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Nez Perce Shirt, ca. 1850

During the nineteenth century, honored Native men in the Plateau and Plains regions wore shirts made of deer, elk, or mountain sheep hide embellished with human and horse hair and decorated with strips of dyed porcupine quillwork or beadwork sewn on the shoulders and sleeves. Men earned the right to wear such shirts through their accomplishments as warriors, and as successful hunters capable of providing food for their families and for others in need. They belonged to military societies and lodges that fostered their progress as warriors, preparing them for battle and celebrating victories through special dances, songs, and ceremonies.

As they accumulated more honors, these men might be given the authority of leading hunting and war expeditions, making them responsible not only for the success of the undertaking but for the safety of all the participants. Such leadership tended to be fluid and was neither permanent nor absolute, and men were continually required to demonstrate their abilities as warriors and hunters. With age and experience, men could rise to the level of band headmen or chiefs, which brought additional responsibilities for ensuring the safety of their followers. A shirt such as this one would signify the owner's membership in such a Nez Perce military society and represent his bravery and leadership.

The shirt is made of tanned deer hide and decorated with strips of porcupine quillwork and beadwork on the shoulders and sleeves. The shoulder designs are formed of quill-wrapped horse-hair, while the sleeves are decorated in plaited quillwork, with beadwork and fringe edging all of the strips. The shirt is also ornamented with bunches of human and horse hair, which could symbolize the coups the wearer has counted or the number of people for whom he had responsibility as a leader. Women made such shirts for their male relatives—often providing their own hair for the decoration—and also earned prestige for their fine quillwork and beadwork. The overall design and instructions for making the shirt may have originated from a dream or vision of the owner.

Nez Perce shirts—as well as those of other Plateau tribes and the Blackfoot and Gros Ventre of the Plains—sometimes feature many perforations, as seen on this example. Such shirts—with the perforations, triangular neck flap, hair fringe, and quillwork—are documented in early journals and ethnographies concerning the Nez Perce (Black 2000, 22; Spinden 1908, 217).

During the early reservation period when men were no longer actively involved in warfare and had few opportunities to hunt, women continued to make hide shirts decorated with beadwork, human hair, and horsehair for their male relatives to wear at ceremonies, parades, and other social events. Leaders of tribal delegations sometimes wore the shirts when they conferred with government representatives in Washington, D.C., and other locations, as symbols of cultural identity and to indicate their status as leaders in their communities.

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References Black 2000, Spinden 1908