



Beaded Jacket

Once known Lakota artist

ca. 1890-1910

H: 32.75"; W: 20"

T0334

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/970/jacket?ctx=0209f4e1c1456b3ff94c9c240c213212309ec66b&idx=0>

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Carefully tailored and constructed of tanned deer hide with a patterned cotton lining, this turn-of-the-century Lakota jacket skillfully depicts a procession of warriors on both front and back. Each side features an imperfect symmetry of its parts: horses of the same patterning face each other over bald eagles or crossed American flags, but their details are as unique as the regalia worn by their riders. Take the human-horse pairing featured on the top left of the jacket's back for example. Rendered in dark blue and gold beads that have since rusted away, the horse presents like a blue roan – perhaps descended from the characteristic wild horses common to North Dakota [1]. The horse's tail is doubled and tied with red cloth in preparation for or return from battle and his rider, like others depicted, carries a society staff adorned with an eagle feather. Such intentionally detailed iconography may suggest that its maker beaded with cultural legibility in mind for community members who would understand the significance of the varied regalia, adornments and horse types.

The jacket's intercultural 'Western' or 'Scout' tailoring combines a military style – identifiable by its open front, square cut and fringed shoulders reminiscent of epaulets – with hide clothing conventions. Dr. David W. Penny traces the sartorial entanglements of such military-style jackets in Indigenous North America from the eighteenth-century 'Captains coat' through to the nineteenth-century 'buckskin' hunting coat. The latter was worn by settlers and Indigenous peoples in equal measure but entrenched as an icon of the much-mythologized American West by frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and performers like Buffalo Bill Cody [2].

The design of the figures themselves recall the flattened, pictographic representations of late nineteenth century ledger art – a remediation of traditional representational forms applied to clothing, buffalo robes and tipis. Nevertheless, the artist has skillfully rendered a three dimensionality to the horse through careful alternation between horizontal, vertical and curved lines of beadwork. The technique may be called 'lazy or lane stitch,' but the artist was nothing but attentive. As a testament to her skill (and that of other once-known makers), the cotton lining on the interior of the jacket covers no stitch marks or loose threads. She will have used an awl to puncture mid-depth into the hide in order to slip the sinew in and out the same side without ever completely perforating the surface [3].

While the care and intricacies of the iconography and making may point to the jacket's use among the Lakota (rather than as a souvenir), the precarity of the dry ochre rub which lends the jacket its remarkably vibrant yellow colour suggests it was made for special occasion rather than everyday wear. Taken together with the American flag motifs featured on the jacket, one might speculate that it was made for and worn at a July Fourth celebration during the early reservation period. In fact, Marsha Bol argues that the use of pictographic images in beadwork emerged at exactly this time, as did the proliferation of the American flag motif [4]. While these celebrations were encouraged by government agents for the purposes of acculturation, the Lakota strategically exploited the gatherings as an opportunity to perform officially prohibited dances and to "display, elaborate and solidify certain core collective values of Lakota identity" such as giveaways [5].

It is in the context of giveaways that Adriana Greci Green locates both the rise of the American flag motif and the surfeit of Lakota beadwork between 1880 and 1910. The flag marks an object for giveaway at the Fourth of July, thus revealing in its iconography its reason for production. That most Lakota objects bearing flag motifs exhibit signs of wear is consistent with the argument that they were made to be given away and consumed within the community [6]. A jacket like this may have been made commemoratively for a specific individual and its careful attention to the horses calls to mind their prominence as ceremonial gifts [7].

The multi-valency of meaning embedded in the American flag motif and its strategic employment by the Lakota contribute to both the preponderance of such materials in museum collections (collected for their novelty by tourists) as well as the maintenance of important cultural traditions. At once signs of the colonial oppressor, the intricately beaded American flag motifs on this jacket operate according to what scholar Ruth Phillips calls “dual signification,” testifying subtly but nonetheless equally to Indigenous ingenuity and survivance [8].

[1] “Nokota History in Brief,” Nokota Horse Conservancy, last modified date unknown, <https://www.nokotahorse.org/nokotareg-history.html>

[2] David W. Penny, “Captains Coats,” in *Three Centuries of Woodlands Indian Art: A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. C. H. King and Christian F. Feest, European Review of Native American Studies Monographs 3 (Altenstadt: ZKF Publishers, 2007), 89.

[3] Emil Her Many Horses, conversation at Otsego Institute, May 19-24, 2019.

[4] Marsha Bol, “Gender in Art: A Comparison of Lakota Women’s and Men’s Art, 1820-1920” (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 1989), 385-443.

[5] Adriana Greci Green, “Performances and Celebrations: Displaying Lakota Identity, 1880-1915” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2001), 64.

[6] Douglas A. Schmittou and Michael H. Logan, “Fluidity of Meaning: Flag Imagery in Plains Indian Art,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2002): 560

[7] Emil Her Many Horses, George P. Horse Capture, and National Museum of the American Indian (U.S.), eds., *A Song for the Horse Nation: Horses in Native American Cultures* (Golden, Colo: Fulcrum Pub, 2006), 11.

[8] Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* (Seattle: Montreal, Quebec: University of Washington Press; McGillQueen’s University Press, 1998), 9.

Figure 1 [detail, photo taken by author]



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Cite as: Gaudet, Manon. “Beaded Jacket (T0334).” *Otsego Institute Alumni Review* Vol 7. (2019)
[<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/gaudet.pdf>].