

## WOMAN'S DRESS

*Mescalero Apache, Circa 1880  
New Mexico  
Native tanned hide, seed beads, tin  
cones, pigment, commercial cloth  
52" long and 42" wide (dress)  
#31224*

### PROVENANCE:

*Ex Maria Eva Fritz, née Whitlock  
(1858-1952), collected before 1898*

*Ex Dolan-Fritz Collection  
Handed down by descent*

### EXHIBITED:

*Old Lincoln County Courthouse  
Museum, Lincoln, NM  
Exhibited between 1955 and 1978*

Apache dresses typically consist of a yoke, and an accompanying skirt. Often referred to collectively as a "Puberty Dress", these items were typically made for affluent Apache females upon their entering womanhood. These ensembles were carefully preserved for formal occasions and often handed down as heirlooms. The tailoring of this particular outfit is unique, as it suggests an Eastern Apache origin. Outfits like the subject one are not altogether common. One notable Mescalero example that recently surfaced in the marketplace came from the Derby Collection.

The Mescalero were a small but culturally unique subtribe of the Apache. Named after the mescal agave upon which they subsisted, the Mescalero Apache developed one of the fiercest warrior cultures in the Southwest and Southern Plains. They were the mountain vanguards of the eastern Apacheria – a territory that overlapped with the Comancheria, at one point spanning Northern Mexico, Eastern New Mexico and West Texas. They hunted buffalo and their territories were continuously threatened by the Kiowa and Comanche. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Mescalero artists embraced many Southern Plains fashion trends.

While the dress itself is stylistically attributable to the Mescalero Apache, it is thought that the cape-skirt ensemble has far earlier antecedents. Written accounts from early explorers in the 19th century discuss the popularity of a cape and skirt outfit throughout Central Mexico, Texas and New Mexico. The hide cape-skirt was, in effect, a Plains translation of the woven garments that were popularly worn in Mexico. North of Vera Cruz, cotton production was scarce, excepting the handful of Puebloan weavers scattered along the Rio Grande. Yet, this style of woman's garment remained fashionable through the mid-19th century. Tribes like the Comanche and Plains Apache, with little to no textile weaving experience, recreated these Mexican outfits with beautifully tanned hides. By the late 19th century, however, many sequestered Southern Plains tribes – now located in Oklahoma – had abandoned this two-piece garment in lieu of a trendier, one-piece dress constructed from three sewn hides. The Plains Apache were among the few who continued to produce the traditional outfit.

The subject outfit is part of a longstanding New Mexico collection. The Dolan-Fritz Collection, of which this dress was a part, was amassed sometime between 1869 and 1898. This time frame corresponds loosely with the death of James Dolan (1848-1898). Dolan was a nefarious Irish merchant who was involved in the Lincoln County Wars in New Mexico in 1878. Dolan, soon after his mustering out of the Union Army in 1869, became a key supplier of food and equipment to Fort Stanton and Fort Sumner, forts which were serving the Mescalero Apache. Records indicate that Dolan's second wife, Maria Eva Fritz, née Whitlock (1858-1952), was the owner of this outfit; she reportedly acquired the outfit from a Mescalero family. Not long after her death, the Dolan-Fritz Collection was exhibited at the Lincoln County Courthouse Museum in Lincoln, NM, from 1955 to 1978. The outfit was subsequently removed for safety reasons, not long after an Apache shirt – given to James Dolan by an Apache friend, self-named, "Jimmy Dolan" – was misplaced.