

DENVER ART MUSEUM

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DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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CENTRAL PLAINS CLOTHING
Smithsonian Institution

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PLAINS INDIAN CLOTHING

1. **THE PLAINS INDIANS** are those tribes which lived between the Rocky Mountains and the Missouri-Mississippi valley from southern Texas to central Alberta and Saskatchewan. For tribal names, present locations and general culture see Leaflet 23. For hide-dressing and beadwork see Leaflets 2 and 73-74, painting, Leaflets 77-78 and house types, Leaflets 19 and 20.

2. **INTRODUCTORY.** The clothing described in this leaflet is that used in the 19th century by those tribes which carried the peculiar culture of the area to its highest development, see Leaflet 23. The tribes in the eastern and western parts of the area wore clothing in general similar, but with some variations. After about 1850 clothing adopted from the Whites was worn to an increasingly large extent by both sexes. The older clothing survived principally for wear on ceremonial occasions.

3. **SOUTH TO NORTH VARIATION.** Plains clothing varies greatly in degree of ornamentation from south to north. Southern Plains clothing is marked by an almost complete lack of any type of decoration except fringing. The use of fringes of all types is highly developed among the southern tribes of the area and reaches its peak in the twisted variety, the finest made and most attractive looking of all fringe types.

On the northern Plains, on the other hand, many elaborate types of clothing decoration were the rule. These are bead and quill embroidery, the use of human and animal hair and white fur; and of feathers.

Paint was used throughout the Plains area. Solid colors seem to have predominated in the South, while detailed designs, both abstract and more or less realistic, appear to have been more frequent in the central and northern sections. Another generally used type of decoration, the tin jingler, was more common in the South.

The tribes of the central Plains occupied a middle ground in the matter of decoration and used plain or elaborate types according to their position in relation to the North or South.

MEN'S CLOTHING

4. **HEADGEAR.** Hats were not worn indoors or in good weather. In winter the northern tribes wore animal skin caps. Some central groups, especially the Arapaho, wore rawhide eye shades, and some southern groups wore, on dress occasions, straight-sided fur caps with open crowns. Participants in ceremonies used many kinds of decorations on the head, usually of feathers, fur, hair, quills or beads.

5. **THE WAR BONNET** was, with few exceptions, worn only by certain highly placed leaders on important occasions of war or peace. The right to wear it was only granted to a man after great services to his people, and at such times it was made for him and presented with solemn accompanying ceremonies. It was worn as much for protection by magic and as a mark of courage as for adornment. It was very decidedly not worn by every man. Women might wear the war bonnet under certain ceremonial conditions, but children never had the right. It was not worn with equal frequency by all tribes on the Plains or their borders and not at all in other parts of the country, though feathers arranged in other ways were widely used as head decorations. Use of the war bonnet reached its full development only after the acquisition of the horse. 1800 may be set as the beginning of this development. The present custom of men and women of all tribes north of Mexico of wearing this headdress on every occasion when they are on view is directly due to White influence.

Two special types of war bonnet should be mentioned. Among the Black-foot and other far northern tribes the feathers in the head band stood straight up instead of sloping back as elsewhere. The caps of some bonnets in the

central and north sections were trimmed with white fur and a pair of horns instead of with eagle feathers. Bonnets of this type seem to have been used principally if not exclusively by medicine men and are usually called "doctors' bonnets."

6. BODY COVERINGS: THE ROBE. Customarily the principal body covering was a robe made of a whole buffalo skin, in most cases dressed with the hair on. It was discarded only in times of strenuous activity or in very warm weather. In cold weather the hair side was out. When worn, the robe was put on in any way which suited the wearer's convenience, but the tail was customarily on the right. Robes were frequently decorated on the flesh side with painted designs—see reference 5; with narrow rows of quill or bead embroidery; or with broad quilled or beaded bands often set with discs. After the introduction of machine-made cloth by the traders wool blankets replaced buffalo robes and were frequently ornamented with the broad bands referred to above.

7. BODY COVERINGS: THE SHIRT. This garment was once worn very little but became increasingly popular as time passed. In form shirts ranged from those with a simple poncho-like pattern made of one skin to complex types made of two or three skins cut into sections and sewn together. Older shirt patterns were more simple than later ones except in the extreme northern section where tailoring of the upper part of the garment developed at an early date. In the earlier shirts the legs of the skins were left dangling at the bottom and the sides and sleeve seams were left open. Later the bottom might be square cut and the sides and sleeve seams closed. At front and back of the neck hung a flap, usually triangular but in the North frequently squared. The main regional variations in decoration are indicated in section 3. Certain outstanding local styles may, however, be indicated here. A prominent feature of northern and central shirts in the use of quilled or beaded bands over the shoulders and down the sleeves. Older northern shirts are extremely long and have painted decorations, stripes or life forms, usually in black. Long fringes from the shoulders and a small section of fringe at the elbow are typical of southern Plains shirts.

8. BELTS made of a narrow strip of skin were always worn around the waist to support the breechcloth, and the tops of the thigh-length leggings when these were worn. Belts were usually undecorated. Pouches, knife sheaths and the like were hung from them.

9. BREECHCLOTH. This article was never omitted by any man. It was originally made of soft tanned skin, but later cloth ones came into use. The breechcloth was 4 to 6 feet long and about a foot wide. It passed between the legs and tucked under the belt in front and back. The ends hung down from the belt like narrow aprons. Breechcloths worn during ceremonies often reached to the ankle or ground and were decorated.

10. LEGGINGS reached from the ankle to the thigh and were held in place by tying thongs attached to their tops to the belt. Leggings were not worn all the time. They were made from single deer or antelope skins and finished with fringes on the outer side. Decoration was done by painting or by sewing on long strips of beaded or quilled skin or cloth. Blue or red flannel replaced skin in most cases in the last quarter of the 19th century. When worn a pair of leggings look much like trousers with the seat cut out.

11. FOOTWEAR. The common type of Plains moccasin was ankle-height, had a hard sole and a soft upper with a tongue. Many northern and Mississippi Valley tribes, however, wore a soft-soled moccasin. There are a number of patterns involving different numbers of skin pieces, and each tribe had, to some extent, cuts peculiar to itself. For winter use some tribes used moccasins of buffalo skin with the hair inside. Moccasins were decorated with quill or bead embroidery and by painting. Moccasins with solidly beaded or quilled uppers are almost restricted to the central tribes, though these also used less decorated types. All moccasins were not decorated. They were cut in lefts and rights and often had skin fringes trailing from the heels.

WOMEN'S CLOTHING

12. **HEADGEAR** was not worn by women under ordinary circumstances. In recent times they have adopted the practice of occasionally covering the head with a shawl or silk handkerchief. Ceremonial head coverings existed for women.

13. **BODY COVERINGS: THE DRESS** reached from the shoulders to between the calf and ankle. There are two main construction types: in one, two animal skins are sewn together up the sides and across the top, leaving arm and neck openings; in the other there is a bodice-sleeve unit made of one or more skins sewn or tied at about waist height to a skirt cut from two or more skins. The first type is restricted to the central and northern tribes while the second is used by all tribes in the area. Except among the Crow—in recent years at least—the sleeves are cape-like and of varying lengths and widths and either open on the bottom or tied with thongs. The Crow sleeve is sewn and tight-fitting. The shape of the sleeves and the cut of the dress bottom vary from tribe to tribe.

The most easily recognizable regional variations are in the decorations of the bodice and sleeves. In the South decoration was absent or limited to narrow painted or beaded edgings. Among the central tribes the bodice and very large cape-sleeves were almost or completely covered with solid beading. The northern tribes used a more or less broad band, usually containing parallel stripes in two or more colors, which followed the curves on the bottom of the bodice and sometimes ran out on the cape-sleeves. Fringes in the various regional styles—section 3—were cut into or sewn on around the edges of the garment. Beads, quills, rows of pendant thongs, elk teeth, shells, tin jinglers, etc., were sewn on the skirts of the dresses to suit tribal custom or the whim of the wearers.

After the introduction of commercial cloth by traders some changes were made in the cut of the dresses, but in general they followed the old styles.

14. **BODY COVERINGS: THE ROBE** of buffalo hide was also worn by women but was usually smaller and lighter than that of the men. Women's painted robes can be identified by their designs which are not those used by men. The latter had sunburst patterns or representations of war or hunting scenes, while the women's robes had a more or less elaborate oblong design across the shoulders and a broad stripe around the edge.

15. **LEGGINGS.** The woman's legging reached from ankle to knee and was kept in place by a garter tied around the leg above the calf. Some tribes tucked the ankle flap of moccasin up under the legging, while others, especially in the South, made the moccasin and legging in one piece. Some of these southern boot-moccasins had a long flap which hung from the knee to the middle of the calf. Most leggings have been made of cloth for many years. Quill, bead, fringe and paint decorations were used, following the regional styles outlined in section 3.

16. **MOCCASINS.** Women's moccasins were like those of the men except in those cases noted in section 15 where they were combined with the leggings.

17. **BELTS** were worn around the waist over the dress. They were wider than those worn by the men, and were decorated with beads, brass nails and discs. Pouches, bags, etc., hung from the belt.

18. **CHILDREN** wore little or nothing in their early years and later dressed in small replicas of their parents' garments.

19. **MISCELLANEOUS.** Fur mittens were sometimes used in the North. Beads, ribbons, small mirrors and other shiny articles were worn to a large extent. Each ceremony had special costumes. Membership in various societies was indicated by the wearing of distinctive regalia. Famous warriors wore feathers and other objects as indications of their brave deeds. Men wore breastplates of long, slim bone beads strung horizontally in parallel rows. Women strung the same type of bead in vertical parallel rows reaching from the neck to below the waist.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas and Alice L. Marriott from the examination of specimens, field notes and from the following sources:

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2. Structural basis to the decoration of costumes among the Plains Indians—Clark Wissler. *Anthropological Papers* v 17 pt 3, 1916.

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4. Indian costumes in the United States National Museum—H. W. Krieger. *Annual Report for 1928*, pp 650-656, plates 20-29, 1929.

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5. Plains Indian painting—John C. Ewers, 1939.

6. The book of Indian crafts and Indian lore—Julian H. Salomon. Harper and Bros., New York, 1928. Valuable for instructions about making various kinds of Plains clothing.