Discover...

TO PLEASE THE SPIRITS

Native American Clothing

For thousands of years, Native American women have made beautiful and functional clothing for their families. They used their skills to prepare hides and to cut and sew tailored clothing to protect their families from harsh weather. In making clothing, women also expressed values central to Native American societies: industry, generosity, and especially kinship.

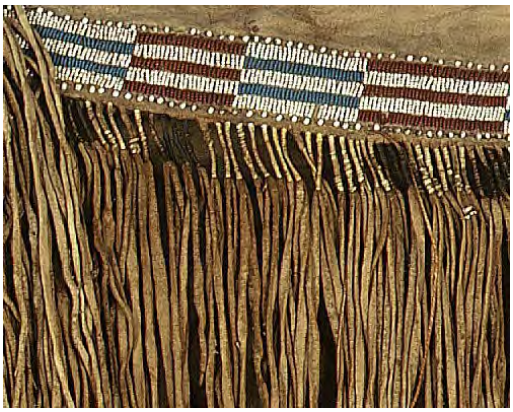
The garments on display in the North American clothing case (case 10.A, near the totem pole) were labours of love and skill. It takes about 40 hours of hard physical work to prepare a hide properly so it can be used for clothing: the hide must be carefully removed from the animal, scraped of flesh, and preparations rubbed into it to prevent it from rotting. It then needs to be stretched and rubbed to soften it, and then evenly smoked to a beautiful tan colour. Native women had very high standards for the preparation of hides, and would notice if someone's hides were poorly prepared.

Cutting and sewing a hide shirt, dress, or coat also involved very skilled work. Garments were cut to take advantage of the natural shape of hides. The leather was cut using flint blades, and later, scissors or steel knives traded from Europeans. Seams were sewn with thread made from sinew, the long muscles along the back of a hoofed mammal, which was carefully dried and split into even lengths. Even after European contact, women preferred to use sinew for sewing, which they simply passed through a hole in the hide made with an awl.

Women decorated clothing with porcupine quillwork (and, later, glass beads imported by European trading companies from Czechoslovakia and Italy, along with silk embroidery thread from China), hide fringe, scraps of cloth, and animal teeth or dentalium shell. Metal thimbles, small hawk bells, and the dew claws of deer were also sewn onto hems to create beautiful sounds as people moved.

Quillwork detail on a Blackfoot shirt. N America; 1893.67.3

Making such clothing was a family effort: a young woman wearing a dress with many elk-teeth sewn to it showed the world how successful her male kin were at hunting elk. Glass trade beads, thimbles, and dentalium shells were obtained by men in exchange for furs, meat, and other goods from European traders and from other tribes. Decorated clothing said a great deal about kinship, which was very important in Native American societies. Clothing was usually made as a gift to close family members, and today, Native Americans still make beaded and quilled moccasins, pow-wow regalia, and other items as labours of love for their relatives, who serve as mobile art galleries for women's art and skill.



Glass beads and fringing detail on a Blackfoot shirt.
N America; 1893.67.6

Clothing also referred to another kind of kinship, for Native American peoples have always believed that humans and animals are related, and should treat each other kindly, as relatives should. Animals are not simply killed; they give themselves to humans for food and clothing, and hunters thank them for this gift and treat their bodies with respect by using as much of the animal as possible. Animals are often addressed by the same terms that humans use to address their relatives, as cousins or grandparents, for instance.

The painted coat in this display (1952.5.01) shows this feeling of kinship in another way. Innu (Naskapi) women of northern Quebec and Labrador adapted frock coats traded from Europeans into their own caribou-hide garments. They carefully copied the cutting and seaming of the European cloth coats, but added a very Naskapi twist: a vertical triangular panel at the back of the coat skirt which extends from hem to waist. This panel represents the mountain where the Lord of the Caribou was believed to live. The coats were painted in a traditional method using mineral and plant pigments in a fish egg binding agent, and were adaptations of caribou hides, painted with these same designs, which were displayed by hunters to the rising sun, the source of life, each dawn. Men wore these coats only when they went out to hunt caribou, as a way of honouring the caribou spirits who were being asked to give their bodies so that their human relatives could live. Today, Naskapi hunters still wear a new item of clothing on the hunt, to honour the caribou.

One of the garments in this case, a shirt (1893.67.3) is a special item of men's gear, worn for ceremonies as well as when going off to war and coming back from war. This is a Blackfoot shirt (shown overleaf). The hairlocks attached to shoulder strips by Plains men were sometimes of human hair from an enemy

A Blackfoot shirt. N America; 1893.67.3

they had scalped or killed; the act of obtaining such hair was important in being recognized as a man in many Plains tribes. Some shirts were also painted with images of captives, sacred objects, weapons, and horses captured from enemies, visual proof of a warrior's experience and skill.

Native American and First Nations people were discouraged from wearing traditional clothes under government policies which encouraged them to assimilate. From 1914 to 1951, the Canadian Indian Act forbade the wearing of "aboriginal costume" on penalty of either a fine or a month's imprisonment. Even during this time, though, Native women made beaded and quilled clothing which their men wore with pride on important occasions. These distinctive clothes became defiant symbols of Native identity, and their wearing signalled resistance to assimilation policies. Today, many Native people in North America wear beaded and quilled jackets, moccasins, and other traditional garments on special occasions such as weddings, and Native artisans are in great demand to produce such clothing for their families and to teach children the traditional skills. Even T-shirts with tribal designs and slogans (see the 'Crow Tribe' shirt in this case, 2003.62.2) are worn to show pride in tribal identity. The items in this case are part of the living heritage of some of the three million Native people in North America today.

Further reading

If you would like to learn more about Blackfoot shirts and the work the Museum is doing with Blackfoot communities in Canada, see our project website: http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts

Berlo, Janet C. and Ruth B. Phillips. 1998. *Native North American Art. Oxford History of art series*; Oxford University Press.

King, Jonathan. 1999. *First Peoples, First Contact; Native Peoples of North America*. London: British Museum Press.

The objects found in this Information sheet can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor)
Case 10A - North American Clothing

Compiled by:
Dr. Laura Peers, Lecturer/Curator

