

## The History of the Tupinambá Feather Cloak

PLUS Masterpieces

# The History of the Tupinambá Feather Cloak

ROYAL MUSEUMS  
OF ART AND HISTORY

MER. BOOKS

1	<b>The History of the Tupinambá Feather Cloak Preserved in Brussels</b>	7
2	<b>Cloaks in European Museums</b>	31
3	<b>Who Were the Tupinambá?</b>	57
4	<b>The Renown of Feather Cloaks in the 16th Century</b>	71
5	<b>The Tupinambá Cloak Preserved in Brussels, at the Centre of an Artistic Renaissance</b>	87



FIG.1 The Tupinambá cloak preserved in Brussels (AAM 5783). The seam between the two parts is visible where the fold begins.

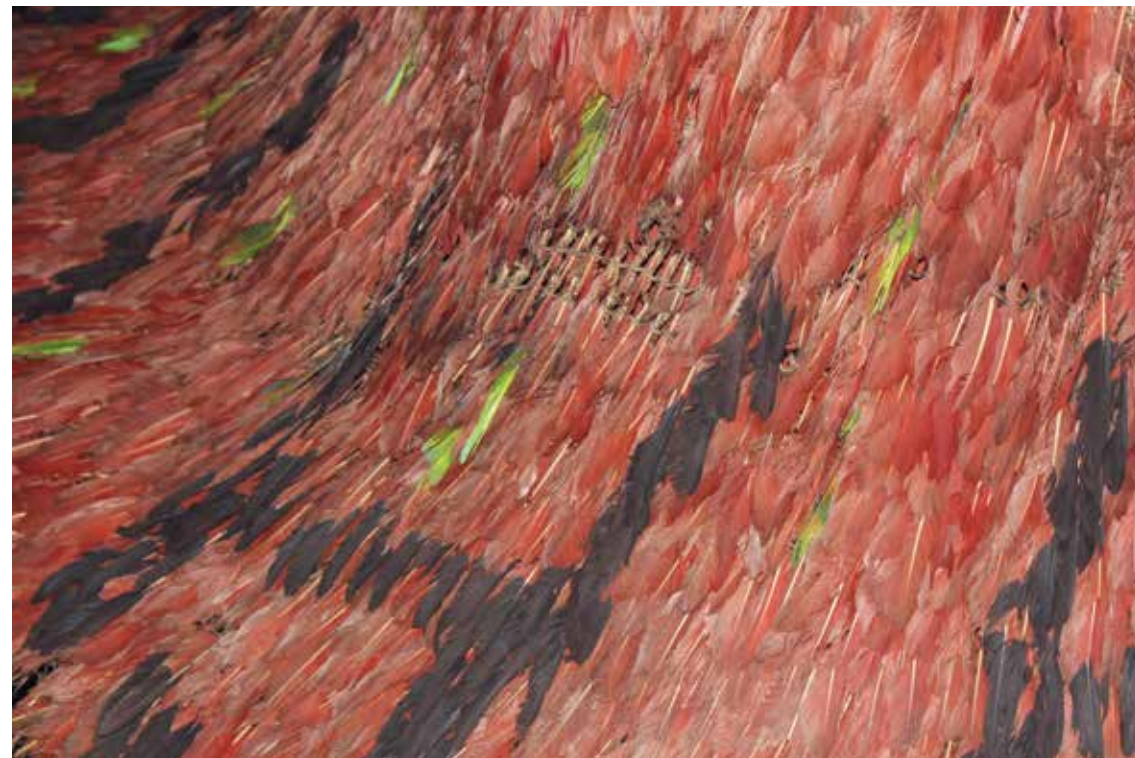
# 1 The History of the Tupinambá Feather Cloak Preserved in Brussels

## 1.1 The Cloak, a Masterpiece in the Royal Arsenal

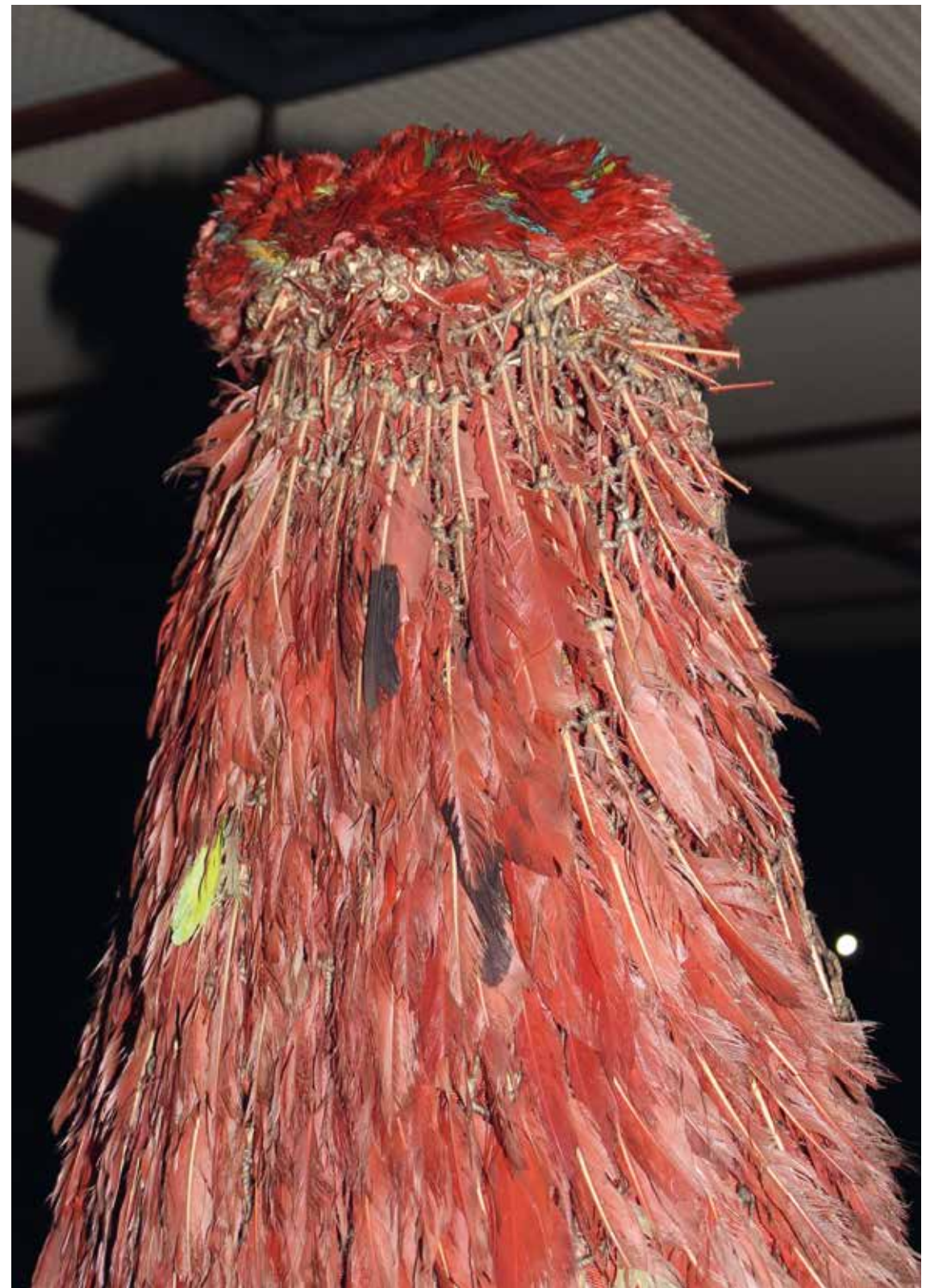
The Tupinambá feather cloak (Brazil) is one of our oldest and most impressive items and is the envy of museums around the world. It is mentioned in the royal inventory of 1780, along with a large staff 2 metres long and covered in wickerwork (ETAM 4160), though the staff itself is probably not Tupinambá.

The cloak is remarkable for its dimensions, 2 metres long and 1.8 metres wide. It actually comprises three parts. Two cloaks, each about 1 metre long, were joined together. In the central part of the cloak, where the feathers do not overlap perfectly, there is a section that appears to be a seam. It is not known when the two parts were stitched together. To make the cloak more durable, a red fabric was sewn onto the back, so it is not possible to see how the two sections were attached to each other. The top of the cloak is finished with a crown of plumules.

The colour of the cloak is also striking. The red feathers primarily come from the scarlet ibis (*Eudocimer rubra*), a bird whose natural habitat includes coastal marshes and the mouths of rivers. The feathers are attached to a cotton net, similar to a fishing net. The mesh of the net is diamond-shaped and wider at the top than at the bottom, where the spaces are tighter. Each feather is tied with a knot. The quill



**FIG. 2** Detail of the lower section showing the arrangement of the black feathers and a few green feathers. The H-shaped pattern on the right is clearly visible.



**FIG. 3** Detail of the crown of red feathers arranged in a tight row. Yellow, green and blue feathers are interspersed in the arrangement.



FIG.4 *Ara chloroptera*, whose green and blue feathers were used to complement the scarlet ibis feathers.



FIG.6 *Ara ararauna*, used for its blue and yellow feathers.

of the feather is inserted into the knot and folded downwards, then secured with a horizontal cord that passes through the diamond shapes of the net. The feathers are not attached randomly, but following a specific pattern, like on a bird, with the right and left wing matching. This gives the cloak a flowing, homogeneous drape.

A pattern is visible on the lower part of the cloak, produced by the arrangement of black feathers and a few green feathers, probably from *Ara chloroptera* (red-and-green macaw). The black feathers come from the wings of the scarlet ibis. They form four vertical lines and two H-shaped figures on the right half of the cloak. In her 2021 study, researcher Gaëlle Dias Ambelakiotis estimated that between 250 and 280 black feathers were used to produce the cloak. As the scarlet ibis has four black feathers at the tip of each wing, she calculated that 37 birds were needed in total. The green feathers (from either *Amazona*\* or *Ara chloroptera*) are arranged in such a way that they form more or less distinct vertical lines between the rows of black feathers.

Besides its exceptional length, the specimen in Brussels also stands out by the crown of red feathers decorating the upper section. These feathers are much shorter and ruffled. The red plumules are interspersed with yellow, green and blue plumules from *Ara ararauna* (blue-and-yellow macaw) and a species of *Amazona*\*. This crown was made using a different technique. The quills of the feathers are inserted into a knot, but are held upright and tightly together, whereas the feathers on the rest of the cloak are laid flat and overlapping, as they would be on a bird.



**FIG. 5** Scarlet ibis, a species that was common on the Atlantic coast of Brazil and whose scarlet feathers were highly prized for making cloaks.



**FIG. 7** Blue-fronted Amazon (*Amazona aestiva*), a small parrot with around ten subspecies, sought after for its beautiful green plumage.

## 1.2. How the Cloak Ended Up in Brussels

The earliest record of the cloak dates back to the late 18th century. It appears in an inventory of objects, primarily weapons and armour, stored in the royal collections of the Arsenal. At the time, these collections were housed in a gallery in the stables of the Court, located on Rue de Namur (1000 Brussels). Weapons and other objects donated by the Court had been stored there since the 15th century.

It is assumed that the staff and cloak were brought back during the European colonisation of America in the 16th century and were initially kept at the Palace of the Dukes of Brabant in Brussels. The earliest reference is found in the inventory of the collections of the Arsenal compiled in 1780 by Georges Gérard, a member of the Académie des Sciences et Belles Lettres in Brussels. They subsequently entered the collections of the heraldic chamber until 1794, but no records of them have been found. They were then transferred to the Royal Museum of Armour, Antiquities and Artillery at the Halle Gate before arriving at the Royal Museums of Art and History.

*In 1835, King Leopold I founded the Museum of Antique Weapons, Art Objects and Numismatics. The collection already featured ethnographic pieces from the Americas. These objects came from the former Arsenal. During his reign, Charles V and his successors expanded the collection with artefacts from the New World. Nevertheless, the*



**FIG. 8** The wooden staff covered with two-tone wickerwork. Despite its Brazilian origins, it is probably not Tupinambá. The diamond patterns were probably intended to represent snakeskin (ETAM 04160).

*inventory from 1780, the only one available for this repository, mentions several highly curious Aztec artefacts including armour, iron staffs and shields, pretentiously and erroneously attributed to Montezuma\* (the spelling used at the time). While these weapons do not appear to come from the Americas, there is nevertheless the famous feather cloak, also incorrectly attributed to Montezuma, but*



**FIG. 9** Portrait of a Tapuya warrior holding his weapons: a bow and arrows, and a wooden club decorated with feathers. The Dutch painter Albert Eckhout (1610–1665) accompanied Johan Maurits of Nassau (1604–1679) on his voyage to Brazil. He was the first person to paint portraits of the Indigenous people. Nationalmuseet – Etnografisk Samling, Copenhagen.



FIG. 10 Portrait of a Tupi warrior. Albert Eckhout (1610–1665). Nationalmuseet – Etnografisk Samling, Copenhagen.

*actually stemming from the Tupinambás, an ethnic group that inhabited the Atlantic coast of Brazil until the 17th century, and, belonging to the same group, a staff covered in wickerwork. Following the historical turmoil in the former Netherlands, only the cloak and staff remained when the museum was inaugurated.*

– SCHOTSMANS 1985, p.15; freely translated.

The museum was founded in 1835, but its collections initially consisted of surplus items from the Royal Arsenal, put together by Duke Antoine de Bourgogne in the 15th century. This collection included weapons, trophies and curiosities. It was housed for many years near the stables of the Court, at the Coudenberg Palace. Following the Battle of Fleurus in 1794, the most valuable items were taken to Vienna by the Austrians to protect them from Napoleon's approaching troops.