So I thought it would provide an opportunity for people to learn. And then also brought on topics of discussion amongst our own people. It would influence the older people that knew. It would also generate some kind of memory of a story that was told to them. And it provided an opportunity for them to share.

*MisaminiSkim (Ancient Buffalo Stone) / Shirlee Crowshoe*

So it’s like, they’re creating conversations, just with their presence.

*Treena Tallow*

*Bringing the shirts here, all of a sudden . . . people started asking questions and we were being led to people who knew what they were talking about. . . . And it’s like we opened up a box of knowledge that we didn’t realize we had.*

*Akaistiskaakii (Many Sweat Lodge Woman) / Ramona Big Head*
Taking the shirts to Alberta, and having Blackfoot people visit with them and learn from them, sparked all kinds of developments across Blackfoot communities. Some of these were related projects created by Blackfoot people, such as special school activities; others were ripples of personal and family learning that spread outward from the handling sessions. One such ripple involved Kainai people working with Blackfoot in other communities to revive the ceremony to transfer the rights to hairlock shirts after decades of dormancy. All of these developments lead to improved self-esteem and stronger communities in subtle but important ways. Together, these effects show how important it is that people have access to heritage items, and that powerful things can happen when such items come home. Museums with collections of First Nations material need to create ways of caring for those collections which take into consideration a duty of care for the people and communities related to the objects as well as for the objects themselves.

As Shirlee Crowshoe commented at the beginning of this chapter, the visit of the shirts provided an important opportunity for Blackfoot people to discuss cultural and historical issues, to ask questions of elders who still hold such knowledge, and to share knowledge across generations and across communities. Because so many heritage items are in museums far from their communities, the opportunities to engage in such discussions and teaching are sometimes simply not present in everyday life. As Shirlee notes, visiting the shirts also provided an opportunity to recall and retell shared memories involving the sacred stories that the shirts embody and the family histories that they evoked.

*These war shirts, they stimulate the memory that some of our people have kind of put away in a closet and kind of closed the door on. When you see those types of things, it rekindles that memory.*

**ROBERT RIDES AT THE DOOR**

I was really emotional when I first saw them, because as a young girl I used to watch my grandmother when she used to tan hides. She used to sit outside, she used to make a tripod or a lean-to, and she used to sit outside while she tanned her hides, while she’s drying her berries or crushing her berries, drying her meat. And she’d be sewing; she’d have a lot of activities going on. And just seeing
Well, you know, for me as an artist... It gives me more and more inspiration. That is why I visit museums and stuff like that. These are inspirations; they inspire me to keep doing what I am doing. As an artist I feel very connected to a lot of my work. These are things that I put my soul and heart into, so, you know, whoever the artist was that did the tanning, there’s so much work that went into these pieces here, especially the quillwork. And so it takes me back, to think about the women that meticulously put the work and effort on each part to complete a shirt, with the added guidance from her husband. And in the end for these men to travel afar, to give them up as a token of friendship. How easy it was for them to give them up. Whereas for me, today, it is not that easy to part with such things, even though they can be replaced. But something of great importance had to have taken place, why an exchange took place, for these men.

Mo’tokaani’po (Walking With a Scalp) / Harrison Red Crow

The shirts, and after watching Corey scraping and when I was watching the tanning of the hide, I was familiar with what was going on. It reminded me of those grandparents and it brought back memories. So I could almost feel all that presence of those people, of all our ancestors. It was really strong.

Anatsoyi’kayaakii / Alvine Mountain Horse

Such processes of recalling and making memories help to make individuals and communities stronger: they strengthen collective knowledge of culture and history across different generations, and bring this knowledge into the present. Assimilation policies, residential schools, and other processes of colonialism have led to gaps in cultural knowledge not only between generations but across families: some Blackfoot families have been more affected by assimilation processes than others, but all have lost grandparents and other relatives who had traditional knowledge. Discussions about the shirts, during the handling sessions and among friends and family afterward, allowed people both to share knowledge and to learn, thus helping to bridge some of these gaps.

The shirts worked as a touchstone to the past and to culture. In discussing them and in asking questions about them, as Ramona Big Head notes, people actually found that they knew a great deal more than they thought they did: “It’s like we opened up a box of knowledge that we didn’t realize we had.” Such realizations—that knowledge has not been lost or forgotten despite the pressures on Blackfoot communities over the decades—also contribute to the self-confidence and health of communities.

Most important, the knowledge embodied in the shirts has started to be used more actively by Blackfoot people. Several groups were touched especially deeply by the shirts’ visit: artists, ceremonial leaders, and teachers and the students they work with.

Artists

Blackfoot artists today draw on techniques, symbols, and meanings from the long tradition of Blackfoot art—but this is difficult when so many of the early
artifacts from that tradition can never be seen by the artists because they are in collections far away. For artists, the chance to study early pieces, to explore their construction, dyes, imagery, and meanings, is an important opportunity to learn about Blackfoot artistic traditions.

Mari King, who teaches Blackfeet art, came to the Glenbow to see the shirts with a group of students from Blackfeet Community College in Browning. She spoke of the effects the visit had on one young artist in the group:

Another student of ours, you might say she was a closet Blackfeet artist. She just didn’t want to bring her arts out. But after seeing these shirts and looking at photographs, and in the class, the kind of artwork that we did . . . we did a lot of these geometric designs like this and we discussed the importance of these . . . And when we got home, she said, “I’m bringing out my artwork.” You know, “I’m going to let other people see it now.” She senses a value of her own work as a result.

As well as providing inspiration, studying the shirts helped artists to learn specific techniques which are not well documented in the published literature. Debbie Magee Sherer, a Blackfeet quillworker, explained that being able to examine the shirts closely has helped her develop as an artist:

I see the errors in the methods that people are teaching out there, both in this book called The Quillwork Companion [Heinbuch 1990] and a website called Nativetech.org. Both of these quillworkers are teaching people to do the back stitch to fasten quills on, and from what I see from the shirts and having been able to study from the old quillwork where the quills have come off, that is not the stitch used at all. And I think it was used occasionally, the backstitch, and I’m not sure exactly why, but mostly it was the running stitch. And so I think when I go home, I am going to apply these methods. I am more inspired to really just totally stick with Blackfoot design. I mean, before I would borrow from other tribes, and if it looked gorgeous I’d use it, but now I think I’m wanting to pretty much stay with Blackfoot.
I think one of the common elements in a lot of my paintings is the land. And that’s kind of a common element, but the mountains as well. And in this one painting that I did, the dancers become a part of that landscape and the colour and the movement and all you see are the designs on the blankets, and because they are dancing you don’t really see their faces. But you see movement.

And I was thinking about the shirts and I was thinking about how the traditional designs are taken from those natural elements like the mountains and the sun and the moon and all of those things that we use, you know, in creating traditional art. But I was thinking about the blankets, I was thinking about the spirits of my ancestors, and my grandmothers, and the creators of these shirts and they’ve come home. And it’s a celebration of reconnection, it’s a celebration of, we’re still alive, we’re still here, we’re still continuing, you know? We’ve evolved through change and our babies are going to be the next ones.

DELIA CROSS CHILD

FIGURE 56. Untitled oil on canvas by Delia Cross Child, 2011.
Because the hairlock shirts are sacred, ceremonial leaders had debated among themselves how to adapt the usual rules of protocol for sacred items to enable the handling sessions to take place. As people discussed this question, they also discussed the possibility of reviving a ceremony that had become dormant: the transfer of the right to own a hairlock shirt. For Kainai ceremonial leaders, this was one of the goals of the project. As Andy Blackwater explained:

The other thing that we discussed was that it is possible that we can reactivate the transferring of these shirts to the people that might have earned [them] through their conduct and contribution to our people and our community, and [that] there needed to be that kind of recognition. And that gave us the idea that if we were able to bring the shirts to our community we would use the shirts themselves, at least one, to go through a transferring process and that would kickstart the transferring of the war shirts back in our community. The process itself has to be done in such a way that it gives the new owners of the shirts the right to conduct the transfer ceremonies in the future to others.

While the shirts were at the Galt Museum, two transfer ceremonies were held for three individuals. For the first of these, a request was made that one of the shirts be brought into the ceremony to link the past and present. It is highly unusual for a museum in Britain to permit such a fragile item to be used in this way, but after Laura and Heather discussed it with the director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, they decided that one of the shirts was strong enough to be used in the ceremony. It did not have quilled strips along the sleeves, so the arms of the shirt could be folded without damage. Knowing that Blackfoot people use body paint made with animal fat and mineral powders for colour during ceremonies to protect themselves against the power of sacred items, they also decided that any transfer of paint to the shirt during the ceremony should be considered an addition to the ongoing life or biography of the shirt, rather than as damage. Heather folded the shirt into a size that would allow it to be passed from one person to
another during the ceremony and in the ceremony it became an important link between the ancestors and people in the present. During this ceremony, two men who had done important work for the Kainai Nation were honoured by receiving the rights to hairlock shirts, so that what was revived was both the ceremony and traditional ways of honouring individuals.

A second transfer ceremony was held at the Galt Museum to honour Pete Standing Alone, a Kainai ceremonial leader who has done much to preserve sacred traditions and knowledge. Ramona Big Head dreamed of Pete wearing a shirt, and worked with ceremonial leaders to find people in several Blackfoot communities who knew the songs so that the ceremony could be held:

We were able to have a shirt transfer ceremony. The songs that were sung at that transfer ceremony are still very much alive. The people that performed the ceremony, the elder, Allan Pard, had the right to do that. For the Kainai people we hadn’t had a person who had the right to do that until now that it has been transferred to Pete [Standing Alone]. By Pete having that right now, Pete can turn around and perform that ceremony now. The men that sang those songs are all still very much a part of our community. Only one was from Siksika. So we actually brought together Piikani, Siksika and Kainai to this ceremony. That’s the important thing.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

From the very beginning Kainai ceremonial leader Andy Blackwater saw the project as “an opportunity to use the shirts as an educational tool for the young people. Perhaps to motivate them to face challenges in a better way; new challenges that we have today.” Frank Weasel Head spoke of the shirts as “our curriculum,” an important opportunity for learning. Some of the handling sessions were therefore held with teachers of Blackfoot students, both on and off reserve, to suggest ways of using the exhibition of the shirts, and the website about them, in the classroom alongside provincial curriculum guidelines. Other handling
sessions were held with Blackfoot high school students from all four communities, including some who live in Calgary.

Several other projects were inspired by the visit of the shirts. At Kainai High School, teachers Ramona Big Head and Delia Cross Child obtained a provincial arts grant to hire Winston Wadsworth, Jr., a Kainai quillwork artist and hide tanner, to teach their classes about these traditional arts. At the Piikani High School, teacher Jean Davis organized sessions with quillworker Trevor Kiitoki. Many students from these schools came to handling sessions and saw the shirts, consulted the website, and also participated in these special school-based projects. Jean Davis reflected on how this learning affected students:

Laura Peers: I guess you must’ve seen a process in the students from the time some of them saw the shirts to the time you did this set of workshops with Trevor Kiitoki. What happened with the students across that time? What did you see?

Jean Davis: Students are so . . . I guess, the outside world, with games and all the things, television, influencing them, I found those students so much more respectful, especially when they came into the Blackfoot classroom. . . . When they came into a Blackfoot class it was almost like they behaved. Their whole attitude changed. They wanted to learn more about their culture. Learn more about their past, their history. It was more meaningful to them. And then when I told them that we were going to do the quillwork, oh, they were so excited. [The school staff] wanted just the Blackfoot class [to do quillwork] and I said “No, it has to involve everyone, whoever wants to come.” And then, you know, the other students came in and they didn’t act up or start talking or fooling around in the classroom and they really wanted to learn about this . . .

Alison Brown: When we started thinking about bringing the shirts over here we were trying to think about a title for the project for the funding application. And it was Frank Weasel Head who came up with one of the phrases. He said, “These shirts are our curriculum.” So, from
your experience, is that something that you would agree with? And if so, what sorts of things do you think the shirts could be used to teach?

**Jean Davis:** Well, for one thing, beliefs and values are really a part of it. There’s a reason for everything that’s on those shirts. It’s not, “Oh, I decided to put this piece of hair here or this particular design.” There’s a reason for everything. So our beliefs and values, our protocol. Respect. Honouring. Honour. A person that wears those Blackfoot shirts had great honour. That wasn’t just anybody that wore those particular shirts. And the students are learning about that. This person had the shirt, and why was there all the different pieces of hair. What they represent. The different designs, what they mean. You know, learning more about that and all of a sudden looking at them, it has triggered a lot of memory in a lot of people: “Oh yeah, this is why this is . . .”; “this is how this is done”; “this is why they had these pieces of hair”; “this is why these marks are on there.” You can take one shirt and have a whole class from just about every belief and value in the Blackfoot culture. And the students, I think for them it’ll develop more of an interest in who they are, where they came from and why things are the way they are.

**Laura Peers:** Some of the teenagers you’re working with come from really challenging family backgrounds because of the histories of loss we were talking about. And the process of identity formation, becoming an adult and becoming a strong adult, is really, really crucial, it seems to me, in your community. And I wondered what role this kind of project can play in that?

**Jean Davis:** Well, I think it really impacts their identity because a lot of them, working with them, they come from all different backgrounds. And for some of them, school is just like a sanctuary. They’ll go to school just to get away from their home lives. Some of them will come to school every day. Some of them don’t because there’s nobody at home. But some of the students that do come, it’s like a sanctuary for them. And for them
to learn about stuff like this in school and be able to go to museums, and especially with the Blackfoot shirts, it’s like a beginning, a new beginning for them to develop their identity.

For years we haven’t had anything like in this in the classrooms. They’ve learned about social studies from a non-Native person’s point of view, you know, the “noble savage” or just a little blurb in the social studies curriculum. But now with Aboriginal Studies being part of the Alberta curriculum they’re learning about their culture and they’re really fascinated. This year was the first year that Aboriginal Studies was taught at our school, and I’m the teacher. And at the end of the semester the kids said, “Mrs. Davis, why is our history so sad?” And I said, “Well it is. It was sad.” And they said, “We never even knew all these things happened to us. And so this is why things are the way they are. And this is why we are on reserves. We didn’t know. We just grew up here and automatically accepted it.” And they didn’t even know the history of why we were put on reserves, the Indian Act, the treaties... So learning about their history is really important for these students to develop an identity, to know who they are, where they’re from, why things are the way they are. And having this, at this time, it is almost like there’s a reason for this. Technology’s developing so darn fast, and these kids looking at their iPods—they can see their culture from a different perspective. Something that’s hands-on, and something that’s coming back to them... It’s almost like our ancestors are behind all this, you know, pushing for these things to come back and visit us to make sure that we teach our kids.

For high school and college students, seeing the shirts had wider implications for education: for learning cultural and historical knowledge. Jenny Bruised Head, who brought a class of Red Crow Community College students to see the shirts, talked to Alison about the importance of such education for Blackfoot young adult and adult learners:

It is very educational for our young people that this is part of our history and it’s very important. And being a Blackfoot teacher, and passing down...
history knowledge and our culture, this is part of it. Knowing about our history, about the men, what the men did for bravery, for protecting their families, [getting] food, bringing food back. The battles that they went through, or achieving things in their life. Today we have our education where you graduate from grade twelve, you go to university, you convocate, your masters, your doctorate. But with them, this was their education; this is where it showed, this is what they accomplished, and so they wore it, you know? And so teaching it from that perspective, I was able to connect with it, and so it was important for me too. It’s easier said than done. Like, I could continue teaching from a textbook but when something comes into our community I think that it’s important that we all go there and show our interest and our children and our grandchildren and our future great-grandchildren, that they understand, “this is what my ancestors did.” They were proud people, they were spiritual people, but they were brave people.

She also noted the response of one of the students in her class when they came to visit with the shirts:

One of the ladies said, “I was almost in tears. They just looked so fragile. They just looked . . . If my grandmother was still alive she would have loved to see the shirts,” she said. She said, “She probably would have had a lot of stories to tell me, but unfortunately my grandmother is gone.” And she said, “I don’t know anything about our people but what you read in the textbooks,” or what little knowledge and information her family has passed onto her. And this cultural identity, we talk a lot about that in my class, the Blackfoot class, Aboriginal Studies. Finding yourself, who you are, means you need to dig up history, whether it’s painful, you open up that door for yourself, you take yourself on that journey and it’s, it’s a good journey. You have the understanding of what our ancestors did. If you don’t understand who you are, you are lost . . .
Knowing the past and one’s culture as an anchor for the present was a common response from college students, but so was the sense of pride they showed when they realized that they were related to the ancestors whose beautiful, powerful shirts they were visiting:

Lea Whitford: And I think, probably the most important thing for me to hear was the sense of pride, you know, the sense of pride.

Laura Peers: ... and what were they proud about?

Lea Whitford: It was just they were proud of being Blackfoot. And that this shirt had so much meaning, because it lent to who they are. It showed them, it taught them, the meaning of what it means to be Blackfeet and to see the pictures or the writings on the shirts, to see the scalps, you know it builds for them being proud of who they are and being proud of their ancestors. And they were talking about, “Can you imagine those men coming over the hill? In their shirts and their regalia?”

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

For high school students who came with teachers and elders for class trips, the effects of seeing the shirts, together with participating in school-based hide tanning and quillwork projects, were very important. Blackfoot teachers and the artists who taught hide tanning and quillwork also reinforced cultural knowledge so that the students learned in many different ways. At Kainai High School, art and English teacher Delia Cross Child encouraged her senior students to reflect upon their responses to these projects as part of writing skills classes. The comments here were made by students who were in their mid-teens when they saw the shirts. One of them said that the project had “affected [his] life beyond any media influences. It was like a window into my original self. It showed me who I originated from. This program made me fill in that empty part of myself. . . . These teachings are not outdated, they are skills that help my people be who they


**Figure 59.** Montage, paintings made as gifts to ancestors by students at Kainai High School, 2010. Work by Blaise Russell and Bruce Starlight (this page); Vance Chief Moon (p. 177); and (clockwise from top left) Chantelle Panther Bone, Karma Day Rider, Mercedes Weasel Head, and Travis Chief Calf (p. 178).
Another student stated that involvement in the project has “played a huge part in who I am today. It gave me a sense of identity. Growing up without cultural influence, I felt lost. I was ashamed of being Native. I attended white schools. Being the only Native in a white school, I was put on the spot, they would ask me questions about my culture and I didn’t have a clue about it. Being involved opened my eyes, my mind and my soul. The talks the Elders and the others . . . gave helped me grow as a Niitsitapi. While doing the activities I felt connected to my ancestors and my cultural past.”

Intriguingly, it wasn’t just the students that the shirts affected. In the Kainai High School project, which teacher Ramona Big Head describes below, even Winston [Corey] Wadsworth, Jr., the quillwork and tanning instructor, learned too. Alvine Mountain Horse, a Blackfoot language teacher, notes:

I really think that what these shirts have done for us is, if these shirts were not in the museum, that knowledge would really have been lost. The knowledge has been preserved for us, because if these shirts had not been taken where would they be? And now they are back. They’ve been brought home and it has renewed that knowledge and the language because when Corey came, he asked me “How do we say a lot of these words that we’re using?” and I’m doing that work for him, right now. I’m going to teach him the language; I’m going to teach him, because even though he practices, he teaches, he does all . . . he taught my students all that, he does not know the language. So I’m going to teach him the language . . . with these shirts coming home it’s renewing the language. It’s bringing that back for our students, the young people, and even the old people that have not been practicing that language. And I think it’s really done a lot for our people and in the classroom. You know, we try and do a lot, we try and practice a lot of this. You know, we’ve tried to tan hide, but not the way we’ve done with this project, you know? There’s been a renewed interest.
This summer at the Sun Dance a lot of the students were amongst the Kanáttsomitaiksi, the liitskinaiksi, and they were in the different [sacred] societies. They were transferred into the different societies either as... well, they were transferred into these different societies, or they were helping out as volunteers. But it really made me proud of who they were to see them participating. And I saw one of my students; he had a shirt, a ribbon shirt. And right away I thought of the Blackfoot shirts. I thought, you know, he’s got his shirt on and I would never see him wearing a shirt like that. Did this shirt, those shirts, have an impact on him that he would be wearing one of those shirts? That he would proudly wear a ribbon shirt like that.

Anatsoyi’kayaakii / Alvine Mount Ain Horse

“THIS RIPPLING EFFECT”: THE SHIRTS AND BLACKFOOT COMMUNITIES

They [shirts] affected children, students, families, elders, and people in our community as well as the communities out there. And so it’s had this rippling effect of awareness, of spirit, of education, of connection, of relationship, of respect, and all of those things that are important.

Delia Cross Child

The visit of the shirts provoked astonishing effects across Blackfoot communities: ceremonies revived, children learning quillwork and hide tanning, people talking to each other about things that might not otherwise have been said. Ramona Big Head talked about the knowledge that we were able to repatriate from having these shirts here: “And that, to me, is the important thing; it’s this renewal... of people who simply know about these shirts or have heard about these shirts.”

There is also a bigger picture here. As well as the revival of knowledge, it is the sense of strengthening connections between people now, and also between the ancestors, that was the most important community effect of the shirts project, as Debbie Magee Sherer explained:

Being part of the Shirts Project has changed my perspective as a quillwork artist in a very deep and fundamental way. Artists tend to be loners and work alone anyway, which is necessary for the work to get done, but to come together with so many different community groups and see the profound effect these artists of the past have had on everyone, well it makes me feel honoured that I can be a link to that past, a link to that ancient craft which is still being practiced.

The effect of the ancestors’ visit was also felt on the museums that hosted the project. At the Pitt Rivers Museum, staff had the chance to hear from Allan Pard, were painted by him for protection in a ceremony in the conservation lab, and thought hard about how to incorporate Blackfoot sacred protocol into loan policies. At the Glenbow Museum, Gerald Conaty welcomed the opportunity to renew relationships with Blackfoot and Blackfeet people with whom he and
I think the shirts brought back not necessarily knowledge, but brought about the fact that this knowledge was still intact, and that it was still there and that people can still use it today to do all of these things. I think the end consequences are that a lot of people want more of this knowledge, and that knowing that it’s there is really a good thing.

PAM HEAVY HEAD

colleagues had worked to repatriate sacred items, to create the Glenbow’s permanent Blackfoot Gallery, and other projects. Relationships need constant work, and those between museums and originating communities are no exception, so participating in the handling sessions, hosting a reception to welcome the ancestors home, and visiting with participants was an important opportunity to strengthen those friendships, renew acquaintances, and allow relationships to grow.

The Galt Museum is smaller than Glenbow, and curator Wendy Aitkens manages and coordinates all aspects of exhibitions, community relations, and collections development. She took a course at the University of Lethbridge, taught by the Glenbow’s Gerald Conaty, about relations between museums and Aboriginal people, and worked hard to extend the Galt’s relations with Blackfoot and Blackfeet people: attending meetings, travelling with Alison Brown and Laura Peers to Browning, hosting meetings at the Galt, and attending the Sun Dance on the Kainai reserve with a Blackfoot colleague. For the Galt, the project was also an opportunity, a very challenging one and one they took very seriously.

All those who participated in the project learned and were transformed in some way by these ancestors. Ramona Big Head describes this transformational process as one of rediscovery as well as of discovery, and her explanation applies to the museum partners as well as to Blackfoot participants:

So for us, it became a kind of opening up of all these questions. The answers were already there and already within us. We just hadn’t asked those questions yet. We hadn’t had the voice to really articulate what we needed to know. . . . The way I see it, the knowledge was always there. But no one really opened that box, because we hadn’t had the opportunity to think about it.

If the project allowed Blackfoot people to open “a box of knowledge that we didn’t realize we had,” as Ramona Big Head states, it did the same thing for the museums involved. We all learned.