

Feather Helmet

In the ethnographic collection of the Historical Museum Bern, there is a rare ensemble composed of feather helmet and the concomitant feather cloak. The pieces coming from Hawaii belonged to a Hawaiian chief who wore them on festive occasions and during times of war. The Hawaiian feather helmet, originally called “Mahiole”, comprehends durable scaffolding incorporating fishing knots and a high crest, a crissa, spanning the head from the front to the back. To create the basis for the helmet, the native Hawaiian plants *Freycinetia Arborea*, also known as the „Ie‘ie“, and *Touchardia Latifolia*, commonly „Olona“, were used. The sturdy “Ie‘ie” grows at great heights, which were associated with the spiritual realm and the gods. While the former was valued for being an earthly manifestation of the gods, the “Olona” was mainly chosen due to its physical characteristics.

On top of the netting structure, which formed the base, the feathers were carefully added. The red feathers of the native „Iiwi“ bird (*Vestiaria coccinea*) cover the majority of the helmet, while the top of the crissa is embellished with the rare yellow feathers of the „O‘o“ bird (*Acruocerus Nobilis*). The red feathers are linked to the major deity of Hawaiian mythology. The yellow feathers on the other hand were specifically hard to gather. This rarity added to their value. The feathers can no longer be obtained since the “O‘o” bird has since gone extinct. Interestingly, every strata of Hawaiian society was involved in the creation. The landowners were charged with the collection of the feathers and the harvesting of the vines. The craftsmen of the land division then worked the raw material into usable fiber. Consecutively, the priests weaved the fiber into the basic structure of the helmet and at the same time bound spiritual powers to the netting. The noblemen, particularly the chiefs and kings, were the ones who in the end got to wear the finished garment, which their subordinates had produced.

The feather helmet, which was worn with the feather cape, functioned as marker of prestige and identification for the noble, both on the social plane and individually. Additionally to the social signification came the protection on the physical level, as well as spiritual level. The spiritual power embedded in the process of making assured the spiritual well-being, while the physical properties of the “Olona” allowed for a durable barrier. In Hawaiian mythology, the head and spine in particular were in need of greater protection as it was considered to be the most sacred part of the body and the seat of the soul. The head was said to be holding plenty of spiritual energy, requiring spiritual protection within rituals and physical protection during times of war.

During the third of Captain James Cook's voyages (1776-1779), the Resolution landed on Hawaii in January 1778. Cook assigned a definite value to objects he received as special gifts on the occasion of festivities or encounters with dignitaries, like the Hawaiian chiefs. The feather helmet must have been acquired in one of these exchanges. Not only the captain himself, but also other members of his crew collected items of the people they visited. In the end, it was the Bernese painter John Webber who brought the feather helmet to Bern. It is unclear whether it was Cook or Webber who was the direct recipient, or if Webber simply received the helmet as a gift from Cook. Webber accompanied the expedition to add illustrations to the written accounts, creating over 200 drawings, etchings, watercolours and oil paintings. 64 of his drawings were then turned into etchings and formed part of the official 3-volume publication called "A voyage to the South Seas", which was sold out immediately. Around 100 of the ethnographic objects collected by Webber were donated to the Burgerbibliothek Bern between 1787 and 1791. The feather helmet, as well as the accompanying feather cape, was donated in 1791. The exact details of the donation are still unknown up until this day.

The objects pertaining to the ethnographic, archaeological and historical collections of the Burgerbibliothek were brought together in the then newly founded Antiquarian Museum of the City of Bern in 1882. Only a few years later in 1894, the whole collection moved to the current location of the Historical Museum Bern. In the entry book of the Historical Museum, the helmet is described as being contained in a glass dome and as extremely rare and valuable. The glass dome spoken of was added to the protection of the object, which was rattled with decay and had been treated with cyanalium by the Antiquarian Museum in 1881. Since the acquisition by the Historical Museum, the helmet has been displayed in various cities around Switzerland, such as Neuchâtel and Basel. There is no record for its leaving the country at any time. This might be due to the fragility of the object and the difficulties in preservation of the delicate feathers. Since 2002 the feather helmet and the feather cloak form part of the permanent exhibition of the ethnographic collection on display at the Historical Museum Bern, being one of the centrepieces.