

***Bird of Paradise:***  
***The Mythical ‘Kinnaree’ to Contemporary Feathery Fashion***

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**Introduction**

The present study aims to discuss the design analysis of ‘Bird of Paradise’; the contemporary feathery woven art in 2001 by the author. This textile art has combined creative ideas from ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ avian elements. This study carried out the historical interest for the regional and urban culture as social interface.

In this paper, I shall discuss:

- 1) The Concept of Motif Design
- 2) The Symbol of Colour
- 3) The Selection of Material
- 4) The Phenomenon of Feathery Fashion

**The Concept of Motif Design**

In World of textile and fashion, there are a lot of motifs illustrating the vegetal and animal world in term of social life and human belief. The ‘Kinnaree’<sup>1</sup> is one of the Thai mythical motifs associated with human belief. The motif was adopted by the Thai Buddhists under the Royal patronage. Old evidence in Thailand of the ‘Kinnaree’ motif is found in the ‘Traiphum’ text that was assimilated by King Li-Thai of Sukhothai period in 14<sup>th</sup> Century AD<sup>2</sup>. According to ‘Traiphum’ text, ‘Kinnaree’ is a half bird/ half woman creature in the Buddhist heaven. The Thai court used to select the ‘Kinnaree’ motif for depicting on the ceremony cloth. The Thai Royal family preserved the ‘Kinnaree’ motif for the court cloth only and not for the common people.

The ‘Kinnaree’ motif has spoken of the divine and of paradise. So, the idea of ‘Kinnaree’ was taken for the source of motif inspiration of the ‘Bird of Paradise’. However, the form of the motif is not depicted as the ‘Kinnaree’ motif in Thai style. It was transformed and depicted with element of bird and sky. The motifs were created in three design series under the theme of ‘Bird of Paradise’ collection.

The first one is depicted in the form of cloud that still looks like the cloud in the sky. It is a symbol of the initiative stage of ‘Bird of Paradise’ and of human life.

The second one displays the cloud that was transformed into the outline of a bird that flies speedily. The motif appears in a full form of bird that means the ‘grown up’ stage of human life.

The third design shows the dignified form of bird as the ‘golden age’ of life. The motif portrays a bird making a u-turn that is associated with the cycle of the life.

We can view the evolution of the motifs how the first one transformed to the second design, and then it became the final stage of the third design. These motifs show us how the sky and cloud gradually formed bird-like creatures, and evoked the ideas of the mythical ‘Kinnaree’ leading to the creation of the “Bird of Paradise.”

## **The Symbol of Colour**

Traditionally, Thai colour concept is derived from the seven colours of stars in the Universe, which is meant for seven days of the week<sup>3</sup>. Though, the colour concept of 'Bird of Paradise' collection is created with new ideas.

The colour of the first motif design is a blue scheme that consists of white, light blue, and dark blue. The proper combination of colour arrangement enhances the deliberate pattern. This colour is inspired from the scene of morning sky that speaks of the youth of life.

Second motif design uses a pink scheme with white in combination. As the pink is a light shade of red, the colour presents a day time period. The symbolic message of the colour is a middle period of human life that asserts the meaning of the motif.

The last colour combination selected for the third motif is a yellow scheme. The combination of white, light yellow and golden yellow were arranged to present an evening sunset. As sunset is the last part of a day, its colour also carries the message of the last part of human life.

We may find that the selections of colour schemes are asserting the symbolic messages of the motifs. In this supplementary way, the 'Bird of Paradise' could achieve a striking expression.

## **The Selection of Material**

As the 'Bird of Paradise' collection has presented the divine and ethereal element, silk was selected for the material of the warp and the weft. To approach the airy feeling, the super fine quality of silk was chosen for weaving the transparency piece.

Furthermore, pure white feathers were selected for finishing the embellishment of the piece. The feathers were added along motifs to present a symbol of avian element in the paradise. The Venice mask with white feathers was used as an accessory from the West. Feathery mask and embellishment evokes the subtle sense of impression.

## **The Phenomenon of Feathery Fashion**

As the piece "Bird of Paradise" stems from the combined idea of Thai mythology and feathery fashion in Europe, it is interesting to observe the contemporary feathery fashion in the East and the West.

Looking at Western fashion, we find that European fashion had adopted feathers for fashion accessories in the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD if not earlier. The feathery fashion also appears as the hi-class evening dress for superstars and elite society. The use of feathers also plays an important role in contemporary fashion accessories, i.e., hat, earring, bag, shoes, fake eyelashes, etc.

The old evidence shows that the feather appeared in European art since the ancient Greeks. One of the great surviving masterpieces of Greek sculpture from the Hellenistic period is "Victory" (aka Goddess Nike)<sup>4</sup>. The sculpture is thought to date from the period 220 to 190 BC. The feathery wing of Goddess Nike displays dignified power as her name "Victory" suggests. The Greek myth also has ideas about other gods, goddesses, and angels that their bodies attached to the feathery wings. Therefore, the feather in the European thinking speaks of the high status and its style suggests high-class fashion or haute couture. We may assume that European designers have derived the idea of feathery fashion from the Greek myth.

In the East, Japan has the mythical avian creature in their old Buddhist text known as 'Karyobinga'<sup>5</sup>. If there is a 'Karyobinga' in painting, it means the painting is about paradise. The idea of the myth has been presented by the 'Karyobinga' dance that is usually performed by Japanese children. The 'Karyobinga' motif is found in decorative objects associated with Buddhism only. Though, it's not depicted on textile design in a secular world.

Presently, some Japanese fashion and textile designers have created the feathery fashion, i.e., design students of Bunka Fashion College in 2006-2007. Under the theme of urban culture as social interface, it seems that the Japanese designers' inspiration for the feathery fashion is derived from the Western myth in combination with their own self-expression. The colour scheme of this Japanese feathery fashion is pure white that suggests the divine feeling. Though, the motif idea may not associate directly with the avian myth in the region.

Interestingly, the creation of feathery fashion collections happens in different time and places. The global interface plays an important role in our lives today, therefore the regional idea may connect with another space. Furthermore, the creation idea may come out beyond the present time, i.e., connecting to the past and transforming to the future.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Kinnaree' in Thai literature is derived from 'Kinnari' in Pali and Sanskrit that is originated in India. The Thai 'Kinnaree' is depicted as a young woman wearing an angel-like costume.

<sup>2</sup> King Li Thai (Mahathamracha I, 1347-1368/74) wrote the 'Traiphum' text (doctrine of Thai Buddhist) since he was a Crown Prince in 1345.

<sup>3</sup> Conway, Susan, (1992: 55-56)  
Also see Smanchat, Sitthichai, (2007: 212)  
Thai people believed in the implications of colours meant for seven days:

Sunday:	wear red, great luck will follow.
Monday:	wear white, the secret of long life will be revealed.
Tuesday:	mix blue and purple, to be blessed with grace.
Wednesday:	wear green for good luck.
Thursday:	wear orange with filled yellow for good fortune.
Friday:	wear grey for success in battle.
Saturday:	wear purple that bring over all success.

This custom of the seven colours was observed by both male and female, and the custom became a symbol of wealth and authority.

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nike \(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nike_(mythology)), Feb, 2009.

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In Greek mythology, *Nike* (Greek: Νίκη , pronounced [ní:kɛ:], meaning *Victory*), was a goddess who personified triumph throughout the ages of the ancient Greek culture.

<sup>5</sup> Iwanami Bukkyo Jiten (Dictionary of Buddhism), Iwanami Shoten, 1996. According to this Dictionary, the term 'Karyobinga' is originated from 'Kalavinka' in Sanskrit. The 'Kalavinka' has a bird body and 'Bodhisattva' face.

### **Further Reading**

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