

CPS SOURCE bySunday

The Amazon River basin is full of plants, animals, and birds found nowhere else on the planet and they have been used by the indigenous people living there for millenia. Among their traditional crafts is "featherwork," a highly complex and expressive art form shared throughout the basin, that uses the feathers from native birds.

Feathered items traditionally indicate the wearer's tribe, cultural and spiritual beliefs, or position in society. They often represent the relationship the Amazon peoples have between cultural characteristics and the environment. The birds used have different importance based on whether they live in the tree canopy, the middle growth, or the ground level. Birds from the upper parts of the canopy have greater prestige than birds associated with lower strata. For example, hunting activities are associated with birds of the higher regions and gardening and gathering activities are associated with birds of the lower regions. Feathers from middle-region birds such as egrets, macaws, and toucans are often used on men's apparel such as the seed apron from Brazil shown below. It has 38 rows of beads and



Apron
Brazil
20th century
cotton, feathers, seeds
#1984-104

feather dangles, most likely from a scarlet or red and green macaw which indicate the apron was intended for a male. The most sought-after feathers are from harpy eagles, birds of prey that live in the uppermost stratum of the rainforest.

Feathers are rarely used to decorate women's clothing, but when they are present they are from birds predominately associated with the rainforest floor. The comb to the left is formed by tying palm fibers, cotton, or grass around bone or palm sticks and the feathers were added for decoration. Such items are generally made by men for women.



Comb
Brazil
20th c.
bamboo, bone, cotton, feathers
#1984-103

Sadly, the introduction of foreign species, over-hunting, and environmental changes, such as habitat destruction, have caused many of the birds with the most beautiful and desirable feathers to become extinct.



Necklace
Surinam
20th century
wild-boar teeth, glass trade beads, feathers
Grayson Collection #1992-171

EXPLORE

To see more artifacts, visit the MoA's online databases:
<https://anthromuseum.missouri.edu/?q=online-databases>

Database search words: Amazon, basin, feather, South America

Tips for Using the Museum Databases

- Log in as a "Guest."
- Enter search terms into one or more fields and click the "Perform Find" button in the status area on the left-hand side of the screen.
- Use the book icon in the status area to move from one record to another in the found set.
- Click on the magnifying glass icon to return to find mode and perform additional searches.
- When finished working with a database, please be sure to click the "Log Out" button in the status area to close your session.

AMAZON RIVER BASIN



The Amazon basin, in geographic terms, includes the highlands of Brazil and Guiana, the Andes foothills, and the Amazon rainforest. It encompasses 2,500,000 square miles in eight separate nations and contains the largest river system on Earth, as well as the world's richest biological territory. This region also encapsulates over 120 autonomous tribal groups whose people have developed an extensive understanding of their natural environment. They have an innate knowledge of the region's seasons, the workings of the river system, and animal and plant taxonomy.

Because of the dense ecological system and the constant raining and flooding in the Amazon region, the soil on the forest floor is very poor in nutrients. Trees are forced to grow to enormous heights in order to fight for sunlight, creating a hierarchy of strata: the canopy, the middle growth, and the ground level.