“Biocultural knowledge, power and poetics in South American featherwork”

PhD Studentship within the AHRC Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM)

Lead Supervisors: Prof Luciana Martins (Birkbeck), Dr Laura Van Broekhoven (Pitt Rivers Museum)
Second Supervisors: Dr Carmen Fracchia (Birkbeck), Prof Andrew Gosler (Institute of Human Sciences, Oxford), Jeremy Uden (Pitt Rivers Museum)

1. The Project

The focus of this doctoral project is on South American objects made by Indigenous peoples out of feathers, or with feathers attached, in the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) collections. Feathered ornaments result from specific combinations of symbolic meanings associated with feathers’ particular colours, sizes and shapes, the different degrees that birds are esteemed by particular cultures, the occasions on which they are used (religious, shamanic or civil), the place they are worn, etc. (Escobar 2007). ‘A striking feature of the Indian cultures of South America’ – said the anthropologist Métraux (1944) – ‘is the extensive use of feathers both for body ornaments and for decorations of bodies and other artefacts’. And he continued: ‘Nowhere have feathers been worked more lavishly or with greater skill than there.’

Yet while visitors gazing at the featherwork displays in the PRM might marvel at the sheer variety of objects’ forms and colours, the multitude of links between particular artefacts, peoples and places remain hidden; visitors are unable to discern and trace specific object histories, meanings and geographies (Gosden and Larson 2007). Exploring South American featherwork in the PRM collections, this interdisciplinary, practice-based doctoral project will seek to develop ways of telling histories of specific objects that shed light not only on the historical processes of collection in the field and the ‘lives’ of the objects in the museum, but also on contemporary debates on Indigenous cultural identity, sovereignty and heritage rights (Françozo 2012), as well as the dynamic relationships among Indigenous peoples, birds, and environments. The project aims to provide understanding of these feathered artefacts as historical biocultural objects, which afford ways of telling the histories in which biodiversity emerges. As Tsing (2012) argues, ‘plants and animals are part of a human disturbance regime; they have a contaminated history.’

This project is timely. The loss of biocultural diversity in South America has accelerated significantly in recent years, with satellite images showing fierce fires engulfing the heart of the continent’s forests and savanna. Although fires are customary in the region, ‘the unusually severe scale of fires corresponded to direct government encouragement’, specifically in Brazil and Bolivia (Blair 2019), who favour agribusiness, mining, and hydroelectric megaprojects in detriment of the globally significant richness of biodiversity, Indigenous cultural heritage and territorial rights. In current Indigenous resistance movements, feathered artefacts, alongside face paint and music, are being used as tools for empowerment. Showing agency grounded in Indigenous identity, this self-representation places objects held in museum stores central to present day Indigenous resistance movements.

Investigating the PRM’s feathered objects, associated archives and photographic collections (such as Moser and Tayler’s in Colombia, Rivière’s in Surinam and Posey’s in Brazil), the project will develop, in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, a selected case study as the basis of curatorial interventions in
the PRM, aiming at empowering Indigenous groups, showcasing their ways of defending the natural world and securing a sustainable way of lifegiving. Posey’s work is of particular relevance here, given his research on the bioethics of ethnobiology and support for Indigenous intellectual property rights. Also important is the object collection of Audrey Butt Colson, for her support of the Indigenous peoples’ fight for land rights.

2. Research Context

In the twentieth-first century, new curatorial practices of Indigenous communities are gradually confronting ethnographic museums’ neo-colonial legacy. Increasingly, museum curators are working towards stimulating visitors to think critically about political issues (López-Garcés et al. 2017). Decolonising the museum also means developing collaborative curatorial practices that are inserted in processes of reconciliation and reparation of historically fractured relations. Within this context, this doctoral project seeks to provide understanding of South American featherwork as historical biocultural objects, that is, objects that ‘represent dynamic relationships among peoples, biota, end environments’ (Salick, Konchar and Nesbitt 2014). A serious shortcoming of much previous anthropological research on feathered objects is to regard them simply as diverse objects, without serious engagement with the issue of which species the feather came from, which can easily lead to a failure to understand the anthropological significance of the object derived from feathers of particular species. Recent interdisciplinary projects on biocultural collections have shown that, by bringing together natural scientists, researchers from the social sciences, arts and humanities, and Indigenous researchers, the artefacts that were collected within a framework of colonial science and exploration might become tools of cultural resilience, enabling the recovery of social, cultural and environmental practices (Fonseca-Kruel at al. 2019, Van Broekhoven 2019).

3. Aims and objectives

i) To contribute to new collaborative curatorial practices for working with biocultural collections; ii) To provide insights into environmental practices, politics and poetics of Indigenous featherwork in South America; iii) To trace the historical itineraries of specific feathered objects from South America in the PRM Collection, linking them with particular bird ecologies; iv) To produce curatorial interventions in featherwork displays at the PRM that would present to the public the research findings in items ii and iii above and help decolonise current displays.

4. Methodology

The development of this research project will involve the following stages: i) Review of key literature on decolonising the museum; biocultural collections; ethno-ornithology; Indigenous South American featherwork; history of collecting expeditions; ii) Survey of South American featherwork at PRM’s object catalogue, archival and photographic holdings; iii) Identification of relevant case study and development of research questions; iv) Identification of key contacts for access to Indigenous communities; v) Fieldwork in South America (the form and duration will depend on the case study selected, final decisions to be made at the end of Year 1); vi) Working with Indigenous representatives, development of the context and concept for curatorial interventions, which might involve the use of the EWA (Ethno-ornithology World Atlas) for exchanges with, and contributions from, Indigenous communities (with Internet access) in two ways: a) use EWA as a transparent data-sharing portal between the student and the community-researchers for mutual commentary; b) potential entry into the Creative Commons’ initiatives for culturally-specific licenses and labels; vii) Production of curatorial display interventions with PRM curatorial team (these might take the form of a small exhibition; or changes to current display case on Lower Gallery east wall; e.g. augmented reality trails, the co-development of educational trails, linking natural history and
ethnographic collections) and a virtual exhibition on South American Artefacts & Birds in EWA (the choice of what the best output will depend on the wishes of the Indigenous representatives and will be developed in co-creation); vii) Critical reflection on display interventions and collaborative curatorial practice, and writing up of the thesis.

5. Outcomes

The studentship will result in: i) a Doctoral thesis (submitted by the end of Year 3); ii) a curatorial project, in collaboration with Indigenous communities (Years 1-2) iii) curatorial interventions at PRM featherwork displays (Years 2-3); iv) contributions to PRM’s Photograph and Manuscript Collections blog, and to Object and Photograph collections catalogue (Years 1-3); v) creation of a virtual exhibition on South American Artefacts & Birds in EWA (Years 2-3); vi) a public gallery talk at PRM (Year 3); vii) academic presentations at conferences or seminar series (Year 3).

6. Fieldwork

This studentship will involve a period of fieldwork in South America. Although the exact period of the visit and the country/ies will depend on decisions concerning the location of the case study selected in the course of the research, it is estimated that a period equivalent to 3 months will be required. Application for fieldwork funding sources will be made to external bodies.

7. Training and Development

The project is designed to provide a Masters-level candidate with training in and experience of innovative collections-based research in a cross-cultural context. A programme of generic and project-specific research training will be provided in the first year of the project. This might include the following: development of Spanish and/or Portuguese language skills; Audio-Visual Practice as Research course, Derek Jarman Lab, Birkbeck, University of London; Birds of a Feather: An Introduction to Ornithology course, Department for Continuing Education, Oxford University; IT Services courses, Oxford University; Manual handling and Database training (PRM).

8. References


1 The curatorial components can be between 50-70% of the submission. The exact percentage of curatorial and written will be decided at upgrade.


