

# The Art of *Amanteca* Or Feather Craftspeople

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The first feather I remember stuck out of my mother's hat which she had put on to go out one evening. It was at a jaunty angle and certainly added a degree of panache to what was really a rather straightforward woman's style hat tidily perched on the top of her head with a short veil flowing down over her eyes. Little did I realize, some half a century ago, that while feathers were regularly used as adornment and decoration in Europe and in North America, there was a rich and sophisticated craft of feathers where the color saturated plumes of birds like the hummingbird, Guatemalan quetzal, toucan, macaw, Honduran parakeet and others now extinct were used like an artist's palette. That craft was essentially Mexican and had been brought to the level of art in Amantla, the neighborhood in Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztecs, where the *amanteca*, or feather craftspeople, worked.

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Indeed among the Aztecs, featherwork was regarded as perhaps their greatest art form. The shields and capes of the Aztec warriors were decorated in resplendent figurative designs with feathers attached by a paste or with needle and thread. The cloth favored by the nobility was thread wound with feathers. The designs themselves indicated the social status of the citizen. Feathers were also objects of tribute or booty and often used as currency just as the cacao bean was. Since featherwork was seen as a form of wealth, fertility, power and status, feathers were kept in the storerooms of the aristocracy; they were also used to lavishly decorate palaces, thrones, idols at festival time and dancers performing religious ceremonies. Cortés was so taken with the featherwork of the Aztecs that in his second letter to Charles V of Spain, he described some of the feathered gifts he was sending to him. King Charles was impressed and shared some with his Hapsburg relatives which is why some arti-



*Saint Rita of Casia*, seventeenth century, 22 x 15 cm. National Museum of Anthropology Collection.

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**Above:** Replica of the Ambras Headdress, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. (The original is in Vienna's Museum of Ethnography.)

facts are found in European museums today.

There are eight surviving pieces of Aztec featherwork in the twentieth century and five are shields. There are two very famous shields in the Stuttgart Museum. But the most famous one of all which was discovered in the eighteenth century is currently in the Vienna Museum fur Volkerkunde. In the Museum of Ethnography in Vienna, even after 500 years one can see Montezuma's vivid green headdress, a ceremonial coat of arms and a great fan which was probably used by an aristocrat's servant to keep the flies off him. There is also a shield in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. It is circular with the blue face of a

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god with goggle eyes and fangs. It's scary and it was meant to be, as if it communicated to the viewer the ferocity of the Aztec gods and the ignominious death to come to the loser in battle who would later be sacrificed to those gods.

After the Conquest the Franciscans and Augustinians sustained the featherwork tradition by displacing it from Aztec paganism to liturgical clothing, church altars and feather mosaics of saintly images. Contrary to what some scholars thought years ago, the art of featherwork was alive and vital throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Christian missionaries provided both German and Dutch woodcuts, metal engravings and Spanish liturgical books which served as inspira-



tion for native artists by providing new devotional images like the ones of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Throughout the world there are famous surviving masterpieces of this period. In Mexico, in the Archbishopric of the Puebla Cathedral in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, often called the Octagonal Chapel, there is a well-known mosaic of St. John the Baptist, St. Peter, St. Francis of Assisi and of the Holy Family. The Holy Family mosaic has hummingbird feathers in the background with gold leaf around the edges of the vestments and the haloes and wings of the angels who are holding small gold crowns over the heads of the central figures in the style of some Flemish paintings. Another brilliant example is the work *Shrine of Our Lady of Remedies* in the National History Museum in Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City. Also in the capital, there is a 40 cm by 31 cm seventeenth century Pietá of the Virgin holding her dead Son in her lap in the Franz Mayer Museum. Finally, there is the Virgin of Sorrow often referred to as "The Doll's House" in the Puebla University Museum.

Examples of this compelling and vibrant colonial art form are scattered throughout the world in Italy, Spain, France, Austria, Germany and the United States. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there is a triptych of enameled gold with the scene of the crucifixion in carved wood on a background of iridescent feathers. In the Los Angeles County Museum there is a chalice made of gold plated silver and rock cristal decorated with wooden sculptures of the apostles placed in niches lined with feathers. Of course, the

Vatican has a number of works which were sent to the Pope by the religious authorities in New Spain for storage and display.

Since the Indians used hieroglyphics in their codices, they were accustomed to doing extraordinarily detailed work in miniscule enclosed spaces. Using feathers like pigment, they managed to integrate thousands upon thousands of feather wisps, many smaller than the size of a pinhead, into representations of hair, flowers, skies and landscapes in subtly differentiated tonalities.

The work of the great French impressionists comes to mind as one looks at this art. Feathers have a minute complex structure. Their brilliant pigments are deposited in the protein or keratin which constitutes the feather. When sunlight shines on and through them, the light is prismatically dispersed with the visual effect of a sheen. It is a pyrotechnical display of concentrated color with suggestions of subtle dramatic energy. More

than any other characteristic perhaps, it is the energy of the gradations of color that define this work.

Unfortunately, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this great art form became moribund as it was displaced by oil painting. Perhaps this is one of the great tragedies of Mexican art. In spite of the continuing cultural adaptations that indigenous artists made to European art forms, the technology of oils and finally the modern printing process almost destroyed one of the most sophisticated art forms humankind has ever invented.

But the *amantecas* continued to show their aesthetic flexibility. After 1830, for example, some feather artists began to use colored lithograph prints as a base, covering them with feathers and extending the image on a backing of sheet metal like the *retablo*. At other times, they used colored cutout figures taken from popular lithographs of the day. But these newer machine manufactured technologies were undermining the old methods and these newer ersatz creations lack the concentrated visual power of great featherwork craft.

The story of the *amantecas* should rightly end with the tyranny and triumph of the modern mass produced image over an old and honored crafted art form. But it doesn't. While featherwork, even when defined simply as a craft, is not currently practiced on a large scale in Mexico, the tradition remains alive in the hands of some contemporary Mexican craftspeople. The Tzotzils of Zinacantán, for example, adorn garments with feathers as do the other Mayas in the Highlands of Chiapas, particularly for their wedding *huipils*.

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This paper comes  
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the paper tree.



Today, certainly, the craft of featherworking continues in two regions of Mexico: the Toluca Valley and in Tlaxcala, Puebla. Clearly, the quality of the yarn, the weaving and the feather ornamentation are not what they were in pre-Hispanic times. Using a back-strap loom, the cotton thread is spun together with down. After lengths of cloth are produced, they are used as the base for appliqué. There are decorative motifs of various dyed feathered braids which have been tinted blue, red and yellow which are placed into the background of overall white down.

Traditional featherworking also continues in some communities like the Huicholes of Nayarit, who, because of their social and physical isolation in the mountains, have retained the integrity of many aspects of their culture. In the Huichol mythology natural phenomena are personified as divine beings who in turn are related to specific colors and plumages. Votive arrows are made and used in religious ceremonies because they are seen as spiritual messengers to the gods who grant protection.

In their culture, feathers retain their pre-Hispanic cultural meaning and some wonderful arrows made of eagle feathers can be seen in the National Museum of Anthropology. The contemporary performers in the Dance of the Shells also still make feathered shields and use them as part of their headpieces.

If one had to date the “renaissance” of featherworking in this century in

terms of a resurgence of the form as a fine art, it would probably begin in 1920 when Manuel Gamio, the great Mexican historian and archaeologist, designed and supervised the construction of two mural patterns, one with an Aztec serpent design and the other with



José Rodríguez, *Coat-of-Arms with Emblems*, 118 x 91 cm, 1829, National Museum of Anthropology Collection.

a Mayan serpent. Joaquín Villasana carried out Gamio’s design on black silk with quetzal feathers on gold, silver and colored silks. Subsequently other contemporary Mexican artists like the weaver Carmen Podín became interested in the medium. In the late 1970s and early 1980s she exhibited feathered robes, capes, shields and collages in the capital but stopped producing in the late 1980s because of the difficulty of finding feathers.

The process of preparing the feathers when they can be found is painstaking because they are first boiled in water to remove all of the impurities like grease, next rinsed, and then submerged again in dyed water with salt or sometimes Campeche wax used as a fixative to

bind them. A number of feather artists use *amate* paper as their canvas or backing. This paper comes from the Mexican fig tree or what the Aztecs called *amacuahuitl*, the paper tree. From the Mendoza Codex, we know that during the reign of Montezuma the Aztecs were using about half a million sheets of paper per year for legal documents, tribute records, civil archives, poetry, etc. Paper making continues in towns such as the small Otomí village of San Pablito near Chicontepec in Veracruz. As you approach the village, you can hear the sound of clapping caused by the women beating on a soft substance, wood fibers, with wooden boards. Using the mulberry and wild fig tree, the Otomís make the paper by pulling the bark off the trees, separating the inner bark from

the outer one, boiling the bark in ash water or lime, and finally rinsing the fibers which are then spread on a wooden board and beaten until they are felted together.

The Aztecs used a glue they called *amatzantli*. This glue was made from orchid bulbs. They sliced fresh bulbs, dried them in the sun and then ground them up. These particles were carefully sifted and the resultant powder mixed with cold water, five parts water to one



part powder. Naturally other kinds of fixatives and materials for backing are used today. Jorge Castillo, for example, a feather artist from Taxco, makes a design by punching holes into a thick sheet of silver and then by inserting into the sheet feathers of various colors which have been coated with a polyester resin.

Artists like Juan Carlos Ortiz from Puebla have solved the feather problem by having their own aviaries. He traces the figure he wants to represent and then glues the feathers onto it from the birds he raises. Gabriel Olay Olay, who lives in Tlalpujaura, Michoacán, works in a similar fashion. Many of his compositions are in the Morelia Cultural Center. In 1980 Carmen Padín had a major show of 32 feather pieces in the Modern Art Museum in Mexico City for which an interesting catalogue was published, *Carmen Padín: Thirty-two Works of Feather Art of Today Using Different Techniques*.

If we think of some of the works of contemporary U.S. artists like Frank Stella and Robert Rauschenberg who have incorporated physical objects like part of an automobile hood right onto the canvas itself, featherworking in this sense is quite modern because it allows the artist to play with space, perspective, tactility, collage and color in strikingly innovative ways.

Some other contemporary Mexican artists, like Aurelio Franco Obregón from San Andrés, Tuxtla, use feathers as part of their sculptures. He makes sculptures of clay and wax and then covers the sculpted objects with feathers. In 1990 he had a major exhibit of 26 of his pieces in Mexico City. In that same year,



*The Immaculate Conception*, 19 x 12 cm, nineteenth century, National Museum of Anthropology Collection.

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Olay Ramos exhibited in the National Museum of Anthropology. In the town of San Francisco del Rincón in the state of Guanajuato, Josefina Ortega Salcedo has developed her own method of placing a base of light-colored feathers on paper and then cutting sections of drawings out of Chinese tissue paper of various colors and covering these drawings with feathers of the same color. Everything is glued together, and she outlines her forms with a dark line made of feathers to conceal the seams. She recently stopped working in the medium, however, because of the time and expense.

There is still a good deal of featherworking in places like Michoacán but it is increasingly difficult today to find artists of stature working in this medium. What has happened is that an art related to, but really quite different from featherwork, *popote*, has emerged. *Popote* is like featherwork because craftspeople construct a complex mosaic of aniline colored straws analogous to feathers which are pressed down on wax covered boards. The visual effect is not nearly as dramatically striking, of course, but many of the techniques employed are identical. These *popote* products can be found for sale in towns near the capital but they are more like a minor and interesting craft variant on the art of the great feathered works Mexico has produced in the past.

An excellent book, *El Arte Plumaria en México* (The Art of Featherwork in Mexico) (1993) has been published by the Fomento Cultural Banamex. Edited by Teresa Castelló Yturbe and written by a group of gifted scholars, it is a comprehensive historic study of the craft

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Red macaw (Ara Macao).

from the time of the Aztecs to the present. The full color photographic illustrations are striking, and hopefully this study will motivate and inspire others to continue a tradition that is uniquely Mexican.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, this publication might be an important step in having a major national retrospective and international traveling exhibition on the art of featherwork through the last 500 years to the present day. The important masterpieces of this genre which, like the work of some great female artists have been basically unrecognized and totally ignored in the history of Western art, could be collected from both Mexico and the other countries where they can be found.<sup>2</sup> Then the public could celebrate them for the works of genius they truly are.

If we wish to believe the great ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagun's account in *The Florentine Codex* of the warrior's soul's progress through the underworld, then nothing could make Mexico's great Aztec forebears happier:

Those killed in battle go to heaven... and after four years, the souls of these dead were transformed into all sorts of birds with gorgeous radiant plumage. They fed from the flowers in heaven as they had done on earth, like hummingbirds. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>While Mexico was not the only country involved in featherwork, it certainly brought this art form to its highest level.

<sup>2</sup>It is interesting to note that *amanteca* is feminine suggesting that perhaps many, if not most, of these artists, might have been women.