

WC 8808027

A man's ceremonial shirt made of two native-tanned hides, presumably of bighorn sheet. The shape and length, 62 inches; 158 cm., identify this shirt as the classic type of the north-western Plains Indians, pre-dating the 1850s' when shorter shirts became fashionable there.

This shirt was first pictured in the 1988 Christmas catalogue of Alexander (Acevedo) Gallery in New York City. It was sold to the Masco Corporation with the information that the shirt came from a private museum in Switzerland. From other sources it was learned that a private museum in Sankt Gallen, Switzerland, was closed down in c. 1958-'60. Inquiries are being made for more information.

With minimal tailoring the pattern of these shirts was largely determined by the natural shape of the hides. It was believed by the Indians that the retention of the hides' original shape promoted the survival of the animal's spiritual power in the garment. The two hides were both cut across just below the fore-legs. Along this cut they were sewn together to form the shoulderline, leaving a slit for the neck opening. The upper parts of the two hides were sewn on sideways so as to form the two sleeves. All seams were sinew-sewn, but the upper parts of the sleeves and the sides of the body were left open. As a conventional expression of respect for the animal's spirit the leg skins were left as pendants on the sleeves and bottom of the shirt. The back of the shirt is indicated by the short tailskin at center bottom, and by the position of the long fringes along the sleeves. Such long fringes were believed to bring good luck in hunting; the shirt's fringed edges served in draining rainwater from the garment in bad weather.

The lighter skin color around the neck opening indicates the former presence of flaps or bibs on both sides of the shirt; narrow rectangular neck flaps made of red trade cloth were standard on these shirts in the 1830-1840 period.

This ceremonial shirt owes much of its visual appeal to the large quillworked panels decorating the front and back. This quillwork, as well as the beadwork, is applied on separate sheets and strips of buffalo leather, allowing their transfer from a worn-out shirt to a new one. The porcupine quillwork was executed in a technique called "simple band sewing", prevalent in most Blackfoot quillwork. The dark brown elements in the quillwork patterns consist of fibers of the maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum* L.); porcupine quills were difficult to dye this dark color before the introduction of commercial dyes in the late nineteenth century.

In contrast to the many early shirts with quillworked discs on front and back, only thirteen shirts decorated with quillworked rectangular panels, one separated panel, and a few contemporary pictures have been located. Eight of these shirts have a reliable documentation of their Blackfoot origin, and also the relevant pictures made by George Catlin, Paul Kane, and Fr. Nicholas Point show Blackfoot people. This Blackfoot documentation ranges from 1832 to 1846, and there is no reason to doubt the same origin for the five undocumented examples. The beadwork on two of the undocumented shirts

suggests that the last panel shirts were made in the 1850s. In the 1940s John Ewers understood his Blackfoot informants to say that such panel shirts were still used in the 1880s, but no such evidence has been found in the great many early Blackfoot photographs (Taylor, 1986; 269). Most probably Ewers' informants referred to shirts decorated with discs.

Bands of pony beadwork run over the shoulders and down the sleeves of this shirt. Pony beads were introduced on the northwestern Plains about 1830, and the Blackfoot were reported to prefer blue and white beads. The beadwork on this shirt is indeed predominantly blue and white, plus some black and yellow beads. The beads are applied in a lazy stitch technique, widely used on the northwestern Plains before the introduction of seed beads in the 1870's. Red cloth appliqué is combined with the beadwork on the sleeves, creating designs similar to those on the quillworked panels. Similar beadwork decorates five of the aforementioned shirts. On two other examples (Brooklyn, Copenhagen, both acquired before 1870) the designs are somewhat more complex, though also executed in pony beads. The simple beadwork patterns are regionally representative for the period before the emerging of distinct tribal beadwork styles. The slightly more complex designs on two of these shirts suggest that this development started in the late 1850s.

The dark brown parallel stripes on this shirt refer to the number of enemy encounters, and also the pictographs painted on the back of the shirt proclaim its owner's war exploits. Painted battle stripes and war records decorate seven of the aforementioned panel shirts; only distinguished war veterans were privileged to have their costumes decorated in this manner.

However, battle stripes and war records were not restricted to panel shirts. The rather rare occurrence of panel shirts places them in a separate ceremonial class, particularly seeing the apparently symbolic quality of the designs on the panels. The shirt owners had undoubtedly earned their status as war veterans, but the symbols on the panels referred to additional achievement. Notice that the panel design of this shirt is repeated on the sleeves. This is also the case on two of the other panel shirts (Winnipeg, H4.4-2; H4.4-4).

Unfortunately, no pertinent information has been recorded in the ethnographic literature, other than the statement that the ritual transfer of certain important medicine bundles to new owners included the associated ceremonial garments. The distinctive decoration of such costumes identified the person as the owner of a specific medicine bundle, its sacred songs, face paint, etc., and the rights to perform its ritual. Colin Taylor was convinced that these panels were the prerogative of medicine pipe keepers or Beaver bundle owners (Taylor, 1994; 33,61). However, the rituals of these particular medicine bundles have survived long enough to leave extensive and detailed records, in which there is no mention of panel shirts. It has been suggested that these shirts represent an early fashion, on its way out in the 1840s. It seems to me that the disappearance of ceremonial garments relates to something more than fashion change, the more so as also the symbolic panel designs disappeared from the repertoire of Blackfoot art. Apparently, the

disappearance of these ceremonial panel shirts related to a ceremonial or social function that was abandoned.

Blackfoot society was experiencing tremendous change in the 1840s, when this shirt was apparently acquired. Only a few years earlier, in 1837, a smallpox epidemic had swept the region, in which an estimated two-thirds of the Blackfoot nation had perished. We can only guess what the effect was on the religious worldview of the survivors.

The introduction of the horse was having its impact on all aspects of the native culture (Ewers, 1955). Before the coming of the horse, trained and ritually initiated “buffalo leaders” (autavatau) regulated the drive of buffalo herds into corrals, where they were slaughtered. The buffalo leader was also in charge of the Buffalo Calling ritual that started while the herd was carefully lured toward the corral, and continued until the successful slaughter. The role of the buffalo leader disappeared when the use of horses changed the drive hunt, and when the Buffalo Calling ritual was co-opted and changed by Beaver Bundle owners.

Native traditions mention as the last buffalo leader White Calf Bull, who was an elderly man in 1855 and most probably no longer active as such (Schaeffer, 1969:12). Ewers (1955:165) mentioned that the last buffalo drive among the southern Blackfeet was in the early 1850s, among the northern Blackfeet in 1872, but the drive hunts were already uncommon in the 1850s, and had changed by the use of horses. The last recording of the old-style buffalo drive among the Blackfeet was in 1843 (Ewers, 1968: 162).

Much of what we would like to know about the early buffalo leaders and their rituals has since long faded out of Blackfoot traditions, but among the horse-poor Plains Cree the old practices continued for several decades longer. While charming the buffaloes to follow him, the Cree “buffalo caller” carried a banner, decorated with a rectangular panel of symbolic designs. On some of these panels the design represent drive lanes and buffalo pounds, while buffalo are pictured on other examples. These banners served as prestigious decorations in the tipi of their owner (Brasser, 1984).

We do not know whether the Blackfoot buffalo leader made use of a banner, but I suspect that the panels on the Cree banners are the symbolic equivalent of the panels on Blackfoot shirts. The red design on most of these Blackfoot shirt panels may represent the buffalo corral, called “blood kettle” (piskun) by the Blackfoot. This bloody slaughter is pictured as a wide red band on the Crows tipi design of the Blackfoot.

Despite some moth damage in the quillwork and the loss of its neck flaps this shirt is an impressive and important document of the ancient Blackfoot way of life.

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Location of Blackfoot panel shirts

1. Statens Ethnografik Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, Cat. 1864.2.2
2. Univ. Museum of Anthropology, Cambridge, England, Cat. 51.37.4
3. Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, England, Cat. 1983.67.1
4. Dept. of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama, n.n
5. National Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark, Cat. Hd.75
6. The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y., Cat. 50.67.5
7. Museum of Mankind, London, England, Cat. 072 AM 14
8. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., Cat. 200630
9. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (panel only), Cat. ?
10. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill., Cat. 14621
11. Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature, Winnipeg, Cat. H.4.4-2
12. Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature, Winnipeg, Cat. H.4.4-4
13. Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature, Winnipeg, Cat. H.4.4-6
14. Collection of John and Marva Warnock, California, Cat. WC8808027

References

1. Brassler, T.J., Backrests Banners among the Plains Cree and Plains Ojibwa. *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 10-1, 1984
2. Ewers, J.C., *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 159, Washington D.C., 1955
3. Ewers, J.C., *Indian Life on the Upper Missouri*. University of Oklahoma Press 1968
4. Schaeffer, C.E., *The Bison Drive of the Blackfeet Indians*, Montana Archeology Society, Memoir No. 1, 1962
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6. Taylor, C., Catlin's Portrait of Iron Horn; an early style of Blackfeet Shirt. *Plains Anthropologist*, Vol 31, 1986
7. Taylor, C., Saam; the symbolic content of early northern Plains ceremonial regalia. *Wyk auf Foehr*, Germany, 1964.