On 24 July 1841, while he and Edward Hopkins were at Fort Edmonton, George Simpson recorded his impressions of Blackfoot men’s clothing:

Almost the only articles of apparel they trade are Blankets and trinkets, as they prefer making their own clothes. A handsome Chief’s dress is very full and elaborate, made of dressed skins, consisting of a richly garnished large tunic, reaching to the knee, adorned with furs and scalp-locks down the sleeves, and almost entirely covered with thimbles, trinkets and various ornaments. They have handsomely wrought leggings, fringed with scalp locks and furs, and highly ornamented moccasins; over their tunic and across the shoulder they throw a large mantle, formed of a painted Buffalo Robe. (Dempsey 1990, 5)
As Simpson observed, the garments worn by Blackfoot chiefs typically included “scalp locks,” that is, locks of hair from the scalps of those whom the chief had killed in battle. Despite Simpson’s language, these “scalp locks,” or hairlocks, were not mere ornaments, nor should they be thought of as trophies. Rather, they were concrete evidence of a warrior’s achievements in battle and ability to defend his people. Men also decorated shirts with hair from horses captured in battle. Hairlocks were normally made either of human or of horse hair, although occasionally the two were combined in the same hairlock.

Although people today often refer to the five shirts discussed in this book as “war shirts,” only three of them have hairlocks. As Andy Blackwater (Aatso’to’aawa) told us, “In the olden days these were called aawahkaotsiisoka’siim, war shirts. They were worn into battle.” Other Blackfoot ceremonial leaders involved in the Blackfoot Shirts Project agreed that these three shirts were worn to go out to and return from war and emphasized that, by virtue of their hairlocks, these shirts are sacred. It is unlikely that the other two shirts were associated with warfare. One of these, beautifully decorated with quillwork and long fringes of hide, would have been worn on ceremonial occasions, such as a formal meeting with a delegation from another band. The other, which is undecorated, was for everyday use. Together, the five shirts thus represent the full range of clothing that Blackfoot men might have worn at the time.

HAIRLOCK SHIRTS

Blackfoot men’s dress generally consisted of a shirt with leggings, a breechcloth, and moccasins. In winter, outer robes would be added, for warmth. Shirts may, in fact, have evolved from painted bison or elk robes (Horse Capture and Horse Capture 2001, 17). Petroglyphs at Áísínai’pi National Historic Site (Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park), in southern Alberta, show men wearing fringed shirts and leggings (see fig. 10). In 1833, the German explorer and ethnologist Maximillian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, travelled through Blackfoot territory and described shirts worn by men:
Figure 10. Petroglyph showing shirt, Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park / Áísínai’pi National Historic Site, Alberta. Photograph by Michael Klassen
If it was something important that was happening, a ceremony, that’s when these shirts were worn. If they were going on a raiding party they would wear them after to show they were successful. And there’s an old song that goes with that, when they go on these expeditions. And they sing this song when they leave and it’s like a daring song... It’s to give them determination, courage, eh? And then when they come back, when they’ve got the stuff they needed, they sing this song, and it’s like a teasing song. So this song was an important song to our people. And to think about it, maybe they put these shirts on when they sang that song. When they were going. It’s just like today, in their finest, they put their tuxedo on. This is our Native tuxedo! For ceremonies, for something important.

NAPIAKI (OLD WOMAN) / CAROLLA CALF ROBE
The dress of the Blackfoot is made of tanned leather and the handsomest leather shirts are made of the skin of the bighorn, which, when new, is of a yellowish-white colour, and looks very well. A narrow strip of the skin with the hair is generally left at the edge of such a skin. These shirts have half sleeves, and the seams are trimmed with tufts of human hair, or of horse-hair dyed of various colours, hanging down, and with porcupine quills sewn round their roots. These shirts generally have at the neck a flap hanging down both before and behind, which we saw usually lined with red cloth, ornamented with fringe, or of sky-blue glass beads. Some have all these fringes composed of strips of white ermine. (Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied 1906, 101)

The artist Karl Bodmer, who travelled with Maximilian, painted Blackfoot men wearing shirts, as did the American painter George Catlin, in 1832 (see fig. 11), and, later, Paul Kane and others.

“Going to war they cast off everything and paint their bodies,” Simpson wrote in his observations on the Blackfoot (Dempsey 1990, 5). Indeed, warrior shirts such as the three in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum would not have been worn into battle itself. As Clarence Wolfleg (Miiksika’am), a Siksika ceremonialist and descendant of the war chief Piitohpikis (Eagle Ribs), explained, clothing must be functional:

A lot of people may think, “Well, how could a warrior take these into battle? So bulky, long.” Well, no. They do not. They dress loose, comfortable, with less things that snag up the better. Because you don’t want anything to restrict your movement when you are in battle, especially when you are riding, or even when you are on foot, when you have to battle hand to hand.

Hairlock shirts were worn when a warrior departed for battle. These shirts were then taken off and carefully stored before battle, to be put on again when riding home. The shirt for formal occasions (1893.673), which is much longer than the others (over 1.4 metres in length), is reminiscent of an older style of garment,
dating to the period before the Blackfoot acquired horses. Shirts were later shortened, to make them easier to wear on horseback.

MAKING CLOTHING

[A shirt] talks about relationships, about the animal that was killed, the animal that was used for many other things, other than the shirt. It fed children; the bones were used for something else. And this particular animal was used for a shirt. And so you start thinking about the relationship to those animals. They gave us life in so many ways.

TATSIKISTAMIK / NARCISSE BLOOD

Blackfoot women were responsible for skinning animals and tanning hides and for sewing clothing. “Women made these things,” the late Frank Weasel Head said. “Women made the shirts—then the men might add the designs, the pictographs you might see on the shirts of their deeds, put them on themselves—but the women did the sewing, and the cutting, and everything on them.” Some women were experts at porcupine quillwork and, later, at beadwork. But, as Weasel Head noted, the painting of garments was men’s work.

Blackfoot clothing was made of hides—elk, deer, antelope, and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. Bison hide was used for robes, but it was too thick for clothing. Hides were prepared by scraping them to remove flesh and hair. On older garments, such as these shirts, an edge of hair was often left on the hide, especially around the legs where the hide was quite thin and difficult to scrape completely without tearing. The tail was sometimes left on as well. After being scraped, the hide was rubbed hard with the animal’s brains, then soaked, dried, and stretched to soften it.¹ Tanning a hide properly was labour-intensive work. Looking at the shirt for formal occasions (1893.67.3), which has very long, large hides and several further hides used just for the impressive fringes, Blackfoot advisors commented that the use of so much hide merely for fringes suggests that the shirt’s owner was from a family who had good hunters (to provide so

¹ For detailed descriptions of traditional hide-tanning processes, see Baillargeon 2011. Much has been written about Blackfoot clothing and its preparation. See, for example, Ewers 1945, 1955, 1958; Hungry Wolf 1980; and Wissler 1910.
16 ¼ gross Indian awls
50 ¾ bunches Agate Beads
22 bunches Aquamarine Beads
2 bunches Barley corn Beads
1 bunch China flowered Beads
18 ½ bunches fancy cut glass Beads
20 bunches mock garnet Beads
2 ½ dozen cut necklace Beads
[coloured] beads
12 ¼ fine white enamel Beads
16 ¼ gross hawk bells
15 yds 2nd light blue cloth
61 yds “ “ “
66 yds 2nd brown cloth
4 ¼ yds “ green “
220 ¼ “ scarlet “
40 yds printed cotton
45 ½ yds com blue striped “
31 yds fine blue striped cotton
12 yds blue duffle
26 yds white duffle
49 yds fine red flannel
48 yds fine white flannel
10 yds fancy printed muslin
3 ½ cents [hundreds?] B.T. needles
6 cents darning needles
2 cents glovers needles
1 ½ cents assorted needles
½ doz Kercers Lined Scissors
3 doz comm. “ scissors
18 pieces plain HB blue Strouds
110 yds plain HB blue Strouds
11/4 yds plain HB green Strouds
10 pieces plain HB red Strouds
5 ½ yds plain HB red Strouds
4 pieces plain HB white Strouds
39/2 yds plain HB white Strouds
10 ¾ pieces com. Plain blue Stroud
20/2 yds com. Plain blue Stroud
7 pieces com. Plain white Stroud
32/2 yds com. Plain white Stroud
10 yds fine Tartan
⅓ gross com brass Thimbles

Figure 13. Cloth, beads and sewing equipment, from "Inventory of Goods, Property of HBC, remaining on hand in Saskatchewan District, 1st June 1841." HBCA B.60/d/69, Edmonton House Accounts, 1841-42. Microfilm 1M471. Reproduced with permission of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives / Archives of Manitoba.
many hides) and many adult women to tan the hides. In other words, the man who wore this shirt came from a well-off family.

Shirts were deliberately fashioned to honour the spirit of the animal whose gift made the shirt possible. Joseph Horse Capture and George Horse Capture describe the basic construction of a shirt:

The two hides were then placed, inside to inside, as if the deer were standing on its back legs. To form sleeves, each hide was cut in two, a bit behind the front legs, and folded and fitted on each side, leaving the bottom portion of the hide for the main body of the shirt. Thus, leg skins hang down from the bottom of the shirt as well as from the sleeves. When a shirt is made this way, you can see in it the original shape of the hides; the animal’s integrity is maintained in the shirt, and with it the animal’s power. (Horse Capture and Horse Capture 2001, 17–18)

They are kept intact as the animal.

MIKSIKA’AM / CLARENCE WOLFLEG

One of the shirts collected by Hopkins, the shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.2), offers an especially good illustration of the way that hides were used in the construction of Blackfoot shirts. It is made from three hides: one for the sleeves, and two more for the front and back of the shirt. The tail of the animal is at the bottom hem. On the right side of the back, a decorative piece hangs below the arm, which has an additional section of hide sewn on at the bottom to give it the desired shape (see fig. 12).

All five shirts are sewn with sinew, fibre from the long muscle in an animal’s back. This was the way that sewing was done before commercial thread was available from traders. Traditional shirts had no side seams: the sides were tied together with a leather thong. The wrists were sewn closed, but the sleeves were left open (Horse Capture and Horse Capture 2001, 18). One unusual feature on these five shirts is that the sleeves are sewn shut from elbow to wrist. This was probably done after Hopkins took them to Montréal: the stitching on the sleeves is similar on all five shirts, suggesting that the same woman sewed all the sleeves at the same time. Moreover, the size of the wrist opening is too small to
allow an average man’s hand to pass through. The hides from which the shirts are made does not display any marks suggesting that they have shrunk over time, so the sleeves were probably sewn in this way in order to display the shirts in Hopkins’s house. As a family connected with the fur trade, the Hopkins might well have had Métis women as household servants who would have known how to sew with sinew.

The fringes and thongs could have been cut with scissors, metal knives, or stone blades. By the time these shirts were made, scissors were available from traders along with awls, needles, and metal hide scrapers (see fig. 13). It looks as if a metal knife was used to make the shirt for formal occasions (1893.67.3): the woman cutting the fringe slid her blade along the hide panel inserted into the shoulder seam, and the point of the blade made tiny cuts in the body of the hide (see fig. 15).

**DEcoration**

The shirts are decorated with porcupine quillwork, hairlocks, and paint. The only trade goods on the shirts are small pieces of red cloth, placed in the centre of quilled sleeve medallions, and red cloth rectangles used for neck decorations. The collar on the shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.2) hangs over the quilled rosette on the front of the shirt. This is unusual and suggests that the collar 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.

The shirts were collected with leggings, which are beaded with black, white, and blue glass pony beads. Some of the leggings have crane tracks painted at the lower edges, a reminder of the time when Paya’kskii (Scarface) saved Morning Star from giant cranes and of the gifts that came to Blackfoot people as a result.

**Painting**

Several of the shirts are painted, one with war deeds of the person who wore the shirt. Other painted decorations include the red fingermarks on the shirt layered...
with paint (1893.67.2), and red ochre and black stripes on several of the shirts, representing “coup” marks. Each of these stripes records a war deed, whether it was killing, scalping, or striking the body of an enemy. Such decorations, which are common on Northern Plains shirts, are related to Northern Plains art, including pictographs, and refer to individual achievements and sacred power (Dempsey 2007; Ewers 1939; Keyser and Klassen 2001, 246–50). The war deeds painted on one shirt (1893.67.1) likewise depict one man’s achievements in battle: enemies killed, weapons and horses captured, and scalps taken. Guns and knives feature among the weapons, reminding us that trade goods were becoming important to the Blackfoot. Besides a tally of objects captured and enemies injured, the shirt includes a battle scene, something that became more popular on Blackfoot shirts across the nineteenth century.

Blackfoot artists made paint from clays and iron-rich earth (red ochre), as well as buffalo gallstones, duck droppings, charcoal, and other materials. Figures were drawn onto hide using porous bone saturated with paint. Different bone “brushes” were used for each colour of paint. The 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 figures or shapes that occur repeatedly. On the shirt with painted war honours, for instance, the heads on all the human figures are exactly the same size.

As well as painting shirts, people painted their faces and bodies for personal protection, both on ceremonial occasions and during warfare. Items such as tipis were also painted with designs representing spiritual powers and sacred beings. These designs and ceremonies to transfer the right to use them continue in use today. Harvesting materials and making paint are likewise accompanied by ceremony and prayer.

Quillwork

The quillwork After quillworker Debbie Magee Sherer examined the shirts collected by Hopkins, she commented: “The skill of the quillworkers was truly remarkable. I was not only amazed at the quality, but the quantity of quillwork: huge squares and disks for the yokes of the shirts; the horsehair-wrapped center of another disk—all indicative of the tremendous amount of time it took to do
Figure 18. Man's legging. Elk, mountain sheep, or deer hide; porcupine quill; wool cloth; sinew; glass beads; paint. Collected by E. M. Hopkins, 1841. Pitt Rivers Museum 1893.67.11. Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 19. Digitally enhanced front of shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 20. Digitally enhanced back of shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 21. Battle scene with horse, shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 22. Red fingermarks, shirt with layers of paint (1893.67.2). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 24. Replaced quillwork, shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.4). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
this work.” Although, today, both women and men do quillwork, in the past quillwork was done by women who had had the rights to do such work ceremonially transferred to them. They learned from other women who also had those rights.

The quillwork on these shirts was done by several different artists, even on the same shirt: the tightness and width of the quilled lanes varies. The quills were dyed with plant dyes, and possibly with cochineal, a red dye derived from insects imported by traders. (Bright aniline, or chemical-based, dyes only became available in the late 1850s.) Some of the colours are still vivid where they have been protected from light by hairlocks.

Panels of quillwork were usually done on separate pieces of hide, which enabled them to be unstitched from one shirt and moved to another shirt, as we see on the shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.4; see fig. 24). Given the lengthy and painstaking work that went into making such panels, it made sense to reuse them. Close inspection of this shirt shows an area of lighter, unpainted hide, along with lines of tiny holes, around the quilled vertical strips on either side of the central chest rosette. This indicates 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, along with the lines of tiny holes where the original strips had been sewn to the hide.

On the shirt with painted war honours, the square quillwork panels on the front and back display an optical illusion: the quillworker deliberately reversed the direction in which she folded the quills on the lower third of the panel, at the same point on both panels. As a result of this, when the panels are viewed from certain angles, the colour appears to reverse.

Some of the “quills” on two of the shirts—the shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1) and the shirt for formal occasions (1893.67.3)—are actually plant fibres. Viewed under a microscope, the darker elements of these decorations consist of long parallel fibres that are very different from porcupine quills. The herbarium at the University of Oxford examined a tiny sample of the plant material under very high magnification and identified it as being from the leaf of the bulrush or cattail (*Typha latifolia*), a plant that Blackfoot people used for a number of purposes.
Figure 25. Plant fibres with quillwork, shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 26. Quill and plant fibre edging of central panel, shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Detail of photograph on right. Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 27. Shirt collected 1827 by Lord Elvestone. Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim, inventory no. V Am 2651a; formerly in the Arthur Speyer collection. Nothing is currently known about Lord Elvestone. Speyer acquired the shirt from a dealer, and although he identified it as Teton Sioux, it bears strong similarities in paint and quillwork decoration to the Hopkins shirts. Image courtesy of Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim. Photograph by Jean Christen.
Many people who viewed the shirts asked what the quillwork figures represent. On all three quilled shirts, the designs in the quillwork refer to sacred stories and gifts from sacred beings. For instance, the double red crosses on the shoulders of the shirt decorated with war honours (1893.67.1) represent Morning Star and “Mistaken Morning Star,” as Paya’kskii came to be called (see the story recounted in chapter 1). The meanings of other designs have, unfortunately, been lost over time.

HAIRLOCKS

*With the hairlocks on there, it’s kind of eerie. But I guess, back in the day, that’s what their culture was, that’s what the common practice was. But I guess that would be similar to today; people in the military have medals.*

*NiiTsitaKi (Lone Woman) / Amanda Grier*

The hairlocks on the shirts include both human and horse hair. The horse hair is coarser and thicker than the human hair. The human hair came from the scalps of enemies taken in warfare. Scalping was widely practiced across North America. Although some scholars have argued that it was introduced by Europeans (who also practiced scalping in warfare, along with taking heads), archaeological evidence for scalping in North America dates from about 485 BC (Chacon and Dye 2007, 6; Axtell and Sturtevant 1980), which means that it was a precontact practice. Historically, scalps were displayed by tying them to tipi poles, bridles, and other items, and locks of hair taken from them were tied to shirts. The presence of hairlocks makes these three shirts sacred, and many Blackfoot and Blackfeet people today say that the spirits of the individuals from whom the hair was taken, as well as those who made and wore the shirts, are tied to the shirts themselves.

**Figure 28.** Detail of horse hairlock and human hairlock, shirt with painted war honours (1893.67.1). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
When Rufus [the late Rufus Goodstriker] had the chance to view the shirts, he became very emotional. It was then that I made the connection in regards to the way Rufus was impacted by the shirts. He was a member, also a member, of the Fish Eater clan. In our clan, there is an offshoot. They call them Hairy Shirts or Hair Shirt, and the leader of that was Rainy Chief. He was the leader of that offshoot. So Rufus knew that. And I think that is what really hit home when he saw the shirts.

Figure 29. Membrane wrap on hairlock, shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.4). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 30. Damaged neck, shirt for working (1893.67.5). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

Figure 31. Epidermis visible on hide, shirt for working (1893.67.5). Image courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.
THE WORK SHIRT (1893.67.5)

The undecorated shirt in this collection is an extremely rare example of a working garment. These have seldom survived because rough wear led to their deterioration and because they were not thought important enough to acquire for museum collections. This shirt is an ordinary covering for protecting the body from wind and from branches when its wearer was walking through the bush, and it was perhaps used as an outer layer when it was snowing. It shows its hard life: there are many tears at the neck, where it has been pulled on and off. The hide on the neck flap is wrinkled, as if it had been soaked by rain or snow and possibly dried by the fire afterwards. The hide is thicker and not as finely tanned as the hide used on the decorated shirts: some areas are very thin, and there are several areas where the top layer of the hide was not fully scraped during preparation. The lower “legs” of the animal that dangle down on the front of the shirt were actually pieced together with scraps of hide, added on to make the front match the back of the shirt in shape. It appears that the hides selected for this shirt were smaller, more damaged, and less well tanned than usual.

Such hide shirts were commonly worn by fur traders and travellers as well as by Blackfoot people. Fur traders made leather shirts and leggings for their own use in the Rocky Mountains area, to protect themselves when riding through brush. A member of Lewis and Clark’s expedition noted in 1805 that “some of the party was employed in making Cloathes out of dressed leather for the party.”

Writing of a hunting expedition into the mountains from Blackfoot territory in 1859–60, the Earl of Southesk stated,

No woollen clothes . . . can stand against these horrible thickets [in the mountains], full of sharp ends of broken branches. . . . Fortunately I had clad myself in Mr. Hardisty’s present—the leather hunting-shirt, which was very comfortable, as well as a complete protection against the hardened spikes that met one at every turn. (Southesk 1875, 171)

The Hudson’s Bay Company hired women (usually the Aboriginal or Métis wives of traders) to make such clothing. While he was at Fort Edmonton in 1841, at the
time that the shirts were acquired, George Simpson purchased a pair of “Leather Trousers,” presumably for his own use. Was the undecorated work shirt a Blackfoot shirt, or was it in fact Hopkins’s or Simpson’s own shirt, made and purchased at a fur trade post? We don’t know.

Such puzzles notwithstanding, these five shirts reveal much about Blackfoot culture and values at the time when they were made: patience and hard work; skill in hunting, tanning, quillworking, and sewing; bravery, determination, and courage; relationships between people and between humans and other living beings. The creation of these shirts was the product of relationships, as were the circumstances under which they were given to Simpson and Hopkins—and, eventually, relationships made it possible for the shirts to return to their home territory. It is these relationships that stand at the centre of the Blackfoot Shirts Project.

3 HBCA B.60/d/68, Fort Edmonton accounts, fo.103, 27 July 1841, Sir George Simpson, d[ebto] r to 1 p[ai]r Leather Trousers 7/6. Interestingly, both he and Hopkins, on the same date, also bought items that seem to be for women, possibly as gifts to wives of chiefs, or as payment for work such as making clothing, or as gifts to mistresses: Simpson, 3 yards blue cloth, 6 yards ribbon, 2 cotton shawls; Hopkins, cotton handkerchiefs, glovers needles.