

Making Feather-Work across Early Modern Cultures

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The present sub-project explores the early modern world of feather-working and leads to a number of publications that combine in-depth archival research with both object-centred approaches and new methodological trajectories. Feather-work is commonly associated with indigenous cultures. The arrival of New World feathers in late fifteenth-century Europe, however, caused pure excitement across the entire continent. One book chapter (in press) thus reconsiders the aesthetic appreciation of New World feathers in Renaissance Europe. Another journal article (under review) focuses on colonial Peru and discusses the early modern nexus between feather-work and textiles. Whilst Peruvian feather-work has been defined as pre-Columbian objects, this paper presents new textual, visual, and material evidence that prove feather-work's significance for the material culture of colonial Peru. These findings serve to initiate a broader debate on the dynamics of cultural encounters in the Ibero-American world that also inform a separate article on early modern Spanish feather-working which is very well underway. Another article, jointly written by Ulinka Rublack and Stefan Hanß, explores the impact of American feathers on Central European ornithological knowledge and visual culture at a sixteenth-century court in Germany. Another case study of a seventeenth-century Protestant court (work in progress) will complement our understanding of the connected and global stories of feathers, feathered artefacts, and birds.

My contribution to the joint volume of the project charts, for the very first time, the thus far unknown history of early modern European feather-working in its relationship with the world of matter and making. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, people were astonishingly eager to purchase, collect, and store feathers as much as they invested high sums of money, lots of time, and plenty of energy in the material transformation, manufacturing and processing of feathers. In consequence, European artisans increasingly specialized in feather-working throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Focusing on feather-workers' activities in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, this chapter studies the people, labour organization, cross-geographical contacts, materials, techniques, and products of this craft between 1500 and 1800.

In all my contributions and publications on early modern feather-working, I reconsider our understanding of the presence, transformation, challenges, and cross-cultural realities of early modern material worlds. Furthermore, I explore new methodological trajectories and heuristic tools in material culture studies such as the usage of digital microscopes, remaking experiments or historians' collaboration with artisans.