Images Take Flight

Feather Art in Mexico and Europe 1400 – 1700

Alessandra Russo
Gerhard Wolf
Diana Fane
“Their Treasures Are the Feathers of Birds”: 
Tupinambá Featherwork 
and the Image of America

Amy J. Buono

There is no community of goods among them and they 
know nothing of money. Their treasures are the feathers 
of birds. He that has many feathers is rich . . .

Hans Staden, The True History of His Captivity, 1557

The Tupinambá: Featherworkers of Brazil
The Tupinambá peoples of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century 
Brazil were the first great featherworking culture of the Ameri-
cas encountered by Europeans. The Tupi were a semi-nomadic, 
aricultural society, inhabiting the forests along four thousand 
kilometers of the Brazilian coastline. Because Tupi culture was 
largely ephemeral, centering on ceremonial traditions that in-
volved dance, sound, movement, and adornment, they remain 
the least known of the major New World societies. Most traces 
of Tupi material culture have been lost, with the exception of a 
few ceramics and weapons, and, most significantly, many stun-
ning pieces of Tupi featherwork.

The most spectacular Tupi artifacts are eleven magnificent 
scarlet-feathered capes, produced during the early colonial 
period (1500–1700). All extant Tupi capes are housed in Euro-
pean museums, largely as remnants of early modern princely, 
scholarly, and mercantile collections. These cloaks, such as the 
two examples from the Nationalmuseet Etnografisk Samling 
in Copenhagen (Figs. 117 and 118), were produced mainly 
from the feathers of the guará or scarlet ibis, a wading bird 
of the Atlantic coast of South America that resembles a small 
and intensely colored flamingo. Highly skilled Tupi plumists 
imicked the form and appearance of both adult and baby 
ibises by choosing and individually modifying feathers of the 
bird for each part of the cape, and then using a range of binding 
techniques to create a ‘natural’ appearance, while even more 
elaborate techniques allowed the Tupi to change the color of 
feathers as they grew on the living bird.

Very quickly after Pedro Álvarez Cabral reached the 
shores of Brazil on 22 April 1500, the Tupi and their striking
featherwork became renowned in Renaissance Europe. This was in part because of the sensational nature of the tales of captivity, cannibalism, and nudity widely disseminated by chroniclers such as André Thevet (1502–1590), Jean de Léry (1536–1613), and Hans Staden (ca. 1525–ca. 1579), as well as engraver Théodore de Bry (1528–1598). Imagery of the Tupi, their rituals, and their capes provided the seeds for centuries of vivid and tenacious stereotypes of feather-bedded New World cultures, creating a great demand for these artifacts within the European marketplace.

Tupi feathered capes—called assojabá or guara-abucu in Old Tupi—served as ritual vestments used in religious performances within both coastal indigenous communities and, at a later date, mission settlements and markets. According to sixteenth-century chroniclers, the feathered mantles were worn in a vast array of ritual circumstances, serving as links to the ancestral realm during funerary rites, as signs of power and prestige in communal festivities, and as vestments in what period accounts describe as cannibalistic captive-captor rituals.

European explorers, merchants, naturalists, and missionaries, searching for signs of indigenous cultural practices that could be compared and contrasted with European ones, accorded great significance to the material, craft, and ritual use of Tupi featherwork, which they shipped back to Europe in large numbers. A pan-European market for Brazilian artifacts distributed the capes broadly, reaching collections in Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Though nominally under Portuguese dominion, control of Brazil's resources was hotly contested by several European countries, including Portugal itself, Spain, France, the Dutch Republic, and Germany. This breadth of European participation distinguishes Brazil's colonial past from that of other New World colonies.

The fact that only Tupi featherwork capes are found in European collections indicates their centrality as markers of Europe's historical relationship to Brazil's 'nature.' European engagement with the Tupi from the outset was fundamentally linked to the exploitation of Brazil's natural resources, especially brazilwood, which was used to manufacture dyestuffs vital to the European luxury cloth industry. Birds, feathers, and featherwork also served as signs of the economic bounty offered by Brazil in particular and the Americas in general.
Trading Hats
The first European account of Brazil and our earliest description of Tupi featherwork dates from Cabral’s arrival in 1500. The Portuguese bureaucrat Pêro Vaz de Caminha, who accompanied Cabral, described the naked and “dark brown” Tupinambá to the Portuguese king as looking “magnificent in their plumage.” From the outset, Caminha treats these and other Tupi feather artifacts as commodities, to be acquired and sent back to Portugal as evidence and as valuable collectibles. According to Caminha, this moment of first contact took the form of an amicable exchange of equivalent material goods—one article of clothing for another—when “Admiral Cabral” traded several European hats for two Tupi headdresses, one of which was made of “large” feathers and the other “a small crown of red and grey feathers, like a parrot’s.”

In a later passage, Caminha describes a second exchange of material goods with this Tupi community, justifying the voyage by providing rare and wonderful evidence of the “new” lands for the king of Portugal. The Portuguese fleet gave the Tupi “some varvels [trinkets]” in exchange for:

Some very large and beautiful red parrots and two small green ones, some capes of green feathers, and a cloth of many colours, also of feathers, a rather beautiful kind of material, as Your Majesty will see when you receive all these things, for the admiral says he is sending them to you.10

As described, this feathered “cloth of many colours” most closely resembles the cape now in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, though we have no circumstantial connection between the two.11 As the letter mentions, though, several capes were shipped back to Lisbon in 1501 on one of the fleet’s returning supply ships, the earliest date for which we can confirm that Tupi feathered artifacts were shipped to Europe as physical evidence of the existence of this new territory.12

The Jesuit ‘Accommodation’ of Feathers
Italy also had a critical relationship with the Lusophone Americas, primarily through the early dominance of Jesuits in the Brazilian missionary enterprise. The Jesuit Curia in Rome administered Brazilian missions, which in turn sent back to Europe both documentary information and material artifacts. Profoundly internationalized, with missionaries in Brazil coming from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and the Germanic lands, the Jesuits played a major role in disseminating information about the Tupi across Europe and in exporting Tupi artifacts to European collectors.

In Brazil, the Jesuits founded mission communities called aldeias, usually located in the countryside at some distance from European settlements. The strategy of conversion used
in the aldeias was based upon the concept of ‘accommodation,’ which emphasized the learning of native languages and the adoption and adaptation of aspects of indigenous culture within missionary practices. To this end, the Jesuits in Brazil primarily focused upon co-opting aspects of ritual performance, including carefully observing and at times encouraging the production of feathered adornments and the use of these vestments within their own Christian spaces.

In 1557, the Jesuit António Blázquez recounted to his superiors a series of extraordinary events he witnessed among the Tupi, leading up to the ritual execution of a captive enemy:

Six nude women came by the public square . . . making such gestures and shaking movements that they really did seem like demons. From head to feet they were covered with red feathers. On their heads they wore carochas [Inquisition-like caps] of yellow feathers. On their backs they wore an armful of feathers that appeared like a horse’s mane, and to animate the celebration they played flutes made from the shinbones of their slain enemies. With this attire they walked around barking like dogs and faking speech with so many mimes that I do not know with what I could compare them. All of these acts took place six or eight days before the killing.13

The inhabitants of this Bahian aldeia were thus baptized while attired in their own feathered adornments, an exemplary demonstration of the accommodation of feathers in the new Jesuit Christian complex of colonial Brazil. The fact that the Jesuits exploited the use of Tupi feathered capes in a baptismal ritual indicates that they understood that the cultural significance of Tupi featherwork within indigenous spiritually transformative rituals could be transferred to a Christian context.

These stories shed light on the process of how meanings were formed as Tupi objects moved from Brazil to Europe. Through this exchange process, the Tupi feathered capes sent to Europe not only constituted signs of encounters with
otherness of the new territories and their inhabitants, but also served as material evidence of the success of the Jesuit missionary enterprise. That success was predicated upon the coexistence of Tupi and European ritual objects within the missionary space. The Jesuits were thus key conveyors and mediators of Tupi culture, and as late as 1610 were involved in the only traceable transport of Tupi feathered capes to Europe.18

Acting Tupinambá in Stuttgart
Tupi capes served a variety of functions when re-deployed in performances for European courts, even in places without direct involvement in New World colonization. At the same time that they were accessioned into early modern collections, Tupi feathered capes were used ceremonially and ritually within European contexts, during which new meanings were construed for them.19 A striking example of this is the 1599 “Queen of
feathered costumes for an audience of six thousand. The festivity was staged as a triumphal entry on the occasion of a territorial council, or Diet. The Diet’s task was to repair the troubled political relationship between the duke and the minor nobility of Württemberg, after he had abrogated a treaty sharing power among the duke, the minor nobility, and the towns, in favor of a centralized administration and economy. In this regard, the procession ritually served to confirm the newly redefined authority and magnificence of the ruler and to establish anew the social hierarchy of the court and the Estates.\textsuperscript{31}

The Stuttgart procession is documented in a series of watercolors that were probably the working sketches used in planning and designing the festivities (Figs. 116 and 119–124).\textsuperscript{32} The watercolors form a single, long frieze, depicting the sequence of characters in the procession, each labeled with the name of the person who wore that costume. The courtiers and principal participants at the Diet are ordered in a clear hierarchy of social precedence, thus reenacting the political structure of the court and the duchy, which was the point of the Diet in the first place.

Some of the most colorful and striking figures are shown wearing Tupi feathered capes, which are depicted with remarkable ethnographic accuracy, likely copied directly from printed illustrations of various New World cultures or possibly even from the objects themselves, as, for example, the Mexico shield in Stuttgart (Fig. 121 and see Fig. 73 and 74). A technical comparison of the particular capes with the surviving Tupi feathered cloaks confirms that, although the Stuttgart objects are lost, they were strikingly similar to the capes now housed in Copenhagen and Milan.

Why would European aristocrats in a land-locked German principality want to dress up as (reputed) cannibals? The use
of the Tupi costumes and the fiction of the “Queen of America” parade, in part served as a kind of game, lightening the mood of the negotiations, but still driving home the authority of the prince. But the ducal court ritually and metaphorically used the representation of America in general, and the Tupinambá in particular, as a primitive other and largely mythical kingdom upon which they could inscribe their political structure and act out a distanced and abstracted version of their community.

The Stuttgart procession and similar events elsewhere in Europe help illustrate the fact that New World colonialism also affected European culture, politics, and identity, that Europe also became a colonial space in the aftermath of early modern expansion.

Tupi feathered capes embodied different types of knowledge for their various owners and viewers. As reported by colonial accounts, the Tupi seem to have valued the capes as
essential components in highly charged religious and communal ceremonies, and as precious possessions. Missionaries and merchants carried Tupi plumage back to Europe as material evidence of their evangelical success and as commercial evidence of the new economic potential of the territories. In Europe, merchants sold and traded feathered artifacts, scholars and collectors studied them, and courtiers performed in them. For the Tupi, the ibis-feather capes and the rituals associated with them served to establish their own communities and social orders within a colonial world, both outside and within Christianity. Period scholars included them into their studies and employed them in the furtherance of their social and intellectual networks. For the courtiers at Stuttgart, Tupi featherwork served as ritual garments for play-acting and as distancing devices to reconfirm their social hierarchies and political dominance.

In modern times these objects have again lived very different lives. As recently as 2000, a hotly disputed controversy arose when one of the Copenhagen capes was loaned to São Paulo, Brazil, for an exhibition commemorating Cabral's arrival in 1500. A politically active Brazilian indigenous community from Bahia—the Tupinambá of Olivença—sent emissaries to the exhibition and staged protests demanding that Brazil take possession of what they described as "their sacred mantle." This group, which is engaged in a larger struggle for legitimacy and land rights, sees the Tupi cloak as a manifestation of a spiritual force for their community and as a key marker of their historical ethnic identity. Despite the efforts of the Tupinambá of Olivença community, the cape returned to Copenhagen after the exhibition. The contemporary relevance of the Tupi capes to Brazilian national identity derives from this long colonial history of these exiled feathered objects. Whatever the ultimate destiny of these artifacts might be, they remain to this day no less culturally relevant and ritually potent than they were for their original makers and intervening owners.


3. The eleven extant Tupi capes are located in the: Nationalmuseet, Ethnografisk Samling, Copenhagen (EHS931, EHS932, EHS933, EHS934, EHS935), Museum der Kulturen, Basel (N. Ivb6577), Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, Brussels (AMM 3782), Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, Brussels (N. 281, 288), Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (N. 173 8), Museo di Storia Naturale, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Florence (N. 281 and 288), and “Museu Seottalianum”, Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano, Milan (no inventory number). For an extended technical and cultural analysis of these eleven capes, see Anna J. Buono, Feathered Identities and Plummed Performances: Tupinambã Interculture in Early Modern Brazil and Europe, PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2007.

4. Other important feathers used in Tupi capes came from the scarlet macaw, military macaw, and oropendola blackbird. For the standard Brazilian ornithology, see Helmut Sick (ed.), Ornithologia Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Nova Fronteira, 1997.


6. In the Old Tupi dictionary we find assojeba (cloak or garment of feathers) and guamaica (long cloak of feathers). See Luis Cádas Thórczy (ed.), Dicionário Tupi-Português com esboço de gramática, de Tupi-Brasileiro, São Paulo, Sociedade de Linguística Brasileira, 1984, p. 69 and 103.


10. Ibid., p. 34.

11. My thanks to Professor Laura Lourenço-Minelli for her kind assistance in gaining access to the Tupi capes in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana.

12. It is difficult to ascertain the form of the textile that Caminha describes as a feathered “cloth of many colours.” Though it seems likely that Caminha’s cloth is a type of artifact that no longer exists, it is also possible that it may have been related to the rectangular “blankets” made of various feathers, such as that in Copenhagen (EHS932) and Florence (EHS935), Museo di Storia Naturale, Università degli Studi di Firenze.


14. Nationalmuseet, Ethnografisk Samling, Copenhagen, Inv. no. EHS932.


18. Archivum Roman Societatis Iesu (ARI), Rome, Bras. 84, fol. 99r–100r (modern pagination, pp. 312–355).


20. This procession, and accompanying watercolor, has been meticulously examined in the important study by Elke Bujak, Neue Welten in europäischen Sammlungen: Afrikanische und Americana in Kunst- und Kabinettsmuseum 2, 1670, Stuttgart, Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH, 2004.


22. This is a quill drawing on paper with bistre, watercolor, opaque color (gold), and gold. Since the drawing exhibits heavy wear (cracks of ink, punctures, corrections, etc.), Bujak suggests that it was used as a sketchbook for the actual procession, likely hanging on the wall. The script even names individual actors used in the procession: Bujak, Neue Welten, pp. 149–160. This watercolor is now housed in Weimar at the Stiftung Weimarer Klassik und Kunstsammlungen, Schlossmuseum, Graphische Sammlung. 1588/89, 29.6 x 30.5 cm; (11¾ x 12½ in.)

