MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY
JACQUES CHIRAC

Press release
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Temporary exhibition / Galerie Germain Viatte
12 May – 8 November 2026

PLUMES FROM PARADISE

Journeys of an Extraordinary Bird from New Guinea



Air Niugini poster, Yamada Masami, 1976, private collection, Paris © Air Niugini

A master in the art of display, the bird of paradise[1], through the brilliance of its plumage and the extraordinary inventiveness of its choreographies, has fascinated viewers since the early centuries of our era, far beyond the forests of New Guinea, its principal territory of origin.

By exploring the sense of wonder inspired by birds of paradise and the imaginaries they have fostered, the exhibition retraces the history of their circulation and representations in the arts, from Oceania to Asia and the West, as well as in Western natural science.

Bringing together nearly 210 works — feather adornments, paintings, taxidermy specimens, fashion pieces and accessories, objects of art and illustrated books — the exhibition crosses the perspectives of natural history, art, fashion, ethnology and ecology. It highlights the ways in which these birds have been mobilised, admired, represented and studied over time.

Conceived in collaboration with scientists and artists from New Guinea, the exhibition also presents contemporary creations rooted in local knowledge and realities, and invites a reconsideration of our relationships with the living world.

[1] "Bird of paradise" in the singular refers to a cultural construct (an emblematic figure in global imaginaries), whereas the scientific reality is plural: the birds of paradise family (Paradisaeidae) comprises 45 species.

Curators

Magali Mélandri,
Senior Curator for Oceania and Insular Southeast Asia. Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac

Stéphanie Xatart,
Art historian, independent curator

Around the exhibition

Catalogue
224 pages, 39,90 €
Co-published by musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac / Grand Palais Rmn



Danse headdress. Papua New Guinea, Mid–20th century © musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, photo Pauline Guyon



Tile decorated with a scene depicting a rider offering fruit to a *simurgh*, a long-tailed mythical bird belonging to persian mythology. Tehran, Iran, ca. 1865-1888 © musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, photo Claude Germain



Boy with a Cape and Turban (Portrait of Prince Rupert of the Palatinate), Jan Lievens, ca. 1631 © The Leiden Collection, New York

Prelude — the artist-birds

Primarily found in New Guinea and certain neighbouring islands, with a few species in the Moluccas and north-eastern Australia, birds of paradise (Paradisaeidae) inhabit a vast centre of biodiversity, rich in food resources and largely free from major predators, apart from humans. Over thousands of years, they have developed an art of the living based on colour, movement and metamorphosis, placing them at the pinnacle of avian evolutionary history.

At the outset of the exhibition, a visual and sound immersion offers a first encounter with this "artist-bird", an unparalleled choreographer with shimmering plumage. The 45 species within the Paradisaeidae family testify to a remarkable biological and aesthetic diversity.

New-Guinea: making alliances

The first section of the exhibition is an encounter with the bird of paradise in its land of origin, New Guinea. The presentation of various body adornments reflects the ties woven between birds, Papuan societies and their territories, notably through exchange networks, dance and song performances, and systems of value associated with feathers.

Audiovisual presentations of these performances, along with sound immersions, contextualise the relationships between human and non-human entities. Local narratives highlight in particular the singular identity of the bird of paradise, both male and female, and its connections with other emblematic species such as the cassowary.

Makassar — Agra — Katmandu: the routes of paradise

For more than two thousand years, the natural resources of New Guinea and neighbouring islands have attracted the interest of distant markets.

The earliest trade routes, established as early as the 5th century, connected western New Guinea and the Moluccan archipelago (the "Spice Islands") to Java, Bali, Malaysia, China, and later to India, West Asia and the Mediterranean. At the heart of these circulations were birds of paradise.

Having become "birds of the world", they were sometimes subject to misunderstandings within local imaginaries, merging with pre-existing mythical narratives. Skins and feathers travelled alongside stories and images; as they circulated, they served a wide range of purposes: precious commodities, diplomatic gifts, insignia of sovereignty and objects of learned curiosity.

Seville – Amsterdam – Prague: from Magellan to Wallace

It was in the early 16th century that the first bird of paradise skins reached Europe, at a time when science could neither explain their form nor their origin. They were regarded as works of God, or as *naturalia* or *exotica* within cabinets of curiosity. Their names, descriptions and early representations reveal the aura of mystery surrounding them and long shaped their initial classification.

Great painters of the 16th and 17th centuries, such as Brueghel the Elder, Rubens and Rembrandt, adopted the motif in allegories that gradually reveal a shift from imagination to reality, from fantasy to science. Natural sciences, through in situ observations conducted in New Guinea and island Southeast Asia (notably present-day Indonesia) in the late 18th and 19th centuries, structured knowledge, drawing on local actors and their expert knowledge, and identified species that inspired both decorative and fine arts.



Rose Valois, milliner. Paradise in flame tones, black toque, 1947 © Philippe Pottier / Institut Pasteur

Paris – London – New York: The Ladies' Delight

At the end of the 19th century, the feather trade became a major industry in women's fashion. The taste for the feathers of exotic species, part of the naturalist movement of this century of scientific exploration, became a fashion at once irresistible and unsustainable in its scale and extravagance. On both sides of the Atlantic, this immense and at times excessive success gave rise to the first activist movements, often led by women advocating for the protection of animal species.

The exhibition thus sheds light on the historical tension between fascination with feathers, commercial logic and the emergence of a conservationist awareness of the living world.

New-Guinea: a bird emblem

Returning to New Guinea, the exhibition unfolds the emblematic figure of the bird of paradise — a source of inspiration for many artists to this day — through a range of contemporary Papuan works and voices. The independence movements that swept across the South Pacific in the 1970s are reflected in the creation of national symbols for each country: the bird of paradise appears on the national flag of the newly independent state of Papua New Guinea. Here, the bird is a living emblem: a national symbol, artistic motif, marker of identity and site of engagement.

Contemporary works, everyday objects, visual archives and filmed testimonies give voice to artists, researchers and Papuan communities, anchoring the exhibition in a situated, collaborative and resolutely contemporary approach.



PNG Pisin Paradise, Simon Gende (b. 1969), Kuman group, Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, Private Collection, Paris

PRATICAL INFORMATION

12 May – 8 November 2026

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OPENING HOURS

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday: 10:30 am – 7:00 pm. Late opening Thursday until 10:00 pm. Closed on Monday outside school holidays.

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