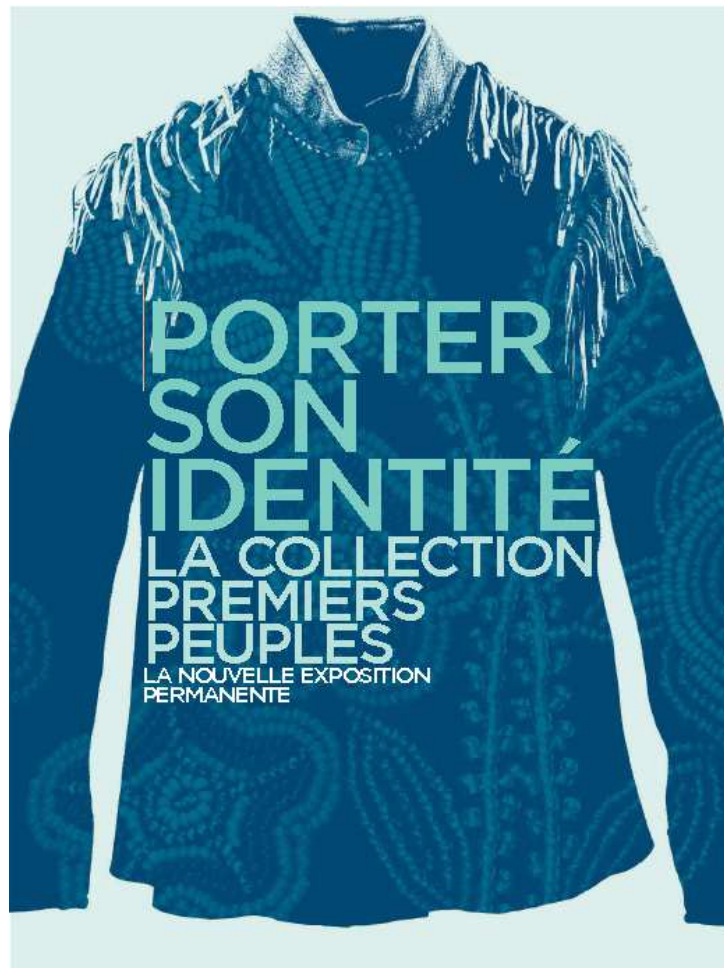


*Wearing our Identity –
The First People's Collection*



Texts of the exhibition

Table of content

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Introduction | 2. |
| Fashioning identity | 2. |
| 1 – Wearing who I am | 3. |
| 1.1 – Wearing where I come from | 3. |
| 1.2 – Wearing life’s passages | 3. |
| 1.3 – Wearing my family | 6. |
| 1.4 – Wearing my rank | 7. |
| 2 – Wearing our culture | 10. |
| 2.1 – Wearing our traditions | 10. |
| 2.2 – Wearing our legends | 15. |
| 2.3 – Wearing our present | 16. |
| 3 – Wearing our history | 17. |
| 3.1 – Wearing our honour | 18. |
| 3.2 – Wearing our struggles | 20. |
| 3.3 – Wearing our resilience | 21. |
| 4 – Wearing our beliefs | 23. |
| 4.1 – Wearing our universe | 23. |
| 4.2 – Wearing animal power | 24. |
| 4.3 – Wearing spiritual respect | 25. |

0 – Introduction

Wearing Our Identity The First Peoples Collection

Questions of identity lie at the heart of many debates in today's rapidly changing world. Languages and traditions are threatened with extinction. When this happens, unique knowledge, beliefs and histories are wiped out. First Peoples understand well the challenges and tensions that can erode a sense of self and belonging. Yet, they have shown remarkable resilience in both preserving ancient identities and forging new ones.

Whether building on the rich textures of the past or fearlessly transforming contemporary fashion, First Nations, Inuit and Métis use clothing to communicate the strength and meaning of their lives. An exploration of First Peoples dress is a compelling and emotional experience – one that must follow interwoven threads of community and spirituality, resistance and accommodation, history and innovation.

0.1 – Fashioning identity

Think about the different ways you express identity, especially in relation to others. How important is your clothing? Are you deliberate in your choices? Do you try to blend in or stand out from the crowd? Do you have a specific message in mind when you select an outfit or hairstyle? Have you ever “reinvented” yourself, and did dress play a part in creating the new you?

1 – Wearing who I am

Specialized stone and bone tools found on archaeological sites in Canada demonstrate the antiquity of techniques for creating warm, tailored garments. Preserved clothing from the Arctic, thousands of years old, shows fine sinew sewing and elaborate fur decoration. In the 17th century, Europeans were so taken by the dress of First Peoples that they procured items of their clothing as presents for royalty.

Today, as in the past, First Nations, Inuit and Métis use clothing to reflect their social order. Specific garment styles may signal gender, age or even marital status. Certain design motifs are owned by families or reserved for the use of high-ranking individuals. Dress is a fundamental expression of personal identity.

1.1 – Wearing where I come from

First Nations, Inuit and Métis are all unique. Their languages, beliefs and cultures are specific to each community. There is, however, one common unifying theme: their connection to the land. Who they are is intimately linked to where they come from.

1.2 – Wearing life's passages

As a young Nunatsiavimmiut Inuit woman tends a seal oil lamp, her future husband glances shyly at her attractive tattoos. A nervous Eeyou man straightens his new leggings, making sure he looks his best for the upcoming feast. A Mi'kmaq mother lovingly secures an embroidered silk cap on the head of her firstborn child. We all mark life's passages by decorating our bodies and wearing special garments. And in so doing, we declare our unique place in a complex world.

Mask representing a female elder of high status

1870-1900

Haida

Cedar wood, animal hair, cotton cloth, paint, metal

Gift of Dr. W. D. Lighthall

McCord Museum, ME938.22

On the Northwest Coast, when a girl reached marriageable age her lower lip was pierced with a pin to receive a labret. Several times over the course of her lifetime, she exchanged her labret for a larger one, marking these key moments with a ceremony confirming her rank. The size of the labret on this mask indicates that it represents a woman of high status.

Labrets

1865-1930

Yup'ik

Stone

Gift of Mrs. J. B. Learmont

McCord Museum, M4937.0-1

In the Western Arctic, only men wore bone or stone labrets like these. The shape of the labret varied according to the wearer's age, and the style differed from region to region. Worn on either side of the mouth, the labrets mimicked a walrus, symbolically transforming the hunter into the animal he hunted.

Group of Inuit men wearing labrets, 1897, G. P. Phillips, McCord Museum, MP-0000.1966.2

Tattoo needle

18th century

Nunatsiavimmiut

Ivory, pigment

Gift of Dr. W. D. Lighthall and David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M5869

Tattoos enhanced a person's appearance, registered life transitions – when a girl reached puberty, for example – or indicated achievements. On the Northwest Coast it was thought they provided protection. Tattooing involved piercing the skin with a sharp tool or needle and drawing a sinew thread coated with charcoal or soot under the surface.

My Hands, 1982, Helen Kalvak (1901-1984), National Gallery of Canada (no. 36493)
Gift of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1989. Photo © MBAC

Portrait of Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow, King of the Maquas, 1710, Jean Simon (1654-1742), after John Verelst (1648?-1734), McCord Museum, M1886

This portrait is one of the best records of 18th-century tattooing in existence. Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow was one of four Iroquois *sachems*, or chiefs, who in 1710 visited the court of Queen Anne in London. Although the exact significance of his tattooed motifs is unknown, they undoubtedly communicated his status as an important leader.

Nivisinaaq, a member of A. W. Buckland's congregation, Igluligaarjuk (Chesterfield Inlet), Hudson Bay, Nunavut, about 1903-1904, Albert P. Low (1861-1942), McCord Museum, MP-0000.1969

Tattoos on an Inuit woman's forehead, chin, cheeks, breasts, arms or legs conveyed specific messages to her community. At puberty, Nunavik girls received tattoos to signify their eventual role as women and mothers. Around the Iglulik area, tattoos were also intended to attract future husbands and please the spirits.

Leggings

1885-1890

Eeyou

Stroud, cotton cloth, glass beads, tanned and smoked hide, silk ribbon, wool braid, sinew, cotton thread

Gift of Betty Firstbook and Lillian M. Ogilvie

McCord Museum, ME938.1.1.1-2; ME987.120.2.a-b

Eeyou leggings were cut differently according to gender. The caribou, it was thought, had to be able to recognize the male hunter in order to give itself up to him. Men's leggings therefore featured a pointed tab resembling the shape of the caribou's dewclaw, while women's leggings were rounded and shorter in length.

Qopisunewei a'qwesnji'j / Infant's cap

1895-1905

Mi'kmaq

Velveteen, cotton lining, silk ribbon, glass beads, cotton thread

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M93

Clothes have always conveyed social differences, including the key one of age. Children, believed to be gifts from the Great Spirit and reincarnations of ancestors, are shown much respect. To varying degrees, children's clothing reflected their position within society. At a very young age Mi'kmaq children wore small caps such as this one, lovingly embroidered with beads by their mothers.

Girl's dress

1865-1900

Niisitapiikwan

Stroud, glass beads, hide, cotton ribbon, cotton thread

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ME927.1.36

As soon as children were able to walk, their mothers dressed them in miniature versions of adult clothing, exposing them to the cultural values and aesthetics of their community. This little girl's dress was worn on special occasions with leggings and moccasins. The elaborate beaded yoke attests to the great care taken by female relatives in making children's garments.

Mother's amauti

1890-1897

Nunavimmiut

Seal and dog fur, sinew

Gift of Mrs. R. Fairbanks and David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M5837

Inuit clothing tells the knowledgeable onlooker what Arctic region the person comes from, as well as the wearer's sex, age and often, for women, marital status. Important indicators are the size and shape of the *amaut* (baby pouch), the length of the garment and the outline of its lower edge, and the decorative inserts. Traditionally, the infant nestled against the mother's bare back in the *amaut* until two or three years of age.

Young girl's parka

1900-1930

Inuinnaq

Caribou fur, sinew

McCord Museum, ME967X.43

The absence of an *amaut* (baby pouch) indicates that this fur parka belonged to a young girl. Although plain, the parka incorporates a number of references to the animal realm. The hood retains the shape of the caribou's head and nose, and the ears have been left on the shoulder area, evoking the transformations that can occur between humans and animals. The three bands of white fur on the upper part of the cuffs symbolize a woman's sewing skills.

Arnauti or widow's amauti

1890-1897

Nunatsiarmiut

Sealskin, seal fur, glass beads, silver(?), lead, brass, pewter spoons, coins, wool braid, linen(?) thread

Gift of Mrs. R. Fairbanks and David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M5836

The *amaut* (baby pouch) of this sealskin *arnauti*, or widow's *amauti*, is somewhat flattened and gathered at the base, symbolizing its wearer's former role as child-bearer. This late 19th-century garment illustrates how Inuit women incorporated novel trade materials into the design elements of their creations: American one-cent pieces dating from 1848 to 1855 decorate the back flap, while spoons, lead drops and braid adorn the front.

Young girl's amauti

1925-1935

Iglulingmiut, Aivilingmiut

Caribou fur, stroud, glass beads, ivory, bone, teeth, wool braid, cotton tape and thread, sinew
McCord Museum, ME937.3

Traditionally, wearing a small *amauti* prepared a girl for her role as child-bearer. The *amaut* (baby pouch), hood and apron flaps (*kiniq*) of a girl's first *amauti* were symbolic rather than functional. The *amaut* was only large enough for a doll or puppy, and the apron flaps were tiny. The back of this *amauti* has two beaded puberty symbols. The large ivory toggle in front served to secure the baby belt, which helped support the infant.

1.3 – Wearing my family

Connection to family is a key source of strength and cultural knowledge for First Peoples. They continually renew these ancestral bonds by sharing clothing techniques, preferred colours and styles, and family-owned patterns. Contemporary creators look to the past for inspiration, while also experimenting with novel designs. Women lavish particular time and attention on garments they make for their loved ones. Family histories are a powerful source of identity today.

Kangextola / Button blanket

“Sun and Sisiutl” design

2012

Made by Maxine Matilpi (born 1956), designed by John Livingston

Kwakwaka'wakw

Melton cloth, stroud, shell buttons

Purchased through the generosity of an anonymous benefactor

McCord Museum, M2012.133.1

Button blankets, in use for centuries, were first made when wool blankets were introduced by Europeans. They are still worn today at feasts and public song and dance performances. The motifs are emblems of the dancer's family history. Both the sun and the Sisiutl (double-headed serpent) seen here are crests belonging to Maxine Matilpi's family. Used as a warrior crest, the Sisiutl has the ability to turn into a magical canoe.

Maxine Matilpi wearing a button blanket, Victoria, British Columbia, 2012, courtesy of Maxine Matilpi

Maxine Matilpi was born in Alert Bay. She spent her early years in her home village of Karlukwees, on Turnour Island, BC. There she learned her first language, Kwak'wala, and was formally trained and educated in many aspects of traditional culture. Maxine has dedicated her talents to ensuring that her people's traditions remain vibrant and strong. She completed her first button blanket in 1985. Since then, she has created close to a hundred ceremonial items in fabric, including button blankets, dance aprons, vests and tunics.

Button Blanket by Zoe L. Hopkins, National Film Board of Canada, 2009, 3 min 39 s
This short documentary, which illustrates the creation of a button blanket, also features the performance of a traditional dance and the art of the West Coast Heiltsuk people.

1.4 – Wearing my rank

Within all First Peoples communities, certain individuals occupy positions of esteem. Among the Subarctic Innu and Dene, experienced hunters are shown great respect. On the Northwest Coast, chiefs inherit their status, along with exclusive rights to ancestral crests, songs and legends. High-ranking individuals signal their social standing by wearing garments of exceptional artistry, often incorporating rare and valuable materials. In ceremonial contexts, dress serves to proclaim the wearer's privileged position.

Portrait of Chief Hiengwa (Earthquake), Gitwangax, British Columbia

1924

W. Langdon Kihn (about 1898-1957)

Coloured pencil and graphite

Gift of Fred Southam

McCord Museum, M927.102

This portrait represents a Gitksan chief in full regalia. He wears a Chilkat robe and a frontlet, and holds a raven rattle. On the Northwest Coast, the crests or emblems that adorn clothing are statements about the wearer's social identity and status. Crests remind onlookers of rights received by the family from mythical creatures in a legendary past. Symbols of power and prestige, they were – and still are – displayed dramatically on formal garments.

Amhalayt / Chief's frontlet and train

1895-1905

Nisga'a

Wood, haliotis shell (abalone), ermine fur, bone, paint, hide, trade cloth, fibre, sea-lion whiskers

McCord Museum, M12694.1-2

According to oral history, chiefs' headdresses hung with ermine pelts and embellished with carved wooden frontlets originated in the Nass River area, home to the Nisga'a. However, the tradition spread quickly across all the northern nations of the Northwest Coast. The figures are a reference to the three levels of the cosmos: the Upper world (eagle), the Middle world (human) and the Underworld (whale). The crown of sea-lion whiskers was filled with eagle down, a sign of peace, which floated over the guests as the chief danced.

Naaxein / Chilkat robe

1880-1910

Tlingit, Chilkat

Mountain-goat wool, yellow cedar bark, pigment

McCord Museum, M9047

For important social occasions, high-ranking individuals often wore prized items of clothing like this robe of mountain-goat wool and shredded cedar bark. The Chilkat robe takes its name from this sub-group of the Tlingit who specialized in their manufacture and trade. The design depicts a crest image seen from three perspectives – front and both sides – symbolically wrapping the wearer in his family history.

Raven rattle

1890-1900

Xàniyus/Xi'xaniyus (Bob Harris) (1870-1935)

Kwakwaka'wakw

Maple wood, paint, sinew, lead shot(?)

Gift of the Art Association of Montreal

McCord Museum, ME928.64

Raven rattles such as this one were used by chiefs during ceremonies. Although the precise significance seems to have been lost, some say that the raven holding something in its beak is a reference to Raven bringing sunlight to mankind. On the raven's back is a man whose extended tongue is joined to a frog, representing a human drawing knowledge and spiritual powers from an animal. Another bird, possibly a kingfisher, forms the raven's tail feathers.

Woman's hair pipe necklace

1900-1910

Niisitapiikwan

Glass beads, cow-bone hair pipes, leather, cotton cloth, brass thimble

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ACC1023

"Hair pipe" beads were originally fashioned by hand from bone, shell, copper or stone. By the 18th century they had become trade items made by Europeans and Americans, and by the late 19th century they were being mass-produced from cow bones. Strung horizontally into men's breastplates or vertically into complex women's necklaces, they were a prestigious article of adornment for those who had earned the right to wear them.

Royal Tour: Aboriginal women at Shagannapi Point, near Calgary, Alberta, 1901, William MacFarlane Notman (1857-1913), McCord Museum, VIEW-6785.0

Dentalium ear ornaments

1900-1915

Niisitapiikwan

Dentalium shells, leather, hide thongs, sinew

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M225, M226

Historically, dentalium shells were harvested by the Makah and Nuuchahnulth and traded extensively throughout North America. As more complex trade relations developed along the Northwest Coast, dentalium became a highly prized mark of wealth and status, and in some places a type of currency. Niisitapiikwan women favoured dentalium shells as embellishments for their capes and dress yokes, and as hair ornaments, necklaces and long, dangling ear ornaments.

Jodi Gillette (Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota) wearing her dress when she danced at the NMAI National Pow-wow at the MCI (Verizon) Center in Washington D.C., 2005. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by Walter Larrimore

Jodi Gillette wears long dentalium ear ornaments similar to the ones presented here.

Earrings

1915-1935

Northwest Coast or Northern Plains

Haliotis shell (abalone), metal

McCord Museum, ME984X.261.1A-B

The beautiful iridescence of haliotis, or abalone, shells was attractive to many First Nations. Archaeological evidence shows that haliotis shell was a trade commodity in northwestern North America – part of a vast, ancient marine shell trade that included dentalium shell and olive snail. Haliotis was used for personal adornments, including labrets and jewellery, as well as appliquéd and inlaid on clothing and ceremonial objects, such as masks. Highly prized, it was an important status symbol.

Silver brooches

1780-1830

Haudenosaunee

Silver

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M995X.3.3, M995X.3.7, M995X.3.10, M995X.3.35, M995X.3.45, M995X.3.48, M996X.3.5, M996X.3.38, M996X.3.80, M996X.3.88, M996X.3.92, M996X.3.94, M996X.3.106, M996X.3.107, M996X.3.113

During the fur trade period, Europeans produced silver ornaments to distribute to First Nations as gifts and in exchange for furs. Silver possessed the same light-reflective quality as the ornaments they had traditionally made of natural materials like shell. Silver brooches of various sizes and designs were very popular with Haudenosaunee men and women, who wore large numbers of them on their clothes. The quantity was a mark of wealth and status.

Silver brooch

1785-1795

Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehaka

Silver

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M201

As gifts of silver ceased with the dwindling fur trade, Aboriginal silversmiths began crafting ornaments of their own. The Luckenbooth brooch – a single or double heart surmounted by a crown – is a Scottish design much favoured among the Haudenosaunee. Here it has been reinterpreted, with the double-heart terminating in eagle heads. Silver jewellery was carefully polished before being worn, as tarnished objects symbolized tarnished relationships.

D-Mouche-Kee-Kee-Awh, George Winter (1809-1876), observed 1837/executed about 1863-1871, watercolour on paper, intended for inclusion in the artist's *Journals*, Tippecanoe County Historical Association

This portrait of D-Mouche-Kee-Kee-Awh, a Potawatomi woman, illustrates how these silver brooches were worn.

2 – Wearing our culture

Vague forms come into view on the horizon. A small group quickly gathers, straining to identify those approaching. Are they family? Or strangers, perhaps friendly, perhaps not? Gradually, the shapes, colours and motifs of familiar clothing emerge, long before faces can be recognized. These are indeed friends, who speak the same language and share ancient traditions. Dress displays and reinforces cultural identity.

Today, First Nations, Inuit and Métis continue to nurture connections with specific communities and local histories, while also supporting broad allegiances. But there is room too for creativity and experimentation. Clothing plays a dynamic role in forging new cultural identities.

2.1 – Wearing our traditions

When Europeans came to North America in the 16th century, they set in motion a calamity of immense proportion. Contagious diseases like smallpox decimated entire indigenous communities. Warfare and displacement ensued. In the aftermath of this turbulent period, First Peoples survived by fashioning a new world. They preserved many ancient practices, while selectively incorporating foreign elements such as cloth and glass beads. Yet beneath outward appearances, clothing forms and designs show remarkable continuity.

Innu / Moccasins

1865-1930

Innu

Tanned and smoked hide, velvet, flannel, silk ribbon, embroidery floss, sinew, cotton thread

Gift of Mrs. Charles Wagner

McCord Museum, M974.57.1-2

Moccasins are undoubtedly the most widely produced and best known item of First Peoples clothing. Relatively standard in form, they come in a great variety of styles. Each community made and decorated their moccasins in such distinctive ways that Aboriginal peoples could often tell by a person's footwear which nation they belonged to. In their materials, patterns and ornamental design, moccasins are truly defined by their culture.

Olonakson / Moccasins

1840-1860

Wolastoqiyik or Passamaquoddy

Leather, glazed cotton, velveteen, glass beads, paper, cotton thread

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M8371.6-7

The tri-lobed motif seen on this pair of moccasins is common to the Wabenakis, the First Nations from southern Quebec, the Maritime Provinces and Maine. It appears more characteristically as an embellishment of the double-curve motif. Women believed in the power

inherent in the decoration they applied to the attire they made for their families. A representation of a sacred plant, for example, had a protective function. It is interesting to note that the designs on the tops of moccasins generally face the wearer.

Moccasins

1900-1915

Haudenosaunee

Tanned and smoked hide, cotton cloth, velvet, glass beads, cotton tape, wool tape, paper, cardboard, metal sequins, cotton thread

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M1078.9-10

The floral design on these moccasins is an evocation of the Haudenosaunee worldview – a visual reminder that berries, flowers and medicinal plants are gifts from the Creator. In the 19th century, the Haudenosaunee produced a wide variety of beaded objects to sell at popular tourist sites. These beaded moccasins were possibly made for sale to tourists, although they may also have been for Aboriginal use. Beadwork continues to be a major form of cultural expression.

Moccasins

1865-1920

Dene, Nêhithawak or Métis

Tanned and smoked moose and caribou(?) hide, embroidery floss, horsehair, porcupine quills, sinew, cotton thread

Gift of Rosanna Seaborn Todd

McCord Museum, M966.57.19.1-2

The pointed-toe moccasin style was at one time widespread in the Western Subarctic area. Here, the moose hide sole turns up around the foot and is seamed from the toe to the colourfully decorated upper. This upper is edged with three rows of horsehair strands bound by single strands of dyed horsehair. Flowers, either naturalistic or fanciful, were by far the most common decorative motif used in the region.

Mîkisaskisin / Moccasins

1920

Nêhiyawak

Tanned and smoked hide, glass beads, horsehair, tin-plated iron cones, pigment, sinew, cotton thread

Gift of the Art Association of Montreal

McCord Museum, ME928.8.1-2

Moccasins made by First Nations from the northern Plains are characterized by very elaborate beadwork. Certain symbolic designs evoking sacred places or beings aimed to provide the wearer with spiritual and physical protection. The triangular motifs on these moccasins represent mountains. Fully beaded moccasins are veritable labours of love, worn for important events such as the pipe ceremony, held to open discussions between nations: people seated opposite the wearer could admire the beaded soles.

Kamiik / Boots

1987

Iglulingmiut

Made by Hannah Aloooolo Akikulu (born 1950)

Sealskin, seal fur, synthetic sinew, polyester and cotton cloth, wool and polyester braid

Gift of Arnold and Betty Kobayashi Isssenman

McCord Museum, M2000.28.1.1-2

Of all the items of clothing made by Inuit women, footwear undoubtedly best illustrates their skill and knowledge. The severe winter conditions in the Arctic demanded footwear that would guarantee warm, dry feet. Traditionally, a person might don as many as five layers of foot protection, which included a caribou stocking (fur to the inside), an inner ankle boot and an outer boot, both of sealskin.

Outfit

1845-1855

Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehaka

Silk, stroud, muslin, mother-of-pearl (conch), cotton thread, wool cloth, brass beads

Gift of Dr. W. D. Lighthall

McCord Museum, M10568-M10570

First Peoples dress and adornment often reflect their exposure to foreign technologies, materials and styles. This silk dress, with its puffed sleeves and gathered waistline, displays the influence of mid-19th century Western fashion in several ways. Yet despite this borrowing of style and material, there is an evident continuity of form and cultural aesthetics: the silk ribbon appliqué on the bottom of the skirt and leggings, for example, is reminiscent of the porcupine quill embroidery adorning earlier pieces.

Waistcoat

1900-1925

Iyarhe Nakoda

Cotton canvas, tanned and smoked hide, glass beads, hair, shell, metal and brass beads, wool cloth, cotton thread

Formerly part of the Harry Hewett Baines Collection, gift of Mabel Molson

McCord Museum, M5338

The practice of reproducing Western-style garments and beading them began in the reservation period and reached its height in the 1890s. Women selected and reinterpreted Western clothing forms and materials, ornamenting them with elaborate beadwork that expressed community preferences. Particular application techniques, colours and patterns evolved into "community styles" that were quite distinct and easily recognizable.

E'pitewei a'gwesn / Woman's cap

1865-1875

Mi'kmaq

Wool cloth, silk ribbon, cotton thread, glass beads, sinew

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M97

The origin of the unique peaked cap or hood worn by Mi'kmaq women is uncertain, although it may derive from Basque headgear brought to the east coast of North America by early traders. Today, it is a cultural signifier of the Mi'kmaq. Made of wool cloth, the caps are generally beaded in an elaborate cosmological design of double-curves. Girls traditionally received these caps as coming-of-age gifts from female relatives -- often their mothers or grandmothers.

Mi'kmaq Elder Ellen Robinson, Ottawa, Ontario, 2011. Photo by Gilles Benoît, courtesy of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples

Akunishkeun / Woman's bonnet

1900-1925

Innu

Cotton cloth, wool cloth, silk ribbon, glass beads, shell buttons, cotton thread

Gift of E. S. Holloway

McCord Museum, ACC5703

As trade materials became more accessible, Aboriginal women created new forms of dress that integrated traditional elements into novel styles. Although the origin of the unique Innu woman's bonnet remains a mystery, it exemplifies this sharing of ideas. Made of red and blue wool cloth, the bonnets are decorated with beads in a typical Innu design. Before donning such a hat, a woman parted her hair in the middle and wrapped each section around a wooden block positioned near the ear. Today, women still wear such bonnets proudly on special occasions.

"Makusham," portrait of Marie-Angèle Bellefleur, Maliotenam, Quebec, 2012, Eddy Malenfant (born 1947), courtesy of Eddy Malenfant and Production Manitu inc.

Scraper

1870-1900

Northern Plains

Bone, cotton canvas, hide, sinew, metal, wool cloth, cotton thread

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ACC1102

The McCord's collection includes a number of tools. As well as bearing witness to the knowledge and skills of various nations, they are an integral part of cultural identity. Scrapers like this one were used to remove hair and flesh from skins, patterns were cut out with knives, and seams were sewn with sinew drawn through holes punched in the skin with a sharp awl. Much of the meaning of clothing is rooted in the time and care taken in its manufacture.

Scraper

1900-1930

Inuinnaq

Antler, metal, copper

Gift of the Arctic Institute of North America

McCord Museum, M21048

Scraper

1900-1905

Inuvialuit

Ivory, slate, iron, resin

Formerly part of the Forbes D. Sutherland Collection, gift of Margaret and Yvonne Sutherland

McCord Museum, ME930.20

Scraper

1965-1975

Made by Jimmish Einish

Naskapi

Bone, hide, cotton thread

McCord Museum, M977.98.3

Ulu / Woman's knife

1900-1930

Inuinnaq

Metal, copper, antler, bone

McCord Museum, ME982X.245

Traditionally, an Inuit woman's sewing kit consisted of a scraper, needles and a needle-case, sinew, an awl, a thimble and a thimble-guard, a boot-sole creaser, and an *ulu*. The *ulu*, sometimes called a semi-lunar knife, symbolized the Inuit woman and her work. Every girl was given one, to be used by her alone. When she married she took her *ulu* with her, and when she died, her *ulu* – or a miniature model of it – was buried alongside her.

Awl

1865-1900

Inuit

Bone, plant fibre

Gift of the Natural History Society of Montreal

McCord Museum, M12145.1-2

Needles

1000-1700

Thule

Bone, sinew

Gift of Alain Dubé and Véronique Hippolyte

McCord Museum, M2002.138.5.1-20

Needlecase and attachments

1900-1930

Inuinnaq

Bone, hide, sinew, cotton cloth, pigment

Gift of the Arctic Institute of North America

McCord Museum, M21092.0-4

Thimble

1910-1915

Inuinnaq

Bone

Gift of J. J. O'Neill

McCord Museum, ME982X.157

Sinew

1900-1930

Inupiat, Utqiagvimiut

Sinew

Gift of John A. Grose

McCord Museum, ME987X.71

Awl and awl case

1900-1911

Tsuu T'ina or Nêhiyawak

Wood, brass tack, metal

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ACC1031.1-2

Sewing bag

1800-1850

Dene

Goose or swan skin and claws, hide, sinew

Gift of the Natural History Society of Montreal

McCord Museum, M5054

This bag is made from the skins of goose or swan's feet, sewn together with sinew. The intricate stitching required to create such bags attests to the great knowledge and skill of Inuit and Dene women. As well as a woman's tools, sewing bags held sinew and pieces of skin for repairs. Sometimes they also contained more personal items, such as combs, charms and beads.

How to Make a Moose Hide by Zack O'Brien and Jeff Bell, The Gift of Language and Culture Project (TGLCP), 2011, 8 min 07 s
courtesy of TGLCP

The time and care devoted by Aboriginal women to the making of hide clothing goes far beyond the sewing and beadwork. This short video illustrates the many steps involved in preparing the hides. From scraping and cleaning to tanning and smoking, it is a long and labour-intensive process.

2.2 – Wearing our legends

First Peoples preserve and share their rich worldview through oral traditions – accounts and legends that have been passed down through generations. Stories are an eloquent form of cultural memory, linked to family, landscape and cosmology. They describe key people and events, clarify cultural status and affiliation, and recount tales of powerful, mythological creatures. Displayed on garments, these ancient stories provide comfort and guidance in a rapidly changing world.

Hat

1880-1920

Kwakwaka'wakw

Spruce root, paint, fibre

Gift of Gordon Reed

McCord Museum, ACC4999

Among Northwest Coast First Nations, clothing signifies wealth, power and affiliation. Crest symbols painted on hats or woven into textiles refer to stories owned by the wearer and his family that tell of mythical encounters with various creatures. In evoking the stories, the crests proclaim membership in a clan. The decoration on this hat depicts a legend involving a killer whale.

Sgaan Lihlaanjadaa Gyaahlaangaay / Legend of the Killer Whale Man / La légende de l'homme-épaulard, CBC Recording and Studio Plasma

Haida audio: narration by Steven Brown, 13 min 17 s

English audio: narration by Todd Brown, Steven Brown, Leo Gagnon, Jeffrey Williams, Tarah Samuels, Brendon Williams, 12 min 40 s

French audio: narration by Vincent Davy, 8 min 19 s

Five brothers are pulled to the bottom of the ocean and through a supernatural ceremony are transformed into killer whales.

2.3 – Wearing our present

Far from being static, the cultural identities of First Peoples are constantly undergoing renewal and revitalization. First Nations, Inuit and Métis often incorporate novel materials, techniques and motifs into traditional clothing forms. The interesting hybrid styles that result seem to straddle two worlds. Worn primarily at ceremonies, weddings, graduations and pow-wows, these garments reflect the past while embracing the future. In this way, dress helps negotiate the present.

Amauti / Woman's parka

1979

Nunavimmiut

Made by Surra Baron, Surra Annanack, Claire Etook and Ayanaylitok (beadwork)

Caribou, seal and dog fur, sinew, glass beads

Gift of Ian Lindsay

McCord Museum, M983.184

The *amauti* is perhaps the item of clothing that best illustrates how the past coexists with the present. Still made and worn today, the *amauti* is a living legacy that dates back thousands of years. By wearing these garments, Inuit women display their accomplishments and their pride in being a part of a rich culture. They also assert their determination to maintain a distinct identity, while adapting to changing times.

Girl's outfit

1999

Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehaka

Made by Pauline Loft

Velvet, satin ribbon, polyester and cotton cloth, cardboard, glass and plastic beads, cowrie shells, hide

Lent by the Kanien'kehaka Onkwawen:na Raotitiohkwa Cultural Center.

Today, despite the widespread availability of mass-produced clothing, the making of traditional-style garments remains a vital and respected activity in many communities. Beadwork is a prominent feature of the traditional dress of the Haudenosaunee. Worn mainly at ceremonial or community gatherings, these clothes reflect Haudenosaunee tastes and values. Special care is taken in making clothing for children – a tribute to their place in the world.

Young members of the Allegany River Indian Dancers, 2008, Stephanie Shultes, courtesy of the Iroquois Indian Museum, Howes Cave, New York

Jacket

2013

Made by Briony Goddard

Commercially tanned deer hide, melton cloth, glass beads

Lent by Briony Goddard

Some people make their own clothes, but beadwork specialists often receive commissions to produce items of exceptional quality and unique appearance. Artist Briony Goddard made this hide jacket. Her designs, worked in vintage and contemporary glass beads, incorporate traditional floral elements, which she intersperses with plants and flowers found locally in the client's home region. The result is a new hybrid design – stunning evidence of the artist's flexibility.

3 – Wearing our history

First Nations, Inuit and Métis children were first sent to residential schools in the late 19th century. They arrived wearing the distinctive clothing of their communities. Many had been finely dressed by their mothers to show that they came from loving homes. The children were quickly given short haircuts and made to wear uniforms. They were not allowed to speak their language or perform familiar ceremonies.

The residential school period is only one of many struggles endured by First Peoples since European contact. Their survival as distinct peoples is a testament to the power and resilience of their identity. Clothing has played a pivotal role in this process, for history is both lived and worn.

The pow-wow

While the origin of the pow-wow is still debated, during the reservation period such gatherings became a way for First Peoples to counter the demoralizing effects of government assimilation policies. Today, pow-wows serve to celebrate and affirm Aboriginal identity through song, dance

and dress that combine tradition with innovation. They also provide an opportunity to come together with non-Aboriginal peoples in a spirit of friendship, sharing and understanding.

3.1 – Wearing our honour

By the 1880s, most First Peoples in Canada had been settled on reserves. Despite ongoing oppression, this relatively stable period initiated an outburst of creative energy devoted to making and wearing distinctive clothing. Garments once reserved for warriors – the feather headdress for example – were now brought out for community and political events. Beaded bandolier bags became widely popular as markers of identity. Diplomatic exchanges gave rise to inventive new clothing combinations.

Eagle-feather headdress

1875-1925

Iyarhe Nakoda

Felt cap, eagle feathers, glass beads, ermine fur, hide, cotton thread, horsehair, dyes, resin (glue)

Formerly part of the Harry Hewett Baines Collection, gift of Mabel Molson

McCord Museum, M5347

The feather headdress is probably the best known component of Plains regalia. Traditionally, those made of eagle feathers were reserved for men of honour, as a sign of their leadership or accomplishments in warfare. Although the significance and symbolism of these headdresses have altered somewhat over time, they are still worn today by chiefs honoured by the community for their noteworthy achievements.

Bear claw necklace and ear ornaments

1875-1910

Tsuu T'ina or Nêhiyawak

Bear claws, brass and glass beads, bones, elk teeth, rawhide thongs

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ACC1045.1-3

Bears possess the admirable attributes of strength, power and courage. By wearing a necklace of bear claws, a man proclaimed his own skill and bravery. The spiritual power embodied in such an adornment also offered him protection. Bear claw necklaces, reserved traditionally for chiefs and elders, are a mark of distinction among most Plains nations.

Honour shirt

1880-1910

Niisitapiikwan

Tanned and smoked hide, glass beads, ermine fur, horsehair, feathers, wool cloth, cotton cloth, wool yarn, sinew, cotton thread, dye

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ACC1003

Much of the regalia worn by men reflected their position within political, military and religious societies. Only recognized leaders could wear shirts like this one, trimmed with human hair or horsehair. Hair locks, whether a gift of allegiance or taken from an enemy or an animal,

embodied personal honour. While First Peoples dress has adapted to changing times, regalia remains an important emblem of personal achievement and honour.

Group of Niisitapiikwan men, Calgary, Alberta, about 1908, attributed to Joseph K. Dixon (1863-1928), McCord Museum, MP-0000.338.4

Aazhoningwa'igan / Bandolier bag

1900-1919

Anishinaabe

Cotton cloth, velvet, glass beads, wool braid, wool yarn, cotton thread

Gift of C. S. Rackstraw

McCord Museum, ME954.1.24

Fashioned exclusively from European materials and adorned with thousands of beads, bandolier bags were primarily for show, as a symbol of identity, wealth and status. Sometimes called "friendship bags," they were often created as gifts to strengthen relationships within communities or between nations. Both men and women wore them, usually at ceremonies and celebrations. The wearing of more than one bag was generally the prerogative of a leader or a person of high honour.

Aboriginal man wearing two bandolier bags, about 1913, Daniel A. Ross, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota

Chief's outfit

1865-1900

Mi'kmaq

Stroud, silk, silk ribbon, grosgrain, metallic ribbon, cotton thread, glass beads, sinew

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M956.1-4

By the second half of the 19th century, garments made from imported textiles and styled after Western prototypes had become widely popular and extremely prestigious. Mi'kmaq chiefs wore coats modelled on the military greatcoats that were at one time presented as gifts by the British government. Many traditional elements remained, however. This coat, for example, is elaborately beaded with double-curve designs that evoke the Mi'kmaq worldview.

Mrs. Stephen Maloney, Judge Christopher Paul, Peter Paul and Mrs. John Jadis (seated) at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, 1905, Nova Scotia Museum, 13.15.a

Judge Paul (wearing a top hat) and Peter Paul are both dressed in coats similar to the one shown here.

3.2 – Wearing our struggles

Sometimes garments take on an agency of their own as reminders of historic events of great importance. So it is with this beaded pouch associated with the Battle of Batoche, the decisive battle of the Northwest Rebellion, fought in 1885. This unsuccessful uprising by the Métis, under Louis Riel, occurred in a period of enormous social change in western Canada. Amidst confusion and loss, this pouch survived as a powerful symbol of Métis identity.

Pigment bag

1875-1885

Nêhiyawak

Deer(?) hide, cotton tape, cord and thread, glass beads, pigment (vegetal or mineral)

Gift of David W. Armstrong

McCord Museum, M2005.70.3

This small pouch was used to carry red pigment for the face and body, a colour often associated with war. The bag was taken from a Nêhiyawak warrior who fought alongside the Métis at the Battle of Batoche, during the North-West Rebellion of 1885. It is a telling reminder of the many struggles of First Nations, Inuit and Métis to protect their rights, their land and their survival as distinct peoples.

The Indian Act

The anachronistically named *Indian Act*, passed in 1876, is one element in a long history of government policies aimed at assimilating Aboriginal peoples into mainstream Canadian life and values. The Act gave the Canadian federal government exclusive authority over all aspects of Aboriginal people's lives, including their right to express their culture and practice their traditions. While the *Indian Act* has undergone numerous amendments since 1876, much of it remains unchanged today.

Image 1:

Thomas Moore before and after his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School, Saskatchewan, 1874, Library and Archives Canada, NL-022474

As government and education policies were devised that aimed to assimilate First Peoples culture, children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to residential schools, where the process began. They were dressed in school uniforms, given Euro-Canadian names and forbidden to speak their language. Many suffered from malnutrition and disease, not to mention physical and emotional abuse. Some did not survive.

Images 2:

Brandon Indian Residential School (Brandon Industrial School), Manitoba, 1903(?), Wm. Notman & Son, McCord Museum, VIEW-3636

Moccasins were the only item of Aboriginal dress tolerated in residential schools.

3.3 – Wearing our resilience

The history of First Peoples is marked by resilience. When a Métis woman chose to mount her embroidered purse on a fashionable silver frame, she strengthened a traditional form while embracing innovation. During the Great Depression, Mohawk entertainers supported their families by donning inventive costumes: they exploited stereotypes to attract audiences. And today when Huron-Wendat chiefs dress in wool and silver, they transform materials that were once foreign. Clothing serves as a powerful site of both resistance and accommodation.

Embroidered shirt

1890-1910

Nêhithawak

Tanned and smoked moose hide, silk embroidery floss, cotton cloth, metal buttons, beaver(?) fur, cotton thread

Gift of Mrs. J. B. Learmont

McCord Museum, M5152

Shirts similar to this one appear frequently in early photographs of Métis, Nêhithawak and Dene men. They clearly reflect Aboriginal exposure to foreign materials and styles, yet in their essence they remain traditional: in their function, fabrication and decoration there is an evident continuity with the past. To the women who made them and the men who wore them, these shirts represent a determination to maintain a separate identity and to preserve cultural values.

Purse

1880-1890

Métis

Velvet, satin, glass beads, silver, brass and iron beads, embroidery floss, cotton thread

Gift of Julien F. Gaudet

McCord Museum, ME988.136.6

In the 19th century, Aboriginal and Métis girls were sent to mission schools, where they were taught the domestic arts of European-style sewing and embroidery. These skills were quickly adapted to traditional motifs. Floral beadwork became a trademark of the Métis, and the elaborate beadwork displayed on this purse exemplifies the intricate designs favoured by this nation's beaders. The silver clasp reflects a willingness to incorporate elements of contemporary fashion.

Armbands

1817-1828

Made by Jonathan Tyler (active 1817-1828)

Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehaka

Silver

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M172.1-2

Silver gorget

1817-1828

Made by Jonathan Tyler (active 1817-1828)

Anishinaabe

Silver

Gift of David Ross McCord

McCord Museum, M410

Diplomatic relations between Euro-Canadians and First Nations included the exchange of gifts. Important among these were silver adornments such as gorgets, armbands and brooches, which became emblems of alliance. Although it is rarely possible to identify the owner of a piece of trade silver, this gorget bears the name "Pandigue," which according to Anishinaabe scholar

Alan Corbiere is likely a misspelling of Baandige (He Who Enters) – a prominent Anishinaabe chief.

Sash

1765-1766

Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehaka

Wool, glass beads

Gift of Robert W. Reford

McCord Museum, M8486

Aboriginal people had been finger-weaving dyed or plain plant fibres – hemp, for example – into sashes long before the arrival of Europeans. Following the introduction of European wool yarns, First Nations women embraced the new materials to create finger-woven sashes, or *ceintures fléchées*, which they sometimes decorated with white beads. These sashes became an important part of men's formal wear in many communities across Canada.

Chief Philippe Vincent, Quebec City, Quebec, about 1880, Jules-Ernest Livernois (1851-1933), McCord Museum, MP-1985.65.2

Huron-Wendat chief Philippe Vincent wears a wool coat, silver armbands, a silver gorget and a sash similar to those presented here.

Outfit probably worn at Chief Poking Fire Village

1936-1940

Haudenosaunee, Kanien'kehaka

Great horned owl feathers, commercial hide, glass beads, paper, cotton thread, felt, cloth, ribbon, deer hide

Gift of Philip MacKenzie

McCord Museum, ME986.147.1-6

In the midst of the Great Depression, as many struggled to survive, John McComber, better known as Chief Poking Fire, built his "Indian Village" in Kahnawà: ke. Visitors from all over the world came to see dance performances and took home a vast array of beaded souvenirs. The village brought Kanien'kehaka families income during these difficult times. Performers wore clothing that corresponded to a tourist's idea of "authentic" dress. Today, these outfits have come to symbolize Haudenosaunee resilience and accommodation.

Portrait of Chief Poking Fire and his grandsons, Caughnawaga (Kahnawà: ke), Quebec, about 1945, gift of David Gawley, McCord Museum, M2012.102.197

4 – Wearing our beliefs

In the spiritual universe of First Peoples, all things are animate and interrelated. Animals and humans are equal and speak the same language. Lightning, trees, stalks of corn – all are alive. Powerful visionaries called shamans, or angakkuit by the Inuit, serve as intermediaries between people and this complex spirit world. Shamans can look into the future, influence the weather, observe the movements of far-off animals and cure the sick.

For many First Peoples, their spiritual identity is the most profound connection they have to the ancient worldview of their ancestors. Clothing plays a key role in sustaining these beliefs. Shamans and believers use dress as a canvas for the expression of cosmological beauty and power.

4.1 – Wearing our universe

The garments made and worn by First Nations, Inuit and Métis are infused with spiritual meaning. Ivory amulets that shimmer and tinkle on the belt of an Inuit angakkuq offer protection from powerful forces. Elaborate beadwork designs on Haudenosaunee leggings express fundamental concepts of duality and balance. All is significant in this dynamic, interconnected universe – from the selection of materials, tools and techniques, to the choice of colours and motifs.

Pouch

1840-1860

Central Plains

Hide, glass beads, tin cones, cotton thread, ochre(?)

Gift of the Estate of Marc and Gilberte Cinq-Mars

McCord Museum, M2005.115.38

Certain articles of dress express the essence of the world on their small surfaces. The circle is a sacred motif, representing the belief that the Creator caused everything in nature to be a continuous cycle. Life mirrors the cycling of the seasons, the daily rising of the sun and the phases of the moon. The equal-arm cross in the centre of this pouch divides the space into four quadrants, simultaneously suggesting the four cardinal directions, the four winds, the four seasons and the four periods of human life.

Leggings

1893

Made by Mary Jacobs

Haudenosaunee

Wool cloth, glass beads, braid, cotton cloth

Formerly part of the Edward Marion Chadwick Collection

McCord Museum, M12537.1-2

Common to many nations of eastern North America, the double-curve motif expresses vital symbols of their universe. For the Haudenosaunee, double curves may suggest the movement of Sky Woman as she walked around the Great Turtle's back. Shown emerging from the top of the Sky Dome, they represent the Celestial Tree – the central axis of the universe. Paired and facing in opposite directions, they evoke the duality of Sky Woman's twin sons.

Shaman's belt

1930-1965

Netsilingmiut

Hide, sinew, antler

Gift of Air Canada

McCord Museum, M999.105.7

Shamans, called *angakkuut* in Inuktitut, hold a special position within their group. Both feared and respected, these men and women have traditionally served as mediators between the community and the spirit world. In the Central Arctic, the *angakkuq* traditionally wore a distinctive belt and headdress. The model knives dangling from the belt were gifts from people who the shaman had helped or who were hoping to receive favours. As the *angakkuq* moved, the tinkling of the ornaments awakened spirits and heightened awareness of the shaman's presence and power.

4.2 – Wearing animal power

The survival of hunting peoples has always depended on a deep and respectful relationship with the animal world. First Peoples reflect this bond through dress that symbolically transforms them into prey. They create garments that wrap the wearer in an animal's coat – aligning limbs, accentuating forms with beadwork, even adding a stylized tail. Inuit parkas incorporate different furs to project animal qualities, like strength and wisdom. Such practices illustrate the profound transformations that lie at the heart of spiritual identity.

Qulittuq and qarliik / Parka and trousers

1900-1930

Inuinnaq, Kilusiktormiut

Caribou fur, sinew

McCord Museum, ME966X.127.1-2

Inuit clothes help transform their wearers, allowing them to acquire the strength, wisdom and spiritual power of the animals the garments are made from. For example, the white fur panels on the chest of this man's parka represent the caribou's dewlap, under which beats its great heart. The light and dark inserts on the upper arms signify the strength of the animal's shoulder muscles, which the hunter must emulate. Even the hood maintains the resemblance, for it still bears the animal's ears.

4.3 – Wearing spiritual respect

Beyond meeting practical requirements and expressing cultural aesthetics, dress can invoke powerful magic aimed at pleasing the spirits of animals. Whether their creations are woven, stitched, painted, quilled or beaded, women devote great attention to producing garments of remarkable beauty. They understand the key role that finely made clothing plays in hunting success. Animals that are honoured and respected will literally give themselves to the hunter.

Shin Gwi'ik / Summer outfit

1850-1880

Gwich'in

Unsmoked caribou hide, porcupine quills, silver-willow seeds, sinew, red ochre

Formerly part of the Edward Marion Chadwick Collection

McCord Museum, ME983X.87, M12521

Among the Dene, ornamentation on clothing was both an expression of cultural aesthetics and an invocation of spiritual power. The quilled, beaded and painted designs on their garments were intended to please and honour the spirits of the animals they hunted, thereby ensuring the success of the hunt. An animal whose spirit was honoured would give itself up willingly to the hunter. Red pigment applied along the seams protected the wearer from spirits that might try to insinuate themselves.

Belt

1865-1900

Dene Tha'

Velvet, porcupine quills, glass beads, cotton thread, dyes

Formerly part of the Edward Marion Chadwick Collection

McCord Museum, M12542

Garters

1865-1900

Gwich'in or Dene Tha'

Wool cloth, cotton cloth, porcupine quills, glass beads, cotton thread, sinew(?)

McCord Museum, M4194, M4195

Tehmíe tth'éeé / Babiche bag

1875-1900

Tlicho

Tanned and smoked hide, babiche, glass beads, iron and brass beads, wool yarn, cotton cloth, sinew, pigment

Gift of Mrs. J. B. Learmont

McCord Museum, M4910

Net bags made of babiche (strips of rawhide) carried the provisions needed on a hunting trip as well as freshly killed game. The top edge usually featured a decorative treatment of folded porcupine quills or beads. Red ochre and tassels of animal hair or – as in this case – wool often adorned the sides. Women played a vital role in attracting animals during a hunt: the beautiful clothes and accessories they made pleased and honoured the animal spirits, for they proved that the animals' bodies were being well cared for and respected.

Dress

1900-1910

Niisitapiikwan, Siksika(?)

Hide, glass beads, metal, fibre

Gift of Dr. John L. Todd

McCord Museum, ACC1000

The two-hide dress, a favourite pattern in the mid-19th century, was made by joining two deer hides together, positioning the tail area just below the neck opening. Women preferred the hides of female animals, as they thus acquired certain desirable properties from the animal. Here, by adding beaded inserts at the base of the dress that represent the animals' kidneys, the maker paid respect to the beings whose hides had been used.

An exhibition produced by the McCord Museum, under the direction of Suzanne Sauvage, President and Chief Executive Officer, and Sylvie Durand, Director, Programs

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The McCord Museum wishes to thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance:

Joséphine Bacon, Tammy Beauvais, Alan Corbiere, Stéphane Dandeneau, Viviane Gray, Heather Igloliorte, Jennine Krauchi, Catherine Anne Martin, Mary Louise Martin, Maxine Matilpi, Pakesso Mukash, Nakuset, Jeff Thomas, Evelyn Vanderhoop, Stanley Vollant, Karen Wright-Fraser.

The Museum also wishes to thank all of its employees who contributed, directly or indirectly, towards this exhibition.

This project has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Appel de projets pour le soutien des expositions permanentes program, part 4 of the Fonds du patrimoine culturel québécois of the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec.

The conservation of the artefacts in this exhibition was made possible through the generosity of The Molson Foundation.