
Title of Object

Feather Currency (tevau)

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Solomon Islands (Santa Cruz Island)

Date of Object: 19th century

Country: Solomon Islands (Melanesia)

Accession Number: 90.80A,B

File Created: 6/26/2017

Material/Medium: Vegetable fiber, feathers, bark, shell, seed pods, wood, pig tail

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Tour Topics

Highlights of World Art, Safari, Currency, wealth, power/status, birds, pacific islands, relationships/family, women, ceremony

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. What makes an object valuable? How do we determine what things or objects are more valuable than others? (beauty, trade value, time to create, artistry, tradition)
2. What makes our currency/money valuable? Have you ever bartered or traded goods or services with another person? How did you determine the value of the traded objects?
3. What colors have special meanings in America today? What colors have special meanings in your family, school, or community? How were these developed?
4. A set of coils was known as the "head of supernatural being" because it would have the power to accomplish difficult things. How do you think that view compares with the American view of money?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Rolls of feathered bands from the southeastern Solomon Islands are among the most beautiful and interesting of the world's currencies. Made only on Santa Cruz Island they were traded throughout the region of Melanesia. They are made of feathers from the scarlet Honeyeater and grey Pacific Pigeon (the pigeon feathers are underneath and act as framework). It has been estimated that a single roll takes between 500 and 600 hours to produce, utilizing the feathers of over 300 birds, with an estimate of 50,000 to 60,000 red feathers. (Artsmia and British Museum)

It can take up to 600 hours and 3 skilled specialists to create a "tevau" or coils of feather currency (pronounced teh-vow). The specialists learn the skills from their family; the trade is hereditary. They are thought to have received their skills from the spirits. The first specialist traps the birds and gathers the feathers; he glues a decoy bird on a branch, and then puts very sticky glue on the rest of the branch. He hides himself in the brush and holds up the big branch, then mimics the song of the female scarlet honeyeater, waiting for a male bird to alight on the branch and get stuck there. Once the bird is stuck, he plucks the red feathers from it, and then he lets it go free. The second specialist makes a 2-inch long platelets of pigeon feathers held together with mulberry tree sap, and mounts and aligns all the tiny red feathers to these. The third specialist mounts the platelets on to a fiber cord binding. The hard substance around which these bands are rolled are pieces of bark. Unwound, a double coil of tevau would have an approximate length of 9 meters or 30 feet (Artsmia, British Museum, and Feather Currency video)

The only source of a permanent bright red color came from the feathers of certain birds, and particularly brilliant red feathers are found on the scarlet honeyeater. Where the idea of feather money came from is unclear, but the red colour certainly points to a Polynesian influence. Red is the colour of the gods, and is rare in nature. (The National Bank of Belgium Museum)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

The Melanesian island group of Santa Cruz lies south-east of the Solomon Islands group and north of Vanuatu. Santa Cruz is administered as part of the Solomon Islands. Feather money is used as a form of currency for settling important obligations (though now Solomon Islands currency is also used for other purposes). (British Museum)

When not in use, the coils were provided with both physical and supernatural protection. Powerful charms often were placed together with the tevau to guard it from harm, and the coil was wrapped in palm leaves and bark cloth. (Met Museum)

Altogether, there were 10 grades of feather money. The lowest grade coils were almost entirely black and were often in poor condition. A coil in a particular grade was worth twice as much as one in the next grade down. For storage, the coils were packed in leaves and cloths together with amulets and hung about 2 meters above the fireplace. If they were kept dry they suffered less damage from fungus and insects. When considering traditional money, we have to set aside our western definition of money. The various forms of money, such as feather money, shells or stones, were used not only for trade but also for ritual payments such as fines and compensation. (The National Bank of Belgium Museum)

Tevau like these were used for major purchases, like a new canoe, and in marriage ceremonies, where they were given to the bride's family to compensate for the loss of their daughter, something known as a bride price. A bride price was a transfer of goods and services from the man's family to that of the woman's. When a daughter married, it meant a loss for her family, not only in the emotional sense, but also in terms of labor. The bride price was seen as compensation for the loss of a daughter and her children. The usual price for a bride was 10 feather coils. In addition, feather money was used in everyday transactions. An entire trading network was set up between the various islands in the archipelago. Payments in feather money existed alongside barter trade. (The National Bank of Belgium Museum)

Nowadays, feather money has fallen into disuse. Since the beginning of the 20th century, and certainly since the Second World War, western coins and banknotes have been used for payments in the Santa Cruz archipelago. The last man skilled in making the coils of feather money, died in the 1980s. Collectors and museums still have some examples. The rest of the surviving coils are often damaged or in a poor condition. The people of the archipelago cast many of the feather coils into the sea because they are part of their national heritage and must not be sold outside the islands. (The National Bank of Belgium Museum)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Feather currency was made exclusively on Santa Cruz Island and traded from there to other islands in Melanesia. This kind of currency was manufactured by three skilled craftsmen, esteemed for their ability to communicate with the spirits. Each roll required feathers from about three hundred birds, and it was the job of the first specialist to collect red ones from scarlet honeyeaters. The second craftsmen glued the red feathers to gray ones taken from pacific pigeons, and then attached these to a long coil of twined fibers. The third artist wound the resulting belt in towards the middle, and provided finishing details, such as bark fibers, shells, seeds, and pieces of turtle shell.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Artsmia.org: Label and audio clip information

Object of the Month File, posted on ipevolunteers.org

Money coil (tevau), Metropolitan Museum: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/320699>

Feather Money, Solomon Islands. Short video uploaded by Australian Museum:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pV5E3LzywFo>

Feather Money, British Museum: http://culturalinstitute.britishmuseum.org/asset-viewer/feather-money-tevau/VgGlcG0Ke5_w0w?hl=en

Feather Money, The National Bank of Belgium Museum: <http://www.nbbmuseum.be/en/2010/10/feathermoney.htm>

Feathered Money from Santa Cruz Island: <http://bowersmuseum.blogspot.com/2006/10/object-of-week-feathered-money-from.html>

Image of scarlet honeyeater from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarlet_myzomela

