

Feather Cloak

The Historical Museum Bern is in possession of a rare ethnographic piece, a feather cloak, which is accompanied by a feather helmet, both originally pertaining to a Hawaiian chief. The feather cloak is one of 54 existing in Europe, which was brought back from a journey to the island of Hawaii. Traditionally called „Ahu‘Ula“, it was an object of major signification in the society of the islanders. The cape is composed of a sturdy net, made up of rows of fishing knots. The plants used to create the scaffolding are the two plants native to Hawaii, *Freycinetia Arborea* also known as the „Ie‘ie“ and *Touchardia Latifolia* or the „Olona“. The former was considered an earthly manifestation of the gods. One of its attributes, which added to this belief, was the considerable altitude at which the vines grow. Great heights were often associated with the spiritual or deified realm in ancient Hawaiian culture. The latter on the other hand was chosen for its physical characteristics and not like the former for its association with the gods.

On the framework of the threading, the red and yellow feathers of two birds were added, creating a triangular shape across the whole outside of the cloak. The red feathers of the „Iiwi“ (*Vestiaria coccinea*) are closely tied to the major deity in Hawaiian myth. As such, they gained their importance through their link to mythology. The yellow feathers of the „O‘o“ (*Acrulocerus Nobilis*), which were rare and harder to procure, were chosen due to their rarity. The „O‘o“ bird with its valuable feathers has since gone extinct. The whole of the heavily stratified society of Hawaii was involved in the creation of the feathery artworks. Under the guidance of the craftsmen who formed part of the land division, the feather arts were created starting with the gathering of feathers and the harvesting of the vines. In the process of gathering, the field owners were charged with the collection of the plants and the following creation of the weavable fiber. The priests then partook in the consecutive step of weaving the fiber into the netting structure and the adding of spiritual power. In the end it was the chiefs who wore the finished garment, produced by the lower strata of society. The incorporation of the various strata in the processing of the basic materials of production for the feather arts, resulted in the objects effectively uniting the community.

A detail that makes the cloak in Bern particularly interesting is the evidence of alteration in the netting. There are traces of mending in the netting structure whose origin is unclear up until this day. It seems like the cloak is composed of a shoulder cape, to which a medium-length cape was added and some pieces of other capes. Despite this modification, the cape preserved in Bern is in good shape, unlike others of its kind, like for example the one in Geneva, which had been restored various times. Eugene Pittard, the founder of the

Ethnographic Museum in Geneva, considers the Hawaiian feather cloak one of the most valuable pieces in the collection of the museum in Geneva. Considering the cape in Bern is in even better shape, its worth can be estimated to be even greater.

The capes function as objects of prestige, markers of identification, socially as well as individually, and they also work on a protective level, both physically and spiritually. “Ahu’Ula” are complex art works, which are deeply embedded in the social, political and religious regimes of Hawaiian culture. The vines used to create the capes would have provided both physical and spiritual protection. It is a well-known fact that the capes and their helmets were the property of chiefs, kings and respected warriors of Hawaiian society; the patterning and ornaments being the main indicators for this.

It was through the Bernese painter John Webber that the feather cloak travelled the long way from Hawaii to Switzerland. He accompanied Cook on his third voyage to enrich the written accounts with his imagery. Overall Webber created over 200 drawings, etchings, watercolours and oil paintings. After his return to the UK, he reworked the images and 64 of his drawings were turned into etchings. Those were included in the official account of the expedition, a luxurious 3-volume book “A voyage to the South Seas”, which was sold out immediately.

Just like Cook and also other crewmembers, Webber collected items of the people he visited. Of said objects nearly 100 were donated to the Burgerbibliothek between 1787 and 1791, the feather cape specifically was donated in 1791. The exact details of this donation are still unknown. It is important to note, that Webber’s collection is the only collection of an explorer that has not been split up. With the foundation of the Antiquarian Museum of the City of Bern in 1882, the ethnographic, the archaeological and the historical collection of the Burgerbibliothek were united. In the year 1894 the whole collection moved to the current location of the Historical Museum Bern.

The objects donated by Webber can only be accurately identified by handwritten labels, which supposedly were added by Webber himself. A lot of times they are faded or torn, or unreliable, since Webber labelled the objects wrongly due to his inability to remember some of the things accurately. Based on these labels, there is a library manual by the Burgerbibliothek from the year 1791, which includes a list as well as notes of when the objects were donated to the ethnographic department.

There are additional textual sources, which have revealed that the cloak was on display during various exhibitions all around Switzerland, in places like Neuchâtel, Basel and others. Since 2002 the cloak is part of the permanent exhibition of the ethnographic collection of the Historical Museum Bern, which emphasises its importance for the collection as a whole.