

Meeting the Ancestors: Learning from the Shirts

While the Blackfoot shirts were visiting Alberta, we held handling sessions with them and Blackfoot people. We hoped that this would allow people to learn directly from their ancestors' work and to 'meet' these ancestors.



Trina Weasel Moccasin and Josh examining shirt, Glenbow Museum, March 2010. Photograph by Owen Melenka, Glenbow Museum.

The handling sessions made this an unusual project for a museum. The shirts are very fragile; some of the hide on the lower parts of the shirts is extremely brittle, and the thongs binding the hair locks to the shirts are also quite weak. Old porcupine quillwork is easily damaged and even after Heather Richardson and her team stabilized the shirts, there were broken quills sticking up which might snag and break off. Oil that is naturally present on human hands can also be deposited on hide, which in turn can attract dirt and insects over time. Most museums limit handling of older objects because of these problems in order to preserve collections for as long as possible, and thus allow many generations to enjoy and learn from them.

The Blackfoot Shirts Project was intended to assist Blackfoot people to reconnect with this part of their heritage, however, and handling is a powerful way of sparking memories and discussions about cultural knowledge. The Project Team therefore talked through the potential problems involved in handling with Blackfoot advisors, and concluded that the benefits to Blackfoot people would far outweigh any potential damage. So that we could be sure we were taking the best possible physical care of the shirts Heather Richardson, Head of Conservation at the Pitt Rivers Museum, came to Alberta to help with the handling sessions. We worked first in the conservation lab at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, and later in the archives room of the Galt Museum in Lethbridge, both of which have stable environmental conditions.

These museums were also well placed for access by Blackfoot community members. The Glenbow Museum is situated near the Siksika reserve, east of the city, and the Galt Museum is closer to the communities of Piikani, Kainai, and the Blackfeet Nation in Montana. Many Blackfoot people also live in these cities.

Because of the shirts' fragility, the number of handling sessions had to be limited. We sought guidance from Blackfoot advisors as to who would benefit most from the sessions. Elders, ceremonialists, artists, teachers, and high school students from each of the four Blackfoot speaking communities were then invited to take part. We also asked people to come in small groups so that we could teach them about the physical state of the shirts and thus minimize the wear and tear that would inevitably occur.

For each session, two or three shirts were brought out; this was a response to space restrictions, the particular nature of each group of visitors (we brought the hairlock shirts out more for ceremonialists, the quilled shirts for artists, for instance) and the fragility of each shirt: one was significantly more fragile than others and came out only for a few workshops. We then covered the shirts with archival Tyvek. As they arrived, participants were given an opportunity to pray and to smudge to acknowledge the presence of their ancestors. Laura then explained the historical background of the shirts and what we knew—and did not know—about their provenance, for instance noting that we do not know what individuals, clans or nations the shirts were from. Heather then gave a briefing on the physical state of the shirts, explaining where the shirts were most fragile and where they were still strong and could still be touched. She also noted that there were light traces of pesticide residues on the shirts and that people should either use the gloves which were provided, or wash their hands after touching to remove these. We also noted our discussions with Blackfoot advisors during the project preparation phase, and explained that since the hairlock shirts were sacred, we had been advised that women who were menstruating should not touch them.

After these introductions, the first shirt was uncovered. We did things this way to enable participants to learn about the nature of the shirts at a slower pace, rather than overwhelming them with the sight of all the shirts uncovered at once. Focusing on the 'undecorated' shirt first, as we often did first, also had the advantage of enabling people to examine the hide, the messages that the shirt held about construction, tools used to make it, to think about Blackfoot relations with animal beings and their own age/gender roles before being dazzled by the beautiful quilled and hairlock-decorated shirts.

Every time we uncovered a shirt, people of all ages gasped audibly at their beauty and power. Some chose to speak or to sing to the shirts: several men sang honour songs. Others brought gifts to honour the ancestors, or dressed in their best clothes. The discussion often moved into Blackfoot, and one elder said that other elders with him in a group were using Blackfoot words that he had not heard in a long, long time. Many women cried at the sight of the shirts, moved by both their beauty and by the fact they had never before had the chance to see such important heritage items. Many people wept as they left, genuinely sad that they might never again see these ancestors.

Alison Frank, a college student, said of her experience,

when you guys lifted off the plastic covering it just almost gave me the hair raising feeling, and it was really spiritual feeling that is hard to explain. Because, especially coming from my background and not knowing much about the, our First Nations culture it was a very spiritual feeling like I... Just even the smell of them, being able to touch them, it kind of made me think... It kind of gave me that appreciation of how nowadays, it's hard to like explain your culture, and having that first... being able to touch them... having the experience to be around them, knowing that they are so many, you know, a hundred years old, it kind of gave me that appreciation for my culture.

Let's see... I was... when I, when we first got here [Galt Museum], and when I first looked at them I almost had this, how do you say it, like a ball in your throat? It almost made me feel like I was going to cry. To experience that was almost like, you know, just getting it from the shirts. It was like I was going, reaching back into my past, my culture, and being able to do that, and coming from the background of not knowing very much about my culture, that's one thing that really stood out to me. It really intrigued me to learn more, and to really actually appreciate what was in front of us.

In every session, we pointed out details of each shirt that helped to tell its story: replaced quillwork strips, cut marks where a woman cutting a fringe had allowed her knife to score the hide of the body, sleeves sewn too tightly at the wrists, remnants of ochre paint. We then encouraged people to engage with the shirts in their own ways. Some told stories of grandmothers who did quillwork or tanned hides. Others referred to the sacred stories represented in some of the quillwork, or the materials used for dyes and paints. Many groups discussed the meanings of the painted war honours on one shirt, agreeing on some interpretations and disagreeing on others. High school students were often most moved by the sense of being in the presence of powerful ancestors and especially of the quality of the workmanship.

We commissioned two replica shirts, which were made from patterns cut from the shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Heather and her colleagues in Conservation cut the first pattern, and Laura's students copied it for distribution to Blackfoot seamstresses.



Astrid Knight, Gabi Benton-Stace, and Alex Robertson duplicating the shirt pattern. Pitt Rivers Museum, 2009.

Sylvia Weasel Head made one of the replica shirts in polysuede and a second in white elk hide. Both were undecorated. In nearly every workshop men were asked if they wished to try them on to see how it felt to wear such garments. High school students responded remarkably to this experience, transforming from slightly shy teenagers to taller, straighter, prouder young men before our eyes. We were also treated to the sight of Martin Heavy Head, a ceremonial leader and educator, teaching a lesson to his students from Kainai High School while he was wearing the replica shirt and standing in front of the shirt with painted war honours—a very powerful set of links between past and present.

In the last few days of the shirts' time in Alberta, the project team hosted a farewell supper for these ancestors. We didn't want them to leave Blackfoot territory without proper good-byes. Many Blackfoot people who had come to the handling sessions attended the dinner, and prayed for the ancestors and their journey. Hopefully the shirts will be able to visit, and to teach, their people again in the future. They certainly won't be forgotten in the meantime.

..it was like a life-changing event, you know? It kind of made me mature in my way of thinking of the First Nations and it gave me so much more of an appreciation for my own culture ...we were here all of maybe an hour with them, you know? And that struck this idea where it made me want to further my education, and to researching, you know, First Nations archives and maybe you never know? I may be head of the first First Nations museum...in Lethbridge! (Alison Frank, workshop participant)