

## The Use of Feathers as Decorative Elements on 16<sup>th</sup> C Hats

Feathers as hat and hair adornment became very popular beginning in the mid 1500s. The main type of feather used by the aristocracy was ostrich. No other bird on record has furnished feathers more consistently since the remotest ages than has the ostrich. When ostrich feathers first came into use for trimming hats, they were employed largely to adorn hats worn by men, but gradually they were used more and more on ladies' hats. (Kloitt p205)

These feathers were generally imported from North Africa and Arabia, frequently through Spain and Italy and other trade routes from the Mediterranean. (Dreher p35) In earlier times, one can sometimes see a huntsman in tapestries wearing game bird feathers on their hats. (Amphlett, p90).

There is no record of domesticated ostrich raising until the mid 1818, Thus, the feathers which were imported in the 16<sup>th</sup> C were generally molted feathers which locals would gather and a small industry was started.

### **Terms:**

A single ostrich feather is called a blade. When several blades are sewn together, they are referred to as a plume.

Some blades are heavy enough to be used singly with the ends of the flues curled by a curling knife. The frons are each individual feather bit sticking out from the shaft of the feather. Only the best blades can be used, as the flues are likely to break during the curling. Blades range in length from 9-24 inches long. (Kloitt p207)

A blade

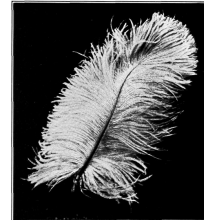
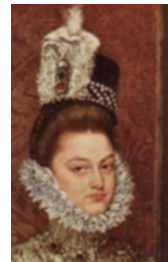


Fig. 1. Ostrich Feather

### **Period Use of Feathers on Hats**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, feathers were generally used in 3 specific styles on hats: Plumes, Sweeping Aigrettes and Pompons.

- A plume is a spray of feathers. Usually 2-3 feathers sewn together and attached to a hat appearing at first glance to be a single feather. Not that upon closer inspection, one can see 3 tips in the picture on the right.



**Plume**  
Clara Eugenia  
1584



**Sweeping Aigrette**  
Edward VI  
1542

- A "Sweeping" Aigrette can be spoken of to include upright plumage such as one sees in Victorian hats, or in a horizontal sweep of feather which one sees in the Henrician period.

- A pompon is a loose "ball" or curl of feather tips that create a fluffy ball. The ball can be large or small and worn singly or with several balls sewn together.



**Pompon**  
Isabel of France and Henry Velois 1551

While ostrich feathers were popular amongst the wealthy, there are some indications that other local feathers were used as well.

According to the *Right and Worshipful Order of Hatters of Dover*, the table to the right indicates which types of feathers were available, and most likely used in the 16<sup>th</sup> C.

By the late 1500s, plumes are also referred to as Aigrettes when worn as hair decoration.

Sadly, there are no know extent full feathers from the 16<sup>th</sup> C hats left. Bugs and moths just love feathers, yum-yum.

	Plumes	Sweeping Aigrette	Pompon
Ostrich	X	X	X
Vulture	X		
Peacock	X		
Pheasant			X
Pigeon			X
Goose	X		X
Spanish Coq	X		X

### How were feathers prepared for use on hats?

#### Step 1:

##### Cleaning and Bleaching

Feathers are a keratin material just like natural hair. They can be washed, combed, curled, powdered and starched without hurting the feather. They can be washed repeatedly throughout their lives and may last many years. (Dreher)

Natural feathers can be anywhere from bright white to black but most are creamy with beige tips. As dying and bleaching of natural hair was well known in the 1500s, it is not too difficult to come to an understanding of how feathers were bleached. *Hair altering, whether bleaching or dying became so popular that best selling books and palettes were written and sold to every maiden in the county. They all strived to be a classic beauty that was passed down orally and literary.* (de Segna) Please see Appendix A for recipes. Specific feather bleaching recipes were kept secret and even today most feather houses will not divulge their materials and processes.

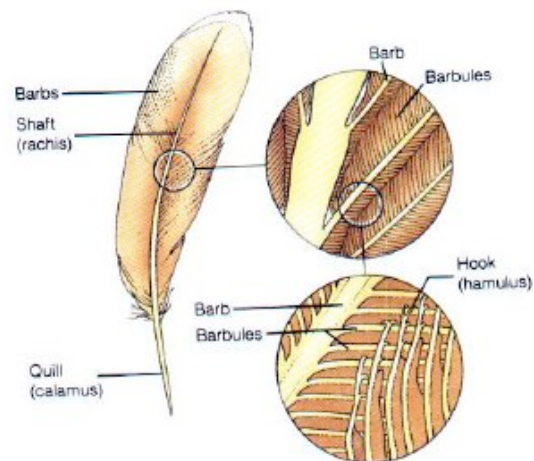
Feathers were rarely dyed when used on hats of the 16thC . Most portraits show either white or black feathers on hats. There are several portraits of men with helms with colored plumes.

#### Step 2:

##### Re-fluffing feathers

Once feathers have been cleaned and/or bleached, they may be slightly lumpy, lax, and sad looking. Stroking feathers from the base up, prompting the hooks on their barbs and barbules to make the barbs realign, can often repair feathers.

If this process was not enough, then feathers were steamed to re-fluff them. With a simple pan of boiling water one could float the feather back and forth through the steam. This steaming loosens up the barbs and again allows the barbules to realign. It was very important that the feather not be allowed to become wet.



### Step 3:



Having bleached and fluffed the feather, one was ready to comb the feather. Birds do this naturally with their beaks. Humans can replicate this process using a wide toothcomb. Wooden combs were very popular and relatively accessible. One wanted the comb to be smooth so as not to damage the barbs and hooks or break any of the frons. Using a comb previously used on one's hair was a great way to add back some of the natural oils to the feathers.

### Step 4:

#### Trimming the feather

One would even out the flues of a feather by trimming the edges as one would trim hair. Scissors or a sharp knife would be used. This allowed one to make the blade any diameter that was appropriate for the feathers' use.

If one was going to use the feather for a "Sweeping" Aigrette, the blade may need to be made slightly narrower by trimming some of the frons. If one was creating a multiple plume design, keeping the frons long but trained would have been important.

### Step 5:

#### Wiring or bending the feather

Feathers need to have their spines slightly bent in order to conform to the use of the feather. This is done in several ways.

The most popular way is to lightly steam the spine and wrap the feather around a small piece of wood while it cooled. This piece of wood would be about 6" in diameter, but could be smaller. (Amphlet)

Another approach is wiring feathers. This is done when one wished to have a feather stand erect or curved without being directly attached to the stock of the hat or if the feather had a weak or broken spine. A narrow piece of wire is covered with thread, usually white or black to match the feather. It is then sew along the spine with thread. One does not pierce the spine when this is done, merely wrapped around the spine and very carefully though the frons. (Dreher, 106). One wires only one feather if several are going to be used. Later all feathers will be sewn together for use as a plume.

Another approach was to hold the spine directly over a dull knife and press the blade into the spine with our thumb. The indentation made by the knife on the back of the spine permits one to bend the feather backwards. Likewise, this can be done on the side or front. This technique can become destructive as it weakens the spine and may lead to needing to be repaired with wiring. (Dreher, 106)

### Step 6:

#### Curling the feather

Curling feathers refers to curling the frons of a feather. This was done using either a dull knife called a curling knife or a hot iron as one would have used for setting ruffs.

Feathers were traditionally curled over a curling knife in the same manner as one runs a strip of ribbon over the blade of scissors when making a curly bow for a present. The curling had to be done very carefully to avoid cutting



the flues or pulling them off the stem. One would grasp a small section of flues, about 1" wide, and place them between one's thumb and the curling knife. Pressing the flues very gently against the knife, one would drag the flues between thumb and knife. One had to be careful not to press too tightly or the frons could break and lower the value of the feather. Additionally, if one doesn't press firmly enough, no curl will appear. One could however, run the flues between the thumb and knife several times to get the desired curl. Repeat the process on successive sections of flues starting at the quill end and working towards the tip.

Some hats required only one feather and at this point the milliner would attach the feather to the desired hat using thread and small stitches. The feather may be attached at the brim as well along the crown for added support usually allowing the tip to float at will.



**Single curled feather**  
Catherine Parr 1545

#### Making a plume

Sewing feather together to create a plume

Once all of the above steps were finished, the milliner would then connect 2, 3 or sometime 4 or more feathers together to make various plumes. These feathers attached using thread around the spines – never through the spine as that weakened it.

One of the more popular designs in England seems to have been 2-3 feathers together with one tall feather and 1 or 2 attached about half way down such that the tip of the tall feather flopped over and hid the spine while the lower 1 or 2 did likewise.



**Several feather creating a plume**  
R Devereux 1597

#### Multiple feathers creating a plume.



In the example on the left, the plumes are used on a helm, but is a good visual example of multiple feather stacked and trained forward to cover their spines. In order for this look to work, feathers are actually worked with the back of the feather facing towards the front in order for the front of the spine to show when trained drooping down.

How often feathers had to be re-curved would have depended a great deal upon the weather. Feathers loose their curls in the damp. One would expect that curling would have occurred quite frequently in England. Even with lacquers and sprays today, we haven't quite conquered uncurling feathers. (Dreher p106)

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