



**Plains Cree Outfit**

Once Known Plains Cree Artist(s)

Ca. 1830-1840

L (Shirt): 38 ½"; W: 25" (at shoulder)

L (Leggings): 47"

T0062a-c

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/720/outfit?ctx=72e4abfb3043bfa71de4389dbb0b9a552f1efa1d&idx=1>

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The maker(s) of this beautiful outfit united a variety of cultural elements from across the Northern Plains. In shape and cut, the shirt resembles the Northern Plains “poncho” type made from two hides cut horizontally below the front legs and sewn together to create the shoulder seams; the cut off pieces are then turned into sleeves.[1] The shirt’s front consists of two hide pieces sewn together horizontally below the chest with a band of fringes inset into this seam; this feature is found on several shirts attributed as Northern Plains or Plains Cree (Nêhiyawak).[2] The Plains Cree have lived in areas from the Northern Woodlands reaching into the Plains, stretching roughly between what today are Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, and Montana.[3] With the fur trade in the eighteenth century, the Nêhiyawak began to move west and onto the Plains.[4] Such movements resulted in the adoptions of some elements of Plains lifestyles, for instance those revolving around horses and the buffalo, while maintaining many of their Woodland traditions.[5]

The shirt displays a combination of painted decorative elements typical for the Plains, like the spears and guns painted on the front, with those more common across the Woodlands, like the stamped circles featured on the back. The set is made from the hide of the Woodlands caribou, thus embodying a multitude of different cultural and regional elements.[6] Moreover, the neck tab features a zigzagged edge, which was created through the use of pinking shears, popular among the Nêhiyawak in the nineteenth century.[7] The shirt and leggings are decorated with beautiful porcupine quillwork elements, whose colors—including black, white, various shades of blue, yellow, red, green, and pink—have remained incredibly vibrant.[8] Quillwork strips cover the shoulder seams. Quilled rosettes sit atop of the shoulders and are part of one long quilled strip that runs along each sleeve. Each features three rosettes in total.[9] Additionally, two large rosettes in “cross-in-broken-circle design” are featured in the front and back of the shirt.[10] While attributed broadly to a once known Nêhiyawak artist, Ted Basser has suggested that the shirt may be more specifically attributed to the “Cree in southeastern Saskatchewan, who had assimilated a considerable number of Assiniboine by intermarriage.”[11] In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Nêhiyawak entered various diplomatic, military, and trade alliances with different communities in the region, among them they participated in the famed Nehiyaw Pwat (Iron Confederacy), which played a key role in controlling the fur trade across the Northern Plains in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.[12] They also entered into trade and diplomatic relations with the Numakiki (Mandan) on the Upper Missouri.[13] Such diplomatic and trade relations led to the exchanges of materials, items, and patterns of design, which this outfit appears to embody.

We know very little about how this outfit was collected. According to the catalogue, it was “given to Thomas Heaven (1808-1847) England, by Aboriginal people while he was in Canada” and held in a private collection in the UK until it was purchased by the Thaws. However, the conditions under which this “giving” occurred remain unknown. Thomas Heaven appears to have been a merchant and businessman active in Quebec from the late 1820s to the 1840s.[14] It remains unclear how and where exactly Heaven might have obtained such a valuable outfit. The set is in pristine condition and was likely only used lightly, suggesting its possible status as diplomatic gift or item of exchange in trade.[15]

However, instead of signs of wear, I was able to identify several alterations to the items, representing yet another expression of encounter. The sleeves are quite short for the size of the shirt and appear to have been cut.[16] Buttons were sewn to the top of the leggings with cotton

thread and buttonholes were added. In multiple places around the top of the leggings the name “John G. Heavens” was stamped onto the hide. The labelling indicates that the shirt may have been a family heirloom inherited by John directly or indirectly from Thomas.[17] Furthermore, the marking suggests that the set might have circulated or been loaned so that attaching one’s name would have ensured the safe return. Labelling and imprinting one’s name onto a piece of clothing expresses a sense of property and right to dispose of the material, and physically reinforces a position of power of an owner or collector. Inscriptions of names (or catalogue numbers) onto material culture are not “innocent” acts, but transform and re-contextualize items according to the current owner’s perspective.[18]

Since the outfit was altered at one (or several) point(s) to fit its wearer’s body and their understanding of how to wear a pair of leggings, the kinds of changes suggest its appropriation for “playing Indian” in England, where the outfit may have served as a kind of costume.[19] Playing Indian as a non-Natives practice has been recorded since early encounters between Europeans and Native North Americans, expressing various conflicting and highly ambiguous relationships between Euro-Americans and Natives. The practice is an expression of imagining the self in particular relation with the other. Such appropriations and, in the case of this outfit, material/physical alterations, marking items of the “other” as property and at the disposal of an owner, manifest “asymmetrical relations of power.”[20] We need to continue to pay close attention to these histories of collecting and appropriation, while also emphasizing approaches, like close-looking and detailed stylistic analysis, to re-document collections, and to identify descendant communities, and make collections available and accessible to them for their own study.

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### Endnotes

[1] See Clark Wissler, “Costumes of the Plains Indians,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 17, no. 2 (1915):51-56. See also Barbara A. Hail, *Hau, Kóla!: The Plains Indian Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology* (Providence, R.I.: Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, 1980), p.68.

[2] For comparison see: Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden: RV 524-2 and 524-3; Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin: IV B 8602a; National Museum of the American Indian, DC: 11/1306.

[3] See for instance, Mandelbaum, David Goodman. *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study*. Regina, Sask: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1979, p.6. Furthermore, “while being one people, there is a great variation amongst the different regional groups.” See McLeod, Neal. “Cree.” In *Indigenous Saskatchewan Encyclopedia*. University of Saskatchewan. Accessed April 6, 2023.

<https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/cree.php>. It is important to note that “The term for Cree varies according to dialect. Plains Cree are Nêhiyawak, Woodland Cree are Nêhithawak and Swampy Cree are Nêhinawak.” See Stonechild, Blair. “The Aboriginal People of Saskatchewan.” In *The Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*. Accessed April 6, 2023.

[https://esask.uregina.ca/entry/aboriginal\\_peoplesof\\_saskatchewan.jsp](https://esask.uregina.ca/entry/aboriginal_peoplesof_saskatchewan.jsp).

[4] For a detailed history of the movement and changing military, diplomatic, and trade relationships see Milloy, John S. *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy, and War, 1790 to 1870*. Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press, 1990.

[5] McLeod, Neal. "Cree."

[6] Ted Basser, The Plains, In Gilbert Tapley Vincent et al., eds., *Art of the North American Indians: The Thaw Collection* (Cooperstown, NY: Seattle, WA: New York State Historical Association; University of Washington Press, 2000), p.174. Also find additional information on stylistic elements and designs and possible community attribution.

[7] See Ted Basser's catalogue entry for pieces RV 524-2 and RMV 524-3 at the Museum Volkenkuden, Leiden.

[8] For records of dyeing methods and techniques see, for instance, Maximilian Prinz zu Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, vol. 2 (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark, 1905). He highlighted that Cree women were skilled in dyeing porcupine quills: "The women are said to be well made, and, in the north, they understand how to dye a beautiful red with the roots of *Galium tinctorum* and *boreale*, and black with the bark of the alder." (p.13) He also described dyeing techniques of the Numakiki (Mandan) (p.278) and the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), specifically yellow and extraction of dye from trade materials (p.103-4). For contemporary research into traditional dyeing techniques, see Roland Bohr and Anne Lindsay, "'Dyeing Commodities Whether in Roote or Floure': Reconstructing Aboriginal Dye Techniques from Documentary and Museum Sources," *Material Culture Review*, January 1, 2009, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/18145>.

[9] For additional examples featuring rosettes along the sleeves, see National Museum of Natural History, DC: E386509; National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh: A.UC.315; Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau: V-B-345a; Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm: 1864.02.0002. For historical representations of shirts with this feature see, for instance, George Catlin's portraits of [Stán-au-pat](#) and [Eeh-tow-wées-ka-zeet](#).

[10] Ted Basser, The Plains, p. 174. Basser identifies this feature as a Northern adaptation of Upper Missouri rosette designs.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Based on the combination of pictorial motifs, the shirt may also be associated with members of the Nehiyaw Pwat (Iron Confederacy), which consisted of Nēhiyawak (Cree) in the South, Nakoda (Assiniboine), Métis, and Nahkawiniwak (Salteaux) and played a key role in controlling the fur trade across the Northern Plains in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Sherry Farrell Racette made me aware of this possible connection during Otsego workshop faculty conversations. For some background information and history of on the alliance see Milloy, John S. *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy, and War, 1790 to 1870*. Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press, 1990.

[13] Ibid.

[14] It is unclear who exactly this Thomas Heaven was. There are records of a Thomas Heaven born in 1807 and passed away in 1847. He appears to have been a business owner trading in wine and beer mostly from the England in Montréal in 1828; he also acted as Canadian agent of an English Crockery Manufactory. In 1841, a Thomas Heaven is referred to as a "lumber merchant" and located in St Michel D'Yamaska, St Augustin. In 1842, he advertised the sales of steam engines. Thomas Heaven went bankrupt in 1845 and his property was sold off, which included circa 23,000 superior white pine logs. (See The Montreal Herald. August 20, 1828. Accessed October 27, 2022 <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/3112689>; "Protest at the request of Thomas Dalkin Hunter." August 11, 1841. Library and Archives of Canada, MG8-F89,

Volume number: 4, Microfilm reel number: C-14032--C-14033. Accessed October 27, 2022 <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=3036244&lang=eng>; Canada Gazette, April 4, 1842. Accessed October 27, 2022 <https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/4259134>; Canada Gazette, no. 182, Regular Issue, March 22, 1845. Accessed October 27, 2022 <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=cangaz&id=252&lang=eng>.

[15] See also the pristine condition of the shirt in Leiden (RV 524-2).

[16] Noticeable by the short length of the sleeves, the differently appearing incisions along the cuff, and also the unusually close distance between the edge of the sleeve to the quill rosette (compare e.g., to the pieces in Berlin, IV B 8602a, and Leiden, RV 524-2).

[17] It is unclear if the family's last name was Heaven or Heavens. I have been unable to locate records of a Thomas Heavens in Canada in this period.

[18] Ricardo Roque, "Heads and 'Cultures:' A. C. Haddon, Colonial Exploration and the 'Strickland River' Inscription," *History and Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2022): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2019.1623211>. For histories of such recontextualizations, specifically in museums, see George W. Stocking, ed., *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, History of Anthropology, v. 3 (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Candace S. Greene, "Material Connections: 'The Smithsonian Effect' in Anthropological Cataloguing," *Museum Anthropology* 39, no. 2 (2016): 147–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12121>. Hannah Turner, *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation* (Vancouver, BC ; Toronto: UBC Press, 2020).

[19] See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, Yale Historical Publications (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Rayna Green, "The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe," *Folklore* 99, no. 1 (1988): 30–55.

[20] Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 186. He also highlighted that, as "one of the foundations ... for imagining and performing domination and power in America," playing Indian has been an integral practice of developing a national identity and laying claims to the settled lands, while also imagining, developing, mediating, and performing stereotypical images that define, in settler terms, who is considered a "real" Native. For background on "Playing Indian" in a European Context see Petra Tjitske Kalshoven, *Crafting "the Indian": Knowledge, Desire and Play in Indianist Reenactment* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012). For a focus on Germany, see H. Glenn Penny, "Not Playing Indian - Surrogate Indigeneity and the German Hobbyist Scene," in *Performing Indigeneity: Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences*, ed. Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 169–205.

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