

What the shirts tell us



Looking closely at the Blackfoot shirts with a museum conservator and a curator

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In museums, conservators are the people who care for the items in the collection physically. Conservators prepare supports for fragile items, remove dust, and stabilize areas of damage while preserving evidence about how they have been used. Heather Richardson, the Head of Conservation at the Pitt Rivers Museum, trained in North American museums as well as British ones; she has worked at the National Museum of the American Indian. Charlotte Ridley, one of the assistant conservators at the PRM, interned at NMAI and worked on their exhibition of Plains dresses.

Curators research items in museum collections to learn about how they were used, what they meant, and how they were acquired. Curators also work with the communities that museum collections come from in order to make collections accessible to community members, and so that the museum knows about any cultural sensitivities attached to particular objects. They are responsible for the interpretation and display of museum collections. At the Pitt Rivers Museum, the curator responsible for the collections from North America is Laura Peers, who has worked with Blackfoot people since 2001.

In July 2009, Heather, Charlotte, and Laura visited the shirts in the textile storeroom of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Although we have seen the shirts many times, we looked really carefully this time, in order to see what the shirts would tell us about how they were made, how they were used, and what happened to them after Sir George Simpson and Edward Hopkins acquired them in 1841. We looked at just four of the five shirts that day, as one of them was on display in the museum, but we learned a lot.

Every object in every museum has a unique number. The numbers of these shirts are 1893.67 (the year they arrived at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and they were the 67th collection to arrive) and then .1 (the painted shirt), .2, .3, .4 and .5 (the plain shirt).

All of the photographs in this document are available as larger images in the images download section on the website.



There are many broken quills on this shirt; it's very fragile.

1893.67.4, Heather noted that there were tears in the hide at the wrist and one at the neck. Many of the quills on the shirt were broken and popping away from the shirt. We also found holes made by tacks or nails along the shoulder and arm area, indicating that the shirts had at some point been nailed to a wall for display. The hide was also filthy in a way that was not original: this dirt was acquired by being on display for a long time.

When we checked the museum's records, we realized that this shirt had been on display for about 30 years. Today, museums don't allow quilled items to be on display for more than about 2 years, because the dyes in quillwork tend to fade very badly if they are exposed to light. Museums also tend to put shirts and other garments on padded mannequins or stands to support them and prevent the hide stretching, and they don't use nails or tacks to pin things up for display. We wondered if those holes were made when Mr Hopkins might have pinned the shirts up in his home to display them before he gave them to the Pitt Rivers Museum.

You can see the hole from the tack in the centre of the neck



We then looked at some of the detailed features of the decorations on the shirt. Looking at the hairlocks, we saw that one hair tassel is twisted (a deliberate double twist), and some locks have resin dabs in them. All of the hair on this shirt is quite fine, and probably human rather than horse.



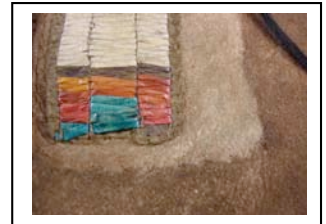
We also noticed something that none of us had ever seen before, which was that underneath the quill wraps on the hairlocks, there is some kind of membrane. We then saw this on another shirt. Was this perhaps rawhide, and maybe used to tighten the bunch of hair in order to get a nice tight quill wrap on the outside?

Replaced quillwork strips

We then noticed something very exciting on this shirt: its vertical shoulder strips have been replaced. On the front of this shirt, there is an area on each side of obviously unpainted hide. When the shirt was made, the quill panels were sewn in place and then the shirt was rubbed extensively with paint. For some reason the original shoulder strips were removed and replaced with much narrower ones, so you can see the unpainted area where the original quillwork panels were. You can even see the original stitch marks.



To add another mystery to this shirt, one of the replacement strips appears to have been cut in half to fit the space, making the design very odd. The colours are very bright, too, brighter than one can usually get with plant and mineral dyes, and yet we know this shirt was acquired in 1841, which was before aniline (chemical) dyes were invented (which was in 1858). We were very puzzled about this, and we hope to ask Blackfoot artists what all these clues might mean.



1893.67.2, the overpainted shirt

This shirt has several layers of paint, including washes, stripes, and finger marks: it really gives you a sense of the person who painted it. The red paint, probably daubed on with fingers, is a bright colour and the black ground is carefully applied, for it does not splash onto any of the quillwork decoration.



Heather showed Laura something she had noticed: you can clearly see the tail of the animal on the front of the shirt, and on either side of the tail, evenly spaced from it, there are worn patches on the hide where the hide is much thinner; there might be a third worn patch just over the tail. Did something hang from these areas at one time?

Heather had also noticed that the wrists on the sleeves on this shirt are very narrow. Laura tried to gently put her hands through the wrists and couldn't: she was afraid she would break the sinew stitching, and she has quite narrow hands. We wondered how this could have been worn by a grown man?





A new collar?

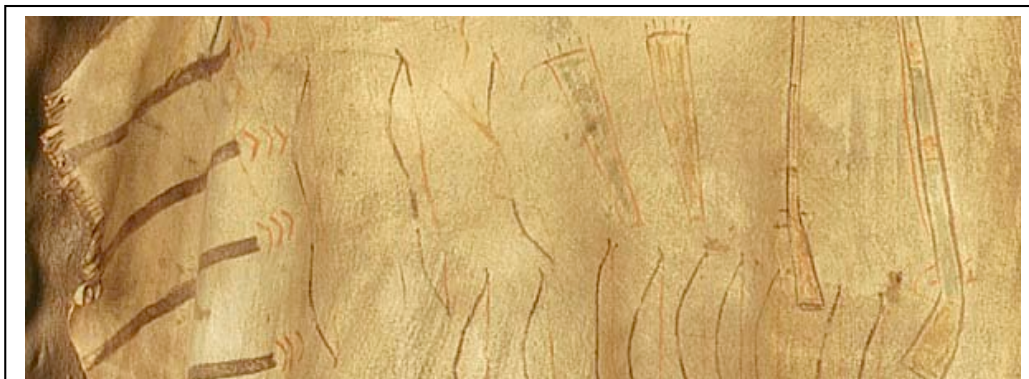
Yet another mystery on this shirt is the red wool cloth collar. We call this kind of cloth 'stroud,' because it was made in Stroud, England, for the HBC trade in the 1800s. The collar obscures the front quilled rosette on one side of the shirt, which surely cannot have been the maker's intention. We wonder if the collar was added after the shirt was made, or if it replaced an earlier hide collar, but we cannot find other stitching holes indicating that there was an earlier collar.

1893.67.1, painted with war scenes



This shirt is distinctive because of the painted decorations on it, which show war stories: items captured from the enemy, persons scalped or killed, horses stolen, and a few scenes that we are not sure of the meaning. We found that we tended to look at these painted scenes and spent less time examining the shirt itself: it directed our attention.

What we did notice was that the hair fringe was a mixture of human and horsehair, with a lot of horsehair. We saw the wrappings underneath the quill wrappings again on these hairlocks. Several of the hairlocks have clumps of red resin in them, and we wondered: is that how the person whose hair this was adorned his hair? The shoulder strips have a yellow background, and where the hairlocks have covered the strips and prevented them from fading (dyed quills lose colour quickly when exposed to light), they are really shocking yellow, like a highlighter! Looking at the hide, which is supple and in fine condition, we noticed tanning peg holes clearly visible on the edge of the shirt at one side.



The Painted Images



This shirt is painted on both sides. Some of the images seem fairly easy to interpret: bows, arrows, quivers full of arrows, several kinds of guns, horses.

Other images are less easy to understand. What do the stripes mean, or the 'horse track' motifs at the end of each stripe? The figures with the triangular bodies are clearly humans, but were they people that the owner killed, or did he scalp them or capture them? The heads of these figures are all the same size; were they stamped and if so with what: perhaps a cork from a bottle of medicine or whiskey? And what is the meaning of the circles with the lines radiating out from them: are they bison pounds? Wounds? Medicine bags? We don't know yet.



Why is the painted shirt patched?

The hide for this shirt was repaired at the time it was made. A hole was patched and the large quillwork panel placed partly over the patch. If you look at the inside of the shirt (Heather and Charlotte gently turned it inside out to do this), there is no sign that the quilled panel has ever been removed and replaced: there are no extra tiny holes which might indicate another line of stitching, which you see when things have been removed and resewn. So the sequence was that the hide was patched and then the quilled and painted decorations added, but why would the woman who made the shirt have used a hide with a hole in it for such a fine shirt?



The undecorated shirt, 1893.67.5



While we were looking at this shirt, Laura commented that unlike the decorated ones, it doesn't seem to say much at first. Heather said that it tells you that not everything was great and glorious, that sometimes people just had to wear something to protect them while they did hard work!

We agreed that this shirt is like work clothing: it is made of hide that is thicker than the decorated shirt. It also isn't as nicely tanned as the other shirts—the hide is fairly rough—and it seems very utilitarian. Laura remembered that some traders and hunters wore hide shirts to go through the mountains because the brush would tear other clothing.



The shirt is also damaged around the neck, which was originally cut fairly small; different wearers, perhaps, have forced it over their heads and damaged the seams. The hide appears wrinkled, as if it has been worn in the rain and gotten wet.

Learning from the shirts

We have so many questions after looking carefully at these shirts: they tell us so much about their makers and their histories of use, but there is still so much more to understand. We hope that as the Blackfoot Shirts Project progresses, and once Blackfoot people have a chance to study the shirts as carefully, we can learn more about the shirts and find some answers to our questions.

Come and see the shirts in Alberta

The shirts will be on display at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, and the Galt Museum, Lethbridge, in spring/summer 2010. Please check museum websites for details, or contact us below.

Contact us

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Glenbow Museum: www.glenbow.org

Galt Museum: www.galtmuseum.com

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