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Considering the Feather Headdress

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Abstract
During the Spring 2016 course Ethnohistory of the Native Northeast, students are studying Native American objects in the Penn Museum collections by combining close material analyses (elements, construction, design, condition, etc.) with other forms of evidence: textual, photographic, historical, and ethnographic. In many cases, the objects we’re studying have little to no provenance data. So, we are seeking out similar objects, reaching out to consult with Indigenous cultural experts, and considering non-material evidence, such as community identity, memory, oral traditions, and other Indigenous knowledges that might illuminate these objects. By sharing this research via social media, we hope to recover object histories, and draw links among museums, archives, and Native communities, in ways that can encourage broader cross-cultural conversations outside of the Museum.

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CONSIDERING THE FEATHER HEADDRESS

By: Margaret Bruchac

During the Spring 2016 course Ethnohistory of the Native Northeast, students are studying Native American objects in the Penn Museum collections by combining close material analyses (elements, construction, design, condition, etc.) with other forms of evidence: textual, photographic, historical, and ethnographic. In many cases, the objects we’re studying have little to no provenance data. So, we are seeking out similar objects, reaching out to consult with Indigenous cultural experts, and considering non-material evidence, such as community identity, memory, oral traditions, and other Indigenous knowledges that might illuminate these objects. By sharing this research via social media, we hope to recover object histories, and draw links among museums, archives, and Native communities, in ways that can encourage broader cross-cultural conversations outside of the Museum.

Take the phrase “Feather Headdress.” In popular culture, thoughts of this Native American/First Nations form of headgear inspire an array of magnificent images. During the late 19th century, historical accounts and oral traditions recount Native men on the Great Plains galloping into battle, wearing the flaring eagle feather style often called a “War Bonnet,” adorned with elaborate beadwork, streams of red wool, and a number of eagle feathers. In tribal traditions, each feather was significant, denoting an act of prowess, an honor given, or a gift of gratitude. Yet, in the midst of the American wars of conquest, and in the aftermath of forced removals to reservations, headdresses and other tribal regalia often ended up in the hands of collectors who gathered anything they could get their hands on, through salvage, trade, or purchase. In museums, these items were locked into cabinets and frozen in time. Feather headdresses and other forms of traditional regalia persisted as markers of Indigenous power and status, but they were rapidly appropriated into other, unintended venues.

This headdress style was prominently displayed by Chief Sitting Bull and others in Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show.” By the early 1900s, as the most recognizable symbol of Indian-ness, it became popular as stereotypical (and often wildly inappropriate) costuming for non-Native actors, children, sports fans, Boy Scouts, European hobbyists, musicians, and fashion models. Hollywood bears some of the blame. On a flickering movie screen, when black and white renditions of these same headdresses appeared (often as poor imitations atop the heads of non-Native actors riding into the sunset), they captured the American imagination, as did the pop culture version of the western Indian Wars.

Abenaki orator, model, and Hollywood script-writer and actor Elijah Tahamont, who went by the stage name “Dark Cloud.” Photograph from the San Francisco Call, February 10, 1901.
During the same era, the elite white men who joined the “Improved Order of Red Men” (IORM) fraternal order began wearing entire costumes to mimic American Indians. The DeMoulin Brothers & Company catalogue sold ready-made suits of rough cotton fringed cloth, bedecked with glass beads and silk ribbons, crowned with a feather headdress. Similar costumes and headdresses were worn by some participants in the Philadelphia Mummers’ Parade, and in the New Orleans “Mardi Gras Indian” brigades. Sports teams further muddied the waters by adopting images of American Indians as mascots, embodying this borrowed power in images of disembodied heads wearing feathers.

Across the United States and Canada, Native tribal leaders had long worn a wide variety of different and distinctive styles of feather headdress. In the northeast, for example, traditional headdresses displayed the upright feathers of turkey, the curling feathers of partridge and hawk, and other combinations. During the early 20th century, many of these people adopted the “Western Plains” style eagle feather headdress. Sometimes, Native people mixed tribal styles; clothing that appeared to be distinctive to one tribal nation was worn by a member of a different tribe. In historical photographs, some items that were obviously commercially made (such as catalogue or theatrical costumes) were worn by Native people in a ceremonial context. Confusing matters further, Native American and First Nations performers and tribal leaders tended to commingle clothing styles from traditional regalia, stage costumes, DeMoulin catalogue purchases, and idiosyncratic adornments in Wild West Shows, Medicine Shows, Indian encampments, historical re-enactments, and other events.

Contemporary Native American and First Nations people continue to use feather headdresses in a wide range of traditional and adapted styles. Trade goods such as red wool, glass beads, and silk ribbons (and even more modern materials) can become invested with ritual meanings when incorporated into a “traditional” garment. This is obviously true in the modern era, when Native American and First Nations regalia typically combines multiple historical and cultural influences and materials.
These considerations raise interesting questions. Is Native regalia identified as such by the manner in which it is made (production) or by the manner in which it is used (adoption)? “Production,” in this sense, would include the entire “origin context” of materials, beliefs, technology, artistry, symbolism, and meanings attached to the object at the moment of its making. “Adoption” could include the method of acquiring the object (by trade, gift, or other means), along with any alterations of meaning that result from its use in a different context. In this regard, a commercially produced item of dress can become invested with significant meaning as “regalia” based upon the context in which it’s worn.

How then, can we tell one headdress from another? Most of the feather headdresses that landed in museum collections are rather vaguely labeled—date collected, name of the collector, and presumed tribe—but this data often tells us little to nothing about the individuals, events, tribal nations, or Indigenous meanings attached to this significant object. Nor does this data tell us how or why these objects left their tribal communities to become part of the museum collection.

In January of 2016, a unique opportunity presented itself when descendants of Frederick Dellenbaugh, a founding member of the “Explorer’s Club,” contacted the Native American & Indigenous Studies Initiative at Penn to request assistance in identifying an historical eagle feather headdress in his collection. The headdress was purchased in 1901, from Elijah Tahamont (Abenaki) a Hollywood actor who went by the stage name of “Dark Cloud,” and it was said to include elements borrowed from other known (and equally famous) Native people.

This object (shown above) inspired faculty and students in the “Ethnohistory of the Native Northeast” course to begin sensitively wading into the myriad objects, imagery, and histories that represent the iconic feather headdress. For comparisons, we examined a few of the feather headdresses housed in the Penn Museum collections. We employed the techniques of restorative research that have worked so well for the “Wampum Trail” and “Speck Connection” projects, by carefully tracking, as much as possible, the origins, documents, narratives, and patterns of circulation for each of these objects. In some cases, we found that information about Indigenous production and use had been lost as objects moved through multiple hands on their way to the Museum. Sometimes, the objects themselves held fascinating overlooked details that revealed clues about their origins. By combining visual analysis, archival research, comparative studies, ethnohistorical readings, and interviews with some knowledgeable Native individuals, we came closer to identifying some of the people and nations that these headdresses are linked to. We made some remarkable discoveries and encountered some as-yet-unresolved mysteries. We look forward to sharing these findings and continuing the conversation in ways that might help to identify unprovenanced headdresses in other museum collections.

For further information, see the following sources:


For other insights into feather headdresses at the Penn Museum, also see:

Danielle Tiger: “Investigating the Origins of a Turkey Feather Headdress”
Margaret Bruchac and Katherine Ku: “Levi Levering’s Headdress: Blurring Borders and Bridging Cultures”

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