

SHARING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Amazonian Feather-work in European Museum Collections

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Since 2002, I have visited 40 museums in Europe (in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland) in order to photograph Amazonian feather-work.

Very few museums have made their entire collections available for the public to see. The so-called “viewable store rooms” are a rarity in Europe, and a desirable goal over the next few years, despite the fact that an average visitor will not have a strong interest in these overflowing storage rooms (the main attraction of the museums will still be their actual exhibits.)

The virtual opening of these museum store rooms brings photographs of the pieces, general catalogues, collection documents, and field photos together, and makes it possible to study the collections in an entirely new and simplified light. In the past it was very complicated, expensive, and time-consuming to travel to individual museums and physically sift through their vast collections in storerooms. With a digital catalogue, the search can be begun at home by sifting through stored collections. This can be followed by the specific investigation of the filtered objects in the respective museums.

It is helpful if these digital presentations are open for all to access via the Internet, and ideally the search words and the digital format should be standardized throughout the different museum databases. Some museums in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France are on the way to realize this goal.

Digitizing the Collection: Sorting – Searching – Organizing - Commenting

The project pertains to the feather-work of the Amazon Basin Indians. This includes a wide range of items that are constructed from feathers. I am specifically concerned with pieces that can be worn on the body as well as other items that are decorated with feathers.

It was required that each individual collection piece was photographed with a digital camera at least twice from separate angles. This ensured that the method of production, as well as the specific feathers used in the pieces, could be effectively analyzed in a later session. Furthermore, this would ensure accurate documentation of each piece’s condition.

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The resolution of each photo was approximately 3,000 x 2,000 pixels. As a result, multiple magnifications are possible. Without such high resolution, fine details would have been lost during analysis of the photographs. For the most part, the only light source was neon. The quality of the photos corresponds to the different lighting conditions of the various museums. Thus, the photos are meant to be used as research documents rather than professional, aesthetic, or artistic photographs. The file names of the photos indicate the specific collection information as well as the collection number. Thus, it is possible for me to perform a simple and efficient search for ethnicity, collectors, body part, piece number etc.

In many cases a piece was incorrectly allocated or not allocated at all. It was necessary for me to create a new allocation for these pieces so I denoted this in parentheses in order to compare museum data to my own evaluations. It is not always possible to confirm my deviating opinions in reference to allocation, because there is not always a similar piece to use as a comparison. Thus, it is important to know that my comments in parentheses are open to debate and not set in stone. After all, one purpose of this Internet platform is indeed to discuss the classifications.

To make it possible to search in all museums, it is necessary that there is a uniform search word listing amongst them (a thesaurus). There must be some sort of alignment of the different data and forms of writing and classification. This is particularly necessary with the designation of ethnicities. In one list the different ways of writing ethnicities is listed, and in each case a standardized way of writing the respective ethnicity is specified. In addition, body parts are designated if the pieces could be worn or carried on that body part. Decorative words such as bracelet, jewelry, cuff, crown, etc. were originally removed. This list is also a component of the thesaurus.

At this point in my progress, I have made it possible to search ethnicity, body part, birds, collector, and collection time period for all of the museums that I have worked at so far. This includes:

- Digital unification of pieces that belong together yet are separated because they are stored in different parts of a museum or different museums all together
- Alignment of the collection data from different collections in order to make comparisons
- Digital unification of pieces belonging in the same collection tank, which are physically separated in different museums
- Chronological sorting within an ethnicity

Seeing the Myth - Encounters with Indigenous Communities

Very few collectors, either academic or traveling, have ever inquired about traditional feather-work from its actual source. Very few people have ever asked feather-work artisans about the symbolic meaning of the colors and birds used

in their feather-work. If the question were posed, the answer might have been: “We make it like this because our ancestors made it like this“. So it is understandable that in almost all actual museum exhibitions feather-work has been exhibited as “art”. This means that the exhibitions isolate single pieces without an understanding of the connection and togetherness of all of the pieces.

The feather-work of the Amazonian Basin Indians appears to be a form of art from the European point of view. However, these pieces more accurately represent the philosophy, myths, and religion of their makers. All of these words standardize the physical and psychological correlation of a life which we could only understand - even partially comprehend - if we ourselves had lived for many years with these people.

In today’s world, there are very few people who live according to their traditional culture. Thus, understanding the cultures of the past is not simple for most modern people because we have not experienced those cultures first hand. If we want to understand an artifact or custom from the past then we must undertake a laborious and intensive method of research to discover its meaning and purpose. We must realize that each group of humans was distinct and unique in their traditions and way of life. Under no circumstance can we assume that these traditional groups were identical just because words like “master art”, “tribal art”, “primitive art”, and “non-European art” lead us to believe this. The material culture in the European museum storage rooms can be an important catalyst or *entrance* to understand the thinking and life of other cultures.

Thus, over the course of the next years and decades it is crucial for ethnological museums to invite the living descendants of these rich cultures so we can learn together, starting with their material history. Even without a deeper understanding we can see all of the spontaneous understanding, the aesthetic joy, the beauty of colors, as well as the attention and patience that an experienced and industrious craftsman had to offer.

Ethnological museums do not retain the historical property of their own countries because they focus on other cultures. These things embody world cultural heritage of a special kind, since they link and connect diverse cultures with the European culture via historical collections. If we want to share this cultural heritage in the future, we need:

Long-term common projects: museums and scientists and Indigenous communities

Digitization of the collections and publication on the Internet

This is particularly important for the living descendants of those who produced these articles in all parts of this world.