

Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa

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



A SHIRT THAT TELLS ITS HISTORY

This shirt is decorated with hairlocks and quillwork. The hairlocks indicate that the shirt is a sacred object to Blackfoot people.

TRADE GOODS

This shirt shows some of the very few European trade goods used to decorate this group of shirts. Two of the quilled rosettes on the sleeve have centres of red wool cloth. Cloth became readily available after 1795, when the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Edmonton in Blackfoot territory. Different kinds of beads, scissors, thimbles and ribbon were also obtained from traders to make and decorate clothing. Some shirts from the 1830s and 1840s are decorated almost entirely in blue, white and black beads, with little quillwork. This shirt is of an older style of decoration, with just a tiny bit of cloth added.

MAKING AND RE-MAKING THE SHIRT

On the hairlock fringes, you can see that the hair has been bound first with some sort of skin or membrane or skin under the quill wrapping. This membrane shrank as it dried, creating tight bundles of hair that were easier to wrap the quills around.



Look closely at the hair locks. One has a deliberate double twist, and some locks have resin dabs in them. All of the hairlocks on this shirt seem to be made of human hair, which is finer than horsehair.



REPLACED QUILLWORK

This shirt once had different, and larger, vertical shoulder panels. Look carefully at the quilled vertical strips on either side of the central chest rosette. Can you see an area of lighter, unpainted hide along with lines of tiny holes? This shows that the original strips were bigger, and that they were in place when the dark paint was applied to the upper chest area of the shirt. When they were removed, an unpainted area was revealed. The lines of tiny holes mark where the original strips were sewn to the hide.

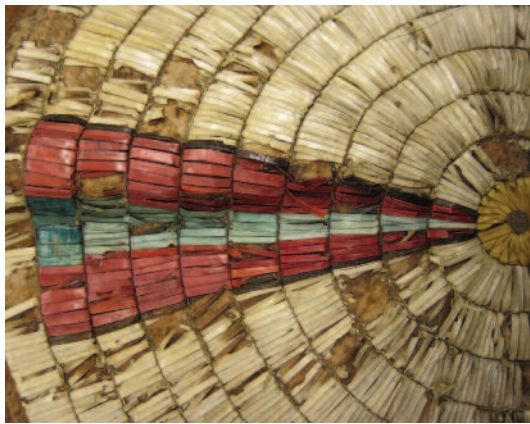
It is also possible that the right front shoulder strip has been cut off. This would explain why the stepped design in the quillwork seems to end suddenly and does not match the other shoulder strip.



SINCE THE SHIRT WAS MADE

Many things have happened to this shirt since it was made.

This shirt, like the others, has large pinholes where it was tacked up for display. The shirt was not properly supported, and, as a result, the hide has stretched around many of these holes.

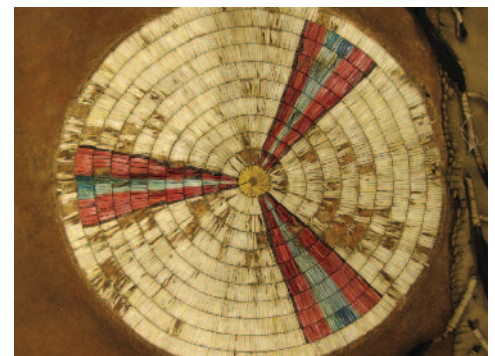


The quillwork on this shirt has been badly damaged. This was caused by several things. Sinew and quills expand and contract as temperature and humidity change. Over time this causes quills to break, pop up or be lost altogether. Quills are also food for insects, which cause damage. Jeremy Uden, the conservator who worked on this shirt, had to stabilize many quills that had broken at one fold and popped up. Quills were eased back into place and then a special reversible glue was used to hold them in place.

Before this shirt was moved from Oxford for this project, conservators cleaned the hide using 'smoke sponges,' which were gently rolled over the hide to lift the soot. Here is a picture of all the dirty smoke sponges used to clean this shirt!



The quillwork was cleaned using cotton wool swabs that were barely dampened with distilled water and then rolled over the quills to lift dirt. Tears, holes and weak spots in the hide were reinforced with polyester tissue on the inside of the shirt, applied with reversible glue. A few detached hairlocks were sewn back onto the original holes in the hide.



**Laura Peers, curator, and Jeremy Uden, conservator
Pitt Rivers Museum**