



Girl's Dress

Once known Lakota artist

ca. 1895

L: 27"; W: 22"

T0069

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/898/dress?ctx=d6e8096182c9d144ab0b0d6ddfc580ab42597a08&idx=0>

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The glittering beads of this dress would have fallen heavy on the shoulders of the young girl who wore it. Since the dress measures only twenty-seven inches tall, she could not have been more than four or five. A mother, aunt, or grandmother sat for hours using an awl to push and pull sinew through the hand-tanned leather. The girl likely would have worn the dress with fully beaded leggings and moccasins. A belt, beaded or strung with metal conchos, would have covered the bare space between the top and skirt. [1]

It would be easy to say we know very little about the history of this dress. In the Thaw Collection, the dress stands alone, separated from its context. The catalogue information suggests the dress was made around 1895 on the Pine Ridge Reservation by a Lakota artist. [2] Yet museum collections often use the year 1895 as a generic catchall for beadwork from the early Reservation Era made by Oceti Sakowin artists. [3] Falling five years after the Wounded Knee massacre and five years into an aggressive program of assimilation on Pine Ridge, the date privileges the establishment of reservations in the plains. The year seems less a precisely calculated identification than a way of aligning the dress with a period of land seizure and cultural upheaval.

Catalogue information is part of what Anishinaabe scholar Mikinaak Migwans (Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation) describes as the “bureaucratic fiction of an object”. [4] The year 1895 classifies this dress as similar to other objects, prioritizing a population or group over its own individual animacy and existence. As Migwans explains, these classifications parallel the population level care that a colonial power imposes upon the Indigenous communities it claims to govern. [5] In a museum collection, the challenge is to meet the object on its own terms. At the 2022 Otsego Workshop, I endeavored to understand my research as a relation of care. As a white-settler scholar, I relate to this dress differently from someone who is Lakota or Indigenous to North America. By paying attention to the construction, design, and life of the dress, I honor the woman who made the dress as well as the child (or children) who wore it.

The woman who made the dress pieced smaller scraps of leather together to take the form of a two-skin dress. The original shape of these dresses came from the outline of an elk or deer skin. Reservations limited hunting and imposed scarcity, so large pieces of hide might have been difficult to find in her community. The leather of the bodice is heavier than that of the skirt so that its fringes stand out stiffly. The fringes at the bottom of the skirt are cut from a sewn-on strip of leather, folded and stretched to make the hide go further. The patchwork is only visible from the underside of the dress, making use of scraps to keep them from going to waste.

The beaded curve at the center of the yoke accentuates where the animal’s tail would have hung. The woman used yellow, red, green, and dark blue beads abstract the shore of a lake or land in the running border of the yoke. The flags and geometric shapes floating in a light blue field likely reference how clouds in the sky reflect in the water. [8] Lakota artists, during the Reservation Era, used the US flag again and again in their beadwork. Depicting the flag became a strategy of both resistance and survival. [9] Beaded onto regalia worn to events like July 4th celebrations, federal agents would have read the flags as a sign of patriotism and allegiance. Yet the woman who beaded these flags knew that Lakota viewers might read them as a message of resistance. [10] According to Michael H. Logan and Douglas A. Schmittou, Lakota artists made more work decorated with the flag than any other nation. The flag appeared, often inverted, as a

way of showing veiled defiance of US rule. [11] The flags on the left and right shoulders of this dress mirror one another, a reflection that could also be an inversion.

The maker likely sewed this dress for a child to wear to a giveaway, where her family might have then gifted the dress to honor another family. Under the reservation system, these ceremonies that had strengthened Lakota communities were under attack. [12] Unusually, this dress's sides are split and closed with ties (fig. 1). This dress was made for a child living through a tumultuous time. These ties may have been added later for display. But if the ties were original, the maker may have added them to make the dress easily adjustable. Perhaps the dress was made during a year when the giveaway had to be delayed, the ties added the next year to fit the child's growing body. Ties at the neck indicate that this could have been the case (fig. 2). Tin cones hang from the bottom of the skirt. On one side, someone repaired them long ago with thread, perhaps after children's running and dancing had jostled them loose (fig. 3). Elsewhere, age has frayed the sinew knots previously hidden beneath lanes of beads, so that they are now visible. The adjustable ties and these careful repairs show that this dress may have been used by other children for years after the initial wearer had outgrown it.

These material signs speak of the care with which this dress passed between families and generations, but the Thaw Collection excises this dress from its original system of relations. What kinds of care, and practiced by whom, remain possible in the museum context? How can research and display exercise care? [13] This kind of care, so different from tin cones being re-sewn on so that a child can continue dancing, is the work of scholars and museum professionals for as long as this dress remains in a museum cabinet.

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[1] Similar dresses in other collections include leggings and moccasins. See for reference: Sicangu Lakota girl's dress, ca. 1890, moccasins, ca. 1900, and leggings, ca. 1895, National Museum of the American Indian, 16/2323; Girl's Dress, Leggings, and Moccasins, ca. 1900 Dakota (Eastern Sioux), Yanktonai or Lakota (Teton Sioux), National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Department of Anthropology (E362331-0, E357937-0, E362333-0).

[2] Eva Fognell and Alexander Brier Marr, eds, *Art of the North American Indians: The Thaw Collection at the Fenimore Art Museum*, 2nd edition (Cooperstown, New York: Fenimore Art Museum, 2016), 159.

[3] David W. Penney, conversation at Otsego Institute, October 22, 2022.

[4] Mikinaak Migwans, "Betraying the Object: Relational Anxieties and Bureaucratic Care in Indigenous Collections Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Art Histories in the United States and Canada*, eds. Heather L. Igloliorte and Carla Taunton (New York: Routledge, 2022), 127.

[5] Ibid, 128-129.

[8] Emil Her Many Horses, conversation at Otsego Institute, October 21-22, 2022.

[9] Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp, *The Flag in American Indian Art* (Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association in association with the University of Washington Press), 1993.

[10] Emily C. Burns, "Circulating Regalia and Lakǎóta Survivance, c. 1900." *Arts* 8, no. 4 (2019): 146.

[11] Michael H. Logan and Douglas A. Schmittou, "Inverted Flags in Plains Indian Art: A Hidden Transcript," *Plains Anthropologist* 52, no. 202 (2007): 209.

[12] Arthur Amiotte and Janet Berlo, "Generosity, Trade, and Reciprocity among the Lakota: Three Moments in Time," in *Plains Indian Art of the Early Reservation Era: The Donald Danforth Jr. Collection at the Saint Louis Art Museum*, eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Janet Catherine Berlo (St. Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2016), 49.

[13] Kim TallBear, "Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry," *Journal of Research Practice* 10, no. 2 (July 1, 2014).

Figure 1 [detail, taken by author]



Figure 2 [detail, taken by author]



Figure 3 [detail, taken by author]



Bibliography

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