

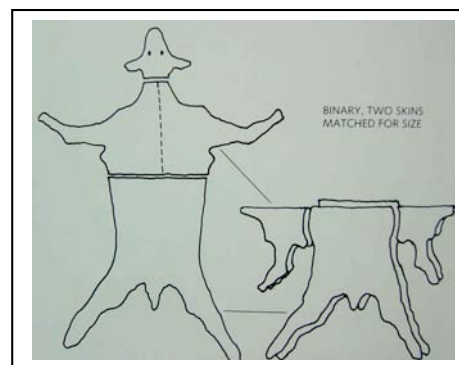
What are the shirts in the Pitt Rivers Museum made of?

Laura Peers

Men on the northern Plains wore hide shirts for ordinary dress and protection from the weather and the brush, as well as for war and ceremonial purposes. Shirts were also worn on diplomatic occasions such as going to negotiate with other tribes or traders, and later for the negotiation of treaties with the US and British governments. Shirts and their decoration expressed the wearer's identity, and communicated something of his relationships with the natural and spiritual world. They might also communicate his spiritual and political power and significant events in the wearer's life. They were far more than just clothing.

The hide, the sinew (muscle fibre used as thread) used to sew with, and the nature of the decorations on the shirts expressed relationships between humans and animals, as well as between men who hunted and women who processed and sewed. Later in the historical period, shirts began to be made of cloth, which also expressed developing relationships with traders. These changes can also be seen in the ornamentation. Older shirts that have survived have few trade goods, and are decorated with local materials, such as porcupine quills and plant and animal fibres. From the 1830s onwards, as trade goods became more easily available, seamstresses used beads, cloth, sewing thread and aniline (chemical) dyes, and also used tools such as scissors, to make clothing.

These five shirts are made of several different kinds of hide: most are deer (possibly pronghorn antelope), and one is of a thicker hide, possibly mountain sheep or moose. All the shirts are of brain-tanned hide, a process in which the brain and liver of the animal is mixed into a paste and worked in across the scraped and de-haired hide. The hides were pegged flat on the ground during this process, and you can still see the holes for the pegs on several of the shirts.



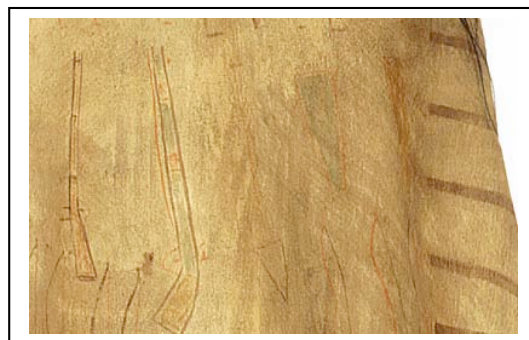
Each hide was cut in half just under the forelegs of the animal. The lower half of the hide, with the back legs and tail, was used for the body of the shirt, and the two half hides were placed together with the hair side out. The upper half of the hide was used for the sleeves. Each upper hide was folded in two so that the upper legs hung together. On older shirts a narrow line of hair may have been left to strengthen the fragile edge of the hide (Hail 1980:68; Horse Capture and Horse Capture 200117-18).

One of these shirts is plain with no decoration at all aside from some hide fringing at the neck, cuffs and shoulders. This is unusual for the shirts that were acquired by museums, and it allows us to see an ordinary working garment. This plain shirt is made of thicker hide than the others, suggesting that it may have been intended for riding through brush which might have snagged and torn thinner kinds of hides. Writing of an expedition into the mountains in 1859-60, the Earl of Southesk stated, 'No woollen clothes...can stand against these horrible thickets [in the mountains], full of sharp ends of broken branches...Fortunately I had clad myself in Mr. Hardisty's present—the leather hunting-shirt, which was very comfortable, as well as a complete protection against the hardened spikes that met one at every turn. All the men had come out in leather since we entered the wood country...' [Southesk 1875:171]

One shirt has hide fringes, a style still widely used by northern Plains peoples today for dress clothing. The fringes were tightly wrapped with porcupine quills where they were attached to the shirt, a technique seen on the other shirts as well. On one shirt (1893.67.2), hide fringes attached to the central rosette are so tightly quill-wrapped that they make a bunched effect for decoration.



There are very few trade goods on these shirts, which is quite unusual even for shirts from this early period. A tiny amount of red trade cloth is used in the centre of sleeve rosettes on 1893.67.4; 1893.67.2, the overpainted shirt, has a red trade cloth neck flap, which may have been added later after the shirt was first made. Interestingly, the shirt painted with war honors (1893.67.1) depicts several trade goods, including different types of guns and knives, although no trade goods are used in the construction of the shirt.



Three of these shirts have a combination of hairlocks and porcupine quillwork decoration. The hairlock fringes are tightly bound at the top with porcupine quills and secured to the shirt with thongs. Under some of the quill wrapping on the hair fringes, there seems to be a membrane which may be rawhide or some other material that would have held the hair tightly together to allow the quill wrapping to be very close.



There are several kinds of porcupine quillwork techniques on the shirts. The sleeve strips, shoulder strips, and the square central panel on one shirt are made by plaiting or braiding the quills in rows, sewing the ends down with sinew. The rosettes on the chests, backs, and sleeves of some of the shirts are begun in the middle with quills wrapped around horsehair (when we looked at one example under a microscope, we saw that the quills are wrapped around a plant fibre which may be maidenhair fern) and then the spiral rows become broader and flatter.



The coloured quills have been dyed with plant and mineral dyes: quills do not take dye easily, and the colours of the dyes indicate a wide range of knowledge: where to get the right plants and stones, how to process them to make dyes, how to soak the quills in the dye bath at the right temperature for the right length of time. Working a design into the rows of a rosette or a band of quillwork is exceptionally difficult, and demonstrates the skills and artistic ability of Blackfoot women. Quillwork was traditionally done by women, and was a transferred right and considered a sacred art. Quills were later replaced by trade beads. Quillwork is so difficult to do that very few people today have the knowledge and the commitment to produce it; their skills are highly valued within their communities.

Human and horse hair have been used on the fringes: the horse hair is coarser, and the human hair is much finer. Some of the human hairlocks are decorated with red ochre paint, and one is twisted. Hairlock shirts are sacred items to Blackfoot people, and certain community members have acquired the ceremonial rights to hairlock shirts through transfer processes according to cultural protocol. While it is appropriate to study the construction of the shirts, we ask you to respect Blackfoot cultural traditions by not making hairlock shirts unless you have been transferred rights to do so.

All illustrations © Pitt Rivers Museum, with the exception of the shirt construction diagram, which is from Hail 1980.

References

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