

WC 8808030

A tailored man's coat, in style reminiscent of the 18th century European "redingote", made of smoked elk or moose hide, sewn with sinew, and decorated with abstract and semi-floral designs in porcupine quillwork, and quill-wrapped fringes. White pony beads separate the fringes below the constricted waistline at the back, where the skirt has a slight flair. Length 48 inches; 122 cm.

As part of a number of northern Plains Indian artifacts, this coat was acquired by Alexander Acevedo, New York dealer, from a private museum in Sankt Gallen that was closed down in c. 1958-'60. Inquired are being made for more information. John and Marva Warnock acquired this coat in 2004.

Colorfully quillworked coats of this type were popular on the Missouri River during the first half of the 19th century, particularly among the Mountain Men and other people engaged in the regional fur trade. Fragments of information indicate that they were produced by the Métis, French-Canadian halfbreeds, primarily at Fort Pierre and Fort Union, both in Dakota Territory. A large number of these people had immigrated from the lower Red River in the 1820s, due to the changes in the Canadian fur trade. It is no coincidence that we find the first reports of such decorated skin coats on the Missouri in those years.

Earlier examples reveal in their painted tradition and loomwoven quillwork the northern art tradition of their producers, but after the 1820s the tailored style of this particular coat became fashionable, on which painting and woven quillwork had been replaced by plaited quillwork. In St. Louis, General William Clark presented one to the Marquis De Lafayette in 1825; John J. Audubon and his friend Edward Harris acquired such coats at Fort Pierre in 1843, and the artist Rudolph F. Kurz had one made by a Métis at fort Union in 1851. There are many other examples, showing the flamboyant style of quillwork that was also used to decorate bandoleer bags, horse gear, and other fancy dress items. The coat discussed here was most probably made in c. 1840.

After the 1850s the fur trade was moving away from the Missouri River, and many of the Métis were assimilated into the regional Indian population. Particularly among the Sioux tribes the Métis art style made its impact on quill- and beadwork.

Literature:

Brasser, T.J., "In Search of Métis Art", in J. Peterson & J.S.H. Brown, eds., "The New Peoples; Being and Becoming Métis in North America". University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, 1985.

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