

WC 8808029

A Plains Indian women's dress, made of native-tanned elk skin, fringed along the sides and bottom.

Length 61 inches: 155 cm.

Blue and white pony beads border the neck opening; blue pony beads form a narrow undulating line across the chest and back, and down the open sleeves. Square patches of red trade cloth formerly decorated the center of the lower part and bottom, front and back.

Alexander Gallery, NYC, acquired this dress from a private museum in Sankt Gallen that closed down in c. 1958-'60. Fixed to the dress is a small sticker with the number 68, most probably relating to the catalog system in the aforementioned museum.

During the nineteenth century this was the type of dress worn by native women all over the northwestern Plains and the adjacent parts of the Plateau (Colombia River region). Yet, the visual appearance that these dresses had in common resulted from two different patterns.

Perhaps the oldest pattern is that of the "deertail dress", made of two mule deer or elk skins, with the head parts and fore legs at the bottom of the dress (notice that in man's shirts the skins were in reverse position). The hindquarters were folded over the outside and the two hides were sewn together along the straight line of this fold, leaving an opening for the head. The undulating edges of the hindquarters were tacked flat, and the two tails were left as decorations at centre chest and back. This pattern, though not unknown on the northwestern Plains, was more common across the mountains in the Plateau region.

The dress pictured here is an example of the second pattern, in which the two hides were cut across along the fold of the former pattern. These two straight upper edges were sewn onto a separate shoulder piece or yoke. Reflecting a conservative attitude rooted in respect for the animals, the overlapping edges of this yoke were given the undulating form that is visible on the former pattern, and short deertails were often sewn on front and back (not on this dress).

The efforts to retain the appearance of a genuine deertail dress suggests that the second pattern is indeed a modification of the first, allowing the elimination of the double layer of skin carried on the shoulders. Women in the Plateau region may have preferred this extra layer in the older pattern to support the massive beadwork covering the upper part of the dress.

Among the Blackfeet on the northwestern Plains one or more lanes of beads follow the undulating edge of the yoke on the front and back. The minimal beadwork of this particular dress, and the use of the early blue and white pony beads suggest an origin date

in the 1830-'40 period. Typically Blackfeet is also the emphatic retention of the skin's head and forelegs at the bottom of the dress. Leg pieces were even added when they were missing on the skins, as is in the case on this dress.

Sewn on the top of these bottom additions, as well as in the center of the skirt, skin strips form rectangles. They served as frames for cloth patches, of which only some red fragments are left. Red are also the patches on another classic Blackfeet dress in the Warnock Collection (WC8308017). Many Blackfeet dresses have this decoration half red and half black. Their undoubted symbolic character has never been recorded and has faded from native memories.

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Literature:

Conn, R., Blackfeet Women's Clothing. American Indian Tradition, Vol. 7-4, 1961.

Wissler, C., Costumes of the Plains Indians. Anthropol. Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 17-2, New York, 1915.