

The Blackfeet Buckskin Shirt

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Introduction:

Blackfeet buckskin shirts are distinctive in the designs that are used on them. Many of these shirts used the traditional mountain designs of the Blackfeet along with porcupine quills. When trading began with the trading companies, glass beads were used to decorate our men's shirts. The designs used were one of a kind art work: for example, if a man were to put down a story of his exploits on a shirt, he would most likely have it painted with certain pictographs and symbols along with the strips of beadwork or quill work along the arms, shoulders and the front and back of the shirt.

Another type of shirt was the war shirt. This shirt was decorated with horsehair along the arms and there were symbols on the front and back of the shirt depicting a war story or event that the wearer was involved in. It wasn't uncommon to see medallions centered on the front of war shirt with a scalp lock attached as fringe.

To introduce this lesson, the teacher can use materials and photographs of shirts from the Blackfoot Shirts Project website [www.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/] to show students various art work on shirts, and changes in types of materials used due to contact with traders and trappers. The teacher will instruct students in project requirements and assessment. This project is easily adapted to age and grade level.

Objective:

In this lesson we will construct a traditional shirt. The objective of constructing a Blackfeet shirt is to teach the student using paper bags, sequins, yarn and paints/colored pencils/crayons how to make a shirt depicting traditional Blackfeet Mountain designs and personal family or individual histories or important events in the life of each student.

Goal:

The goal of this lesson is for the student to create a simile of what a traditional Blackfeet shirt looks like. The student will also learn the importance of recording individual or family histories using shirts as a vehicle to enhance the oral and pictographic history of Blackfeet families.

Learner's Outcome:

The learner will understand the effort and thought that is put into making a traditional Blackfeet shirt by using the hands-on method. They will also gather stories that are important about themselves or their families oral histories and put them down on the shirts as a way to preserve these family histories. In doing the research and discussing with the student's families what kind of history is important and unique to that particular family each student will have a better perceptiveness on what it is to be Blackfeet.

Student Assessment:

Students could be assessed on this lesson through the presentation of finished projects and oral telling of designs on shirt.

Reconstructing a Blackfeet Men's Traditional Shirt

You will need:

4 to 6 large paper grocery bags. THE BROWN ONES WORK BEST SINCE THEY ARE THE COLOR OF TANNED AND SMOKED BUCKSKIN.

Yarn to make the fringe and hold the shirt together, the yarn should also be a light brown or tan color to match the color of the bags.

Paints, colored pencils, crayons and sequins to draw and decorate your shirt. ***hint: crayons work best as they seep into texture of bag as it is being ironed giving it an authentic look of buckskin***

A hole punch or paper punch

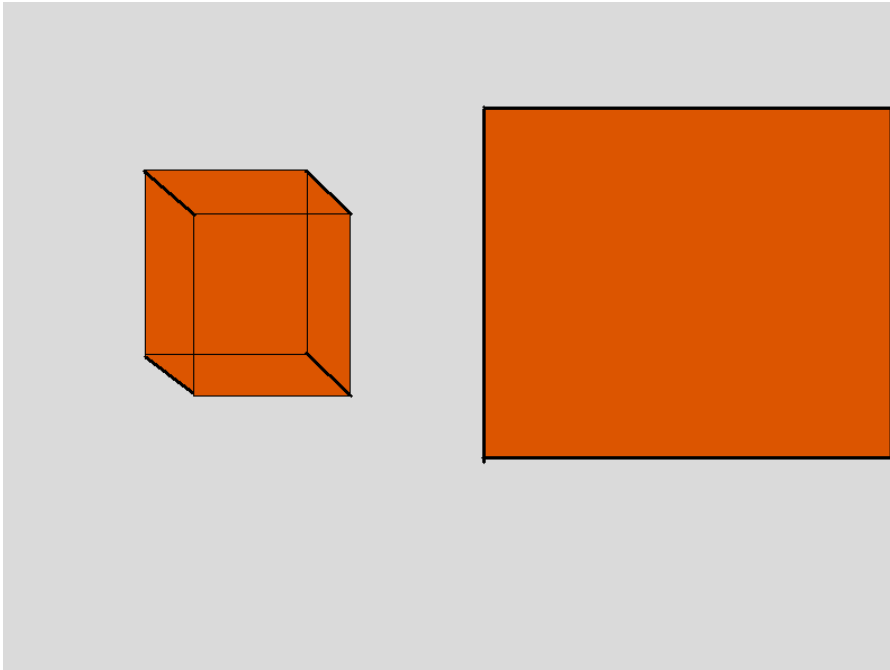
A clothes iron

Waxed paper, for use with crayons. The waxed paper will be placed on top of the design and pressed to sink the color into bag.

For younger students glue will work nicely to hold the shirt together.

Felt can also be used instead of paper bags. You can make miniature shirts with felt squares, or larger ones with felt sold by the roll.

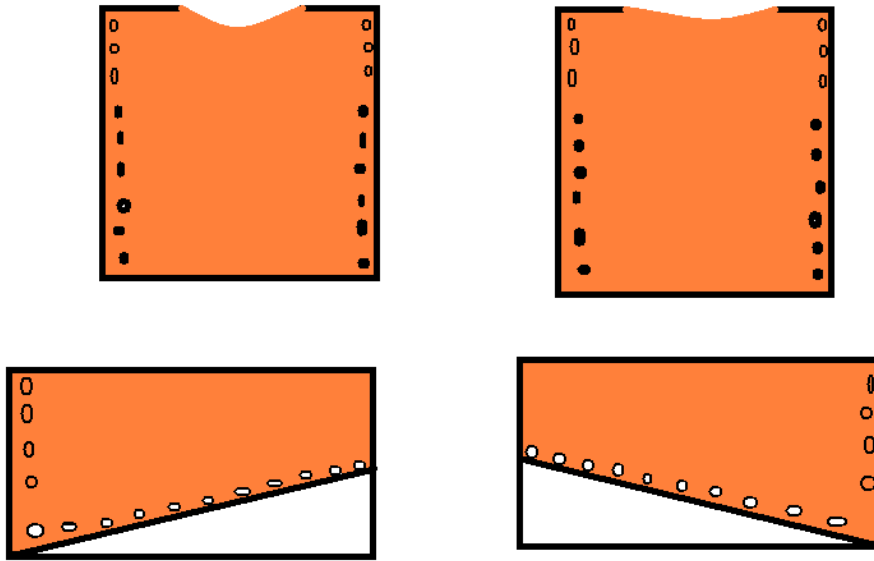
Step 1. Cut or tear the paper bags along the glued seams, so that you have large flat pieces of paper. Two of the paper bags will be used for the front and back of the shirt and the remaining two will be used for the arms.



REMEMBER: wet the bags and crinkle the bags by crumpling them in balls and then use an iron to straighten them out. Try to keep some of the crinkles in so that the bags resemble a tanned hide.

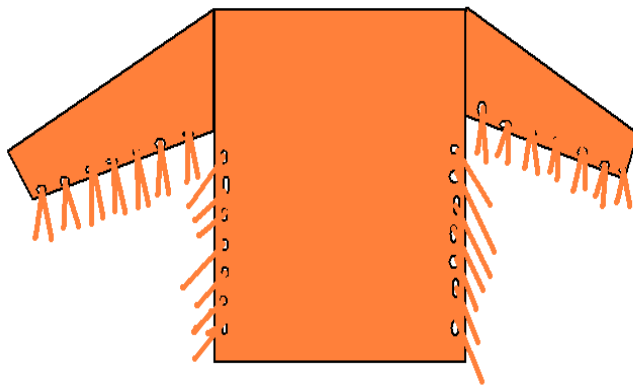
Step two: Dry the bags, and then stitch or glue two of the bags together as shown in the illustrations below. Then cut the two remaining bags according to the size of the arms needed for each child.

Attach the arms to the main body. In the illustrations you will see punch holes, use the yarn to stitch the bags together and remember to cut the yarn at least 12 to 14 inches long so that each shirt will have fringe.



After attaching the arms use the yarn to tie the bottom of the sleeves closed and remember to keep the yarn long for fringe.

The finished shirt should look like the illustration below.

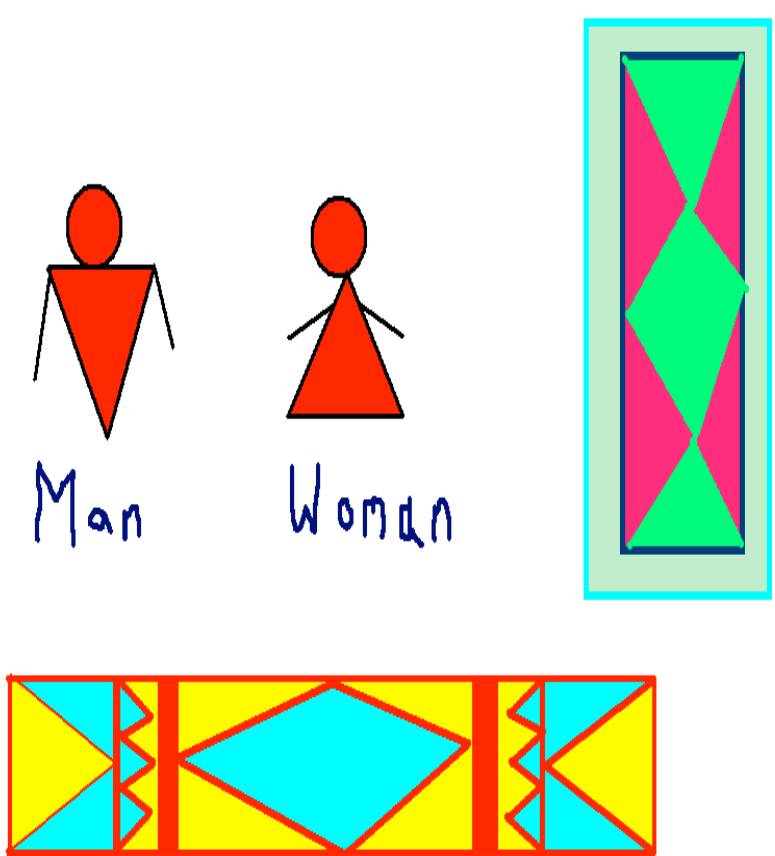


Step three: Draw or paste designs, using the sequins, crayons or paints, that tell the story of an event (or events) that is important to you or a story that is unique to your family. This will be the front and back of your shirt.

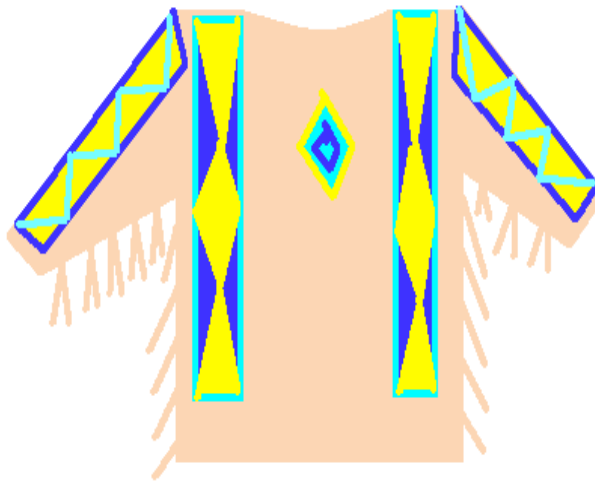
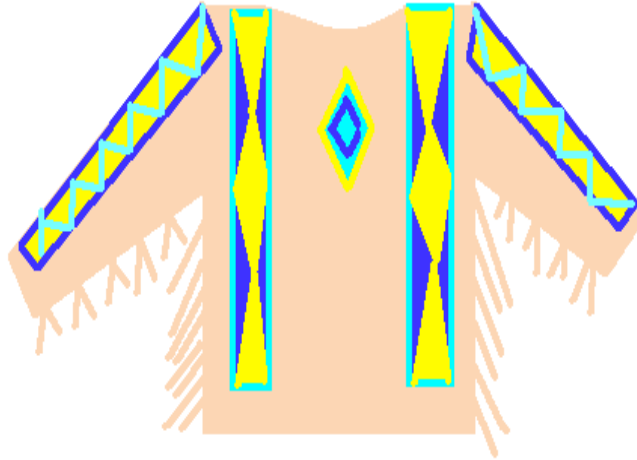
You can draw the designs in crayon, and then press them with the iron so the crayon sinks into the paper. *You should use a blank sheet of paper between the iron and the crayon to protect the iron.* Once the crayon has soaked into the paper it will look like traditional painted designs.

You can also put designs on the top of the sleeves and along the shoulders like suspenders. This is where the mountain design was used.

Here are some examples of common designs that were used by the Blackfeet in their artwork:



A completely finished shirt might look like the one below.



Created and Submitted by Anna BullShoe

Resources:

Blackfeet elders:

Molly Bullshoe: Fluent Piegan Speaker , K-12 Retired Educator, Historian,
Tribal Consultant and Elder
Interview January 2010
Heart Butte, Montana

Mary Mad Plume: Keeper of War Shirt, Fluent Piegan Speaker, Historian,
Tribal Consultant and Elder
Browning, Montana

Print and web resources:

Blackfoot shirts project website, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford:
<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts>

[Blackfeet Nation](http://www.blackfeetnation.com) : www.blackfeetnation.com

[Blackfeet Nation History](http://www.manataka.org/) : www.manataka.org/

[Native Americans: Blackfoot History and Culture \(Blackfeet ...](http://www.native-languages.org/blackfoot_culture.htm)

www.native-languages.org/blackfoot_culture.htm

Hungry Wolf, Adolf and Beverly Hungry Wolf. *Blackfoot Craftworker's Book*.
Book Publishing Company, Summertown, TN 38483 (1977; rev.ed. 1991)

Stanley-Millner, Pamela. *Authentic American Indian Beadwork and How To Do It*.
Dover Publishing, Inc., New York, NY (1984)

Solomon, Julian Harris. *The Book Of Indian Crafts and Indian Lore*. Dover
Publishing, Inc., 31 East 2 Street Meneola, NY 11501