

PRESS RELEASE:

Ames Anthropology Award Goes to the Blackfoot Shirts Project

The Council for Museum Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association has jointly awarded the 2011 Michael M. Ames Prize for Innovative Museum Anthropology to Dr. Laura Peers (Curator of the Americas, Pitt Rivers Museum and Reader in Material Anthropology, University of Oxford), Dr. Alison K. Brown (Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen), and Ms. Heather Richardson (Head of Conservation, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford), for their collaborative ‘Blackfoot Shirts Project’ which brings together historic collections in the United Kingdom with Blackfoot people in Canada and the United States.

Building on relationships developed first by Brown during her doctoral research in the late 1990s and then during a photographic history project with the Kainai First Nation, Peers, Brown and Richardson developed a project to lend five historic hairlock shirts, from the Pitt Rivers Museum collection, to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary and the Galt Museum and Archives in Lethbridge, Alberta, both of which are located in traditional Blackfoot territory.



The five shirts are nearly 200 years old. They were collected in 1841 by Sir George Simpson, the governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and given to his secretary, Edward Hopkins. They have been in the Pitt Rivers Museum since 1893 but prior to the project only a handful of Blackfoot people had seen them. As most surviving Blackfoot clothing from this period is now in museums in Europe, Blackfoot people are keen to access these materials so they can learn about the skills and techniques used by their ancestors.

The shirts are made from elk and deer hide and are adorned with porcupine quill embroidery, hide fringe, and strands of horse and human hair. The quillwork designs are related to sacred stories of the Blackfoot people and one shirt has also been painted with the war deeds of its owner.

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