
8-4-2017

Review of *Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Precolumbian Era*

Amy Buono

Chapman University, buono@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/art_articles



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [Latin American History Commons](#), [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), [Latina/o Studies Commons](#), [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buono, Amy. "Book Review: 'Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Precolumbian Era.'" *College Art Association*. August 4, 2017. <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2032/>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Art at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Review of *Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Precolumbian Era*

Comments

This book review was originally published in [caa.reviews](#) in 2017.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Copyright

College Art Association

caa.reviews

Critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies

About caa.reviews

Book Reviews

Exhibition Reviews

Essays

Recent Books in the Arts

Dissertations

Supporters

View CAA Journals

Visit the CAA Website



August 4, 2017

Heidi King, ed.

Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Precolumbian Era

Exh. cat. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012.
232 pp.; 200 color ill. Cloth \$60.00 (9780300169799)

Radiance from the Rain Forest: Featherwork in Ancient Peru

Exhibition schedule: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
February 26–September 1, 2008

Amy Buono

CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2017.110

Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Precolumbian Era, edited by Heidi King, is an important contribution to a profoundly complex yet largely overlooked artistic genre: Andean featherwork. While feather mosaics from Mesoamerica have received much scholarly attention and praise, featherwork of the Andes has largely been ignored. In a review of *The Arts in Latin America, 1492–1820* (click here for review) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2007, Suzanne Muchnic noted that “in the world of art, feathers are regarded with a certain kind of dread . . . feathers are trouble” (Suzanne Muchnic, “The Art of the Feather [and the Downside],” *Los Angeles Times* [October 14, 2007]). Muchnic’s comment is indicative of the problems feather crafts present, not just for museum professionals, but also scholars at large. Given such logistical issues as the international transportation of biological materials, the conservation of these extremely fragile objects, constructing appropriate exhibition mounts and displays, and the sometimes uncertain provenance of these objects, Muchnic’s observation explains a lot about why featherwork remains under-exhibited and under-researched, and highlights why *Peruvian Featherworks* is so important a contribution.

Based on King’s stunning 2008 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *Radiance from the Rain Forest: Featherwork in Ancient Peru*, this volume highlights both the difficulties of interpreting ancient Andean featherworking and its rich scholarly potential. The volume includes an introduction and seven essays, written by textile specialists, archaeologists, and a conservator. Collectively, the essays document this important exhibition of rarely displayed featherwork and comprise an overview of Andean featherwork from the late third millennium BCE to the sixteenth century CE in a case-study format, including material from the cultures of Paracas, Nasca, Moche, Wari, Sican, Chancay, Chimú, and Inca.

Beautiful color plates of around seventy objects constitute roughly half the length of the catalogue. Given the difficulty of viewing these objects outside a special exhibition, these images are one of the book’s valuable contributions. Augmented by the important bibliography, the collection of objects in *Peruvian Featherworks* represents an art-historical treasure trove of Andean cultural heritage. Broken down by object types—tabards (open-sided tunics), headgear, ornaments and accessories, and ritual objects—the book certainly will stimulate art historians to investigate particular genres of artistic production in the Andes and beyond. King’s catalogue also provides comparative material for understanding the depth and breadth of iconography, design, color, form, and especially, the aesthetics of size in Andean artistic practices. Most significantly, however, this book addresses the multi-faceted functions of feathers in ancient and early colonial Peru, and questions, if not always explicitly, feathers as *media*.

King’s introduction and lead essay chart the many functions that feathers served in the contexts of the indigenous Americas in general, and in the Andes in particular: radiant and iridescent indices of the spirit world; ritual paraphernalia of sacred power; reifications of light, vision, and flight; embodied and ornate festive attire for elites; votive offerings; luxury material akin to precious metals, shells, and colored stones. She includes descriptions by early modern Spanish chroniclers of the importance of feathers in the Inca world. Birds, dead and alive, and plucked feathers were carried from the



Search

CAA News

Subscribe to

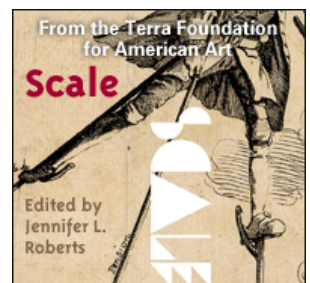
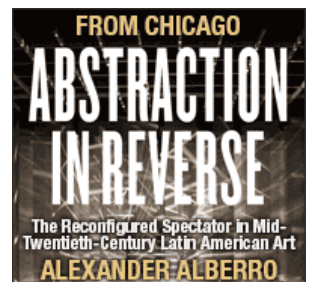
CAA News

The newsletter of the
College Art Association

Review Categories

CAA & WYETH FOUNDATION FOR
AMERICAN ART PUBLICATION GRANT

FULL APPLICATION DUE:
SEPTEMBER 15



rainforest over the Andes as tribute to the Inca rulers, to be converted into artifacts in feather workshops in the highlands and along the Pacific coast. Pedro Sancho de la Hoz's 1535 account, cited by King, describes a "warehouse in the vicinity of Cuzco that contained more than one hundred thousand dried birds whose feathers were used for clothing" (12). Like featherworking elsewhere in South America, only a tiny subset of the bird species available were utilized for their plumes: in extant Andean artifacts, only two percent of Amazonian basin bird species are represented. Most of the feathers come from macaws, parrots, cotingas, and tanagers, likely chosen by their makers for their resplendent colors (12).

As King notes, though Andeanists have closely attended to textile arts, featherwork has not received the same scholarly interest, probably as a result of the ways these objects reached museums. In the case of Peru, featherwork is not just trouble, but serious trouble. Since the colonial period, archaeological sites across Peru have suffered from looting and informal excavating, resulting in the loss of original burial contexts and thus insight into the original spatial relationships among feathered objects, other artifacts, and buildings.

After the introduction, the volume progresses chronologically. Ann Pollard Rowe examines objects from the Ocucaje Basin of Peru's Ica Valley. Dating from 350–200 BCE, this is the earliest-known featherwork from the Central Andes. Contemporaneous with the better-known and stylistically related Paracas culture to the north, Ocucaje burial artifacts include not only ceramics, baskets, and metal adornments, but also textiles and feathered garments for men. Rowe elsewhere has argued for pairing featherwork and textile arts into a single genre, and here proposes that shifting religious beliefs led to new iconography, more lavish burials, and the inclusion of rich textiles into mummy bundles and of feathers into ritual attire (47–48). Rowe discusses, among other items, ten brilliantly yellow-feathered figural ornaments that some scholars have described as appliqués for tunics, but which she argues are more likely hair ornaments (53). Each of these gold-colored figures has a different design, possibly representing face painting. Either way, the wonderful transmedial aspects of these figures are extraordinarily rich subjects for art-historical analysis.

Mary Frame treats the Nasca culture of Peru's South Coast, and specifically the ceremonial center of Cahuachi, where a cache was excavated in the late 1980s. Her essay, which focuses on forty dresses and eight shawls, brings to the fore important issues of gender in relation to feathers. Twenty-five dresses have feathered embellishments, suggesting the degree to which plumes, as a valuable material, were connected to women on symbolic and ritual levels. In fact, Frame claims that "birds were strongly associated with women" at Cahuachi (61). This is intriguing to say the least, since scholars have most commonly associated feathered adornments from across the ancient and colonial Americas with the ritual adornment of the male body. Frame, using a wonderfully detailed photograph of a woman's dress, shows how indigenous artists painted onto it a spectacular scene of birds feeding on cultivated plants, and argues for a larger conceptual linkage between birds and women (61). One wonders if there may be other textiles, from other sites, that might strengthen this argument. Additionally, Frame introduces the issue of feather dyeing, and the clear interest in Nasca featherworkers to produce colors that were *not* vibrant, *not* the color of birds from the rainforest, an issue that deserves further attention by scholars of the Andean world.

Mercedes Delgado's essay examines a mummy bundle excavated in 2002 from Cerrillos, in the upper Ica Valley of Peru's South Coast. It holds the feather-textile-wrapped bones of a woman, known as the *Winged Woman Shaman of Los Molino*, likely a priestess or healer, and a human-sized, feather-covered bird effigy at her side. This Wari burial is dated 725–730 CE, some eight or more centuries after the Paracas culture abandoned the site. Delgado reveals the complex construction of the entombment, which represented environmental regions: the rainforest, the coast, and the highlands. This woman likely served "as an intermediary between the community and the gods" (67). Delgado argues not just for the gendering of feathers per se, but shows how the materiality of feathers helps explain the role women played in the sacred arena in the Wari (and Paracas) cultures.

Santiago Uceda and King's co-authored essay addresses featherwork from the sprawling Chimú Kingdom of northern coastal Peru, from the twelfth to the late fifteenth century. They examine the burial offerings deposited at the Huaca de la Luna architectural complex, the largest find of Chimú featherwork from a controlled excavation. Looters left much of the feathered artifacts and textiles behind, preferring objects of precious metals over plumes. The primary informational damage of the pillaging was to remove the thousands of feathered objects from their original "findspots" (71). These feathered objects number in the thousands, produced by the Moche, the Sicán, the Chimú, and even the Inca (74). At least fifteen sets of these consisted of miniaturized male plumed garments, together with non-feathered, full-sized matching clothing; why these tiny artifacts were made raises captivating questions (75–76). Uceda and King propose that their small size indicates that many of these objects were intended as offerings for the deceased or the *huaca*.

Johan Reinhard's contribution turns to the role of feathers at the Inca mountaintop shrine of Lulluillaco, where three intact burials were excavated in 1999. At 6,739 meters, Lulluillaco remains one of the world's highest archeological sites (80). The burials contain three bodies—a boy, a girl, and a young woman—accompanied by male and female figurines of gold, silver, and shell, wearing miniature clothing associated with Inca nobility. Wrapped in textiles, the figurines feature feathered headdresses as large as their bodies. While most scholars have referred to these figurines as "dolls," and others have suggested they were "substitutes for human sacrifices," and others "symbolic representations of the *aqllakuna*, or chosen women," Reinhard argues that they functioned as offerings to deities and mountain gods (86).

In the final essay, Christine Giuntini moves into the laboratories of the modern museum, providing a useful overview of the material and biological issues relevant to the cultural study and conservation of ancient featherwork. Giuntini reminds readers that feathers are complex integumentary structures and that as media they require specialized knowledge of the avian world. Just as a specialist of Renaissance painting should understand pigments and binding media, scholars must have knowledge of feather morphology in order to comprehend its aesthetic possibilities. For example, the majority of ancient feathered objects in the Americas were made from the outer contour, or flight, feathers, which differ in texture, physical structure, and optical properties from the insulating down. The imperative to consult with ornithologists, to compare bird feathers, bodies, and skins, makes the conservation of these objects challenging. Giuntini also describes an ontology of natural and altered feather color, and provides a broad discussion of Andean featherworking techniques. This foundational essay is a first step toward understanding what makes Andean featherwork technically distinct from traditions in other parts of the Americas, such as in neighboring Amazonian regions or, farther afield, in Mesoamerica.

Collectively, the book's valuable contributions show that feathers are indeed "trouble" with which scholars are just beginning to grapple. How do we think through these objects not just archaeologically and physically, but contextually, by situating them within the visual, spatial, and sensorial environments of the Andean cultures that produced them? One way forward is to address featherwork in conceptual terms. What do extremes of scale—such as miniaturized tiny feathered tunics and fruits, or monumental feather panels—reveal about Andean featherwork traditions? How might we expand our discourses on the visual effects of plumes in Andean featherwork to account not just for iridescence and vibrancy but also the symmetry and mirroring created with the less spectacular feathers of the brown Muscovy duck? What are the relationships between Andean and Amazonian featherworking cultures, which share some similarities in feather choice and placement, and featherwork technologies such as *tapirage*? A technique that biochemically changes the color of a living bird's feathers, *tapirage* has been found in both ancient Andean and in indigenous Brazilian cultures from at least the sixteenth century onward; the link between the two, if any, is unknown.

Peruvian Featherworks is a superb resource for understanding how featherwork fits into the larger arena of Andean artistic practices. Foundationally, the volume addresses crucial issues concerning the functions and gendering of featherwork, and its intermediality. Only through expanding links with scholarship in archaeology, anthropology, conservation studies, ornithology, historical biology, ethnography, and museum studies, as *Peruvian Featherworks* ably demonstrates, will art historians better come to terms not just with the problematic nature of feathers, but also the creative possibilities that feathers offer for understanding larger sensorial and performative realms.

Amy Buono

Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of History of Art and Architecture, University of California, Santa Barbara

Please send comments about this review to editor.caareviews@collegeart.org.



Copyright © 2016 College Art Association. Reviews and essays are licensed to the public under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

By accessing and/or using caa.reviews, you accept and agree to abide by the Terms & Conditions.