

Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa

Our ancestors have come to visit:
Reconnections with historic Blackfoot shirts



SHIRT FOR FORMAL OCCASIONS

This shirt does not have hairlocks, so it is not a sacred object for Blackfoot people. Its beautiful fringes and quillwork mark it as a shirt worn for formal occasions. Blackfoot advisors tell us that the use of so much hide just for fringes suggests that the shirt's owner was from a family who had good hunters to provide so many hides, and many women to tan the hides.

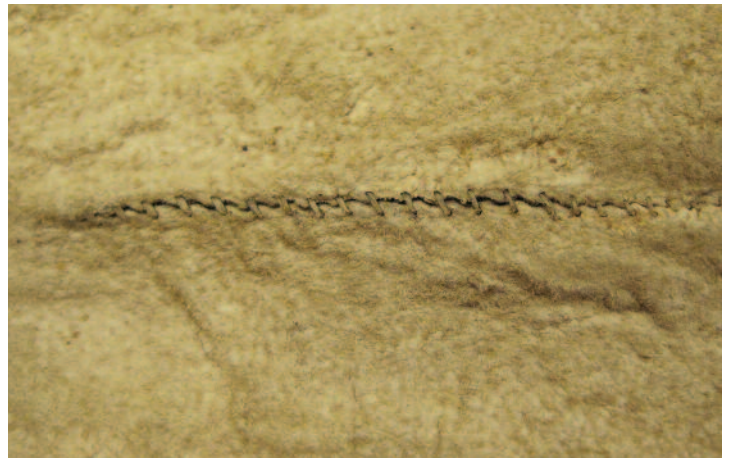


The body of this shirt reveals many things about how it was made. Can you see scrapes across it? These were made when the hide was first being cleaned and the hair removed.

The folded-over style of neck flap was common in Blackfoot shirts made before the 1850s. Compare it to the sewn-on hide or red cloth neck flaps on the other shirts.

On this shirt there are a lot of repairs to the hide. These were done before Hopkins acquired the shirts and are all very finely stitched using sinew. These may be repairs of small holes and nicks in the hide, made as it was being tanned.

The shoulder fringes appear to have been cut after the panel of hide was sewn into the seam between the body and the arm. Can you see the tiny nicks in the body of the shirt where the fringes emerge? This is where the knife or scissors kept going and rested on the main body as the fringe was cut.





Can you see the fur from the original animal on the fringe along the lower edge of the shirt? It is difficult to scrape the hide completely clean at the edges, because it is thinner there and prone to tearing.

On the right side of the front there is the remains of a thong, which would have been used to tie the two sides of the shirt together when worn.

As with the other shirts, the sleeves on this one have been sewn a short distance up from the wrist using sinew. This has resulted in a narrow opening at the cuff.

QUILLWORK

Areas of dark brown on the front roundel are plant material rather than quill. We do not yet know what plant was used for this. The brown areas on the back roundel are quill.

The quillwork colours are still quite vibrant although the blue has faded from light damage.



DAMAGE

The hide on the trailers and bottom of this shirt has become brittle and fragile, particularly where the hair is still attached. Much of the fringing is fragile, with some sections only attached by very thin pieces of hide.



TREATMENT

We cleaned the hide using 'smoke sponge,' a soft rubber material. We cleaned the quillwork with damp cotton wool swabs. Quills were eased back into place and secured with tiny amounts of conservation glue.

Tears or holes in the hide were backed for support by applying a polyester fabric colour matched to the hide.

All work is reversible and acid-free. As well, areas of the hide distorted by old tack holes were humidified before being gently worked to ease out the distortion.

Heather Richardson, head of conservation at the Pitt Rivers Museum, spent 15 hours preparing this shirt for study workshops and exhibition in Alberta in 2010.

Laura Peers, curator, and Heather Richardson, conservator
Pitt Rivers Museum