Visiting the Blackfoot Shirts
A Personal Reflection

ALISON FRANK-TAILFEATHERS

On 26 May 2011, Jenny Bruised Head, an instructor at the Red Crow Community College satellite campus in Lethbridge, brought a small group of her Native American Studies students to the Galt Museum to visit the shirts. The group spent an hour with the shirt for working (1893.67.5) and the one with layers of paint (1893.67.2), looking closely at how they were made and discussing how they related to their knowledge of Blackfoot history and culture. Here Alison Frank-Tailfeathers, a member of the Kainai Nation and a student in the class, describes her impressions of the visit.

When we first got there and when I first looked at them I had this strange feeling. It almost made me feel like I was going to cry. I felt like I was reaching back into my past, my culture. Being able to feel that, and not knowing very much about my culture, made the experience so amazing to me. It really intrigued me to learn more, and to really actually appreciate what was in front of us.

It’s really hard to describe the feeling that I got from it. Like I said, it was a very spiritual feeling. I felt like I was being able to actually think back to when the shirts were worn, when they were made and all the detail that was put into them. To think back, at that time, I can imagine how hard it was for a woman to sew on all the quills and the details. Even the shape. They were so long and the arm holes and the neck holes were so small. It made me visualize a Native man from back then; from what I think, what I would have imagined, a Native man was like. Kind of different, because I realized that they were so much taller and probably a lot leaner than I would have thought. So it really made me visualize, and think of our past in that way, where I wouldn’t have thought about it before.

The work that went into them was so amazing. I never would have thought that. It must have taken some time to do those outfits. Another thing that intrigued me was how talented our people were back then. And nowadays, you don’t really see the quillwork and stuff like that. A lot of things have changed since, but it really gave me a lot of appreciation for the work that had gone into
them. Then we looked at the other shirt, the one with the hair. I’ve always been taught that our hair is sacred. I’ve been told not to throw it away, to bury it, or to keep it. When we were told that was human hair—some maybe have human hair on there—it made me feel like maybe these shirts have spirits travelling with them.

From my experience seeing them, I think of it as a step back into our past. It made me realize the importance of knowing where we come from. It was a really big eye-opener to me, to appreciate our past and our history. And it kind of struck an idea for me to learn more about them. Even when we were talking about it . . . I asked if there was any way that they could stay or come back. And that’s one thing that I have been thinking about since. I would hate to see the shirts as that [far from home]. From my experience, the shirts have initiated something with me. They left me wanting to know more about my culture. Having that actual visual, and being able to touch them, it gave me that appreciation for them. I know the importance of how we, especially the youth, need to learn more about our culture.

Even something like this is living proof of our history right there and how important [it is] that we need to get them back. From my experience and how they made me feel, they made me want to learn more about my culture and share my knowledge. I think if more young people like me can see these shirts it will give our First Nations people the push they need to get the shirts back. If we could eventually get them back, in the upcoming years, that would be a really good experience, especially for the young people. I find there is a growing number of youth that are losing our culture and, as our elders are dying, we are not going to have the stories and we are not going to have the information that we do now. I want to learn more, and I want to be able to teach my younger siblings and family members about it.

That was quite the experience for me, and I am sure it is going to be quite different seeing them behind the glass rather than up close. We were able to take the magnifying glass to look at all the stitching and all the detail that had gone into these shirts. It is a shame that others can’t, or won’t be able to get to see them up close as we did. And that’s one thing that really amazed me about the shirts was the detail, the stitching and just learning a lot from them. I was thinking
about how this past semester I learned about the signing of the treaties, and to
know that these predate the treaties, that gave me even more appreciation for
them, because that dates them. It leaves me wondering what kind of people wore
them, why they were made, stuff like that and it just kind of planted an idea that
I want to keep learning about the history.

If I walked out of here, as one person walking out of here wanting to learn
more, imagine if we can get ten people walking out of here wanting to learn
more. That will cause a ripple effect. Especially the youth, the First Nations youth
really need to learn more about their culture. Like I said, once the elders are
gone, you know we are losing our information from the people who lived it. They
all have a story; each one of these shirts. And we have to learn them. Otherwise
we are losing a piece of our culture, and that’s one thing that’s sad to say but it
may happen. Projects like this are just one step closer to our keeping our culture
alive and keeping it going.