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Feathers are having a moment in the world of interiors and design

By Gisela Williams



The fashion world has gone mad for feathers, from Louis Vuitton's ostrich-feathered headdresses to Dries Van Noten sandals embellished with ostrich, goose and pheasant feathers. In a smaller but no less dramatic way, feathers are also having a moment in the world of interiors and design.

Feathers have, of course, been used decoratively for millennia, in fashion and ritual, in cultures from Africa to the Americas. One of the most compelling design-related exhibitions now on (until early March) is a collection of ancient feathered wall hangings at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The 12 stunning panels, each about 7ft by 2ft, were discovered rolled up in large ceramic jars in 1943 in the valley of Ocoña in Peru. More than 1000 years old, the panels were made in southern Peru during the era of the Wari empire. They are covered with thousands of blue and yellow macaw feathers, and look almost avant-garde today.

Contemporary feather wallcoverings from the Nest collection by F. Schumacher & Co, a New York-based decorative textiles company, are in more subtle hues. Twenty-four different patterns have been created by arranging humanely gathered feathers on paperbacked panels.

"Feathers are in the air," says Dara Caponigro, creative director at Schumacher. "They are organic, utilitarian, and the colour and texture found in a feather are so special. For us, they are like jewels." The three-yard long panels are made in Taiwan. William Stubbs, a US interior designer, used several dozen panels of dark blue, iridescent overlapping feathers to cover the walls of a master bathroom. "The colour was beyond beautiful, very intoxicating and hypnotic," says Stubbs, who is based in Houston. "The results were stunning."

Equally stunning was an installation at London's Clerkenwell Design Week in May by Tracy Kendall, an award-winning British wallpaper designer. Kendall presented Black Swan, a wall of shimmery black feathers sewn on to paper. Prices are available upon request.

Eric Charles-Donatien attracted a lot of attention at the Maison&Objet show in Paris last year with his eccentric sculpture-like pieces: a 2m metal lamp pierced with gold-dipped feathers; a hanging mobile-like object of real and metal feathers – half-dreamcatcher, half-necklace; and a centrepiece of metal scales embedded with feathers.

“I wanted to show the art of working with feathers in a different, meaningful way,” says Charles-Donatien, who was design director at Maison Lemarié for many years. When it comes to feathers, Charles-Donatien is considered a master artisan by the world's most prestigious couture houses. “When I first started working with feathers, they were used mostly for expensive showpieces and costumes for a stage spectacle. Now they are considered a mainstream fashion embellishment like embroidery. That's why, a few years ago, I started to push working with feathers even further – into the home.”

Charles-Donatien is working on two hotel projects – one in London and the other in Paris – both of which use feathers with lighting, a combination which appears to be inspiring designers around the globe. Take, for example, the glamorous 1920s-style chandelier of ostrich feathers created by South African designer Haldane Martin and the whimsical crocheted chandelier embellished with grey feathers from Italian designer Loredana Bonora for a show last year at the Plusdesign Gallery in Milan.

“There is something so warm and beautiful about light going through feathers,” says Heike Buchfelder, founder of the Berlin design company Pluma Cubic. Since 2005, Buchfelder has been designing lights with feathers sprouting from cylinders or spheres of canvas. Tosa, a recent design, is a towering standard lamp with an enormous sphere of flame-dyed goose feathers, resembling a giant red dandelion or a Dr Seuss illustration.

“Feathers are fascinating,” Buchfelder says. “It's amazing how nature works. When feathers get dirty and broken from wind or water, they can be repaired by being smoothed over. The individual threads work like zippers.” Buchfelder only uses feathers from geese and chickens, birds raised to be eaten. Her lights can be found in the restaurant of the Ashmolean museum in Oxford and Lufthansa's VIP lounge in Munich.

“Feathers are naturally built to be dirt-repellent,” she says. “Their surfaces are smooth and any dust that lands on the feathers can be easily removed. They are also extremely durable, thanks to their hornlike quills. Under the right conditions, they can last for centuries, as is the case with traditional feather ornaments created by native tribes in North and South America.”

Artists such as Rebecca Horn are also using feathers to powerful effect. Her feather sculptures of wings – such as “Cockatoo Mask” and “Black Cockfeathers” – are in the Tate collection. And lately, the British artist Kate MccGwire is gaining a reputation

for her sculptures and installations made using feathers, which are both menacing and beautiful.

MccGwire grew up exploring the waterways of Norwich, east England. Fascinated by birds and taxidermy, she has been creating installations and sculptures from feathers for almost a decade. Next year is set to be an important one for her, with exhibitions of her work at MoMu, the fashion museum in Antwerp, and the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris.

Works such as “Flail”, an object that resembles the knotted neck of a black swan contained in a glass case that seems too small to hold it, looks like a piece of taxidermy of a creature from another world. Installations such as “Evacuate”, a twister-shaped flood of feathers exploding from an oven, conveys the impression of something wild being released.

“Nature is beautiful and wonderful but it’s also tricky and brutal,” says MccGwire in her studio on the Thames. “I work very hard to achieve a creature that looks like it could be real.”

MccGwire is endlessly interested in feathers. “They are incredibly light but also incredibly strong,” she says. “They are the most unbelievable colours. Even with a black crow there is an amazing range of hues. If you look at the feathers on the wing of a magpie, there are these exotic petrol blues. I want to celebrate the incredible colours that we overlook.

“People ask me when I am going to move on from feathers,” she continues, “But each time I make a piece, I think about the next object I want to make.”



‘Quell’ (detail), by Kate MccGwire



A sculpture by Eric Charles-Donatien

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