

WC 8808028

A man's shirt made of native-tanned deerskin, the upper half and sleeves painted blue faded to grey, the lower half and neckflaps yellow. Length 48 inches; 122 cm.

A large quillworked roundel trimmed with yellow and black pony bead decorates the chest and back; quillworked strips bordered with blue pony beads run across the shoulders and down the sleeves; quillwrapped hairlocks are attached along one edge of all of these strips. The roundels are executed in a single-quill parallel folding technique called "simple band sewing"; the strips consist of three lanes of three-quill diamond plaited quillwork. The dark brown parts in this quillwork are a vegetable fiber, probably maidenhair fern.

Alexander Gallery, NYC, acquired this shirt from a private museum in Switzerland. Presumably, this was the private museum in Sankt Gallen that closed in c. 1958-'60. Fixed to the shirt is a small blue sticker with the number 67, that may relate to the catalog system in the aforementioned museum.

This shirt was first illustrated in Alexander's Christmas catalogue of 1988, p. 67; in "Splendid Heritage", p. 21, published by the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, Santa Fe, 19095; and exhibited at the Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, in 1998-'99.

Intermediate between a poncho and a shirt, this garment is a classic example of the northern and central Plains fashion in the 1830s-'40s. In 1994, Dr. John Ewers suggested that it might be of Assiniboin origin, presumably due to the former tendency to associate the large Quillworked roundels with this tribe, and Ewers believed the "three-row" quillwork as on this shirt was characteristic for the Assiniboin (Ewers. 1956; 408).

However, large roundels on shirts and three-row quillwork were popular throughout the upper-Missouri region. Among the regional Sioux tribes the large shirt roundels referred to the ceremonial hoop game, played in buffalo-calling rituals (Wissler, 1907; 41). The narrow triangular neckflaps of this shirt have not been found on early Assiniboin shirts; in combination with large quillwork roundels this type of neckflaps has been noticed on several Sioux shirts of the 1830-'50 period. Also diamond-plaited quillwork was much more common on Sioux shirts than on Assiniboin examples.

Obviously, most distinctly Sioux is the coloring of this shirt. Painting the upper half of the shirt blue or black was done by several tribes of the northwestern Plains, but in combination with a yellow-painted lower half, a Western Sioux origin is almost certain. Symbolizing the Sky and Rock, this blue/yellow painting identifies the shirt as that of a Wicasa Yatapika, a chief of high standing in traditional Lakota society. The hair tassels on such a shirt were donated by members of his band; the horsehair tassels may refer to horses captured and given away.

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Literature

Ewers, J.C., George Catlin, Painter of Indians and the West. Smithsonian Report for 1955, Washington, 1956.

Wissler, C., Some protective Designs of the Dakota. Anthropological Papers American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 1 New York, 1908.