EIGHT

Visiting the Shirts

The visits of Blackfoot community members with the shirts were intense, profound sessions. They needed to be carefully planned and coordinated to enable participants to benefit from them as much as possible in the limited time available, and to meet museum concerns about handling the fragile shirts. Although the sessions had to be held in museum spaces—the conservation laboratory at the Glenbow, and the archives room at the Galt—they were taken over in many ways by Blackfoot prayer, language, and perspectives. In this section we discuss how the handling sessions were structured and how Blackfoot people responded to the shirts within these sessions.

Planning for the handling sessions began long before the shirts arrived in Alberta. The sessions were aimed at elders and people involved in ceremony, high school and college students, and artists, each of whom could bring different kinds of knowledge to the shirts and would work with them in different ways. An equal number of sessions was arranged for each of the communities
People might lose interest if they look at something through glass, and it's being told through an interpreter or somebody from the museum. People lose interest or that focus, but when you see something hands-on and you are able to touch it and smell it, and just feel it, you have that connection. . . . Seeing them up that close for me was very emotional. I felt very connected. I felt like there was a spiritual being or connection in that room. . . . I can't really describe it, but there was something definitely around that morning.

AAKOMIIYANSTIKITSTAKAKII (MANY DIFFERENT OFFERINGS WOMAN) / JENNY BRUISED HEAD

For me, especially, the emotion that I felt when I was there and was able to touch them was overwhelming, looking at the quillwork and at the technique of how things were put together. Those things are becoming lost arts for us. Which we call art today, but is a way of life, you know, at one point. So those skills are being lost and an opportunity to be able to touch them and to have such an intimate relationship with such an artifact, it had a lot more meaning than just being able to stand there and to look at something through glass. Or sitting in a drawer and somebody else pulls it out and handles it for you and you just get to take a picture, you know? It's different, very different.

MAISTAKII (CROW WOMAN) / LEA WHITFORD

There's nothing better than actually having that person right beside you to hug them, instead of just looking at a picture. And that's the way it is with these artifacts, to actually be able to feel them and touch them and know them, you know? These are your ancestors, they belong to your ancestors. Your ancestors made these things. Your ancestors . . . There was a use for them, there was a purpose for them.

POOKSNAWAAKI (LITTLE CHIEF WOMAN) / JEAN DAVIS
and there were also several “open” sessions for people who were not part of an organized group. The handling sessions were held in the two weeks prior to the exhibition opening at each venue and up to three sessions were held every day with each one lasting between one to two hours, depending on the needs of the group. The handling sessions had a cap of twelve people to accommodate the size of the room available and the Pitt Rivers Museum’s policy on handling artifacts, and so in consultation with ceremonial leaders and with the assistance of people from each of the four Blackfoot nations, invitation lists were drawn up. Some 550 people from across all four communities attended a handling session, and they ranged in age from three months to well over ninety.

Many visits began with an elder leading a prayer. The project team then explained what was known of the shirts’ history and how they came to be in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Using a replica polysuede shirt made by Kainai seamstress Sylvia Weasel Head, we indicated those parts that were especially delicate and which people should avoid handling (for example, the tiny fringes cut at the legs of the animals which are now very brittle). In order to spread the inevitable wear on the shirts, different ones were used in each session, with the least fragile being used most frequently, and in most sessions two shirts were available for the group to see. The shirts were covered with a Tyvek sheet before each group arrived and we would look closely first at one and then move onto the next. Many people spoke of the intense emotion they felt when the covers were first removed. “We were a little bit hesitant to go forward to these shirts because I guess you could sense a power from them,” said Harrison Red Crow. “There is always that respect. With anything old there is always that respect before you approach these things. . . . When we did start examining these shirts it was just breathtaking.”

The sense of ancestral connection was intensified for many participants when they began to gently stroke the hide or lightly touch the hairlocks. Carolla Calf Robe, for example, ran her fingertips along the red ochre finger marks on the shirt layered with paint (1893.67.2). She later described her experience:

When I was touching them, I could feel the energy of those shirts. That’s why I showed you my hands. They were just red and they were just
When they were uncovered, we all just stood back in awe. I'm the least likely person to become all mystical, I'll tell you that right now. But there was just this feeling of awe, is all I can describe it as. I stood there and I thought, "My goodness, you know, someone made these shirts. And this person, or persons, obviously put in so much time and effort." And it was such detail, attention to detail, that I guess only an artist would do. . . . And then there was a part of me that felt this longing, you know? How long have they been gone from Blackfoot territory and now they are back and they are hearing the language. . . . And I'm not talking about the shirts themselves, but I'm talking about the people that made the shirts. That's what I mean by the spirits behind the shirt. You know, how long had it been since someone had admired their work? Can you imagine what that must have felt like to have that?

AKAISTISKAKII (MANY SWEAT LODGE WOMAN) / RAMONA BIG HEAD

When I first saw them, it was kind of, like I said at the end of it, you had asked me at the end how I felt and I felt . . . mixed emotions. I felt happy; I felt honoured; privileged, also, because I think not everyone has been able to see them up close the way we did, and my daughters were able to see them as well. But I almost had butterflies in my stomach. . . . I heard Annie say it was like a visit from our ancestors. That's what it felt like, when we were there that day. And it was really an honour to see them and I can't thank you enough for giving us that opportunity.

NIITSITAKI (LONE WOMAN) / AMANDA GRIER

I was so excited when I came and I felt so honoured that I was one of the ones that came. To me, it's a blessing to see them. There's certain things in life that you get to see once in a lifetime. For me that was one of them. And I couldn't help think of my great-grandfather, Crow Spreads His Wings. I have a picture of him with his buckskin outfit. And I was trying to think if he had a shirt like that. I kept closing my eyes and thinking, "What kind of a shirt did he have?"

NAPIAKI (OLD WOMAN) / CAROLLA CALF ROBE
throbbing, eh? That’s why to me, I was thinking, the spirits must still be there in him, because these shirts were brought back home. And I thought the spirits of these owners must be so happy that they came to see their shirts.

The sensory experience was heightened for some people who smelled the hides, and though any traces of wood smoke are long gone, this made little difference to those who described watching their mothers and grandmothers tan hides and recalled the scents that were evoked. Spending time with the shirts was profoundly moving for all participants on multiple levels; people repeatedly commented that they could feel their ancestors in the room and that this made them feel good and proud as they reflected upon how they had fought for their people. On more than one occasion men sang honour songs for the ancestors and some people brought them gifts of sweetgrass.

The construction of the shirts was studied very closely and the observations participants made and the knowledge they shared with one another and the project team have helped us all to think about ancestors who made and wore them. Many conversations started with a comment on the physical features of the shirts, but then spread outward into discussions about Blackfoot values, stories, and cultural knowledge, and their relevance today. The shirts also evoked stories about people’s own ancestors. Clarence Wolfleg, for example, a ceremonial leader from Siksika, who had served in the military and was the First Nations School Programmer at the Glenbow at the time of the shirts’ visit, talked frequently about his ancestor, the war chief Piitohpikis, Eagle Ribs. Clarence participated in many of the handling sessions and drew upon his own experiences and stories about Piitohpikis to explain how a man could earn the right to wear a hairlock shirt. He also emphasized the contemporary relevance of war shirts and their leaders in the present, especially for younger people seeking role models, a point that was raised in many of the sessions, as he explained to Alison Brown in an interview about his involvement in the visits:

There’s a lot of young interest, especially in warriors, because the young people always want to find something to gain strength and confidence.
And especially from people in the urban setting; they are trying to survive the best way they can. They are always looking for tools they can use, and if they look at something [like this] they can say, “You know, these are great warriors. I can’t be like them, but I can take the principles and the philosophy and the values that they use, and this is how they became great warriors.” You know, that lesson of life. Because even those people that wear the shirts, when they wear them, people recognize them. Maybe they don’t know them personally, but they recognize them. That person wearing that shirt, that person’s been through a lot. And I got to look up to that person. I want my young boy, I want my son to be of that stature, to walk tall and be proud.

There were often many discussions going on in the room at the same time, as people responded to what they saw and felt, and as they learned from each other and from the shirts themselves. In some sessions, especially those attended by elders and ceremonial leaders, the conversation was mostly in Blackfoot and concerned sacred knowledge connected to the shirts and historical knowledge of Blackfoot trading relations. There were also lengthy discussions as people tried to recall words that relate to the materials used in the shirts’ construction but which are rarely used today.

One issue that arose during the project, and which, in retrospect, should have been discussed in more depth with project advisors prior to the sessions taking place, concerned the recording of the visits. The funding for the project came from an academic research council, and funding councils in the UK, as in Canada and the US, expect scholarly research to be documented and published. As part of the research process, and for the purposes of publications, the project research team needed to document the project process, including understanding how people responded to the shirts. This proved to be a sensitive and difficult issue.

The majority of participants brought cameras with them, or used their cell phone cameras, to take images for their own use of elements of the shirts, of themselves standing alongside them, sometimes while wearing one of the replica shirts made by Kainai seamstress, Sylvia Weasel Head. Many of these
images were uploaded onto personal Facebook pages immediately following a visit, and were commented on by friends and family. Many of these images were also generously shared with the project team. We also took photographs during the handling sessions, on behalf of participants, or as visual records of the project, and we used a release form for this purpose. However, with the exception of one session held early in the Glenbow phase of the project, we did not record the handling sessions with video or with sound.

There were a number of reasons for this that were informed by ethical practice in anthropology and by cultural protocols. First, recording what were sometimes very intense encounters seemed intrusive. We did not wish to turn the visits into research sessions that privileged the project team’s interests over those of participants. Second, we were wary of having recording devices of any kind running at times when some participants may have wanted to discuss ceremonial knowledge, as this goes against Blackfoot sacred protocols. We did not want the presence of cameras or digital recorders (whether they were switched on or not) to constrain how people engaged with the shirts, especially given that some individuals were already unsure how to respond to them and may have felt uncomfortable if they felt their actions were being recorded. Finally, we had framed the project in such a way that interviews about its impact were due to be undertaken as part of the research, following people’s visits with the shirts, at a time when participants had had the opportunity to reflect on what they had experienced.

All this said, we were reminded by one of the women we later interviewed that we had had the great privilege of hearing all the stories and discussions that were vocalized during the handling sessions, while most Blackfoot people had not. Given this, would it have been better to have recorded at least parts of the sessions as they took place, so that the footage could be incorporated into resources that would be accessible long after the shirts had returned to Oxford? In the case of the Blackfoot Shirts Project, no such recordings were made by the project team, but, as it turned out, the late Narcisse Blood, who was an accomplished documentary filmmaker, decided to film sessions that he attended with Red Crow Community College and Kainai High School students, as well as a session with elders from the Kainai Nation. Some of this footage, alongside filmed

1. There are some excellent models for recording generated by similar heritage engagement projects in which a range of resources for community and external use have been produced (see, for example, videos uploaded to the website of the Inuvialuit Living History Project at http://www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/, or the Australian Museum’s Sharing Stories project at http://australianmuseum.net.au/Sharing-Stories-Aboriginal-Collection).
interviews he made subsequently (including with ourselves), was incorporated into a short documentary which we have both used in teaching and that was included in an exhibition about the Blackfoot Shirts Project held at the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2013. Similarly, Adrienne Heavy Head, who works for the Blackfoot Digital Library, recorded the visit to the shirts of Kainai Studies students from Red Crow Community College and later published this footage on the Blackfoot Digital Library website (http://blackfootdigitallibrary.org/). She has also posted recordings made at the conference we subsequently organized about the Blackfoot Shirts Project, which was held in Oxford in 2011, which include presentations made by Blackfoot colleagues as well as by the project team and Glenbow and Galt staff.

Blood and Heavy Head negotiated permission to record the individuals who appear in their footage themselves, and it is our view that the Blackfoot Shirts Project was better served by their efforts to record parts of the session than if we—as outsiders—had tried to do so. In the end, after wrestling with the issues surrounding recording of the visits by the project team, we decided to return several months after the visits and interview a selection of participants about their experiences and responses, having allowed sufficient time for people to have processed their thoughts and emotions.

**EXPERIMENTING WITH THE SHIRTS**

People who saw the shirts were often surprised at their size as they are much longer than the buckskin outfits men wear today for formal occasions. The sleeves are also longer and are sewn with sinew, though historically they would have been left open. In all the visits people noticed these physical differences and their observations prompted comments about the size of Blackfoot men in the past as well as questions about the construction of the shirts. One of the ways people explored how the shirts might feel when they were worn was by trying on either the polysuede or commercially tanned hide shirts made by Sylvia Weasel Head. When these shirts were put on, people could see that the cuffs would have been turned up, rather than left hanging loose, as they appeared when lying flat.
I was at the Glenbow Museum the day that Byron Jackson tried it [the replica shirt] on. The talk was that the shirts were quite small—too small for our present day Blackfoot people. I said, “Yes, but we’re seeing it through the eyes of 2010.” Blackfoot people were built so much differently in the past. So when Byron tried it on, I said, “Basically that would have been the stature of a Blackfoot man, or Blackfoot youth, two hundred years ago; they would have been built like Byron.” Once that replica shirt was put on him, it fit perfectly. Although it looked so much smaller laying on the table or hanging on the mannequin, it wasn’t. Then you started realizing that, yes! a Blackfoot man would have worn that shirt with pride.

IITOOMITOATOO (FIRST ONE THERE) / LISA CROWSHOE
Figure 48. Lonny Tailfeathers and Donovan Tailfeathers wearing replica shirts, Galt Museum, 2010. Photograph by Laura Peers.
on the table. Copies of some of George Catlin’s portraits of Blackfoot leaders were available for people to consult during their visit, and these also allowed people to see that shirt cuffs were worn turned up. Trying on the replica shirts also allowed the wearer to feel how the shirt draped and so could imagine what they would have felt like when the wearer was on horseback. Many teenage boys and men tried on one of the two shirts towards the end of their visit, and amid considerable laughter as the women in the room fussied about them, straightening the neckline and cuffs and smoothing the creases, they stood taller and prouder. Young men, many of whom had at first been a little reticent, were transformed in front of the group, and said how “awesome” or “cool” it felt to wear such a shirt, and asked what they might do to earn one. Darnell Rides at the Door, a Blackfeet ceremonial leader and educator, who travelled to the Galt Museum with students from the Browning High School, commented that when the young men put on the replica shirts, “the chest would puff out [and they were like] ‘I’m a warrior from way back.’” In another instance, having heard about the shirts from relatives, Donovan and Lonny Tailfeathers drove to Lethbridge on the off chance that they might be able to see them. Like many other visitors, they found their experience profoundly moving and asked that we photograph them wearing the shirts made by Sylvia Weasel Head and standing proudly together with the ancestral shirt. This was a frequent request, and many people now have similar photographs of themselves, their friends and family, and one of the shirts as a tangible reminder of their visit with the ancestors.

HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE VISITS

Everyone involved in developing the project was keen that as many school and college students as possible should engage with the shirts, but for this to happen there were many logistical constraints to work around. These included accommodating school and college timetables and ensuring that Blackfeet students from the United States who would have to cross the border to Canada had the correct travel documents. With the support of the administrators within the various tribal boards of education we were able to work around these challenges, and by
I don’t think a lot of the students knew that a lot of this knowledge is still there, and this knowledge can still be used. And I think a lot of them really don’t care, because they’re too involved with Facebook and other stuff like that. But I think in the future, as they think more about it, they’ll learn to appreciate this more than they have at the moment. And for some of them that are already involved in ceremony, I think for them it was a real eye-opener as well. I think a lot of them are finding that they can get more knowledge from these things.

*PONOKAISIKSINAM (WHITE ELK) / MARTIN HEAVY HEAD*

And the students’ reactions after we left, that’s all they did was talk. There was a buzz. You know, usually kids will just eat and fall asleep. They didn’t. They were talking and marvelling at “Wow! It would have been so cool to wear one of those shirts back in the 1800s” and “We were great warriors and we did have this pride” and we do and we still do and we can still hold onto it. . . . One of the students was blown away by the fact that porcupine quillwork, the quillwork, was real. Because they had never even seen it. They were taught about it, they knew a bit about it, but to actually see how the quillwork was done on the shirt that was there that day and to see the tone and the change in the lighting and how that magically turned from a darker hue to a brighter one. That student himself was an art student and he was trying to figure out how he could get that effect on his own artwork. And it was also almost incomprehensible to him to think that one of his ancestors had that technique already, hundreds of years ago.

*DARNELL RIDES AT THE DOOR*
the end of the project dozens of students had taken part in handling sessions, in
addition to many more who saw the exhibition at either the Glenbow or the Galt.

The Pitt Rivers Museum education team’s experience of working with school groups has shown that students get most out of organized handling sessions with artifacts if they are between a half hour to one hour in length. Blackfoot teachers who advised us on planning the schools’ participation agreed, and given that there was a limit to the number of handling sessions we could allocate to each nation, it was recommended that the visits should be aimed at older students. This was due in part to the fragility of the shirts and the cap on the number of session participants, but was also because it was suggested that older students would be better equipped to discuss a range of issues connected to the shirts. The middle and junior schools were encouraged to bring their students to the exhibitions and to use the web-based resources. The high schools on each reserve, as well as some schools in Calgary and Lethbridge and the town of Cardston with high numbers of Blackfoot students, participated in visits. At both the Glenbow and the Galt, classes were split into groups of ten students and two teachers. These groups then alternated between time with the shirts and in the museum galleries, where staff members Clarence Wolfleg and Blanche Bruisedhead, respectively, talked to them in more depth about the shirts and their historical and cultural context. College students also attended sessions: Red Crow Community College sent three groups, two from Kainai Studies and one from the Adult Education program. Blackfoot Language students from Old Sun Community College at Siksika were joined by ceremonial leaders from their community who had visited the shirts earlier in the day and wanted to stay longer. Finally, a group of seven students and their instructors from Blackfeet Community College drove from Browning, Montana, to Calgary—a trip of five hours each way—to spend a morning with the shirts. The project team joined this group for supper when they arrived in Calgary, which gave us the chance to get to know each other a little better and to prepare for the visit the next day.

Some educators prepared their students in advance by using the classroom materials provided on the project website or by asking an elder to talk to their students about the stories of Scarface. As most Blackfoot people have never seen Blackfoot heritage items of this age unless they are involved in ceremony,
Figure 49. Students from Red Crow Community College (Kainai Nation, Alberta) visiting the shirts, Glenbow Museum. Photograph by Owen Melenka, 2010. Reproduced courtesy of Glenbow Museum.

Figure 50. Students and instructors from Blackfeet Community College (Browning, Montana) visiting the shirts, Glenbow Museum, 2010. Photograph by Owen Melenka, 2010. Reproduced courtesy of Glenbow Museum.
many students were unsure what to make of the shirts at first. The support of their teachers and elders was crucial. Terran Last Gun Kipp, for example, who was part of the Blackfeet Community College group, later made this point in an interview when Alison asked him if he had ever had the opportunity to see any Blackfoot items as old as the shirts before. He replied, “Besides the things in the museum? Not really. A few things, maybe at the ookaan [Sun Dance], but not like that, not anything that significant.” Such expressions of unfamiliarity with heritage items were very common among people who wanted to see the shirts, and even some teachers who are ceremonial leaders themselves were initially unsure how they and their students might respond. Kainai educator, ceremonial leader, and society member Jenny Bruised Head, for instance, explained some of her views on this point to Alison in an interview following her visit with Adult Education students from Red Crow Community College:

Jenny Bruised Head: I am thankful that I got to see them, and the students that I teach were able to come out and see them, and that they participated. Even myself, because I was thinking, “Well, what am I going to learn about these shirts?” I kind of had this negative perspective at the beginning, but the more I read about them with the emails, with the information that you sent to me, I felt like I need to see these shirts; I need to be part of this journey that these shirts are on so I can tell my grandchildren when they grow up [and can say], “Well, my grandmother saw them.”

Alison Brown: Why did you think you might not learn anything from them?

Jenny Bruised Head: Because I’ve never ever seen a war shirt, besides reading from a novel from a non-Native perspective. And I guess we already have that thinking of, “Well, the Indians killed people, killed each other and they scalped each other, took each other’s hair,” or whatever, you know? And I thought, “Is that bad or good? Do we say it’s good or do we say it’s bad?” And I don’t like to focus on the negative; I like to focus on the positive. But when I went there, and the more I read on them, it was like, I had to go. I had to see them.
Jenny’s observations indicate some of the complexities that face Blackfoot educators who want to use heritage items to teach. To counteract the impact of colonialism on Blackfoot communities, many teachers have developed resources that will enable their students to learn more about their own history and culture in order to strengthen their sense of who they are as Blackfoot people. The visit of the shirts is considered by many teachers to have happened because the ancestors wanted to support this process. This point was discussed at length in specialist training sessions facilitated by Kainai educator Alvine Mountain Horse that were held in the week prior to the school visits, and which were attended by teachers who planned to bring their students to see the shirts or who wanted to develop related curriculum resources. Participants also exchanged ideas for how to incorporate the shirts and the many layers of cultural and historical knowledge they encompass into classroom activities, and ideas about responding to questions about cultural protocol that might arise among their colleagues or in discussions with parents.

Many questions were raised during the school and college handling sessions. Educators encouraged their students to think about who had worn the hairlock shirts and the qualities they would have had to demonstrate to earn them. These sessions became an opportunity for students to think about their own achievements and to take pride in what they have done to bring honour to their own families, for example, by doing well in sports or academically, through joining a ceremonial society, or by taking part in powwow. Students and teachers also worked together to talk about the time the shirts would have been made and worn and speculated on what life was like for their ancestors in the early nineteenth century. One issue that was raised several times concerned the future of the shirts. Many students are familiar with repatriation efforts and are aware that ceremonial leaders have been working hard for decades to repatriate ceremonial and other heritage items and return them to use. During the Kainai High School visit to the shirts, teacher Martin Heavy Head talked to the students about how the visit of the shirts followed on from earlier repatriation work and responded to their questions about why the shirts were only returning home for a visit and were not staying. The shirts were thus able to help the students learn about current political issues as well as about historical and cultural knowledge.
There were, of course, differences in how younger students and those at the college level responded to the shirts. As the comments from the teachers quoted in this chapter show, visits to the shirts and the continuation of the Blackfoot Shirts Project into the classroom through initiatives developed by teachers in several community and off-reserve schools, all the students who came to see them have gained new perspectives on their culture and history, even though they may not yet be aware of the deeper significance of the shirts. For some students, however, access to the shirts has been so inspirational that they feel that their lives have been transformed. Terran Last Gun Kipp, who visited the shirts with a group from Blackfeet Community College, changed his major to Blackfeet Studies the day immediately following his visit; he has since pursued museum studies at the university level. Reflecting on his experience later he explained that seeing the shirts opened his eyes to how much there is to learn about his people and said, “It just gave me more of a drive to learn as much as I can about my tribe. Because there’s so much you can learn. It’s never-ending.”

**ARTISTS, SEAMSTRESSES, CRAFTSPEOPLE**

When I saw the shirts it was like reconnecting with my grandmother. . . . When there’s a window or a glass frame between you and an object which you have some connection to, you never really feel a connection other than just viewing it and reading what the little tag is telling you: that this is yours; that this belonged to your ancestors. I remember going to Glenbow and always looking at them, but they were always placed, you know, on the other side of this glass image and you were trying to make sense, “Okay, it’s a beautiful piece of art, but I’d like to touch it, I’d love to feel it . . . .” So, to be able to touch those shirts and to be able to see them it was like you just have this connection. The realness that this is the story and this is how they travelled and this is how they came back home for a visit. And here we are looking at the beautiful intricate work with the porcupine quill, and Corey [Wadsworth] noticing the differences on it and helping us to understand it. Because I didn’t know anything about quillwork.

DELIA CROSS CHILD
[It] was a day that probably I will never forget. It was so rewarding to see the responses of the children as you say. The students themselves—high school age here is grades nine through twelve—and I believe the majority of the students that we had were grades nine and ten. All of them belong to Mrs. Tatsey's history classes, her Blackfeet Studies classes, and most of them were also involved with Mr. Bird's Blackfeet science classes, Mr. Guardipee's Blackfeet art and design. And the students' reaction was totally awesome. They were totally enthralled. They were captivated that they were old and that they were able to actually see them. They were also very impressed by the fact that they were able to touch them. At first, they wanted to capture everything on film; they all had their cameras and if they didn't have a camera they had a cellphone, and they were enthralled. They were interested and amazed that the things that they were being taught in school and that they had seen in other museums were actually real. They were something that did actually take place and they were real and [they] held them in their hands. . . . And I think it's going to be exciting to see the reactions this fall when they go back to school, which is soon, as to if they can capture that same technique. Not only from the cultural one and the pride behind it, but also from an artist's standpoint.

DARNELL RIDES AT THE DOOR
Figure 51. Terran Last Gun Kipp, Frank Weasel Head, and shirt with layers of paint (1893.672), Glenbow Museum, 2010. Photograph by Laura Peers.
The symbolism inspires me to really go back to just pure Blackfoot design. As I saw on these shirts, especially as they were explained by the Canadian elders, the symbolism and what they mean. Cause I wasn’t really sure what the symbolism meant. I had never seen that kind of symbolism and I didn’t know what it meant. . . . When I first saw them in Lethbridge I was just amazed at the quillwork. I had seen old shirts in the Smithsonian exhibit of 2000 with a lot of quillwork, but I really hadn’t seen any Blackfoot shirts of that age. So it was pretty amazing.

**NA’TOO’AKI (SUN/HOLY WOMAN) / DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER**

Several sessions were held for artists, craftspeople, and seamstresses. Included in these groups were people who work with contemporary art forms, such as photography, music, and dance, as well as those whose focus is on traditional arts. In the planning meetings we were advised that as Blackfoot artists today could be inspired by the shirts in ways we might not anticipate, it would be beneficial to the Blackfoot artistic community broadly if artists working with a range of different media were involved. It was envisioned that these sessions would allow for the creative exchange of artistic perspectives and that the shirts would contribute directly to this dialogue through the observations and discussions of the artists about the skills of the women who had made them. We liaised with practicing artists from all four communities to identify people who might be interested in joining a group, and the sessions that resulted were some of the most exciting for all involved.

The quality of the materials and the physical details of construction were especially fascinating for the artists, who used their visits to share ideas and cultural and applied knowledge about techniques, from the tanning of hides through to the flattening and dyeing of porcupine quills. There was also much discussion about individual features, such as how the hairlocks were attached and the possible meanings of the figures on the shirt with painted war honours. Speculation about which roots and berries would have been used to create the rich reds, blues, and yellows used to dye the porcupine quills had been a feature of debate in other sessions, and there was a wonderful moment of connection when quillwork artist Winston Wadsworth, Jr., brought in a bag he had made and

**Figure 52.** Winston Wadsworth, Jr., with his own quillwork and shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.674), Glenbow Museum, 2010. Photograph by Alison K. Brown.
held it alongside the quillwork disc of one shirt (see fig. 52). Winston explained that he had been experimenting with Saskatoon berries, and everyone in the room could see the similarity between his own work and that of the quillwork artist who had achieved the same shade over 170 years earlier.

Some seamstresses commented on the neatness of the stitching used for repairs and others measured the very few seams on the shirts with their own hands and arms. There was also much discussion about the processes of tanning hides and the values of hard work it instils, especially among those who were learning how to tan hides themselves and are very well aware of the amount of effort involved. Adrienne Heavy Head, for example, who had recently participated in a course on hide tanning run by Red Crow Community College, commented on the time and skill involved in making clothing as spectacular as the five shirts:

To think of how much time was spent on making those shirts, and how much detailed work was put into it . . . Because they were all made, the designs, all the quillwork—which was, I think, much harder to work with than beads—and to take the time, and the patience that it would have taken, not only to sew them on but to go through the whole process of dyeing them and to know the pattern you are going to use, and how to lay it out. They just seemed different from other things that I have seen in museums.

It was clear from comments such as this that engaging with the shirts in the visits was not just about immediate responses. Learning from ancestral artifacts can be a long process, affecting and inspiring people in ways they might never imagine. In the interviews we undertook after people had visited the shirts and had had time to reflect upon their experience we were often told that knowledge connected to the shirts, and indeed other heritage items, is not lost, but it is often dormant. It was explained that access to heritage items, including those that have been absent from the community for many decades, can spark interest in reviving language, skills, stories, and knowledge of places and ceremony. Shirlee Crowshoe, who has worked for many years with museums and other heritage
organizations, for example, observed, “You know, a lot of that knowledge is lost or, I guess in another sense, not really. It’s stored in someone’s memory. And to have something like that, it triggers something where they go back and they remember. Not right away. It takes time for them to reflect, and time for that to come back.” Connecting physically with heritage objects does not necessarily involve the instant recollection of memories and cultural knowledge, but it can help people to gradually remember details stored in their memory, details that need a trigger to be released. Similarly, for the artists who engaged with the shirts, several have since told us that they needed time to absorb their experience and reflect upon how it has helped them to develop creatively. Visual artist Mari King, for example, has explained this process in this way:

We got to see these shirts and actually touch them at the Glenbow Museum. And that was just like . . . there’s sometimes words that can’t express the full meaning of what a person feels from their heart and from their soul. It goes past the limitations of the human brain. It touches down into the very roots of my being; of who I am; of where I come from, that I connect with these shirts.

I know the impact these shirts have had on me in my artistic endeavours as well. After I left the Glenbow Museum I really thought hard about these shirts and what they truly meant to me and what they would mean to future generations of Blackfeet as well. And I hope that through my artistic endeavours I’ll be able to capture just even a glimpse of a life that’s close to the Creator.

So much of the images in these shirts here depict a sacredness about our way of life two hundred years ago. And to think about that and to think about today, how much that sacredness is still there, we’re still living out a certain sacredness. But most of us are not wearing shirts like this today; but we’re still carrying this on in a different way. And these shirts are so wonderful to see and to know that that’s a living part of us, like in our DNA and it comes back to life.
Mari has drawn upon this experience in her recent artwork, as can be seen in figure 53, a monotype titled Bull’s Back Fat after a Blackfeet ancestor, which is also influenced by the imagery visible on the hairlock shirts.

In the end, the Blackfoot Shirts Project made it possible for over 550 Blackfoot people to visit the shirts up close without a glass barrier, and many more experienced them through the two exhibitions hosted by the Glenbow and Galt museums. The handling sessions provoked a range of emotions: awe when the shirts were first seen and the presence of the ancestors was felt; laughter, then pride, when young men tried on the polysuede or commercially tanned replicas; sadness, a sense of injustice, and sometimes anger when the topic of their being taken back to a museum far away was mentioned. Despite the conflicting emotions that were raised, and the tensions between museums and originating communities that are embedded in a project like this, we were told repeatedly that the shirts had “come home for a reason.” It may be hard for any of us to fully understand what that reason—or reasons—might be, but in the pages that follow we offer some possibilities by presenting reflections from Blackfoot people on what they think the impact of the shirts’ return to Blackfoot territory has been.