

Indigenous skins. Indian Costumes at the Court of Württemberg

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During the carnival season of 1599 the Duke of Württemberg invited his princely subjects to a festivity which required their active participation. He himself showed up as a personification of 'America' and his courtiers were dressed up as Indians, wearing skin costumes that enveloped their entire bodies, representing indigenous nakedness. The invited were assigned the roles of the emperors of antiquity or, in one case, that of an admirer of the beauty and social status of 'America'.

The spectacle is documented in a coloured miniature (today in the art collection of Weimar) and shows that the Indian costumes have been exactly modelled on the engravings of de Bry's "America" series which was being published since the early 1590s.

The Duke and courtiers of Württemberg appropriate the skins of the 'savage' Indians, conflating the sexual appeal of the exotic 'other' with the magic protection against the threatening 'other' that are implicit in the masquerade. Besides, the Duke demonstrates that he participates in the important new discourse of ethnography, he symbolically confers the American riches on himself and - by cross-dressing as a female - he places his guests and political partners in positions where according to European standards of courtship they have to honour him.