

# Feathers, cognition and global consumerism in colonial Amazonia

May 1 2024

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Amazonia is the home of the largest variety of birds in the world. In such a unique environment, craft cultures have flourished by translating the beauty and creativity of environmental materials like feathers into stunning pieces of art.

An [article](#) titled "The Material Creativity of Affective Artifacts in the Dutch Colonial World" in *Current Anthropology* by Stefan Hanß of the University of Manchester, examines artisanal featherwork within the context of early modern colonialism and globalization. These structures, Hanß writes, both engendered and endangered material creativity and knowledge.

In the article, Hanß examines how new ways of handling, trading, and thinking with feathers emerged in colonial Dutch Brazil. "Dutch colonial encounters with South American enviromateriality," Hanß notes, "stirred European appreciation of and engagement with the creative and transformative power of natural environments."

As a result, art like featherwork became a valuable commodity. The resulting global exploitation of Amazonian birds, feathers, and indigenous knowledge transformed Amazonian life and impacted South American biodiversity.

To fully capture the cognitive achievements of 17th-century featherworkers, Hanß combines in-depth archival research with affect theory and imaging analysis conducted by the John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester.

This [new methodology](#) is exemplified by the research done on the

Messel Standing Feather Fan of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, an object whose history reflects the global scale of the trade in materials, the transmission of artisanal knowledge, and the blurred boundaries of consumer cultures in the seventeenth-century Dutch Empire.

Ultimately, the article "highlights the immeasurable global, creative potential of South American biodiversity and [cultural diversity](#), adding insights into the consequences of its growing extinction today."

**More information:** Stefan Hanß, The Material Creativity of Affective Artifacts in the Dutch Colonial World, *Current Anthropology* (2024).  
[DOI: 10.1086/729605](https://doi.org/10.1086/729605)

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Feathers, cognition and global consumerism in colonial Amazonia (2024, May 1)  
retrieved 29 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-feathers-cognition-global-consumerism-colonial.html>

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