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CULTURE FLOCK

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A thesis submitted to the University Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Honors Degree

Southern Illinois University

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Deciding on what to do for my thesis was a long process. As an Anthropology major, the obvious choice was to gather research and create a paper. However, as I am progressing on to graduate school to study exhibition design, I decided to ask the museum staff if a larger project would be possible. Working closely with Lorilee Huffman, the curator of collections, Nate Stienbrink, the curator of exhibits, and Susannah Munson, the archives manager, I developed the exhibition “Culture Flock,” which opened at the University Museum April 2, 2013, and ran through May 10, 2013.

The inspiration for my exhibit came from a trip I took out to the museum archives. The museum’s collection is vast, and it was a rather intimidating task. Eventually, I settled on using objects from the ethnographic collection to create an exhibit around the use of bird imagery around the world. I had previously done some work with animal symbolism for another class and was eager to work with the subject again, as there is not much work out there concerning it. From there, I chose several objects that I wished to work with and spent the next month researching their origins and significance. This information would then become my object labels.

Working within the space I was provided proved to be a bit of a challenge. In the end, in order to prevent crowding, I decided to utilize only one wall of the alcove gallery. Several of the objects were three dimensional and so creative decisions had to be made about how they would be installed on the wall. Multiple cases would feel too cluttered, but we were in possession of a case that mounted to the wall. The more fragile objects with security concerns were placed in there. Two masks were featured in my exhibit, one that hung relatively flat, and one that is meant to fully encircle the head. I managed to come up with a mounting system involving a styrofoam

head and pipes to keep this mask up right and away from walls and paint that might damage the materials.

Other aesthetic decisions included the color I used, a light blue which complimented all of the highly colorful artifacts without being overpowering, but still adding more interest than white. Within my means, I worked with a blue, white, and black color palette, something simple and functional that also might help visitors to think of the sky and birds. I chose fonts that were clear and readable. The title sign was placed at the back corner of the wall to separate it from the connecting exhibit.

Some of the challenges I faced were understanding what was going to be possible for the creation of Culture Flock. My advisors had to encourage me in the beginning to think bigger and not limit myself. Time was my biggest enemy. My exhibit was set to open towards the end of the spring semester which is also when the MFA shows are installed. There are very few workers at the museum and so everyone was stretched pretty thin and unable to give me all the help I needed. Everything came together, but I would have liked to be done earlier than when we did finish. In the future, this has taught me to plan things out to the finest detail, and be sure that schedules are set and confirmed with the people you need to work with. Assume nothing. This was such a wonderful opportunity and I cannot wait to continue my studies in exhibition design and continue to work with talented individuals to create the unique experiences you can only get from museums.

Kuna Mola

Bird: Eagle (?)

San Blas Islands, Panama

ca 1950s

cotton

Accession Number: 2009.7/4

Gift of Drs. Marvin and Marion Kleinau

The Kuna women of the San Blas Islands in Panama began to make *molos* as a replacement for body paint after Spanish colonization in the 16th Century and the contact with missionaries. They transferred the geometric patterns used in body paint to clothing. Typically worn on the front of a blouse, molas are created by appliquéing layers of cotton fabric to form a design. In the mid-20th century, the designs expanded to include anything from scenes in nature, as seen in the bird here, to recreations of magazine ads. Molas are still made by Kuna women today to be both worn by the Islanders and sold. Those sold can appear on blouses, or used in a variety of other ways from pillow coverings to being framed as an artwork, like the mola on display.

The bird on the mola is in the act of catching a fish and the orientation makes the bird appear large and powerful. This bird appears to be a type of eagle, perhaps a Harpy eagle, due to the plumage on top of its head. There are over 40 species of hawks and eagles native to the Panama region, including its national bird, which is the Harpy eagle.

Santiago Atitlán Village Pantalones

Bird: Various

Santiago Atitlán Village, Guatemala

1969

cotton, mercerized cotton embroidery thread

Accession Number: 69.21/46

Collected and purchased for the Museum by Ruth Ginsberg (Place)

In the Guatemalan Highlands, men in the village of Santiago Atitlán, traditionally wore this style of cotton pants, or *pantalones*. Although they look quite wide, these pants are actually meant to be worn with a sash, creating a bunched-up appearance. Motifs in Guatemala textiles celebrate life, and show their harmony with nature

and the cosmos through symbols, such as birds. The pantalones on display have the legs decorated with four rows of embroidered tropical birds.

Ming Dynasty Wine Jar

Bird: Heron

China, Ming Dynasty Wanli Period

1573-1619 CE

porcelain, rosewood base

Accession Number: 70.218/2.1-2.2

Museum Purchase in Hong Kong

This porcelain wine jar, used for serving wine, is characteristic of objects from the Ming Dynasty, Wanli Period (1573-1619 CE). During the Ming Dynasty, China went through major innovations in how they made, adorned and designed their pottery. This jar is a perfect example of the highly detailed pattern-work exhibited by Ming ceramics.

In China, the heron is seen as a symbol of longevity, given their lengthy lifespan. On the jar on display, herons are seen flying around the shoulder of the jar on display, amidst stylized clouds that mean good fortune.

Kawawaka'wa Model Canoe Paddle

Bird: Raven

British Columbia, Canada

unknown date

wood, paint

Accession Number: 62.131/35

Museum Purchase from the University of British Columbia

The Kawawaka'wa (Kwakiutl) is a First Nations indigenous group living in the Pacific Northwest on the coast of British Columbia. Their art style is very similar to other Pacific Northwest tribes and they share several ideas concerning spirituality. The bird depicted on this model paddle is most likely Raven, or *U'melth*, a powerful figure in Kawawaka'wa mythology, who brought the sun, fire, the moon, salmon and the tides to humans. These last two meanings, being related to water,

would more than likely link the image of Raven to something like a paddle, a tool meant to be used in water.

Wixarika Yarn Painting

Bird: Eagle

Mexico

ca 1969

yarn, wood, beeswax

Accession Number: 69.3/19

Collected and purchased for the Museum by Dr. Philip C. Weigand

Yarn paintings, such as this one by Antonio de la Cruz, are an important part of Wixarika (Huichol) culture. Located in the Sierra Madres Occidental region of western central Mexico, the Wixarika are a Native American group with a strong shamanistic tradition, which is often reflected in their art. Yarn paintings are created by coating the yarn in wax and pressing it to a board. Traditionally, yarn paintings were used as aids for spiritual leaders, as they communicated between the gods and goddesses of the Huichol peyote religion and earthly life. Today, many yarn paintings are made with modern materials, such as embroidery thread, and are sold commercially.

Among the Wixarika, birds are seen as messengers to and from the gods and goddesses. The most revered bird is the eagle (*wealika*), who is seen as embodying the goddess Mother Eagle, who is the mother of the sky and goddess of life. The birds portrayed in the Museum's yarn painting may be a pair of Harpy eagles due to the feathered plumage represented on top of their heads.

Nepalese Mask

Bird: Garuda

Nepal

ca 1969

papier mâché, paint

Accession Number: 69.1/261

Collected and purchased for the Museum by Dr. Basil C. Hedrick

This mask symbolizes the god, Garuda, translated to mean “eagle” in Sanskrit, that is a mythical figure found in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology. In Hinduism, Garuda is a god himself and serves as the mount for Vishnu. He is depicted with the body and face of a man and has red wings with an eagle’s beak. Garuda was the sworn enemy of the serpent race and ate snakes, while also wearing them on his wrists. This snake diet is similar to the one of the Short-toed eagle a species of bird popular in India.

In Buddhism, the Garuda are a race of enormous, golden winged birds, who have their own social structure and are led by a king. They are considered a lower *deva*, or non-human, supernatural being.

This mask was made in Nepal, and more than likely aligns with the Hindu version of Garuda. Garuda is an important figure throughout Asia, and has been featured as a national symbol for both Indonesia and Thailand.

Zia Pueblo Jar

Bird: Roadrunner

New Mexico

ca 1969

ceramic

Accession Number: 69.20/62

Collected and purchased for the Museum by Dr. Charles H. Lange

The Zia Pueblo cultural group is located in New Mexico. They are very well known for their thin-walled pottery made using the coiling method. Zia pottery uses the coiling method to create the pottery. It is commonly styled with geometric patterns on a white background. The roadrunner is a popular design among the Zia, as it represents speed and is the bearer of prayers. It is also the state bird of New Mexico. The roadrunner on the jar on display is shown in a typical roadrunner pose.

latmul Initiation Mask

Bird: Cassowary

Middle Sepik River Region, Papua New Guinea

ca 1950s

bamboo, shell, feathers, balsa wood

Accession number: 69.4/25

Gift of Morton D. May

This wicker-style basketry mask is from the latmul cultural group, who are located in the Middle Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea. This mask is used in male initiation ceremonies in which a young boy is inducted into an all-male secret group. When initiated, the boy officially assumes adulthood. During these initiation ceremonies, members of the secret group wear these masks, which represent ancestor spirits, in order to keep women and children away from the initiation site. The elongated nose is associated with fertility.

The mask is made of woven fibers, shells, and cassowary and swamp bird feathers. It is possibly that the mask might be a stylistic representation of the cassowary bird, which is important to the cultural groups in the Sepik River region. In this region, the female cassowary is seen as the creator of the world and humanity. Cassowaries are relatives of the ostrich and are known for their aggressive nature, standing as tall as the average man and armed with sharp talons.

Exhibit Statement

There are currently over 10,000 species of bird in the world that are spread across all seven continents. In fact, you have probably seen at least one already today. With those impressive numbers, it is no wonder that birds have frequently been the subject of artwork across cultures.

Why birds in particular? We have always had a fascination with the fauna around us, and birds are an excellent source of wonder. Their sleek shape, whether large or small, and their range of colors are reflected in the art on display. When adding the meaning of the bird imagery used by the cultures represented, their importance is even more enhanced.

Beyond representing them, we also respect birds, for they can do something that we truly cannot; fly. Flight, and the connection of birds with the sky has caused them to be associated with beauty, power and a link to the divine.

The artwork displayed in this exhibit provides a well-rounded scope of the ways birds have been used in art around the world, whether religious, emblematic or aesthetic.

**Curated by Rachael Huszar
Senior Honors Thesis**

