

Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa

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



SHIRT WITH LAYERS OF PAINT

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



PAINT

The red paint on this shirt is still bright after more than 150 years. The finger-marks on the lower half of the shirt give a sense of the artist's presence.

The black stripes are coup marks. Each records a war deed, whether it was killing, scalping, or striking the body of an enemy.

We don't know the meaning of the dark layer of paint on the upper part of the shirt. It was very carefully applied after the quilled rosettes were sewn on. Look at the rosettes on front and back. The dark paint comes right up to the edge of the quilled patch, but does not go onto the quillwork.



CONSTRUCTION

All of the quillwork on this shirt, including the rosettes, is bordered with yellow quill stitching. Also, the front and back rosette designs are identical.



The red wool collar on this shirt is cloth imported from England by the Hudson's Bay Company from England. The cloth hangs over the quilled rosette on the front. This is unusual and suggests that it was added after the shirt had been made. The shirt might originally have had a hide collar, but we can find no trace of it.

These shirts were originally open under the arms. Can you see one of the ties at the side of the shirt? This would have tied the front and back together at the waist.

The fringing along the lower edge of the shirt has been cut to produce decorative loops in some places: can you see these? The holes may have been made when the hide was pegged down to be scraped clean.

The tail of one of the animals whose hide was used for this shirt can be seen on the front lower hem. At the edges of the hide that hangs down from the sleeve, you can see the animal's hair too.



Just above, and on each side of the tail, are patches where the hide is worn and much thinner and weaker than other sections. There may be a third worn patch immediately over the tail. Was something originally hung from those points as a decoration?



This shirt is made from three hide: one for sleeves, and two more for the front and back of the shirt. The tail of the animal is at the bottom hem. On the back right side, there is a decorative piece hanging below the arm that has had an additional section of hide sewn on at the bottom to give it the 'right' shape.

The sleeves of this shirt have some puzzling features. The wrists are so narrow that a woman with average sized hands could not get her hand through. Blackfoot advisors think that the seam might have been re-sewn, perhaps for display purposes, after the shirt was collected. Yet, like the original sewing on the shirt, these seams are sewn with sinew – thread made from the back muscle of an animal.



Were these arm seams changed after the shirt was made and worn by its first owner?

Was it worn by a small woman, or a child? If so, why?

Or did someone in the Hopkins' house use sinew to sew the sleeves more tightly to mount the shirt on a pole for display?

There are other old stitch holes visible below the seams on the front and back of the right arm; these holes are toward the cuff. If the sleeve had been sewn using these holes it would also have produced cuffs too narrow for a man to wear. This is also a puzzle.

DEALING WITH DIRT AND DAMAGE

This shirt has some very fragile areas. The hide on the lower trailers has become hardened and brittle, and many of the fringes are attached only by very thin sections of hide. The quillwork is very brittle and prone to breaking when the shirt is moved. The dark paint sometimes flakes off. These problems have been caused by changing temperature and humidity over time, attack from insects, and poor handling and display methods in the past.

In order to move the shirts from England, use them in workshops with Blackfoot people, and display them, conservators strengthened tears in the hide by backing them with polyester tissue, using a special reversible glue. Broken and bent quills were eased back into place and attached to other quills where possible so they would not be further damaged by handling. A detached hairlock on this shirt was re sewn into position using the original stitch holes.



All the shirts have been gently cleaned. They were covered in soot, and we think that they were displayed in Hopkins' home, which would have been heated by open coal fires. The inside and outside of the hide, the quillwork, and the hairlocks were all quite sooty. Here you can see where a conservator has carefully sponged away soot. Quillwork was cleaned using distilled water on cotton wool swabs. The swabs were dampened, and then rolled over the quill to lift the soot. The hairlocks were also cleaned dampened tissue which was pulled through the hair to remove the soot. It took one conservator 146 hours to clean, stabilise, and prepare this shirt for its visit to Alberta.

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