their capital city, Chan Chan, was built around huge royal compounds that were at once administrative centers and royal burials.¹⁰ Most of the ceremonial life of the Chimú took place in the royal compounds (*ciudadelas*), which were adorned with clay friezes. The gold and silver of the Chimú were legendary in quantity and quality, but very little of it has survived as a result of the mining operations in Colonial times. The Chimú rulers did not impress their peers and public by using imagery containing frightening deities or human/animal composite figures. Instead, their images, mostly shore

birds and fish, are benign and ornamental. The same can be said of Chimú textiles, whose designs are often simply geometric. The layout of the royal compounds likewise suggests that Chimú rulers were powerful without resorting to power imagery. Instead, the Chimú seem to have emphasized luxury: splendid textiles, gold earplugs, "crowns," collars, and especially



Fig. 2. Wari four-cornered hat, cotton, cane, and feathers, seventh–eighth century, ht. 17.145 cm. New York, Brooklyn Museum, A. Augustus Healy Fund, 41.228 (courtesy Brooklyn Museum).

⁹Bonn-Muller 2008.

¹⁰Moseley and Day 1992.

featherwork. The Chimú, who did not themselves live in a forested area, seem to have had excellent access to tropical birds. It may not be accidental that the splendid architectural ruins of the Chachapoya culture on the eastern slope of the Andes were contemporary with the Chimú. The fret design on Chachapoya architecture is similar in concept to one found on Chimú wall friezes. Thus, an exchange system in birds for featherwork may have been part of a cultural interrelationship.

Featherwork was probably most commonly made for headdresses, as the excavated piece from Pachacamac shows.¹¹ Headdresses varied from square hats to openwork crowns to hoods. Two spectacular hoods from a private collection in the show, with either big white or very dark brown bunches of Muscovy duck feathers on their crowns, are impressive because of the natural beauty and sheer power of the feathers themselves.

Another impressive type of item in the show is the tabard. The standard Peruvian male garment, the tabard is a long shirt, like a tunic, with a slit for the neck. However, the sides of a tabard are open and have ties to adjust it to the body, whereas the sides of a tunic are sewn. Some tabards are about the size and shape of tunics. The exhibition has about a half a dozen of these with human and animal images, possibly depicting supernatural beings, rendered in simple, colorful shapes. One appears to display images of frontal birds (fig. 3). The most astounding ones are the oversized tabards that look like oriental rugs; this resemblance has been increased by their being draped over a stand in the installation. On average, these are more than 152.4 cm (60 in) long. Most of them are nonfigurative, with rich, geometric-patterned borders that further increase the similarity to rugs. Probably the most spectacular piece in the exhibition is a yellow tabard from a private collection with a blue border that has two stylized birds near the bottom.

Similar in size to the great tabards are oversized rectangular hangings, consisting of solid yellow and blue feathered areas, whose function is not known (see fig. 1). Close to 100 of these panels are preserved, each one about 203.2 cm (80 in) long: the five variously colored examples in the exhibition have been drawn



Fig. 3. Chimú tabard, cotton and feathers, 15th–16th century, lgth. 76.2 cm, wdth. 63.5 cm. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1959, 59.135.8 (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

from the Metropolitan Museum's own collection, which contains 20 panels.¹² These were purchased by the Museum of Primitive Art in the 1950s and went to the Metropolitan Museum in 1982 with the rest of the Rockefeller Collection. All the panels were found accidentally during construction work near La Victoria, on Peru's southern coast, in 1943. A cache of more than 90 feathered cloths had been deposited in about eight pottery vessels (> 1 m ht.) placed between three concentric walls of adobe. Most of these cloths are covered with blue and yellow macaw feathers, but a few are covered with red and plain yellow feathers. As the vessels are Wari in style, the find must date ca. 700–800 C.E. Recent radiocarbon dating of the panels themselves has reaffirmed this. Presumably, the feathered panels were wall hangings for an architectural context, but we know nothing about their original function. Displayed all together, they must have been spectacular. As with the tabards, the sheer expanse of their feather-covered surfaces is amazing.

Besides the quantity of beautiful natural feathers, one is impressed by the techniques of

¹¹ Supra n. 3; Reina and Kensinger 1991, figs. 1.25, 1.26.

¹² Bird 1958.

attaching these feathers to cloth. In both textiles and featherwork, the craftspersons were sometimes male and sometimes female. Cotton itself is native to Peru and has been woven into cloth there since 2000 B.C.E. The plain-weave cotton cloths for featherwork were always woven to size because Andeans did not cut fabric. Generally, long strings of feathers have been sewn to the backing. In the blue-and-yellow hangings (see fig. 1), the stitches and knots of the two color areas are not identical, suggesting different groups of sewers. Often in featherwork, the feather is stitched at a slight angle to the cloth to bring out its three-dimensionality and sheen.¹³ Designs have been created by stitching feathers in rows starting from the bottom and working upward in a process similar to shingling, and they are relatively large scale on much featherwork from the Andes. Thus, the pre-Conquest aesthetic in Peru has created simple images of maximum visual impact perhaps intended to communicate from a distance. In the Colonial period in Mexico, by contrast, as a result of Spanish patronage, featherwork approximated the subtlety and complexity of paintings and thereby demonstrated the possibilities of the medium.¹⁴

The use of the Amazonian technique of tapirage is an indication that in the Peruvian area, the focus was on the feathers more than the designs.¹⁵ The yellow feathers of live birds were plucked, and a mixture of frog and/or toad skin secretions mixed with dye was rubbed onto the birds' bodies. When the new feathers grew out, they had an uneven reddish cast over the natural yellow that was evidently much prized. One feathered tabard from a private collection in the show has these special feathers in its border, but the tapirage technique is not explained to the visitor. We do not know if Andeans acquired these feathers exclusively from rainforest areas or whether they also practiced this technique themselves. The quantity of Andean featherwork, however, suggests that besides being exchanged from tropical areas, birds may have been bred in captivity.

Feathers are fragile yet strong. Some objects, such as the 500- or 600-year-old earplugs in the exhibition, are covered with a delicate design of trimmed feathers without their central barbs. On an exceptional openwork

crown from a private collection, the layer of trimmed turquoise feathers is as thin as paint. These trimmed feathers were attached with an organic resin glue.

In general, a favorite color of Peruvian featherwork seems to have been yellow from macaw or parrot feathers. One must imagine these pieces worn with gold jewelry and insignia, whose gold often was inlaid with turquoise and shell in mixed media displays. The exhibition suggests even more unusual combinations by means of the head and skin of a small fox from a private collection, which is covered with yellow feathers and probably functioned as a headdress. But many other items in Peru, from litters to parasols—most of which have not survived—were likewise covered with feathers. This exhibition has illuminated a dimension of the perishable arts of Peru that would otherwise be unimaginable.

The installation of the show has positive and negative aspects. The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of the Metropolitan Museum has a small, narrow space for temporary exhibitions between the African and pre-Columbian sections. This "gallery" recalls a galley kitchen—walled on the sides but open at both ends. The show's 70 objects are crowded into this narrow space; therefore, despite their careful installation, one cannot adequately experience each object on its own, and pieces are easy to miss. At the same time, a benefit of the crowding is that one is overwhelmed by the proximity of this rich material, and visiting the exhibition must resemble being in an ancient Peruvian featherwork storage area, which was surely the way such artifacts were kept. Whereas bluish feathers and other dark-hued feathers are not colored by pigment but rather by the refraction of visible light and can therefore handle being brightly illuminated, the pigments of feathers with the yellow and reddish (carotenoid) colors fade in bright light. Therefore, the show's lighting is necessarily somewhat low.

This exhibition provides the first opportunity in modern times for one to have an overview of Peruvian featherwork, and it is all the more remarkable because the existing literature on featherwork is slim. Although it was not ready for the exhibition's opening, the curator, Heidi King, is preparing a catalogue

¹³ Rowe 1984.

¹⁴ The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1990, figs.

119, 120.

¹⁵ O'Neill 1984, 147.

that will be a very welcome addition to the scholarship in this field. And the exhibition she has deftly assembled is a show for everyone: from the aesthete and the archaeologist to the curious of all ages.

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