Debbie Magee Sherer of Cutbank, Montana, is a quillwork artist whose work has been included in the National Museum of the American Indian’s exhibition on Northern Plains shirts, Beauty, Honor, and Tradition; her work has also won prizes at the highly competitive Santa Fe Indian Market. Debbie first saw the shirts at the Galt Museum in Lethbridge. She was able to examine them again in April 2011, when she participated in a conference held at the Pitt Rivers Museum about the Blackfoot Shirts Project. During that visit Debbie spoke to Alison Brown about her experience of being involved in the Blackfoot Shirts Project.

Debbie Magee Sherer: My name is Deborah Magee Sherer. I like to use the name “Magee” because it has roots in Blackfeet history and associates with my family. So I use the name “Magee Sherer.” And I am here [in Oxford] with a Blackfoot delegation—they are mostly from Canada—I am one of three Blackfeet, or Ammskaapipiikani, Southern Peigan, and I feel very honoured to have been invited.

Alison Brown: Thank you. Well, one of the reasons we wanted to have you involved in this project is because, of course, you do quillwork. And my understanding is that until you saw the shirts you’d seen old things in books but you’d never had the chance to get that close to quillwork of that age. So can you talk a little bit about your reflections on that, and what seeing the shirts meant to you as a quillwork artist?

Debbie Magee Sherer: Well, I had handled artifacts, including old quillwork, but never of that age. My mentor, who taught me construction methods, does repair and restoration work on old stuff, plus he actually has done some reproductions. I was in his studio a lot over the years, and he would say, “Go ahead. Pick it up. You can look at it,” you know? And so that’s how I learned. I never
Visiting with the Ancestors

could have learned how to do this without him. He was really the key. And when I went back home and wanted to learn some of this stuff and I found walls were up, doors were closed, and I think it was more because people didn’t really know how to do it, but they didn’t want to admit it. So he was really the key to my becoming involved in this. But I had handled old objects, yes.

ALISON BROWN: Is there anything about these particular shirts that have helped you learn about the art that you do?

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: Yes. The symbolism inspires me to really go back to just pure Blackfoot design. 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. And to have Frank [Weasel Head] and Herman [Yellow Old Woman] talk about what this means, that was really inspiring for me. When I first saw the shirts 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.

ALISON BROWN: And how do you think this is going to help you in terms of developing as an artist? I mean, you told us you had a bit of a light bulb moment here in the Pitt Rivers when you got a chance to revisit some of that quillwork. Do you think that, as an artist, having that kind of access has helped you think about your own practice?

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: Yes, it has. It actually has, I think, changed it quite dramatically, because 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 have 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 spot stitch. And the written material shows a method of working from left to right. I’m sure the stitching was
done vertically or from right to left, just like lazy 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.

ALISON BROWN: So has it allowed you to reflect upon your identity as a Blackfeet woman?

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: Well, you know, I was thinking about this last night. I thought, I am so honoured to be an integral part of this team. I have the knowledge of how to do this, and I am that link between that period when quillwork was done and modern times when it is lost. I am that link because I know how to do it. And I can look at those shirts and I know how they are constructed; I know how they are done. So that made me feel really proud. Narcisse [Blood] was asking me what I think about this, and I said I think it’s an awesome conference, and it’s nice to be in a place where what you do is really honoured. In Montana, because of lingering racism and prejudice, Indian art is not seen as a real art. It’s seen as a lowly craft and it’s pretty much dismissed and marginalized. So, to come to Oxford where you guys are on the cutting edge of this thinking, that this is a valid, viable art, it really inspires me.

ALISON BROWN: There’s a comment that you made, Debbie, when we were upstairs looking at the leggings, and you were asking me about glass bead disease, and I asked you if you’d seen it before. And you said, “Well, no. Because I’ve never seen anything as old as this before.” And it really struck me that so much of this older material is over here [in the UK and Europe]. What would your message be to the museums that are here who are looking after these kinds of collections? What would you say to them in terms of the importance of making that material available to a person like yourself?

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: I’d say it’s extremely important to bring these items back to their communities. They are part of us and we of them. It would encourage
more people to want to learn how to do quillwork and the traditional arts. One of the reasons I think it’s a lost art is because it takes so much time, and when we are educated, we have to get a good job, and support our families. Traditional arts like beadwork and quillwork take such a tremendous amount of time, and nobody has that time anymore. We have to work, we have families to support and raise. We have long distances to travel to get basic services like health care and material goods. And having these artifacts so far removed from their communities is what contributes to the traditional arts being lost. Everything takes a long time and we, as Indian people, do not have that time. And so getting access to these materials is crucial so that we understand the construction and can see it without looking through a glass case or at a two-dimensional photo. I think more people would really want to do it and would find ways that they can do it without sacrificing their careers and livelihood. If we don’t have that experience of the object, if we only see pictures of the items, it’s like going on a trip and only looking at the pictures of the destination. Is that a real trip? I think more people would really want to do it and would find ways that they can do it within the framework of jobs and family.

**Alison Brown:** I was thinking that when I first started working out in southern Alberta, I met with one of the ceremonial leaders who is also an artist, and he told me that he started going to museum collections when he was younger because there was no one on his reserve who could teach him those skills. And so he said that when he went into the museums—he was talking mainly about Glenbow, but he’s been to lots of other places too—that when you go into those storage areas, it is like the ancestors are there with you, and are teaching you, just by you being there and looking at the construction and looking at the materials and looking at the fineness of the work. It’s like having those people with you while you are in there. Is that something that you would relate to?

**Debbie Magee Sherer:** Absolutely. I know exactly what he is talking about. And when I sit down and do quillwork I do feel that presence, especially when I smudge and pray. And I ask for help, and I get it. And I ask, “I’m not really sure how . . .” —sometimes I’ll say a prayer—“I’m not really sure how to finish this, so
by the time I get to this row, can somebody please come and help me? And let me know, or give me an idea.” And it usually does come through. It’s a very spiritual connection. Very spiritual.

ALISON BROWN: And I’ve also heard you have to be in the right frame of mind.

Debbie Magee Sherer: Ah, yes. I was told by an Assiniboine Sioux lady who does fantastic quillwork—I asked her, and said, “I’m not able to get my quillwork straight,” and I showed her this bracelet, and the stitching was crooked, and she said, “Well, if you have conflict in your life, you can’t do quillwork, because this is really big medicine you’re dealing with.” She said, “This is a spiritual practice and you have to be settled in your heart. And you have to be peaceful, have a peaceful heart.” And I said, “Oh, my gosh.” Because I had realized that I had conflict with a person, starting two years before, and I thought back to my quillwork, and that was about the time I started having problems with it. So you have to have a peaceful heart to do this. You really do. It does affect your quillwork if you’re not a peaceful person and if you have a lot of conflict, if you have a chaotic life.

ALISON BROWN: So it teaches you how to live?

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: Absolutely. There’s a connection there. It teaches you how to live. And in Browning, where I’m from, I see so much chaos and conflict. So many unsettled, troubled lives. There’s a lot of drug use. And it’s hard to sit down and be creative and focus on your art when you have all that in your life. All the chaos and comings and goings . . . So if a person wants to do quillwork, then they have to make a commitment to be settled and peaceful and tranquil, because you just can’t do it if you’re just constantly running from here to there, to and fro, getting involved in this person’s life, getting this person out of jail, or enabling addictions. My own life is far from perfect, but I’ve tried very hard the last fifteen years to make my life peaceful and uncluttered and simple.

ALISON BROWN: Yes, when you put it in that perspective it makes it clear how difficult it is to sustain something like this in a community that is troubled in
many, many ways. But I think it’s important to take heart that there are people like yourself, and some of the other people that we’ve spoken to across the project, in some of the other communities, who really are taking this seriously. And particularly the younger students.

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: Yes.

ALISON BROWN: We met a couple of [Blackfeet] students who said that having access to those shirts changed their lives.

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: Yes. Now, if they can sustain that and go back to that original change of heart and just sustain it as a way of life, and realize that this calling does teach you how to live.

ALISON BROWN: So what are your hopes for a project like this? You know, for the long term.

DEBBIE MAGEE SHERER: For the long term? I hope more museums in Europe will open up their collections and make an effort to bring our ancestors home, if not permanently, then for a nice long visit.