

WC 8805004
Blackfoot Shirt

A shirt of native-tanned deerskin, decorated with beadwork strips over the shoulders and along the sleeves, and a beadwork rosette at center front and back. Red cloth neckflaps with some human hair tassels. The beadwork strips fringed with ermine (winter weasel) fur strips, human hair tassels and brass bells. Painted parallel stripes on front and sleeves.

Length 46 inches; 117 cm.

Acquired from Alexander Gallery, NYC; no documentation.

This shirt, actually a poncho, has all of the features of an early 19th century garment of the northwestern Plains: the narrow rectangular red cloth neck flaps, the rosette on front and back, the loose lane stitch (Crow stitch) of pony beadwork, the simple block patters on a white background of the beadwork, and the painted stripes.

Pointing to a Blackfoot origin is the ermine fringe, the beadwork pattern of blocks between two stripes, and the tiny black blocks along the edges of the rosettes. The large block patterns of the shoulder strips are proto-typical of more elaborate block designs that remained popular in Blackfoot beadwork throughout the 19th century. All beadwork was executed on separate strips of leather, and may well be older than the shirt itself.

There are here, two features that are unusual in Blackfoot art. In early Blackfoot art, the simple block designs are almost invariably blue on a white background. The stark black patterns on this shirt are reminiscent of Jicarilla Apache, not of Blackfoot art. Unusual for Blackfoot is also the asymmetry of the painted stripes: black on one side, red on the other. This asymmetry in painted war marks is frequently noticed on early Sioux shirts, seldom on Blackfoot examples.

Nevertheless, the predominant features of this shirt are those of a Blackfoot product of circa 1850, but the aberrant details raise the possibility of a Sarsi origin. This small Athapascan tribe adopted Blackfoot fashions by circa 1800, but much of their artwork continued to reveal influences from other neighbors.

Drs. T.J. Brassler
Peterborough, Ontario
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Literature:

- Conn, R., Native American Art in the Denver Art Museum, Denver, 1979, p. 167 (no documentation)
- Ewers, J.C., Blackfeet Crafts. United States Indian Service, Haskell Institute, 1945, pp. 34 and 50.

Horse Capture, J.D. & G.P. Horse Capture; Beauty, Honor and Tradition. University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 27.