Questions About the Shirts

Who wore these shirts? Who made these shirts? Why were they made? Why were they worn? Why, why? Why is it that you have to go through a shirt transfer to acquire this? What is the significance? All these questions start to come up and pretty soon, that’s where the curriculum comes in. Because pretty soon you are looking at different aspects, you’re looking at the social aspects of the people back then, you’re looking at the historical, you know, what was happening at the time. And you’re looking at, even at the hairlocks on there, some of them were human hair, some were horse hair. Well, whose hair was on there? And that’s a question you would ask a student: “Why would they have human hair on there?” And then the students start to think about that “Why . . . ?”

AKAISTIŠKAAKII (MANY SWEAT LODGE WOMAN) / RAMONA BIG HEAD

As Ramona Big Head understood, the shirts raise many questions. Ramona was speaking from the perspective of an educator, but the questions she asks here were voiced by many other people as well. In this section we present a selection of the questions that emerged during the handling sessions. We do not offer definitive answers, because some of the questions actually cannot be answered: either there is insufficient information or the information that is available is contradictory. The responses here are based on historical research using archival documents where appropriate, other scholarly research on historic clothing and fur trade relations, and the interpretations shared with us by knowledgeable people who visited the shirts.

How old are the shirts?
Parts of the shirts were likely made between ten and twenty years before they were acquired in 1841. It is possible that some of the quillwork panels and shoulder strips were “recycled” by being added to these shirts after being were removed
from other shirts that had worn out. This would mean that the shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.4), has components that are as much as 190 years old.

One clue to the age of the shirts, and how long they were made before George Simpson and Edward Hopkins acquired them, is the wear patterns on them. The shirts do not appear to have been worn much before they were collected: the quilled sleeve strips are not creased or broken, for instance, which would have happened quickly if they had been worn while riding. There is damage around the neck area of most of the shirts, however, suggesting that they were worn. This is a contradiction that we do not fully understand. Based on the wear patterns, the condition of the hides, and the fact that it would have taken at least a year to make each of the quilled shirts, it is possible that they were made at different times between ten and twenty years before they were collected.

**Whose shirts were they?**

Unfortunately the written documentation relating to the shirts does not specify the names of the men who owned the shirts, nor even which Blackfoot nation they are from. All we know is that Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika leaders met with Sir George Simpson and his party at Fort Edmonton in July 1841.

**Who made the shirts?**

The shirts were made by women, probably a group of women working together. Some would have tanned the hides, some would have sewn, and others would have done the quillwork. It is unlikely that one woman made all five shirts. Debbie Magee Sherer, an experienced quillworker, believes that the quillwork was made by several different women because the length of stitches, tightness of folds, and overall quality of the work varies from shirt to shirt and even on the same shirt. The women would have prepared the hides and sewn the shirts and added quillwork and other sewn decorations, such as the trade cloth at the neck of the shirt layered with paint (1893.67.2) and along the sleeves of the shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.4). The painting on the shirts would have been done by men, in response to dreams or to commemorate special events.
What are the shirts made from?
The shirts are made from the hides of animals such as deer, antelope, elk, and bighorn sheep and are sewn with sinew thread. Analysis to test the hair follicles to determine precisely which animals they are made from was inconclusive, because traditional tanning methods remove the hair follicles. However, the hides are not thick enough or large enough to have been bison. A variety of additional materials are used in the decoration of the shirts, such as porcupine quills, human and horse hair, pericardium membrane or veins (used to bind the hairlocks), and pigments made from minerals, plants, and other natural materials.

Are there any trade goods on the shirts?
Very few imported trade goods have been used to decorate the shirts. This was a deliberate choice, as Blackfoot people had access to a wide range of trade goods through the posts of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the American Fur Company. Trade goods used on these shirts are restricted to the red fabric on the neck of the shirt layered with paint (1893.67.2) and also inserted into the quillwork shoulder strips of shirt with replaced quillwork (1893.67.4).

Although few trade goods have been used on the shirts themselves, a number of goods, including a musket, a gun, a metal lance-head, a bucket or kettle, and a knife, are visible in the motifs on the shirt painted with war honours (1893.67.1).

What do the designs in the quillwork and paint mean? Why were they chosen?
The designs relate to either personal achievements (in the case of the war deeds painted on the “warrior” shirt) or involvement in ceremony. They are all deliberate and had meanings that were known when the shirts were made: they are not random decorations. Only those with the experience and the rights to such designs could wear them.

When would they have been worn?
Although they are sometimes called “war shirts,” the hairlock shirts would not have been worn into battle. Instead a warrior would have worn the shirt as he left his home camp but would have removed it before fighting commenced and
hid it in a safe place. Once the battle was over, he would retrieve his shirt and wear it as he rode back to his camp.

The shirt for formal occasions (1893.673) would have been worn at times such as diplomatic discussions with other tribal groups or with traders. The shirt for working (1893.675) was for everyday use.

**What kind of hair is in the hairlocks?**
The hairlocks are a mixture of human and horse hair. The horse hair is coarser and straighter than the human hair. The human hair would have come from enemies slain by the wearer of the shirt.

**Whose hair is it? Can DNA analysis tell us?**
The hair is probably that of enemies and would have been taken in battle, although in some Northern Plains tribes, relatives of warriors gave locks of hair to lend them strength and power in battle. DNA analysis could give some clues about the health, diet, and lifestyle of the persons whose hair it is. Such technology cannot give precise answers about who the hair belonged to, however, nor even the particular tribe. No scientific tests have been undertaken on the hairlocks to date, in view of the ethical issues concerning the scientific testing of human remains.

**Why are the sleeves sewn up?**
Traditional Northern Plains shirts are made rather like ponchos, with just a few stitches at the wrist to hold the sleeve on the wearer’s arm. All five of these shirts have a seam from wrist to elbow. The shirts would have been displayed in the home of Edward Hopkins, either in Montréal or in Henley-on-Thames near Oxford. We think that to make it easier to put them on display, the sleeves were sewn up with sinew in order that a pole could be inserted through them for support. Sinew would have been available to Aboriginal women in Montréal (some of whom would have been wives of fur traders) and as the stitches in the sleeves on all five shirts are remarkably similar, this suggests that one woman sewed all the sleeves.
How would the fringes have been cut?
Scissors and knives were available to Blackfoot people from the late 1700s, when they began trading directly with the HBC. Not all Blackfoot women would have used them, but they were certainly available in Blackfoot territory in the early nineteenth century when the shirts were made (see fig. 13).

On the shirt for formal occasions (1893.67.3), there are tiny nicks in the hide at the point where the fringing joins the body of the shirt. These suggest that the body, the sleeve, and the extra piece for the extravagant fringing were all sewn together and the fringing was cut after this. The knife or scissors used to cut the fringe slid down each new fringe and its point landed in the body of the shirt. The blade used for this was sharp and pointed, but it is impossible to tell if it was a metal knife, scissors, or a stone tool.

Why does the rectangular quillwork panel on the shirt with painted war honours seem to shift from light to dark, depending on where you look at it from?
This is because the quillwork artist changed the direction in which she was working: the quills are folded in different directions and catch the light differently. The change in direction occurs in the same row on the front and back panels, indicating that she meant to do this, that the effect was deliberate and had a meaning. Perhaps she meant to show the ground.

What do the paintings on the war honours shirt represent?
The paintings refer to the owner’s own war deeds. Many people who looked at the shirts had suggestions for what each part of the design might represent, but the story behind each illustration would have been personal to the owner.

Most people felt that the human figures represent enemies killed or scalped, and the weapons indicated that they had been stolen from enemies. Some people thought that the black lines that end in horse tracks indicate the number of times the owner went to war, but there were also other explanations for this. The tall triangular figure ending in a circle, with lines or dots inside the triangle, is probably a buffalo pound.
What would a person have to do to earn a shirt like this?
Many of the high school students asked this question. It allowed us to talk about leadership, bravery, and taking care of family in a larger sense: responsibility, working hard for one’s family, and other values.

Why would shirts like this have been given to the governor of the HBC?
As discussed in chapter 5, elders and older people felt strongly that the shirts were given to create or maintain an alliance with the HBC. There was a tradition of gifting clothing at the time of making or renewing alliances on the Northern Plains. There was also an unusually large encampment of Blackfoot people at Fort Edmonton when George Simpson and Edward Hopkins were there. As Simpson was both the head of the HBC and the representative of the Queen, it seems likely when considering all these factors together that the shirts were given as a diplomatic gift. They would have been given as a gift of objects; the rights to the hairlock shirts are unlikely to have been transferred to either Simpson or Hopkins. In his description of meeting Blackfoot leaders at Fort Edmonton, Simpson makes no reference to any transfer ceremony having taken place.

Some people at the visits asked whether the shirts might have been sold for whiskey. Although whiskey was starting to become a problem by 1841, relations between the Blackfoot and incomers were very different to what they would become a few decades later. The HBC valued long-term relations with the Blackfoot and the Blackfoot were very powerful in military terms at the time. Also, Simpson’s description of the nine Blackfoot chiefs who met him, and the size of their camp, strongly suggests a serious diplomatic purpose for the visit. The shirts were probably given in that context.

Why were the shirts only visiting?
Blackfoot ceremonial leaders felt it was extremely important that the shirts come home for a visit immediately, before more elders who held traditional knowledge would be lost. They wished to bring the shirts, elders, and youth together as soon as possible to stimulate learning about Blackfoot ways. It was easiest and quickest to bring the shirts to Alberta as a standard museum loan, which made their visit temporary.
What will happen to the shirts in the future?
In September 2010, the shirts returned to Oxford at the end of the loan. They were exhibited with information and images about the project at the Pitt Rivers Museum from March to September 2013. Blackfoot leaders have made a request that the shirts be permitted to come home for a longer visit, as a long loan, and this has been agreed in principle with the Pitt Rivers Museum; fundraising and organization will have to go forward for this to happen.

What other Blackfoot collections are in British museums?
There are many Blackfoot heritage items in museums in Britain, as well as in museums in mainland Europe. Several of these museums have put information about their collections online. Some examples are:

ROYAL ALBERT MEMORIAL MUSEUM, EXETER:
http://www.rammworldculturesonline.org.uk/Research/Blackfoot/About/

MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE:
http://maa.cam.ac.uk/home/index.php

THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/default.aspx