CHAPTER 10

Cultured Materiality in Early Modern Art: Feather Mosaics in Sixteenth-Century Collections*

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The Pre-Hispanic Technique of Feather Mosaics

The textures are so subtle and so delicate in their shimmering materiality that even today you have to force yourself not to reach out and touch the fine feathers that make up Mexican feather mosaics. This very wish—a abruptly prevented by the glass display cases used in museum presentation—is documented in early modern sources describing the amazement that pre-Hispanic and colonial featherwork aroused in Europe. In 1599, for instance, Ulisse Aldrovandi reported that Pope Sixtus V wanted to touch a feather mosaic depicting St. Francis of Assisi in order to convince himself that it was really made of feathers, rather than painted.1

The subtlety of the work is due to the fact that, unlike in later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artefacts, the feathers were not used directly to make feather mosaics; instead, the Amantecas (as the pre-Hispanic feather artists were known) first glued the feathers onto amaté paper and then used bone knives to cut the paper into thin strips, from which the actual motifs were formed. Only in this way could the fine outlines and detailed motifs be created. As a result, the material properties of the feathers—their iridescent colour effects and glossy surfaces—were preserved, whereas their characteristic forms, outlines, and formal quill-and-vane structure were no longer visible. This fragmentation effectively turned the feathers into coloured raw materials for a new kind of artistic design, just as painters could make use of coloured materials in crude, unformed textures. Another similarity to painting was that the feathers were sometimes steeped in dye before being used (see the Florentine Codex).2

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1 Aldrovandi Ulisse, *Ornithologiae hoc est de avibus historiae libri XII* (Bologna, de Franciscis: 1599) 656.
This very aesthetic attractiveness of the feathers, plus the fact that feather mosaics were previously unknown in Europe, rapidly led to featherwork becoming a symbol of the ‘New World’. In the early modern era this was reflected in, among other things, the use of feather ornaments in personifications of America. However, studies have shown that this is based on a misconception. It is now thought that the figure of America [Fig. 10.1] was depicted with a skirt

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