Feathers as decoration in European history

A Today, we do not generally associate feathers with the military in Europe, yet history shows that in fact feathers have played an intriguing role in European military clothing. The Bersaglieri of the Italian Army, for example, still wear a bunch of long black feathers in their hats hanging down to one side, while British fusiliers have a clipped feather plume whose colour varies according to their regiment. The Royalists in the English Civil War adorned their headgear with ostrich feathers. 'Historically, feathers were an incredibly expressive accessory for men,' observes Cambridge historian, Professor Ulinka Rublack. 'Nobody has really looked at why this was the case. That's a story that I want to tell.'

Rublack is beginning to study the use of featherwork in early modern fashion as part of a joint project between the Universities of Cambridge, Basel and Bern. To the outsider, its preoccupations (her co-researchers are studying gold, glass and veils) might seem surprising. Yet such materials sustained significant economies and expertise.

B Rublack has spotted that something unusual started to happen with feathers during the 16th century. In 1500, they were barely worn at all in Europe; 100 years later they had become an indispensable accessory for the fashionable European man. In prosperous trading centres, the citizens started wearing hats bedecked with feathers from cranes and swallows. Headgear was specially manufactured so that feathers could be inserted more easily. By 1573, Plantin's Flemish–French dictionary was even obliged to offer words to describe people who chose not to wear them, recommending such terms as: 'the featherless' and 'unfeathered'.

Featherworking became big business. From Prague and Nuremberg to Paris and Madrid, people started to make a living from decorating feathers for clothing. Impressive efforts went into dyeing them. A 1548 recipe recommends using ashes, lead monoxide and river water to create a 'very beautiful' black, for example.

C Why this happened will become clearer as Rublack's project develops. One crucial driver, however, was exploration – the discovery of new lands, especially in South America. Compared with many of the other species that early European colonists encountered, exotic birds could be captured, transported and kept with relative ease. Europe experienced a sudden 'bird-craze', as exotic birds became a relatively common sight in the continent's largest markets.

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Given the link with new territories and conquest, ruling elites wore feathers partly to express their power and reach. But there were also more complex reasons. In 1599, for example, Duke Frederick of Württemberg held a display at his court at which he personally appeared wearing a costume covered in exotic feathers and representing the Americas. This was not just a symbol of power, but of cultural connectedness, Rublack suggests: 'The message seems to be that he was embracing the global in a duchy that was quite insular and territorial.'

D Nor were feathers worn by the powerful alone. In 1530, a legislative assembly at Augsburg imposed restrictions on peasants and traders adopting what it clearly felt should be an elite fashion. The measure did not last, perhaps because health manuals of the era recommended feathers could keep the wearer safe from 'bad' air – cold, miasma, damp or excessive heat – all of which were regarded as hazardous. During the 1550s, Eleanor of Toledo had hats made from peacock feathers to keep her dry in the rain. Gradually, feathers came to indicate that the wearer was healthy and civilised. Artists and musicians took to wearing them as a mark of subtlety and style.

E As with most fads, this enthusiasm eventually wore off. By the mid-17th century, feathers were out of style, with one striking exception. Within the armies of Europe feathers remained an essential part of military costume.

Rublack thinks that there may have been several reasons for this strange contradiction. 'It's associated with the notion of graceful warfaring,' she says. 'This was a period when there were no standing armies and it was hard to draft soldiers. One solution was to aestheticise the military, to make it seem graceful and powerful.' Feathers became associated with the idea of an art of warfare.

They were also already a part of military garb among many native American peoples and in the Ottoman empire. Rublack believes that just as some of these cultures considered the feathers of certain birds to be highly significant, and sometimes sacred, European soldiers saw the feathers as imparting noble passions, bravery and courage.

F In time, her research may therefore reveal a tension about the ongoing use of feathers in this unlikely context. But, as she also notes, she is perhaps the first historian to have spotted the curious emotional resonance of feathers in military fashion at all. All this shows a sea-change in methodologies: historians now chart the ways in which our identities are shaped through deep connections with 'stuff' – the material objects that are parts of our lives.

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Questions 34–36

*Choose the correct letter, **A**, **B**, **C** or **D**.*

Write the correct letter in boxes 34–36 on your answer sheet.

34 In Section B, what information is given about the use of feathers in the 16th century?

- **A** Some were not real feathers, but imitations.
- **B** They were sometimes coloured artificially.
- **C** Birds were specially bred for their feathers.
- **D** There was some disapproval of their use for decoration.

35 Rublack suggests the feather costume worn by Duke Frederick in 1599 represented

- **A** a lack of sensitivity to American traditions.
- **B** a rejection of the beliefs held by those around him.
- **C** a positive attitude towards the culture of the Americas.
- **D** a wish to follow a fashion of the time.

36 According to Rublack, one reason why feathers survived in European military costume was because

- **A** birds were seen as having religious significance.
- **B** feathers suggested certain qualities about military activities.
- **C** the power of feathers was feared by other cultures.
- **D** soldiers came to associate particular birds with warlike qualities.

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Questions 37–40

*Complete each sentence with the correct ending, **A–G**, below.*

*Write the correct letter, **A–G**, in boxes 37–40 on your answer sheet.*

37 Hats decorated with long black feathers

38 Feathers from cranes and swallows

39 Feathers from exotic birds

40 Peacock feathers

A	lost popularity in the 16th century.
B	were used as protection from bad weather.
C	are worn today by some soldiers.
D	could only be worn by men of noble birth.
E	were used to create an outfit worn by a person of high status.
F	were once awarded for military achievements.
G	became popular decorations for urban dwellers in the 16th century.

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WRITING

WRITING TASK 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

A magazine wants to include contributions from its readers for an article called 'The book that influenced me most'.

Write a letter to the editor of the magazine about the book that influenced you most. In your letter

- ***describe what this book was about***
- ***explain how this book influenced you***
- ***say whether this book would be likely to influence other people***

Write at least 150 words.

You do **NOT** need to write any addresses.

Begin your letter as follows:

Dear Sir or Madam,

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WRITING TASK 2

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Write about the following topic:

> ***Some people spend most of their lives living close to where they were born.***
>
> ***What might be the reasons for this?***
>
> ***What are the advantages and disadvantages?***

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words.

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