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Elisabeth Gerner



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"Feather Muffs of all Colours"

Fashion, Patriotism, and the Natural World in Eighteenth-century Britain

Elisabeth Gerner

- 1 On 13 September, 1759, General James Wolfe was killed during the Battle of Quebec, which resonated throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the turning point in the Seven Years' War. News of Wolfe's death reached the London press by 17 October and soon after anecdotes of his heroic demise circulated throughout Britain. Newspapers relayed that the courageous Wolfe had thrown himself into battle, continuing to fight after he had been shot through both the wrist and the belly. He finally fell when a third shot hit him "near the breast", only perspiring once he knew the French were defeated: "having enquired some time after, if the French were repulsed, and being assured they were; declared, that he then died satisfied".¹ Painted as a tragic hero whose patriotic sacrifice for king and country was an exemplar only eclipsed by the death of Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, he was memorialised in paintings, prints, and sculpture.² Most famously, Benjamin West's 1770 epic history painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, which portrays Wolfe in the position of Christ in the Lamentation, was one of the most widely reproduced and circulated images of the late eighteenth century.³ (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1: *The Death of General Wolfe at Quebec*, Benjamin West, c. 1771, published by Tessari & Co. Engraving, 30 x 41 cm



Lewis Walpole Library, inv. 771.00.00.33+

Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

- 2 Flanked by forlorn British soldiers, the dying military martyr is foiled by a stoic, kneeling Iroquois warrior, whose bare, tattooed skin and feathered headdress visually contrasts against the woollen uniforms, brass buttons, and white linen of the British officers.⁴ West's retrospective construction of the scene conveys Britain's successful imperial conquest and colonial power over their French adversaries, and their continued exploitation of the land and indigenous inhabitants of North America. Wolfe's death is cast as a noble sacrifice in the service of the burgeoning British empire. Yet within this vast public commemoration of the fallen hero, Wolfe's death is invoked in a rather unusual context: a diatribe on fashion. Published on 16 August, 1765 in the *Gazeteer and New Daily Advertiser*, the anonymous commentator implores, "Consider ladies, that to gain the fur trade the brave Wolfe fell!"⁵ The anonymous author refers to a rather unexpected consequence of the Seven Years' War, during which Britain acquired previously French-occupied Canada and control of her lucrative fur trade. Despite the newly opened channels of trade for British furriers, women of fashion, as this author scorns, no longer had a taste for fur, only for feathers.
- 3 The accessory over which British women's taste had reputedly changed was the muff, the cylindrical accessory worn over the hands that had been fashionable in Britain since the sixteenth century.⁶ Not a newly invented or isolated fashion of the 1760s, muffs had and would be worn on and off throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, constructed with fur, silk, and feathers. A notice of a lost "Feather Muff lightish Colour" along with other missing articles of clothing from *The Daily Courant* of 1706 attests to the feather muff's wear from the first decade of the century.⁷ An advertisement from 1747 offered "feathered Muffs and Tippetts of all colours" for sale

and black feather muffs were widely advertised in the 1780s.⁸ Though numerous feather muffs survive in museum collections, few survive from before the turn of the century, reflecting the rarity of extant feather objects.⁹ This lack of material artefacts, alongside the notoriety of birds of paradise and the plume trade, has often meant that the feather's story in fashion is heavily weighted to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰ When addressed in an eighteenth-century context, feather fashions primarily refer to the ostrich feather and its coiffeurial debut in the 1770s.¹¹ This article looks before the dominance of birds of paradise or ostrich plumes, from the feather's position on the head to the feather's position around the hands. Tracing the associated global geographies of the feather and the feather muff, this article addresses the feather muff, from its arrival in the early 1760s as a politically charged invader, to its position as a product of the feather trade, and finally to its context within a wider, global culture of feathers in mid-century Britain.

1. For this "the brave Wolfe fell": The French feather muff invasion

- 4 The first announcement of the feather muff's arrival on British shores was published as an editorial to the author of the *London Evening Post* written by "an Englishman".¹² Published in May, 1762, the author commends the acquisition of Canada and the fur trade for the Crown, then quickly censures the "multitude of French sycophants amongst us, such as Milliners, Mantuamakers, Mademoiselles, &c," who had cajoled British "Ladies of Quality" to throw off their furs and wear feathers. Complaining that "Whilst Canada was in the hands of the French, fur muffs and tippets could only please our Ladies; but no sooner is it in our own, but feather ones, forsooth, must be all the fashion" because "nothing can be genteel, agreeable or becoming, but what is worn at Paris; and that feather muffs are now all the fashion there".¹³ Echoing a familiar refrain of anti-French sentiment laced with economic protectionism that pervaded British views on dress over the century, the fashion for feather muffs was framed as a sartorial French invasion, intended to undermine the newly acquired Canadian fur trade.¹⁴
- 5 These denunciations were repeated in several published editorials over the coming years. The unpatriotic nature of the Frenchified feather muff was even mentioned in a report on commerce and trade in October 1762. Reflecting on the previous competition with France for beaver, which was used to make felt hats, the author concludes, "I hope to see a law passed in the approaching sessions of parliament, for prohibiting the use of feathers in muffs and tippets; which vile fashion has been assiduously introduced by the instruments of our enemies, with a view of doing hurt to this new and important colony".¹⁵ Further diatribes were published in 1764 and again in 1765, which, above all, lamented Wolfe's death as in vain. The 1764 editorial highlights the author's condemnation of primarily the female weakness of this fashionable invasion, noting that, "But, frantic as our women are in copying French modes, I am pleased to see our men have not yet got into coats with skirts of a span length; nor have any of them disgraced their heads with skimming-dish hats, except courtiers and coxcombs".¹⁶ Like most published diatribes on fashion, the author's gendered vitriol underlines the piece; the overtly French connotations of these accessories added further fuel to the protectionist fire.¹⁷

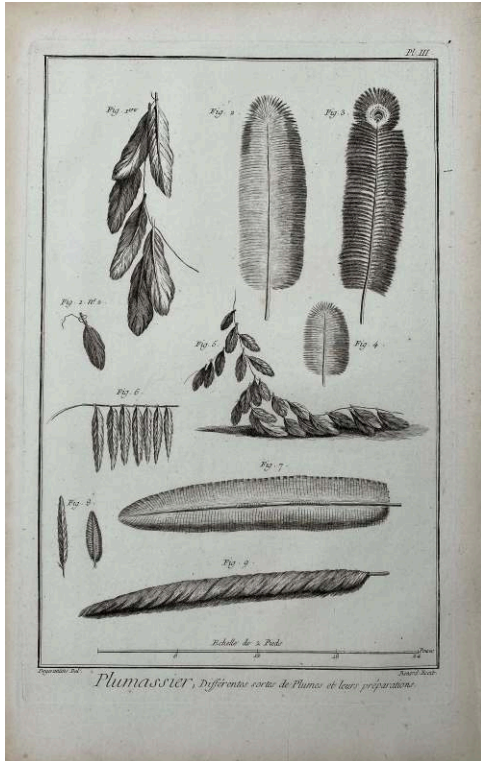
- 6 Printed alongside these Francophobic tirades, reports of imported muffs for sale, along with those seized and re-sold through customs house auctions, attest to the flurry of feather muffs crossing the Channel in the 1760s. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Britain had enacted a programme of mercantile legislation, attempting to protect and enable British manufacture and exports.¹⁸ Foreign textiles, like silks, linens, and cottons, as well as made-up millinery, were banned or heavily taxed when ships reached British ports, resulting in a thriving demand for illegally imported goods.¹⁹ As Susan North has argued, the “complicity of the whole of British society in smuggling” made contraband a mainstay of British fashion.²⁰ Though packet boats from France were suspended during the Seven Years’ War, the demand for French commodities did not cease, resulting in the illegal import not only of banned silks, but legal goods as well, attempting to avoid customs duties. Countless French feather muffs were seized at Glasgow, Deal, Poole, and Dover. One account of a seizure at Poole reports, “They advise from Pool [sic.], that, among other illicit goods secured from a late seizure in the King’s warehouse, are a considerable quantity of French feather muffs”. The report further illuminates that, “from some papers taken on board a smuggler, it appears, that commissions have been received at Bourdeaux [sic.] from London, to send over, at proper opportunities, fifteen thousand more of the same commodity, for Winter wear”.²¹ Similarly, when a prize ship was intercepted near Southampton, from “some papers found on board... it appears very large commissions are now executing in France for feather muffs, of a new pattern, to be imported against the ensuing winter-season”.²² French production of feather muffs were fuelled by commissions from British consumers, who acquired French imports through naval relatives as well as their sartorial retailers. For example, Sabine Winn of Nostell Priory specifically sought out retailers who would supply her with French contraband.²³ Though widespread, contraband was not without its risks. In addition to the numerous maritime seizures, retailers in possession of illegally imported goods were at risk of confiscation: “a parcel of French feather muffs were seized at Greenwich, said to be the property of a Milliner at the west end of town” and reports of nationwide searches were threatened.²⁴
- 7 Though a comparably small percentage of smuggled goods next to imported textiles like silks and calicos, feather muffs contributed to the protectionist culture of the 1760s, when even the Queen rallied for British fashion. In early January, 1765, after reporting that Queen Charlotte and the court will only wear British silks, the *London Evening Post* also noted that:
- We are likewise assured, that Feather Muffs, so industriously and in such Profusion introduced here by the French after they found themselves deprived of Furs by the Loss of Canada, will very shortly grow quite out of Date, by our Most Gracious Queen’s appearing on her Birth-day in a Furred Muff; with a View of giving Employment to our own Manufacturers.²⁵
- 8 The attempt of Queen Charlotte to exert her sartorial influence over court fashion to aid British manufacturers, in particular the silk industry, coincided with a tightening of legislation for French silks and ready-made accessories in 1765.²⁶ It also encouraged British feather muff production. In February 1765, the *London Chronicle* reported that “A foreigner now in London has undertaken, on proper encouragement, to carry on a manufacture for making feather muffs equal to the French imported from France”.²⁷ By the following week, news of a “Lady’s feather-muff manufactory [sic.]” was being circulated, advertising the London-made muffs “for beauty and fine colours, are no way inferior to those brought from France”.²⁸ Competition in the feather muff business

through domestic production attempted to stem the importation of French muffs, which by 1769, was estimated to be more than 50,000 for each winter season, spurring on the growth of the British feather trade.²⁹

2. Finding Feather Muffs

- 9 Within the column inches of published tirades devoted to feather muffs in British newspapers in the early to mid-1760s, few actually point to the makers and sellers of feather muffs. Those rare occasions when feather muffs are advertised for sale, like at "Veale's Warehouse, Glover and Furrier", they are mentioned broadly without specifics as to their origins, design, or maker: "a large Parcel of Fur and Feather Muffs, to be sold very cheap".³⁰ One London feather maker, Francis Currey, whose trade card survives in the Sir Ambrose Heal collection of the British Museum, describes himself as "Feather-man and Milliner", selling "Feather Muffs and Tippetts of all sorts" in addition to other typical articles of millinery.³¹ A challenge of locating feather muffs arises both from their problematic status during the early 1760s — they were increasingly advertised with greater transparency over the following decades once their French tinge had faded — and also because feather muffs were sold by multiple branches of the sartorial trades, including furriers and milliners. Yet before they were sold in "every Milliner's shop" and appeared "on every fashionable lady's arm", feather muffs were first a product of the feather trade.³²
- 10 Feathers were a foundation of eighteenth-century life from cradle to grave. Feathers were slept on in feather mattresses, slept under in decorative plumed canopy beds. They were used daily as quills to write with, in brooms and dusters to clean with, and in funereal rites to honour one's passing. Sartorially, feathers were employed widely in men and women's hats, military uniforms, muffs, tippetts, and headdresses. In the 1770s and 1790s, ostrich plumes topped women's coiffures, cementing their place in British court dress through the early decades of the twentieth century.³³ Despite their ubiquity across eighteenth-century society, the British feather trade can be challenging to locate for the modern-day historian. Mirroring feathers' many uses, just as many terms were applied to identify those who sourced, dealt, and transformed feathers from raw material into useful goods. Unlike France, where one term prevailed, in Britain those of the feather trade were known by: feather maker, feather-man, feather manufacturer, feather dealer, feather merchant, feather dresser, feather worker, and the French term, *plumassier*.³⁴ As I have demonstrated in my recent work on the feather trade, the French feather trade can act as a useful lens, shedding light on its more obscure British counterpart.³⁵
- 11 The primary source for a description of the eighteenth-century feather trade remains Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*.³⁶ The explanatory text for *plumassier panachier* was published in 1751, and was followed by five illustrative plates in 1771. Feathers were de-greased of animal fats, dyed, cut, and shaped before being sewn into feather muffs. Feather muffs in the eighteenth century were often made from common feathers, like those from chickens and cockerels, rather than exotic birds with colourful and distinctive plumage. Unlike fur, which retained the colour of the animal's pelt, feathers could be dyed into bright and vivid colours.³⁷ After feathers were coloured and shaped, they were braided onto cords, which can be seen in *Plate III*. (Fig. 2)

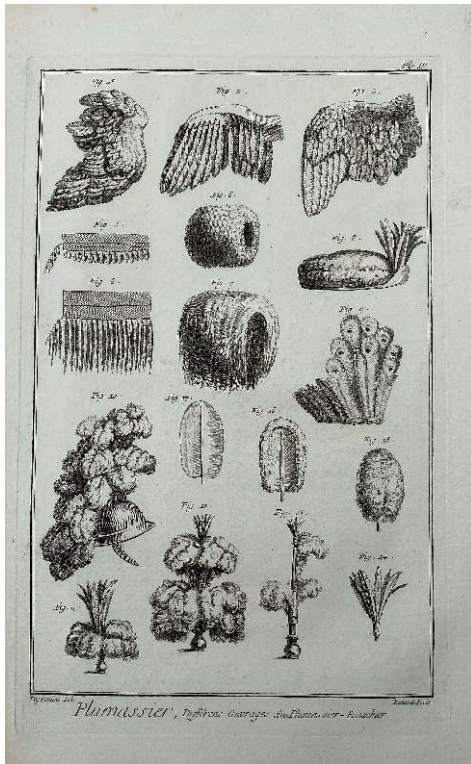
Fig. 2: "Plumassier panachier, Plate III", *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, Vol. 8, 1771. Etching and engraving, 27 x 43 cm



Collection of the author

- 12 As identified on the plate, "Fig. 3" in *Plate III* shows cock feathers tied onto twine. As Geraldine Sheridan has argued, the plates of the *Encyclopédie* often provide greater material detail than the original text.³⁸ While the discursive description illuminates the dressing process, the plates illustrate how feather muffs were made. Once the feathers were dyed and dried, their braided cords were sewn onto rectangular pieces of fabric that formed the inner base of the muff. The braided feathers were attached in rows, back and forth, creating a dense layering of feathers, depicted in *Plate IV*, which shows feather muffs amongst a variety of the feather maker's plumed creations. (Fig 3)

Fig. 3: "Plumassier panachier, Plate IV", *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, Vol. 8, 1771. Etching and engraving, 27 x 43 cm



Collection of the author

- 13 In the centre of the plate, two muffs are portrayed — each in a state of progress and completion. The top muff is made of “small feathers” and the lower muff is made up of longer and larger cock feathers, each constructed of sewn rows of feathers depicted to the left of the finished muffs. Unlike ostrich or egret plumes, whose identifiable shape was retained and enhanced by the feather maker’s tools, feathers used in feather muffs were transformed from individual plumes into a swirl of vivid colour. This can be seen in an extant feather muff, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Fig. 4)

Fig. 4: Anon. (British), Feather muff, third quarter of the 18th Century, chicken feathers and ermine



Judith and Gerson Leiber Fund, 1984, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. Acc. No. 1985.101

- 14 Measuring 20.3 cm wide, a cylindrical exterior of tightly worked feathers forms the façade of a brilliant red feather muff, roughly dating to the third quarter of the eighteenth century. The dense layer of feathers is sewn onto an interior canvas base that forms a barrier between the plumed exterior and the interior ermine lining. Coiling out from the centre, long and thin plumes overlap one another to form a varied, tactile façade. Their slight variation in colour and texture gives the surface depth and forms a playful illusion of movement. The muff's bright red colour might at first suggest that the feathers are sourced from an exotic bird of the east, when in fact their origin is the common chicken. Chicken and cockerel feathers were inexpensive to source and easy to dye, and were frequently used in fashion. Dyed common feathers were a popular trick of the feather maker to transform something ordinary into extraordinary, reflecting the rising interest in feathers sourced from the ever-expanding reaches of the empire.³⁹ As Frieda Sorber has argued, "for *plumassiers* feathers would be mere raw materials, requiring an artisan's care to transform them into useful objects or fashionable ornaments," an observation particularly true for feather muffs.⁴⁰ The art of the feather maker transformed common feathers into a sumptuous twirl of colour and soft plummy textures, a metamorphosis of nature into fashion.

3. Feather Muffs and the Natural World

- 15 The appropriative and transformative relationship between feather muffs and nature can be seen throughout the eighteenth century. Like feather fans, tippets, hats and headdresses, muffs freely borrowed from the avian adornments of nature. As Richard

Steele quipped under the pseudonym Issac Bickerstaff in a 1709 editorial of *The Tatler*, coincidentally also a tirade against fashion, the hooped petticoat, feathers were one of many offerings of the natural world seen to enhance the natural beauty of women,

I consider woman as a beautiful romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks. The lynx shall cast its skin at her feet to make her a tippet; the peacock, parrot, and swan, shall pay contributions to her muff; the sea shall be searched for shells, and the rocks for gems; and every part of Nature furnish out its share towards the embellishment of a creature that is the most consummate work of it.⁴¹

- 16 Steele's portrayal of a woman and her dress as a "beautiful romantic animal", the collective sum of nature's parts was intended to contrast the unnatural shape of the hoop petticoat, whose abundant volume significantly altered the female form. His instructive metaphor reflected perceptions of eighteenth-century gender, but also foreshadowed a pattern of women's engagement with the natural, and in turn, colonial world which forms the focus of the final section of this article.⁴²
- 17 In *Lady Henrietta Cavendish-Bentinck, Countess of Stamford*, attributed to Johann Zoffany, formerly to Benjamin West, the artist depicts a feather muff like a swirl of multi-tonal colour. (Fig. 5)

Fig. 5: *Lady Henrietta Cavendish-Bentinck, Countess of Stamford*, attributed to Johann Zoffany, c. 1763. Oil on canvas, 99 x 73.6 cm



National Trust, inv. NT 321527
© National Trust / Robert Thrift

- 18 Most likely painted to celebrate her marriage to the fifth Earl of Stamford in 1763, the picture portrays Henrietta Cavendish-Bentinck, the second of four daughters of William Bentinck, the Duke of Portland, and Margaret Cavendish Bentinck (née Harley), the Duchess of Portland. Seated at a tea table, Lady Henrietta wears a white silk gown and

petticoat, with layers of delicate lace ruffles at her elbow, white silk bows down the front of her stomacher, and white pearls around her wrist and neck. A black lace shawl around her shoulders acknowledges the recent passing of her father, who died in 1762. Set against the subdued background, her monochrome attire, dark hair, and alabaster skin are set off by flashes of bright coral: a ruffled choker around her neck, bows at her elbows, beads in her hair, and a large feather muff. The portraitist's brush strokes of white overlaying the pinky reds give definition to the muff's composition of individual plumes. Like the extant example above, Lady Henrietta's feather muff is a textured whirl of colour.

- 19 Muffs appear frequently in women's portraits from the 1760s. Unlike the later decade of the century when portraiture favoured sitters in classical and more artistic modes rather than contemporary dress, portraits of the 1760s retain their eye for contemporary sartorial detail.⁴³ Feather muffs can be seen on the canvases of Joshua Reynolds, Allan Ramsay, and, as seen with Lady Henrietta, Johann Zoffany, attesting to their fashionability during the late 1750s and 1760s.⁴⁴ Similar to the texture of fur, feathers offered artists an opportunity to demonstrate the skill of their brushwork and technique in capturing the delicate textures of each airy plume. The feather composition of Lady Henrietta's scarlet muff is indistinguishable; the muff could either be made of dyed feathers, like the red chicken muff above, or made from the plumes of a more exotic bird.⁴⁵ Lady Henrietta's sartorial choice to be depicted with a feather muff could reflect her fashionability and that of the current mode in feather muffs in the early 1760s. A rare advocate for the feather muff noted that they were "more genteel than ermine or swansdown" in "The Oeconomy of Dress. An Original Essay. By a Lady".⁴⁶ Alternatively, the coral sartorial accents could merely be contrived elements by the portraitist – against the white gown, black lace shawl, and dark green background, the bright flashes of colour ground the composition of the portrait. However, Lady Henrietta's portrayal with a feather muff bears greater significance when viewed in the context of her mother, the Duchess of Portland, and the feather culture of the Bluestockings.
- 20 Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, the Duchess of Portland, along with Elizabeth Montagu and Mary Delany formed the core of an active network of women, linked through friendship and their interwoven interests and practices with collecting, making, and the natural world. Recent scholarship on the Bluestockings, the intellectual and artistic circle so named for botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet's worsted blue stockings, has witnessed a material turn, a wave of new research focusing on their material engagements with craft, the decorative arts, and natural history.⁴⁷ Scholars, like Beth Fowkes Tobin, have highlighted the Bluestockings' "intense and intimate engagement with art-making and collecting practices that required as well as produced knowledge about the natural world," advocating an approach that bridges the previously distinct disciplines of science and art, craft and natural history.⁴⁸ These practices of collection and material engagement have been increasingly viewed through a colonial lens.⁴⁹ Within the profusion of shells, flowers, animals, specimens, and colonial curiosities that occupied the houses, gardens, menageries, museums, minds, and hands of these women, feathers hold a particularly symbolic and metonymic status as emblems, envoys, and captives of empire.⁵⁰
- 21 In the context of the decorative arts, feathers most often take the form of featherwork, which, like shellwork, transformed raw materials through collecting, arranging, and

constructing them into pictures or decorative patterns.⁵¹ Though multiple hands, including the Parminter cousins at their house A la Ronde and Miss Anstey, crafted featherwork, Elizabeth Montagu was the most famous practitioner of featherwork of the time.⁵² Her six panels of featherwork depicting flora and fauna, which took ten years to complete, eventually furnished her Feather Room in Portland Square, which was lauded in the press and visited by Queen Charlotte.⁵³ Prior to and after their completion, Montagu collected her feathers widely, noting in a letter to Elizabeth Carter in 1781, "From ye gaudy peacock to ye solemn raven, we collect whatever we can".⁵⁴ Utilising the maritime infrastructure of colonial expansion and transatlantic trade, Montagu sourced her feathers through family and friends from as far away as India to as near as a friend's Michaelmas dining table.⁵⁵ The brightly coloured plumage of imported birds kept as pets and as live specimens in aviaries was gathered when birds dropped their feathers, or gifted to Montague, as James Barrington wrote to her, "it is the only comfort I have at the death of a beautiful bird, to think that their plumage will have the honour of shinning as a Constellation in the exalted situation of Mrs Montagu's Palace at Portman Square".⁵⁶ Similarly, in William Cowper's poetic description of Montagu's feather room, "The Birds put off their every hue / To dress a room for Montagu", which included contributions from the peacock, pheasant, cock, and swan. As Beth Fowkes Tobin observed, the birds' happy sacrifice of their feathers echoes the genre of the country house poem in which various game present themselves to the master of the estate, and was seen above in Steele's avian offering, "the peacock, parrot, and swan, shall pay contributions to her muff".⁵⁷

- 22 Feathers were gathered not only to supply the materials for featherwork, but were collected in their own right, often as scientific and ethnographic specimens of non-European shores and peoples.⁵⁸ Birds played a significant role at the Duchess of Portland's estate, which was home to her vast collections, Bulstrode Park.⁵⁹ The Duchess of Portland amassed feathers as specimens, kept live birds in her aviaries and menageries, and exhibited taxidermied birds in her display cabinets, representing "the far-reaching orbital trajectories of the museum and its contents".⁶⁰ Far removed from the context of colonial "violence, coercion, and expropriation" in which they were collected, the birds wandered the estate freely, creating an immersive and contrasting display of foreign flora and fauna set against the backdrop of English gardens, arguably expanding the Duchess's global collections beyond the confines of their glass cases.⁶¹ Mrs Powys records a selection of the birds she saw on her visit to Bulstrode on 13 July, 1769. Though disappointed at the menagerie's lack of ordered presentation, she notes,

the many beautiful birds it contains, of which there was a great variety, as a curassoa, goon, crown-bird, stork, black and red game, bustards, red-legg'd partiges, silver, gold, pied pheasants, one, what is reckon'd exceedingly curious, the peacock-pheasant. The aviary, too, is a most beautiful collection of smaller birds – tumpers, waxbills, yellow and bloom paraquets, Java sparrows, Loretta blue birds, Virginia nightingales, and two widow-birds, or, as Edward calls them, 'red-breasted long-twit'd finches.'⁶²

- 23 The movement of birds and feathers at Bulstrode reflected the exchange of artefacts, knowledge, and sentiment. As Madeleine Pelling has established, the practice of exchanging feathers acted practically as the sharing of specimens or featherwork supplies, but, when folded into letters, also acted as expressions of friendship and sociability, emblematic tokens of the women who gave them.⁶³

- 24 In the hands of the third friend, Mary Delany, feathers took shape not artistically in feathermaking nor scientifically in collections, but sartorially in the form of feather muffs and tippets. Though best known for her shellwork, embroidery, and paper flowers, Delany's sewing practice and interest in the natural world intersected when she made feather muffs and tippets. Throughout her correspondence, the making and exchange of feathered accessories is a repeated practice. She writes to her sister in 1728, "By Monday's coach I will send... a tippet of my own making and invention," which may have been the tippet of macaw and canary feathers still in the family's collection when Lady Llanover published Delany's letters in 1861.⁶⁴ The Duchess of Portland also transformed her feathers into feather muffs, noting in a letter to Delany that, "I am going to make a muff of jay's feathers".⁶⁵ Though the Duchess uses the common jay feather for her muff, more exotic feathers were also employed. The Marchioness of Gray gave her daughter, who Anne Buck notes was herself collecting feathers, a peacock feather muff made by "Miss Delane" in 1780.⁶⁶ Employing Chloe Wigston Smith's framework of the global domestic object, or "handmade artefacts created by women that make references to the world, scientific expeditions and colonies," the feather muff evokes geographies beyond its French associations so prevalent in the 1760s, foreshadowing the mass importation of birds of paradise and the plume trade.⁶⁷
- 25 Delany's practice of making feather muffs, not only for herself, but for others becomes a sentimental exchange when given to close friends and family. Amanda Vickery has argued that "the frequency with which female handicrafts were given as gifts suggests both the prestige put upon them and the power they had to connect women".⁶⁸ The emblematic sentiment attached to muffs can be seen in a letter from 1733 written to her sister, in which she writes, "I have made up my green muff, and it looks very pretty; Lady W. [Lady Weymouth] liked it prodigiously, but I could not make her a compliment of it because it is a counterpart of yours, and sort of emblem of you and me, and so I must cherish it".⁶⁹ Though it is unknown whether the green muff Delany describes is made of feathers or embroidered silk, that she "must cherish it" because she views it as "a sort of emblem of you and me" speaks to the material affection that could be imbued into clothing through the emotionally charged practice of sewing. Upon her death, while leaving most of her wearing apparel to her maid, Ann Motley, Delany specifically bequeathed sentimental sartorial articles including "all her fur and feather muffs and tippets" to her niece, Mrs Port, of Ilam.⁷⁰ For Delany and her circle, the feather muff is an object that embodied both their material and decorative practices and combined interest in the avian natural world. Unlike a feather given as a bookmark or to supply a decorative screen, the feather muff was a wearable, portable emblem of their friendship, passions, and affection, one that could leave the display cases, feather rooms, and aviaries, and be carried forth into the world.⁷¹

4. Conclusion

- 26 Returning to Lady Henrietta's portrait, where once the feather muff was an indicator of fashionability, it now becomes a more weighted object. While the black lace shawl is most likely worn as a memorial of respect to the passing of her father, her feather muff can be read as a tribute to her mother and her aviary of friends.⁷² Textual records for the muff do not survive, making it equally possible that it was composed of dyed

feathers, bought from a feathermaker, furrier, or milliner's shop, or made from the Duchess's exotic birds potentially even by Delany as one of her many feathered sartorial gifts. Lady Henrietta's muff acts as a bridge between the sartorial world of fashion and feather muffs, imported from France or made-up by London feathermakers, and the global and implicitly colonial feather culture of Bulstrode Park and the Bluestockings. Unlike the feathers of the Iroquois warrior, which were displayed as a trapping of otherness, the feather muff worn by Lady Henrietta becomes a hybrid object, whose feathers signify the expansion of imperial power within western sartorial convention.⁷³ Through the charged significance of her muff we are able to see how feather muffs participated in the fashionable, natural and imperial worlds. When the male authors scorned the perceived French assault of feather muffs, they characterised the feather muff as unpatriotic, an interloper, and an antithesis to British commercial values and economic interests, and by implication the women that wore them. However, when viewed in the context of the growing British feather trade and the rich feather culture already thriving by the 1760s, these "tawdry feather'd muffs" were contributing to a landscape already plush with plumes.⁷⁴

NOTES

1. *London Gazette Extraordinary*, October 17, 1759; *London Chronicle*, October 18-20, 1759.
2. For a discussion on the reception of Wolfe's death see Alan McNairn, *Behold the Hero: General Wolfe and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997.
3. See A. McNairn, *Behold the Hero*, p. 144-164; Emily Ballew Neff, 'At the Wood's Edge: Benjamin West's "The Death of Wolfe" and the Middle Ground', in *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World*, edited by Emily Ballew Neff and Kaylin H Weber, London: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 66.
4. See Vivien Green Fryd, 'Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's "Death of General Wolfe"'. *American Art* 9, no. 1 (1995), p. 72-85; David Tomas, *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings*, London: Routledge, 2018, p. 13-15; Julie F. Codell, 'The Art of Transculturation', in *Transculturation in British Art, 1770-1930*, edited by Julie F. Codell, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 9-13; E. B. Neff, 'At the Wood's Edge', p. 64-103.
5. *Gazeteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 16 August, 1765. A similar tirade of the previous year also refers to Wolfe's death: 'a conquest, purchased with the blood of a Wolfe', *Lloyd's Evening Post*, March 12-14, 1764.
6. Ruth Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Furs: A Historical Survey with 680 Illustrations*, Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2010, p. 81.
7. *Daily Courant*, December 31, 1706.
8. George Faulkner, *The Dublin Journal*, November 14-17, 1747.
9. For lack of surviving dress, see Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 4-12. Extant objects often have exceptional provenance, like the Bristow hat or a military bicorn worn by Obedeah Herbert, a continental naval admiral, during the American War of Independence. Silk and feather Tudor hat, Acc. No. 3503710, Historic Royal Places, London; Feathered bicorn hat, 1776-83, Acc. No. 2009.300.2683a-e, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

10. For example, recent museum exhibitions on feathers have largely highlighted their use in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Fashioning Feathers: Dead Birds, Millinery Crafts and the Plumage Trade*, University of Alberta, 2011; *Birds of Paradise: Plumes & Feathers in Fashion*, ModeMuseum in Antwerp and the Bowes Museum, 2015; and *Fashioned from Nature*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2018.
11. See Caitlin Blackwell, 'The Feather'd Fair in a Fright': The Emblem of the Feather in Graphic Satire of 1776'. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013), p. 353-376.
12. *London Evening Post*, May 6-8, 1762.
13. *London Evening Post*, May 6-8, 1762.
14. See Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette*, London: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 216-219; Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.
15. *London Chronicle*, October 21-23, 1762.
16. *London Chronicle*, July 19-21, 1764.
17. See Aileen Ribeiro, *Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750 to 1820*, London: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 35-43.
18. Feather muffs were also exported to Colonial America, like on the Brig Hope from London, advertised in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 1, 1764.
19. See Renaud Morieux, *The Channel: England, France and the Construction of a Maritime Border in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 248-280.
20. Susan North, 'The Physical Manifestation of an Abstraction: A Pair of 1750s Waistcoat Shapes'. *Textile History* 39, no. 1 (2008), p. 101. See also, R. Morieux, *The Channel*, p. 248-280.
21. *London Evening Post*, October 9-11, 1764.
22. *Public Ledger*, August 12, 1765.
23. Serena Dyer, *Material Lives: Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the 18th Century*, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021, p. 152.
24. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, Jan 10-13-1766; *Lloyd's Evening Post*, Feb 2-4, 1764.
25. *London Evening Post*, January 3-5, 1765.
26. Raymond L. Sickinger, 'Regulation or Ruination: Parliament's Consistent Pattern of Mercantilist Regulation of the English Textile Trade, 1660-1800'. *Parliamentary History* 19, no. 2 (2000), p. 227; William Farrell, 'Smuggling Silks into Eighteenth-Century Britain: Geography, Perpetrators, and Consumers'. *Journal of British Studies* 55 (2016), p. 268-294.
27. *London Chronicle*, February 5-7, 1765.
28. *London Evening Post*, Feb 16-19, 1765.
29. *Public Advertiser*, January 31, 1769.
30. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, December 9-12, 1763.
31. Heal notes that business would later specialise as an ostrich feather manufactory, reflecting the growing specialisation of the London feather trade. Trade-card of Francis Currey, c. 1768, paper, Acc. No. Heal, 61.6, British Museum, London.
32. *Lloyd's Evening Post*, March 12-14, 1764.
33. Joanna Marshner, 'A Weaving Field of Feathers – Dressing the Head for Presentation at the English Court, 1700-1939', in *Birds of Paradise: Plumes & Feathers in Fashion*, edited by Kaat Debo, Emmanuelle Dirix and June Swann, Tiel: Lannoo, 2014, p. 141-152.
34. Elisabeth Gerner, 'Fancy Feathers: the Feather Trade in Britain and the Atlantic World', in *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Nation of Makers*, edited by Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020, p. 201.
35. See E. Gerner, 'Fancy Feathers'. For the French feather trade, see Frieda Sorber, 'Feathers, Nature Improved', in *Birds of Paradise: Plumes & Feathers in Fashion*, edited by Kaat Debo, Emmanuelle Dirix and June Swann, Tiel: Lannoo, 2014, p. 187-99.

36. The first British account of the feather trade was published in 1804, decades after descriptions of other sartorial trade were widely circulated. E. Gerner, 'Fancy Feathers', p. 201-202.
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38. Geraldine Sheridan, *Louder than Words: Ways of Seeing Women Workers in Eighteenth-Century France*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009, p. 4.
39. See for example, two feather chip hats, most likely by the same maker: feather hat, 1750-1770, Acc. No. T.90-2003, Victoria and Albert Museum, London; feather hat, 1750-1775, Acc. No. 43.1832, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. For the desirability of 'exotic' commodities, see Joanna de Groot, 'Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections: Reflections on Consumption and Empire', in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 186-189.
40. F. Sorber, 'Feathers, Nature Improved', p. 189.
41. *The Tatler*, No 116, January 4, 1709 in Richard Steele, *The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff Esq*, Vol. III. London, 1711, p. 13.
42. See Erin Skye Mackie, *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
43. Laura Engel argues that the decline of muffs in portraiture was a direct correlation to their associations with actresses. Laura Engel, 'The Muff Affair: Fashioning Celebrity in the Portraits of Late-eighteenth-century British Actresses'. *Fashion Theory* 13, no. 3 (2009), p. 279-298.
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45. Richard Brooks noted flamingo feathers for muffs. Richard Brooks, *The Natural History of Birds: with the Methods of Bringing Up and Managing those of the Singing Kind*, Vol. 2. London: Printed for J. Newbery, 1763, p. 337.
46. *The Universal Museum; or Gentleman's and Lady's Polite Magazine of History, Politicks and Literature*, April 1762, p. 208.
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48. B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 56-57.
49. For example, *Curious Encounters: Voyaging, Collecting, and Making Knowledge in the Long Eighteenth Century*, edited by Adriana Craciun and Mary Terrall, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019; *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, edited by Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005;

Madeleine Pelling, *The Duchess's Museum: Collecting, Craft and Conversation c.1730-1786*, forthcoming.

50. Sophie Thomas, 'Feather Cloaks and English Collectors: Cook's Voyages and the Objects of the Muesum', in *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory in a Global Context: From Consumerism to Celebrity Culture*, edited by Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 81-85; Joseph Roach, 'The Global Parasol: Accessorizing the Four Corners of the World', in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, edited by Felicity Nussbaum, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 98, 103; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p.130-131; C. Blackwell, 'The Feather'd Fair', p. 368-373.

51. B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 59.

52. Noël Riley, *The Accomplished Lady: A History of Genteel Pursuits, c. 1660-1860*, Wetherby: Oblong Creative, 2017, p. 213; B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 61.

53. *Morning Post*, April 1, 1788. N. Riley, 'Accomplished Lady', p. 214.

54. E. Eger, 'Luxury', p. 199.

55. Though Fielding suggests that feathers were bought from arts and embroidery shops, further work needs to be done identifying the professional sources of Montagu's feathers. N. Riley, 'Accomplished Lady', p. 214-215; B. Fowkes Tobin, *The Duchess's Shells*, p. 33-35; Kathleen S. Murphy, 'A Slaving Surgeon's Collection: The Pursuit of Natural History through the British Slave Trade to Spanish America', in *Curious Encounters: Voyaging, Collecting, and Making Knowledge in the Long Eighteenth Century*, edited by Adriana Craciun and Mary Terrall, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019, p. 146, 151-152; M. Pelling, *The Duchess's Museum*.

56. E. Eger, 'Luxury', p. 199; B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 60-61.

57. B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 60.

58. See S. Thomas, 'Feather Cloaks', p. 69-88.

59. See M. Pelling, 'Collecting the World', p. 114-116.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 115; K. Murphy, 'A Slaving Surgeon's Collection', p.146.

62. *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, Oxon. Ad. 1756 to 1808*, edited by Emily J. Climsonson, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899, p. 121; B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 67.

63. M. Pelling, 'Collecting the World', p. 116.

64. Mrs Pendarves to Mrs Anne Granville, 29 February, 1728. *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany: with Interesting Reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte*, edited by Lady Llanover, London: Richard Bentley, 1861, vol. 1, p.159; Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd, 1979, p. 181.

65. Letter from the Duchess of Portland to Mrs Ann Granville, August 24, 1737. *Autobiography*, 1861, vol. 1, p. 618.

66. A. Buck, *Dress*, p. 181.

67. Chloe Wigston Smith, 'The Empire of Home: Global Domestic Objects and *The Female American* (1767)'. *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 1 (2007), p. 67.

68. Amanda Vickery, 'The Theory and Practice of Female Accomplishment' in *Mrs. Delany & Her Circle*, edited by Mark Laid and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts, London: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 102.

69. Letter from Mrs Pendarves to Mrs Ann Granville, December 19, 1733. *Autobiography*, 1861, vol. 1, p. 425.

70. *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany: with Interesting Reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte, Second Series*, edited by Lady Llanover, London: Richard Bentley, 1862, vol. 3, p. 483.

71. The Duchess gave Mary Hamilton 'a peacock's feather to keep and use as a mark in a book to remember her by', M. Pelling, 'Collecting the World', p.116.

72. After comparing herself to a Friesland hen, Montagu self-reflectively shares her love of the goose. *The Letters of Elizabeth Montagu with Some Letters of Her Correspondents*, edited by Matthew Montagu, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, vol. 3, p. 14; B. Fowkes Tobin, 'Bluestockings', p. 68. Delany referred to the Duchess as 'the sweet bird'. *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany: with Interesting Reminiscences of King George the Third and Queen Charlotte*, Second Series, vol. 3, p. 407.

73. C. Wigston Smith, 'Empire of Home', p. 68; Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 21-26; De Groot, 'Metropolitan Desires', p. 170; J. Codell, 'Art of Transculturation', 1-4.

74. *Gazeteer and New Daily Advertiser*, August 16, 1765.

ABSTRACTS

The end of the Seven Years' War (1763) and the acquisition of the fur trade in Canada had an unexpected consequence in British fashion. Despite the increased access to and availability of furs by British furriers, the newspapers noted with disgust that, under the influence of French milliners who had already adapted to their loss of fur supplies, British women of fashion had no taste for furs, only for feathers. The feather muff became the target of the press's vitriol, an unpatriotic symbol of French sycophantism that was designed to undermine Britain's victory for which the brave General Wolfe fell.

Despite the weighted and charged connotations surrounding the feather muff, its position in eighteenth-century dress and fashion has never before been explored in depth. This article aims to amend that oversight and contextualise the feather muff's problematic status alongside its material lifecycle and understand the muff as an accessory that could bridge not only the Channel and the globe, but also the disparate worlds of fashion and natural history. Beginning with its notoriously charged appearance in the early 1760s, this article examines the lifecycle of the feather muff in mid eighteenth-century Britain. It first explores the feather muff's perception in the press as a sartorial French intruder in British fashion. It then establishes how the feather muff was a product of the feather trade, exploring its make and manufacture. Finally, considering the symbolic and emblematic nature of the feather, it places the feather muff within wider narratives of British feather culture, female sociability, and the natural world.

La fin de la Guerre de Sept Ans (1763) et la mainmise des Anglais sur le commerce canadien de la fourrure qui en a découlé ont eu une conséquence inattendue sur la mode britannique. Malgré l'accès et la disponibilité accrus aux fourrures ainsi permis, les journaux se lamentent que, sous l'influence des modistes français qui s'étaient déjà adaptés à leur perte d'approvisionnement en fourrures, les élégantes britanniques délaissaient les fourrures pour s'enticher désormais de plumes. Le manchon de plumes devint la cible des attaques de la presse, un symbole antipatriotique de flagornerie française destiné à saper la victoire de la Grande-Bretagne pour laquelle le courageux général Wolfe était tombé.

Malgré la place importante qu'il occupe dans les signes de l'élégance au XVIII^e siècle, le manchon de plumes n'a jamais été réellement étudié. Cet article vise à corriger cette omission et à contextualiser cet accessoire tout au long de sa vie matérielle, pour le voir comme un objet qui liait non seulement la Grande-Bretagne au reste du monde, mais aussi les mondes apparemment distincts de la mode et de l'histoire naturelle. En commençant par son apparition controversée

au début des années 1760, cet article examine le cycle de vie du manchon de plumes dans la Grande-Bretagne du milieu du XVIII^e siècle. Il explore tout d'abord la perception du manchon de plumes dans la presse britannique où il est vu comme une importation inopportune venue de France. Il s'agit ensuite de se pencher sur sa fabrication et de le lier au commerce de la plume. Enfin, compte tenu de la nature symbolique et emblématique de la plume, l'article resitue le manchon dans les contextes plus généraux du statut des plumes en Grande-Bretagne, de la sociabilité féminine et des sciences naturelles.

INDEX

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AUTHOR

ELISABETH GERNERD

Dr. Elisabeth GernerD is a research fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.
egernerD[at]mac.com