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Unidentified artist

(New Spain (Mexico), second half of the 17th century)

*Portrait of Pope Alessandro VII
(after a print of the portrait by
Pietro Paolo Vegli)*

c. 1665-1666

emplumado (feather work mosaic), tropical
bird feathers, paper and gold leaf on copper
61 x 44 cm.; 24 x 17.3 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Italy.

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This portrait, made of hundreds of exotic bird feathers, is an extraordinary example of *amanteca*, commissioned directly in Mexico by an Italian patron. Only rare specimens of this precious featherwork technique have survived; this one in particular is distinguished for its large size and technical quality. Unlike what was thought until recently, this portrait does not depict Pope Innocent X, born Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, but his successor, Pope Alexander VII, born Fabio Chigi, who was at the head of the Catholic church from 1655 to 1667. During the research for the exhibit of this work at Museo delle Culture di Milano (MUDEC) (on schedule from September 2021 to September 2022 – please see the technical card in the Museum catalogue for further information and bibliography), we discovered that, in addition to replicating an oil painting by Pietro Paolo Vegli depicting *Pope Alexander VII* (conserved in Palazzo Chigi in Ariccia, Rome) (fig. 1), this feather mosaic is probably the same portrait commissioned around 1665 by Athanasius Kircher (great Jesuit scholar and collector of antiquities and curiosities gathered in the Kircherian Museum in the Roman College, Rome) to Mexican priest Alexandro Favián. In one of the letters of their epistolary correspondence, Favián informed Kircher that he had received the model (probably a print of the Roman painting) that he would entrust to the *amanteca* artist; but unfortunately, it is not clear from their later correspondence whether this featherwork was eventually sent to and received by Pope Alexander.

Historical Comments on *Emplumados* (Feather Mosaics)

For the indigenous populations of Mesoamerica, feathers were among the most highly-prized items, comparable with valuable gems such as jade or turquoise. Beyond any merely utilitarian interest (they were, for example, used in the manufacture of arrows), commercial, ornamental or ornithological ones (Moctezuma's aviary was one of the places that unsettled the Spanish the most when they entered Tenochtitlán), or medicinal function (feathers were used in cures where a delicate application of the medicine was necessary), feathers were used as a tribute, offering and amulet, considered to be a symbol of fertility, abundance, wealth and power. Those wearing feathers (such as high-ranking political or religious dignitaries, warriors or those chosen for ritual sacrifice), were associated with the divine; in fact, some of the most prominent gods in the Mexica pantheon were related to the most beautiful birds. Such is the

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case of Huitzilopochtli, directly linked to the hummingbird, whose attire consisted partly of feathers covering his head, shield and left sandal; or Quetzalcóatl, the plumed snake (in náhuatl, *quetzal* means feather), who, according to legend was the creator of lavish feathers and master of humanity in all works made with them. Such was the prominence of feathers in Pre-Colombian Central American culture that the representation of one of them was the number *centzontli* (which translates as great mane of hair).

Feathers' power to embody the sacred both in the local religion and in Christianity was one of the instruments used by the evangelizers to break down barriers separating them from the natives, and undertake their mission. For example, the story about the conception of Huitzilopochtli tells how his mother, the goddess of fertility Coatlicue, was sweeping the temple when a ball of feathers fell on her, which she took and held against her breast, thereby falling pregnant; a passage relating a birth without any male participation and therefore reminiscent of the story of the birth of Christ where, let us not forget, the archangel Gabriel (a winged servant of God) told Mary that she would become pregnant by the grace of the Holy Spirit, taking the iconographic form of a dove.

The schools founded as convent annexes were not solely centres of indoctrination, but places where the missionaries took advantage of the manual skills of the newly-converted to generate a new form of Christian art with which they could identify, combining European form and content with American techniques and aesthetics. As such, artists who worked with feathers, a format that had a long Pre- Hispanic history, could continue their activities.

When the Spanish disembarked, Mesoamerica was not the only region in the world where feathers had been worked with since time immemorial, but it was the one in which this art form had the greatest prominence and where it was most highly appreciated. Proof of this is the fact that immediately after the arrival of the colonizers, the *amantecas* started to create helmet crests, round shields, fans, clothing and many other items. These and other feather objects amazed the Europeans in such a way that they quickly became must-have collectors' items, whose inclusion was essential in any self-respecting cabinet of curiosities. It is therefore

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hardly surprising that the indigenous peoples of the American continent were personified as being richly feathered figures.

But, if there was one sort of work that received particular admiration these were mosaics or paintings made using feathers, as shown by the texts included above. When executing these pieces, birds were used as a sort of living palette, with their feathers providing the chromatic and luminous effects that proved the envy of brush painters, as they were hard to attain using the mineral and vegetable pigments of the day. In chapter XX of book IX of his General History of the things of New Spain (c. 1577), or Florentine Codex, Bernardino de Sahagún explains, in the náhuatl language, and illustrates, the process involved in creating these works, which may be summarised as follows: taking an engraving as his model, the *tlacuilo* (painter) would make a preliminary sketch on amate paper or cotton, on which the *amanteca* would stick both common and precious feathers, which had been previously selected and trimmed. With time, other materials were added to compositions, such as paper and gold leaf, and lines and colours were highlighted using brushes. The *amanteca*'s trade was socially recognized, and as such came with certain privileges, such as in Pátzcuaro being exempt from providing personal services in order to be able to devote themselves to their artisan endeavours (figs. 2–5).

Despite the limitations involved in this very particular type of mosaic work, the *amanteca* made every effort to reproduce the gaze captured by Pietro Paolo Vegli: solemn, dignified, astute, vigorous and penetrating, the look of the man, rather than the politician, is the real star.

Without doubt, one element that catches the eye is the simulated frame, perfectly integrated into the piece, and which further enhances its overall visual impact. It is made up of a succession of rhombi, dots and spiral-ended ribbons, a pattern seen in many contemporary works (for example, the piece housed at the Museum of America in Madrid), and which aims at imitating Italian works in *pietre dure* also being carried out at that time.

In addition to the extraordinary nature of its iconographic source, this feather mosaic is original in that it presents a portrait, of which few were made using this technique, given over

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fundamentally to religious matters. News has reached us of other examples, such as the portrait of the Emperor Moctezuma II in the keeping of his descendants, and one of Bishop Juan Palafox y Mendoza, in a private collection in Seville.

This portrait, the object of study, was executed on a copper base measuring 61 x 44 cm., covered by countless feathers of different sizes (both whole and trimmed) and colours (varying shades of white, brown, red, orange, yellow, green and blue). The areas that have lost feathers show us that, curiously, these were stuck directly onto the metal, without there being any layer of vegetable fibre in between, as was commonplace. Other materials liberally applied to the work include thin strips of paper (orange, yellow, pink, flesh-coloured, brown and black), and gold leaf (on the frame and in details of the decoration of the chair, ring and shoe buckle).

In his *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, the Jesuit José de Acosta tells us how Sixtus V, on receiving a Saint Francis: “[...] wanted to test it, running his fingers over the work, it seeming amazing to him that it was so well executed that it was impossible for the eye to tell whether the colours were the feathers’ own natural ones, or had been added artificially with a brush” (book IV, chapter XXXVII).

And another Jesuit, Teófilo Ciotti, wrote from Tepotzotlán in 1585 that he was thinking of commissioning: “[...] three feather images, and the Indians take ve or six months to complete a good one, but I want to present one of them to the Pope”.

We should, then, perhaps consider this work in the context of a gift.

In short, this portrait of Pope Alessandro VII is a magnificent example of the new artistic sensitivity embodied in feather mosaics during the colonial period; a work charged with profound religious, cultural and social significance, and executed for the refined delight of both sight and touch.

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Figure 1. Pietro Paolo Vegli, *Portrait of Pope Alexander VII*, oil on canvas

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Figures 2, 3, 4 & 5. Some of the drawings with which De Sahagún illustrated the work of the *amantecas* in his *General History of the things of New Spain* (book IX, chapter XX)