

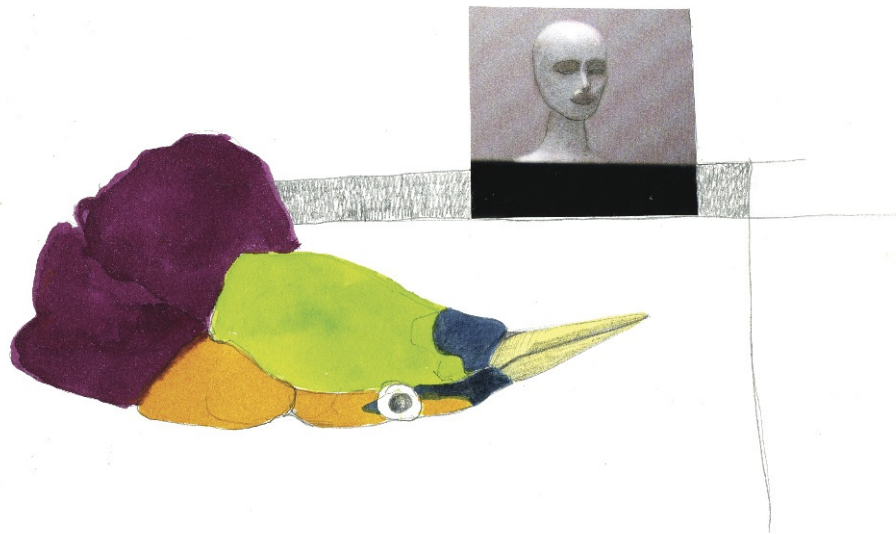


*A dialogue of drawings and research between environmental artist Kate Foster and cultural geographer Merle Patchett, originally produced in bookwork form for the show Fashioning Feathers. This incarnation reproduces material available on the online catalogue.*

*By Kate Foster and Merle Patchett*

# STUFFED BIRD ATTACHED

*"When Malay, Polynesian, Portuguese, Dutch and English traders became fascinated with the rare birds, they were also merely dis-covering – making appear – objective effects of sexual selection accumulated over a few tens of thousands of years. No heroic entitlement can be conferred to anyone in this story: evolutionary creativity is absolutely without subject."*



with the Plume Boom, there was an insatiable  
hunger for these feathery remains from Paradise –  
marketed as accoutrements of taste and decorum

How can the presence of millinery prepared birds-of-paradise skins in a Clothing and Textiles Collection affect our understanding of the entangled histories of humans and animals? What relationships, practices and geographies brought about their movement from natural habitats in New Guinea, making them into millinery ornaments and introducing their presence in a clothing and textiles collection in Western Canada?

*Stuffed Bird Attached* is a dialogue of drawings and research between environmental artist Kate Foster and cultural geographer Merle Patchett engaging with these questions.

### ***Paradisaea apoda***

For anyone handling bird-of-paradise skins, the rare beauty and sumptuous quality of their plumage cannot go unnoticed. Nor is it hard to imagine why birds-of-paradise, as Arun Saldanha tells us, have for millennia been “ornaments, commodities and gifts”. Papuan tribes have used the ostentatious plumes of the males for centuries to adorn themselves during ceremonies and war. And as early as 5000 years ago, their plumes entered the luxury trade via the Moluccas, where they were particularly coveted for the headdresses of Moluccan Islamic sultanates. Europeans, by comparison, were relatively late in discovering the seductive wonders of the “bird-of-paradise.”

As far as it is possible to tell, the very first skins of the greater and lesser birds-of-paradise were brought to Europe in 1522 by the surviving crewmembers of the only ship to complete Magellan’s circumnavigation voyage of the globe. According to the diary of Antonio Pigafetta (the only journal kept during the journey), the skins were a gift from the sultan of Bacan island (one of the Moluccas) for the emperor Charles V.<sup>ii</sup> With the introduction of -five ‘trade-skins’ from the Magellan voyage to Europe, the “great bird-of-paradise” became a focus of scientific curiosity and study. The extraordinary beauty and rich colour of the bird’s plumes meant that trade skins were highly sought after by European cabinet collectors, who secured them through Europe’s growing trade with Indonesia and New Guinea. According to Pierre Belon’s *Natural History of Birds*, by the end of the 1540’s, mounted birds-of-paradise were “a common sight in the cabinets of Europe and Turkey.”<sup>iii</sup> Collectors were particularly captivated by their unusual anatomy, for the legs had been removed during their preparation as trade skins. This gave rise to European speculation that the birds did not have feet and instead spent their lives perpetually in flight, living off dew and never touching the earth till death.

“The Malay traders gave them the name of “Manuk dewata,” or God’s birds; and the Portuguese, finding that they had no feet or wings, and not being able to learn anything authentic about them, called them “Passaros de Col,” or Birds of the Sun; while the learned Dutchmen, who wrote in Latin, called them “Avis

paradiseus," or Paradise Bird. John van Linschoten gives these names in 1598, and tells us that no one has seen these birds alive, for they live in the air, always turning towards the sun, and never lighting on the earth till they die; for they have neither feet nor wings, as, he adds, may be seen by the birds carried to India, and sometimes to Holland, but being very costly they were then rarely seen in Europe."<sup>iv</sup>

HIPPOMANVCODIATA, SEV MANVCODIATA LONG.



the way the birds were prepared gave European scholars a peculiar view of their natural history

The mysteries of their lifestyle were suggested in a set of illustrations produced by Ulisse Aldrovandi for his encyclopedia *Ornithologiae* published in 1599.<sup>v</sup> Considered one of the most respected naturalists of the period, Aldrovandi's representations and descriptions substantiated the idea that the birds only lived on sky dew and sun rays and never landed, even when breeding (the female apparently laying her eggs in a special cavity on the males back). Although

some complete skins arrived in Europe from the early 1600s, refuting Aldrovandi and his peers' ideas, in 1758 Linnaeus perpetuated the myth by naming the greater bird-of-paradise (the largest of the genus *Paradisaea apoda*, or "legless bird-of-paradise."

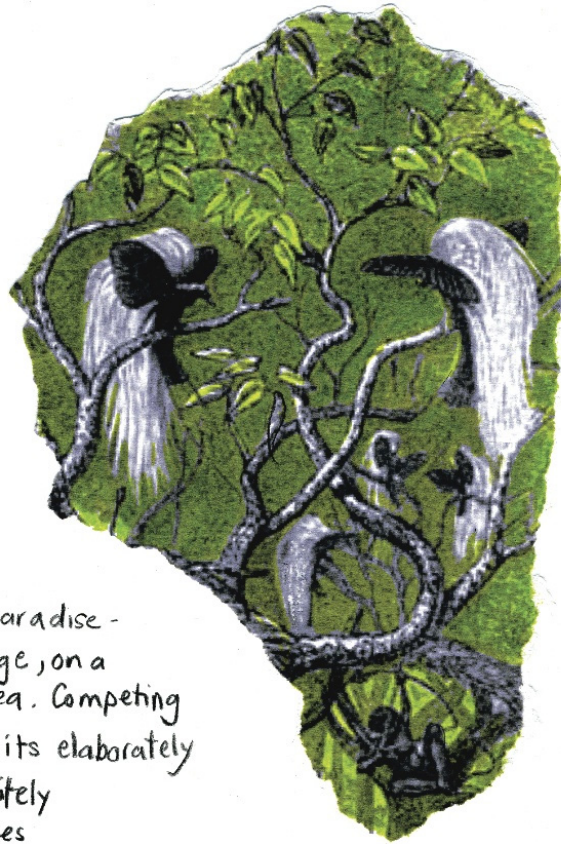
## Possessing Paradise

"The emotions excited in the minds of a naturalist, who has long desired to see the actual thing which he has hitherto known only by description, drawing or badly-preserved external covering, especially when that thing is of surpassing rarity and beauty, require the poetic faculty fully to express them."<sup>vi</sup>

Europeans continued to know very little about the behaviour and biology of birds-of-paradise until 19th century voyages of exploration made it possible for naturalists to carry out first-hand observations of the birds in the wild and to collect and prepare specimens using scientific preparation techniques. In 1854, Alfred Russell Wallace (1823-1913) ventured into the Malay Archipelago of South-East Asia in search of natural history specimens, including the coveted "great bird-of-paradise." He emerged eight years later with 125,660 specimens of different species of birds and insects from the region, including several live greater birds-of-paradise. Wallace presented an autobiographical account of his collecting trip in *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-utang and the Bird of Paradise* (1869). Thanks to the expertise of indigenous hunters Wallace got unparalleled access to the birds, enabling him to observe their behaviour first hand, and to publish the first scientific descriptions of the mating practices of the greater bird-of-paradise in *The Annals and Magazine of Natural History* in 1857:

"They are in a state of excitement and incessant activity, and the males assemble together to exercise, dress and display their magnificent plumage. For this purpose they prefer certain lofty, large-leaved forest-trees (which at this time have no fruit), and on these, early in the morning, from ten to twenty full-plumages birds assemble, as the natives express it, "to play and dance." They open their wings, stretch out their necks, shake their bodies, and keep the long golden plumes open and vibrating – constantly changing their positions, flying across and across each other from branch to branch, and appearing proud of their activity and beauty."

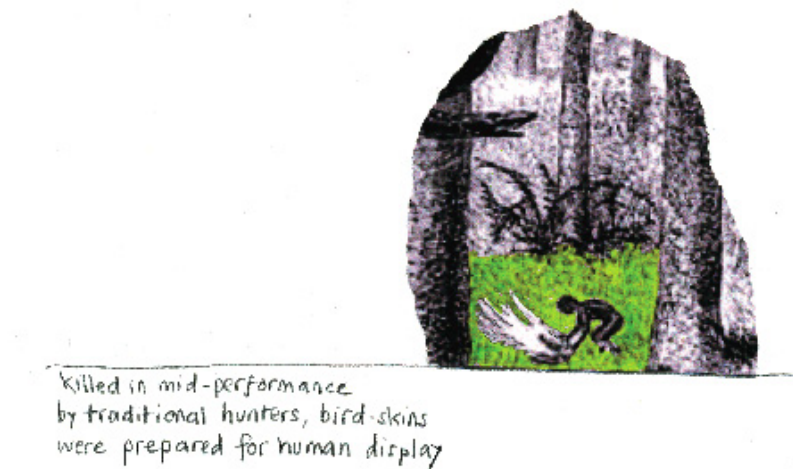
a bird plucked from paradise -  
 a male in peak plumage, on a  
 treetop in New Guinea. Competing  
 for female attention, its elaborately  
 evolved display exquisitely  
 fulfilling the possibilities  
 of feather and form



In *The Malay Archipelago* Wallace also provides details of local knowledge of birds-of-paradise, including various hunting and preservation techniques used:

"A boy waits at the foot of the tree, and when the birds come at sunrise, and a sufficient number have assembled, and have begun to dance, the hunter shoots with his blunt arrow so strongly as to stun the bird, which drops down, and is secured and killed by the boy without its plumage being injured by a drop of blood. The rest take no notice, and fall one after another till some of them take the alarm. ... The indigenous mode of preserving them is to cut off the wings and feet, and then skin the body up to the beak, taking out the skull. A stout stick is then run up through the specimen coming out at the mouth."<sup>vii</sup>





Wallace's descriptions of bird-of-paradise mating behaviour helped to buttress Darwin's theory of sexual selection and Darwin may well have been thinking of them when writing about sexual selection in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871): "When we behold a male bird displaying his graceful plumes or splendid colours before the female . . . it is impossible to doubt that she admires the beauty of her male partner."<sup>viii</sup> Unfortunately for the birds, these marvels of evolution caught the eye of another unintended suitor.

### Paradisaea apparel

"Millinery is ever a matter of interest to women, and a new chapeau is almost invariably regarded with greater interest than even a new frock, for the latter is more of a necessity. . . . Mrs. John Jacob Astor is wearing a chic purple crinoline hat with a small, flat, round crown and a wide brim that curves over a bit at the edges and then rises at the right front and describes a wide, flaring semi-circle to a point back of the left ear. Its sole trimming is a black bird of paradise plume that starts from the left of the crown and sweeps upward, outward, and backward against both brim and crown."<sup>ix</sup>



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During the first two decades of the 20th century, hats decorated with bird feathers, wings and entire bodies, were fashionable among women living in the cosmopolitan centres of Europe and the Americas. The brilliant plumes of the greater bird-of-paradise were most desirable due to the beauty and sumptuous texture of their mating plumes, but also because of their comparative rarity and resulting expense in Euro-American plume markets.





the feathers 'willowed' and dyed - often black  
in plumassier's workshops, probably a sweatshop

From 1905 to 1920, between 50,000 and 80,000 bird-of-paradise skins were exported annually to the feather auctions of London, Paris and New York.<sup>x</sup> The increased demand for bird-of-paradise plumes in these fashion capitals inspired Malay, Chinese and Australian hunters to seek their fortunes hunting birds-of-paradise in New Guinea's rain forests – one of "the most lucrative hunting grounds during the international plume boom."<sup>xi</sup> The hunted skins were then sent to Europe through the plume-trade routes that had been well established between New Guinea and Europe through trade in bird-of-paradise skins in the name of science. On arrival in Europe, the skins and plumes were traded in bulk lots in London's commercial sales rooms. Once in the hands of plumassiers (feather makers) the skins and plumes of birds-of-paradise were often dyed black. This was partly because the type of women who could afford bird-of-paradise plumes was often in mourning dress and partly because black gave greater versatility and seasonality. Those plumes that were not bought up by

European plumassiers and fashion houses, were made accessible, though still at great expense, to women in even the outer-most reaches of the colonies through clothing and apparel catalogues priced between ten and thirty dollars.

The accessibility of bird-of-paradise plumes indicates the massive impact the plumage trade was having on living populations. During the plume boom, the most sought after greater bird-of-paradise was almost brought to the brink of extinction. While the trade in bird-of-paradise plumes became the cause celebre of conservation societies like the Audubon Society, it was really a fashionable new hairstyle that ultimately saved the birds, as absurd as that may sound,. In 1913, the bob and other short hairstyles were introduced—cuts which would not support large extravagant hats.

a common pose for these worked feathers was atop a hat—  
a strange development of the birds' own treetop display.  
Once on a hat, pinned and stitched to silken forms,  
the male bird now had his movements choreographed.  
Their glory extinguished, dead feathers, oblivious to  
the likely extinction of their species.



strapped in place as macabre puppets of  
mourning - instead of their own eyes, glassy  
hemispheres pinned to black-dyed feathers

## Paradise Lost?

"Bird-lovers must now bid farewell forever to all the birds-of-paradise. Nothing but the legal closing of the world's markets against their plumes and skins can save any of them. On Oct. 2, 1912, in three show-windows within 100 feet of the headquarters of the Fourth National Conservation Congress, I counted 11 stuffed heads and 11 complete sets of bird of paradise plumes, displayed for sale. And while I looked, a large lady approached, pointed her finger at the remains of a great bird of paradise, and with grim determination, said to her shopping companion:

"There! I want one o' them, an' I'm agoin' to have it, too!" <sup>xii</sup>

Concern about the widespread slaughter of wild birds for the millinery trade led to the formation of the first conservation societies, who sought to ban the trade and persuade ladies not to use plumage for their own adornment. Campaigns against 'Murderous Millinery' by the Audubon Society in the U.S., and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Great Britain, initiated the first wild bird protection acts. In 1913 the U.S. passed the Lacey Act, which banned both interstate and international feather imports and, although anti-plumage legislation failed in Britain's House of Commons in 1908, Britain passed similar legislation in 1921. <sup>xiii</sup>

Opposition to the slaughter of wild birds, including New Guinea's birds-of-paradise, resulted in unprecedented international cooperation on conservation issues and legislation that eventually curtailed the global trade in bird feathers. These conservation efforts are one of the earliest manifestations of global environmentalism and appropriately led to the elevation of the bird-of-paradise as an international symbol of conservation. However, even with this status, bird-of-paradise numbers continue to dwindle through a black market trade in their plumes, as well as by the slow destruction of their habitat through New Guinea's contemporary exports in gold, copper, timber and coffee. If the latest reports prove accurate, many bird-of-paradise species are said to be on a 'flight to oblivion.' <sup>xiv</sup>

These dwindling numbers are why it is important to delve beneath the captivating image of any bird-of-paradise skins existing in the realms of human culture, as we find that appreciation of their beauty is not merely a Euro-American tradition. First and foremost, the birds themselves appreciate their beauty, or they wouldn't have evolved it at all. Second, Papuans and non-European traders have, for millennia, indulged in the birds' beauty and myth. Perversely, it was the enormous distance between New Guinea and Europe, and the consequent rarity and cost of the birds in European markets, that increased their appeal to scientific collectors and ladies of fashion in Europe and North America. Wallace had it right when he wrote that any meaningful consideration of these birds would surely conclude:

"that all living things were not made for man. Many of them have no relation to him. The cycle of their existence has gone on independently of his, and is disturbed or broken by every advance in man's intellectual development; and their happiness and enjoyment, their loves and hates, their struggles for existence, their vigorous life and early death, would seem to be immediately related to their own well-being and perpetuation alone, limited only by the equal well-being and perpetuation of the numberless other organisms with which each is more or less intimately connected."<sup>xv</sup>



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- <sup>i</sup> Arun Saldanha 2010 'Two Birds of Paradise in North Holland, 1592: The Gift in the Exotic', *Parallax*, 2010, vol. 16, no. 1, 68–79.
- <sup>ii</sup> Antonio Pigafetta, "Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo" (Report on the First Voyage Around the World). Paris, 1524-1534.
- <sup>iii</sup> Pierre Belon, *L'Histoire de la nature des oyseaux*. Paris, 1555.
- <sup>iv</sup> Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: the Land of the Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise*, 1869. Google ebook Digitized 17 Feb 2006.
- <sup>v</sup> Ulyssis Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae, hoc est de avibus historiae*, ex Camerali typogr. Manolesiana, 1599. Google ebook, Digitized 28 Jul 2010.
- <sup>vi</sup> Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 1869.
- <sup>vii</sup> Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 1869.
- <sup>viii</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (first edition, London: John Murray: 1871), chapter 13-16.
- <sup>ix</sup> From 'The What Women Are Wearing' section of the *New York Times*, September 25th, 1904. Available [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).
- <sup>x</sup> Figures from Doughty, R. W. *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: a Study in Nature Protection*, (University of California Press, 1975).
- <sup>xi</sup> Stuart Kirsch 'History and the Birds of Paradise: Surprising Connections from New Guinea', *Expedition* 48:1 (2008) 15-21.
- <sup>xii</sup> Hornaday, W. T. *Our Vanishing Wildlife: Its Extermination and Preservation*, 1913. e-book available [www.gutenberg.net](http://www.gutenberg.net)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Stuart Kirsch 'History and the Birds of Paradise: Surprising Connections from New Guinea', *Expedition* 48:1 (2008) 15-21.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Richel Dursin, 'Birds of paradise on flight to oblivion', *Asia Times Online*, March 3, 2001. Last accessed Dec 12<sup>th</sup> 2011.
- <sup>xv</sup> Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, 1869.