Tribal Art

Art of Brazil

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Dedicated to Anna Muttart

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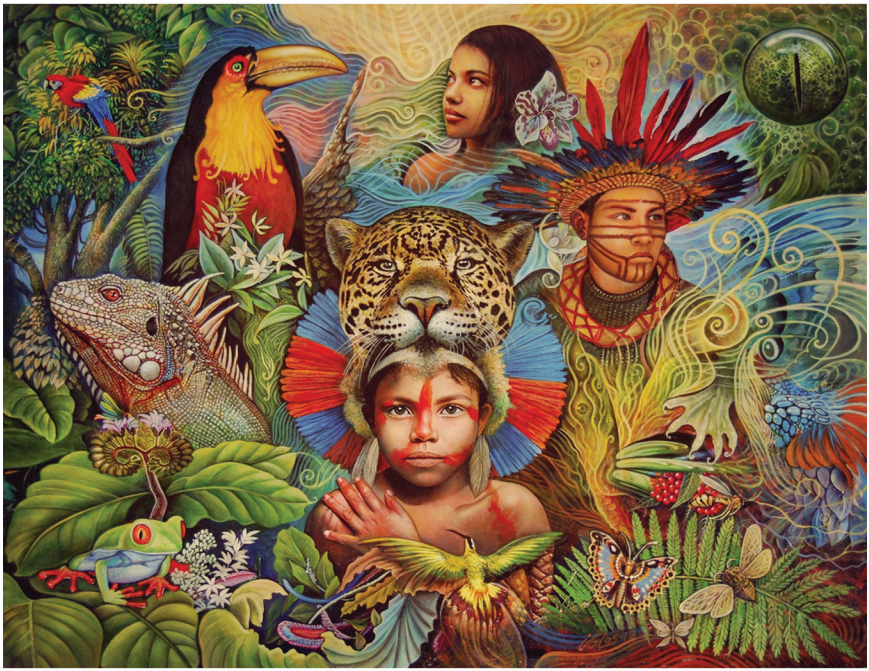
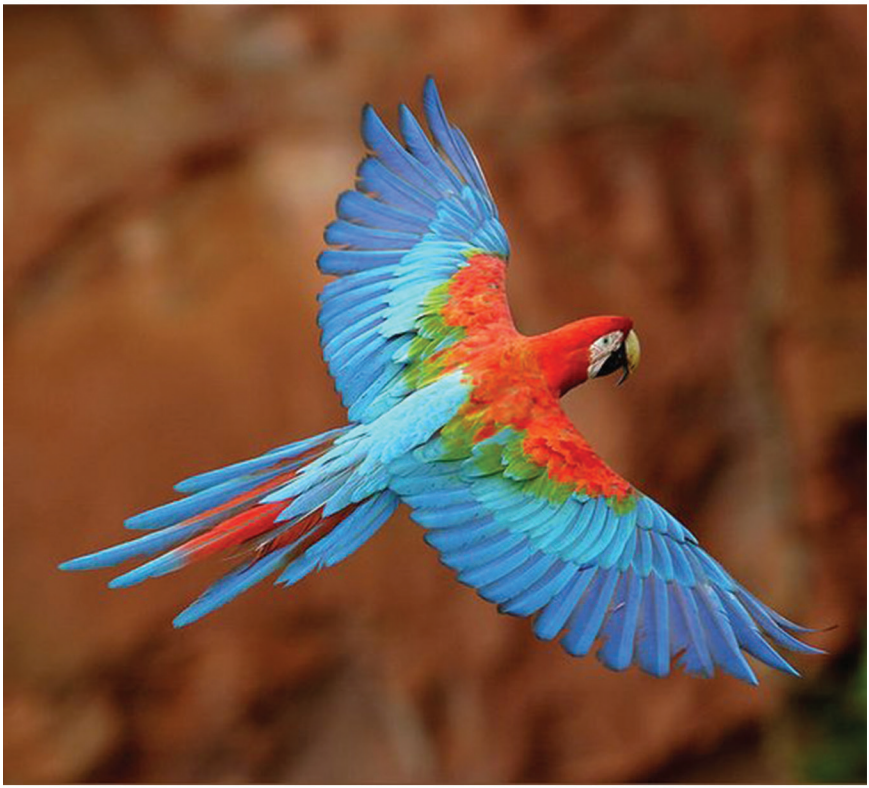


For 100 million years, unspoiled rivers and streams have wound their way through the Brazilian rainforest. Millions of plant and animal species have inhabited that space. There too, indigenous people have created beautiful feathered headdresses, masks, ear adornments, body paintings, and beadwork which they have worn to mark births, puberty, marriages, and other sacred ancestral rituals. Body decorations, songs, dances, and music have symbolized wisdom passed down from one generation to the next, strengthening the bonds between nearly 350,000 indigenous Brazilians and their home, the Amazon Rainforest.



Learning featherwork during puberty, men use feathers from parrots, toucans, and curassows bred in captivity. From the tail or wings, they pluck pinnae feathers with a continuous surface and a spindle-shape. From the ribs and abdomen, they pluck broad rounded feathers. From the neck, they pluck downy feathers.

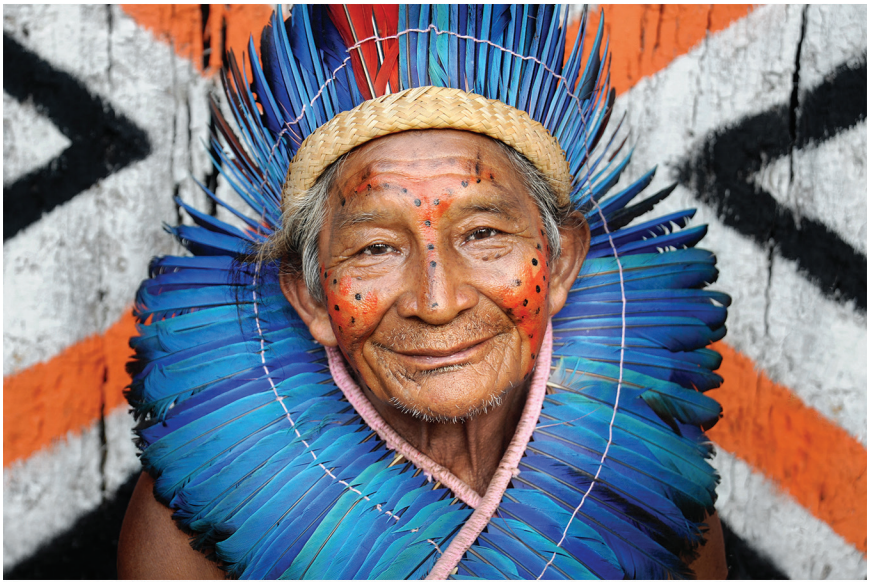
To create a headdress, “plumassiers” (featherworkers) bond feathers to fabric, thatch, or wood supports, using resin or wax. Each tribe has created their own unique designs that reveal who they are and where they come from.

At the World Indigenous Games, a Brazilian Bororo tribesman (above) competes in the archery competition. In some Amazon tribes, the bow and arrow have replaced the spear-thrower for hunting. Some groups fight with lances and clubs, but the bow and arrow are the principal weapons of warfare. Arrows have unique tribal markings and feathers.

To make an arrow, river cane is cut for the shaft. A wooden tip is inserted on one end. A nock is cut on the other end. A stone, bone, or shell arrowhead is secured on the tip using sinew (deer tendon) and tree resin. Two or three feathers are set along the shaft at the nock end (fletching).

A tribesman (above) blows a projectile at a target with a blowgun (also called a blowpipe or blowtube). Hunters use seeds, clay pellets, or darts to kill small animals like birds and monkeys. Some tribes dip dart tips in curare or other poison to paralyze their prey without making it inedible. In addition to blowguns, tribesmen also make harpoons, traps, arrows, and snares.

Tribesmen often raise the orphaned young of their prey. These pet monkeys, parrots, curassows, wild boars, and tortoises are treated like family and are never eaten, with the exception of large tortoises.



Raimundo (above), Dessana tribal elder of the small Tupé village up the Rio Negro river from Manaus, looks on. He wears a headdress made from feathers of the hyacinth, blue and gold, and scarlet macaws. His face is painted with the crushed red seed of urucum fruit.

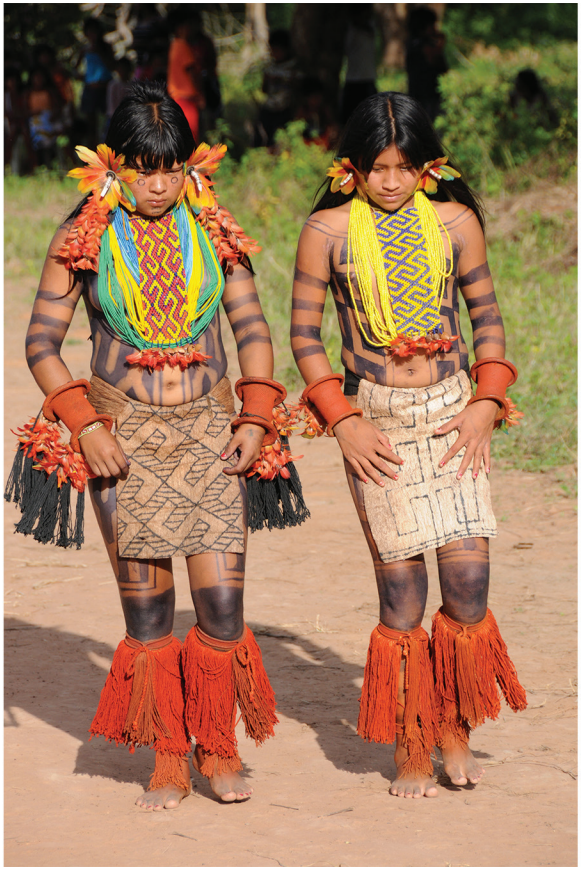
The most important role of the tribal elder is to protect and transmit ancestral traditions. Each ritual has its own dance steps and music. Pan-pipes, rattles, musical bows, or end-blown horns accompany dance ceremonies associated with rites of passage, shamanic healing rituals, house purifications, and seasonal observances.

Dessana children play pan-pipes made of cane, wrapped and tied with chambira palm fiber. Rattles are made of gourds, turtle shells, calabashes, wood, cocoons, bark, hide pouches, animal horns, and coconut shells. The string of a musical bow is plucked, rubbed, or struck between two ends of a curved stick. End-blown horns are made of bark, bamboo, calabashes, wood, bone, or clay.

Vocal music varies from tribe to tribe. Most songs speak of animals, forest spirits, and mythical beings. The Kuikuro tribe has more than 2000 songs.

A young Karajá tribesman from Bananal Island wears feather ear plugs, a feather headdress, beadwork, and body painting, including "omarura" (two facial circles). "Myranis" (rectangular beaded breastplates) are made of glass beads. Long ago, they were made of red, white, and black seeds.

In most tribes, women create body paintings with thin bamboo spatulas, bluish black genipa juice, annatto dye, and charcoal. They often paint black stripes and bands on arms and legs. Animal designs are commonly used on faces, hands, and feet.



On Bananal Island, two Karajá girls participate in the “ljaso” ritual wearing “Inytu” loincloths, feathered ear adornments, myranis, bracelets, “lokura wokus” (monochromatic beaded necklaces,) body paintings, and gaiters (leg coverings).

Indigenous peoples of South America adopted the tradition of body painting from the Incas. According to the anthropologist, Levi-Strauss, the Caduveo tribe believed that designs on the face conferred social status, spirituality, and dignity and that “unpainted human beings were indistinguishable from mere animals.”

A Karajá boy from Bananal Island wears his “Lori Lori” headdress (above). As the parrot population declines, birds are more difficult to capture. As a result, only a few traditional feather Karajá designs, such as the Lori Lori and “Aheto,” are still made today.

Sometimes plumassiers dye white feathers by soaking them in the natural red dye of the brazilwood tree (from which the name Brazil was derived). The dye can also be used for textiles, inks, and paints. In the days of Henry IV of France, the vibrant red color was so popular that Europeans traveled to the Americas to bring back brazilwood.

Santa Isabel youths (10 to 12 years old) participate in a large Karajá male initiation ritual called “heto hokã”. The boys stay in a ritual house called “the Big House” for seven days where their hair is cut and their bodies are painted. At the end of their confinement, they wear a feather “ra-heto” (“house of the head”), gaiters, bracelets, and myranis. Their lower lip is perforated and a labret ornament (a symbol of maturity) is inserted.

In many tribes such as the Guaraní, young men learn religious chants and dances during this period of isolation from the community.