



The Aztecs

15 October 2020 to 22 June 2021

THE QUETZAL-FEATHER HEADDRESS
(Ancient Mexican feathered headdress)

Why is the Featherwork Headdress in the Weltmuseum Wien?

Both the armoury and the Kunst- und Wunderkammer (Chamber of Art and Wonders) assembled by Ferdinand II, Archduke of Austria and Count of Tyrol at Ambras Castle was renowned throughout Europe. In 1596, a year after his death, an inventory of his collections was compiled. Of particular interest for the Weltmuseum Wien are the Indian feather artefacts from modern-day Mexico listed in this inventory that are now housed in the Museum. The most famous among them is the celebrated ancient Mexican feather headdress comprising hundreds of long quetzal feathers and over a thousand small gold plates. Created around 1515, this magnificent "crown" is the only one of its kind to have survived. Today, it is regarded as something of an icon of the Weltmuseum Wien.

Formerly in the Habsburg family collection, it entered the Natural History Museum in 1880 as part of an exchange. In 1928, the Museum's anthropological-ethnological department became the Museum of Ethnology, which eventually became the Weltmuseum Wien located on the Heldenplatz in central Vienna. In the inventory of the Ambras Collection it is listed as a "Mörischer Huet von langen schönen gleissenden, grünlechten und gulden federn" (Moorish hat with long beautiful gleaming, greenish and golden feathers); in the seventeenth century this precious object made of long quetzal feathers was identified as Indian, but from the nineteenth century onwards it was inventoried as Mexican.

This Mexican connection meant that for decades in post-revolutionary Mexico the feather headdress was attributed to the Aztec ruler Moctezuma, becoming a symbol of Indigenismo, of the connection of the new Mexico with the Aztec Empire – a myth that is still circulated today. It is the world's only extant feather headdress from ancient Mexico and an important document of pre-Columbian culture and society in Mexico. In 1940, a copy was produced in Mexico.

2010-2012: Cooperation Project between Mexico and Austria
Comprehensive Historical Research and Conservation Measures

Since the 1990s, there have been attempts by Mexico to arrange the return of this unique artefact to Mexico, including a request for a fixed-term loan of the feather headdress to Mexico-City. In 2010, this led to an agreement between the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico (INAH) and the KHM-Museumsverband, into which the Weltmuseum Wien was incorporated in 2001. This agreement included establishing a bi-national, multi-disciplinary commission tasked with carrying out a two-year research project focused on this unique artefact, its historical importance and present condition. In addition, it implemented all necessary conservation measures to ensure the artefact's preservation in the museum in Vienna, and to evaluate the possibility of loaning it to Mexico.

Completed in 2012, these examinations yielded new findings about how the artefact was produced, and about its present condition and state of preservation. In addition, we studied ways to control vibrations



affecting the object in order to evaluate if it could safely be transported on a plane. The results were negative, i.e. the artefact cannot be moved, or rather it is at present not feasible to transport it over land, by ship or by plane.

This two-year research project resulted in a comprehensive publication in both German and Spanish. For the first time, Austrian and Mexican scientists discussed all relevant historical, ethnographic and conservation questions. Never before was the material condition of the feather headdress analyzed and its historical and mythical function examined in such detail. Mexican and Austrian conservators then cleaned the feather headdress, making it possible to continue safely to display it in the permanent galleries.

Displaying it in the Weltmuseum Wien

Following the completion of the examinations in 2012, the Weltmuseum Wien displayed the unique feather headdress in a spectacular new installation for the first time since 2004. Since then, and thanks to our generous sponsors A1 Telecom Austria, all Mexican citizens enjoy free entry to the Weltmuseum Wien. Since the reopening of the Weltmuseum Wien in 2017, the ancient Mexican feather headdress has been on display in the permanent collections on the Ground Floor, installed in a bespoke, safe and “vibration-free” vitrine.

Additional artefacts with ancient Mexican origins in the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien are a feather-mosaic shield made around 1500 (one of only four in the world), and a feather standard or fan, c. 1540 (?); both were originally in the Ambras Collection.

Publication

Der altmexikanische Federkopfschmuck

Eds. Sabine Haag, Alfonso de Maria y Campos, Lilia Rivero Weber and Christian Feest

Altenstadt 2012: ZKF Publishers

152 p. / € 19.90

Available in German in the museum shop and in the online shop.

PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

Press photographs are available in the press section of our website free of charge, for your topical reporting: www.weltmuseumwien.at/presse/

Quetzal-feather headdress

Feathers of the quetzal, cotinga, roseate spoonbill, squirrel cuckoo, kingfisher; wood, reed chips, fibres, paper, cotton, leather, gold, brass

H: 130 cm, W: 178 cm

Mexico, Aztec, around 1520 AD

KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien

Inv. no. 10.402

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OPENING HOURS

Daily except Wednesdays
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

TICKETS

<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/information/#tickets>

NEW: The Annual Family Ticket for two adults and up to three children or teens under the age of 19 for only € 79! For more information, please visit <https://www.khm.at/en/family/>

CONTACTS FOR YOUR VISIT

Information, questions & suggestions
+43 1 534 30-5052, info@weltmuseumwien.at

Cultural education & outreach programme, guided tours, and programme registration
+43 1 534 30-5150, kulturvermittlung@weltmuseumwien.at

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