

## Upper Missouri Shirt, c.1830

**Object:** H. M. Grimmer Inventory #31094. A man's 'poncho-style' shirt with quilled decorated strips. Attributed to the tribes of the Upper Missouri River region, probably Mandan or Hidatsa, c.1835. The shirt is made of native-tanned hide; dyed porcupine quills; maiden fern; Stroud cloth and sinew. The shirt is 44" wide and 34" long.

**Provenance:** Bill Chastain, a dealer, Albuquerque, NM;  
To Peter Mansfield, AZ, acquired in 1981-82;  
To Cody Old West Auctions, MT, 2007;  
To GrimmerRoche, Santa Fe, NM;  
To a private collection, CA, 2008.

### **Artistic and Historical Significance:**

*By Thomas Cleary*

Pre 1850 quilled and pictographic shirts from the Upper Missouri region are among the most celebrated objects in Plains Indian Art. These shirts were created during a unique period in history, in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when an influx of horses and western trade goods in the Upper Missouri River area stimulated a rise in the nomadic warrior culture. To the Hidatsa and Mandan, these quilled shirts were the prized possessions of a newly emerging generation of warrior elite. To the earliest generations of Anglo-Europeans who saw them, these shirts were among the first large-scale curiosities to emerge from the 'Noble Savage' and his romanticized Spartan-like culture.

The subject shirt is of a rare type, of which less than a dozen are known (Figures 1-3). Similar shirts reside in important institutional collections, most notably the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC; the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA; the Berne Historical Museum in Berne, Switzerland; the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the Pignorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome, Italy (Figures 12-14). In 2015, an unknown quilled pictographic shirt was discovered in Ireland, having been originally collected by British officer Captain Raymond Harvey de Montmorency sometime between 1865 and 1867 (Figure 10). The Montmorency shirt was later acquired at auction in 2016 by the Bradford Brinton Museum in Big Horn, WY. The subject shirt was collected in the early 1980s and is one of two known examples not currently housed in an institution.

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The subject shirt typifies the quilled pictographic style: it utilizes a binary construction, whereby two brain-tanned hides – probably deer or antelope – have been sinew sewn together at the shoulders to create a poncho-like form (Figure 5). The arms are made from the front section of the hide and attached at the shoulders. Covering the shoulder and arm seams are rectangular panels decorated with naturally dyed porcupine quillwork. Attached to the chest and back of the shirt are rosettes ornamented with radiating lanes of quillwork with black vegetal accents.<sup>1</sup> The quillwork is fastened using a wrapped technique. Accenting the neck opening of the shirt on either side is a rectangular bib made of red Stroud cloth.<sup>2</sup> The body of the shirt is painted with a program of pictographs, including bears paws, enemy heads being lanced, ‘X’-like marks and stacked pipes.

Quillwork is perhaps one of the oldest decorative traditions in the Plains, particularly the Upper Missouri region. Siouan speaking tribes migrating from the Great Lakes brought the art form into the Upper Missouri in the 1600s. The Arikara, the Mandan and the Hidatsa, long-time residents of the Upper Missouri (Figure 4), embraced quillwork as an artistic tradition and quickly achieved a high proficiency with it. These tribes were so successful that they often traded their quilled decorative strips with outlying tribes for horses and hides. Because they were attached separately onto individual hides, these prized quilled works could be recycled onto newer shirt bodies.

Such quilled pictographic shirts consequently were honorary emblems, traditionally worn by an elite few. By the mid-19th century, shirts had become important garments in Plains material culture. Referring to a similarly constructed Blackfoot shirt from the 1830s, Plains scholar Theodore Brasser writes:

“From the open construction of these poncho shirts, it is evident they were not intended to protect their owners against inclement weather. They were ceremonial regalia, restricted to outstanding warriors, ritual leaders, and chiefs. Many men declined to make use of their rights to such a prestigious shirt, as they were afraid of ridicule if they did not live up to the expectations of great courage and generosity that come with such an honor. These shirts might originate from visionary experiences, be acquired as the ceremonial

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<sup>1</sup> Research by Plains scholar Candace Greene has explored the use of maiden fern in pre 1850s Plains quillwork. The fern functioned typically as a black framing element in early quillwork patterns. The inclusion of this vegetal element seems to have been particularly popular in the Upper Missouri/TransMontaigne region at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> Stroud cloth is a term which describes a woolen cloth that was manufactured in Stroud, a market town in Gloucestershire, England. The cloth was chiefly used for the production of red British military uniforms between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cloth also proved to be an exceedingly popular trade commodity to the tribes of North America, largely because indigenous artists had difficulty procuring red dyes themselves. The cloth (and the dyes which composed it) became a coveted fashion accessory on the Plains and was heavily incorporated into the material culture therein. This included, but was not limited to objects like shirts, dresses, weapon ornamentation and shot pouches. (See Corey in Bibliography.)

regalia for ritual leaders, or be granted by a warrior society to a man of outstanding bravery.”<sup>3</sup>

Pictographic shirts evolved from the ancient tradition of tattooing and the underlying desire to convey social standing through symbolism.<sup>4</sup> The quillwork, meanwhile, developed from the need to elegantly cover up unsightly seams in hide garments. These practices coalesced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to create shirts that were the ultimate expressions of wealth and social prowess. At the same time, these shirts carried with them a meaning and purpose that was specific to the wearer.

Our understanding of these rare objects is still evolving, however. Collective evidence suggests that this style of shirt was in vogue by the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where it was seemingly adopted by most of the Upper Missouri River region.<sup>5</sup> George Catlin (1796-1872) painted portraits of Blackfoot, Plains Ojibwa, Assiniboine and Sioux men wearing such shirts along the Upper Missouri River in the 1830s (Figures 15-16).<sup>6</sup> Yet, all of the extant shirts of this style have misleading collection histories. Shirts were occasionally circulated through intertribal exchange, war and gift-giving.<sup>7</sup> A shirt could start off with one tribe and hypothetically be traded to another well before being collected.

Scholars have therefore assigned different dates and tribal attributions to these garments over the years. The specimen at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh was reportedly collected from a Yankton Sioux chief in 1837 shortly after a battle with the Hidatsa (Figure 13).<sup>8</sup> A Smithsonian shirt collected by artist John Mix Stanley in 1853 has a Blackfoot attribution (Figure 12);<sup>9</sup> so too did the Montmorency shirt when it sold at auction in 2016 (Figure 10),<sup>10</sup> even though this attribution has since been informally debated amongst experts.<sup>11</sup> Norm Feder,

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<sup>3</sup> Gaylord Torrence et al, *The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 2014): 136.

<sup>4</sup> Castle McLaughlin, *Arts of Diplomacy: Lewis & Clark's Indian Collection* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003), p.164.

<sup>5</sup> The Upper Missouri River region is a culture area which geographically corresponds with flow of the Missouri River in North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this region was principally inhabited by the Crow, the Blackfoot, the Arikara, the Mandan, the Hidatsa and the Sioux. Their close proximity to one another as well as fur trader forts along the river made this area a burgeoning center for commerce and artistic exchange. Consequently, it is almost impossible to give accurate tribal designations to shirts from this area and period.

<sup>6</sup> George Catlin's portraits of *Buffalo Bull's Back Fat* (Blackfoot, 1832), *Eagle's Ribs* (Blackfoot, 1832), *Pigeon's Egg Head* (Assiniboine, 1831), *The Six* (Plains Ojibwa, 1832) and *One Horn* (Sioux, 1832) depict important headmen from different tribes of the Upper Missouri River region all wearing similar shirts.

<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, p.163-165.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Feder, "Plains Pictographic Painting and Quilled Rosettes," *American Indian Art Magazine* 5.2 (1980): 57.

<sup>9</sup> Candace Greene, "The Use of Plant Fibers in Plains Indian Embroidery," *American Indian Art Magazine* 40.2 (2015): 62.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Cowdrey, *Blackfeet War Chief's Shirt and Leggings of the 1830s* (Boston, MA: Skinners Inc., 2016), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cowdrey, in a 2016 promotional essay published by Skinners, Inc., concluded that the Montmorency outfit is Blackfoot. Yet, this attribution has been informally debated by other experts in the field. The checkerboard

however, asserted in a published study in 1980 that three of these quilled pictographic shirts were more than likely drawn by the same artist or artists.<sup>12</sup> Individual research by Plains scholars Arni Brownstone,<sup>13</sup> Christian Feest and Michael G. Johnson has subsequently confirmed that the artists are either Mandan or Hidatsa.<sup>14</sup>

It has long been thought that the key to unlocking the differences in these shirts lies in understanding the pictorial program and the quillwork style of each shirt. These unique features not only suggest something about the individual wearer, but perhaps also the affiliated tribe. Plains warrior earned social standing through acts of leading of war parties, ‘gift giving’,<sup>15</sup> ‘horse steals’,<sup>16</sup> killing and ‘counting coup’ (non-fatally striking or touching the enemy with a coup stick). Each act conveyed a necessary quality – be it leadership, bravery, generosity, wealth or skill – but a first strike was perhaps an act valued above all others. Warrior-artists who had achieved these acts were consequently eager to portray them on their clothes for all to see.

The subject shirt has series of pictorials which are linked to the Mandan and Hidatsa warrior cultures.<sup>17</sup> The lanced heads likely represent kills.<sup>18</sup> An older shirt from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, MA, bears similar markings. (Figure 6, the Peabody shirt, was collected c.1819 and has been attributed to the Mandan.) Another shirt attributed to the Mandan, c.1820, has horizontal ‘pipe’ markings. George P. Horse Capture, co-author of *Beauty, Honor, and Tradition: The Legacy of Plains Indian Shirts* discusses the markings:

“On the back of the shirt, the warrior-artist has painted, on the right side, fourteen wide horizontal bars ending with inverted triangles. These represent pipes. To carry a pipe

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quillwork on the outfit’s leggings, the drawing style, and the overlap of quillwork panels on drawn pictorials suggests ownership by several tribes at different stages, other than Blackfoot.

<sup>12</sup> Feder: 55.

<sup>13</sup> Arni Brownstone, “European Influence in the Mandan-Hidatsa Graphic Works Collected By Prince Maximilian of Wied,” *American Indian Art Magazine*. 39. 3 (2014): 63-64.

<sup>14</sup> Michael G. Johnson, “Wanata’s Costume in Edinburgh: An Early Example of a Yanktonai Sioux Ceremonial Warrior Costume?: Comparing the Man’s Shirt with other surviving similar Specimens,” *People of the Buffalo: Volume 2* (Wyk auf Foehr, Germany: Tatanka Press, 2005), p.182.

<sup>15</sup> See Figure 13. The multiple “bow tie” elements which frame the central pictorials are symbolic of gifts given. Prince Maximilian of Weid noted the importance of this symbol during his travels in the Upper Missouri River region in the 1830s. The giving of gifts was an important social-political, practiced both internally and externally in a tribe. This not only testified to the wealth of the giver, it also demonstrated his generosity.

<sup>16</sup> Horses were a major source of wealth on the Plains – one upon which the nomadic Plains Indians depended. Plains Indians traded extensively for them and often stole them in order to improve their own herd sizes. Successful ‘horse steals’ often afforded warriors more wealth.

<sup>17</sup> The Mandan and Hidatsa were both sedentary groups that lived nearby one another in the Upper Missouri River. Unlike other Upper Missouri groups, the Mandan and Hidatsa practiced farming in addition to buffalo hunting. The material cultures of these tribes came to be very similar as a consequence.

<sup>18</sup> Evan Mauer, *Visions of the People: A Pictorial History of Plains Indian Life* (Minneapolis, MN: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1992), p.184-185.

during a war party was an honor reserved for men held in high regard within the community. Each wide bar is the stem of a pipe, and the triangle is the bowl.”<sup>19</sup>

These specific markings are not unique to the Mandan or Hidatsa warrior culture. Yet, the manner in which these pictographs are drawn and the areas in which they are found on the subject shirt are similar to earlier known Hidatsa and Mandan examples.

Most significant are the different ‘X’ forms which decorate the front and back of the shirt. These exploit marks have specific meaning to the Hidatsa, Mandan and Arikara. According to Garrick Mallery, a Bureau of American Ethnology researcher specializing in Native American pictographs: the Arikara, a drawn ‘X’ means that the wearer killed an enemy, while among the Hidatsa and Mandan, it means that the wearer was the first to strike a fallen enemy with a coup stick (Figure 8).<sup>20</sup> This symbol and its meaning are confirmed by a pair of Mandan leggings that were collected in 1911 (Figure 9). A Hidatsa warrior-artist Wolf Ghost, who painted the leggings, noted that the ‘X’ markings indicate a ‘first strike’ on the enemy in Hidatsa culture. The subject shirt also has ‘X’s which are accompanied by upside-down ‘U’s in the quadrants. These ‘U’ symbols likely refer to horse hooves and might therefore be a reference to ‘horse steals’.

This research indicates the wearer of the subject shirt was a highly accomplished Hidatsa or Mandan warrior. He led four war parties and killed six enemies; he counted coup and participated in several successful ‘horse steals’ and coup counts. Equally important is that the wearer has bear paws on his shirt alongside his warrior resume. Bears were revered on the Plains for their ferocity and strength and only the bravest warriors would risk hunting them. To therefore include bear imagery on a shirt was significant, as the wearer had to have been inspired by a vision in which a bear spirit approached him. This allegiance with a highly revered and ferocious animal speaks to the character of the owner.

By the 1850s, the political landscape of North America was changing. The cession of Mexico’s northern territories to the United States government in 1848, coupled with the discovery of gold in California in 1849, made the Plains a hub of activity, particularly for the tribes of the Upper Missouri. Quilled pictographic shirts from the Upper Missouri region had become the celebrated curiosities and highly desirable collectables in the wake of this. Captain Raymond Harvey de Montmorency (1835-1902) and John Mix Stanley (1814-1872) are among the few Anglo travelers to have collected them. In the John Mix Stanley painting, *The Last of the Their Race* (c.1857), Stanley displays a quilled pictorial shirt – the same one he collected in the

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Horse Capture and George Horse Capture, *Beauty, Honor, and Tradition: The Legacy of Plains Indian Shirts* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.54-55.

<sup>20</sup> Garrick Mallery, *Picture Writing of the American Indians: Volume I* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1972), Fig. 572.

1850s – in the middle of the composition (Figure 11). About this painting, Peter Hassrick, Director Emeritus at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, WY, writes:

“The Last of Their Race is an allegory of the vanishing race...Stanley arranged a multigenerational group of American Indians on a rocky outcropping...A centrally placed warrior, recognized as such from his decorated shirt...forms the apex of the group.”<sup>21</sup>

Arguably among his most important works, *The Last of Their Race* features the Smithsonian shirt at the center of the painting’s composition. Stanley selected this shirt to help portray American Indians in what he perceived to be their most authentic clothing. To him, the shirt was nostalgically emblematic of Plains warrior culture. The mid-century gave way to a new style of Plains shirt. Imported glass beads from Venice had become a popular medium in the stead of quillwork – although tribes like the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara maintained their quilling traditions. As Stanley’s painting suggests, shirts like the subject one became native heirlooms and highly desirable ‘curiosities’ amongst Anglo-European collectors.

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Hassrick and Mindy Besaw, *Painted Journeys: The Art of John Mix Stanley* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), p. 93-95.

**Images:**



**Figure 1.** H. M. Grimmer Inventory #31094, referred to herein as the 'subject shirt'. A man's 'poncho-style' shirt with quilled decorated strips. Attributed to the tribes of the Upper Missouri River region, probably Mandan, c.1835. The shirt is made of native-tanned hide; dyed porcupine quills; maiden fern; Stroud cloth and sinew. The shirt is 44" wide and 34" long.



**Figure 2.** A detail of the subject shirt shown in Figure 1. The detail shows a pictorial program which includes lanced heads, bear paws and stacked pipes. These pictorials demonstrate the prowess of the original wearer.

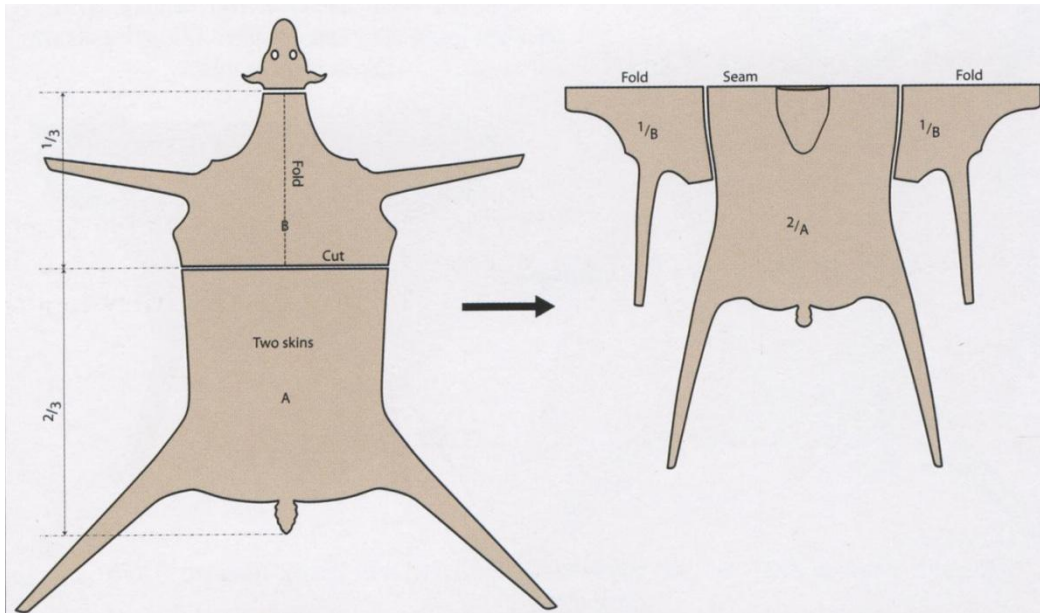




**Figure 3.** The reverse side of the subject shirt shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 4.** A map showing the approximate geographical locations of various Plains tribes (during the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century). Note the proximity of the tribes located along the Upper Missouri River.



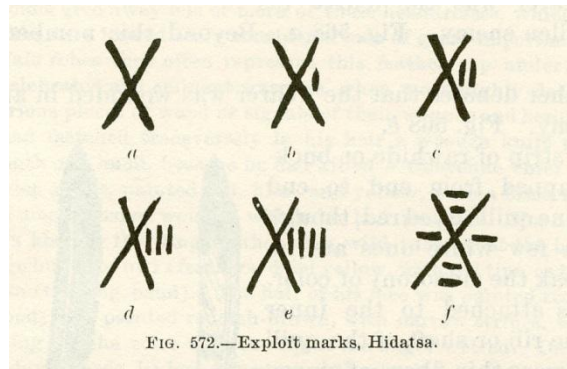
**Figure 5.** Diagram showing how a two skin, poncho-style shirt was constructed. This style was particularly popular in the Central and Northern Plains in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 6.** A man's 'poncho-style' shirt with quilled decorated strips. Attributed to the Mandan, c.1820. The shirt is made of native-tanned hide; dyed porcupine quills; maiden fern; hair locks and sinew. This shirt was collected in 1929 by George Heye in Paris, France. This shirt is currently part of the collection at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC (Cat. 16.5277).



**Figure 7.** A man's 'poncho-style' shirt with quilled decorated strips. Attributed to the Mandan, c.1800-1830. The shirt is made of native-tanned hide; dyed porcupine quills; natural pigments; maiden fern; hair locks and sinew. The shirt is 30" wide and 50" long. This shirt was possibly collected c. 1819 from Roderick McKenzie; it was subsequently acquired in 1890 by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University in Cambridge, MA (90-17-10/49309).



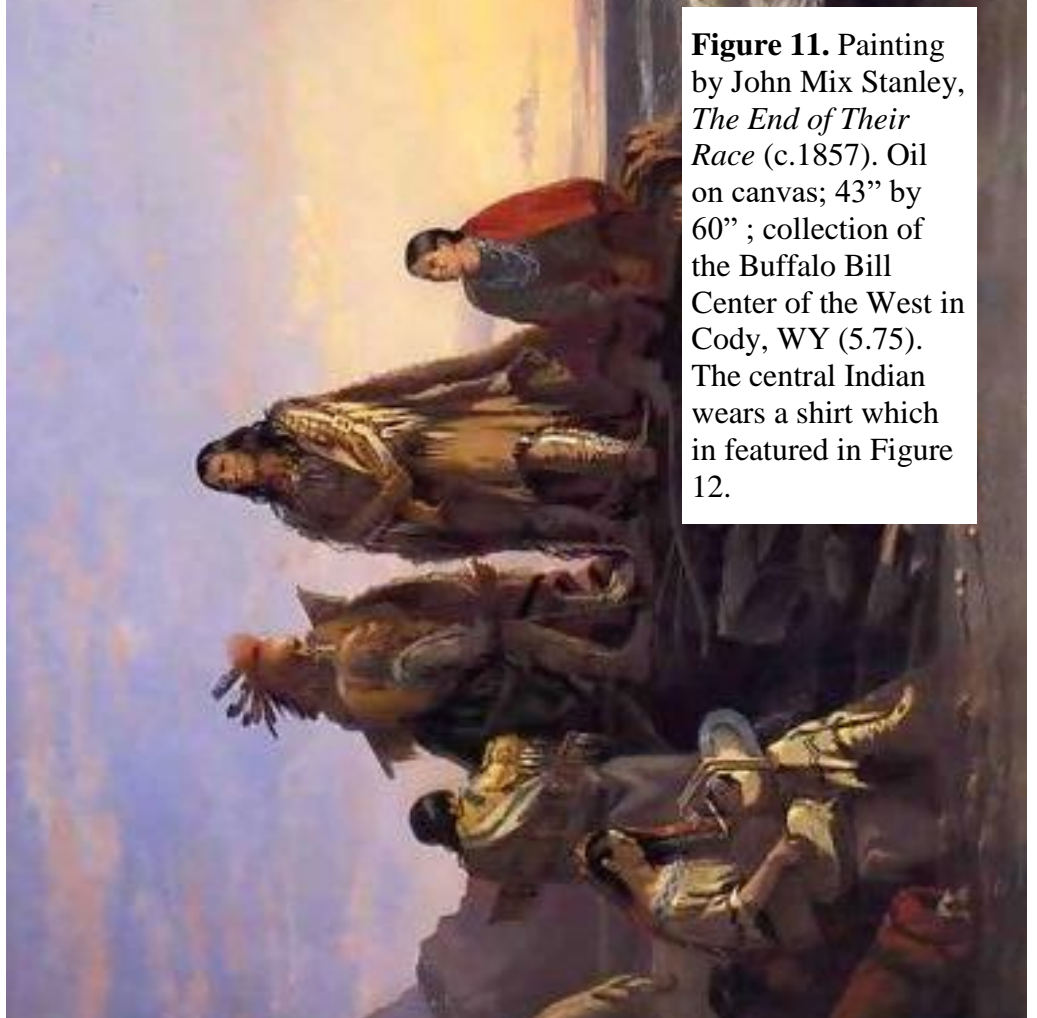
**Figure 8.** Excerpts from Garrick Mallery’s book, *Picture Writing of the American Indians* (1972). These exploit marks have slightly varying meanings among the Hidatsa, Mandan and Arikara informants that Garrick Mallery interviewed. Among the Arikara, Figure a.) means that the wearer killed an enemy, while among the Hidatsa and Mandan, it means that the wearer was the first to strike a fallen enemy with a coup stick. Figure b.) among the Hidatsa and Mandan represents the second person to strike a fallen enemy, while among the Arikara it means the first to strike coup. Figures c.) through Figure e.) have similar differences among the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara, with Figure e.) only being used by the Arikara to designate the fourth person to strike coup (as Figure d.) represents that among the Hidatsa and Mandan). According to the Hidatsa, Figure f.) means that the wearer had figured in four encounters; the lateral marks to each side meaning he was the second to strike coup on two occasions, and the third to strike coup on two other occasions.



**Figure 9.** A pair of quilled leggings. Attributed to the Mandan (leggings) and Hidatsa (painting), c.1890. The leggings are made of native-tanned hide; dyed porcupine quills and natural pigments. Each legging measures 34” long. The leggings were collected c.1911 by Gilbert Wilson and subsequently acquired by the American Museum of Natural History in Washington DC (AMNH 50.1/6017b, a). The Hidatsa painter of these leggings, Wolf Ghost, claimed that the painted designs on the right (Mandan design) and left (Hidatsa design) leggings represented the same honor mark for striking the enemy. The subject shirt has the same ‘X’ symbols.



**Figure 10.** A man's 'poncho-style' shirt with quilled decorated strips. Attributed to the Blackfoot, c.1830. The shirt is made of native-tanned hide, dyed porcupine quills, natural pigments, maiden fern, hair locks and sinew. The shirt is 30'' wide and 50'' long. This shirt was possibly collected c. 1819 from Roderick McKenzie; it was subsequently acquired in 1890 by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University in Cambridge, MA (90-17-10/49309).



**Figure 11.** Painting by John Mix Stanley, *The End of Their Race* (c.1857). Oil on canvas; 43” by 60” ; collection of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, WY (5.75). The central Indian wears a shirt which is featured in Figure 12.



**Figure 12.** A quilled man's shirt with painted pictorials. Attributed to the Blackfoot, c. 1835; it is 47" wide and 69" long. The shirt was collected in 1836 by Western artist John Mix Stanley (1814-1872) and is currently part of the collection at National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (Cat # 16/5207). This shirt was prominently featured in Stanley's paintings. See Figure 11.

In spite of the museum's tribal designation of 'Blackfoot', several scholars have concluded that Figures 13, 14, and this shirt, were all painted by a Mandan or Hidatsa artist.





**Figure 13.** A quilled man's shirt with painted pictorials. Attributed to the Yanktonai, Sioux; 53" long. The shirt was collected in 1836 by chief Wanata and is currently part of the collection at National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, Scotland. Note the 'bowties' around the perimeter of the shirt, these denote 'gifts given' – an act of generosity in Plains warrior culture.



**Figure 14.** A quilled man's shirt with painted pictorials. Attributed to the tribes of the Upper Missouri (probably Mandan or Hidatsa), c. 1830-40; 34" long. The shirt is currently part of the collection at National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC (# 403, 344-A) Note the stylistic variation of two smaller quilled rosettes, as opposed to a larger central disc. This design seems to have been a variant style that was also prevalent. See Figure 16.



**Figure 15.** Portrait by George Catlin, *Peh-Tó-Pe-Kiss, Eagle's Ribs, A Piegan Chief*, (1832) Oil on canvas; 29" by 24"; in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (# 1985.66.160). This style of shirt was particularly popular for the tribal elite in the Upper Missouri in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Figures 1, 10, 12, 13, 14 are all extant examples of this shirt's type.



**Figure 16.** Portrait by George Catlin, *Sha-Có-Pay, The Six, Chief of the Plains Ojibwa*, (1832). Oil on canvas; 29" by 24"; in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (# 1985.66.182). This portrait shows a variation of the shirt style that was also popular. See Figure 14.

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