

The Plumage Bill: Feathers and Femininity



Photograph of a found object inspiring *Count Raggi's Bird* by Kate Foster

*This exhibit took as its starting point an artwork by the artist Kate Foster - "Count Raggi's Bird" - a bookwork created after Foster acquired a box marked 'feathers' containing the feathers and head of a bird of paradise, *Paradisea Raggiiana*, which would have once adorned the hat of a fashionable and wealthy Victorian woman. The bookwork and box containing the feathers were exhibited alongside archival photographs of women working in plumage 'sweatshops' and Virginia Woolf's provocative essay *The Plumage Bill* in order to expose and explore some of the gender contradictions and class tensions associated with the trade and production of bird skins and feathers for millinery purposes.*

Curatorial Essay Accompanying Exhibit:

Feathers and Femininity

Feathers fascinate, feathers are fetishized, feathers it seems are very much back in fashion. Kylie sported electric blue ostrich plumes on her recent “Showgirl” tour, Ditte Von Tesse favours pink ones for her infamous “Feather Fan Dance”, and if the pages of Vogue are to believed feather fascinators make the ultimate 2009 summer wedding accessory.

Yet like most fashions, feathers have been the height of fashion once before. Plumage was an essential part of Victorian and Edwardian dress. The uses were seemingly endless: turbans, neck ruches, boas, bonnets, bandeaus, capes, aigrettes and innumerable styles of hats. The variety of plumage was also seemingly endless: herons, egrets, ostriches, grebes, pheasants, cocks, owls, parrots, peafowl, marabou, ibis, birds of paradise, etc. Furthermore, wings, bodies, heads, as well as tail plumage were all used in the millinery trade and occasionally different species were merged into one hat (see 1). At the height of “feather fashions” (around 1901-1910) 14,362,000 pounds of exotic feathers were imported into the United Kingdom at a total valuation of £19,923,000¹. South African ostrich plumes, due to their particularly sumptuous nature, were so in demand during this period that their value per pound was almost equal to diamonds.²

However, the extent of these imports was of increasing concern to contemporary conservationists who sought to ban the trade and persuade ladies not to use plumage for their own adornment³. Campaigns against ‘murderous millinery’ by the RSPB and others culminated in the 1920 Plumage Bill that was put to the parliamentary vote. On the 10th of July 1920 H. W. Massingham (1860-1924), writing under the nom de plume of ‘Wayfarer’, made the following comments concerning the failure of the 1920 Plumage Bill in the House of Commons:

¹ Estimation and valuation from Doughty (1975) *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: a Study in Nature Protection*. University of California Press.

² Stein (2008) *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce*. Yale University Press.

³ For example, the RSPB’s *cause celebre* from its establishment in 1890’s was the battle against the plumage trade until it effectively ended in Britain with the 1921 Importation of Plumage (prohibition) Act. The more robust 1925 Wild Birds Protection Act followed to secure the conservation of native species as well (see Evans 1997).

“What does one expect? They have to be shot in parenthood for child-bearing women to flaunt the symbols of it, and, as Mr Hudson says, one bird shot for its plumage means ten other deadly wounds and the starvation of the young. But what do women care? Look at Regent Street this morning!”

Virginia Woolf in her reply essay “The Plumage Bill”⁴ (**see 2**) responds to Massingham’s charge with the creation of the character ‘Lady So-and-So’ (**see 3**). Woolf proceeds to paint a harsh portrait of the unthinking, self indulgent woman of fashion – the buyer of the feather – presenting her in a way that seems astonishingly to corroborate Massingham’s view. But in another twist, she renders a far more devastating portrait of men – the hunters and merchants that turn killing into a commodity, and the male parliament that fails to pass the plumage Bill prohibiting the trade. Woolf prompts her audience to question the social code that unconsciously condemns women’s pleasures – the love of beauty and fashion – as sin whereas men’s pleasures – their lusts for hunting, women, money – are accepted even valorised:

“Can it be that it is a graver sin to be unjust to women than to torture birds?”

However, while Lady So-and-So is a creation of a patriarchal system of male production and wealth and a patriarchal aristocracy, she is also a reflection/product of patriarchal society as produced and consumed by women. Lady So-and-So’s existence as a consumer, and a flawlessly finished consumer icon at that, was at least partly the work of women producers of luxury goods or services. For example the ‘lemon coloured egret’ was almost certainly dyed by female hands; in 1889, in London and Paris over 8000 women were employed in the millinery trade and the majority of the 83,000 people employed in New York City in 1900 in the making and decorating of hats were women⁵ (**see 4**).

A class-bound Woolf may have been ignorant of this point, or, more likely, intentionally ignored it so she could highlight the male producers and profiteers controlling the trade. Whatever her reasons, the lasting point she

⁴ First published in the *Woman’s Leader*, 23 July 1920. Recognised as Woolf’s ‘earliest feminist polemic’ *The Plumage Bill* was written before Woolf wrote *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) arguably two of the most important feminist polemics in English literature.

⁵ Figures from Doughty 1975 *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: a Study in Nature Protection*. University of California Press. Stein 2008 discusses in some detail the young women and girls who prepared feathers for sale, usually for very low wages and in grim conditions. They were also prone to tuberculosis, due to the dust and fluff. Moreover, the term ‘as mad as a hatter’ was coined because milliners were forced to inhale fumes of mercury when working, as mercury was used in the felting process.

makes in her essay is that, with cash in hand, Lady So-and-So had every right to buy the beautiful complementary accessory for her opera ensemble, an accessory, as Wolf so cutting observes, deemed by the fashion press to be worthy of Lady So-and-So and the occasion:

“Lady So-and-So was looking lovely with a lemon coloured egret in her hair”.

Sound familiar?

By Merle Patchett

1. Referred to a box marked 'Feathers' which once belonged to a fashionable and wealthy Victorian woman. The box contained a dyed-black bird-head identified by zoology staff at University of Glasgow as *Paradisea raggiana*; a rare Bird of Paradise only found in New Guinea. Although dyed black the slight flecks of amber and green that shone in the light indicated its original colour, allowing identification. The box also contained ostrich plumes and more unidentified feathers. All of these feathers would have been used to adorn a single hat. Box of feather was exhibited alongside Foster bookwork *Count Raggi's Bird*:



<http://www.meansealevel.net/files/countraggi/CountRaggi.pdf>

2. Referred to a bookwork containing Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Plumage Bill' which could be picked up and read.
3. Referred to a mock up of Lady So-and-So which consisted of a manikin draped in an of-the-period pale green silk dress, a darker green ostrich feather shrug and a lemon coloured egret feather (egrets were nearly made extinct by the plumage trade). The egret feather had a label attached to it saying "try me" (in Alice in Wonderland "drink me" style to reference the 'mad as a hatter' association with milliners who went mad from inhaling mercury fumes, mercury being used in the felting process) and a mirror was placed so that visitors could try the feather in their hair for themselves. The ostrich shrug similarly invited touch with a "feel me" label:



4. Referred to a series of archival photographs showing women (some in their young teens) working in plumage 'sweatshops' in New York and London.

