

Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa

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



WAR DEEDS

This shirt is painted with a personal war record, and hairlocks of both human and horse hair. The hairlocks show that the shirt is a sacred object to Blackfoot people.



WAR DEEDS

Blackfoot people went to war to defend themselves and their territory, and to gain honour. This shirt bears a record of its owner's deeds in battle. The painted images show a tally of enemies killed, weapons and horses captured, and scalps taken.

This shirt is made entirely of traditional materials: elk hide, sinew thread, porcupine quills, and natural dyes from plants and minerals. The elk hide is brain tanned. You can still see the holes made when the hide was pegged to the ground to be cleaned.



Although no European trade goods were used to make this shirt, it has clues telling us that it was made during a time of change for Blackfoot people. For example, the owner of this shirt captured guns and knives, reminding us that trade goods were becoming important to the Blackfoot. Also, early shirts like this often only show a tally of objects captured and enemies injured, while later shirts depict battle scenes. One such battle scene is shown here along with the older-style tally.

PAINTING

Blackfoot artists made paint from clays and iron-rich earth, as well as buffalo gallstones, duck droppings, charcoal and other materials. Paints were also used for personal protection. Harvesting materials and making paint required ceremony and prayer.

Figures were drawn onto hide using porous bone saturated with paint. Different bone 'brushes' were used for each paint color.



These painted outlines of figures, and the stripes on these shirts, have been pressed or slightly cut into the hide along the outline of the paint.



Templates and stamps were sometimes used for repeated figures: look at the heads on all the human figures on this shirt, for instance.



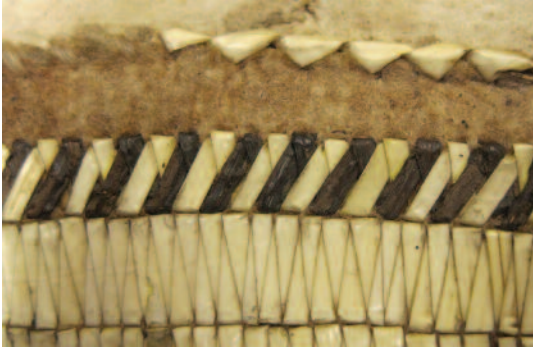
HAIRLOCKS

The hairlocks on the shirt are from both horses and humans. The horse hair is coarser and thicker than the human hair.

On the right sleeve there are holes in the hide between every existing hairlock. They are too regular for these hairlocks to have been lost. It appears the holes were made but not used. There are 35 horizontal hairlocks on this sleeve, but holes for 58. There are 58 hairlocks on the left sleeve, plus holes representing two further hairlocks which have been lost.

QUILLWORK

The double red crosses worked in porcupine quills on this shirt have spiritual significance for Blackfoot people. In the past, quillwork was done by Blackfoot women who had the rights to do so ceremonially transferred to them. They learned from other women who also had those rights. Today, both women and men do quillwork.



Some of the 'quills' on this shirt – including the brown edging on the central panel – are actually plant fibres.

We can tell this by looking at the dark elements under the microscope, which shows parallel fibres that are very different from porcupine quills. We do not yet know what kind of plant was used. We are doing further research with quillworkers to identify it.



Plant dyes were used on the quills on this shirt. Aniline, or chemical, dyes only became available in the late 1850s. On one side of the shirt, the vertical shoulder strips have faded to a cream colour, but on the other side, the yellow background is very bright around the red cross motifs. It was probably protected from the sun by the hairlocks so that it has not faded.

We have carefully taken measurements and a full pattern from this shirt. This information has been sent to Blackfoot seamstresses and Blackfoot art classes so that people can make similar shirts and to inspire further learning.

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